

Review Article: Sport and the Irish: new histories*

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Writing in 1978, the American scholar Allen Guttman observed that 'sports remain among the most discussed and least understood phenomena of our time'.¹ That this statement still has more than an echo of truth to it almost forty years later is testament to how marginal sport has been as a subject of professional historical inquiry. This is odd given the popularity of sport, particularly among certain demographics, and the volume of attention it received from the media. Sport commands bespoke coverage in all newspapers and news broadcasts, has the capacity to provoke the full range of human emotions, and is inevitably bound up with issues of identity, nationhood, and social demarcation, particularly along the lines of gender and class. The three books under review are quality works of scholarship that have the capacity to enrich many debates within 'mainstream' Irish historiography.

As a focus of serious research, sport history in Ireland can trace its roots back to the late 1980s when sporadic works of scholarship began to emerge amid the morass of amateur efforts of variable quality that have always dominated the genre. In that regard, W. F. Mandle's work on the G.A.A. and nationalism, published in 1987, was an important starting point.² This was followed in 1993 by a pioneering work on sport and sectarianism in Northern Ireland by two British sociologists, John Sugden and Alan Bairner. And while Sugden and Bairner's Gramscian framework seemed slightly ill fitting for a society divided along ethnic and religious lines, theirs was, nonetheless, an important study.³ Bairner, with various collaborators, would go on to produce a significant volume of follow-up work on sociological aspects of sport in Northern Ireland.⁴ A more

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* THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORT IN DONEGAL 1880–1935. By Conor Curran. Pp 334. Cork: Cork University Press. 2015. €39.

THE IRISH SOCCER SPLIT. By Cormac Moore. Pp 312. Cork: Atrium. 2015. €25.

SPORT AND IRELAND: A HISTORY. By Paul Rouse. Pp 375. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. £30.

¹ Allen Guttman, *From ritual to record: the nature of modern sports* (New York, 1978), p. vii.

² W. F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association & Irish nationalist politics, 1884–1924* (Dublin, 1987).

³ John Sugden and Alan Bairner, *Sport, sectarianism, and society in Ireland* (Leicester, 1993).

⁴ See, for instance, Alan Bairner and Peter Shirlow, 'Loyalism, Linfield and the territorial politics of soccer fandom in Northern Ireland' in *Space and polity*, ii, no. 2 (1998), pp 163–77.

explicit effort to discuss sport within the framework of Irish political historiography also emerged in the 1990s. Work by Mike Cronin and Paul Rouse did much to challenge, especially, the G.A.A.'s mythologised version of its own history and mission.⁵ Cronin ventured further, producing work on boxing, soccer and the Tailteann games.⁶ These works, among others, provided the basis for the flowering of the genre in the late 2000s and into the present decade.

The research that has appeared over the last ten years has also been influenced by the methods and approaches of historians of British sport. The seminal work on soccer by Tony Mason and rugby league by Tony Collins have found echoes in the fine-grained local and regional studies that have been prominent in Irish sport historiography.⁷ Thus dense social histories of sport in Westmeath, rugby in Munster, cricket in Tipperary and soccer in Munster have appeared, generally originating in doctoral theses.⁸ The dearth of archival sources on Irish sport, which is often a feature of social history more generally, has been compensated for by the profitable mining of local and regional newspapers, trade directories, census records and so on. A more prominent development was the body of work produced to coincide with the G.A.A.'s one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary in 2009. A large research project, conducted through Boston College, yielded two lavish books and a critical edited collection, all of which have enriched the historiography of Gaelic games.⁹

The historiography of Irish sport, as it stands, has exhibited two tendencies. First there has been much critical focus on the relationship between sport, politics and cultural identity. The history of the G.A.A. has, for example, been rigorously reappraised and demythologised. We have discovered, for instance, that the notorious ban on foreign games implemented by the G.A.A. from 1901 to 1971 had little, in provenance, to do with politics and was a mundane

⁵ Paul Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland: a history of the G.A.A. ban on foreign games, 1884–1971. Part one: 1884–1921' in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, x, no. 3 (1993), pp 333–60; Mike Cronin, 'Sport and a sense of Irishness' in *Irish Studies Review*, iii, no. 9 (1994), pp 13–17; Mike Cronin, 'Fighting for Ireland, playing for England? The nationalist history of the Gaelic Athletic Association and the English influence on Irish sport' in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, xv, no. 3 (1998), pp 36–58.

⁶ Mike Cronin, 'Which nation, which flag? Boxing and national identities in Ireland' in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, xxxii, no. 2 (June 1997), pp 131–46; Mike Cronin, *Sport and nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic games, soccer and Irish identity since 1884* (Dublin, 1999); Mike Cronin, 'Projecting the nation through sport and culture: Ireland, Aonach Tailteann and the Irish Free State, 1924–32' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, xxxviii, no. 3 (July 2003), pp 395–411.

⁷ Tony Mason, *Association football and English society, 1863–1914* (Brighton, 1980); Tony Collins, *Rugby's great split: class, culture and the origins of rugby league football* (London, 1997).

⁸ Tom Hunt, *Sport and society in Victorian Ireland: the case of Westmeath* (Cork, 2007); Pat Bracken, *Foreign and fantastic field sports: cricket in County Tipperary* (Thurles, 2004); Liam O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster: a social and cultural history* (Cork, 2011); David Toms, *Soccer in Munster: a social history* (Cork, 2015).

⁹ Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse, *The G.A.A.: a people's history* (Cork, 2014); Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse, *The G.A.A.: county by county* (Cork, 2011); Mike Cronin, Paul Rouse and William Murphy (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009* (Dublin, 2009).

administrative measure. And whilst it acquired political freight, much of this came later.¹⁰ We can also say now with much confidence that the lived experience of Irish sport was much more complex than a neat cultural division into 'foreign' and 'native' camps: nationalists in significant numbers enjoyed 'foreign' games. The idea that one should align their political viewpoint with their sporting preferences was, to many, both mawkish and contemptible.¹¹

The second tendency prevalent in Irish sport historiography, and already mentioned, is the focus on localities and regions. It is now clear that the nation is not a stable framework for analysing the Irish sporting experience. Taken together, regional studies of Irish sport history enunciate a bewildering variety of experience within and between sports according to class, religion, and geography among other variables.

In the first two books under review we are treated to fine exemplars of each trend. Conor Curran's *Sport in Donegal* is, in many ways, typical of the local studies that have emerged in recent years: it is painstakingly researched using a rich and voluminous array of primary sources. And while the scarce archival sources available to historians of sport have been successfully incorporated here, the backbone of this book is provided by an exhaustive survey of local newspapers. These sources have allowed the author to describe the evolution of sport in Donegal from 1880 to 1935 in remarkable detail. This level of rigour, deeply impressive throughout, is exhibited in over 1,500 endnotes, fifteen pages of appendices and dozens of tables and maps. There are no impressionistic, throwaway conclusions in this book, the weight of empirical evidence simply would not permit this.

Donegal, from a socio-economic perspective, was not, as Curran ably explains, a homogenous county. The Derryveagh and Bluestack Mountains divided the county into the relatively prosperous and populous east and the more rural and remote west. The east, with its proximity to Derry city and the Lagan valley, was much advanced economically, when compared to the west. Donegal, particularly in the east again, possessed a much larger and denser Protestant population than most of the counties that would later comprise the Irish Free State and the county had a long and well-recognised tradition of seasonal migration, particularly to Scotland. These socio-economic and geographical features were clearly recognisable in the evolution of Donegal sport, and it is to Conor Curran's credit that he clearly elucidates the county's sporting experience with this heterogeneity clearly in mind.

The book comprises seven chapters: one outlining the socio-economic context in which sport developed in Donegal; one detailing the history of pre-codified and minority sports; three analysing the fortunes of the G.A.A.; one on association football (soccer); and one describing the conflict between Gaelic games and soccer in the county. As the balance of emphasis in the chapters suggests, Curran's principal preoccupation is the history of Gaelic games in Donegal and the sluggish progress of the G.A.A. in the county due to, among many factors, the popularity of soccer. The prominence of these sports in the book is justified by the relative failure of other codes to challenge their pre-eminence. Efforts to establish the game of rugby proved fruitless and while cricket was somewhat more successful, particularly among Protestants, it

¹⁰ See Rouse, 'The politics and culture of sport in Ireland'.

¹¹ See Toms, *Soccer in Munster*, pp 85–114.

failed to attract the critical mass of adherents and the competitive structure needed to sustain itself in the longer term. The history of sport in Donegal, therefore, revolves around soccer and Gaelic games.

Curran's chapter on the development of soccer is fascinating, precisely because it illustrates how the county's social, demographic and geographical idiosyncrasies were reflected in sport. It was east Donegal's proximity to Derry city that gave soccer its initial stimulus; the County Derry Football Association nurtured Donegal clubs by granting them affiliation and allowing them to enter local competitions. Access to administrative and competitive structures, it has been observed in much sport history writing, has been vital in giving clubs a unity of purpose needed to gain a foothold in their local communities. The eventual formation of Derry City F.C. gave soccer a focal point that stretched into its Donegal hinterland. Further impetus was given to soccer by seasonal migrants who had experienced the game in Scotland; the Keadue Rovers club, for instance, was founded by two brothers who had played soccer in Perth (p. 169). Curiously, given the experience of soccer in other parts of Ireland and Britain, religion was of no consequence in Donegal soccer and clubs, according to the best evidence available to Curran, who comments that they 'seem to have been run on a cross-community basis' (p. 194).

The G.A.A.'s efforts to cast aspersions on the nationality of those whose liking was for the association code was met with indifference and soccer persevered. This, in Curran's astute reading, illustrates the 'importance of how, in many cases, the development of sport is affected by which sport is first introduced into society' (p. 197). The resilience of soccer in Donegal displays, ultimately, the weakness of cultural determinism as an explanation for patterns of sporting preference in Ireland. The G.A.A., in turn, developed only fitfully in Donegal. Michael Cusack's 'prairie fire' failed to ignite in the north-west county where cultural nationalism possessed little magnetism and where the association was beset by organisational malaise. From a conceptual viewpoint, it is clear that manifold structural factors dictated the popularity of various sports. Yet much was also contingent upon the role of individual agency. The fortunes of the G.A.A. in Donegal at various times seem to have depended, for example, on the involvement or otherwise of the writer and nationalist, Seumas MacManus. His disappearance from Donegal G.A.A. in 1907 led to an immediate downturn in the organisation's fortunes. Curran's book is a timely reminder that historians of sport, in their eagerness to link their subject matter to grand historical narratives, should avoid the temptation to ignore the mundane.

The tension between explanations based on structure and agency is also very much in evidence in the administrative history of Irish soccer, as carefully documented in Cormac Moore's *The Irish soccer split*. Given that the game in Northern Ireland is strongly associated with the sectarianism that has poisoned inter-community relations in Ulster, it would appear difficult at first sight not to accord political significance to the split, from the 1920s, of Irish soccer into northern and southern administrative bodies and international teams. This split was most infamously expressed in 1993 when Northern Ireland played against the Republic of Ireland in a vital World Cup qualifier in Belfast. The game took place in Windsor Park, home to Linfield F.C., and a citadel of unionist identity. To avoid any unnecessary provocation, the Republic's national anthem was not played and the tricolour was not flown. Despite these efforts, the atmosphere was toxic, thanks, in part, to the

unscrupulous goading of Northern Ireland manager, Billy Bingham. As Cormac Moore recounts, 'Fans with southern accents were advised to keep quiet throughout the match' (p. xv), and sectarian chanting could be heard from the stands. In this context soccer, common sense would suggest, merely reflected broader political conflict, and was a medium through which tribal hatreds were exhibited. The natural tendency, therefore, might be to imagine the origins of the split as a parting based on broader cultural and political division. Yet, this would be teleological as Cormac Moore's nuanced accounts present an altogether more complex story.

Soccer, in Britain, Europe and South America, tended to initially take root in industrial areas where the game offered a social outlet for those whose working lives were spent in mines, factories and foundries. Ireland was no exception to this model and the northeast of the island, as the only region to meaningfully industrialise, was where the game initially flourished. The first soccer match to be played in Ireland took place in Belfast in 1878 and by the early 1880s, an administrative body (the Irish Football Association) had been founded and competitions had been established. Significantly the I.F.A. was, and remains, based in Belfast. The first clubs in Dublin appeared in the early 1880s, and though many of these affiliated to the I.F.A., the founding of the Leinster Football Association in 1892 would sow the seeds of internecine strife in Irish soccer. Soccer could not remain aloof from broader developments and the game within Ulster became divided along sectarian lines from early in its history. Clubs such as Belfast Celtic and Linfield, for example, became key social institutions within Catholic and Protestant communities in Belfast respectively from their foundation in the late-nineteenth century. The acrimony between these clubs, in turn, was aggravated by political flashpoints such as the home rule crisis in 1912.

Yet sectarianism did not poison relations between northern and southern football men in any tangible way. A consistent theme in Moore's crisp and straightforward narrative is the meagre influence of external political or cultural concerns on the *internal* politics of Irish soccer. Irish soccer officials, north and south, fell out with each other, not because of cultural background, but due to disputes over issues (influence, resources and prestige) that might typically concern men in any hierarchical organisation. I.F.A. annual meetings in the early-twentieth century were tempestuous affairs that, on occasion, morphed into physical violence. Yet there was little evidence of anything sinister underpinning this conflict and disputes were usually caused by such trivialities as gate receipt distribution, voting rights and the selection process for the international team. And so it was that in 1921, the Leinster Football Association decided that its future lay outside the jurisdiction of the I.F.A. and the Football Association of Ireland was founded. Though the split was caused by the long-held (and justified) perception among Leinster officials of disproportionate northern influence at the I.F.A. committee table, it was occasioned by the fixing, in early 1921, of an Irish Cup tie replay between Shelbourne and Glentoran for Belfast, even though the drawn match had also taken place in the northern city. This decision set in motion the process of secession that culminated in a unanimous decision among Leinster clubs to sever their connection with the I.F.A.

The F.A.I. (for a brief period the Football Association of the Irish Free State) had difficulty establishing itself in international football; the I.F.A., unwilling to cede control of the game island-wide, had powerful allies in the

form of the English, Scottish and Welsh F.A.s. Thus the F.A.I. was only accorded 'dominion' status among the home associations and could not secure international fixtures with its neighbours. In 1924, the split was almost resolved when the I.F.A. made a series of proposals aimed at bringing the two bodies together in a quasi-federal arrangement. Though the northern body was willing to concede significant ground, the F.A.I. rejected the scheme due to the proposed management of the international selection committee and the split was thus made permanent.

The organisation of Irish soccer into separate administrative bodies and international teams reflecting the island's constitutional status is exceptional in Irish sport. Indeed, the fate of Irish soccer (among other Irish sports) is a salutary case study of what happens to civil organisations when nations are partitioned. Cormac Moore's book retells this fascinating story in a clear, dispassionate account. The split, ultimately, was not the natural outcome of partition and political divisions; it was, in the words of Moore, 'neither inevitable nor necessary' (p. 231).

Without the labours of Curran, Moore and others, Paul Rouse would have had considerable difficulty producing his splendid *Sport and Ireland*. A work of massive scope and ambition, *Sport and Ireland* resembles, in some respects, Richard Holt's classic *Sport and the British*.¹² It would have been much simpler for Rouse to confine his project to the period since 1800 – the timeframe that all of his published work to date has been concerned with. Yet he has consulted sources much used by historians of earlier periods to produce a work that spans pre-Christian Ireland to the present day. In that respect, the works of commonly quoted chroniclers of medieval and early-modern Ireland such as Bede, Gerald of Wales and Fynes Moryson are scoured for references to the contemporary sporting culture. Rouse shows considerable ingenuity in reconstructing the history of folk sports in Ireland using historical atlases among other sources.

The author, thankfully, avoids excessive naval-gazing about the definition of 'sport' and uses contemporary notions of play as a common sense approach to delimiting his topic, particularly in the earlier centuries covered in the book. Moreover, and as appropriate, sport is placed within the broader leisure (as well as the political and social) culture of the different time periods covered. In his treatment of the pre-nineteenth century period, therefore, sport is seen as part of a broader culture of fairs, patterns and festivals and the jollity and disorder often associated with such occasions. From around 1850 onwards, by contrast, sport was moulded to the needs of a modernising society.

This is a work of impressive mining and Rouse supplements the relatively sparse published research with extensive trawling of primary sources. Thus newspapers, travel writing and archival sources are all profitably excavated – quite an undertaking for a volume covering such a chronological expanse. The latter chapters, dealing with the period since 1800, are the most impressive, perhaps. This is, after all, Rouse's specialist period and the one for which we have the most sources and previously published work. The emergence of modern sport in Ireland is thus chronicled with extensive coverage of soccer, rugby and G.A.A. offered. The fortunes of each sport in light of broader social, economic and political vicissitudes are carefully

¹² Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: a modern history* (Oxford, 1989).

discussed but no sweeping conclusions are (or can be) reached – Rouse has a keen eye for the intriguing exception. The unrepentant zest for soccer and rugby that many nationalists possessed, for instance, proves that the enjoyment of sport for its own sake can never be overlooked by historians, irrespective of the power of political persuasion in determining cultural tastes.

It is when discussing the G.A.A. that Rouse's work comes into its own. Rouse is one of the leading historians of the G.A.A. and his deep attachment to the association matched by a certain circumspection makes for compelling, authoritative writing. This is exemplified in the passages discussing the early history of the G.A.A. and the colourful career of the association's founder, Michael Cusack. Rouse has an encyclopedic knowledge of Cusack's voluminous writings and brings his character to life. Thus, we are presented with an individual whose keen intellect and unsurpassable sporting vision was undermined by his belligerent personality and pugnacious journalism. Figures of much less cultural import than Cusack have received more scholarly attention and the truculent Clareman would be the worthy subject of an up-to-date biography. Later sections dealing with the G.A.A.'s efforts, from the 1920s, to self-mythologise are also fascinating.

As with any volume with such an extensive remit, the limits of space mean that some topics could have received more detailed coverage, especially those hitherto overlooked in previous historical writing. Rouse, especially in relation to the post-Second World War period, broaches topics that have been accorded either minimal or no attention from historians before now. Thus gender, sport and the state, and the effects of technological change and globalisation on Irish sport are all introduced but, most certainly, merit more extensive research. Indeed, the history of Irish sport since 1945 easily warrants a book equal in length to the volume under review. But such is the scope of Rouse's project that it is certainly not a weakness of this volume that these issues are not given fuller treatment.

The latter sections are spiced with a welcome and colourful polemic on the effects of pay television on Irish sport. Indeed, one is left wondering if, as Irish sporting culture yields to the forces of globalisation, it is possible that the endless local variety that has marked Irish sport history may be supplanted by the bland, homogenous diet of sporting events now consumed across Britain and Ireland. The evidence presented in this volume would lead one to an optimistic conclusion; unique features of Irish sporting culture, such as the G.A.A., have proven both resistant and adaptable. Ultimately, this is a compelling work that proves that Irish cultural history exists outside the walls of the Abbey Theatre or the narrow confines of the cultural revival. Above all, Paul Rouse has proven that the history of how Irish people coalesced in their spare time and had fun is serious history indeed.