

**THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION AND
THE ROLE OF GAELIC GAMES IN EARLY
20TH CENTURY IRELAND**

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fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy

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Abstract

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has been an influential organisation in Irish society for 125 years. Popular historiography places the GAA at the forefront of Irish nationalism during the early 20th Century. This paper focuses on the role of the GAA between the time before the Easter Uprising through ‘Gaelic Sunday’ in 1918. The GAA during this time has traditionally been seen to be a major force in the political events of the day, but this view of the association is born from the actions of a few individuals which have, through time, come to be seen as the actions of the GAA. From Easter Sunday 1916 to the interned prisoners in Frongoch to ‘Gaelic Sunday’ in 1918, the role of the GAA was as a cultural association rather than one of active revolution.

Keywords:

Gaelic Athletic Association, Irish Nationalism, Easter Uprising, Gaelic Sunday, Frongoch Internment Camp, Gaelic Games, Cultural Identity, Irish Independence

Declaration

I, Andrew McGuire, hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other University, and that it is entirely my own work. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

Signed,

Andrew McGuire

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Introduction

In 1888, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) compiled a report entitled *The Political Aspect of the Gaelic Athletic Association*. In the report, the RIC considered the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) to be a political body, rather than a sporting one, by saying, ‘it will be seen that from the first there was little or no pretence of keeping clear of politics: the question was not whether the Association was a political one, but only to what particular section of Irish National politics it could be annexed’.¹ Though the report was written only three years after the foundation of the GAA, it showed the attitudes of the police and government in Ireland towards Nationalist bodies.

The belief that the GAA was a major political organisation has been persistent throughout the existence of the association, extending through the historiography of the association. The dominant view of the GAA has been that it was a major influence on the Nationalist actions of the early 20th Century. W.F. Mandle went so far as to say that ‘it is arguable that no organisation had done more for Irish nationalism than the GAA – not the IRB...not the Gaelic League...not the Irish Parliamentary Party...not even Sinn Féin’.² This view of the GAA as an organization at the forefront of the Nationalist movement, as though the association was the creator of modern Irish nationalism, has been challenged lately in works by historians such as William Murphy.

Murphy and others have revised this view of the GAA as a monolithic Nationalist organisation into a more nuanced view. To Murphy, ‘the association’s vulnerability and the limits of its influence in a period when nationalism realized revolutionary change is now evident’.³ While Murphy’s view of the GAA has challenged the previously dominant theory of the GAA, both ideas still concern themselves with the actions of the GAA leadership and the larger

¹ ‘The Political Aspect of the Gaelic Athletic Association’, (The National Archives, London, British in Ireland, CO 904/16: microfilm, National Archives Ireland).

² W.F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish National Politics 1884-1924* (Dublin, 1987), p. 221.

³ William Murphy, ‘The GAA During the Irish Revolution, 1913-23’ in Mike Cronin, William Murphy, and Paul Rouse (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884-2009* (Dublin, 2009), p. 76.

organisation. This view of the association has led to the actions of the GAA leadership being applied to all members down the line. The feelings and attitudes of the general population are still ambiguous and are rarely considered.

With a few test cases, this paper will look to explore the different views of the GAA and its role in Irish society. The examples chosen have been selected for the unique circumstances in which the GAA found itself, circumstances under which the GAA was in a position of unusual prominence in society. By examining the GAA while it was at the focus of Irish society, a more accurate view of the association can be examined as there are fewer competing organisations and influences. The GAA has until now been treated as a homogenous, monolithic organisation, and its actions, or more usually, the actions of high-profile members, have been ascribed to the entire membership of which it was comprised. The first body to have fallen into this trap was the British government, while in later years historians have followed suit. Little work has been done to suggest that the ordinary members had differing attitudes than those of the GAA as an organisation, or of officials who were particularly active in the Nationalist movement. This paper will consider three main points of view of the GAA – the view of the members, the leadership, and the government. An emphasis will be placed on the differences between the attitudes of the upper echelons of Irish nationalists within the GAA and those of the rank-and-file members.

This paper is composed of three chapters. Chapter I covers the time period between turn of the 20th Century through the aftermath of the Easter Uprising. Chapter II examines the experiences of men interned at Frongoch Prison Camp after the Easter Uprising. Chapter III explores the events of 4 August 1918, which would be dubbed ‘Gaelic Sunday’ wherein there was a mass organising of GAA matches as a form of social protest. The time period for this paper was selected to fill gaps in existing research, between the more heavily researched periods of the foundation of the GAA in the late 19th Century and the events of Bloody Sunday in 1920. Previous research has focused greatly on these two pivotal time periods in Irish history, and this has reinforced the idea of

the GAA as being a large influence on the Nationalist movement. Throughout each chapter the theme of the differences between the GAA and its members will be discussed, and how those differences affect the views and actions of government.

Chapter I seeks to explore the idea put forth by William Murphy that the GAA was the ‘playground of the revolution’, that rather than a major influence in the quest for Irish independence, the GAA was merely a means for those who would go on to lead the rebellion to hone their skills. Examples showing how revolutionary leaders were able to gain experience and training in the GAA which served them in their work towards gaining Ireland’s independence will be considered. Some attention is paid to the actual events of Easter Week 1916 as it pertains to the GAA, but the Uprising itself is not covered in great depth as this is a topic of many other works and outside the scope of this paper. However, the differences between the role of the GAA in the proceedings of Easter Week and the roles played by men who were affiliated with the GAA in some capacity will be examined. The chapter concludes by looking at the government response in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Uprising, including the view the government took of the GAA’s role and how the GAA was affected by subsequent government action.

Chapter II examines the idea of Gaelic games being used as a form of national identity by those interned in Frongoch Prison Camp. The chapter begins with a brief reconstruction of the daily lives of the men held in the camp. Next, the chapter discusses the games played within the camp, the connection between the games and a sense of national identity. The dual role of Gaelic football as both an expression of identity and a practical way of passing time in confinement is also discussed as an extension of the idea of the differences between the GAA as a vehicle for Nationalist aims held by some and the views of the average person who merely enjoyed playing Gaelic games.

Chapter III relates the events surrounding ‘Gaelic Sunday’ in which Gaelic games were played across Ireland as a form of social protest. A ban on public meetings had been passed by the British authority in Ireland prohibiting the gathering of large groups without

prior police permission. The GAA used this chance to mobilise its members as a show of resistance. The chapter also discusses whether the proclamation itself was intended to include Gaelic games, and if not, what motives the GAA had to continue with its plans.

A large number of different types of primary sources were used in this paper. The greatest proportion of primary sources is comprised of various types of government documents. The House of Commons records of the time are particularly useful to gauge what issues the Irish politicians were concerned enough with to bring to Parliament, as well as the government's response to those issues. The files of the Chief Secretary for Ireland found in the National Archives Ireland (NAI) serve much the same purpose. The *Royal Commission for the Rebellion in Ireland* and related police reports serve to judge the concerns of the authorities and as a record of the government's response to the Easter Uprising.

For more personal accounts, a number of memoirs were consulted. The works of men like Séamas Ó Maoileoin and W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, who were interned at Frongoch, offer the best chance to reconstruct life inside the camp and gauge what effect the playing of Gaelic games had on the internees. In addition to official published memoirs, a number of documents relating to the duties of Michael Collins as secretary of the Geraldines Football Club were also consulted.

A number of newspapers were also examined in the course of conducting research. One newspaper in particular, the *Gaelic Athlete*, was particularly useful in gaining insight into the attitudes of the GAA leadership during the period between 1914 and 1915. The editorial columns in this periodical gave accounts of attitudes and feelings at the time they were published, emotion that can be lost in the writing of memoirs years after the events have come and gone.

Secondary sources on the GAA fall into two general categories. The first category deals with the GAA as a whole entity. In academic work, the two most frequently cited works in this category are *The Story of the GAA* by Marcus de Búrca and *The Gaelic Athletic Association & Irish National Politics* by W.F. Mandle. De Búrca's work was originally

published as *The GAA: A History* in 1980. The updated version, published in 1990, covers the history of the GAA up to the date of publication. This work takes an in-depth look at the issues that have faced the GAA throughout its existence, from the difficulties encountered by its founders through to modern problems like how to remain relevant into the 21st century. The first six chapters, which cover the period from 1884 to 1922, are of particular interest to this work. Mandle's work begins with the foundation of the GAA in 1884 as well, but the narrative ends with the conclusion of the Irish Civil War in 1924. Mandle's work builds on that of de Búrca, further examining the relationship between the GAA and Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in a much different manner.

A new generation of historians has begun research into the GAA which begins to challenge the conclusions of the work produced by Mandle and de Búrca. One such historian whose work is of importance to this paper is William Murphy. In an article in a book he co-edited with Mike Cronin and Paul Rouse, Murphy challenged the idea that the GAA was a major force in the movement for Irish independence, instead arguing the GAA was merely a training ground for those who would go on to lead groups more active in the fight for independence.

The other group of secondary sources used in this paper focus more on specific people or teams over general surveys of the GAA. These works are most useful in their ability to provide information that is not included in broader works. In books such as Tim Pat Coogan's biography of Michael Collins or William Nolan's history of the GAA in Dublin lies a wealth of information that is omitted from works such as Mandle's for considerations of space and topicality. Also, in the case of Michael Collins, secondary biographies are the only narratives of his life as he died before he could publish any memoir. In the case of this paper, secondary sources of this more specific type were consulted at a minimum compared to those of which regarded the effects and influence of the GAA as a whole. For the entirety of the paper, attempts were made to use primary sources whenever possible, preferring to use secondary sources chiefly for the presentation of previous research.

This paper begins around the turn of the century because of the previous work of Mandle and de Búrca. Between 1886 and 1887, the IRB steadily gained control of the GAA Central Council, installing P.N. Fitzgerald as Secretary at the 1887 Convention held in Thurles, Co. Tipperary. A contingent of priests, led by Father Scanlan from Nenagh, opposed the nomination of Fitzgerald on the grounds that his being an IRB Official would ‘give a very questionable appearance to the outside public’.⁴ For the next two years, the GAA operated with IRB members as high-ranking officials. During this time period, the GAA came under intense scrutiny by the authorities, particularly the RIC, and the report quoted at the introduction was produced. This same report concluded that two points of contention were deemed to show the ‘true character’ of the GAA as far as the British Government was concerned. The first point was the ban on any policemen being involved in the Association. The second was that ‘a number of clubs have collected in uniform, and taken a conspicuous part in National League demonstrations’.⁵ This interest from the RIC and government would continue on through the Irish Civil War and continually influenced the actions of the GAA.

⁴ Mandle, *The GAA*, p. 50.

⁵ ‘The Political Aspect of the Gaelic Athletic Association’, (The National Archive, London, British in Ireland, CO 904/16: microfilm, National Archives Ireland).

Early 1900s

As the new century dawned, Ireland was at a pivotal point in her quest for self-governance. Many of the men and women who would lead Ireland through the Irish War of Independence and subsequent Irish Civil War were coming to age during the first decade of the 1900s. For many of these future leaders, such as J.J. Walsh and Michael Collins, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) would provide their first chance for taking the responsibility for organising and overseeing large groups of people.

By the early 1900s, the GAA had been through several attempts by various nationalist groups to co-opt its power structure for their own use, with some attempts more successful than others. As John O'Beirne Ranelagh put it in his work *A Short History of Ireland*, 'from 1887 onwards, the GAA was regarded by the Special Branch of the RIC as an adjunct of the physical force national movement, and its activities were regularly reported'.¹ For the next thirty years, the RIC had informants inside GAA clubs and would follow members to and from meetings. In 1910, Mr. John O'Donnell, M.P. for Mayo South, questioned Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary of Ireland, about the police following GAA members in County Galway. O'Donnell accused the police of having detectives follow members at meetings in Athenry and 'to report to local police stations the names of persons who attend such meetings'.² Further, it was alleged, that the president of the county board, Tom Kenny, and other officials were even followed as they went to Dublin on GAA business. O'Donnell reiterated the position of the GAA as being non-political in nature. Birrell replied that 'no person is being shadowed or watched in County Galway or elsewhere because he is a member of the Gaelic Athletic Association'.³

Birrell's answer at first glance appears short and perfunctory, quickly replying and dismissing O'Donnell's concern. However, more can be made of Secretary Birrell's reply than is immediately apparent.

¹ John O'Beirne Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland*, (Cambridge, 1994), p. 153.

² 'Gaelic Athletic Association Meetings (County Galway)', *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, xvi, 1700 (18 Apr. 1910).

³ *Ibid.*

Birrell does not say that Kenny and the others are not being followed at all; merely that membership in the GAA was not grounds for being followed. Police in County Galway could very well have been following Mr. Kelly, or anyone else, because of the government's perception of the GAA being an associated part of the IRB. As was stated in the Dublin Castle report after the IRB takeover in 1886-7, the GAA was considered to be part of the 'physical force movement' in Ireland, and would therefore be subject to police scrutiny.⁴ Birrell's answer implies that while the British government in Ireland might not have considered membership in the GAA sufficient grounds for police interest, there was still a level of distrust of the upper levels of GAA leadership.

The leadership of the GAA struggled with how to handle being a Nationalist body without appearing to be political in nature. The police report to Dublin Castle admitted that Michael Cusack had been 'quite honest in his original idea, which was to initiate a purely non-political association of athletes,' but this was doomed from the start because of 'the utter impossibility of establishing amongst the general body of the Irish people a society of any kind which could be kept free from politics'.⁵ In 1886, two years after the foundation of the GAA, the so-called 'political clause' was added to the constitution, saying,

That the Gaelic Athletic Association shall not be used in any way to oppose any national movement which has the confidence and support of the Irish people.⁶

The vague wording of the clause allowed both Home Rule and Fenian members to infer that the GAA supported their political views, which was used to great effect by Fitzgerald and other IRB members.

Nine years later in 1905, on the occasion of his silver jubilee, Archbishop Croke wrote that, 'as far as he knew...the Association was purely an athletic body and that alone. The members of the Association had taken sides in the recent political dispute, which was but natural'.⁷ At that year's convention, the 'first comprehensive constitution and

⁴ 'The Political Aspect of the Gaelic Athletic Association', (The National Archives, London, British in Ireland, CO 904/16: microfilm, National Archives Ireland).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Marcus de Búrca, *The Story of the GAA to 1990*, (Dublin, 1991), p. 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

rules of the GAA' were codified. In the constitution, Rule 2 clarified the non-political nature of the GAA, reading:

That the Gaelic Athletic Association shall be a strictly non-political and unsectarian association. No political questions of any kind shall be raised at any of its meetings, and no club shall take part as a club in any political movement.⁸

While this new constitution cleared the official position of the GAA with regards to its political stance, it did little to dissuade the police from keeping a watchful eye on the GAA. Police scrutiny would again fall on the GAA as the Irish Volunteers emerged as a Nationalist body.

Upon the formation of the Irish Volunteers, the *Gaelic Athlete* was quite vocal in its support and belief that GAA members should join. The *Gaelic Athlete* was a weekly newspaper that styled itself 'the only journal in Ireland entirely devoted to Gaelic pastimes'. During World War I, the editorial staff of the *Gaelic Athlete* was unapologetic in their anti-British views, nearly appearing pro-German at times. In one such instance, an editorial decried what the author felt was a 'pronounced Imperial tinge which has developed in the Irish atmosphere since the outbreak of the war'.⁹ Continuing, the author went on to state that 'our whole constitution is sternly opposed to any Jingo or pro-British tendency'.¹⁰ As de Búrca notes, the *Gaelic Athlete* was not officially endorsed by the GAA, but it did have the support of many prominent Association figures and seemed to 'accurately reflect the mood of average members'.¹¹

With further regards to the Irish Volunteers, the *Gaelic Athlete* was a vocal supporter of its readers supporting the Nationalist cause. A weekly article called *Jots and Tittles* ran small news items, usually of a similar theme or content. In one edition of *Jots and Tittles*, it was relayed to the reader that 'over the Channel the present European situation has brought forth expression of opinion that the football field

⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

⁹ 'Editorial', *Gaelic Athlete*, vi, no. 137, 15 Aug. 1914.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ de Búrca, *The GAA*, p. 130.

ought to be used as a recruiting ground for the Army'.¹² In a display of support for the Irish Volunteers, the article went on to say that 'a similar remark applies to Ireland in regard to our own Volunteer force'.¹³ A more blatant appeal to aid the Volunteers was seen in an advertisement in the very next issue of the paper.

A large advertisement was taken out announcing the Irish Volunteer Aid Association had begun organising the Volunteer Military Medical Corps under the auspices of the Irish Volunteers. The aim of the Medical Corps was to supply the Volunteers with 'proper Medical and nursing staffs, and adequate hospital and ambulance equipment'.¹⁴ By 1915, the *Gaelic Athlete* was reporting that GAA involvement in the Irish Volunteers in Co. Kildare was so extensive that 'nearly all the members of the GAA were identified with the Volunteer movement' and that Volunteer activities were interfering with the playing of Gaelic games.¹⁵

The most extreme position advocated by the *Gaelic Athlete* was that of the creation of rifle clubs, of course to be run under the auspices of the GAA. The idea for the rifle clubs came from a suggestion of the Kerry County Board, the impetus for which was due 'to the growth of the military spirit in Ireland'.¹⁶ The rifle clubs were to be organised in the same fashion as hurling and Gaelic football, with competition ranging from inter-club all the way to All-Ireland contests. The reason for the editorial staff believing the rifle clubs should be implemented under the organisational umbrella of the GAA was two-fold. The first reason was that the rifle clubs would be the 'material assistance' that practical experience a rifle would provide to the Irish Volunteers. This first reason was entirely a practical matter. The newspaper's support for the Volunteers is well-known at this point, as has been shown. It only makes sense that the editorial staff would be in support of a programme to enhance the effectiveness of the Irish Volunteers. The second, more idealistic, reason was that the GAA was the only suitably

¹² 'Jots and Tittles', *Gaelic Athlete*, vi, no. 138, 22 Aug. 1914.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 'Appeal for help and money', *Gaelic Athlete*, vi, no. 139, 29 Aug. 1914.

¹⁵ 'Kildare', *Gaelic Athlete*, vii, no. 158, 9 Jan. 1915.

¹⁶ 'Editorial', *Gaelic Athlete*, vi, no. 142, 19 Sept. 1914.

Nationalist body capable of organising such a competition. The logic was that if there was a demand for rifle clubs, then ‘the GAA should be the body to cater for that demand, and not an alien body, or a body with no National motives’.¹⁷ Again, the GAA is shown as a body of Nationalist orientation. The fear of the rifle clubs falling under the control of a body that was not Nationalist in its outlook, or worse a foreign one, necessitated that the GAA be in control. The GAA was founded on the grounds that it was to provide a means to promote and support Irish pastimes, in direct competition to those organisations that were British in origin, so no other body would do to run the proposed rifle clubs that would be effectively auxiliaries to the Irish Volunteers. Ultimately, the rifle clubs never came into being. However, the GAA did still provide a means for training future leaders of the Easter Uprising and Irish War of Independence.

The GAA provided men like J.J. Walsh and Michael Collins with experience to learn how to lead and organise large groups and a test ground to implement new organisational techniques. William Murphy called the GAA ‘the playground of the revolution’ for those who would go onto lead Ireland to its independence.¹⁸

When Michael Collins emigrated to London as a youth, he ‘threw himself with all the enthusiasm of a healthy and vigorous youth’ into the Geraldines Football Club.¹⁹ Before long, Collins was elected secretary of the club at the age of 18.²⁰ The effectiveness of Collins’s diplomacy in sensitive matters can be seen with the handling of the payment of a debt to the proprietor of the pitch which was used by the Geraldines Club for its football matches.

The incident began when the treasurer of the club, Mr. Sullivan, lost the money for the rental of the pitch and neglected to tell anyone else in the club, presumably to attempt to recover the money on his own

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ William Murphy, ‘The GAA During the Irish Revolution, 1913-23’ in Mike Cronin, William Murphy, and Paul Rouse (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884-2009* (Dublin, 2009), p. 76.

¹⁹ Piaras Béaslai, *Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland* (2 vols, London, 1926), i, p. 15.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

without admitting to his mistake.²¹ The owner of the pitch, Mr. A. Toley, threatened to no longer allow the Geraldines the use of the grounds until the rent had been paid, a sum of £3 16s. 6d.²² Collins then turned his attention to O'Sullivan, the club treasurer, in an attempt to sort out the matter. It was at this point that O'Sullivan finally admitted to having lost the money at the pitch. O'Sullivan worked to repay the club the lost funds.²³ The careful handling of the situation by Collins led to a resolution satisfactory to almost all involved.²⁴

As secretary of the Geraldines, Collins had a responsibility to act in the best interests of the club. In the conflict with Mr. Toley, Collins was at risk of losing the use of the pitch which was so necessary to the continued survival of the club. However, Collins was able to assuage any slight perceived by Mr. Toley to the point where Toley offered the club the use of a winter pitch. Without Collins's intervention, the club could have been faced with the loss of the pitch, or even legal action from Mr. Toley as he sought compensation for his rent owed. However, the situation with the issue of pitch rentals would pale in comparison to the upheaval the London GAA would undergo at the end of the year regarding the playing of foreign games.

Many of the London GAA members wished to play soccer in addition to Gaelic football and hurling. However, the GAA had, since its inception, been adamantly against members playing or patronising foreign games, with those found to have done so subject to expulsion. Collins was steadfast in his refusal to allow the men of the Geraldines Club to partake in what he called 'garrison games'.²⁵ Collins's report to his club at the end of the year was scathing in its indictment of the actions of the club:

²¹ O'Sullivan to Collins, 11 Sept. 1909 (UCD Archives, Collins Papers, P123/33).

²² Toley to J. Harrison, 7 Aug. 1909 (UCD Archives, Collins Papers, P123/26).

²³ O'Sullivan to Collins, 28 Aug. 1909 (UCD Archives, Collins Papers, P123/32; P123/34).

²⁴ Collins sent a postal order to Toley for £2 10s., and requested that he allocate the club a pitch for use over the winter season. Toley was still quite angry; he wrote to the club, accusing them of 'taking advantage of my trusting disposition' and demanding his payment in full. Collins took up a subscription within the club to pay the remaining rent, and explained to Toley that the 'treasurer absconded with the funds'. He again requested that Toley set aside a pitch for the Geraldines for use over the winter. Upon receipt of the balance of the amount owed him, Toley offered the Geraldines a winter pitch for the price of £10 10s.

²⁵ Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins: A Biography* (London, 1990), p. 16.

An eventful half year has followed a somewhat riotous general meeting. Great hopes instead of being fulfilled have been rudely shattered...Our internal troubles were saddening but our efforts in football and hurling were perfectly heartbreaking. In no single contest have our colours been crowned with success...In hurling...we were drawn to play five matches but disgraceful to say in only one did we field a full team. If members are not prepared to act more harmoniously together and more self-sacrificing together...the club will soon have faced into inglorious and well-deserved oblivion.²⁶

Michael Collins was uncompromising in his view that foreign games were one of Britain's most effective agents in the 'peaceful penetration' of Irish society, and that under all circumstances there should be 'no soccer for Gaels'.²⁷ By the end of the rift, only three clubs remained, one of them Collins' Geraldines.²⁸ For Collins, the GAA was an important organisation in the movement for Irish independence.²⁹

The commitment of the leadership of the Geraldine club to the ideals of Irish nationalism can be seen by a resolution passed by the team regarding the use of the Irish language. By a vote of 12 to 4 in favor, the club resolved for each member to obtain a copy of *The Gaelic Athletic Annual* so that they might 'learn the different terms in Irish used in Gaelic Football and Hurling thereby to carry into practice the ideal of our club – 'our national language on the field of play'.³⁰

The passion Collins carried for Gaelic games is readily evident from the dramatic speech he gave to his fellow Geraldines. His address also shows the general lackadaisical attitude of the other members of the club. Of the club's five hurling matches, only once did they manage to get enough players to field a team. Many members of the club were not nearly as emphatic in their support of the club as was Collins. Collins' obvious belief in the GAA's role in supporting Irish nationalism is not reflected in the attitudes of the general membership. Even the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Béaslai, *Michael Collins*, p. 16.

²⁸ Coogan, *Michael Collins*, p. 16.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁰ Geraldine Club Note, undated, (UCD Archives, Collins Papers, P123/36).

vote on the use of Irish language was not unanimous, and the amount of men who voted on the motion was just one more person than is needed to field a hurling team.

While the secretary of the Geraldines Football Club, Collins drew the attention of more openly Nationalistic and political bodies. Another member of the London GAA, Sam Maguire, would recognise Collins as a perfect candidate and recruit him into the IRB.

Maguire was a Corkman who had emigrated to London, where he played football for the Hibernian football club.³¹ As well as being a member of the London GAA, he also joined the Gaelic League and eventually the Irish Republican Brotherhood.³² Maguire remained at his job in the postal service in England until after the Irish War of Independence, working to intercept documents which may have been of interest to the military planners within the IRB. Maguire eventually returned to Ireland after the Irish Civil War, but could not keep his employment in the postal service after the government removed all former IRB members from civil service posts. Maguire eventually returned home to Cork, where he died of tuberculosis in 1926.³³ However, Maguire is remembered today as the namesake of the trophy given to the All-Ireland Gaelic football champions. Upon his return from London, Maguire saw himself as an IRB and GAA member, adhering to neither pro- nor anti-treaty political parties. This left him in a position of being embraced by neither side, which led to his dismissal from the civil service.³⁴ However, as the GAA had always placed itself as a Nationalist, but non-political, entity, Maguire was a perfect man to be honoured by a championship trophy.

In addition to the GAA giving opportunities in direct leadership, it also gave leaders a chance to implement and test logistical measures designed to best run and organize large groups. The best example of using the GAA to implement such ideas is the work done by J.J. Walsh while a member of the Cork County Board. Walsh was a post office

³¹ Mike Cronin, 'Sam Maguire: Forgotten Hero and National Icon' in *Sport in History*, xxv, no. 2 (2005), pp. 190-1.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

employee in Cork, as well as an influential GAA member. In his memoirs, *Recollections of a Rebel*, Walsh recounts that around 1902, the GAA was in decline in Cork, after ‘all the educated and influential classes were switching over to alien games’.³⁵ Walsh and his cohorts saw an opportunity to bolster the falling ranks of the Cork GAA. ‘In a short time,’ wrote Walsh, ‘we had organised hurling and football leagues, not only in the country, but also in the lanes and streets of the City and towns...With this intensely organised instrument, war was declared on foreign games which were made to feel the shock so heavily that, one by one, soccer and rugby clubs began to disappear’.³⁶ However, Walsh’s grassroots organisation of GAA clubs in Cork was still subject to oversight from the county board. Walsh felt that the board at the time was using methods that were ‘out of date’ and that his methods would be better if he and his men took ‘on the whole responsibility for the GAA in the county’.³⁷

In 1909, Walsh was elected as chairman of the county board by a margin of fifteen votes. Walsh split his time between his job at the post office and his responsibilities with the county board. He wrote that he would often work on GAA matters until ‘one or two a.m. and find myself at the Post Office counter at seven’.³⁸ Walsh’s experiences from working in the civil service allowed him to revolutionise the efficiency of the Cork GAA to the point that the county board had generated sufficient income to buy shares in the Great Southern Railway, which gave Walsh and the county board ‘the necessary pull where travel facilities counted for a great deal’.³⁹ The railways were a vital link for inter-county games, so the ability of the county board to influence the railways as shareholders, in addition to the clout of the GAA, was a major boon to Cork. As will be seen after the Easter Uprising, restrictions on the use of the railways could be very detrimental to the abilities of the county boards to schedule matches against each other. In his book, Walsh wrote that soon county boards across the country, such as the Dublin County

³⁵ J.J. Walsh, *Recollections of a Rebel* (Tralee, 1944), p. 16-17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Board lead by Harry Boland and Mick Crow, were emulating the techniques pioneered in Cork.⁴⁰

However, the British authorities in Ireland were not keen on Walsh's activities in Cork. After five years as chairman of the county board, Walsh was transferred to the post office in Bradford, England. The *Gaelic Athlete* immediately took up the issue of Walsh's transfer, decrying it as the 'first shot' in a 'campaign of terrorism' aimed at the Cork GAA.⁴¹ The editorial described the chain of events that befell Walsh. First, Walsh was subject to a compulsory transfer to the Bradford post office, for what they claimed was 'on account of that gentleman's National activities'. Walsh tendered his letter of resignation to the Cork County Board, which the board refused to accept. Instead, the county board adopted a resolution to petition the Postmaster-General to reinstate Walsh to his previous position in Cork. This resolution was presented to the Cork Corporation, of which Walsh was also a member. However, the Cork Corporation voted against the resolution. The *Gaelic Athlete* quoted the Corporation's decision as being 'a protest against [Walsh's] politics.' The editorial condemned Cork Corporation for what it called the 'intrusion upon the right of a free man in an alleged free country to hold what political views he wills.' GAA boards around the country passed resolutions in support of Walsh, but all to no avail.⁴²

Seven months on, in June 1915, J.J. Walsh had moved to Dublin and opened a shop at the corner of Blessington and Berkeley Streets on Dublin's north side. The *Gaelic Athlete* carried the news in an article entitled 'Rally Round, Boys!',⁴³ urging its readers to show its support of 'his great services to the GAA' by purchasing goods from Walsh's new store. The article called for Walsh to receive a 'welcome from the Gaels of Dublin' by way of business for his new establishment. 'In patronizing that establishment,' the article continued, 'you are helping your own'.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ 'Editorial', *Gaelic Athlete*, vi, no. 149, 7 Nov. 1914.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ 'Rally Round, Boys!', *Gaelic Athlete*, vii, no. 182, 26 June 1915.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Also, around the time of the incident involving J.J. Walsh, tensions were running high in Westminster, as the Nationalist nature of the GAA came under fire. One matter in which the GAA was involved was the proposed 'Weekly Rest-Day Bill' and the other was the GAA's continued ban of police and military personnel.⁴⁵

The day of rest bill was proposed to ensure one day's rest in every week. Lord Henry Cavendish-Bentinck introduced the bill in mid-1913 as a 'bill to amend and consolidate the Acts relating to Sunday employment, and to regulate the conditions of labour upon the basis of six working days in the week with Sunday as the normal rest-day, and for other purposes connected therewith'.⁴⁶ However, one section of the bill, specifically Clause 1, Subsection 4, as it related to amusements threatened to interfere with GAA operations. Mr. Meehan summed up the problem the GAA would have under the bill, saying 'under Subsection (4), Clause 1, they [the GAA] would be prevented from engaging in these sports on Sunday, because as a general rule they charge a small sum at the gate for admission to see the game, and prizes are offered in connection with the competition'.⁴⁷ William Redmond, M.P. for Clare East and younger brother of Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond, was an original sponsor of the bill and was undertaking efforts to have Ireland exempt from the offending subsection so that the GAA might continue operations unencumbered. Redmond claimed that the version of the bill with which he was presented and agreed to the principles of was not the version of the bill currently under consideration. Redmond claimed that if the version being debated over were the one brought to his attention, he 'should have said from the very first that in its present form the Bill was obviously entirely inapplicable to Ireland...Naturally, had I seen that, I should at once had said that it was impossible'.⁴⁸ Redmond felt that Sunday in Ireland was a day of general relaxation, one in which 'the people are allowed to enjoy themselves,' and the main

⁴⁵ 'Gaelic Athletic Association', *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, lxxi, 704 (28 Apr. 1915).

⁴⁶ 'Weekly Rest-Day Bill', *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, lv, 387 (9 July 1913).

⁴⁷ 'Weekly Rest-Day Bill', *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, lxii, 2289 (22 May 1914). Note: It is unclear whether the Mr. Meehan in question is Francis E. Meehan of Leitrim North or Patrick J. Meehan of Queen's County, Leix. Both men are present in the voting rolls.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2267.

form of entertainment was Gaelic games.⁴⁹ To have Gaelic games fall under the umbrella of the bill would be to prohibit the main form of entertainment for the majority of the Irish population.

Thomas Lundon, M.P. for Limerick East received a letter from the GAA Central Council expressing its worries regarding the bill:

On behalf of the Gaelic Athletic Association, I write to draw your attention to the wording of a Sub-section which appears in the Weekly Rest-day Bill down for Second Reading in the House of Commons tomorrow. The following is the Sub-section referred to: To carry on, advertise, engage in, or be present at, any public performance, spectacle, exhibition, game, contest, competition, or other entertainment of whatever kind at which any fee or payment is charged or demanded, directly or indirectly, either for admission to such entertainment or for the use of any place or seat within or in the neighbourhood of the hall, theatre, enclosure, etc.

We think that if that were carried into effect, it would virtually entirely suppress all Sunday sport, and, of course, you as an old member know this would wipe out our association altogether, because we are able to play the national pastimes only on Sundays. We are convinced, even if this Bill does not apply to Ireland, it will have ill-effects, because we know, as a fact, that the Gaelic Athletic Association in Great Britain is composed of our kith and kin, and is growing stronger and stronger every day.⁵⁰

As a long-standing member of the GAA, Lundon was against the bill in its entirety because of the spread of the GAA to places like ‘London, Glasgow, Liverpool, Cardiff, and elsewhere’, places where Irish immigrants would not be exempt from the bill, even if Ireland itself was granted an exemption, and would not be allowed to play ‘the games of their country and of their forefathers’.⁵¹ Lundon concluded his remarks

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2274.

⁵¹ Ibid.

saying, 'I hope no Irishman will assist in putting it [the bill] on the Statute Book.'⁵²

The opposition to the bill was more than just an opposition to the general distaste for British rule in Ireland. Through this bill, the Irish legislators saw their country's national pastimes at stake. The GAA had become 'the most powerful national organisation in Ireland', according to London.⁵³ Even English politician Sir Edward Gouling, M.P. from Worcester and later Baron Wargrave, acknowledged that the GAA did 'a vast amount of good and provides reasonable recreation and amusement for multitudes of people on a Sunday afternoon.'⁵⁴ A large section of Irish national identity was at stake if the GAA was not allowed to hold matches on a Sunday afternoon. However, this was not a case of the GAA being deliberately singled out for government sanction. Instead it can be argued that the effect on the holding of Sunday matches was nothing but an unforeseen consequence of Lord Cavendish-Bentinck's original good intentions. At worst, the effect of the bill on the GAA is indictment of the general ignorance of lawmakers in Westminster in understanding the daily lives of a large proportion of the Irish population. However, that does not mean that the GAA was not the direct target of some of the government's actions.

The GAA's ban on police officers and military men from becoming members of clubs was a very contentious point during World War I. In April 1915, Sir Frederick Banbury, M.P. for the City of London, questioned Mr. Tennant, Under-Secretary of State, about any action the War Office intended to take against the GAA. Banbury asked Tennant if he was 'aware that the maintenance of this rule by an association which claims to be one of the largest Nationalist organisations in Ireland operates against the enlistment of members of the Gaelic athletic clubs?'⁵⁵ Banbury's accusation against the GAA was that by not permitting those who were already police and military men from being members, it was preventing any existing members from subsequently enlisting *ex post facto* and was a major detriment to

⁵² Ibid., 2274-5.

⁵³ Ibid., 2273.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 2227.

⁵⁵ 'Gaelic Athletic Association', *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, lxxi, 704 (28 Apr. 1915).

recruitment efforts by the War Office. Under-Secretary Tennant declined to make any specific statements on ‘what precise effect on recruiting of the rule in question might be,’ and went on to explain that his office had no intention of taking any actions against the GAA.⁵⁶ Banbury pushed the issue further asking if Tennant would ‘take steps to put a stop to any society passing resolutions which will stop recruiting in Ireland or elsewhere?’⁵⁷ Tennant replied that his office would do whatever they could to prevent such resolutions from passing. The follow-up question asked by Sir Banbury merely asks about resolutions that ‘will stop recruiting,’ rather than asking about resolutions that come out ‘against recruiting’.⁵⁸ Surely Banbury intends to word his question in this way as to include rules and resolutions like the GAA’s ban, as he saw the GAA as inhibiting recruitment without explicitly having passed a resolution against such. The resentment of the ban on police and military personnel would again manifest itself in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Uprising, as will be seen shortly.

Also in this discussion, John O’Connor, M.P. for Kildare North, asked Tennant, ‘is the right hon. Gentleman aware that this organisation declines to be regarded as a Nationalist organisation, and is one which includes all parties in Ireland?’ Receiving no answer, he then asked, ‘is not the definition of ‘Nationalist organisation’ a misnomer?’⁵⁹ Under-Secretary Tennant replied that, ‘I should think very likely that this is true, but I am not able to say’.⁶⁰

Mr. O’Connor’s first question is only partially true. The GAA had always professed itself to be Nationalist in outlook, but claimed no party allegiance. Again, as with other issues of contention, the *Gaelic Athlete* published a forceful editorial in defense of the GAA. The article accused O’Connor of ‘disowning the Association, and, inferentially, relegated it to the limbo of institutions which are accursed’.⁶¹ The article then continued in a sarcastic manner arguing against O’Connor’s view of what a Nationalist body would entail. The author, in a thinly-veiled

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 705.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ ‘Editorial’, *Gaelic Athlete*, vii, no. 175, 8 May 1915.

reference to O'Connor's purchasing of guns from Belgium prior to World War I, wrote, 'According to this definition, then, a real Nationalist must do something more. Perhaps he ought to import engines of destruction, ancient and modern, and obliterate or render inactive anyone who ventures upon the expression of a contrary definition of a practical Nationalist'.⁶² The article concludes with a sarcastic acceptance of O'Connor's position, 'we must, hereafter, sunder ourselves from our Nationalist aspirations, and henceforth content ourselves with merely National ones. The tribulation is a heavy one, but what can we do but grin and bear it?'⁶³ To the GAA, or at least its ardent supporters in the *Gaelic Athlete*, any implication that the GAA was not a Nationalist body, or worse a faux-Nationalist body as O'Connor's 'misnomer' comment might suggest, was a grave insult.

The next major challenge for the GAA was the Easter Uprising. The specific events of Easter Week 1916 are well documented and need not be recounted for the purposes of this paper. This paper will, however, briefly mention a few of the GAA members who played a role in the events, before moving on more pressingly into how the GAA was effected in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Uprising.

Among those GAA members who were active during the Easter Uprising were a handful of men who held key positions. Harry Boland, the prominent IRB member and contemporary of J.J. Walsh, was chairman of the Dublin GAA County Board in 1916 at the time of the Easter Uprising.⁶⁴ Boland and Walsh would both find themselves among the hundreds imprisoned after Easter Week. Members of the GAA would also find themselves in pivotal roles in the fighting that took place, among them Frank Burke and Peadar Boyle. Frank Burke, who would go on to win two All-Ireland Senior Hurling and three All-Ireland Senior Football championships for Dublin, was a second lieutenant in the Irish Volunteers.⁶⁵ Peadar Boyle served as quartermaster of the South Dublin Union Garrison would go on to hold several important

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. Note: Italics in original.

⁶⁴ *The Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin 1884-2000*, ed. William Nolan (3 vols, Dublin, 2000), i, p. 137.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 128.

governmental positions, serving on Dublin Corporation, as Lord Mayor of Dublin, and as Fine Gael T.D.⁶⁶

Though many men took place in the events of the Easter Uprising, the GAA did not play as prominent a role as might be suggested by the actions of the upper levels of GAA leadership. In *The Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin 1844-2000*, William Nolan wrote that ‘it was not so much membership of the GAA that motivated men and women to take up arms but rather membership of the Gaelic League’.⁶⁷ Figures in that same work show that many of the GAA clubs in Dublin had few or no members partake in the Uprising. William Murphy, citing figures in *The GAA in Dublin*, figured that of the seventy GAA clubs in Dublin, thirty-two clubs had three or fewer members taking part, while seventeen had no members in the Uprising.⁶⁸ The actions of the few have influenced perceptions of the GAA as a major force in the events of Easter Week 1916. The high profile members of the GAA who did take up arms invited the attention of the British authorities upon the organisation, even though a majority of clubs in Dublin had few or no members who took part in the Uprising. This attention has passed on to the histories of the GAA, where a disproportionate amount of responsibility has been placed on the GAA for the events of Easter Week.

The response of the British government after the Easter Uprising was swift. The rebellion was quelled within a week, many hundreds arrested, and its main leaders executed. As Nolan notes, ‘four of the executed leaders of the Easter Rising – Patrick Pearse, Con Colbert, Michael O’Hanrahan and Eamon Ceannt – were associated either in a players or administrative capacity within the GAA in Dublin’.⁶⁹ Beyond the immediate arrest or execution of those involved, the government moved to have an official inquiry into the events of Easter Week; the result was the Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland. Many of the interviewed police and military officials referred to the GAA as an

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 126.

⁶⁸ Murphy, ‘The GAA in Revolution’ in Cronin, Murphy, & Rouse (eds), *The GAA 1882-2009*, p. 67.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

anti-British association. Sir Matthew Nathan, Under-Secretary for Ireland under Augustine Birrell, included the GAA in a list of groups he named as anti-British associations which disagreed with Redmond's support of the recruitment of Irish troops for British forces in World War I. Among the other groups on the list were the Gaelic League, Irish Republican Brotherhood, and Sinn Féin.⁷⁰ Nathan expanded on his views of the GAA later in his testimony, saying he believed that the GAA had 'always been anti-British. They would not allow soldiers in uniform to attend their games'.⁷¹

Sir Neville Chamberlain, then Inspector General of the Royal Irish Constabulary, joined in with Nathan in condemning the GAA and its policy of refusing 'soldiers or sailors or police in joining in their games'.⁷² Distrust of the GAA ran high among senior military and police officials due to the ban. Constable Michael Davis of the Kingstown Station echoed Banbury's beliefs of one year earlier that the GAA inhibited the RIC and Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) in their efforts in recruiting new members. Constable Davis testified that any recruit brought into the police force in Ireland had to recognize the fact that by joining a police force they sever forever their connection with their friends and associates, and that they in [the] future will be debarred from taking part in any national sport or entertainment. The Gaelic Athletic Association, which is a powerful organisation throughout Ireland, will not permit any member of the DMP or RIC to compete in any sports held under their rules.⁷³

Other members interviewed during the commission's hearings expressed their continued beliefs that the GAA was anti-British through a connection to the IRB or Sinn Féin. Chamberlain expressed his belief that the IRB and Sinn Féin were 'practically the same', and that 'the

⁷⁰ 'Lieutenant-Colonel The Right Honourable Sir Matthew Hill' in *Minutes of Evidence Given Before The Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland*, p. 3, [Cd. 8311], H.C. 1916, xi, 187.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁷² 'Sir Neville Chamberlain, Inspector General of the Royal Irish Constabulary' in *Minutes of Evidence Given Before The Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland*, p. 3, [Cd. 8311], H.C. 1916, xi, 234.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 657.

extreme section of the Gaelic Athletic Association has endorsed the Sinn Féin doctrines'.⁷⁴

Chamberlain did qualify his remarks as characterising the 'extreme section' of the GAA instead of its entirety. Major Ivan Price, Director of Military Intelligence for Irish Command, believed that the Irish Volunteers had gained 'practically full control' of the GAA and Gaelic League.⁷⁵ The connection between the GAA and Irish Volunteers had been well established and quite public. However, the GAA was not under the control of the Volunteers. Rather, as de Búrca suggests, the two bodies shared an 'informal but effective alliance'.⁷⁶

County Inspector H.O.H. Hill, County Kerry, testified as to some of the mutual assistance between the GAA and Volunteers. On 22 May 1915, the Volunteers held a parade of 550 armed men under the direction of Eoin MacNeill immediately after a GAA match.⁷⁷ On 19 November 1915, Hill testified that 113 Volunteers, among whom 82 were armed, attended a match between Killarney and Castleisland where the sum of £16 was collected for the purchasing of arms.⁷⁸ And on 26 February 1916, mere weeks before the Easter Uprising, Padraig Pearse inspected a contingent of 248 Volunteers assembled in the sports fields in Tralee.⁷⁹

Throughout the commission's testimony, evidence was given by military and police authorities as to the role of the GAA in the events of the Easter Uprising. Most of the information related to the commission regarding the GAA fell mainly into two categories – displeasure with the ban on police and military and the belief that the GAA was controlled by the IRB, Sinn Féin, or Irish Volunteers.

Besides the official inquiry into the events of the Easter Uprising, the government took concrete actions in Ireland which directly affected the operations of the GAA. One of the first steps taken by the government was the suppression of the press. Four newspapers, among

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁷⁵ 'Major Ivan Price' in *Minutes of Evidence Given Before The Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland*, p. 3, [Cd. 8114], H.C. 1916, xi, 242.

⁷⁶ de Búrca, *The Story of the GAA*, p. 133.

⁷⁷ 'County Inspector H.O.H. Hill' in *Minutes of Evidence Given Before The Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland*, p. 3, [Cd. 8114], H.C. 1916, xi, 263.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

them the *Gaelic Athlete*, were suppressed ‘for the most flagrant offenses’ against the Defence of the Realm Regulations (DRR).⁸⁰ Without the *Gaelic Athlete*, the GAA lost its most effective means of communication with a wide, national audience. The *Gaelic Athlete* would not appear in print again until April 1924.

The GAA had also come under subject of the new entertainments tax, which had come into effect just prior to the Easter Uprising. John O’Connor had approached the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Reginald McKenna, regarding the possibility of the GAA being exempt from this tax under the provision that excluded those organisations dedicated to preserving and reviving national pastimes. McKenna would only acknowledge that the issue had been brought before him and decline to give any indication as to the eligibility of the GAA to take advantage of this exemption, instead saying that the matter of eligibility was a matter for Customs and Excise.⁸¹

By 5 July 1916, McKenna was able to relate to the House of Commons that Customs and Excise had received a formal application from the GAA requesting it be exempt from the entertainments tax, and ‘that the Board have decided that on the evidence before them there is no title to exemption’.⁸² Even on matters regarding taxation, the GAA found itself at odds with the British authorities over the issue of this ban on police and military. The government demanded the GAA revise its rules regarding the regulations on membership in order to qualify for the exemption. The GAA refused both to amend its rules and pay the tax.⁸³

Once again, in November 1916, the GAA and police came to a head regarding admission to matches. James Ryan, Secretary and Treasurer of the Limerick County Board, was arrested on 12 November on charges of ‘obstructing police while in the discharge of their duty’ under Defence of the Realm Regulation number 43 for refusing to allow

⁸⁰ Ginnell to Chief Secretary Birrell, 28 March 1916 (N.A.I., Chief Secretary Office Papers, 1916 Rising Collection, 5641/25143).

⁸¹ ‘Gaelic Athletic Association’, *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, lxxxii, 20 (3 May 1916).

⁸² ‘Irish Gaelic Athletic Association’, *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, lxxxiii, 1137W (5 July 1916).

⁸³ Mandle, *The GAA*, p. 179.

two RIC officers into a hurling match.⁸⁴ A copy of rules was circulated to police in Co. Limerick outlining their duties with regards to entering matches.

3. As regards the police being refused entrance to the GAA Meeting, the police have power under DRR 51 to enter any place and in the event of there being refused admission they should then state that they are acting under the DRR and request admission officially. If entrance is again refused, the person concerned should be arrested then or later and charged under DRR 43.

4. I would point out that the Major General Commanding is desirous that Police should attend all Feis, GAA Meetings, etc, and they should use the powers given them under DRR 51 for this purpose.⁸⁵

Ryan's arrest was seen as a serious enough affront to the GAA that MP for Limerick East, Thomas Lundon, took the matter to Parliamentary questions. There he asked Henry Duke, who had replaced Birrell as Chief Secretary of Ireland, as to why Ryan had been arrested. Duke cited DRR 43, as seen in the letter to troops.⁸⁶ After Duke's reply to Lundon, Michael Flavin and Richard Hazleton, MPs for Kerry North and Galway North, respectively, asked Chief Secretary Duke under what circumstances a police constable is permitted to enter a place of amusement or football matches free of charge. Duke's reply was simply, 'if their duty calls them'.⁸⁷

Throughout 1916, the GAA had been in the cross-hairs of government on several occasions. One last confrontation would occur between the two before year's end, that being over the issue of special trains for the transportation of supporters between matches. On two occasions, trains were cancelled in Limerick, while a train to Athlone for

⁸⁴ Duke to Lundon, 16 Nov. 1916 (N.A.I., Chief Secretary Office Papers, 1916 Rising Collection, 5645/25595).

⁸⁵ Orders to Troops in Co. Limerick, 11 Sept. 1916 (N.A.I., Chief Secretary Office Papers, 1916 Rising Collection, 5639/24928). Note: Underlining in original.

⁸⁶ Lundon to Duke. 16 Nov. 1916 (N.A.I., Chief Secretary Office Papers, 1916 Rising Collection, 5645/25595).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

an All-Ireland semi-final was also cancelled.⁸⁸ In the second instance, the Urban District Council of Athlone unanimously passed a resolution registering its 'emphatic protest' of the cancellation of trains which caused 'serious loss' for shopkeepers in Athlone. Furthermore, the council expressed that the 'inconsiderate, unnecessary, and provocative actions of this nature can have but one effect – a feeling of bitterness towards English administration in the Country'.⁸⁹ Chief Secretary Duke replied that in the case of the train bound for Athlone, 'the running of excursion and other unnecessary trains is undesirable having regard to the urgent necessity of economising fuel'.⁹⁰ As Britain was still in the midst of World War I, Duke's suggestion that the cancellation was a rationing measure is not entirely unreasonable.

Throughout the early years of the 20th Century, the GAA was one of the largest Nationalist organisations in Ireland. From this prominent position, the GAA drew the attention of the authorities in Ireland, who saw the association as seditious. Much of the attention brought onto the GAA was due to the Nationalist activities of ardent revolutionaries who held influential positions within the association. The British authorities ascribed these revolutionary ideals of the directors of the GAA to the entire body of the group, which was quite often not the case. This tendency to superimpose the mind-set of the GAA leadership onto the all those who may have been members continued on through the historiography of the GAA, which has quite often asserted the GAA as being at the forefront of the political wing of the Nationalist movement.

⁸⁸ Landon to Duke. 15 Nov. 1916 (N.A.I., Chief Secretary Office Papers, 1916 Rising Collection, 5645/25633); Hayden to Duke, *Ibid*.

⁸⁹ Resolution. 25 Oct. 1916 (N.A.I., Chief Secretary Office Papers, 1916 Rising Collection, 5645/25633).

⁹⁰ Hayden to Duke. 15 Nov. 1916 (N.A.I., Chief Secretary Office Papers, 1916 Rising Collection, 5645/25633).

Frongoch

Immediately after the Easter Uprising, hundreds of men were arrested and thrown into prison. The leaders of the Easter Uprising were executed. Those that were not released were held in prisons and internment camps across Ireland and Britain. According to Tom Looney in his biography of Dick Fitzgerald, a total of 2,519 people were arrested and placed into one of ten different British jails and camps.¹ Within the confines of the camps, Gaelic games were very popular among the men. Not only did the Gaelic games give the men some form of entertainment, but the games also played a role in establishing a structure and routine in the camp. The games were also Gaelic in their nature, and playing the games was a way for the interned men to retain their Irish identity while under control of British authorities.

Located in Wales, near the village of Bala, Frongoch was a former prisoner of war camp that had been home to some 1,800 prisoners of war during World War I.² After the Easter Uprising, the German prisoners were moved and many of the interned Irish were sent to Frongoch, or a similar camp, where they were held without trial for weeks, and in some cases months, at a time. During their time at Frongoch, the prisoners were left to occupy their time in any fashion they could. The main forms of entertainment were academic courses, primarily the Irish language, military drill and instruction, and sport. As Lyn Ebenezer put it, 'self-created entertainment was important for the men not only to relieve the boredom but also to lighten their minds. Physical recreation was just as important'.³

Frongoch is situated in the Welsh countryside, far from any major cities or waterways. In a letter to the *Evening Herald*, subsequently reported by the *Irish Independent*, G.A. Lyons described Frongoch as 'a desolate district in the mountains, with little life of any

¹ Tom Looney, *Dick Fitzgerald: King in a Kingdom of Kings* (Dublin, 2008), p. 119.

² 'The Irish Prisoners at Frongoch Camp', *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Dec. 1916.

³ Lyn Ebenezer, *Fron-goch and the Birth of the IRA*, trans. Lyn Ebenezer (Llanwrst, 2006), p. 130-1.

kind'.⁴ In his memoir *B'fhiú an Braon Fola*, Séamas Ó Maoileoin described the camp as being set 'at the foot of some medium high mountains, in Merioneth County in Wales. In a way it resembled Connemara, I thought at first sight, but I don't believe there is any place in Connemara so out of the way, so lonely, so cold, so desolate and gloomy as it is'.⁵ Ó Maoileoin had been interned for his work in destroying a section of rail line outside Ballycastle, County Mayo during Easter Week 1916.⁶

Not everyone was stuck by the stark landscape in such a negative fashion. A correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* described Frongoch as 'a modest little hamlet...in the beautiful valley down which the River Tryweryn forces an impetuous and fretful course'.⁷ Michael Collins, too, was taken by the landscape. In a letter to his girlfriend, he wrote that the camp was 'situated most picturesquely on rising ground amid pretty Welsh hills'.⁸

The camp itself was separated into North Camp and South Camp. Many of the buildings had been converted from an old whiskey distillery. First reports out of the camp in the Irish press were that the conditions in the camp were not of a sufficient standard for the prisoners held there. The *Anglo-Celt* reported that 'it is said that the detention camp at Frongoch was condemned by Americans when being used for German prisoners of war'.⁹ Sir John Maxwell completely denied the accusations of the camp being unfit. The *Irish Times* reported that Maxwell 'wholly repudiated the allegation made in this connection against the Frongoch Camp. It was not used for Irishmen after being found unfit for Germans, but it was thoroughly suitable for its purpose'.¹⁰

The report by an American envoy in which the *Anglo-Celt* claimed Frongoch had been found unfit for German prisoners had quite the opposite conclusion. In his report, Boylston Beal, Special Attaché to

⁴ 'Life in Frongoch Camp', *Irish Independent*, 8 Aug. 1916.

⁵ Séamas Ó Maoileoin, *B'fhiú an Braon Fola*, trans. Patrick J. Twohig (Ballincollig, 1996), p. 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷ 'Frongoch Camp', *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Dec. 1916

⁸ Charles Townsend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*, (London, 2005), p. 317.

⁹ 'The Rebellion and The Aftermath', *Anglo-Celt*, 15 July 1916.

¹⁰ 'Nationalists and the Rebellion: Frongoch Camp', *Irish Times*, 27 July 1916.

the German Division of the United States Embassy, found that ‘there was no ground for criticism of this camp’.¹¹ In his report, Beal outlined areas of concern, such sleeping accommodation, sanitary arrangements, kitchens, the infirmary, work and recreation, and found them all to be in good condition and without criticism.¹² The complaints by the German prisoners in Frongoch were quite ordinary, such as requesting exchange for those wounded and the officers of the camp requesting better quarters than the enlisted men. The most pressing complaint was a lack of a fire escape in one of the dormitories, which the War Office assured Beal would ‘receive prompt attention’.¹³ In all, the conditions for the Germans at Frongoch were quite adequate for prisoners of war, and not at all worthy of being ‘condemned’ as the *Anglo-Celt* claimed.

Though the United States Embassy report itself found no fault with the camp while it was home to German prisoners of war, reports of sub-standard conditions for the Irish continued to appear in the press. The *Irish Independent* ran an interview in August 1916 with a recently released prisoner who claimed that the camp had ‘very bad sanitation arrangements’ due to over-crowding and that the meat used for meals was ‘frequently condemned by the doctor as unfit for human food’.¹⁴

The complaint about over-crowding stemmed from the fact that more than 3,000 men had been arrested in the initial stages of the internment process. However, 1,200 men had been released by July 1916, which eased the problem of having too little room for the men interned.¹⁵ As more and more men were being released, the authorities moved all the men to the North Camp, which had better facilities for the prisoners.¹⁶

For the Irish prisoners, there were restrictions on visits and items that could be sent into the camp. In late June 1916, the *Irish Times* printed the guidelines for visits to Frongoch:

¹¹ Boylston Beal, ‘Enclosure in Report No. 5’ in *Reports of Visits of Inspection made by Officials of the United States Embassy to Various Internment Camps in the United Kingdom*, p. 10., [Cd. 8224], H.C. 1916. xv, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ ‘Items of Interest: Irish Prisoners at Frongoch’, *Irish Independent*, 14 Aug. 1916.

¹⁵ ‘The Late Rebellion: Persons in Detention’, *Irish Times*, 7 July 1916.

¹⁶ ‘The Irish Prisoners at Frongoch Camp’, *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Dec. 1916.

We are asked to state that Tuesdays and Thursdays are visiting days at Frongoch Internment Camp, the hours being from 2 to 3 o'clock. Prisoners can only receive one visit per month. Application for permits must be made in writing to the Commandant, leaving sufficient time for reply to be sent by post. No admission is granted except on production of an authorised permit.¹⁷

As the above regulations state, each prisoner was allowed one visitor per month, and the visit could only last one hour. In one case, this restriction saw a visitor who had traveled from Cork to Frongoch, a journey of 300 miles one-way, and was turned away at the gate.¹⁸ Thomas McPartlin, friend of Irish MP William O'Brien, traveled to Frongoch as part of a delegation from the Manchester Aid Committee. In a letter to Mrs. O'Brien, McPartlin wrote that a trip from Manchester to Frongoch and back took from 7 AM to 6PM. Upon arriving, McPartlin was denied entry to the camp, but gained what information he could from other visitors and the officers in charge of the camp.¹⁹ These rules would later be relaxed somewhat, allowing for visitors to come inside a two hour window on any of three days of the week, though individual visits could only last thirty minutes. The prisoners were also afforded two visits per month instead of the single visit which had been the case previously.²⁰

Despite the conditions of their internment, the men tried to lead as normal of lives as they could. The men devised for themselves a schedule that included specific times for meals, bathing, chores, education classes and recreation. The regimented schedule of the day provided a means for keeping discipline among the large number of prisoners. Of particular interest to this paper are the types of classes the men attended and the type of recreation enjoyed by them.

When the men first arrived at Frongoch, one of the first things they noticed was the prevalence of the use of the Welsh language in

¹⁷ 'Frongoch Internment Camp: Visiting Regulations', *Irish Times*, 30 June 1916.

¹⁸ 'Rebellion Questions: Legal Representation', *Irish Independent*, 30 June 1916.

¹⁹ McPartlin to O'Brien. Undated [c. 1916], (UCD Archives, McPartlin Papers, P19/A/8).

²⁰ 'Irish Prisoners at Frongoch', *Irish Times*, 10 Oct. 1916.

everyday life. Any of the local civilians who worked within the camp used Welsh among themselves regularly.²¹ Ó Maoileoin noted that ‘how faithful they were to their native language. Even the shopkeepers, it was Welsh they spoke among themselves, even though the customers did not understand a word. It was the very opposite of Ireland’.²²

Inspired by the use of Welsh among the general population of the region, a large number of the Irish prisoners sought to learn their own native language while interned at Frongoch. W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, Commandant of the interned men, wrote that ‘in the civilian studies, the major portion of our time was devoted to the Irish language, which was only as it should be’.²³ The educational classes in Frongoch were deliberately Irish in nature. Classes in the Irish language were held three days a week, Irish history every Thursday, Irish step-dancing twice weekly, and debates were held in Irish every Sunday evening.²⁴

However, the British authorities were not as supportive of the new Irish initiatives. Censors routinely prohibited items in the Irish language from reaching the men inside the camp. McPartlin wrote in his letter that the regulations at the camp were ‘very strict, no Irish papers’.²⁵ Laurence Ginnell, MP for Westmeath North, questioned the government as to why ‘no Irish matter or paper containing Irish matter is allowed to reach them...while allowing the free use of German literature to German prisoners and internees?’²⁶ On answering Ginnell’s question, Mr. Samuel, Secretary of State for the Home Office, said that ‘the censorship of books and letters in the Erse language presents difficulties.’ T.M. Healy, MP for Cork Northeast took exception to the use of the term ‘Erse’ by Samuel, asking ‘would you call the Hebrew language Sheenie?’²⁷ Samuel corrected himself and said that “letters in Irish have been passed, and this will continue, unless the

²¹ Ebenzer, *Fron-goch*, p. 75.

²² Ó Maoileoin, *B’fhiú an Braon Fola*, p. 63.

²³ W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, *With the Irish at Frongoch* (Dublin, 1917), p. 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁵ McPartlin to O’Brien. Undated [c. 1916], (UCD Archives, McPartlin Papers, P19/A/8).

²⁶ Ginnell to Samuel. 28 July 1916 (N.A.I., Chief Secretary Office Papers, 1916 Rising Collection, 5645/25633).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

number should increase to such an extent as to cause difficulty in their examination'.²⁸

At Frongoch, the camp authorities were not very accommodating for language consideration. Ebenezer relates an example which illustrates the point of Ginnell as to the disparity between the treatment of the Irish and German prisoners. When the Irish arrived, one of the signs above the water tap was inscribed with the German '*Trinke Wasser*' [drinking water]. However, the request of the internees for a similar sign in Irish was denied by the authorities.²⁹ The camp authorities were more accommodating to the requests of the Irish prisoners when it came to the matter of recreation.

The recreation field was open to the men for two hours between 2 PM and 4 PM.³⁰ M.J. O'Connor recalled that the games played 'were football (Gaelic, or course), skittles, and "Cat" or baseball, as well as weight throwing, weight lifting, etc.'³¹ Football matches were played twice per day.³² The men wanted to play hurling as well as Gaelic football, but the camp authorities would not allow the prisoners to have camáns, for the obvious security risk the men would pose if they decided to wield their hurleys as weapons.³³ McPartlin wrote that the prisoners were 'allowed to drill under their own officers and kick footballs which are also been sent from here[Manchester], as well as other games'.³⁴ Sean O'Mahony wrote in *Frongoch: University of Revolution* that Frank Burke recalled that the men were given a football by Father Moore, the chaplain of Stafford Jail who was visiting Frongoch.³⁵

The men in Frongoch organised a football tournament consisting of four teams, three from South Camp and one from North Camp.³⁶ The South Camp wore uniforms of 'a blue stripe running from the right shoulder to left waist, while North Camp sported red bands.'³⁷ The team

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ebenezer, *Fron-goch*, p. 97.

³⁰ Brennan-Whitmore, *Irish at Frongoch*, p. 38.

³¹ M.J. O'Connor, *Stone Walls* (Dublin, 1966), p. 64.

³² Ó Maoileoin, *B'fhiú an Braon Fola*, p. 54.

³³ Brennan-Whitmore, *Irish at Frongoch*, p. 38.

³⁴ McPartlin to O'Brien. Undated [c. 1916], (UCD Archives, McPartlin Papers, P19/A/8).

³⁵ Sean O'Mahony, *Frongoch: University of Revolution*, (Killiney, 1987), p. 101.

³⁶ Ó Maoileoin, *B'fhiú an Braon Fola*, p. 54.

³⁷ O'Mahony, *Frongoch*, p. 100.

from North Camp and two of the teams from South Camp were named after executed leaders of the Easter Uprising.³⁸ Ó Maoileoin is the best source for a first hand account of the tournament set up, as he played on the third team from the South Camp, which was called ‘The Leprechauns’, captained by the great Kerry footballer Dick Fitzgerald.³⁹ Fitzgerald captained Kerry to victory in the 1913 and 1914 All-Ireland football championships.⁴⁰ The Leprechauns were made up of those men who were left over after the ‘pick of Ireland’s footballers’ were claimed by the other teams, men such as Frank Burke, the playwright Frank Shouldice, future TD for Kerry Paddy Cahill, and Michael Collins.⁴¹ Shouldice played senior football for Dublin before being interned, Cahill played for Kerry, and Burke would win 5 All-Ireland medals combined between hurling and football.⁴²

The Leprechauns played two matches against each of the other three teams. Though the team was made of the ‘rubbish [that] was left’ after creating the other teams, Dick Fitzgerald would lead them to become camp champions. Ó Maoileoin praised Fitzgerald’s ability to take a team that was ‘mainly composed of little fellows’ and lead them to victory.⁴³ Fitzgerald ‘was well versed in the game and taught [his team] every trick he had’.⁴⁴ Ó Maoileoin was ‘convinced that he [Fitzgerald] was better in Frongoch than he ever was in Croke Park’.⁴⁵

The fact that The Leprechauns had been comprised of ‘two or three hurlers, who had never before played football’ and ‘little fellows’ shows both the ability to use Gaelic games for establishing a sense of identity, but also that it was not the only way. While active in the events of Easter Week as a member of the Volunteers, O Maoileoin never saw the GAA as a means towards expressing his Nationalist views. For him, the Irish Volunteers were a more direct means of achieving his aims, rather than the more cultural Nationalism of the GAA. However, once

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ó Maoileoin, *B’fhiú an Braon Fola*, p. 54.

⁴⁰ O’Mahony, *Frongoch*, p. 99.

⁴¹ Ebenezer, *Fron-goch*, p. 131-2.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ó Maoileoin, *B’fhiú an Braon Fola*, p. 54.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

interned at Frongoch, the GAA was a more viable method for Ó Maoileoin to express his Nationalist views.

In July, a match between Kerry and Louth was played as the final to the annual Wolfe Tone Tournament, with a second match played between teams representing Wexford and Dublin. The matches were mentioned in the sports sections of Irish newspapers. The *Anglo-Celt* reported that Kerry beat Louth by a single point, while Wexford scored 2 goals and 3 points to defeat Dublin who scored 1 goal and 3 points.⁴⁶ Athletic competitions were also held on the recreation grounds. Michael Collins excelled at the athletic competitions, winning the 100 yard dash in a time under eleven seconds.⁴⁷ Collins placed second in the 56 lb. throw, losing to Munster champion Seán Hales.⁴⁸ Hales was one of Collins' best friends in Frongoch, and would later be killed in Dublin by Anti-Treaty IRA forces for his Dáil vote authorizing the army to execute prisoners.⁴⁹

The outcomes of the matches are not the only significant results of the Gaelic games played within the camp. The matches, as well as the teaching of the Irish language, point towards a larger question of self-identity. Brennan-Whitmore said that the fact a majority of time was devoted to teaching Irish was 'only natural', while O'Connor wrote that 'of course' Gaelic football should be the only code played by the prisoners. Both men wrote with the conviction that it was only natural for the Irish to play Irish games and speak in the Irish tongue, despite being imprisoned in a camp run by a foreign culture. The men took the opportunity to actively seek ways in which to outwardly express their sense of cultural identity. The Irish language and games that were unique to the culture that created them were a bold statement rejecting the ways of the foreign authorities. The men interned at Frongoch felt a sense of duty to embrace the cultural aspects that made them different from the British who imprisoned them in the camp, as a means to differentiate themselves and declare their own identity.

⁴⁶ 'Athletics and Sporting: Prisoners' Football', *Anglo Celt*, 29 July 1916.

⁴⁷ Ebenezer, *Fron-goch*, p. 134.

⁴⁸ Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins: A Biography* (London, 1990), p. 51.

⁴⁹ Piaras Béaslai, *Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland* (2 vols, London, 1926) i, p. 111.

Newspapers in back home in Ireland picked up on the news of the Gaelic activities of the men and reported the news proudly. The *Meath Chronicle* quoted a man known as ‘the Carp’ as saying ‘the intense Gaelicism of the Irish Prisoners of War at Frongoch Internment Camp is clearly demonstrated in their eager attendance at Irish Language classes, organized under the direction of capable teachers and their zeal in pursuing the Gaelic games arranged by well-known G.A.A. men in their midst’.⁵⁰ The use of Gaelic within the camp was greatly celebrated in an article in the *Southern Star*, saying of some Gaelic League members interned that

their zeal for the language never slackened, and in Frongoch camp they did their bit in helping their compatriots to acquire a better knowledge of the mother tongue. The Irish classes, debates, and concerts held there were highly appreciated, and went to show that the Gael, although far away from home, never forgets he is Irish and that he has a past.⁵¹

⁵⁰ ‘Football Game at Frongoch Internment Camp’, *Meath Chronicle*, 29 July 1916.

⁵¹ ‘In Cork’s Own Town’, *Southern Star*, 19 Aug. 1916.

Gaelic Sunday

On 4 July 1918, Lieutenant General Frederick Shaw, Commander in Chief of the British forces in Ireland, signed a proclamation to prohibit ‘the holding of or taking part in any meetings, assemblies, or processions within the whole of Ireland.’¹ Immediately after the proclamation, concerns arose out of Ireland. Newspapers reported on meetings of the Gaelic league, workers’ unions, and other meetings that were banned by police. Members of the House of Commons strongly questioned government officials over provisions in the proclamation. The response of the Gaelic Athletic Association was to hold matches of Gaelic games *en masse* across Ireland as a statement against the government’s authority, a day which would come to be called ‘Gaelic Sunday’.

On 11 July 1918, Joseph King, MP for Somerset Northern, questioned Edward Shortt, Chief Secretary of Ireland, at length in Parliament. King began by asking Shortt if he would ‘give figures for the first six months of this year showing how many persons belonging to Sinn Féin, Cumann na mBan, and the Gaelic League, respectively, have been convicted for any act of sedition or breach of the peace?’² Shortt declined to provide any figures as the work involved would outweigh any benefits of the knowledge of such information. King was presumably referring the specific portion of the proclamation that declare ‘the associations known as the Sinn Féin organisation, Sinn Féin clubs, the Irish Volunteers, the Cumann na mBan, and the Gaelic League to be dangerous’.³

King continued on, asking Shortt if he was ‘aware that the Cumann na mBan...is a women’s organisation, and that its only political recent activities have been directed against conscription?’⁴ Shortt replied that ‘membership of this society is restricted to women of Irish birth or descent’ and it is ‘closely associated’ with the Irish volunteers.

¹ ‘Order Under Defence of the Realm Regulation 9AA’, (The National Archives, London, British in Ireland, CO 904/16: microfilm, National Archives Ireland).

² ‘Sedition Charges’, *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cviii, 481 (11 July 1918).

³ ‘Criminal Law and Procedure (Ireland) Act, 1887 (Proclamations, etc.)’ *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cvii, 1818 (4 July 1918),

⁴ ‘Cumann na mBan’, *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cviii, 481-2 (11 July 1918).

The concern of the government with regards to the membership practices of Cumann na mBan mirrors the concern over the ban of the GAA on police and military from joining their association. For the government, the idea of any association determining membership in a manner which was exclusionary of English men and women was considered seditious.

King also asked Shortt about the proclamation as it concerned the Gaelic League. King defended the Gaelic League as being inclusive of ‘persons of different religious creeds and political views’ and questioned whether there was any evidence that supported the Gaelic League as being ‘an organisation supporting seditious aims or violent methods’.⁵ Shortt replied that he was aware that the Gaelic League was accepting of members from across religions and political beliefs, and outlined that there was in fact evidence linking extreme Sinn Féin elements with the Gaelic League. ‘The Proclamation’, Shortt explained, ‘was not intended against the Gaelic League, but against people who might use the Gaelic League for seditious purposes’.⁶ The Gaelic League would be allowed to continue in its meetings as long as it continued to do so in a peaceful manner.⁷

Some MPs were worried about their ability to address their constituencies without the need for a permit. William Doris, MP for Mayo West, claimed that he received notice that he ‘should not address a meeting of his constituents in Park last Sunday’.⁸ Shortt then told Doris that he did not receive ‘any such notice’, but that he may have been instructed that he ‘could not address them without a permit’.⁹ John Dillon, from Mayo East, immediately asked Shortt whether he would ‘introduce that law into this country – that no member can address his constituents without a permit? Is that the democratic liberty for which we are all on to fight?’¹⁰ Joseph Devlin, MP for Belfast West, then asked if a permit would be needed for a meeting of ‘the Irish

⁵ ‘Gaelic League’, *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cviii, 484 (11 July 1918).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ ‘Meetings (Permits)’, *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cviii, 1978-9 (25 July 1918).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

in Newcastle-on-Tyne', referring to Shortt's own constituency.¹¹ Shortt's reply was that it was not necessary to obtain permits in Great Britain, so any gathering in Newcastle-on-Tyne could be carried off without interference. The extension of the proclamation to cover the addressing of constituents raised major concerns for the abilities of MPs to effectively serve those they had been elected to represent.

John Donovan, MP for Wicklow West, questioned Shortt 'whether, in the view of the fact that the Gaelic Athletic Association was not within the category of the organisations recently proclaimed as illegal in Ireland, will he say why the police authorities banned the playing of football and hurling matches under the auspices of this body except with the special permission of the authorities'.¹² Shortt replied that 'any gathering which comes within the regulation requires a permit, which is always granted in the case of *bona fide* sports or entertainments'.¹³

However, given the past antagonism of the British government towards the GAA, the '*bona fides*' of the association were not clear. The question remained as to whether a match played under GAA auspices was just an athletic competition, or was some form of political meeting. In late July 1918, Devlin gave an impassioned speech before the House of Commons asking, 'is it the law which makes it treasonable to play Gaelic games because they said they are political? Is it the law which says it is treasonable to hold hurley matches? ... Is it the law that football matches, athletic sports, Gaelic festivals, Irish concerts, are to be held only if the local police and military permit?'¹⁴

Around the time of Devlin's speech in Parliament, the Central Council of the GAA met to discuss the challenges presented under the proclamation. There had been several instances of police interference at GAA matches. The *Nenagh Guardian* gave a dramatic account of the police breaking up a Gaelic football match in Banagher, County Offaly. The match had not been advertised, but a small force of police who were present when the game started cautioned the players. All present were

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 'Meetings (Permits)', *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cviii, 1978 (25 July 1918).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 'Mr. Dillon's Motion', *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cix, 152-3 (29 July 1918).

intent on the game when nearing the interval District Inspector Knox, Birr [County Offaly], arrived with police and soldiers. The order was given to disperse the players and spectators, and the police and military charged down the field. A number of persons were injured by the batons of the police. No resistance was offered, players and spectators making their escape as best they could over the fences. They were pursued by the military and police across the fields and down the road towards the town'.¹⁵

On 30 July 1918, the *Irish Independent* reported that the military had occupied the GAA grounds in Kiltyclogher, County Leitrim.¹⁶ In the same article was a report of the police charging a crowd at a Gaelic football match in Ballymena, County Antrim, after refusing to comply with an order to disperse and a report of police taking the names of spectators and players at a junior football match at Castleblayney, County Monaghan. Before a match in Kerry between the John Mitchells of Tralee versus the Dr. Crokes from Killarney, the teams were attacked by police with batons on their way to the pitch.¹⁷ Police activities against Gaelic games went so far as the arrest of nine boys during a match in Phoenix Park.¹⁸

As the police responded to the proclamation with measures as far as to go about breaking up matches with the use of batons, the GAA was forced to gauge a response. A meeting of the GAA Central Council was held, where the secretary related the news of a meeting with Dublin Castle that 'no hurling or football matches would be allowed...unless a permit was obtained'.¹⁹ With this understanding that the GAA would be required to seek permits for any matches that were to be held legally, the council was unanimous in its decision that 'no permit be asked for under any conditions'.²⁰ Provincial and county councils were instructed not to seek permits, and players were told that 'no member of the association shall take part in any competition where such permit may

¹⁵ 'Ban on Irish Games', *Nenagh Guardian*, 27 July 1918.

¹⁶ 'Irish Prohibitions', *Irish Independent*, 30 July 1918.

¹⁷ Witness Statement of Maurice Horgan, (National Archives Ireland, Bureau of Military History, WS 953).

¹⁸ 'Proclamation and Irish Games', *Manchester Guardian*, 31 July 1918.

¹⁹ Notes on Central Council minutes, 29 July 2009 (Private notes of Mark Reynolds, Archivist, GAA Museum, Croke Park, Dublin).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

have been requested'.²¹ Reportedly, any member would be 'automatically and indefinitely suspended' as punishment for any application for permits.²² The meeting concluded with the decision to hold as many matches as possible on 4 August 1918.²³

As news of the GAA's plan spread, the government was forced to respond. One option the government had was to respond in kind with a mass mobilisation of police and military to suppress as many GAA matches as it could. This was a dangerous option, pitting police and military against large masses of players and spectators had the potential to lead to violence and rioting. The events of Bloody Sunday two years later would illustrate this scenario in a very tragic way.

Instead, the government backtracked on their previous position of interfering with matches. The first week of August 1918 saw reports in newspapers outlining the government's new position. Authorities sent around a circular to police outlining that football and hurling matches were not to be considered as falling under the restrictions of the proclamation.²⁴ The fact that the police interrupted GAA matches previously was explained away by Shortt that the police 'had unfortunately misunderstood their instructions'.²⁵ The *Manchester Guardian* praised the decision of the authorities to reconsider their approach, saying that what 'the consequences of the police and military interference with that enormous number of fixtures might have been many people here would prefer not to think about'.²⁶

The sheer number of matches scheduled by the GAA forced the government to reconsider its policy. The North Tipperary Board had scheduled sixteen matches in sixteen different locations which were to be 'whole-heartedly carried out'.²⁷ The *Anglo-Celt* carried a list of matches to be played in Counties Cavan and Monaghan, with the number of matches listed being seventeen and twenty-seven

²¹ Ibid.

²² 'GAA and Permits', *Nenagh Guardian*, 27 July 1918.

²³ Notes on Central Council minutes, 29 July 2009 (Private notes of Mark Reynolds, Archivist, GAA Museum, Croke Park, Dublin).

²⁴ 'Proclamations and Irish Games', *Irish Independent*, 1 Aug. 1918.

²⁵ 'Irish Sports: The Ban Removed', *Manchester Guardian*, 31 July 1918.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 'Gaelic Sunday', *Nenagh Guardian*, 3 Aug. 1918.

respectively.²⁸ In County Meath, GAA matches were being incorporated into the local harvest festival for the Patron of Kieran. The article in the *Meath Chronicle* wrote that ‘every Irish man and woman worthy of the name is expected to patronise in some practical manner their national pastimes’.²⁹

The planned events of Gaelic Sunday went off as planned by the GAA. Approximately 1,500 football, hurling, and camogie matches were played all across Ireland on 4 August 1918, all without permits and all without police interference.³⁰ Over thirty matches were played in Dublin alone.³¹ Matches were played all over Dublin, from Phoenix Park to Sandymount, Clondalkin to Clonsilla.³² Two or three members of the DMP were seen in the vicinity of Croke Park, but they did not interfere in any manner with proceedings inside.³³ The only police action taken in Dublin was only tangentially related to the proceedings of the day. Fourteen boys, aged between twelve and seventeen, were arrested for selling flags on the street. The boys were taken to various police stations, and subsequently released once their names and addresses were taken down.³⁴

Outside Dublin, other matches were held with great success. Matches in Belfast were ‘passed off in circumstances similar’ to those in Dublin.³⁵ In Kilkee, County Clare, a hurling match was played between a team of priests and a team of Christian Brothers, much to the amusement of the spectators.³⁶ Forty matches were arranged in County Cork, but the weather forced many to be abandoned.³⁷ However, all sixteen matches were played in North Tipperary, despite the heavy rain.³⁸ In Athlone, 2 members of the RIC and a ‘large number of soldiers’ were present at a match, but as paying spectators rather than

²⁸ ‘Athletics and Sporting’, *Anglo-Celt*, 3 Aug. 1918.

²⁹ ‘The Patron of Kieran’, *Meath Chronicle*, 3 Aug. 1918.

³⁰ ‘Gaelic Games All Over Ireland’, *Irish Independent*, 5 Aug. 1918.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² ‘Gaelic Sunday’, *Irish Times*, 5 Aug. 1918.

³³ ‘Gaelic Games All Over Ireland’, *Irish Independent*, 5 Aug. 1918.

³⁴ ‘Gaelic Sunday’, *Irish Times*, 5 Aug. 1918.

³⁵ ‘Gaelic Games All Over Ireland’, *Irish Independent*, 5 Aug. 1918.

³⁶ ‘A Novel Hurling Match’, *Irish Independent*, 8 Aug. 1918.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ ‘Taking Over of Public Offices: Permits for Religious Gatherings!’, *Irish Independent*, 6 Aug. 1918.

acting to prevent the matches.³⁹ At a match in Kilruane, County Tipperary, a police sergeant and constable sought admission to the match being played. The two men were turned away at the gate, unless they agreed to pay admission like any other spectator. The police officers then decided to watch the match from the road outside the grounds.⁴⁰

In terms of playing the games, Gaelic Sunday was an unqualified success. Outside of uncontrollable forces like the weather, all matches were played, and no match was prevented from taking place by the police. The day showed the ability of the GAA to organise Gaelic games on a mass scale. The material results of Gaelic Sunday are quite obvious, but was the day successful in terms of making a political statement?

The first question that must be addressed was the motivation behind Gaelic Sunday. While police were actively enforcing the proclamation's ban on public meetings at GAA matches, Gaelic Sunday was a non-violent measure of resistance to the treatment to which the association was subjected. However, faced with the sheer numbers, the government was forced to reconsider its approach to the proclamation as it applied to GAA matches. With the mere threat of action sufficient to achieve the desired effect, why would the GAA continue on with its plans for Gaelic Sunday?

The Enniscorthy council saw fit to congratulate the Central Council for the 'effective means it had devised for defeating the attempt that had been made to crush the GAA out of existence'.⁴¹ This provides insight into the mindset of the GAA during the time of the proclamation. The idea of Gaelic Sunday was born out of an institutional survival instinct for self-preservation. When the GAA was threatened it 'issued a challenge to the government...and the government had failed to take it up'.⁴²

³⁹ 'Gaelic Games All Over Ireland', *Irish Independent*, 5 Aug. 1918.

⁴⁰ 'Taking Over of Public Offices: Permits for Religious Gatherings!', *Irish Independent*, 6 Aug. 1918.

⁴¹ 'News of the Week: Provincial', *Weekly Irish Times*, 17 Aug. 1918.

⁴² *Ibid.*

The reason for the idea of Gaelic Sunday is clear, but with the challenge laid before the government, and the government's capitulation, the question remains why the GAA held Gaelic Sunday once it was clear that the government had no intention of prohibit it from taking place. The same article discussing the Enniscorthy District Committee provides the answer. 'It might be said that the GAA had an easy victory,' the article read, 'but the victory had great significance as showing what the people could accomplish by unity of purpose and determination'.⁴³

Gaelic Sunday became a day to mark victory over the policy of the government. The Dublin correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* blamed the defeat of the proclamation on the 'stupid attempt to confounded all forms of Nationalist activity, legitimate and illegitimate, under one ban as seditious'.⁴⁴ However, the GAA was able to drive 'a coach and four' through the proclamation, as the correspondent quoted Daniel O'Connell.⁴⁵ By showing the government its widespread influence, the GAA was able to become an effective agent for change in Ireland, and do so in a non-violent manner. Once its desired effect was achieved, the point was driven home in a national display of unity and common purpose.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ 'The Irish Proclamation: A Stupid Confusion', *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Aug. 1918.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

The GAA has played a prominent role in Irish society since its founding in 1884 as the promoter of Gaelic games. The GAA, through Gaelic games, allows for the promotion of a particularly cultural type of nationalism. This is a means for people to express an Irish identity in a manner that is non-violent and non-political. Through its nationwide organisation, the GAA allows Irish people across the country to all participate in the same sports, providing a unifying influence.

Dominant historiography has treated the GAA as a major force in Irish independence. Authors like Mandle and de Búrca have equated the particular nationalism of the GAA with the movement for Ireland's independence. High-profile GAA members who also were involved in revolutionary activities have reinforced this perception, both in popular thought and historical research. Gaelic games provided men like Michael Collins practical experience in leadership and organisational skills, which has been extrapolated into the theory that the GAA was itself an active organisation for independence.

However, the mistake has been made to attribute the beliefs and actions of individuals to the GAA and its entire membership. Merely having revolutionaries in its ranks does not itself make the GAA a revolutionary organisation. From the 1888 police report through to modern historiography, this view of the GAA has been repeated and reinforced. This characterisation of the GAA has failed to take into account the many levels of membership and the different attitudes of each. While the GAA contained a small number of men who would fight for Ireland, the association and its members were not taking up arms on any large scale. The decision to participate in the events of Easter Week was an entirely personal one, not one dictated by the GAA.

For the men interned after Easter Week, Gaelic games provided a means to break up the monotony of life in prison camp and in doing so make a statement of their Irish identity. Gaelic football was a uniquely Irish sport played within a camp run by the British authorities.

On Gaelic Sunday, the playing and watching of Gaelic games was a means for the general population to support the GAA in a way that

spoke to their sense of Nationalism without striking out at the British government. Gaelic Sunday provides the example that most of the association's members preferred statements of national identity to be made on the pitch rather than through armed rebellion.

This paper follows work of new historiography by historians like William Murphy and Mike Cronin that challenges the previously held views of the GAA as playing a more active role in the creation of modern Ireland through political means. While it is undeniable that members of the GAA also belonged to groups like the IRB or Irish Volunteers, to paint everyone who played Gaelic games as being revolutionaries does a disservice to both the GAA and its members. As has been shown, it is incorrect to ascribe the actions of a small minority of GAA members, no matter how high-ranking or influential, on to the majority of members.

The view of the GAA held by the British authorities stems from two sources – the IRB taking control of the GAA during the 1880s and the association's instance on banning police and military from membership. Contemporary views have been influenced greatly by this earliest interpretation of the GAA by the British authorities.

However, this view of the GAA has been shown to be far too narrow. Rather, the GAA was far less active in the political nationalism of the time. During the very early days of the GAA, the association was sought by the Irish Republican Brotherhood to be annexed for its own brand of Irish nationalism. While some commonalities in membership undoubtedly existed into the 20th Century, the lack of official GAA activity during the Easter Uprising shows that the IRB did not retain significant influence over the leadership of the GAA.

The GAA was the best way for the population of Ireland to find common identity in a politically turbulent time. The avowedly non-political orientation of the GAA allowed Irish men and women of all political persuasions to join under a common banner of Gaelic games despite any differences they might have held of opinion. Different examples have been explored throughout this paper that have shown the difference between the GAA as it was during the early 20th Century – a force for a national cultural identity without being politically or

revolutionarily minded – rather than how it has been previously viewed in the existing orthodoxy.

During the time of the Easter Uprising, the country of Ireland was at a turning point in its quest for an independent existence. Even during this period of unrest, the GAA, as an organisation, did not take an active role. The association was used by particular individuals as a means to their vision of an independent Ireland, but the lack of mass mobilisation of GAA members during the Easter Uprising shows how the majority of the Irish men and women who comprised its membership viewed the forceful Nationalism of men like Collins and Walsh.

The real character of the GAA is seen in the games of Frongoch and the events of Gaelic Sunday. In both of these examples, beyond the highly volatile conditions of the Easter Uprising, the nature of the GAA is seen with more clarity. In Frongoch, Gaelic games were the obvious choice for recreation. The men in the camp had a need for physical and mental stimulation to stave off the boredom of confinement. Gaelic football was not merely a way for the men to keep themselves occupied, but in doing so to make a statement about their collective Irish identity. On Gaelic Sunday, the primary method of recreation for the Irish masses was threatened with becoming a prohibited activity. The sheer number of players and spectators who turned out effectively rendered the authority of the Royal Irish Constabulary ineffective, more so than the active rebellion of Easter Week 1916. The GAA showed itself to be an effective influence in the mobilisation of Irish men and women by uniting them under a shared commonality, rather than being another divisive force that was quite common in Ireland at the time. Under the GAA, the men and women of Ireland had their best means of uniting via a common national game, a connection that went beyond politics and regional differences. The national reach of the GAA and its non-active role in the divisive politics of the day made it strong force in Irish nationalism, though not in the manner that has been previously thought.

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