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Racial Purity at the Celtic Fringe: The Irish Race Olympics, 1924-32

In 1924, 1928, and 1932, the Irish government hosted and funded Aonach Tailteann, the Irish Race Olympics. The three Olympics attracted competitors from Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Entry was restricted to those who were of Irish birth or could claim Irish heritage. Effectively Aonach Tailteann was a racially pure sporting and cultural event that sought the exclusion of all outsiders. Throughout the organizing stage, in its publicity and during the events themselves, the idea that there was an exclusive Irish race spread across the world was championed. The events that were chosen for Aonach Tailteann were predominantly chosen because of their Irish heritage, or else were governed by rules that excluded external influences. Principal amongst the sporting events were the Gaelic games of handball, Gaelic football and hurling, as well as an Irish athletics program. Aonach Tailteann included a wide variety of cultural competitions, and these also stressed Irish purity above all other concerns. There was a

multitude of competitions for Irish dancing, Irish music, art, and literature.

This paper explores the history of Aonach Tailteann, and examine why the new Irish state, which was seeking a place amongst the democratic nations of the world, chose to organize such a racially exclusive event. In understanding the reasons behind the choices that the Irish government made, the paper will illuminate a concern that was paramount in the 1920s and early 1930s: the purity of the race and the fitness of the nation. In positioning Aonach Tailteann as part of an exercise, which sought racial purity, it becomes clear that those competitors involved in the event were presenting their bodies for ideological purposes. From the opening ceremonies of Aonach Tailteann that included men and women dressed as ancient warriors from 1800 BC, through the strength and manliness of the leading hurlers, to the physical grace of the Irish dancers, the Irish Race Olympics championed and glorified the Irish body, its strength, grace, beauty, history and religious purity. By examining contemporary evidence from the period of Aonach Tailteann. and contextualizing these within theory relating to the body, the paper will offer a unique insight into a little understood area of sporting history.
