

Dennis P. Ryan
University of Western Ontario

***Playing the Game on Their Own Terms:* The Role of Sport Within the Irish Catholic Community of Toronto, 1880-1920**

During the mid to late nineteenth century in Toronto, Irish Catholic immigrants and their descendants constituted the city's main minority group, subsumed within a staunchly British Protestant city. An analysis of interactions within the Irish Catholic community and outward with the British Protestant mainstream reveals a complex set of processes, centred on the concepts of cultural identity, ethnicity, religion, and nationalism. An examination of the historiography dealing with these issues highlights the important role sport can play in these processes. Studies of Irish Catholic communities in Scotland, Australia, the United States, and Canada have been particularly instructive, illuminating the manner in which sport has been a vehicle for maintaining ethno-religious identity among immigrants, while simultaneously expressing their desire to interact with the wider community. This paper argues, similarly, that Toronto's Irish Catholic community utilized its sporting teams as a means to bolster ethno-religious pride within a hostile environment, and to interact with the British Protestant mainstream.

The paper challenges the idea that in an immigration context, one either seeks to 'assimilate' or 'acculturate' into one's new homeland *or* retains cultural characteristics or connections associated with one's former homeland. This simplistic notion, in relation to the study of sport and ethnicity, has often been applied to the Irish Catholic immigrant experience. Specifically, Irish immigrants who participate in Gaelic games (the national sports of Ireland) are said to be retaining their cultural identities, while those who participate in the sports of their new homeland are said to be 'assimilating' and foregoing their cultural background. However, this study of the Toronto situation, in addition to others, demonstrates that another interpretation is possible. Although Irish immigrants adopted, wholeheartedly, the North American sports of football, baseball, and hockey, they did so within an ethno-religious context — that is, with an Irish Catholic sport club or school and with the express desire of competing against British Protestant sport clubs or schools. Therefore, the adoption of local sports as opposed to the continuation of traditional Irish sports does not signify an abandonment of cultural pride and desire to assimilate.

This desire to compete against, and defeat, representatives of the British Protestant mainstream exemplified an inclination towards full inclusion within society as a whole. In this way, the Irish Catholic community rallied around its sporting representatives, viewing athletic success as an assertion of its group esteem. Sport played a powerful role in the city of Toronto, as it facilitated interaction between groups that had previously only met as adversaries in rioting and streetfighting. In addition, prominent Irish Catholic leaders of the era credited athletic success as a catalyst in spurring gains in other areas, be they educational, commercial, or political.

A variety of primary source documents from the archives of St. Michael's College, as well as several Protestant colleges in the city, were of vital importance. In addition, an array of newspapers served as valuable sources of information. Local Irish Catholic newspapers were of the greatest help, while Orange and mainstream dailies also proved to be good sources.

This study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it adds to the body of work on the importance of sport to cultural identity, general, and especially for excluded minority groups. It also provides a valuable insight into Irish Catholic culture in Toronto, as well as the interaction between that group and the British Protestant majority. Thus, it contributes to the literature on the city of Toronto and allows cross-cultural comparisons with Irish Catholic immigrant communities in other parts of the world. Such a comparison may reveal unique characteristics about the Canadian experience, or bolster its conformity to other British-influenced nations. Finally, this study provides further support the argument that the sustaining of cultural identity through associationalism and ethnic interaction does not preclude integrative tendencies and a desire to participate fully in the new homeland.