

The Greening of American Sport: Sport and the Nineteenth Century Irish Immigrant

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Why the largest wave of immigrants to America's shores in the nineteenth-century has been ignored by sport historians while smaller and seemingly less significant ethnic groups have enjoyed ongoing attention in the literature, remains a mystery. This paper examines the underlying reasons why the contribution of Irish immigrants to the growth of this nation has generally been overlooked and will focus upon their deepseated relationship with sport. Among the theses explored are the "melting pot" theory of assimilation, the related ideas of cultural independence and pluralism, and the constructive reality of conflict between mainstream American and emerging ethnic groups.

The appearance of cultural heroes, including a long line of Irish-American prizefighters (Ryan, Kilrain, Sullivan and Corbett), baseball stars (Kelly, Bresnahan, Mack and Comisky) and Olympic track and field champions (Connolly, Burkey and Flanagan), attests to the growing insurgence of Irishmen into American sport. Similarly, sports teams adopting such Gaelic-associated appellations as "Fenians", "Celtics", "Shamrocks", "Hibemians", and "Emeralds", increased in number as denizens from the Land of Erin made greater inroads into the traditional American pastimes of rowing, track and field, and baseball.

Ever-conscious of their ethnic roots, Irish-Americans strove to protect their cultural identity through introducing and promoting Gaelic football and hurling under the aegis of the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish American Athletic Club. Furthermore, while the work of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Emerald Society and other Irish cultural

groups has generally been associated with political, temperance, labor, literary and other social causes, sport was seldom forgotten.

Utilizing archive material of the American-Irish Historical Society together with nineteenth-century Irish-American newspapers and a variety of other sources, this paper represents the first attempt by a scholar to comprehensively describe and explain the relationship between sport and the largest national group of immigrants to arrive in the United States during the 1800s.