



**Griffin, B. and Strachan, J. (2019) 'Introduction: sport in Ireland from the 1880s to the 1920s', *Irish Studies Review*, 27 (3), pp. 299-308.**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Irish Studies Review* on 29/05/19 available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2019.1620984>

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## Introduction: Sport in Ireland from the 1880s to the 1920s

I

The study of sport in Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has – to risk a cliché from the sports world itself – progressed in leaps and bounds in recent decades. The period under discussion in the essays collected in this special issue of *Irish Studies Review*, from the 1880s to the 1920s, is of particular interest to historians. Before the 1880s, sport in Ireland – with the exception of horse racing<sup>1</sup> – was participated in and consumed mainly on an ad hoc basis,<sup>2</sup> and the little organised sport that had developed was largely the preserve of an unrepresentative elite who were intent on excluding the majority of the population from engaging in their athletic and other competitions and from joining the sports clubs under their control.<sup>3</sup> The club was central to several sports in Ireland before the 1880s, especially archery, cricket, cycling, athletics and cricket,<sup>4</sup> but in general there was little of the organisational and codification drive on a national level in Irish sports that was evident in Britain in the same period.<sup>5</sup> Rugby was the first Irish sport to see the permanent establishment of a national organisation that had control over its clubs and competitions throughout the entire country in the late Victorian era: this was the Irish Rugby Football Union, which was founded in 1879. Other sports saw similar organisational developments in the period covered by this special issue: the Irish Football Association was established in 1880, the Irish Bicycle Association in 1882 (changing its name to the Irish Cyclists' Association in 1884), the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in 1884, the Irish Amateur Athletic Association in 1885, the Irish County Polo Club Union in 1890, the Golfing Union of Ireland in 1891, the Irish Hockey Union in 1892, the Irish Amateur Swimming Association and the Irish Ladies' Golf Union in 1893, the Irish Ladies' Hockey Union in 1894, the Irish Amateur Gymnastic Association in 1895, the Irish Bicycle Polo Association in 1898, the Irish Amateur Rowing Union and the Irish Badminton Union in 1899, the Irish Automobile Club

in 1901,<sup>6</sup> the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland in 1902, the Irish Bowling Association in 1904, An Cumann Camógaíachta (the Camogie Association) in 1905, the Irish Lawn Tennis Association in 1908 and the Irish Amateur Boxing Association in 1911. This mushrooming of national controlling bodies for various sports is indicative of the keenness with which Irish enthusiasts for sport embraced the codification model that revolutionised sports activity in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. It also provides an insight into the sheer variety of sports in which Irish men and women participated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Irish historians were generally slower than scholars elsewhere to regard sport as worthy of scholarly discussion, and when they eventually turned their attention to the history of Irish sport, it is perhaps unsurprising that they at first concentrated mainly on exploring the history of Ireland's largest and most successful sports organisation, the GAA. The early decades of the organisation's history – those of the Irish cultural revival and revolutionary periods – were of particular interest to these pioneering scholars. Painstaking work by authors such as Marcus de Búrca and W. F. Mandle put the establishment and growth of the GAA into historical context by bringing to light the cultural and political factors that influenced the early promoters of the organisation. While it would be unfair to claim that they wrote mere administrative histories of the GAA, it was probably inevitable that much of their attention should have focused on negotiating and explaining the numerous internecine squabbles between key individuals and groups that jockeyed for control over the organisation in its formative decades.<sup>7</sup> More recent scholarship has not entirely neglected to explore further the behind-the-scenes debates and arguments to which the GAA's leaders devoted much of their time and energy,<sup>8</sup> but historians have also widened their scope and looked more closely at the social and cultural history of the GAA from the 1880s to the 1920s, a topic which Mandle pioneered in one of his earliest contributions on the GAA's history.<sup>9</sup> Our understanding of the social and cultural history of the GAA in the organisation's early decades has been enriched

by authors such as William Nolan, Tom Hunt, Richard McElligott, Conor Curran and Brian McCabe, all of whom who have used the county as their geographical focus,<sup>10</sup> as well as scholars who have provided a regional or national perspective on various aspects of the GAA's history in this period.<sup>11</sup> An important recent collection of essays on the GAA during the tumultuous years from 1913 to 1923 offers further evidence of the riches to be unearthed when Gaelic games are examined through the lens of the social, cultural or political historian.<sup>12</sup>

While Gaelic games from the 1880s to the 1920s continue to be the subject of important contributions from Irish sports historians,<sup>13</sup> historians have also turned their attention to other sports in this key period in the development of Irish sport. Kevin McCarthy's *Gold, Silver and Green* examines the participation of Irish athletes in the Olympic Games from 1896 to 1920, as well as the successful campaign to secure Irish representation on the International Olympic Committee in the early 1920s.<sup>14</sup> Liam O'Callaghan's study of rugby in Munster shows that that sport's appeal was much broader than one would presume from its supposed status as a "garrison game",<sup>15</sup> and David Toms and Conor Curran have produced similar findings in their examinations of the other "garrison game", association football, in Munster and Ulster, respectively,<sup>16</sup> as has Neal Garnham in his exploration of the sport's early development in Ireland as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Important book-length studies of the social history of such individual sports as tennis and cycling in Ireland have also been completed in recent decades,<sup>18</sup> and there have also been valuable shorter contributions on various aspects of the social and cultural history of Irish cricket, soccer, rugby, golf, hunting, cockfighting, wrestling and motor racing.<sup>19</sup> For many historians, the county continues to be a prime focus for the study of specific sports in this era, as shown by Tom Hunt's exploration of polo in Westmeath,<sup>20</sup> Michael O'Dwyer and Steve Dolan's histories of cricket in Kilkenny and Galway, respectively,<sup>21</sup> and Conor Curran's discussion of football in Cavan,<sup>22</sup> for instance.

Several scholars have examined the history of a variety of sports at the county level, with general studies of sport in Clare, Longford, Cork, Donegal, Kildare and Waterford by Joe Power, Tom Hunt, Donal O'Sullivan, Conor Curran, Samantha Finch and David Toms, respectively, being particularly noteworthy examples.<sup>23</sup> Tom Hunt's pioneering book on sport in Victorian Westmeath led the way in showing Irish historians how focusing on sport may be used as a means of illuminating wider aspects of Irish life.<sup>24</sup> While most scholarly focus has been directed towards delineating sport's social, cultural or political aspects, some attention has also been given to biographical studies of individual sportsmen or sportswomen or sports administrators.<sup>25</sup> The most innovative contribution of this type is Stephen Walker's *Ireland's Call*, which explores the lives of some 40 prominent Irish sportsmen who were killed while serving in the British armed forces during the Great War, a work which is written in a similar vein to Stephen Cooper's *The Final Whistle*, which details the stories of fifteen members of London's Rosslyn Park Rugby Club who were killed on active service in the First World War.<sup>26</sup>

While most scholars have concentrated on the period encompassing the final two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, increasing numbers of historians of sport have begun to show an interest in the 1920s as well. Thus far, there has been a strong institutional focus in this scholarly input. Cormac Moore's study of the Irish soccer split of 1921 which led to football in Ireland being administered by two separate bodies, the Irish Football Association and the breakaway Football Association of Ireland, with the former controlling football in Northern Ireland and the latter controlling the sport in what became the Irish Free State, skilfully places soccer's partition into its historical context. Moore provides the most detailed exposition yet of how the troubled politics of the period helped to widen what turned out to be an unbridgeable gulf between the Northern and Southern administrators of football in Ireland.<sup>27</sup> The uneasy interplay between politics and

sport is also highlighted in Tom Hunt's exploration of the troubled history of the National Athletic and Cycling Association of Ireland in the interwar period.<sup>28</sup> The Southern state's use of sport in the form of the Tailteann Games, as a form of self-promotion at home and abroad, has come under scrutiny from a number of scholars.<sup>29</sup> Other aspects of Ireland's sporting history in the 1920s remain unexplored or underexplored, but important recent contributions by Conor McCabe, Mark Tynan, Liam O'Callaghan and David Toms give an indication of the rich seam of material to be mined when historians of sport investigate the years immediately following the upheaval of the 1914-1923 era.<sup>30</sup>

## II

The essays in this special issue constitute important additions to the scholarly literature on Irish sports history in the key transitional period from the 1880s to the 1920s. Paul Rouse's "The Sporting World and the Human Heart: Ireland, 1880-1930" looks behind Irish sport's diverse organisational structures to take a close look at what motivated men and women to participate in the growing world of sport in this era. Paying particular attention to such variables as class, gender, ideology, education and employment, Rouse teases out, in some detail, the myriad factors which prompted large numbers of Irish people to engage in sports activity. His results show that some of our generalisations and assumptions about this subject do not do full justice to the complexity of the factors involved. Deirdre Raftery and Catriona Delaney's "'Un-Irish and Un-Catholic': Sports, Physical Education and Girls' Schools" makes a welcome investigation into a much-neglected topic, that of physical education and sports in girls' schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>31</sup> Raftery and Delaney chart key similarities and differences between developments in English public schools and girls' schools in Ireland, and also interesting differences between the types of physical activity that were favoured in Irish Protestant and Catholic girls' schools in the decades before Partition. Sport and physical exercise in schools was a low priority for the

administrators of the education system in the Irish Free State; as Raftery and Delaney show, various conservative clerical and other voices added to the difficulties of those educators who wished to provide opportunities for physical recreation and sports for the girls in their charge. Richard McElligott's "'Boys Indifferent to the Manly Sports of their Race': Nationalism and Sport in Ireland, 1880-1920" also focuses on children and sport. McElligott explores nationalists' use of sport as a means of inculcating Irish Ireland ideals amongst Irish children, especially boys, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While much of this propagandist drive targeted boys in schools, McElligott also shows that its scope was much broader and that it also encompassed a variety of quasi-military youth groups, most notably Na Fianna Éireann. Just as the sports that adults played or supported often became badges of political or confessional identity in this period, the same may be said for the sports that children took up, hence the interest which nationalist ideologues often showed in getting children to play Gaelic games and to eschew their "foreign" alternatives. John Strachan and Kayla Rose's essay, "Illuminated Addresses, National Identity and Irish Sport, 1880-1901", investigates a relatively underexplored strand of Irish sports history, that of the material culture of Irish sport.<sup>32</sup> Strachan and Rose's primary interest is the illuminated address, the popular Victorian and Edwardian artefact through which the address's subscribers showed their approbation of the recipient's behaviour, character or general contribution to society. As the authors demonstrate, many people in the Irish sports world shared the contemporary fondness for the illuminated address. Their detailed examination of three such examples – two funded by members of the GAA and one by supporters of horseracing – illustrates how these kinds of hitherto overlooked artefacts reveal much about sports enthusiasts' group identities. Brian Griffin's "Cycle Camping in Victorian and Edwardian Ireland" explores the seemingly arcane world of the cycling enthusiasts who combined their favourite pastime with camping breaks and holidays in the Irish countryside. Griffin argues that cycle camping

appealed for a number of reasons, including its relative cheapness, the temporary release that it brought from constrained urban modes of living, and its perceived mental and physical health benefits. A close examination of the activities and mindset of the Irish cycle campers suggests that they had much in common with their contemporaries, the “muscular Christian” sports enthusiasts, Griffin concludes. Conor Heffernan’s “The Irish Sandow School: Physical Culture Competitions in *fin-de-siècle* Ireland” opens a window into Ireland’s previously unexplored world of physical culture and masculinity in the late Victorian and Edwardian era. Heffernan’s essay shows that Ireland was not immune from the obsession for bodybuilding that swept much of Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an obsession that was fuelled to a considerable extent by the publications of the Prussian-born strongman and indefatigable self-publicist, Eugen Sandow. Focusing primarily on one of Sandow’s popular bodybuilding contests, the “Great Competition” of 1901, Heffernan documents many Irishmen’s keenness to develop, and display, muscular bodies that had been developed on approved Sandowian “scientific” principles. Sandow’s Irish disciples, argues Heffernan, bought into a notion of masculine identity which was based in large part on the scientific acquisition of muscle, in contrast to the masculine identity promoted by the GAA, which had opposition to British imperialism at its core. The final essay in this special issue, Tom Hunt’s “Ireland and the Paris Olympic Games (1924): A Difficult Journey Successfully Negotiated”, deepens our knowledge and understanding of the intricate manoeuvrings that were involved in securing Ireland’s place on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and, as a result of this, Ireland’s right to compete as a separate national team at the Olympic Games. The key individual in this was J. J. Keane, a Dublin-based businessman and keen supporter of the GAA. Hunt does a skilled job of outlining Keane’s deft handling of the process of securing Ireland’s place at the Olympic table, a task in which Keane succeeded despite the political turmoil affecting Ireland in the immediate



post-war years and the hostility of British IOC members. He also discusses Keane's simultaneous efforts at both securing and then maintaining unity in the Irish athletics world in the early 1920s, bringing to summation much of the previous four decades' organisational developments in Irish sport.

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<sup>1</sup> For horse racing's popularity with all classes of Irish people before the 1880s, see D'Arcy, *Horses, Lords and Racing Men*; Kelly, *Sport*; and Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent lively discussion of sport in Tipperary in the post-Famine decades, see Bracken, *Sport in County Tipperary*.

<sup>3</sup> Griffin, *Politics of Irish Athletics*; Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 141-143.

<sup>4</sup> Bracken, "Foreign and Fantastic Field Sports"; Hunt, *Westmeath*, 113-140; Griffin, "Irish Cycling Clubs"; Griffin, "Big House at Play"; Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 112-122.

<sup>5</sup> The Irish Rifle Shooting Association, which was established in January 1867, was an exception to this rule.

<sup>6</sup> This organisation received the prefix "Royal" in 1918.

<sup>7</sup> de Búrca, *Michael Cusack*; de Búrca, *The GAA*; Mandle, "The IRB"; Mandle, *GAA and Nationalist Politics*; Mandle, "GAA and Popular Culture".

<sup>8</sup> Rouse, "Politics of Culture and Sport in Ireland"; McElligott, "Politics or Play?"; McAnallen, "Michael Cusack"; Hassan and McGuire, "GAA and Revolutionary Irish Politics"; Billings, "The First Minutes."

<sup>9</sup> Mandle, "GAA and Popular Culture".

<sup>10</sup> Nolan, *GAA in Dublin*; Hunt, *Westmeath*; McElligott, *Forging a Kingdom*; Curran, *Sport in Donegal*; McCabe, "Gaelic Football in Cavan". Hunt and Curran also examine such sports as cricket, association football, hockey and rugby.

<sup>11</sup> Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism*; McDevitt, "May the Best Man Win", 14-36; McAnallen, Hassan and Hegarty (eds), *Evolution of the GAA*; Duncan, "The Camera and the Gael"; McAnallen, "Role of Owen O'Duffy"; Garnham, "Early Success of the GAA"; Billings, "Speaking Irish with Hurley Sticks".

<sup>12</sup> Ó Tuathaigh (ed), *GAA and Revolution in Ireland*. See also Murphy, "GAA during Irish Revolution".

<sup>13</sup> McElligott, "1916 and the GAA"; McElligott, "Contesting the Fields of Play"; McElligott, "Quenching the Prairie Fire"; Hassan and McGuire, "Gaelic Sunday"; Rouse and O'Carroll, "Sport and War"; Rouse, *The Hurlers*.

<sup>14</sup> McCarthy, *Gold, Silver and Green*.

<sup>15</sup> O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster*.

<sup>16</sup> Toms, *Soccer in Munster*; Curran, "Networking Structures".

<sup>17</sup> Garnham, *Association Football*.

<sup>18</sup> Higgins, *Tennis*; Griffin, *Cycling*.

<sup>19</sup> Garnham, "Roles of Cricket"; Garnham, "Heroes or Villains?"; Murphy, "Sinn Féin and the Hunt in Ireland"; Drucker, "Hunting and Shooting"; Higgins, "Pluperfect Respectability"; Ward, "Cockfighting"; Gunning, "Association Football in Connacht"; Gunning, "Hardy Fingallians"; O'Callaghan, "Rugby and First World War"; Montgomery, *Gordon Bennett Race*; Montgomery, *Phoenix Park Speed Trials*; Curran, "Networking Structures"; Ó Maonaigh, "Who were the Shoneens?"; Curran, "Social Background".

<sup>20</sup> Hunt, "Polo".

<sup>21</sup> Dolan, "All Out".

<sup>22</sup> Curran, "Association Clubs in Cavan".

<sup>23</sup> Power, "Aspects of Sport in Clare"; Hunt, "Longford Sport"; O'Sullivan, *Sport in Cork*; Curran, *Sport in Donegal*; Finch, "Sport and Society in Kildare"; Toms, "Sport and Society in Waterford".

<sup>24</sup> Hunt, *Westmeath*.

<sup>25</sup> For some examples, see Ó Riain, *Maurice Davin*; Griffin, "Count Stadnicki"; Griffin, "William Millar Woodside"; Ó Baoghill, *Nally*; Hunt, "Peadar Cowan"; Hunt, "Walter Newburn"; Hunt, "Harry Cannon"; Caffrey, "Richard T. Blake"; McElligott, "Richard Blake"; Gillmeister, *From Bonn to Athens*; Garnham, "William Kennedy Gibson"; Hassan and McGuire, "Dick Fitzgerald"; Montgomery, *Leslie Porter*; Montgomery, *R.J. Mecedry*; Cronin, "Pat O'Callaghan"; Cronin, "Sam Maguire"; Walsh, *Sam Maguire*.

<sup>26</sup> Walker, *Ireland's Call*; Cooper, *Final Whistle*.

<sup>27</sup> Moore, *Irish Soccer Split*.

<sup>28</sup> Hunt, "National Athletic Association".

<sup>29</sup> Cronin, "Aonach Tailteann"; Cronin, "Projecting the Nation"; Ryan, "Aonach Tailteann"; Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 245-255.

<sup>30</sup> McCabe, "Football Sports Weekly"; O'Callaghan, "Rugby Football"; Toms, "Sport and Society in Waterford"; Tynan, "Soccer Hooliganism".

<sup>31</sup> Relatively little has been written on the sports activity of either girls or women in Ireland in this period. For some rare examples, see Griffin "Cycling and Gender"; Hunt, "Women in Westmeath"; Nic Congáil, "Rise of Camogie"; Corry, "Camogie"; Fitzpatrick, Rouse and McAnallen, "Freedom of the Field"; Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 197-205.

<sup>32</sup> For contributions on this subject, see Griffin, "All Colours of the Rainbow"; Cronin, "Sam Maguire"; Strachan and Nally, *Advertising, Literature and Print Culture*, 88-107, 128-131; Heffernan, "Strength Peddlers". Cronin and Higgins's *Places We Play* spans a longer period than that covered by this special issue – it offers an intriguing cultural history of the places where sports were participated in throughout Ireland.