

An Historical Identity: Historians and the Making of Irish Nationalist Identity in the Gaelic Athletic Association¹

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Abstract

The history of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) that has been presented by both GAA adherents and professional historians has consistently stressed the role of political nationalism in mobilising and sustaining the GAA in the years from 1884 through to the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. This article, while accepting the great importance that nationalism played in the early years of the Association, revises the accepted view by proposing alternative ways of understanding the success of the GAA as a sporting organisation. The article examines the written history of the Association to demonstrate how unshakeable the nationalist interpretation has been and how this version of the GAA's history has been shaped by the contribution of the nationalist struggle in Ireland. It is then possible to move on and search for other factors that can explain the growth of the GAA. These reasons are essentially English and are commonly understood as the reasons for the development of modern sport, that is, codification, fair play, muscular Christianity and so on. The identification of these revised reasons for the growth of the GAA is hardly surprising, but their existence – and the widespread acceptance and use of the English inspiration for the model of sporting development in late nineteenth century GAA circles – calls into question the essentialist political and nationalist interpretation of the GAA's early years.

In 1997 Port Adelaide made its debut in the Australian Football League. Alongside the excitement of having a team playing at the top level of Australian Rules football, the residents of Port Adelaide entered a wider debate currently present in sport that seeks to understand the sense of community that exists between town and team. In *The Australian* Terry Plane argued that:

Port Adelaide is not a microcosm a prime example, a darkness on the edge of town or a victim in a sociological study of maritime communities. It's unique even for a dockside city. . . . It has a spirit that transcends its adversities and flows through people like the river through its heart, maintaining its salt of the earth character despite its down at heel facade. . . . Jobs have gone, sure, and the footy club is leaping from whale in the local competition to minnow in the big league, and is widely tipped to take this year's wooden spoon. But just as the people have copped containerisation – and decimal currency – and maintained pride in their territory, they'll

expect their team to do well. It's not optimism: it's knowledge based on experience that they can beat the odds.²

Port Adelaide is portrayed as a team from a town that has suffered the ravages of changing industrial patterns yet keeps its head held high because of an unbreakable spirit that exists in the town. The close links between the team and the wider community and a shared history at both a personal and city wide level means that the 'wharfies' take pride in sporting competition. The sight of Port Adelaide Power playing on the biggest domestic stages is proof that the community remains undefeated. Identical pictures are painted across the footballing world as journalists and academics seek to explain sporting success and the accompanying pride that it engenders in the context of community. While agreeing wholeheartedly with such investigations, the aim of this article is to show that the Irish case is different. While commentators in Ireland do make allusions towards an undefeatable sense of community that sustains a team,³ it is my contention that the sense of community and identity that links Gaelic Games and their followers has emerged as a result of an officially sanctioned manipulation of history. The production of an identity within the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is not solely the product of spectators identifying with their team, but is a process that has used Ireland's troubled history as a way of tying the spectator into a specific political and cultural identity, that of Irish nationalism, which the games personify because of their nature and their past.

The GAA has played a significant role in the history of Irish nationalism. Founded at the height of the late nineteenth century Gaelic revival and from its position on the cultural wing of the nationalist reawakening, the GAA could move centre stage and play an important part in the Irish revolutionary period that culminated with the 1922 founding of the Irish Free State. Bill Mandle summed up the role of the GAA during this period by stating 'it is arguable that no organisation had done more for Irish nationalism than the GAA'.⁴

Mandle's view is undoubtedly valid, but it is symptomatic of a general approach that historians have taken towards the GAA. Historians who have explored the emergence and growing popularity of the GAA have always examined the Association through the medium of political upheaval, emergent nationalism and state building. As a result, a consensus history has emerged that places the GAA at the heart of Irish nationalism, thereby instilling the game with a definite and specific identity. By examining the written history of the GAA as it has been produced by both GAA supporters and professional academics, it is possible to demonstrate that history and shared experiences have been manipulated in a way that links the identity of the GAA with the force of political nationalism. Unlike identity formation in many other sports in other countries, in Ireland through the GAA, identity is formalised from above.

The Written History of the GAA

For a sporting body that is so important in the history of Ireland, has a great resonance for the diaspora and exists as one of the few successful 're-inventions' of native traditions and pastimes, the GAA has been poorly served by historians. The bulk of the written history of the Association has been compiled by GAA supporters, people who can generally be considered to be 'on the inside'. Few academics have involved themselves with a consideration of the GAA and their work predominantly revolves around the question of Gaelic games and the national struggle. Whereas other national pastimes have attracted sports historians who examine the past through different vehicles – muscular Christianity, fair play, national and community identity. and postmodernism amongst others – the GAA written history has not developed an agenda beyond the Association's role in the emergence of Irish nationalism. The absence of a wider agenda serves only to further cement the links between the GAA and a sense of identity that is nationalist.

Before a discussion of works that have been produced, it is worthwhile considering why the historical focus on the GAA has been so narrow. The major reason has been the reluctance of the GAA to open its archives to general scrutiny. Without access to Council Minutes and other key materials held at Croke Park, it is difficult to reconstruct what debates actually took place prior to a decision being made. This can, in part, be overcome by using key newspapers such as *United Ireland* and the *Freeman's Journal* that supported the activities of the GAA and for long periods allowed GAA officials to write the Gaelic games columns, but this is still unsatisfactory. In the search to replace 'official' GAA material that is inaccessible, historians have been driven towards government held archives. There is a wealth of information here but it all revolves around Special Branch reports of GAA activities. The problem here is that Special Branch were only concerned with the GAA as a potentially subversive body, not as a sporting organisation. Although this material is fascinating and well worthy of scrutiny, the obvious result from its use is to see the GAA as a front for radical nationalist organisations such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood and in no wider context. As a result of these logistical difficulties relating to available archive material the history of the GAA remains a minimalist topic for the historian wishing to understand its wider development and organisation beyond the nationalist question.

It is my contention, however, that there is a far deeper malaise that holds back historical work seeking to examine the GAA and its effects on Irish society and history in the widest possible terms. This malaise is part of larger problems present in the writing of Irish history. For decades there was one accepted nationalist version of Ireland's past that was promoted by those who had taken part in the Irish revolutionary period, the government in Dublin and the academic

establishment. Since the 1960s, as a result of the ‘revisionist’ debate, Irish history has slowly become a far more fluid subject with sections of society, particularly in the Irish Republic, prepared to challenge shared and self-conceived notions of the past. Unfortunately, but understandably in the light of the situation in Northern Ireland, this has predominantly been an academic undertaking. Similar revisionism has not appeared within sports history – historians and other interested parties have been too concerned with the ‘big’ issues to involve themselves with studying ‘mere’ sport as has happened in other countries. The GAA has played no part in the wider revisionist exercise⁵ and historians (amongst others) have been wary of challenging the nationalist version of events so predominant in the history of the GAA. Two excellent examples illustrate the attitude of the GAA that holds back any wider consideration of the Association’s history. In 1987 a new magazine to cater for GAA fans appeared. In his first editorial Martin Brehny was able to conclude: ‘criticise the GAA and you are immediately labelled unpatriotic. A big and influential core of officials confuse criticism with ill will. It is a childish outlook, yet it continues to be prevalent’.⁶ In a similar vein the 1992 President of the GAA publicly attacked revisionist historians for denouncing Irishness.⁷ It is within this contemporary climate, one little changed over the 114 years of the Association’s existence, that historians have had to approach the GAA. The coverage below of the written histories of the GAA will demonstrate the narrowness of the agenda of those writing about the GAA centres solely on the official production of a nationalist identity. The written history of the GAA can be split into two categories and will be dealt with separately. The first is dominated by works produced by GAA members and often officially sanctioned by the Association while the second are those pieces produced by writers with a scholarly agenda.

The GAA Perspective of History

The first notable work on the history of the GAA was T.F. O’Sullivan’s *Story of the GAA*⁸ published in 1916 and based on an earlier series of newspaper articles. O’Sullivan was a GAA official and the book presents a highly simplistic notion of the Association’s past beginning with the seven pioneers who met in Thurles in 1884 to reawaken the Gaelic nation through sport and taking the narrative up to 1916 by recounting details of major personalities, decisions taken by the Central Council and recording the results of matches. Although there is no explicit mention of the Easter Rising as such an inclusion would have meant that the book would not be approved by military censors, there is an implicit celebration of the Rising as those GAA men who took part are included in the list of GAA personalities. Although not a widely researched history, as it is more of a contemporary account, O’Sullivan’s book is important as it sets out an accepted chronology that is rarely challenged by subsequent authors. This chronology,

while celebrating the games of the Gael. primarily revolves around the role of the GAA in reawakening the national spirit.

The first important consideration of the GAA published after independence was P.J. Devlin's 1934 book, *Our Native Games*.⁹ Much of Devlin's book looks back before the days of the GAA and attempts to find the historical roots for Gaelic games in earlier centuries. This is an important exercise in the creation of a historical mythology surrounding the games (irrelevant of historical accuracy) as it allows the appropriation of blame for the demise of original Gaelic games onto the British. This, in turn, necessitates that the foundation of the GAA be seen in terms of an heroic underground movement that succeeded against the overwhelming odds of re-establishing native political and cultural identity in the face of British oppression. By re-emphasising an accepted chronology of the GAA's history and reinforcing it with the weight of pre-1884 events, Devlin produces the 'long' version of Irish history that was popular within inter-war nationalist circles. This history begins with the happy and successful Gael who is then nearly destroyed by the British incursion. Despite the depletion of the Gael's strength they successfully re-group and finally drive the British out. Within this history Devlin transposes the accepted norm of nationalist Irish history onto the GAA's history. Chronologically, Devlin's book dates to a difficult period in the history of the Irish Free State and of Irish nationalist history. Freedom had been won in 1922, but only partially. In the early 1930s there was a wider debate as to whether Ireland should continue to push forward and attempt to gain control of the fourth green field, that is Ulster (as enshrined in the GAA constitution) or if it should accept the reality of a divided Ireland. Devlin ties this situation back into Gaelic games by warning:

Ireland may have reached the haven of peace and freedom; but unless she [sic] is to be run aground or scrapped there, surely she should be kept sea-worthy and fit to brave the tempests when the necessity arises? The sense of loyalty lost to a nation is as fatal to her hopes as is the spirit of discipline lost on a ship. A sense of national loyalty cannot exist without knowledge of and pride in all that nationhood implies and entails. That influence is in danger of fading in the Gaelic ranks; and in the conflict between native and imported customs it is an essential element. Until we restore the natal spirit of the Gaelic Athletic Association, we may be flattered by its material prosperity; but we cannot be assured of its integrity or the fulfilment of its mission.¹⁰

For writers such as Devlin the nationalist battle had been fought but the longer war had yet to be won. It is a theme that reoccurs constantly in the later writings

of many GAA men who record the Association's history.

One of the most crucial figures in GAA journalism during the middle decades of the twentieth century was P.D. Mehigan who wrote under the pen name 'Carbery'. Mehigan was a GAA loyalist and traditionalist whose involvement with the Association spanned a long period. He could look back to a boyhood during which he had met Michael Cusack, had lived through the upheavals of the War of Independence and the Civil War and yet had to live his later years in an Ireland struggling to come to terms with the forces of modernity. Mehigan wrote two crucial texts, his 1941 *Gaelic Football*¹¹ and in 1946 the accompanying *History of Hurling*.¹² It is easier to examine both texts as one as they duplicate the central history of the GAA. Mehigan, a close friend of Devlin, uses the same basic chronology and history as that in *Our Native Games* and elaborates many similar themes. Taking the long history of oppression as his starting point Mehigan wrote:

The Irish nation, physically and spiritually, touched its lowest ebb in 1884. Three rebellions had failed before overwhelming force. Famine and disease had ravished the dispirited population. There was dullness, lethargy and stagnation abroad; the peasantry were flying from the land. The old pastimes and culture of the nation were dying or dead. It looked indeed as if the 700 year struggle of the Gaelic nation for freedom was on its death bed. The hurling, dancing, native music – aye, and the Gaelic tongue itself were threatened with oblivion. Then Michael Cusack from the Barony of the Burren, Co. Clare, sounded his clarion call, and at once the nation rallied.¹³

Within such a version of history, Mehigan, as with Devlin before him accepts the central role that the GAA played in the successful reinvention of national pride that led to the political pursuit of independence. Within this context Mehigan is able to write some wonderfully excessive prose linking the Association with the struggle for nationalism. Under a picture of Croke Park, the national stadium of the GAA and the place where British soldiers killed twelve spectators and one player during a match in 1920. Mehigan wrote 'Croke Park, the headquarters of the GAA is the best evidence of the wonderful strides made in Gaelic games. A bare rough patch of turf when purchased by the central council, the national stadium has been built by the Gaels into a magnificent sports ground. The turf is ideal – drenched too in patriot blood'.¹⁴ After re-emphasising the nationalist version of history, Mehigan moves the debate forward in questioning the contemporary role of the Association. He is not as hesitant and negative over the future of the GAA as Devlin as the political context had changed considerably.

At the time these two books were published Eamon de Valera, the Fianna Fail *Taoiseach*,¹⁵ was setting out his vision for the future of Ireland. Culminating in his famous 'dream' speech of St. Patrick's Day 1943, de Valera envisaged an Ireland that would be self-sufficient, rurally and agriculturally centred, Gaelic speaking and traditionalist. This was summed up in a phrase from the speech when he dreamt of the countryside 'bright with the laughter of comely maidens'.¹⁶ For GAA men like Mehigan, de Valera's ideas for the recapturing (or reinvention) of the Gaelic spirit across all aspects of Irish life was the political embodiment of the whole spirit of the GAA mission. The message of Mehigan's two books builds on a history of the GAA that expresses the centrality of the Association in reawakening the spirit of nationalism and looks forward in the hope that alongside de Valera's dream of rural idyllicness the GAA can play a second key role in the rebirth of a truly Gaelic Ireland.

E.N.M. O'Sullivan's *Art and Science of Gaelic Football* written in 1958¹⁷ was primarily an attempt to produce a textbook for young Gaelic Football players that would teach them the importance of their national game as well as providing hints on playing and training. O'Sullivan's starting point makes the same criticism about writing on the GAA that is inherent in my argument. He noted 'there is unfortunately a complete dearth of books dealing with our national games . . . it is sincerely trusted that this attempt, no matter what inadequacies and short comings it may possess will, if not meet this deficiency, at least encourage others, better equipped, to blaze further this important national physical culture trail'.¹⁸ The short fifteen page history of Gaelic football that O'Sullivan offers begins at the start of the first millennium and works through the early legends to the advent of Cusack and the GAA. Unlike other writers O'Sullivan does not see the history of Gaelic games solely as an instrument of nationalism but stresses instead the changing nature of the games. This culminates in an appreciation of the GAA as a body that codifies and popularises Gaelic games as a sporting spectacle rather than the more normal view of the GAA as part of nationalistic triumphalism. O'Sullivan's book is not a great historical masterpiece, but is important as it stands alone in its use of a non-political agenda when approaching its subject.

The period from the mid 1960s witnessed a shift in the way that GAA supporters wrote their history. Two major factors precipitated the change in emphasis and both reinforce a traditionalist link between the Association and Irish nationalism. The first factor was a debate that began within GAA ranks over the ban on foreign games and the exclusion of Army personnel from the GAA's ranks. Although the ban was eventually lifted in 1971, the debate is underpinned by the work of Brendan Mac Lua.¹⁹ He argues that the ban was central to the very existence of the GAA as it constantly reinforced the purity, not only of the actual games, but of the Irish race. The second factor in changing the debate was the

start of the modern troubles in Northern Ireland. As the GAA had always been committed to a thirty-two county Ireland its sympathies naturally lay with the plight of the nationalist population. The first major book relating to the history of Gaelic games written in the wake of the Northern troubles was Art Ó Maolfabhail's history of hurling.²⁰ The book traces the history of hurling from the ancient legends to the modern era and, although not an explicitly nationalist history, it does make linkages between the late nineteenth century reawakening of the national spirit with events in the North. It is this type of history that attempts to transplant the heroic nationalism of Cusack, Davit, Croke and company into modern Northern Ireland that has assumed a position of primacy within the history written by GAA adherents and that exists right up to the present time. In a chapter entitled 'The Camán in Irish History' Ó Maolfabhail explores the use of the camán as a symbol of nationalism. He describes how Liberal home rule MP's arriving in Dublin in 1888 are met by a crowd bearing their camáns. A similar scene is enacted in 1891 when Pamell's funeral cortege is accompanied by an identical crowd. The 1798 centenary and the 1903 centenary of Robert Emmet's execution are both celebrated 'solely [by] young men carrying hurls on their shoulders'.²¹ Ó Maolfabhail clearly makes links between hurling and the nationalist enterprise of the turn of the century, which he reinforces and transplants to modern Northern Ireland by describing how '[y]oung women demonstrating outside courts of law in Belfast in 1971 carried hurling sticks as a symbol of their nationalism.'²²

The written history of the GAA across the last quarter century has been caught up in the problems surrounding the North. The Association as a whole has to support the nationalists of the North, an ideal encapsulated by Pat Fanning, former President of the GAA who stated in 1973, 'the GAA position is clear. Its historical role is not a myth. Our charter proclaims the determination of the GAA to work for a 32 County Ireland . . . The allegiance of the GAA is to Ireland. That allegiance is unequivocal. The very existence of the GAA is a protest not alone against the occupation of Casement Park, but against the occupation of Ireland or any part of Ireland'.²³ Within this understandable support for the GAA members of Ulster and the constant restating of a historical mission that this implies, how can the Association ever confront its past objectively? One way, as with Marcus de Búrca's otherwise excellent history of the GAA,²⁴ is to ignore, with the exception of the final two pages, that the troubles exist. In taking such a decision it is easy to locate the history and the role of the Association primarily in the period 1884 through to the early 1920s where the story is one of successfully reawakened nationalism rather than one of continuing struggle. In the most recent book on Gaelic games written by the *Irish Times* GAA writer Tom Humphries,²⁵ the spirit of Mehigan's 1941 text is reinvoked, and clear links again made between the spirit of the Irish revolutionary period and the struggle in the

modern North. Humphries writes:

Casement Park itself had been occupied by the British Army in the early 1970s denying the community access to its principal leisure facility. In August 1975, the mood of the north had been inflamed further when Provisional IRA men displayed weapons at a rally inside Casement Park. The ground itself is named after a Republican hero, the British traitor Roger Casement. Just one pitch drenched in so much history and emotion.²⁶

In concluding this section on GAA inspired history we see a narrative that leads us from the reawakening of an Irish nation in 1884, which concluded with Independence in 1922 and is now, within the GAA mindset, being re-enacted in the North of Ireland. This history only allows for a nationalist construct of history and the creation of a nationalist identity. The whole tenor of the games is one in which the Irish nation, actual or perceived, rejects West Britonism and embraces Irishness. This Irishness is both a political ideal encapsulating all thirty-two Counties, and a cultural one that embraces the legend of the Gael. Within this history the GAA can never be a sporting body, but is instead something central to the life blood of a nation, or as Humphries states:

through a long history, during which native language and native law were driven underground, the door to freedom always remained ajar for people who could express themselves through play . . . the influence of the GAA cannot be measured in units of membership or revenue, through attendance's or viewing figures. Its impact is emotional, visceral the GAA is more than a sports' organisation, it is national trust, an entity which we feel we hold in common ownership.²⁷

Academics and the GAA

In the light of Richard Holt's comment that 'the formation and early history of the GAA is arguably the most striking instance of politics shaping sport in modern history',²⁸ it is surprising how few historians have tackled the GAA as an individual topic of investigation. It is dealt with in a multitude of modern Irish history monographs²⁹ and then always in its political context, but there are few academics who have turned their attention to the GAA as a specific subject. Those examined here are W.F. Mandle, Paul Rouse, and John Sugden and Alan Bairner. In addition to the actual dearth of academic work on the GAA there is the concomitant problem that those works that have been produced have hugely supported the dominant version of history I have outlined; one that primarily

stresses the nationalist dynamic in the foundation and success of the GAA and does not focus equally on wider social, economic or specifically sporting reasons behind its success. In this historians have again cemented an historical identity of nationalism with the games rather than seeking other forms of attachment, community or identity that allow the games to prosper.

Mandle's book³⁰ is the most important work ever produced that details the history of the Association and should always be a first point of reference for anyone studying the area. The book does, however, have real faults in terms of its focus. The jacket notes to Mandle's book state that 'the appeal of the Gaelic Athletic Association was also partly that of muscular Christianity which at that time, was sweeping the British Empire . . . as a sporting body it was a great success, tapping wells of nationalism and the developing interest in sport as mass entertainment'.³¹ Within this statement there is the hint of wider dynamics beyond the national struggle encouraging the growth of the GAA. Despite the hint, Mandle's book concentrates exclusively on the GAA as part of the nationalist struggle and any alternative reasons behind the growth of the GAA are restricted to a single discussion during the text.³² Although the work is not written in the same triumphant manner as those works by adherents of the GAA, Mandle fails to explore the Association in any terms other than as a movement that is mobilised and then embraces nationalism as its sole *raison d'être*. It is a history of the radical Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) as much as it is a history of the GAA. In Mandle's opinion the GAA is nothing without nationalism and vice versa. Ideas of social changes, communication improvements, codification, the amateur ethic and muscular Christianity have no place in Mandle's history. What is surprising is that many of these themes were advanced in a previous work.³³ In this earlier chapter Mandle extends his vision beyond the political dimension of the Association and embraces some of the themes later absent in his book. In one key sentence he encapsulates much that is absent four years later, writing:

[b]ut not even the GAA, founded, manipulated and sustained, first by the IRB, later by the nationalist movement as a whole, could escape the wider influences that came from its being located within the United Kingdom. The sports revolution that codified and organised so many traditional games, and invented new ones, was British, even an English phenomenon.³⁴

Mandle, although demonstrating an awareness that forces other than nationalism have shaped the GAA, is content to link the identity of political nationalism with the success of the games.

The work of Paul Rouse is one of the best ever published on the GAA. His article concentrates specifically on the development and retention of a ban on

foreign sports and uniformed personnel.³⁵ By examining the history of the ban Rouse is able to demonstrate how fluid the whole debate surrounding the Association and political nationalism actually was in the period up to 1921. He clearly shows how many of the custodians of the GAA manipulated the past in an attempt to justify contemporary actions. As Rouse states:

the ban was seen as the ultimate expression of the GAA's intimate association with nationalism. For its supporters, the nationalist ethos implicit in continued acceptance of the ban was essential to the growth of the organisation. Indeed, they regarded this nationalism as being of even greater importance than the games themselves within the context of the movement's progress.³⁶

Throughout his article Rouse, while accepting the importance of links between the GAA and political nationalism is prepared to challenge this contention and questions whether there are wider reasons for the success of the GAA as a sporting body. The history that Rouse observes is far more contested than that put forward by GAA loyalists. Nationalism is not an all encompassing and central life force for the GAA, but rather an important weapon in a far bigger armoury. Ultimately however, the article is still centred, albeit critically, on nationalism as the defining identity in the growth of the GAA.

Sugden and Bairners book is, despite the title *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland*,³⁷ essentially an examination of sport in Northern Ireland and as such has to tackle the difficult links between a nationalist history and the lived reality of the Northern troubles. It is a vitally important text, yet one that has to deal with the same problems as those as Ó Maolfabhail – how to separate contemporary manifestations and constructs of nationalism in Northern Ireland from the history of the Irish revolution and the stated aims of the GAA. The historical coverage of the GAA from the 1880s through to the foundation of the state is straight forward and concentrates on the development of Gaelic games as a manifestation of a national sport in the context of a reawakened nation. Again, as with Mandle, the main focus is concerned with political dynamics and there is only the briefest acknowledgment of other forces that explain the success of the Association.³⁸ As the subject of the book is Northern Ireland, the majority of the Gaelic Games chapter concentrates on the Association during the period of the troubles. The coverage that Sugden and Bairner offer has to place the historical mission of the GAA, that is a thirty-two county nationalism in the context of a twenty-eight year armed struggle in which the Irish Republican Army fought for the same stated aim. It is therefore entirely understandable and correct that the work examines how the activities of the GAA encroach into the politics of the Northern situation and vice versa. However, in

the light of the stated aims of this article, Sugden and Bairner's work has to be criticised in the same way as other academics as they stress nationalism as the primary force behind the emergence and continued success of the GAA.

Conclusion

By reviewing the written history of the GAA it is possible to see how an identity has been created and reconstructed over time that links sport in Ireland with forces different from those normally advanced elsewhere. For the GAA, a sense of identity is not created on the back of a sense of community, but is created from above. The followers of the GAA and professional historians have, since the beginning of this century, constantly stressed the importance of nationalism as the reason for the growth and popular support for the games of the Gael. They have avoided a rigorous assessment of other factors that may cause a game to be popular and in doing so have jettisoned other notions of identity. With the continuation of the nationalist struggle in the North of Ireland it is impossible for the GAA to disentangle from the past and stress a different and more inclusive identity. The games remain solely the games of the Gael, the games that brought about a successful reawakening of nationalist forces that triumphed through the War of Independence and continue the struggle today. The evidence of this exclusive identity can still be seen on the streets of 1990s Northern Ireland. On 13 May 1997, Sean Brown, a Catholic, was abducted and murdered by Loyalist paramilitaries. Although the killing was sectarian, Brown was a readily identifiable target for the opposing side as he was Chairman of the Wolfe Tone GAA club in Bellaghy, County Derry. Abducted while locking up the clubhouse for the night, Sean Brown's love of his sport was the reason behind his death. While the GAA and historians continue to see the Association as having a specifically nationalist identity and no other, men like Brown will always be an easy and readily identifiable target for those full of sectarian hatred. While nationalism is undoubtedly a central part of the identity of those following the GAA there is a need for a wider understanding of how identity and sport are linked in Ireland.

NOTES:

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Football and Identities International Conference. The University of Queensland. Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, 21-23 February 1997.
2. T. Plane, 'The game starts from scratch in the Port of indomitable spirit' in *The Australian*, 31 March 1997, p. 12.
3. See F. Curran, *The Derry City Football Club Story 1928-86* (Derry, 1986) as a classic example of community spirit in the face of adversity.

4. W.F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics, 1884-1924* (London, 1987), p. 221.
5. For a critique of the GAA and its use of historical myth see M. Cronin, 'Defenders of the Nation? The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Identity', *Irish Political Studies* 11 (1986).
6. *Gaelic Review*, September 1987, p. 4.
7. R.F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch* (London, 1995). p. xv.
8. T.F. O'Sullivan, *Story of the GAA* (Dublin, 1916).
9. P.J. Devlin, *Our Native Games* (Dublin, 1934).
10. Devlin, *Our Native Games*, p. 68.
11. P.D. Mehigan, *Gaelic Football* (Dublin, 1941).
12. P.D. Mehigan, *History of Hurling* (Dublin, 1936).
13. Mehigan, *Gaelic Football*, p. 18.
14. Mehigan, *Gaelic Football*, p. 22.
15. Fianna Fail was de Valera's political party of which he was *Taoiseach* or 'leader'.
16. See J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-85* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 241.
17. E.N.M. O'Sullivan, *The Art and Science of Gaelic Football* (Tralee, 1958).
18. O'Sullivan, *Art and Science*, p. viii.
19. B. MacLua, *The Steadfast Rule: A History of the GAA Ban* (Dublin, 1967).
20. A. Ó Maolfabhail, *Camán: 2,000 Years of Hurling in Ireland* (Dublin, 1973).
21. Ó Maolfabhail, *Camán*, p. 53.
22. Ó Maolfabhail, *Camán*, p. 53.
23. *Irish Times*, 23 April 1973.
24. M. de Búrca, *The GAA. A History of the Gaelic Athletic Association* (Dublin, 1980).
25. T. Humphries, *Green Fields. Gaelic Sport in Ireland* (London, 1996).
26. Humphries, *Green Fields*, pp. 116-7.

27. Humphries, *Green Fields*, p. 3.
28. R. Holt, *Sport and the British. A Modern History* (London, 1989), p. 240.
29. For example see T. Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Dublin, 1981).
30. Mandle, *The GAA and Irish Nationalist Politics*.
31. Mandle, *The GAA and Irish Nationalist Politics*, jacket notes.
32. Mandle, *The GAA and Irish Nationalist Politics*, pp. 13-15.
33. W.F. Mandle, 'The GAA and Popular Culture. 1884-1924' in O. MacDonagh, W.F. Mandle and P. Travers, eds., *Irish Culture and Irish Nationalism* (London, 1983).
34. Mandle, 'The GAA and Popular Culture', p. 105.
35. P. Rouse, 'The Politics of Culture and Sport in Ireland: A History of the GAA Ban on Foreign Games 1884-71. Part One: 1884-1921', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 10, 3 (1993).
36. Rouse, 'The Politics of Culture and Sport in Ireland', p. 333.
37. J. Sugden and A. Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (London, 1993).
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