# Catholics and Sport in Northern Ireland: Exclusiveness or Inclusiveness?

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Of all the trouble spots in the world in the post 1945 period, the Northern Ireland problem has been one of the most enduring. The loss of life resulting from the conflict, over 3,000 since 1968, is by no means the highest when compared to other more violent conflicts such as that in the former Yugoslavian states. What distinguishes the conflict in the Northern Ireland is that it is fought out under the jurisdiction of one of the worlds most enduring liberal democracies, that of the United Kingdom. The religious identities involved in conflict, those of Catholicism (represented by the forces of nationalism) and of Protestantism (represented by unionism) are not fundamentalist, misunderstood or demonised in the way that Islam has been by politicians in the West. This is a conflict that mirrors the religious identities that are found across the Western world and which speak a familiar language. This familiarity of the competing religious identities in Northern Ireland makes the conflict all the more difficult to understand.[1]

On 19 October 1996 an Irish League soccer match between Portadown and Cliftonville was abandoned after Cliftonville supporters and their buses had been attacked by a stone throwing mob before kick-off. These supporters never made it into the ground, and once the team were aware of what had happened to their followers, they refused to play the second half. In response to the violence one supporter, Gary Arthurs, vowed never to watch his beloved Cliftonville again. He said, 'It's only a matter of time before somebody is killed and no football match is worth that'.[2] The problem for Arthurs and his fellow Cliftonville supporters is that they are identified by their Protestant/ unionist opponents as Catholics and nationalists. While it might be argued that the ill effects of such identification, which stems from broad perceptions of religious belief, may have been tempered by the ongoing paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland, it is clear that identity is a key issue in that society.

The aim of this article is to assess how the Catholic population of Northern Ireland has sought to stress its own identity in the area of sport in a state which, although democratic, is divided along sectarian lines and constantly overshadowed by either the threat of, or the reality of violence. By examining the two major spectator and participation sports, Gaelic Games and soccer, it is possible to demonstrate that the feelings of alienation felt by the Catholic community has resulted in the development of exclusively Catholic sport and the relative failure of inclusive sport. Sport in Northern Ireland is, it seems, divided along religious lines. Gaelic Games can be seen

as sports that support the Catholic population through its exclusiveness, stresses political aspirations that champion the cause of an Irish Republic and that exclude the broad Protestant/unionist population. Soccer, despite being a global game in a way that Gaelic Games are not, and having a great following amongst both sections of Northern Irish society, has, since 1968, failed to include the Catholic community. This has meant that Catholic clubs have either been forced out of existence or have transferred their allegiance to the southern Football Association of Ireland (FAI) which has left the Northern Irish Football Association (IFA) presently running a league competition which has only one team which can be said to represent the Catholic community. The ultimate conclusion of the article is that despite the usual 'hopeful' view of sport as having an integrative capacity that should bring about a commonality of experience and togetherness, in Northern Ireland, sport has been a force of division that underpins, rather than counteracts the bitterness of a sectarian society.

**Historical Background**

Before tracing the nature and background of sport in Northern Ireland, it is vital to understand the extremes of the contemporary situation. Listed below are random examples from recent press reports but they could be taken from any of the years of the modern troubles. They show how far sport, and its relationship with religious identity, has placed individuals in Northern Ireland in a position of danger. The selection is indicative of how religious belief, when taken to its violent extremes, dislocates normal sporting behaviour and those connected with it.

> At 15 he [Donal Gray] had signed for last season's Irish League winners Portadown and joined Partick Thistle as a professional at 17, but moved back to the Northern Irish team Glenavon to be with his family after his Mother died . . . as an Irish Catholic he dreamt of representing Celtic or Liverpool and had got as far as trials for the Scottish club and was planning a move across the water when the masked men came. They ran up to the door shouting: 'Open up, IRA'. 'One of them put a gun to my head and they dragged me out into the yard. I didn't think I would die but thought I'd never play football again. They were beating me with iron bars and wooden clubs. I just felt myself go dizzy and I just lay there, half dead, so they went'. The attack left Gary with a broken leg, a fractured knee, puncture wounds where he had been beaten with nail studded wooden clubs and head, chest and arm injuries . . . he had done nothing to provoke the attack a message from the terrorists has been filtered down through the community to tell him as much.[3]

> The North of Ireland Cricket and Football Club is on the brink of the most important decision of its 138-year history – to forsake its

> lovingly tended pitches in South Belfast's lower Ormeau Road and move to the mainly Protestant east of the city. Last month the club's pavilion was burned down. . . .The changing demographics of Belfast have left the club increasingly isolated in a zone of working class nationalism. Last month's arson attack was the third in as many years.[4]

> His comments as he dismounted from the Grand National winner were echoed by the vast majority of Irishmen disgusted by the IRA. Tony Dobbin, a Catholic Ulsterman, said he was ashamed to say he was from 'over there' after terrorists forced the postponement of the world's most famous horse race with a bomb hoax. Patricia Perry, Dobin's elder sister, has been subjected to a campaign of intimidation from alleged Republican paramilitaries in the jockey's home town of Downpatrick, Co. Down. She has been threatened by masked men armed with baseball bats on four occasions this month, and she also claims that one of her assailants had a gun. . .They suspect that the encounters are linked to Dobbin's post-race comments.[5]

These extracts clearly show how important religious lables are in Northern Ireland. They also demonstrate how sport has become another battleground in the Province between identities. Sport is used to reinforce, rather than break down, sectarian centred belongings. This results in a Catholic man being beaten by paramilitaries fighting for a unified Catholic Ireland, even though his identity places him on 'their side'; a cricket club forced to move because it is a Protestant club playing an 'English' game in a Catholic neighbourhood; and the family of a Catholic jockey who dared to condemn the tactics of the IRA being intimidated because he spoke out. This is the modern reality of sport and its links to the politico-religious battle plaguing Northern Ireland, but this battle has long standing historic roots.

Northern Ireland came into existence in 1920 as a result of the Government of Ireland Act, a partition of Ireland that was underpinned further by the establishment of the independent Irish Free State in 1921. After the bitterness of the Irish Home Rule campaign and the War of Independence, it was hoped by politicians in London, Dublin and Belfast that Ireland had found a way towards peaceful co-existence which would avoid in future the bitterness of the Home Rule campaign. This was not to be the case. While the Free State was to become the Irish Republic in 1948 and function as a stable and peaceful democracy, Northern Ireland has been dogged throughout its existence by a whole range of social, economic and political problems, all of which have been reinforced and underpinned by sectarianism. While the Irish Republic has been predominantly Catholic and has largely been able to satisfy its peoples nationalist demands, the Northern Irish state has been divided between a Catholic and Protestant population. The Protestants have always been in the majority and chose from 1920 to

marginalise the other community. Catholics were denied access to fair voting, jobs and housing and levels of intercommunal violence have always been high. In the late 1960s the problems came to a head when the Protestant dominated Stormont parliament could not respond quickly enough to the demands of the predominately Catholic Northern Ireland Campaign for Civil Rights (NICRA). With the introduction of British troops, the rise of paramilitary bodies on both sides of the sectarian divide, and flashpoints such as the use of internment and the events of 'Bloody Sunday', Northern Ireland descended into a cycle of violence from which it has struggled to escape.[6]

The conflict in Northern Ireland has affected all aspects of life in the Province including sport. Despite legislation which has attempted to remove discrimination on religious grounds in the areas of employment and housing, the legal attempts to outlaw paramilitary organisations and the recent and continuing attempts at a peace process, Northern Ireland is a divided society. The Catholic and Protestant communities live in separate housing estates, they vote differently, are schooled separately, attend separate churches and largely play different games.

The division in sport has manifested itself in a number of ways, some historical, others that have developed in response to the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland. With the partition of Ireland in the early years of the 1920s some sporting bodies, such as those controlling soccer, divided along the lines of the border. The IFA controlled the game north of the border; the FAI controlled the south.[7] Both bodies ran separate professional leagues and both were recognised by the international governing body FIFA and the European body UEFA. This situation continues to the present day.

Other sports however, such as boxing, did not act on the partition of Ireland, and continue to run their affairs on an All-Ireland basis. In doing so they have been recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), although in other sports the IOC sees Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. This has led to difficulties for Protestant boxers from Northern Ireland. Although having British citizenship they are forced, if they wish to participate at the Olympics, to represent Ireland. The IOC does not see them, as being from a Northern Ireland that is part of the UK (whereas a show jumper or athlete from the Province would compete for Britain). The problems that this causes are evidenced by the experience of Wayne McCullough, a Protestant from the fiercely loyalist Shankill Road in Belfast. He fought for Ireland at the 1988 and 1992 Olympic Games winning Silver at Barcelona. The celebration of his success was muted as it was won under a foreign flag and in the extreme led to his relations being intimidated and beaten by Loyalist paramilitaries.[8]

Other sports such as cycling, which although initially accepting the border, have since split within Northern Ireland into two bodies, the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation (NICF) and the Ulster Cycling Federation (UCF). Although both bodies state that they are non-sectarian, it does appear that the NICF has a Protestant predominance and the UCF represents a greater number of Catholics.[9]

Sport is thus divided as a result of history along religious and ideological lines. The domestic official bodies have no general consensus as to whether or not they recognise partition, and the international sporting bodies do nothing to enforce a common norm from above. The official divisions that stem from the 1920s are replicated in the symbols of identity used by different sports. Some such as Gaelic Games which organise on an All-Ireland basis fly the Irish tricolour at Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) grounds and its sportspeople stand for the anthem of the Irish Republic, 'A Soldier's Song'. Soccer in Northern Ireland uses the Red Hand of Ulster as their flag, yet the national team stand for the British anthem of 'God Save the Queen'. At the Olympics the Irish Amateur Boxing Association will use the Irish Tricolour and stand for 'A Soldier's Song' whereas at the Commonwealth Games the Northern Irish representatives will fly the Red Hand of Ulster and sing 'The Londonderry Air'.[10]

Within all this official confusion as to what a sport represents it is hardly surprising that sport often acts as a force of division in Northern Ireland. Michael Billig wrote that he:

> read the sporting pages, turning to them more quickly than is appropriate, given the news of suffering on other pages. Regularly I answer the invitation to celebrate national sporting triumphs. If a citizen from the homeland runs quicker or jumps higher than foreigners I feel pleasure. Why, I do not know. I want the national team to beat the teams of other countries, scoring more goals, runs or whatever.[11]

Billig was writing from the perspective of an Englishman who also accepts and celebrates the fact that he is part of a wider Britain. For him their is a clear sense of who his team is – England in soccer and cricket, Britain at the Olympics or Commonwealth Games. For Catholics in Northern Ireland (and to a lesser extent Protestants) they cannot embrace national and international competition in the same way as Billig as there is no agreed notion, either domestically or internationally, of what the nation is. There is no single anthem or flag, no single sporting body, and no clearly agreed geographical notion in existence of the Ireland that Catholics want to see on the sports field.[12] Once this obvious historical and organisational confusion, with the accompanying contested identities, is overlaid with the reality of the modern troubles, it is easy to understand why sports for Catholics have developed along exclusive lines and why inclusiveness has largely failed. It is clear that while there is much confusion within the sporting arena within Northern Ireland, with respect of issues of identity, it is clear that sporting bodies reflect, reinforce and often legitimise the division of the communities in Northern Ireland. In this context, we have to accept that while sport has many noble and worthwhile attributes and can bring people closer together, it can also act as an agent of intransigence. In this, is sport in Northern Ireland any different to debates that circulate around the issues of policing, the religious

divides that are apparent in education, and the complexities of identity that overlay the arena of housing provision?

**Gaelic Games and the choice of exclusiveness.**

Michael Cusack founded the GAA in Thurles in 1884. It formed part of the wider revival of Gaelic culture, and had political nationalism as one of the cornerstones of its belief. Cusack argued that Irish pastimes and sports had been destroyed by the English influence and if the late nineteenth century trend for Irish people to play so-called 'garrison games', i.e. soccer and cricket, continued, there would be no indigenous Irish culture left. Without a specifically Irish sporting culture, which could form links in the popular imagination between sporting endeavour, the Irish language, the Catholic religion and the ancient spirit of the Gael, then there could never be a successful Irish national reawakening. In organising the first meeting Cusack demanded that there was a need 'for Irish people to take the management of their games in[to] their own hands'.[13] In the context of religion and sport Cusack's choice of patrons for the new body are central to our understanding. The three patrons were Charles Stewart Parnell (Leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party), Michael Davitt (Founder and leading member of the Land League) and Archbishop Croke of Cashel. As Mandle noted, Cusack's choices 'demonstrated accurate recognition of the three most important streams feeding Irish nationalism of the time'.[14] Croke was representative of one of the central driving forces which underpinned the Gaelic revival and the late nineteenth century resurgence in nationalism, the Catholic Church. In accepting the invitation to become patron of the GAA, Croke offered the clearest statement of how sport, religion and politics were to be linked in Ireland.

> One of the most painful, let me assure you, and at the same time, one of the most frequently recurring, reflections that, as an Irishman, I am compelled to make in connection with the present aspect of things in this country, is derived from the ugly and irritating fact, that we are daily importing from England, not only her manufactured goods. but together with her fashions, her accents, her vicious literature, her music, her dances, and her manifold mannerisms, her games also, and her pastimes, to the utter discredit of our own grand national sports, and to the sore humiliation of every genuine son and daughter of the old land. . . . Indeed if we continue travelling for the next score years in the same direction that we have been going in for some time past, condemning the sports that were practised by our forefathers, effacing our national features as though we were ashamed of them, and putting on, with England's stuffs and broadcloths, her masher habits and such other effeminate follies as she may recommend, we had better at once, and publicly, abjurer nationality, clap hands for joy at the sight of the Union

> Jack, and place 'England's bloody red' exultantly above the green.[15]

The appointment of Croke linked the GAA with the force of Catholicism from the start. This is a relationship which has not waned with the passing years, Of the twelve patrons that the GAA had during its first century of existence, seven of them, two Cardinals and five Archbishops, have been drawn from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

The centrality of the GAA within Irish life was underpinned by the events of the revolutionary period from the 1890s up to the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1921. As a movement, although primarily a sporting one, the GAA espoused the cause of a thirty-two county Irish Republic. As an organisation members of the radical Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) infiltrated the GAA. As a result it became an intensely political body and served as a front for the promotion of radical nationalism. The clerics who were involved in the GAA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century opposed the IRB involvement, as the IRB were a secret organisation. The Church battled the IRB for control of the GAA, but was ultimately defeated. However, despite clerical opposition to its role within the Association, the IRB was committed to the creation of a Catholic Ireland as a central part of its ideology.[16] Such a commitment did much to assure members of the clergy that the GAA was still a centrally important vehicle in the promotion of Catholic values. Thus, even in division, as the GAA has often been through its history, the Catholic identity of the movement has always been central.

Members of the GAA were involved in the events of the 1916 Easter Rising and countless others, although not directly involved, were arrested by the British in the aftermath of 1916 as the GAA was perceived by the British as a subversive national organisation. It is clear from the literature surrounding the Rising how important the imagery and ideology of Catholicism was to those who took part.[17] In 1920 during the War of Independence the GAA was the target of a reprisal attack after Michael Collins and his IRA operatives had killed members of British intelligence. Thirteen people, including one player, died when the Auxiliaries of the British Army drove into Croke Park in Dublin and fired into the crowd. This event was depicted somewhat badly by Neil Jordan in his 1996 film, *Michael Collins,* but its use by Jordan as an incident worth portraying demonstrates the central place of the GAA in the mythology of the Catholic and nationalist struggle for independence. As de Burca has commented, 'the GAA was justly proud of the recognition by the British, implicit in the selection of the target for the reprisal, of the Associations identity with what one of the shrewdest observers called, "the underground nation"'.[18] With the foundation of the Irish Free State the GAA became the third pillar which supported the nation behind state and church. As Sugden and Bairner have argued, 'its [the GAA] pre-political function [was] more or less inverted from a traditional position of antagonism to the state to that of outward supporter; whereas the GAA had been formed in the 1880s as part of a campaign of resistance against British

hegemony, by the late 1920s it had become a vital part of the institutional infrastructure of the fledgling Irish Free State'.[19] Since 1922 the GAA has performed an important but uncontroversial role in Southern Ireland. However, as an all-Ireland body with a clear nationalist, and thus tendentially religious agenda it was bound to play a more controversial role in Northern Ireland with the onset of the modern troubles.

In the North the GAA has been able to play out the role it apparently believes it played in the South up to 1922. It has been able to position itself as one of the few legally functioning national based bodies in the North,[20] and from that position has played a central role in defining nationalist identity. It has consistently stressed a separate Catholic and Irish identity and has pursued the cause of Irish unity and the concomitant destruction of the Northern State with its Protestant British backed hegemony. Throughout the years of the troubles the GAA has used its history to promote its own standing amongst the nationalist community. It has constantly referred to the nationalist heroes of the past and used the language of romantic Catholicism and nationalism by stressing the fourth green field ideal. The correlation between the Irish revolution of 1912-22 and the northern situation is problematic. The GAA has pursued in its rhetoric ideals which belong alongside the language of physical force Republicanism rather than the more realistic constitutional nationalism of the SDLP. A common revisionist critique of the IRA and Sinn Féin is that their view of history has become warped in the pursuit of a contemporary political agenda. The same is true of the GAA. Not only in the thrust of its own beliefs, but probably more importantly in view of the dynamics of the North, in the way the Association's aims have been perceived by their opponents. McGarry and O'Leary have summed up the GAA's position by stating,

> the GAA has been the most successful cultural nationalist organisation in Ireland, and has undoubtedly revived and strengthened traditional native sports – and on a wholly amateur basis. However, it success has been at a price. Ulster Protestants and the security forces have viewed the GAA with suspicion, as a nursery school for republicans – Padraig Pearse was one of its most famous graduates, and numerous convicted IRA prisoners have followed in his footsteps. It is not therefore surprising that GAA games and members have been subject to harassment.[21]

The GAA's position as a Catholic and nationalist flagbearer has been transferred to the North, not only in its own mind, but also and problematically, in the minds of its opponents. This position has resulted in the GAA taking a central role in the politics of the North whilst 'operating a very narrow definition of politics'.[22]

Under the GAA's Rule 21, members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Army are excluded from the membership of the Association. As with

Bloody Sunday and the attack on Croke Park in the first decades of the century, elements within the security forces and the loyalist community identify GAA clubs with Catholicism and nationalism. As a result clubs have become the targets for attacks of violence and arson. In October 1991 the Ulster Defence Association added the GAA to its lists of legitimate targets because of its 'continual sectarianism and support for the republican movement'.[23] This was reinforced by a further press release which declared that targets are 'those associated with the republican war machine . . . and identified at least a dozen members of the Gaelic Athletic Association as being involved'.[24] The reality of this threat has resulted in the deaths of individuals associated with or present at GAA owned premises, and attacks on GAA clubhouses. In 1992 a man was shot dead while at the Sean Martin GAA club in east Belfast, and the landmark 3,000th victim of the troubles was killed while outside the Lámh Dhearg GAA club in Hannahstown West Belfast. The attitude of the British Army has added to the feeling of siege amongst members of the GAA. As Gaelic games were organised on a thirty-two county all-Ireland basis there has always been constant traffic across the border made up of supporters, officials and players of the different teams. These have been stopped and searched by the army, and in 1988 Aiden McAnespie was shot by the army at a checkpoint while travelling to play Gaelic football in the South. The Army has also been criticised for its occupation of Belfast's Casement Park in the early 1970s and its use of the Crossmaglen Rangers' ground in South Armagh as a helicopter base. The place of the GAA at the centre of the Catholic and nationalist community whilst existing primarily as a sporting organisation has led to heightened levels of animosity towards it.

The British government has funded the GAA in ground building, promotion of the sports and so on through the Sports Council and the Department of Education, yet the GAA maintains its ban on British Army and RUC personnel under Rule 21. This has led to opposition from Unionist politicians who object to what they perceive as a front organisation for terrorism receiving funding. In this there is an obvious dichotomy. While on one hand the British state funds the GAA, the other sees its elected officials in the Unionist parties, the army and the RUC remaining deeply suspicious.[25] Problematically this has led at times to increased surveillance of the GAA by the security forces and a heightened sense of animosity from the Protestant community generally, and Loyalist paramilitaries specifically, because they view the GAA, its clubs and its members as inseparable from the cause of Republican terrorism. This cycle of mutual suspicion and conflicting political ideologies cannot be broken until the GAA removes its apparently sectarian message from its sporting agenda, an idea that was unthinkable until the start of the peace process.[26]

In the North during the troubles the GAA has been a central focus for the Catholic and nationalist community under its cover as a sporting association. It has espoused the broad republican and nationalist cause and in doing so has cemented its support amongst the Catholic and nationalist community whilst bringing about the wrath of Unionists politicians, Loyalists

Paramilitaries, the RUC and the British Army. Institutionally and socially the GAA has backed the creation of a thirty-two county Ireland in direct contradiction to the wishes of Ulster's other tradition and resolutely fails to recruit Protestants to its ranks.[27]

**Soccer and the Failure of Inclusiveness.**

Soccer, the global game, is a game that is dominated at the professional, semi-professional and organisational level by one tradition: Protestantism. It has failed to act as a conduit for the inclusion of both religions The historic and contemporary experience of soccer clubs that are identified with Catholicism demonstrate all to clearly how destructive the troubles and the accompanying sectarianism can be.

After the partition of Ireland as a result of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 two separate bodies emerged to govern football in the island of Ireland. In the Irish Free State, what is now the Irish Republic, FAI took control. In Northern Ireland the IFA held sway. In the North teams such as Linfield and Belfast Celtic continued to dominate the soccer scene in the Province's first city, while 1929 saw the foundation of Derry City in the second city. Soccer was hugely popular and the rivalry intense. Not only were Linfield, Belfast Celtic and Derry City the three leading teams from the two most important cities, but also the rivalry was given an extra dimension by the very nature of Northern Irish society. Teams such as Linfield were identified as Protestant and unionist, while Belfast Celtic and Derry City were identified as Catholic and nationalist. Violence between fans, and at times on the pitch, was part and parcel of the match day experience when these teams met. Although this violence may have the normal sporting rivalry as its basis, it was always played out against a backdrop of sectarian hatred. This was, and still is, a problem endemic in Northern Irish society. As Dominic Murray noted, 'the more obvious manifestations of cultural life in Northern Ireland are inextricably built into the separated communities. The normal avenues of communication and contact between people which would provide a tendency towards the creation of a single shared culture are closed'.[28] Within the framework which Murray suggests we can see the base root of all the problems of soccer. Although it should be a leisure pursuit, a common language and an experience that unites elements within a society, in Northern Ireland this has not been the case. John Sugden and Scott Harvie were able to conclude 'the vast majority of clubs currently operating at senior level are associated to a greater or lesser degree with the Protestant community and are, by and large, administered and supported by people from such backgrounds'.[29] So despite the fact that soccer has always been a game that provides a common language for everyone in Northern Ireland (interest in the English and Scottish Leagues is high and cuts across community, as does participation in the sport at a grass roots level), the actual operation of senior soccer in the Province has not reflected this common interest. As the game is predominantly Protestant (and can thus be seen as tendentially unionist) individuals on the terraces, in the boardrooms, and on the pitch, have always

brought their own preconceived notions of what they, and their opponents, represent into the soccer arena.[30] It does not matter that Derry City, for example, have always pursued an open policy in the recruitment of players and committee men from both sides of the sectarian divide and was traditionally supported by fans from the Catholic Bogside and the Protestant Waterside, what mattered was that the followers of teams such as Linfield, the representatives of Protestantism and unionism, perceived Derry City and other Catholic clubs as bastions of Catholicism and nationalism. This is the central idea here, that soccer (and indeed most aspects of cultural and leisure life) in Northern Ireland acts not as a arena in which to unify competing traditions within the community, but instead acts as another forum in which division, mutual suspicion and sectarian hatred can be reinforced by both traditions present within the community.[31]

Before moving onto discuss the experience of Derry City in the period after 1968 it is worth exploring the events surrounding Belfast Celtic in the late 1940s. This will demonstrate that soccer in Northern Ireland, even in a period prior to the modern troubles, was rife with the destructive sectarian tensions which led to the demise of Derry City some twenty years later.

Belfast Celtic was founded in 1891. It was based in Catholic West Belfast and took the inspiration for its name from the famous Glasgow Celtic. As a junior team Belfast Celtic had beaten Linfield 1-0 and a great rivalry began. After their admittance to the senior league in 1896 Belfast Celtic became locked into a constant struggle for footballing dominance with Linfield with the league championship and the cup doing a constant shuttle across the city between the two teams. As a result of the intense competition between the two teams, the religious and political nature of their respective support bases and because of the huge political upheavals in Ireland up to the mid 1920s Belfast Celtic withdrew from the league from 1915-18 and again from 1920-24. This was in response to club fears over the safety of their staff and supporters while games were being played out against the monumental political changes of these years. The last game of the 1919-20 season illustrates how real these fears were. At a Belfast Celtic-Glentoran game violence between sections of the crowd led to an abandonment of the match. The response to the abandonment was for an individual in the Belfast Celtic section of the crowd to fire a revolver at the Glentoran crowd.[32] It was difficult for sporting normality to exist in such a climate. Although Belfast Celtic rejoined the league in 1924-5 season their games against traditional enemies such as Linfield and Glentoran were often marred by violence. In 1948 the final straw came. On Boxing Day Belfast Celtic played Linfield at the latter's Windsor Park ground. The game ended in a l-l draw, but the final whistle was the signal for a riot in which the Linfield crowd attacked the Belfast Celtic players. Most of the team and many officials received serious injuries, the worst being Jimmy Jones, the Belfast Celtic striker, who suffered a broken leg. As a result of his injuries Jones never played again. The supreme irony of this blatantly sectarian fuelled riot was that Jones, although a Belfast Celtic player, and thus identified with Catholicism and nationalism, was actually a

Protestant.[33] The response of the Belfast Celtic board to the events of Boxing Day was swift and absolute. They announced that at the end of the season they would withdraw from senior football, as they could no longer play soccer in such a climate. Despite their inter-war record of fourteen league championships and their undoubted pedigree as one of the finest and best supported teams in Northern Irish football, Belfast Celtic left the league and never returned. The forces of sectarianism had claimed its first soccer victim.

The case of Derry City is probably the most famous and has been covered in detail elsewhere.[34] Derry City's ground was, from its earliest days, the Brandywell in the heart of Derry's Catholic Bogside. In the late 1960s and the first explosive years of the modern troubles, the Brandywell was located in the centre of the of one of the most disturbed areas, and a battleground between the forces of radical nationalism, most notably the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the fledgling Provisional IRA, and the massed ranks of the Stormont Parliament security machine, including the B Specials, the RUC and eventually the British Army.[35] In such a climate it was impossible for Derry City to play their league and cup matches at the Brandywell, and they were forced to play their 'home' matches some twenty miles away at Coleraine. Derry City did their utmost to stay in the league, but the IFA failed to give them any real backing or encouragement, preferring instead to see the Derry situation as one that was governed by the security forces and the decisions made by other IFA clubs to stay away from Derry. The IFA failed Derry City and the club decided to leave the league in 1972. It is clear that while the political and security situation in Derry made the hosting of weekly soccer games difficult, the failure of a Protestant dominated IFA Council and the decisions made by the predominantly Protestant soccer clubs in the IFA to stay away from the Brandywell, were the real causes of their departure from the league. Although Derry City eventually reformed and joined the Southern based League of Ireland in 1985, an unavoidable conclusion is that they had to leave their 'home' league as a result of clearly sectarian forces. Catholic clubs were unwanted by the IFA and the majority of senior clubs.

It is clear from the experience of Belfast Celtic and Derry City that soccer in Northern Ireland could never be played without the forces of sectarianism encroaching into sport. Since the departure of Derry City there have only been two clubs clearly identified with the Catholic and nationalist traditions left in the League: Cliftonville and Donegal Celtic. There are endless examples of matches featuring Cliftonville ending in violence, but I use the example of Donegal Celtic to demonstrate that the forces that led to the demise of Derry City are still present in Northern Irish soccer. In 1990 Donegal Celtic had been drawn at home in the Cup to play Linfield. Donegal are an Intermediate League team from the fiercely Nationalist Andersonstown area. The RUC, acting as they had done with Derry City, advised the IFA that the game could not go ahead safely at the Donegal ground, and advised it be moved to Linfield's Windsor Park. Despite seeking a High Court judgement to overrule this move, Donegal were forced to visit Linfield. The game, despite the RUC's

fears over playing the match at Andersonstown ended in a riot, with fifty plus injured and the firing of plastic bullets. The nationalist press attacked both the RUC and the IFA for failing to ensure crowd safety and cast doubts on the political and sectarian neutrality of the IFA in making such decisions, i.e. that the IFA, based at Windsor Park, would always favour Protestant and unionist teams over Catholic and nationalist ones.[36] The experience of Donegal Celtic demonstrates that the problems of the early 1970s that plagued Derry City and the way in which members of the Catholic and nationalist tradition would view such problems had not been resolved some twenty years later.

It was my contention early in this section that soccer in Northern Ireland is dominated by one tradition over the other. That is not to argue that soccer is solely a Protestant and unionist concern in the way that Gaelic Games are the sole preserve of the Catholic and nationalist tradition, but rather the senior levels of soccer in terms of team loyalty and administration are dominated by one tradition. The actions of FIFA and the FAI reinforce this domination.

To illustrate this point I return to Donegal Celtic. In 1991 another Irish Cup game, this time against Ards, was moved by the RUC again citing public order fears as the motivation. In response Donegal Celtic withdrew from the competition and applied to the FAI to join the Southern League. Both the FAI and FIFA rejected the proposed move, despite the precedent set by Derry City, and the similarity of Donegal's plight. By 1972 it had become clear that Derry City could not function in Northern Irish soccer because of the prejudices involved and the violence attached – in 1991 the situation for Donegal Celtic was identical as no one would ensure the safe conduct of soccer matches in Andersonstown. The reasons behind the FAI and FIFA rejection was the geographical situation of Donegal Celtic – no one could ensure the safety of Southern teams travelling across the border into the heart of Belfast.[37]

Northern Irish soccer has reached a position where it cannot, and some would say will not, deal with teams coming from predominantly Catholic and nationalist areas. By seeing the Derry City situation as a one off – which evidently it is not – the FAI and FIFA essentially wash their hands of any responsibility to teams from Northern Ireland's second tradition. The result, as Sugden and Bairner were able to conclude, is that 'the integrative potential of football is increasingly difficult to realise'.[38] In a similar vein Arthur Aughey in his submission to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation pointed out that 'In Northern Ireland association football has emerged during the troubles to become the symbol of Ulster Loyalist identity'.[39] Finally, Alan Bairner was able to write that 'the impression created is of a Protestant community seeking to maintain control over a sport in a manner which could be said to reflect Unionist political efforts to maintain the Union in the face of growing encroachment by Irish Nationalists'.[40] In this I see few signs of hope for Northern Irish soccer. Even if the current peace process is an ongoing success, can sectarianism and its accompanying violence be removed from soccer in the Province? In fact, is it not more likely that with the removal of terrorist violence from the political scene as an outlet for sectarianism, which

other venues and spaces, such as football grounds, will become the focus for those with an axe to grind? Sport as an area for religious inclusion has failed in Northern Ireland.

In 1985 when Derry City joined the League of Ireland the club looked forward to welcoming all elements of Derry society back to the Brandywell. They were going to play soccer in a League devoid of Linfield matches, security forces and all the connected problems. In 1985 a Protestant from the Waterside was able to tell a local reporter that he would not, despite being a lifelong supporter, be returning to the Brandywell. 'Look at the game against Shamrock Rovers last year [1984]. The majority of the crowd were only intent on annoying those people who were not of their own religious persuasion. They seem to me to have found a vehicle for their bigotry that they have searched for years to get. I want no part of that scene'.[41] In 1995 the veteran Derry sports writer Frank Curran maintained that Protestants from the Waterside would still not attend the Brandywell.[42] In a similar vein Sugden and Bairner wrote, 'Most of them [Protestants] express their feelings simply by staying away from the Brandywell. The hooligans among them, however, lie in wait ready to throw missiles at busloads of Derry City supporters as they return from games in the Irish Republic.[43] This is in many ways the saddest aspect of the Derry City story and the context within which soccer has to exist in Northern Ireland. After being forced out of the Irish League and having to reinvent itself in a foreign League, Derry City did not rid themselves of the accompanying sectarianism. The Protestant and unionist supporters chose to either stay away or attack Derry City as a symbol of Catholicism and nationalism, now made worse after their entry into the Southern League.

Derry City, like Belfast Celtic and Donegal Celtic, were victims of violent tendencies present in their society that could not be contained. Despite deserving credit for reforming, their rise from the ashes was a one off and offers nothing to clubs in a similar position. After reforming Derry City were as much a victim of the old forces, albeit to lesser degree, as they had been in the early 1970s. If anything this demonstrates that sport in Northern Ireland will always struggle to be removed from its political and social context.

In Northern Ireland symbols of allegiance are centrally important to everyday life, and which soccer team you choose to follow and what game you choose to play defines, rightly or wrongly, who and what you are. This is not a new problem and pre-dates the emergence of the modern troubles. In Northern Ireland, sport rather than being a common unifying theme in a troubled environment, is too often another excuse for division and antagonism. This is not to suggest that sport is solely an instrument of division between the religious communities in Northern Ireland; it undoubtedly bridges many gaps. But sport, is like many other aspects of society in Northern Ireland, even in the years of an ongoing peace process, deeply divided. One wonders whether sport, an arena that so readily lends itself to tribal, nationalistic and religious identity, can move beyond the cause of division before key aspects of Northern Ireland's future, such as a mutually acceptable police force, are put in place?

**NOTES:**

1. For a discussion of many of the themes here see M. Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic Games, Soccer and Identity since 1884* (Dublin 1999).

2. *Irish Times,* 26 October 1996.

3. J. Turner, 'Irish pain that does not cease', *The Guardian,* 21 July 1997, p. 8.

4. D. Sharrock, 'Goodbye to all that, as the Belfast sporting club where W.G. Grace swung his bat uproots for Protestant sanctuary', *The Guardian,* 13 August 1997, p. 6.

5. H. McDonald and A. Alderson, 'IRA terror for family of jockey who spoke out', *The Sunday Times,* 27 July 1997, p. 6.

6. For details of the origins of the modern troubles see, S. Wichert, *Northern Ireland Since 1945* (London 1991); C. Kennedy-Pipe, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland* (Harlow 1997).

7. For details see H.F. Moorhouse, 'One State, Several Countries: Soccer and Nationality in a United Kingdom' in J.A. Mangan (ed.), *Tribal Identities. Nationalism, Europe, Sport* (London 1996), pp. 55-74.

8. To understand the complexities of the McCullough case see M. Cronin, Which Nation, Which Flag? Boxing and National Identities in Ireland', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport,* 32, 2, June 1997, pp. 131-46.

9. See J. Sugden and S. Harvie, *Sport and Community Relations in Northern Ireland* (Coleraine 1995), pp. 118-26.

10. For the confused and contradictory use of anthems and flags by different sports see Sugden and Harvie, *Sport and Community Relations,* pp. 38-42.

11. M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London 1995), p. 125.

12. Rugby Union is one of the few sports which operates on an agreed and widely accepted All-Ireland basis which is accepted by both Catholics and Protestants. However, the majority of Catholics involved at the top level are from the South, especially from Leinster and Munster. As a result of this clear zoning of Rugby support we cannot speak of a game which operates across the divide in Northern Ireland, as Rugby Union in the Province is still the preserve of Protestants.

13. *United Ireland,* 11 October 1884.

14. W.F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics, 1884-1924* (London 1987), p. 99.

15. Cumann Lúthchleas Gael, *A Century of Service, 1884-1984* (Dublin 1984), p. 18.

16. For an excellent and detailed coverage of the IRB and GAA relationship see Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association.*

17. For details see F.X. Martin, 1916 – myth, fact mystery' in *Studica Hibernica,* 7, 1967.

18. M. de Burca, *The GAA: A History of the Gaelic Athletic Association* (Naas 1980) p. 150.

19. J. Sugden and A. Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (Leicester 1993), p. 33.

20. The GAA is the second biggest organisation across the 32 counties in terms of membership after the Catholic Church. It operates successfully and legally on both sides of the border. Political parties have, with the exception of Sinn Fein, operated strictly on one side of the border only.

21. J. McGarry and B. O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford 1995), p. 224.

22. Sugden and Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society,* p. 35.

23. *The Independent,* 9 October 1991.

24. *The Guardian,* 16 November 1991.

25. See Sugden and Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society,* pp. 35-6.

26. In 1998 the political parties in Northern Ireland signed the Good Friday Agreement that paved the way for a peaceful settlement of the troubles. It was ratified by a huge vote in referendums held on both sides of the Irish border. Despite such promising signs the GAA refused, at a Special Congress held to debate the issue, to delete Rule 21. At the time of writing the Rule had been suspended with a view to further debate at an unspecified future date.

27. According to one survey the membership of the GAA is 100% Catholic. See Sugden and Harvie, *Sport and Community Relations* for details, p. 30.

28. D. Murray, 'Culture, Religion and Violence in Northern Ireland' in S. Dunn (ed.), *Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland,* (London 1995), p. 228.

29. Sugden and Harvie, *Sport and Community Relations in Northern Ireland,* p. 95.

30. For a recent analysis of soccer in Northern Ireland, especially from the mid-1990s, see A. Bairner and P. Shirlow, 'The Territorial Politics of Soccer in Northern Ireland' in G. Armstrong and R. Giulianotti (eds.), *Football Cultures and Identities* (Basingstoke. 1999).

31. For useful coverage of some of the themes dealt with here see J. Sugden and A. Bairner, Sectarianism and Soccer Hooliganism in Northern Ireland' in T. Reilly, A. Lees, K. Davids and W.J. Murphy (eds.), *Science and football* (London 1988), pp. 572-8, and J. Sugden and A. Bairner, 'Observe the Sons of Ulster: Football and Politics in Northern Ireland' in A. Tomlinson and G. Whannel, *Off the Ball. The Football World Cup* (London 1986) pp. 146-57.

32. See Sugden and Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society,* p. 82.

33. For full details of the match see J. Kennedy, *Belfast Celtic* (Belfast 1989) pp. 91-102.

34. See V. Duke and L. Crolley, *Football, Nationality and the State* (London 1996), pp. 70-5.

35. For a good description of political events in Derry, see E. McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (3rd edn., London 1993).

36. See Sugden and Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society,* pp. 87-9.

37. Sugden and Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society,* p. 89.

38. Sugden and Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society,* p. 89.

39. *Building Trust in Ireland. Studies Commissioned by the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation,* (Dublin 1996), p. 41.

40. A. Bairner, ‘The arts and sport’ in Aughey, A. and Morrow, D. (eds.), *Northern Ireland Politics* (London 1996) p. 172.

41. *The Sentinel,* 24 July 1985.

42. Interview with Frank Curran.

43. Sugden and Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society,* p. 87.