



## The late Dermot Earley, RIP, 1948–2010

# Fond memories of the great Dermot Earley

■ Seamus Duke

When the news of the passing of Dermot Earley was relayed to me on Wednesday afternoon by a text from Seamus Hayden, it set me thinking back over his wonderful life and achievements – and I realised that Dermot Earley was my hero from as far back as I can remember.

There are very few people who are a link back to my own father's time – because he is dead for almost 40 years – but Dermot Earley was one of those people. From the earliest memory I have of being brought to football matches I can remember Dermot Earley.

A tall, dark-haired giant of a man (that's what it seemed to me at that stage), he jumped higher, kicked further and scored more than anyone else.

When we went out to play football in the garden when we came back from McHale Park or Pearse Stadium or Hyde Park we 'were' Dermot Earley, soaring high, kicking points, scoring frees.

Then when I grew older I got to know Dermot Earley as a person and it was fantastic to realise that the hero you had as a boy was actually just as impressive as a person to meet and to know. Put simply, Dermot Earley was one of the finest people I have ever had the pleasure to meet. He had everything. He was a brilliant sportsman, a mighty family man, a superb public servant, a great representative for the country and also a great Roscommon man. In fact in my humble opinion he was the greatest Roscommon man of them all.

Everyone will have their stories to tell about Dermot over the next while or so. I will pick out two. One of the last times that I met him was at the door of the Roscommon County Council



August 1980. Roscommon's Dermot Earley celebrates with his son after victory over Armagh in the All-Ireland football semi-final at Croke Park.

offices the year before last. That day he was the subject of a civic reception on the occasion of him being appointed as the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces.

He was a little late – and so was I. He and his wife Mary stepped out of the car and as soon as he saw me that familiar smile appeared on his face. His hand shot back behind his hip in customary fashion for the big handshake. "Good to see you" was what he usually said. The handshake was always warm and genuine.

We stood in the drizzly rain chatting for ten minutes or so. We chatted about all the usual things – Roscommon football, the family and how everyone was getting on and anything else that was going on. Regardless of being a little late he stood and chatted. He was a thorough gentleman. It was always a pleasure to meet Dermot.

The other story comes from the trip to New York with Roscommon footballers in 2006. On the Friday evening we attended a reception

hosted by the Irish ambassador at a very high-rise apartment building. During the course of the evening Dermot took us out on the terrace where there was a magnificent view of the New York City skyline.

The UN building was not far away and he pointed to a section of the building that was illuminated. "That's where my office was. I was there for nine years" he said proudly. It was a measure of the stature of the man and what he had achieved in his working life. We sat in the May sunshine that evening and we chatted and laughed and remembered the great days past in Roscommon and elsewhere. He was relaxed and loved being in the company of his own people – the Rossies.

I could go on and on about the great games, the highs and the lows, the good days and the bad days. I listened on Wednesday to the lunchtime news as they replayed an interview that he did with Marion Finucane some years ago. His diplomatic skill and his prowess as an army man were legendary and he will be remembered by many as a great soldier and a great Irishman.

But for me, and many like me, I will remember Dermot Earley as a great Roscommon man. The Primrose and Blue jersey tucked into his shorts, his huge passion for Roscommon football, his will to win and his great sportsmanship. He never, never forgot his roots and was always one of the most proud Roscommon people you could ever meet.

We all regret not winning in 1980 against Kerry but this week it doesn't seem to matter. Truly, truly we shall never see his like again. Roscommon and Ireland will be a much poorer place for his passing.

A dheis De go raibh a anam dilis.

# Roscommon's greatest ambassador

■ Paul Healy

It is no exaggeration to say that Dermot Earley was probably the greatest living Roscommon person. Quite simply, he was the ultimate ambassador for the county. Gerry O'Malley and the late, great Jimmy Murray deserve to be mentioned in the same category. For decades we knew Dermot Earley as the football great and the gentleman who wore his love of Roscommon so prominently on his sleeve. His amazing rise through the Defence Forces – to the very top – merely copperfasted the legend. Truly he became the most renowned Roscommon person on the planet. That he should die at such a relatively young age is heart-breaking for his family, friends and thousands of admirers.

To those of us who grew up from the 1960's on he was the hero on the field of play. As a schoolboy in Rooskey I was mad into soccer but I jumped on the Roscommon GAA bandwagon when the tremendous 1977-1980 team came along. I vividly remember now that when we walked the couple of miles to school in the mornings – a wayward walk more often than not – it was Dermot

Earley who we were pretending to be as we soloed from one side of the road to the other and scored imaginary goals, impersonating the voice of Micheal O'Hehir...."it's Dermot Earley with the ball, he beats one man, he beats another, he crashes an unstoppable shot to the net and Roscommon lead Kerry....!"

In short, Dermot Earley was the footballer that generations of young Roscommon lads wanted to emulate. He was a hero, a gaelic God. It was only as we grew older that we learnt of – and began to appreciate – his peerless sense of sportsmanship.

It is well documented that Dermot never won an All-Ireland senior football medal – but he was of course recognised across Ireland as one of the greatest players never to have received that ultimate honour. It never deprived him of inclusion in any discussion on great players. Earley of course won five Connacht senior football titles, an All-Ireland U-21 title (in 1966), two All-Stars, a National Football League title and many more honours. It is genuinely the case however that this was one footballer whose greatness was measured more by his class and sportsmanship on the field than by the number or importance of his medals.

In latter years Dermot rose to the very top in the course

Dermot Earley celebrates in the dressing room with members of Roscommon Minor team who won the All-Ireland final in 2006.



of his distinguished service in the Irish Defence Forces. After much-heralded service with the United Nations he returned to Ireland to rise to the very top position, that of Chief of Staff

of the Irish Army.

Anyone who knew or encountered Dermot Earley was struck by his incredible love for Roscommon and his pride in the county, its people and

its football. In New York a few years ago, on the occasion of the Roscommon v New York championship 'weekend,' he made an acclaimed and emotional speech which will never

be forgotten by those who were present.

He was remarkably modest and humble, an unassuming son of West Roscommon who achieved greatness but never let it affect his outlook on life or his affinity with fans and friends.

Now as we take in the sadness of his untimely death it is reassuring to recall his joy at Roscommon's All-Ireland Minor title in 2006. Earley was an important and inspirational part of the backroom team.

One could write thousands of words about this legend; a man who was truly 'an officer and a gentleman.' He was one of Roscommon's greatest-ever footballers, indeed one of the finest to ever grace the game. He brought remarkable distinction and honour to his county. His army career was one of consummate achievement and service. He was a proud and loving family man and the ultimate ambassador for his beloved county. A great Irishman who has sadly died while still relatively young. May this great Roscommon man rest in peace. His feats will be proudly spoken of long into the future and his legacy will be long celebrated and will inspire people now and in the future.