



# Goodbye to Jimmy, the Greatest Rossie

By Noel Fallon

**T**he end of an era. How many times has that phrase being used since that fateful day? Jimmy Murray's fame and legend transcended GAA and sport to make him arguably the most famous Roscommon person who has ever lived. His place among the pantheon of GAA greats was assured long ago. Only a select few players from any county leave their mark indelibly on the national sporting consciousness. Roscommon can be proud it has more than its fair share. Gerry O'Malley, Dermot Earley and Tony McManus....but Jimmy was first among equals. His sheer longevity, his charisma, the legend of the pub with the football hanging from the ceiling.

When the Roscommon Team of the Millennium was being selected in 1999, Jimmy Murray was chosen on 92 percent of the teams sent in by Roscommon Champion readers. Only Gerry O'Malley with 95 percent was more popular. When the great O'Malley describes Jimmy Murray as his "idol" it gives an insight to the impact the Knockcroghery man made on all who saw him play.

What did he mean to Roscommon? Think of how his contemporaries Jack Lynch and Christy Ring were loved by Corkonians or how Polish people revered Pope John Paul II and you have a sense of the affection Roscommon people felt for Jimmy Murray.

He revelled in the role of being the county's most famous ambassador. It was surely appropriate that he's the godfa-

ther of the one-time Irish Ambassador to the USA Noel Fahey (now Ambassador to The Vatican). As well as the aura of achievement, he had charisma and presence. A presence that was about far more than physical size. He commanded respect and adoration and the mantle rested easily on his shoulders.

He was the original GAA superstar long before the word was invented and he remained a star all his long life. What makes a legend? There must be something indefinable and anyone who met Jimmy Murray knew they were in the presence of greatness.

He was always young at heart – surely a contributory factor to his extraordinarily full and long life. He had a wonderful attitude to life and he was driving around town up to not so long ago. You felt energised after meeting him.

Jimmy coped comfortably with the iPod generation. This was a man who brought out a CD of his signature tune 'The West's Awake' when he was in his mid-80s. Inevitably, the proceeds from the CD went to charity.

In late 2005 John Boyle of GOAL launched a fundraising venture for the Third World charity. It was a signed, framed picture of Jimmy Murray with the Sam Maguire Cup floating on the shoulders of ecstatic Roscommon fans. Of course the picture sold out.

On the night of the launch in his own

pub Jimmy, naturally, sang 'The West's Awake'. The camera phones came out and recorded the moment. Jimmy took all his stride but could even he have imagined back in the 1940s that he would remain so central to Roscommon life years later?

Like any child growing up in a sporting mad Roscommon home I learned at my parents' knees the grim tale of 1946. The ambulance man wiping the blood off the hero's face so he'd look acceptable when he became the first man to receive the Sam Maguire Cup for a third time. The tale came Kerry's two late goals. The tale ingrained in the county's consciousness but, strangely enough, I think it embellishes the legend of Jimmy Murray.

To have spoken to Brendan Lynch, Liam Gilmartin, John Joe Nerney and Dr. Hugh Gibbons – the four remaining heroes – over the last few years has been a privilege. It's like meeting Oisín on his return from Tir na nÓg and hearing tales of Fianna.

It is quickly apparent these are special people. From their accounts it's clear Pádraig Ó Sé, Eamonn Boland, Bill Carroll, Donal Keenan and their team-mates were also men apart. Yet even with all the great players Roscommon let the gap slip in five minutes when Jimmy Murray wasn't there to lead them. It is the eloquent testimony to his leadership.

An avuncular figure is someone you turn to for advice and comfort. Jimmy Murray has been a kindly uncle and

inspiration to three or four generations of Roscommon people. At the Champion's People of the Year function in November of 2006 he was only too glad to give advice to the minors. With the wisdom of the ages, he advised people to be patient and allow the teenagers of 2006 to develop into seniors in three to five years. That same night he was all on for going to Rockford's with Marty Morrissey and, needless to say, sang 'The West's Awake' to a hushed audience.

He sang the song in a more racuous atmosphere in the dressing-room in Tuam after Roscommon's thrilling win over Galway in 2001. Knockcroghery's favourite son was jubilant. He also came to the dressing-room in Tuam in 1998 to praise the team for their courageous draw with Galway in that year's Connacht final.

Back to 2001 and the day I got an insight into what he was like on the field in his prime. Roscommon was playing Kerry in the league on a splendid spring day. It was a cracking game as league games go and the media was lucky enough to be beside Jimmy. As the action reached a crescendo, he became increasingly animated.

It culminated in him jumping out of his seat, using my shoulder and that of the journalist beside me as levers and bellowing at the top of his

voice at the Roscommon midfielders to "go for the ball." I don't know if they heard him but Roscommon gained the initiative and won the game. It was a stepping stone for the success to come. Jimmy was approaching his 84th birthday at the time but the fire in his eyes and the power in his voice gave a glimpse of what made the Kerry and Cavan defences quake on the days when greatness is earned. Then when the game was over he was back to his normal, affable self.

He was extremely quick-witted – giving a hint to how nimble he had been on the football field. At Roscommon Golf Club's celebrations in 1996 I was lucky enough to get chatting to the great man. An extremely keen golfer who was a former president of Roscommon Golf Club, I asked him casually what his handicap was. "79 years," was his rapid-fire response.

So many former great players prefer to drift into obscurity when they leave the arena and the roar of the crowd fades. Jimmy Murray was the total opposite. Yes, he went down the former GAA players' favourite route of taking up golf but he revelled in the attention.

He went from being one of the famous footballers in the land to the proprietor of the best-known GAA pub in the country. The pub became a place of pilgrimage from GAA fans of every county in Ireland – appropriate for a man of deep religious belief. "A one-man tourist attraction," in Paul Healy's memorable phrase.

Knockcroghery became known throughout the land because of him and in return the people showered their love and respect on him.

Jimmy was always at the end of the phone if a journalist was looking for information on a contemporary who had passed away, be it his team-mates Bill Carlos and Jack McQuillan, or the famous commentator Michael O'Hehir.

He would pay a fulsome and heartfelt tribute that captured the essence of the person – highlighting their good qualities without resorting to exaggeration.

He enjoyed meeting all kinds of people – even journalists – and would ask you to sign his book. It was like leafing through the Book of Kells to see all the famous names.

The football from the 1944 All-Ireland is the foremost relic in Roscommon GAA but the it was the pub's proprietor was acted as a magnet for people from every county. About 10 years ago I heard of a man coming from Carlow who cried with joy at meeting Jimmy Murray.

"A gem" is how former Champion reporter Sean O'Domhnaill described him. He was the most precious possession Roscommon had for over 60 years. Seán played a central role in Jimmy's parting gift to Roscommon. We were winding down our pre-minor final supplement and realised Jimmy hadn't been interviewed.

Seán volunteered to go out to Knockcroghery and got a great interview from a man who was any journalist's dream. It was the icing on top of the cake as we wrapped up the supplement. Then when the team stopped in Knockcroghery on their victorious return from Ennis Fergal O'Donnell said he had used the interview as motivation for the team before the replay. Jimmy had urged the team to chase the ball as if their lives depended on it.

The hero from the 1940s was always there willing to give advice if people were ready to listen. Jimmy Murray showed the way to beat Kerry in an All-Ireland final; 62 years on the minors listened and learned.

In the wake of his passing, there is a void in the heart of every Roscommon person or at least anyone who had a sense of the county's past and an interest in the county's future.

The greatest void by far is for his family and that shouldn't be forgotten. In a marvellous homily at the funeral mass, Jimmy's brother Canon Paddy concentrated more on Jamsie Murray the man rather than Jimmy Murray the footballer. That was important and correct. With GAA heroes the legend often supersedes the man. That didn't happen with Jimmy Murray because the man was special; as his brother said it was his qualities as a man that made the footballer.

Jimmy Murray leaves a legacy that extends far beyond football and will last as long as Roscommon exists.

He fervently believed it was the most wonderful privilege in the world to be a Roscommon person. He believed Roscommon people were better than anybody else, but, keeping with the diplomacy required from an ambassador, he would say they were as good as anybody else.

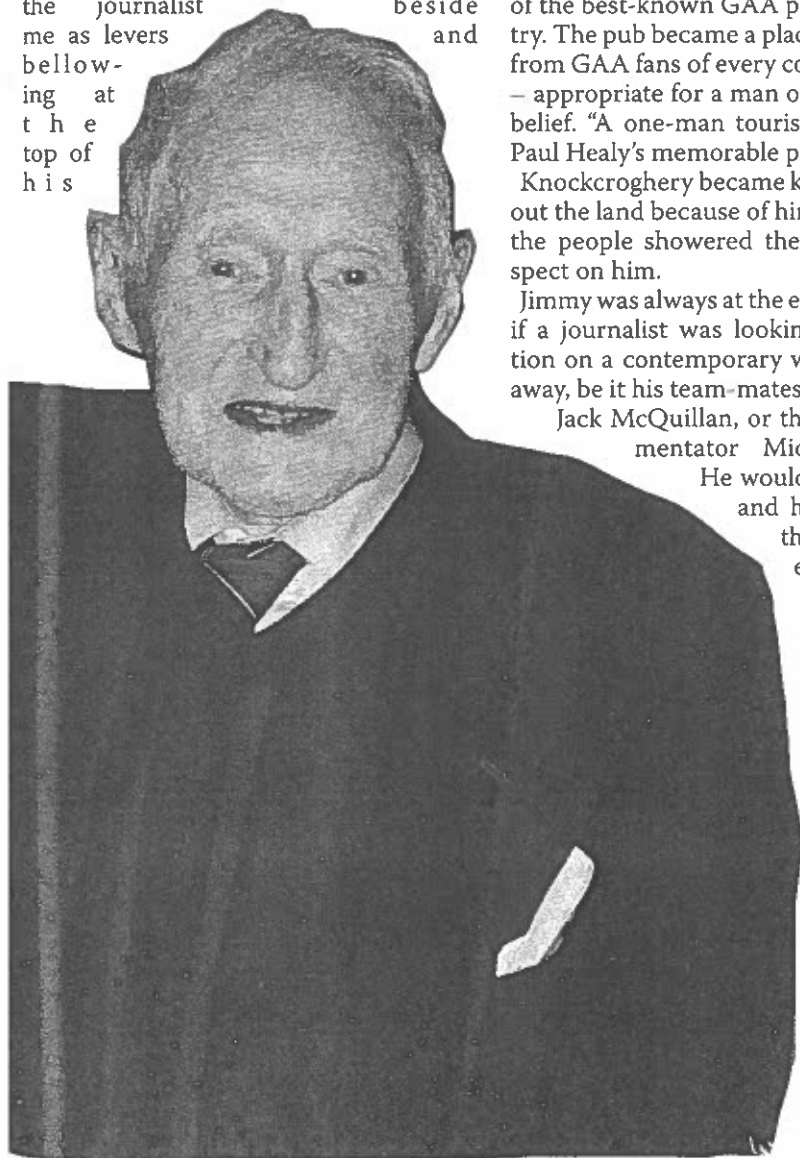
Apart from being Roscommon's greatest son, he was the county's No. 1 supporter.

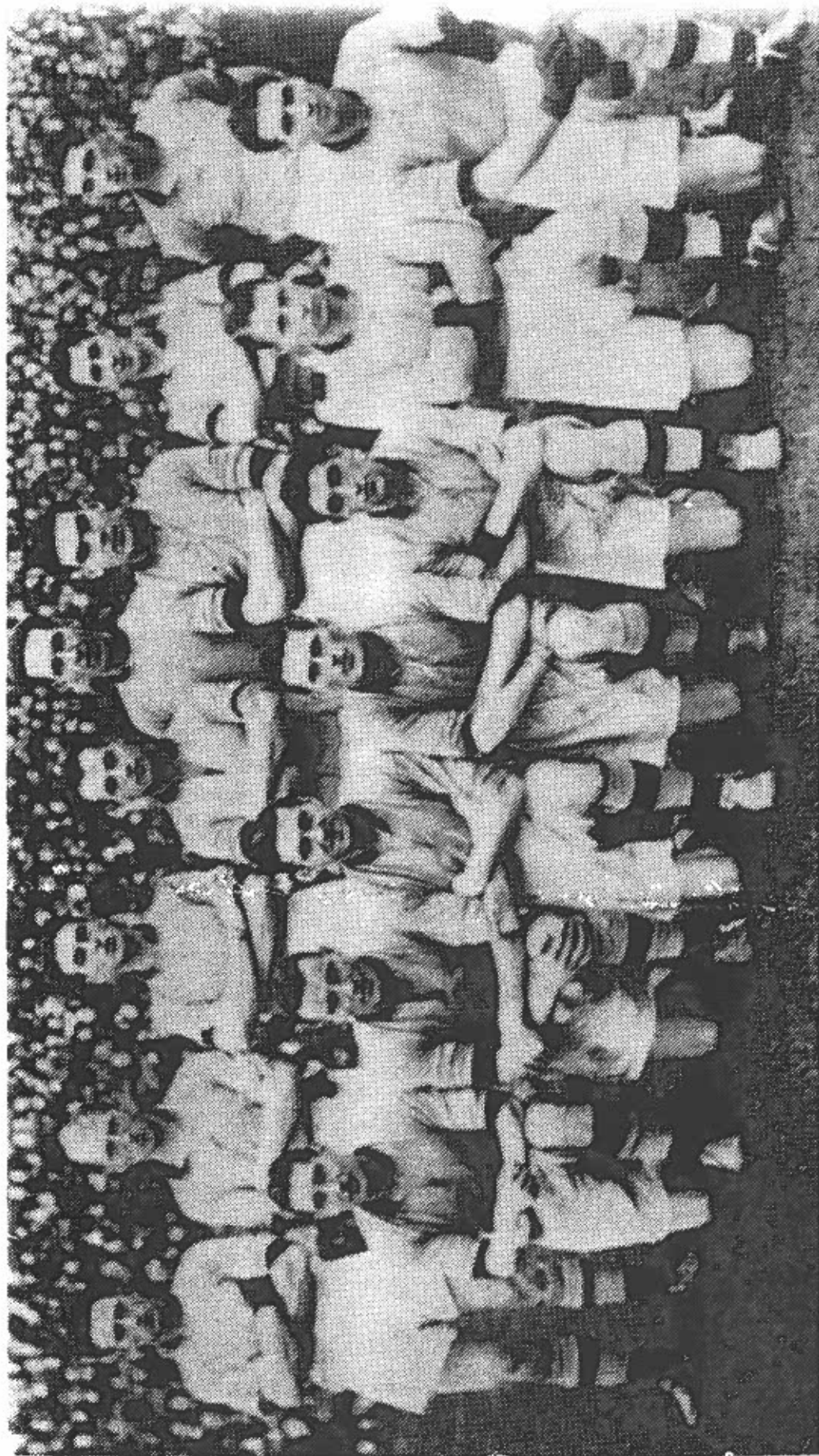
As the texts flew on news of his death, one from a neighbour struck a chord. It read: "RIP, the Greatest Rossie".

And so say all of us.

Ar Dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Noel Fallon is Deputy Editor of the Roscommon Champion





### REPLAY — ROSCOMMON ALL-IRELAND CHAMPIONS — 1943

BACK ROW (left to right) — O. Hoare, J. Murray, P. Murray, J. McQuillan, F. Glynn, L. Cummins, F. Kinlough, L. Gilmartin  
FRONT — J. P. O'Callaghan, B. Lynch, D. Keenan, D. McDermott, B. Jackson, B. Carlos, E. Boland.

"Grants 7 Gaelic football"  
Seán Óg O'Callachain

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## | JIMMY MURRAY

In 1944 Jimmy Murray from Knockcroghery, Co. Roscommon, joined a unique band of players who had successfully achieved the rare distinction of captaining back-to-back All-Ireland senior winning football teams. In an era where Kerry were easily the dominant force, the Roscommon achievement was all the more remarkable and widely acclaimed. The other back-to-back winning captains were John Joe O'Reilly of Cavan in 1947 and 48; Seán Flanagan of Mayo in 1950 and 51; Enda Colleran of Galway in 1965 and 66; and Dublin's Tony Hanahoe in 1976 and 77.

But Jimmy 'Jamsie' Murray of Roscommon stands alone in GAA history, having led his county team on five occasions around Croke Park in the All-Ireland pre-match parade. This happened twice in 1943 when Roscommon beat Cavan in a replay to bring the Sam Maguire Cup to the county for the first time, once in 1944, and twice again in 1946 after Kerry forced a replay by scoring two goals in the closing minutes. The Munster men went on to win the replay and deny the Roscommon captain of unbelievable and unmatched honour for himself and the county.

I can safely say that the Roscommon teams of that period were powerful sides and would compare favourably with any of the present-day squads. The real powerhouse centred on the half-back line of Brendan Lynch, Bill Carlos and Ownsie Hoare. The two midfielders were Éamon Boland and Liam Gilmartin, both of whom were brilliant fielders of the ball and long kickers who provided a great service to their attack. The half-forward line had Phelim Murray, Jamsie Murray and Donal Keenan, all three gifted, accurate score-takers.

What was probably unique at that time was the ability of some players to switch to other positions, as did Ownsie Hoare and Phelim Murray.



Hoare filled the left wing back berth in the 1943 final replay against Cavan with Phelim Murray at right half-forward. In the 1944 All-Ireland team which beat Kerry, Ownsie played in goal with Phelim Murray at left wing back. The changes never affected the performance of the team in any way.

Bill Carlos was the personification of greatness at centre back. He was a sturdy figure, but when he rose to contest a high ball, you had the feeling that it was his to command. Forwards were simply brushed aside and the ball was delivered with great authority. In the 1944 final the combined work of Boland and Gilmartin clearly outmatched the best efforts of the formidable Paddy Kennedy and Seán Brosnan—a feat in itself. Jamsie was the skilful leader in attack. His timing was excellent. He was medium size but he competed successfully against taller opponents, displaying a resolve that always gave him an edge in the battle for possession.

Jamsie was one of five great players who were past pupils of Roscommon CBS, where they honed their football skills for the major breakthrough at All-Ireland level in 1943 and again in 1944 with Brendan Lynch, Bill Carlos and Phelim Murray in the half-back line, a line of defence that was to prove awesome in subsequent games. The high fielding Liam Gilmartin, who partnered Boland at midfield, was also a CBS Roscommon product, as was Jack McQuillan at full forward. A lot of credit went to Brother Moloney and Brother Kennedy for their part in coaching many of their Connacht Colleges successes.

Between 1942 and 49, Jimmy Murray won six senior county football championship titles with Roscommon Gaels and a senior hurling medal with St Patrick's in 1945. In his long career his style never varied as a skilful forward, whether in the centre or operating from a corner berth. He was undoubtedly a figure-head captain during Roscommon's glory period at All-Ireland level. It is unbelievable to note that Roscommon were actually graded junior in 1938, but showing true grit and resolve they became one of the most successful teams five years later when they carried off the All-Ireland crown in 1943.

Jimmy Murray felt that the basis for that win was fashioned when they beat Galway in the Connacht final, having tasted defeat the previous two years at the hands of the Tribesmen. In the Connacht Senior Football League final in 1942, Roscommon, who had defeated Leitrim, Mayo and Galway but had lost unexpectedly to Sligo, met Galway in a

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play-off at Roscommon. The game which attracted a large crowd was a thriller, especially the last twenty minutes in which the teams were level on two occasions. Galway's fate was sealed when Jamsie placed Donal Keenan, who flashed over a cracking point for victory. After the match, corner back Harry Connor said we had 'won something senior at last'.

But the euphoria of winning that 1942 League final proved to be a false dawn when the two counties met later that year in the Connacht final at Ballinasloe. 'We were confident enough after our league win,' said Jamsie, 'but as the game wore on I did feel that we were not imposing ourselves in the exchanges and the luck factor was not helping us either.' The game was very exciting with the lead changing hands on several occasions. Phelim Murray, Jamsie's brother, gave the team a major boost when he scored a brilliant point from a very acute angle, and minutes later Hugh Gibbons got possession and released the ball to Jamsie who rounded two defenders and cracked the ball to the Galway net. At half-time the score stood Roscommon 1-1, Galway 0-4.

The second half produced typical championship fare, the scoring was close, but Galway had a slight edge and that was reflected in the opening stages when Galway applied the pressure with points from substitute Pierce Thornton and Charlie Connolly. The Roscommon forwards did have a number of good chances, but they failed to make them pay off. Galway were hanging on to a one-point lead minutes from the end when Roscommon were awarded a close free. Jimmy Murray handed the ball to the ever reliable free-taker, Donal Keenan, happy in the knowledge that a replay was inevitable. But horror of horrors, for once the noted marksman shot wide. Galway won 2-6 to 0-11. There were no recriminations over that miss. The game was to prove a very useful learning process against a more experienced Galway side, who were subsequently beaten by Dublin in the 1942 All-Ireland final. Roscommon got a timely reminder that a lot of hard work goes into winning the blue riband of Gaelic football. Jamsie Murray, reflecting on the defeat by Galway, was more convinced than ever that the margin between his aspiring team and other leading contenders was not that great.

Roscommon had already captured All-Ireland minor and junior All-Ireland honours and the big push for the elusive senior crown was the immediate target at the start of 1943. It was to be a momentous year for the Roscommon team and their captain Jamsie. They reached the

Connacht final again with keen rivals Galway and achieved victory by 2-6 to 0-8. Thus did Roscommon win the coveted Connacht title for the first time since 1919. Seldom was such jubilation seen in St Coman's Park as the players were chaired off the field and hailed as true champions.

Louth posed a lot of problems for the Connacht men in the All-Ireland semi-final before the westerners emerged victorious by 3-10 to 3-6. Liam Gilmartin, who had replaced the injured Frank Kinlough in the Connacht final against Galway and who played brilliantly against Louth, was retained at midfield for the All-Ireland final against Cavan. The first part of Murray's dream had come true—to reach an All-Ireland senior football final. It was now up to the team itself to achieve the dream of outright success.

The Cavan team bristled with big names: Big Tom O'Reilly, Simon Deignan, Mick Higgins, T. P. O'Reilly, Joe Stafford and John Joe O'Reilly. Roscommon and their captain Jamsie were facing a mammoth task. The players were very edgy. But not so Liam Gilmartin. Jamsie said: 'We used to often remark that Liam was so relaxed before a game that he could lie down and sleep in the dressing room and then go out and play a blinder.'

For the first time in Roscommon's history the county had qualified for an All-Ireland senior football final. It was to be the biggest occasion ever for Jimmy Murray and the rest of his side. There was a lot of tension in the dressing room, which was natural for first timers. There was a loud roar from the Roscommon followers when Jamsie led his team out on to the field before an attendance of 68,023. As I viewed the scene on that occasion, I was surprised to notice that Roscommon didn't engage in any pre-match kick-about. The team simply stood around in a group, waiting for the band to form up for the match parade.

Cavan did a bit of a kick-around and the usual running and passing the ball to each other before they eventually joined Roscommon for the parade. Cavan took command from the start and quickly got into their stride while Roscommon looked all at sea. By the time Roscommon had an opening point from Liam Gilmartin, Cavan had scored a goal and a couple of points. Slowly Roscommon responded and at half-time they trailed 1-4 to 0-3.

Minutes after the restart Jimmy Murray gave his team the boost they so badly needed. A Brendan Lynch free came soaring into the Cavan

defence, the ball broke down into the waiting hands of Jamsie Murray, who turned quickly and crashed the ball to the Cavan net. At the end of the second half it fell to John Joe O'Reilly to save the Breffni men with an equalising point, 1-6 all. Roscommon were glad to get a second chance.

The replay took place before a reduced attendance of 47,193, but wartime restrictions prevailed at the time and getting to Croke Park was always a big problem. The replay produced exciting enough football, but Roscommon appeared to have shrugged off a lot of the mediocrity which had assailed them in the drawn match. They led 2-2 to 2-0 at the interval. Roscommon laid the foundation for victory early in the second half with Donal Keenan points, and captain Jamsie was seen to great effect laying on another point for Frankie Kinlough. Phelim Murray knocked over a point and tempers became frayed at that stage. In a goalmouth mêlée referee Paddy Mythen was assaulted. The offenders were severely punished by Central Council after a lengthy investigation weeks after the game. Roscommon won the match 2-7 to 2-2.

Jamsie Murray recalled that great achievement when he stated: 'It was my most fond memory. We got great receptions at every station on the way home. They had torchlight processions on the platform at Knockcroghery and a big bonfire at the station gate. For months afterwards, we attended victory receptions all over the county. It's something that we will never forget.'

My near neighbour Liam Gilmartin, Roscommon's 6' 4" midfielder who ably partnered Éamon Boland against Cavan's great combination of Simon Deignan and T. P. O'Reilly, enjoyed the exchanges and the sporting battle for midfield control. He told me: 'It was a very enjoyable contest all through the game. Éamon and I had our periods of control and we used it, I thought, wisely. Jimmy Murray was always on the prowl and he was always available for a pass. We won that All-Ireland because we had got over any nerves that had militated against us in the drawn match. Murray was a very good captain. He always commanded the respect of the players and if he saw some flagging in efforts of the play he would give a shout, "Come on lads, don't let the side down", and we always responded.'

The fact that the team was relatively young was to stand to them when they opened their defence of their Connacht title in 1944. Roscommon were now the team to beat in terms of an All-Ireland



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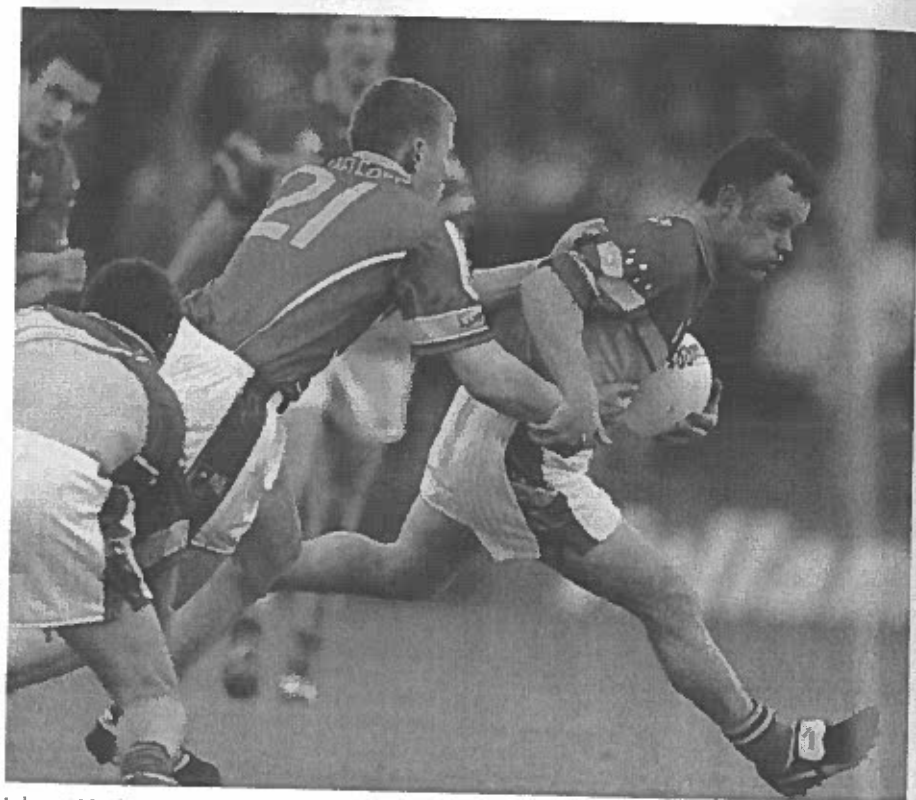
honours quest. They retained their Connacht title with an easy win over Mayo, then easily disposed of Cavan in the All-Ireland semi-final.

Croke Park was packed with 79,245 spectators for the Roscommon-Kerry final. Jamsie Murray had the notable distinction of once again captaining the reigning champions. In one of the best All-Ireland finals ever, victory went to the Roscommon men by 1-9 to 2-4. In his victory speech Jamsie told the cheering crowd: 'To beat Kerry in an All-Ireland final is every team captain's dream and I'm delighted that this Roscommon team has achieved it. It is well known that no team can be regarded as true champions until they beat Kerry in a final.'

Jimmy Murray's All-Ireland winning credentials have still remained intact. His record of having shared in the unique honour of captaining his county to win back-to-back All-Ireland titles still stands, while his record of leading his county team on five occasions in the All-Ireland parade has never been bettered.



Jimmy Murray, Roscommon's victorious All-Ireland captain in 1943 and 1944.



Johnny Nevin, Carlow's long-serving dual player, in football action against Longford's Michael Kelly in a 2004 Leinster football championship tie. (*Inpho*)