

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

COLM LIDDY



WILLY CLUNE OF BALLYCAR NATIONAL SCHOOL CO. CLARE

Schoolmaster

In 1940 there were 9,777 primary school teachers in Ireland. Some were the type whose ex-pupils would spend the rest of their lives trying to forget; others the sort with a strategy of endless repetition to drill home the lesson. But there were a few able to truly educate and inspire, who could lift the words from a page, who taught their pupils to think 'Maybe I could...'. One such was Willie Clune, principal of Ballycar National School.

Willie was born in 1889, the son of a carpenter. Of his eight siblings, there was one (Conor) who was executed on Bloody Sunday during the War of Independence. Willie lived in the village of Quin, Co. Clare and cycled eight miles daily to teach in Ballycar. His wife was Catherine and they had two children, Monica and Fergus. He died in 1965 and is buried just outside the door of Quin Abbey. These are the dry facts of his life but the living of it contained so much more.

"There was not one person who came into his schoolyard from any background, with shoes or without, who wasn't respected. He was a man who loved the wonder of children. He knew the names of plants and bushes in Latin, Irish and English. On sunny days he would take the whole school to the top of the hill to show them the history of the local area. Master Clune had some extraordinary ideas. He delighted the children with his belief that if you tried hard enough, and really used your concentration, you could go back through not only your own memory but other people's memories to remember, for example, an Irish word."

These are the words of Michael D. Higgins, an ex-pupil who responded to this teacher's inspiration with a crusade for social justice that took him all the way to the Presidency of Ireland. But there were many

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others for whom he lit a candle in the darkness of rural poverty. Well remembered are his witty observations and clever phrases, his kindness if a child was sick, and the likelihood that if you met him during the school holidays he might just give you a half crown. They remember him too on his bicycle - carrying it when the road was flooded - turning it upside down to fix the freewheel. There was also professional recognition, as he won the Carlyle and Blake Premium, (awarded to the top 16 principals in Ireland) four times.

1. This tiny grainy photo is the best available of Willie Clune.
2. His most famous ex-pupil in 1950.
3. Sample of Willie's handwriting from the school roll.
4. The back wheel of Willie Clune's bicycle

Note: This 'Forgotten Person' was presented to President Higgins on the occasion of the launch of the *Hidden Gems and Forgotten People* project at the National Library of Ireland on 8 October 2015.



Larry Breen, Federation of Local History Societies presents the gift to President Higgins



From left: John Hulme, Federation of Ulster Local Studies; Colm Liddy, author of the article; President Higgins; Larry Breen and JJ Woods, FLHS

A report of the event is available at <http://www.fuls.org.uk/launchodhiddengems081015.html>