

W.F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association & Irish Nationalist Politics 1884-1924*. Christopher Helm, London, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1987. Index, pp.240, \$75.

This is a first-rate and fascinating book and Dr Mandle is master of his subject. It is not easy to nominate many books equally thought-provoking and intellectually revolutionary in Irish history over the last ten years -- it rivals S J Connolly's *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland* in stimulus and depth-potential. It is a lid-lifting book. In sports history also, it illustrates and illuminates much of that strange inter-relationship between politics and games, in which the game becomes far more than itself -- or an encapsulation or symbol -- but is the political disposition and emotions of a group, played out, in action on the only mode available or intelligible to the participants.

The novelty and achievement of Mandle's book are set out clearly in his final paragraph, in which he makes the following claim:

It is arguable that no organisation had done more for Irish nationalism than the GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association] -- not the IRB [Irish Republican Brotherhood], so influential in its founding but now dissolved, not the Gaelic League, its linguistic counterpart which had failed in its mission to restore the national language, not the Irish Parliamentary Party, which had been unable to adjust to the nationalist revival, not even Sinn Fein which had broken apart under the impact of the Treaty. The Gaelic Athletic Association had fulfilled its mission -- to revive the native games of Ireland, and to awaken the national spirit. Throughout all the vicissitudes, harassments, chicaneries, divisions, manipulations and disputes, it had kept the objective for its existence in view, and had succeeded in achieving them.

A large claim indeed -- that a sporting organisation, above all, had sustained through the heat of hostile days and years the spirit of Irish consciousness and independence -- but its basis rests on thorough and detailed scholarship, tight and disciplined argument, and keen evaluation of alternative scenarios. Above all, through the use of police files and the detail of meeting reports, Mandle is able to convey something of the workings of the Irish popular mind, in all its crudities, emotive extravagances, cunning, determination and nobility: this is history of the rough, in the rough, ringing tough and true through a Mandle style which is sardonic without being superior, and which conveys a sense of conviction and reality.

The nationalist role of the GAA has been stylised through such old film clips as show members marching in military formation with hurling sticks sloped on shoulders, seemingly an exotic and slightly absurd adjunct to the romance of the 1916 rebellion. The reality, as now revealed by Dr Mandle, is not only what was known, that the GAA acted as a front for the Irish Republican Brotherhood, but what importance that had for the IRB and how vital was the GAA as the repository of hard core determined nationalism at the grass roots ordinary level. He reveals also the reverse and context of the idealism -- quarrels and factionalism, extravagant denunciations in which all moderation and restraint were lost, cabals of nasty schemers plotting and operating in devious, unscrupulous venomous ways, and cheating of all kinds -- plus the unsavoury aspects of being riddled with both informers (reporting to the British) and hatred -- particularly of priests and the Irish Parliamentary Party. It is the negative side of the GAA, strongest in its earlier years, which gives Mandle's book so much of its bite and veracity, and lends it such striking credence as compelling history: here sport, politics and ideology are mixed in a dangerous heady concoction in which victory is imperative, an immensely exciting prospect at all levels. Here are games in which loss could seem -- could be -- slavery, even death. Perhaps Dr Mandle is a little too prosaic to take seriously enough some of the dramatic themes with which he deals: certainly the language of the Association sometimes strains credulity as it drifted into the domain of revolutionary politics in the Irish romantic tradition. The *Gaelic Athlete* thundering out on cleansing the world with blood, or the 'rolling tuck of the drum' in 1916, sounds a bit much even for the world of hurling -- but then, in ancient Ireland, hurling did have associations with violence and death.

A splendid book, particularly for those interested in sport and politics and the politics of sport. Great for those specialising in sporting bodies as revolutionary organisations -- surely *that* would be a select readership? But recommended too for those who like a good, entertaining, and profitable read, with a light touch, a serious purpose, and a feel for the history of the common man.

(It is good to know that the history of the GAA in Australia has long been under collection and study by Kerry Murphy, the man who appears as St Patrick in Sydney's St Patrick Day processions: it is to be hoped that we will soon see an Australian version of Mandle, or at least its distant echoes.)

Patrick O'Farrell  
History  
University of New South Wales