

100 Donegal Democrat Anniversary 1919-2019

John Downey, the man who started it all a century ago

Founded by the late John Downey, the Donegal Democrat was first published on June 16, 1919.

It was not the first newspaper published in Ballyshannon as the town has a history in publishing, being home to the Ballyshannon Herald, the Donegal Independent and the Donegal Indicator, the latter where he remained as foreman until 1918.

Fired with ambition to start a newspaper that would reflect the spirit of militant nationality then struggling in the birth of the country. In 1919 the newspaper was born, a sturdy infant that has survived precarious times and the unappreciated attention of the then occupying British military forces.

The editorial in the first issue set out that it was to be a 'non-political paper in a world of politics, but believed that in doing so is doing right. It stated: "We are making our bow to the public at a critical period in our national and local history and it shall be ever our object to uphold anything that will further the national and local interests."

A man of courage when he saw his country's salvation lay in the leadership of De Valera and the Fianna Fail movement

Raided

The paper had a fairly militant nationalist policy, which, during the War of Independence, led to it being raided on several occasions by police and British soldiers, who on one occasion announced that they were looking for a 'typewriting machine'. But they left on being assured that there was no such machine on the premises. At that time the paper was completely hand set, each letter of type being placed individually, a far cry from modern computer setting. It was not surprising therefore that there were only 10 pages, measuring nine inches by 11 inches. The

paper looked much different then also, with no photos and its front page full of adverts, one of these offered a new Ford car for £120. Initially only a couple of hundred copies were sold, only in Ballyshannon and surrounding areas.

Downey was forever seeking new ideas and new inventions that would add to the efficiency of his works and reader circulation and in 1922 a Lynotype of the latest was installed to be speedily followed by still more modern machines.

'Democrat Cup'

In 1909 he was the first goalkeeper for Aodh Ruadh Hurling Club and an inspiration and guide to the footballers. His generous gift of the 'Democrat Cup' inspired so many other fledgling Gaelic football clubs to progress and go on to earn county titles. Respected as an outstanding Gael, and true nationalist in every sense actively associated with the Gaelic League in the fight to keep the national language alive. An enthusiastic GAA follower, he regularly at-



John Downey, who founded the Donegal Democrat in 1919, pictured with his wife, Mary

tended All Ireland finals, even into his 60's. Patron of Bundoran Drama Festival he sponsored the 'Donegal Democrat Cup' for encouragement of Dramatic Art in schools.

Possessed of a great sense of community spirit he voluntarily relinquished his rights to the town's Market House in favour of providing meeting rooms for the Local Defence Forces, GAA and Gaelic League. The Ballyshannon Brass and Reed Band and the local Red Cross Movement were constantly indebted for his unstinted support.

At Requiem Mass on Saturday 24th May 1947, Fr. JJ Gallagher CC said, 'John Downey was a man with outstanding business acumen, courage and foresight. From a small beginning he established one of the best provincial printing works in the country. A man of courage when he saw his country's salvation lay in the leadership of De Valera and the Fianna Fail movement, found him a most enthusiastic supporter'.

Born and buried in Cashelard at 63 years old, he earned for himself a respect rarely accorded so sincerely and wholeheartedly by fellow townsmen to one of their own. Following Requiem Mass, the mile long cortege saw businesses in town sus-

pending and blinds drawn, with members of the Oireachtas, Judiciary Press, Legal and Medical professions, Co. Public Bodies, GAA, Gaelic League and the Taoiseach represented.

"When public attention had to be called to any matter affecting the well being of the town he was the spokesman of the people, did everything in his power for the betterment of the area. His place will not be an easy one to fill," concluded Fr. Gallagher.

The year after his death the Democrat was purchased by Cecil A King who at the time had been working as a journalist with the Derry Journal. Following a series of subsequent takeovers by other newspaper groups, the wheel has come full circle.

Cecil Og King, synonymous with the Democrat for decades

The King family was synonymous with the Donegal Democrat from the late 1940s to the 1990s, through Cecil King and then through Cecil Og, who was the driving force behind the modernisation from hot metal to modern equipment. Cecil Og did not, however live to see the full fruit of his labours, called to his eternal reward on 14 September, 1993 at the young age of 56.

Born in Derry

Cecil was born in Derry and came to Ballyshannon with his father, Cecil snr., who, along with a number of associates, had purchased the Donegal Democrat from John Downey. He had his schooling in De La Salle in the town and after his Leaving Certificate joined the staff of the Democrat. After completing an appren-

ticeship, he was appointed Managing Director in 1976 and immediately set about the modernisation of the newspaper. He had a great interest in technology and his highly developed business acumen was instrumental in the huge undertaking which saw the Donegal Democrat change from hot metal to computerised production and also moving to new premises on the Donegal Road in 1980.

Business leader

Cecil became known nationally in the printing and publishing industry as well as being a leader in the local business community as a member of the Chamber of Commerce. Outside of work Cecil had a great association with the FCA, having joined them shortly after leaving school. He rose quickly to 2nd Lieut. When the FCA was integ-



The late Cecil Og King pictured with the late Kathleen Emerson at a William Allingham Society presentation in Ballyshannon

rated with the regular Army, he served with B Co 24 Bn, becoming Company Commander. Later he was promoted to

Commandant, and area commander, South Donegal and he was a regular participant in the All-Army shooting competitions.

Possessed of a strong voice, Cecil was a prominent member of the local Musical Society and Church Choirs and was also a founding

member of a Slice of Ireland. A talented actor, he won many awards at local drama festivals and was part of the cast of The Old Road, performed by the local Premier Players, which won All-Ireland honours.

Drama Festival

Cecil was a chairman of the Ballyshannon Drama Festival Committee and among other local groups which he strongly supported were The Samaritans, Chamber of Commerce, Abbey Centre Trust, Tidy Towns, NW Tourism and Donegal Enterprise Board. He was a founding member and director of North West Radio. He is survived by his wife, Mary and his sons Damien and Jonathon and daughters Alison and Evan and his brother, Anthony Oliver King, New Jersey.