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„Gaelic Games and the upsurge of modern sports
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Irish identity (1873-1913)“

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Preface

Sport matters. It is intertwined with many of the most urgent questions of our time. The societal and economic implications of sporting occasions are manifold and diverse; “sport languages”¹ resonate and mediate not only between the different parties involved in what is commonly perceived as a “game” (players, referees, spectators, officials), but between wider cross-sections of society and in multiple contexts. Especially the “language” of modern sport has clearly transcended the confines of sport alone. In slight aberration of C. L. R. James’ famous quote,² it is probably fair to ask “What do people know of sport, who only sport know?” Especially in an academic context this has been increasingly recognised in the last two decades or so. Sport is no longer considered to be a minor component of cultural studies or merely “a cultural reflex to the core values of society.”³ In the introduction of a special issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist*, Alan Tomlinson, Andrei S. Markovits and Christopher Young advert to the fact that “in the social sciences’ analysis of sport, scholars recognise more and more widely the centrality of understanding sport as culture and locating the sport culture in terms of particular aspects of time and space.”⁴

The thesis “Gaelic games and the upsurge of modern sports in Britain – The GAA and its ambivalent contribution to Irish identity (1874-1913)” is an attempt to follow up on the academic valorisation of sport. It is no coincidence that it is the final paper for the completion of a degree in history. For a variety of reasons, sport is particularly entangled with the historian’s profession. Markovits and S. L. Hellerman argue that “in all manifestations of sport culture that intangible thing called ‘history’ matters immensely” and that “through the drive of all hegemonic sports to reproduce and legitimate themselves, every game, often explicitly but always implicitly, becomes a discourse with history.”⁵

¹ A term introduced in Andrei S. Markovits and Lars Rensmann, *Gaming the World – How Sports Are Reshaping Global Politics And Culture* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 51.

² In *Beyond A Boundary* (Stanley Paul & Co, 1963), James raises the question “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?”

³ Alan Tomlinson, Andrei S. Markovits and Christopher Young, “Mapping Sport Spaces,” *American Behavioral Scientist* Vol. 46 (2003), 1463.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1467.

⁵ Andrei S. Markovits and S. L. Hellerman, *Offside: Soccer and American exceptionalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 20.

For the task of corroborating the relevancy of sport through a carefully conducted historical study there is probably no better medium than Ireland. Publishing a compilation of essays on sporting identities in Europe, Philip Dine and Seán Crosson even think that “there can be no doubting the centrality of the Irish case in any informed analysis of sports-related identity construction.”⁶ This is especially true for the specific circumstances of late-19th-century Ireland, when sport became part of a nationalist revival. This politicisation of sport was due to the patronage of the concomitant and all-pervading sporting revolution by Ireland’s historic rival: England. The consequence was a collision of interests that saw the matter of sport moving to the centre stage of the Anglo-Irish conflict. In this, sport clearly outperformed other sub-sections of Irish nationalism, because it was – unlike high literature or politics, for example – “not the preserve of the few, but the passion of the many.”⁷ W. F. Mandle concludes:

Anti-British sentiments in Ireland have all but been a novel revelation of the 19th century. They have penetrated and stirred up Ireland since the Norman invasion of the 12th century – but it seems that it required the burgeoning of British games, together with a wide-ranging consciousness of the Celtic past, to enable the myths to be fully invigorated, and the moral lessons of pride and distinctiveness to be drawn.⁸

As soon as the unifying and nationalist drive of Irish sport revealed its full potential, it was no longer “only” Irish; it was uniquely Irish by allegedly drawing on the traditions of the native population in a once free and independent Ireland – accordingly, the sport that really mattered was called “Gaelic”. P. J. Devlin ascertained: “When the full significance of the Gaelic Athletic movement shaped itself in our mind, we saw in it a realisation of visions that had floated down the centuries, dimmed by time and the drift of the nation from the distinctive life that once made them real.”⁹ Engaging in or following Gaelic sport in Ireland had become more than just leisure or recreation; it was a statement – socially, culturally and economically. This nationalist polarisation of Irish sport aggravated the Victorian commitment to prevent an imperial “domino effect”, in which Home Rule (in politics and in athletics) could serve other colonies as useful blueprint of separatism. It was inevitable that the frictions that derived from this ideological confrontation accompany many of the analyses in this thesis. However, this study is also meant to point to the limitations of the “imagined” imputations that have all too

⁶ Philip Dine and Seán Crosson (eds.), *Sport, representation and evolving identities in Europe* (Oxford, New York: P. Lang, 2010), 5.

⁷ Mike Cronin, *Sport and nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic games, soccer and Irish identity since 1884* (Dublin: Four Court Press, 1999), 18-19.

⁸ W. F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics* (London: Helm, 1987), 154.

⁹ P. J. Devlin, *Our Native Games* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1935), 94.

easily been projected onto the Anglo-Irish conflict. Throughout this work, it is suggested that only the interplay between the historic, the nostalgic and the “imagined” holds the key to any understanding of the unique sporting scene in Ireland.

This work must also be understood as an attempt to put Gaelic sport in Ireland in the context of its early decades. To draw from the very “original” values of its revitalisation in the latter parts of the 19th century, the focus is on the constitutional period of the informal Gaelic athletic movement and its transformation into an organised form: the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the dominant and all-pervading organisational unit of Gaelic sport in Ireland. This timeframe, from 1873 to 1913, saw the emergence of many of the characteristic identity-structures that still shape the sporting landscape in Ireland. At that point in time, no sporting entity was left untouched by the movement of modern sport, which triumphantly appeared first in England. Hence, as much as Ireland tried to sever the bonds with Britain, it couldn’t avoid from being entangled with sporting networks in the United Kingdom. The GAA not only benefited from the “games revolution” in Britain, but “went straight to the heart of the matter with uncanny perception.”¹⁰ This is why the British impact on sporting Ireland spawned neither a duplicated, nor a secluded entity, but something in between. It is one of the major tasks of this study to discern the components of this asymmetric halfway-status.

To grasp the core mentalities of Gaelic sport culture, the immersion in Ireland’s still vivid and flourishing Gaelic sporting scene was indispensable. An ERASMUS-scholarship allowed me to do just that for a whole academic year at the National University of Ireland in Galway. Spatially very close to some of the historic strongholds of Gaelic sport in East County Galway and surrounded by a lively sporting community, it was possible to determine the major lines of the internal-Irish debate about Ireland’s “national treasure”. This work penetrates and expands on some of these core issues of this highly unique phenomenon. At the same time, the exemplifying and comparative approach of the study is meant to reach out to a wider (continental) audience that is interested in global sporting identities. After all, the almost total neglect of Irish sport-culture among continental scholars has ever been a source of my motivation to “introduce” the peculiarities of the matter to mainland Europe.

¹⁰ W. F. Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture, 1884-1924,” In *Irish Culture and Nationalism, 1750-1950*, edited by Oliver MacDonagh, W. F. Mandle and Pauric Travers (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1985), 106.

It is no contradiction that the “journey” of this study about the origins of Ireland’s unique sporting identity starts in Britain. The sporting revolution that originated there in the middle of the 19th century and spawned the emergence of modern sport, caused huge repercussions, not only in Ireland, but also in most other parts of the British Empire and beyond. Chapter 1 traces the origins of this movement, shows how it was caught up in the multiple pressures and influences of a highly volatile socio-economic background (1.1) and examines the specific public school environment in which it could flourish (1.2). It is here that one of the recurring themes of this paper will first come to the fore: namely, that the concept of modern sport must be understood as an inherently contradictory one. Capturing this notion, Gruneau says that “it transpired in an uneven and fragmented way, mediated by subtle shifts in class- and gender-based cultural preferences and perceived needs.”¹¹ One of its characteristics became particularly apparent in Ireland: notwithstanding its comprehensive and standardising impact, modern sport did not trigger an eradication of local sporting traditions. Together with the historic legacy of troubled Anglo-Irish history, this and other inherently ambivalent traits of modern sport will set the context to explain the mixture of appreciative and renunciatory reflexes with which Ireland responded to the arrival of modern sport (1.3). While many in late-19th-century Ireland naturally rejected anything British, adapting to modern sport meant dealing with intrinsically British forms of modern organisation, regulation, competition, vitality, energy and the values of self-improvement. Holt therefore asserts that modern sport was – in the case of the GAA – “a reaction against modernity and a consequence of it [at the same time].”¹²

If the concept of modern sport in itself was replete with contradictions, this was particularly true of modern sport’s application in Ireland. Hence, modern Gaelic sport (still) adheres to a range of contradictory features. McDevitt acknowledges:

Gaelic games were characterized by dichotomous conflicts between civilizing tendencies and violent content, between a desire to be viewed as peaceable and disciplined while at the same time presenting an impression of incipient revolution, and finally, between the paramountcy of muscular stature and ascendancy of intellectual control. In this way, the games reflect the fortunes of the Irish nationalist movement that wavered between parliamentarism and military defiance and between conciliatory Home Rule and republican separatism.¹³

¹¹ Richard Gruneau, “The Critique of Sport in Modernity: Theorising Power, Culture, and the Politics of the Body,” in *The Sport Process – A comparative and developmental approach*, edited by Eric Dunning, Joseph A. Maguire and Robert E. Pearton (Human Kinetics Publishers, 1993), 89.

¹² Richard Holt, “Ireland and the Birth of Modern Sport,” in *Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, edited by Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 34.

¹³ Patrick F. McDevitt, *May the best man win: sport masculinity, and nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880-1935* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 35.

These ambivalent notions are exposed to constant (re)-evaluation within the GAA – the one and only organisational structure of Gaelic sport in Ireland. Due to this quasi monopolistic status, Chapter 2 will outline the history of Gaelic sport in the first three decades of the GAA’s existence. After Michael Cusack’s efforts to get the Gaelic athletic movement started (2.1), it was the GAA’s initial attribution with highly nationalist sentiments that was most notable for its formative period after the foundation in 1884 (2.2). This politicisation was responsible for the turmoil that shook – and nearly destroyed – the GAA in the late 1880s and early 1890s (2.3). It is paradigmatic for the main argument of this study that it was large-scale modernisation that ensured the viability of the association and – even more importantly – to make it one of the most successful bodies symbolising a new and self-confident Ireland. The impulses that initiated the modernising momentum were manifold; and they conspicuously resembled the features that made modern sport such a successful venture in Britain: the sophistication of rules relating to the running of sporting bodies and the actual play on the field, the adaptation to capitalist exigencies, *scientification* of playing styles and training routines or the (journalistic) creation of a star-system (2.4). Nevertheless, even if the GAA followed the unwritten precepts that governed the development of modern sporting organisations and competitions everywhere, it never forfeited its appeal of uniqueness. Mandle refers to this when he says that the association “was always in sum greater than its parts, something that could not be said of any other (modern) sporting organisation in the world, with the possible exception of the New Zealand Rugby Football Union.”¹⁴

Two aspects of Gaelic sport’s ambivalent stance towards modern sporting ideals are worth investigating separately in the first two sections of the concluding Chapter 3. Firstly, how the GAA dealt with the influx of regularisation that was initiated by the modern sporting revolution in Britain and how it tried to employ it for its own nationalistic purposes (3.1). Secondly, the broad interferences of the British amateur-ethos – one of the constitutional features of modern sport – with the Gaelic sporting doctrine are analysed against the specific social background of the early GAA-membership. It will be clarified how the emergence of a hybrid between amateurism and commercialism allowed the GAA to claim a moral authority over the games it governs by simultaneously benefiting from the monetary revenues (3.2). Finally, the two major disciplines of the GAA, hurling and Gaelic football – interchangeably subsumed under the term “Gaelic games” – are more closely scrutinised in relation to their different evolutions (3.3).

¹⁴ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 144

Archbishop Croke's famous letter of acceptance to become patron of the GAA left no doubt about the cultural enemy against which the association was conceived as an antipode. He wrote:

One of the most painful, let me assure you, and, at the same time, one of the most frequently recurring reflections that, as an Irishman, I am compelled to make in connection with the present aspect of things in this country, is derived from the ugly and irritating fact that we are daily importing from England, not only her manufactured goods, which we cannot help doing, since she has practically strangled our own manufacturing appliances but, together with her fashions, her accents, her vicious literature, her music, her dances, and her manifold mannerisms, her games also and her pastimes, to the utter discredit of our own grand national sports, and to the sore humiliation, as I believe, of every genuine son and daughter of the old land.¹⁵

This statement shows that sport bears not only the potential to bring people from different backgrounds together, but, in divided societies, is more likely to reflect divisions and, in some instances, to reinforce the sectarian identities that keep people apart.¹⁶ Referring to the special case of sporting Ireland, Alan Bairner concludes: "You can't fool history in sports."¹⁷ In similar terms, Mike Cronin acknowledges: "To try and suggest that sport could, in such an environment [Ireland], be a neutral pastime to unite the opposing communities, is to deny the experience of history."¹⁸ Hence, any in-depth analysis of the Anglo-Irish relationship in sport is bound to focus on a divisive scheme at the expense of sport's more unifying potentials. However, this thesis substantiates why this Anglo-Irish division in sport has only rarely been "real", but served a particular purpose: to popularise, and thereby to nationalise, allegedly "native" pastimes. Even if the GAA was created to oppose all that Britain stood for, it could not avoid the consequences of its particular location in time and space – both of which were pervaded, especially in sporting quarters, by British value structures.

The analytical model that is developed in this work is supposed to challenge this narrow focus on contradistinction that shaped vast parts of Irish sport historiography in which the evolution of a unique Irish sporting culture is depicted as a "fertile terrain upon which to wage cultural wars."¹⁹ At the same time, this thesis does not tie in with overassertive claims of continuity

¹⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 24 December, 1884; quoted in Brendan Fullam, *The Throw-In: The GAA and the men who made it* (Dublin, Wolfhound, 2004), 44.

¹⁶ Alan Bairner, "On Thin Ice? The Odyssey, the Giants, and the Sporting Transformation of Belfast," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 46 (2003), 1525.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1526.

¹⁸ Mike Cronin, *Sport and nationalism in Ireland*, 144.

¹⁹ Alan Bairner, "Sport, Nationality and Postcolonialism in Ireland," in *Sport and Postcolonialism*, edited by John Bale and Mike Cronin (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2003), 161.

such as the one of Mandle, who asserts that Irish sport “paralleled precisely the English experience.”²⁰ Above all, the study should be understood as a challenge to those characterisations of the GAA that appear from time to time as if the organisation was a homogeneous entity, engaged only in a project of political and cultural liberation. The concomitance of both, anglicising and de-anglicising influences, in the course of shaping the Irish sporting landscape is indeed indicated in various studies on the GAA; most notably in Mandle’s *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics* and R. V. Comerford’s essay on sport in *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*. Nevertheless, this particular duality had not yet figured as the central theme of a historic study. By outlining and analysing the central pillars of historiographic contestation, this work is supposed to fill this academic void. While the study should not be understood as an attempt to engage the history of Gaelic games in anything like its totality, it can hopefully supply future research-projects with the proper tools to scrutinise the facets that lie at the heart of Irish “exceptionalism” in sport.

Even though the (anti)-Britishness of Gaelic sport is employed as a basic criteria of analysis throughout the thesis, it should not be taken as the only (or superior) parameter to assess the uniqueness of sporting Ireland. On the contrary: the overemphasis on the ideological impact of sport in Ireland – as illustrated in scholarly, journalistic and historiographic contributions – tends to over- rather than to underestimate the impact of (anti)-Britishness. All these depictions that revolve around the discrepancies spawned by the Anglo-Irish conflict should be taken with caution – not least because of the complexity that arises from the multiple versions of Irishness and Britishness. A documentary that has recently been shown on RTE and BBC acknowledges in its introduction that “any reduction of Irish history to the pervading Anglo-Irish conflict is self-limited.”²¹ Many historic treatises about Irish sport adhere to a “long version” of Irish history “which begins with the happy and successful Gael who is then nearly destroyed by the British incursion.”²² My study, I hope, transcends this “consensus history” of the GAA that places the association at the heart of Irish nationalism yet fails to examine the wider context within which the GAA operated.

²⁰ Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 112-113.

²¹ “The Story of Ireland,” Part III, aired on BBC2 on 30 May 2011.

²² Mike Cronin, “Fighting for Ireland: playing for England? The nationalist history of the Gaelic Athletic Association and the English influence on Irish sport,” *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1998), 39-40.

I've already mentioned that I was fortunate to have the chance to experience first hand how much Gaelic sporting culture still means to the Irish people. In this respect, the politically momentous state visits to Ireland in 2011 were powerful reminders of the symbolic significance of (Gaelic) sport on the highest level of international diplomacy. Queen Elizabeth, the first British monarch to visit Ireland in a century,²³ was warmly welcomed in the former colony that was long irreconcilable due to its experience of British oppression. It was symptomatic that her appearance at Dublin's Croke Park, the epicentre of Gaelic sport in Ireland, on May 18 was considered to be the single most significant breakthrough in the relations between Ireland and Great Britain in the course of the visit. This must be perceived against the background of a vicious attack of British security forces ("Black and Tans") on the Croke Park crowd on a day that has become known as "Bloody Sunday" (21 November, 1920) – a day which had inflicted Ireland with a trauma that penetrated the core of the cultural nation.

The circumstances in which Barack Obama came in contact with Gaelic sporting traditions a week later (23 May) were not embedded in such a historically biased context. After Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Enda Kenny had presented Obama with a hurling-stick as a national symbol of the Irish nation, the US-president indulged in a few decent hurling-moves in front of the TV-cameras. It was also notable that the man standing closest to Obama during his speech on College Green (thus being on camera throughout the whole speech) was former GAA-president (2003-2006) Sean Kelly – patently representative of how Ireland wanted to be perceived by a world audience.

Only the evolutions of Irish sport in the late 19th and early 20th centuries can instill both these incidents with real meaning. All these developments are examined in this work. The implications of the central arguments therefore extend beyond the timeframe of 1874 to 1913.

The inspiration to delve into a topic does not only derive from intensive reading – no academic venture could be initiated if it wouldn't be for the ability of so many people to mediate the excitement of a given topic in personal discussions. I want to express my deepest gratitude to those, who have helped me along the way in just such a fashion: Andrei Steven Markovits, University of Michigan, for the vital inspiration before and during the project; Mike Cronin, Boston College Dublin, for his assistance in finding the right focus for the thesis and John Cunningham, Laurence Marley and Robert Portsmouth at NUI Galway (as well as the tutors of the Writing Centre there), for accompanying my academic endeavours.

²³ King George V. had visited Ireland in 1911.

Dónal McAnallen, Seán Crosson and John Connolly, as well as Mark Reynolds from the GAA Museum Archive, Croke Park, and Frank Coffey from the Michael Cusack Heritage Centre in Carron have additionally been helpful in many regards. Finally, I want to say thanks to Univ.-Doz. Dr. Finbarr McLoughlin of Vienna University, who supervised the thesis and provided me with vital feedback on earlier drafts, which was essential in framing the work as it now stands.

1. The British concept of modern sport and its reception in Ireland

1.1 Benchmarks of the “sporting revolution”

The “sporting revolution” in mid-19th century Britain transformed the medium of sport – and many of its interrelated spheres – in an unprecedented way. The focus of this thesis, which is concerned with how Ireland reacted to this process, presupposes a substantiation of what this revolution was actually about. First and foremost, it was responsible for the creation of modern sport – a process that can only be treated in a cursory and fragmentary way in this study. However, as the concept of modern sport is employed as the prime terminological and comparative device in this work, it is necessary to define closely what is meant when we call sport “modern” in this context. In this opening sub-chapter, the delineation of the nature of modern sport (1.1.1) is followed by the substantiation of the transformation it underwent (1.1.2) and the demonstration of the cultural, social and economic circumstances in which it could flourish (1.1.3).

1.1.1 The nature of modern sport

With his elementary conception of sport, evolving as a sub-category of the vectors “play”, “games” and “contest”,²⁴ Guttmann provides a useful heuristic device for historians to discern what actually comprised the compound “sport”, that was to be modernised in mid-19th-century Britain. In his seminal work *From Ritual to Record*, he shows that the most basic asset of modern sport was its contra-distinctive design to primitive, ancient, and medieval sports.²⁵ Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning concur with this distinction, emphasising the violence of ancient sport and its modernisation along the lines of a “civilising process”. Apart from the regression of violence that accompanied the emergence of modern sport, the perception of violence in sport in particular would have been altered fundamentally in the middle of the 19th century. From then on, practices that made the games potentially more violent would have been introduced mainly as a result of growing competitive pressure than

²⁴ Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record – The Nature of Modern Sport* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

as enjoyable ends in themselves.²⁶ Richard Gruneau argues for a less gradual and evolutionary picture. He says that modern sport's "claim to 'culture' versus barbarism"²⁷ was not based on an inevitable process of modernisation, but rather on "something that was won through a complex history of negotiations, struggles, and compromises."²⁸ Sébastien Darbon accentuates this de-linearity in the making of modern sport by asserting that it was not simply the product of an evolution, but was more akin to a revolution.²⁹

For Andrei Steven Markovits, different sporting cultures and identities resemble the functionality of "languages" – the most universal and elementary of them being the "language" of modern sport.³⁰ This posture captures the universal and inter-disciplinary assets that are ascribed to modern sport. All the different manifestations that have been elicited since its inception were minor in comparison with those distinguishing modern from pre-modern sports.³¹ In the course of the subsequent extension of regularised sporting practices on a global scale, the purposes behind them – however much they deviated from the original brands – remained everywhere of the same kind.³² Nevertheless, the universalistic and all-embracing appeal of modern sport should not be seen as an impediment for the advancement of specialised and local practices – that is, because modern sport initiated not only an "outward radiation", but also a "downward diffusion".³³ On similar lines, Darbon states: "What is at stake in the diffusion process of sport is the dialectical play between the universal dimensions and the contextual dimensions of sports cultures"³⁴ – which effectively means the relationship between the *global* and the *local*. Markovits therefore perceives the incentives of modern sport "in the vanguard of creating global publics" on the one hand, as well as responsible for the "fostering of local socialisations", on the other. This complex interplay between the "universalisation of particularism" and the "particularisation of universalism" has also been termed as "glocalisation".³⁵

Hence, modern sport clearly embraced a virtue on its own terms – however, it is of great significance for the argument of this work, which technical and ideological components, decisive for sport, were to be called "modern". Whereas most scholars agree that modern sport could only succeed by pushing the original forms of folk games and bodily practices to

²⁶ See Eric Dunning, "Culture, Civilization and the Sociology of Sport," *Social Sciences Research*, Vol. 5, Issue 4 (1992).

²⁷ Gruneau, "The Critique of Sport in Modernity," 89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁹ Sébastien Darbon, "An Anthropological Approach to the Diffusion of Sports: From European Models to Global Diversity," in *Sport, representation and evolving identities in Europe*, ed. by Philip Dine and Seán Crosson (Oxford, New York: P. Lang, 2010), 18.

³⁰ Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 211.

³¹ Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*, 73.

³² *Ibid.*, 94.

³³ Eric G. Dunning, Joseph A. Maguire and Robert E. Pearton (eds.), *The Sport Process – A comparative and developmental approach* (Human Kinetics Publishers, 1993), 115.

³⁴ Darbon, "An Anthropological Approach to the Diffusion of Sports," 25.

³⁵ Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 44.

the cultural periphery, commentators have been much more reticent and intransparent when it comes to more tangible markers of sport's modernity. Guttman is exceptional in that he penned an accurate and useful classificatory pattern. The most significant implications of modern sport for this study – its moralising impact and nationalist potential – derive from and manifest themselves within the impetus that he discerned as characteristic for all modern sports: the tendency to turn every form of play into some kind of contest.³⁶ In the course of this process, the seven micro-level key factors of modern sport – as stipulated by Guttman – come to the fore. These factors are: secularism, equality of opportunity to compete, specialisation of roles, rationalisation, bureaucratic organisation, quantification and the quest for records.³⁷ These parameters will – directly or indirectly – become the focus of our attention frequently throughout this thesis. It is also essential for the argument of this study that modern sport is deployed as a genuinely British concept. Most sport historians concur with this particular nexus. C. L. R. James was among the first who acknowledged: “The organizational drive for [modern] sport had come from Britain. It was from Britain that sports had spread as nothing international had ever spread for centuries before.”³⁸ The games of modern sport might vary, but their relation to society, their philosophy, their very progress followed principles laid down, almost copyrighted, by the English.³⁹ Bairner asserts that from the 19th century onwards, England's appreciation as the “midwife of the modern sporting world” was unprecedented;⁴⁰ Guttman acknowledges that, wherever it exerted its impact, the language of modern sport has always been English;⁴¹ and according to Johan Huizinga, the modern sporting revolution in England formed “the cradle and focus” for the development of a peculiarly modern form of “ludic practice”.⁴² It is here, that Guttman's theorem of *play* converges with the inherent Britishness of modern sport.⁴³

It is debatable, to what extent Irish contemporaries were aware of the Britishness and modernity that framed the transformation of Irish sport at the time. Irish athletes knew that it was not very patriotic (in an Irish sense) to play rugby or association football – but the setting up of sporting organisations or the detailed regulation of rules was probably not thought of as

³⁶ Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, 73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁸ C. L. R. James, *Beyond A Boundary* (Stanley Paul & Co., 1963), 157-158 quoted in J. A. Mangan, *The Cultural Bond – Sport, Empire, Society* (London: Frank Cass, 1992), i.

³⁹ Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 105.

⁴⁰ Alan Bairner, *Sport and the Irish – Histories, Identities, Issues* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), 7.

⁴¹ Allen Guttman, “The Diffusion of Sports and the Problem of Cultural Imperialism,” in *The Sport Process – A comparative and developmental approach*, ed. by Eric Dunning, Joseph A. Maguire and Robert E. Pearton (Human Kinetics Publishers, 1993), 125.

⁴² See Dunning, “Culture, Civilization and the Sociology of Sport.”

⁴³ The cohesion between modern sport and Britain should not be blurred by the terminological equivocation that derives from the often unconscious and arbitrary translation of the term “British” into “English” (and vice versa). Whereas “British” is employed as the main denominator of provenience in this thesis, the otherwise differently angled term “English” is – when applied – supposed to mediate the same set of values. The geographical, political and economic presuppositions of the term “Britain” that are employed in this study are of equal importance: even though Ireland was part of Britain in the 19th and early 20th centuries (1801-1922), the use of the terms “Britain” and “British” categorise and identify industrialised “mainland” Britain, as distinct from the predominantly rural island of Ireland.

being overtly British. Surely, a majority of people involved in Irish sports must have had some imagination of the watershed in sporting institutionalism that originated in Britain; but this realisation was not perceived in a contextualised and classified way, as will be argued in this work. However, the Irish response to, and acquaintance with, the sporting revolution must be seen as a reaction to something British and modern.

1.1.2 Original and advanced modern sport

The role of modern sport and its peculiar ramifications – in general terms and within the specific sporting entity of Ireland – underpin the main argument of this thesis. Neglecting the transformation to which modern sport succumbed within two decades of its inception, would mean to be confronted with a myriad of idiosyncratic fault lines. This is the case because the concept of modern sport generated friction on issues such as unity/fragmentation, universalism/particularism, homogeneity/heterogeneity, monocausality/multicausality, unidimensionality/multidimensionality and unidirectionality/multidirectionality.⁴⁴ Gruneau even asserts that the inherent paradoxes of modern sport moulded its *Gestalt* into an “intoxicating cultural brew”. He proclaims:

There were deep tensions, for example, between the pursuit of disciplinary mastery on the one hand and a sense of balance and proportion on the other; between the ideals of controlled masculine competence and competence demonstrated through physical intimidation; between a professed internationalism and the fuelling of nationalist and colonial rivalries; between the alleged purity of amateurism and the economic necessities of holding major competitions.⁴⁵

This study is meant to circumvent confusion of these highly diverse implications by making a clear differentiation between *original* and *advanced* modern sport. To distinguish between these two methodological instruments, it is necessary to take a closer look at modern sport’s origin and evolution.

Although a first wave of modernisation in the 18th century pertained to some “principal pastimes” such as foxhunting and horseracing,⁴⁶ the academic acquaintance with the term “modern sport” usually refers to the middle of the 19th century, when socio-economic circumstances disposed a certain upper middle-class stratum of Victorian Britain to instigate

⁴⁴ Murray G. Phillips, “Diminishing Contrasts and Increasing Varieties: Globalisation Theory and ‘Reading’ Amateurism in Australian Sport,” *Sporting Traditions*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2001), 21.

⁴⁵ Gruneau, “The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 91.

⁴⁶ Allen Guttman, “Diffusion of Sport, Global,” in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World Sport*, edited by Karen Christensen and David Levinson (Great Barrington: Berkshire Publishing Group and ABC-CLIO, 1995), 2.

an ideological and organisational revolution of sport. This revolution included “household names” of modern sport such as association football, rugby, tennis and athletics. This process and its specific manifestations – tagged by Elias as “the sportization of pastimes”⁴⁷ – shall be called *original modern sport*.

As much as this concept of modern sport was initially linked with the attitudes of a particular social class and paradigms such as pure amateurism, gentlemanly sportsmanship and fair play, it soon succumbed to social, cultural and economic dynamisms of more permeable and international dimensions – a trend that coincided with the challenge of Great Britain’s cultural hegemony by the United States. In the course of this process, moral entrepreneurship in and through sport had to be reconciled with the de facto existence of a capitalist marketplace threatening to commodify sport at every turn.⁴⁸ The bourgeois canons of *original modern sport* were gradually refracted downwards into the working classes.⁴⁹ This chasm that was to cause the decomposition of modern sport a mere two decades after its initiation, evolved along the issue of amateurism in particular. The circumstances and outcomes of the compromise between the puritans of *original modern sport*, who perceived amateurism as the only honourable way to engage in sports, and the ever growing number of those, “whose commitment to amateur sport did not extend to imbibing the morality, the preferred cultural vision, or the classicist male bodily aesthetic,”⁵⁰ is further elaborated in Chapter 3.2.1. For now, the “deflected” form of modern sport that derived from this structural “adjustment” shall be called *advanced modern sport*.

Original, and particularly *advanced*, modern sport became the main proponents of a first wave of globalisation in sport,⁵¹ which can be located in the period from the 1870s to the 1920s. This period witnessed “the international spread of sport, the establishment of international sports organisations, the growth of competition between national teams, the worldwide acceptance of rules, and the establishment of international sporting competitions.”⁵² If modern sport is credited with streamlining sporting practices at this particular time, its significance has all but waned if we look beyond the 1920s. Modern sporting incentives must be considered to have been not only a part of, but a prerequisite of the popularisation and nationalisation of world sport after the First World War – even if they

⁴⁷ See Dunning, “Culture, Civilization and the Sociology of Sport.”

⁴⁸ Gruneau, „The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 91-92.

⁴⁹ Stephen Jones, *Workers at play: A social and economic history of leisure, 1918-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 25.

⁵⁰ Gruneau, „The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 91-92.

⁵¹ Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 44. This “first globalization” did largely constitute the dispersion of sporting practices within the British Empire.

⁵² Joseph Maguire, *Global Sport – Identities, Societies, Civilizations* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 78.

clearly transcended the specifically Protestant, amateur and imperial connotations of *original* and *advanced* modern sport. Gorman even thinks that the bifurcation of the imperial sporting ethos with a broader international movement to coordinate sporting activities from the 1920s was the purest manifestation of modern sport.⁵³ This coalescence, however, is discussed not only in favourable terms. Many of the potentially cosmopolitan influences of modern sport were to be undermined by counter-cosmopolitan or counter-civilising reactions,⁵⁴ particularly in the interwar-period. This, in turn, held significant ramifications for the development of sport as it entered into a “second globalisation”⁵⁵ in the 1980s. At this stage it became obvious that the potential of what Guttmann anticipated in the emergence of globalized sports, the expression of *communitas*, was severely limited.⁵⁶

1.1.3 The economic, cultural and social medium of modern sport

The emergence of modern sport can only be fully understood by considering circumstances that are clearly independent from contextual factors of particular sports. This is what Darbon means, when he suggests following an “extrinsic” approach to substantiate the phenomenon.⁵⁷ Guttmann does so by ascertaining that it is the relative political, economic, military and cultural power which accompanies the *ludic diffusion* that determines the origin, direction and quality of transfer-processes in sport.⁵⁸ The pre-eminence of the British Empire in the 19th century rested upon exactly these parameters. The cult of athleticism played such a crucial role in this, that many commentators attribute Britain’s superiority first and foremost to the “games-playing code”.⁵⁹ Hence, the key for a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon lies in the peculiar combination and bifurcation of socio-political factors in 19th century Britain. The Victorian hegemony that proved to be decisive for the initiation of modern sport benefited from the cultural implications of a specifically British set of ideas, beliefs, rules and conventions concerning social behaviour – epitomised mainly by the aristocratic upper-class. But mid-century Britain also experienced the rise of the middle classes, who were losing patience with restricted educational and occupational opportunities and the demonstrable

⁵³ See Daniel Gorman, “Amateurism, Imperialism, Internationalism and the First British Empire Games,” *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2010), 614-624.

⁵⁴ Mark Dyreson, “Globalizing the Nation-Making Process: Modern Sport in World History,” *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2003), 92-93; Dunning, Maguire and Pearton, *The Sport Process*, 39-43.

⁵⁵ Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 207.

⁵⁶ Dyreson, „Globalizing the Nation-Making Process,“ 102.

⁵⁷ Darbon, „An Anthropological Approach to the Diffusion of Sports,“ 20.

⁵⁸ Guttmann, “Diffusion of Sport, Global,” 2.

⁵⁹ J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school: the emergence and consolidation of an educational ideology* (London, Portland: F. Cass, 2000), xxv.

incompetence of leading sporting administrators.⁶⁰ Aristocratic and entrepreneurial notions merged into a new public doctrine that was spread in Britain – and carried throughout the Empire – by such figures as administrators, military officers, industrialists, agriculturalists, traders, financiers, settlers, educators and advisors of various kinds. Thereby, the values of modern sport were mediated and fostered more through informal authority systems than through formal ones.⁶¹

Only in modern England did a variety of figurational pressures dispose the landed and upper middle-classes to initiate a social dynamic that merged into the creation of modern sport. In spite of the inventive and revolutionary character of this upheaval, and against the background of the gradual decline of aristocratic paternalism, the elite patronage of modern sport is mostly seen as a defensive reaction, rather than deriving from a visionary impulse. This defensiveness was directed against the “dangerous irrationality and power of the masses”⁶² that was spawned by the formation and expansion of an industrial society. The main representatives of this “dangerous mass” were the constituents of the rising lower (industrial) working classes – the proletariat “at home”, and the native populations of the colonies.

The insecurity of Britain’s ruling classes vis-à-vis this human threat was gradually kindled by the advent of new technologies, the enclosure of feudal estates, and the migration of thousands of workers to urban industrial centres. The prevalent confidence in science and human reason forced the establishment to adapt its imaginations of natural social hierarchies and legitimate religious doctrine.⁶³ One of the initial inducements for the upper middle-classes to modernise sport, lay in the recognition that sport was an increasingly important space and a key battleground of social declaration. Against the background of the threat that emanated from the industrial masses, it is not surprising that the establishment’s creation of *original modern sport* was exclusivist in many ways. The creation of pure amateurism was paradigmatic in this regard (see Chapter 3.2).

This socially exclusive genesis of *original modern sport* was soon to be superseded by initiatives of the increasingly confident lower classes, which marked the evolution of *advanced modern sport*. This divisive design of modern sport did not prevent the two spheres from overlapping and bifurcating in the most extraordinary of ways. Nor does it indicate that either *original* or *advanced* parameters of modern sport turned out to be superior. In fact, it lies at the core of modern sport’s intrinsic value structure that it mediates popular notions

⁶⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁶¹ Brian Stoddart, “Sport, Cultural Imperialism and Colonial Response in the British Empire,” *Sport in Society*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (2006), 812.

⁶² Richard Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem: Some reflections inspired by Eric Dunning,” *Sport in Society*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2006), 565.

⁶³ Ibid.

from both ends of the social stratification. It became associated with the rise of a new entrepreneurial plutocracy as well as the establishment of a renewed conscience of collectiveness. It was the source not only of high-minded ideals, but also of patriotism of a more down-to-earth and pugnacious nature.⁶⁴ Moral obsession and spiritual indoctrination were important – however, modern sport was not so much a “vehicle of crude social control”, but rather a “generator of a shared vocabulary of fairness and an embodiment of principles for the decent organisation of public life.”⁶⁵ Nowhere was this amalgamation more apparent than in British public schools (see Chapter 1.2).

If the roots of modern sport are traced back to British incentives of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one should not forget that this implies far more than what happened on the island of Britain and its closest colony Ireland. Congruent with the colonial dogma “Here begins elsewhere”, colonies such as South Africa, New Zealand and Canada were pivotal for Britain’s pioneering role in the creation of distinctive leisure outlets (see Chapter 1.3.1). In fact, the demand for a combination of entertainment (leisure) and defence – a nexus that was soon to be projected on modern sporting endeavours – was not so acute in mainland Britain as was the case in the colonies of the Empire. It is, for example, more than doubtful if cricket would have been able to print its stamp on England, if the colonial climate for the sport (particularly in India and the West Indies) had not been so favourable.⁶⁶ Hence, the legacy of modern sport would be a different story – if there would be a story at all – if it wouldn’t have been for the imperial stretch that rendered a large-scale transfer-process of the games revolution “at home”.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British – A Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 263.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 267-268.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 203-211.

⁶⁷ Stoddart, “Sport, Cultural Imperialism and Colonial Response,” 813.

1.2 The British public school system: prime mode of transmission

Dublin Castle and its “extensions”, in the form of British security forces and administrative institutions, were the most visible and influential symbols of the British state in Ireland. The initial success of British sport in Ireland naturally stood in close relation to this military and administrative presence. Nevertheless, this does little to explain the more sustainable impact of British sporting mechanisms in Ireland. In this respect, it was the saturation of Irish education by the curricula of British public schools that made all the difference. In this sub-chapter, I delineate the advent and systematic indoctrination of a particular sporting ethos at British public schools after 1850 (1.2.1) and its adoption by educational institutions in Ireland (1.2.2).

1.2.1 The evolution of the sporting ethos at British public schools

The nature, variety and complexity of this extraordinary, powerful, essentially middle-class educational movement has exerted a direct and indirect influence on both modern society and modern sport and is itself now a contemporary global phenomenon of extraordinary influence, politically, economically, culturally and emotionally.⁶⁸

Alongside the Victorian obsession with character and imperialism, Britain engineered a potent educational ideology based on athleticism, which produced social repercussions far beyond the boundaries of educational institutions. The chief breeding ground for this ideology was the British public school – an independent, non-local, predominantly boarding school for the upper and middle classes.⁶⁹ In the second half of the 19th century, public schools like Rugby, Eton, Harrow, and Winchester joined with Oxford and Cambridge to create an ethos of fair play, good sportsmanship and business acumen.⁷⁰ These pioneering institutions not only created a platform for a new sport culture to flourish, they were also vitally important for the actual codification and development of the team sports that initiated the subsequent sporting revolution. Furthermore, the training acquired on the playing field was the basis of courage and group loyalty that endowed boys with attributes that a rapidly expanding Empire was striving for: responsibility, honour and a willingness to give their lives for the preservation of the Empire.⁷¹ The proponents behind the new sporting agenda of the public schools were

⁶⁸ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, xxvi.

⁶⁹ Vivian Ogilvie, *The English public school* (London: Batsford, 1957), 8.

⁷⁰ Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*, 60.

⁷¹ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, 8.

forerunners of the transformation of athletics from a simple source of fun and relaxation to a doctrine thought essential for the continued success of Anglo-Saxon civilisation.⁷²

Indications of the public schools' athletic doctrine that played a crucial role in the transformation of British society from the middle of the 19th century were scarce in the previous half-century. In the first decades of the 1800s, the outlook and agenda of British public schools were moulded by the ideal of Britain's leading educational figure Thomas Arnold, who is, in many studies, incorrectly referred to as the originator of the "athletic sports system". In *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, J. A. Mangan shows that Arnold had no interest in games and sporting chivalry in general. Arnold would have rather been characteristic for a time, when public school masters – apart from those at declared Jesuit institutions – met the boy's leisure activities with relative indifference.⁷³ For boys, who were deprived from any sort of surveillance outside of the classroom, the supplementation of sporting practices with pre-modern attributes like physical intimidation and the inflicting of pain on opponents was inevitable.⁷⁴ Games were usually either extensions of somewhat childish and unorganised pastimes or escalated in violent outbursts. The type of football that pupils engaged in at various public schools at the time involved vigorous scrimmages known as the "rouge" at Eton, the "hot" at Winchester or the "squash" at Harrow.⁷⁵

By the 1850s, the tide had fundamentally turned. Educational curricula were systematically underpinned with "restrained" and regularised sports and soon became established as a quintessential pedagogic supplement. It was this infusion of tranquillity, reform and renewal that re-shaped the nature and outlook of the public school in a way that is repeatedly referred to as the characteristic public school ethos in this work. G. E. L. Cotton, headmaster at Marlborough from 1852 to 1858, was one of the first educators who identified organised games as an adequate antidote to poaching, trespassing and general lawlessness. Hence, the "sportification" of British public schools that Cotton set in motion with his agenda, was prompted not just for the sake of ideological persuasion, but also by the practical challenge to control the pupils' behaviour when they were away from the direct supervision of teachers in the classroom. His "Circular to Parents", issued in 1853, was a powerful proclamation for the inclusion of games as part of the formal curriculum. It marked a turning-point in the

⁷² Dyreson, "Globalizing the Nation-Making Process," 95.

⁷³ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, 16-18.

⁷⁴ Dunning, Maguire and Pearton, *The Sport Process*, 54-55.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Dann, "British sports in Ireland: muscular christianity, amateurism, and the imperial sporting ethos c. 1860-1940" (PhD diss., National University of Ireland, Galway, 2007), 35.

development of public school education, as it heralded the epitaph of unsupervised leisure.⁷⁶ Consequently, the image of public schools as being distinct from private schools for their freedom from state supervision was turned upside down: authorities encouraged young and enthusiastic school-masters to follow an almost military zeal to propagate engagement in British games in order to endow the boys with an *esprit de corps*. It was a large-scale attempt to energise the boys' thrust for self-advancement and individual masculine prowess and to combine it with a responsibility and commitment to one's peers – precisely the kind of values that would help to forge and solidify a powerful new bloc of aristocratic and high bourgeois class alliances in British society.⁷⁷ With the public schools' remarkably swift replacement of vice, squalor and brutality by control and manliness, those who could afford to, joined, and those who could not, imitated.

For approximately 70 years between 1860 and 1930 at Harrow, Lancing, Loretto, Marlborough, Stonyhurst and Uppingham, an assortment of headmasters, masters, old boys and pupils wove around their games and playing fields a sometimes attractive, frequently naïve, and occasionally ridiculous web of romance and chivalry.⁷⁸

“Playing the game”, which soon became a metaphor for life, had nothing in common with the rampant and unorganised physical activities of public schoolboys in the early 1800s. Instead, gentlemanly and codified recreation was now seen as the ideal supplement to moral and intellectual education. Theologian and writer Charles Kingsley provided the literary model of the new approach. “Through sport, boys acquire virtues [...] not merely daring and endurance, but better still, temper, self-restrain, fairness and honour.”⁷⁹ These attributes exhibited the fundamental aspirations of a new generation of masters at British public schools. It is self-evident that their enterprise could only be sustainable if they would succeed in creating a new community of peers who recognised and agreed to be bound by higher rules of regulated authority. It is here that the thin red line of the public schools' athletic agenda – between laudable idealism of character building and crude opportunism – becomes most apparent.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, 13-28.

⁷⁷ Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 567.

⁷⁸ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, 181.

⁷⁹ Richard Holt, “Ireland and the Birth of Modern Sport,” 37.

⁸⁰ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, 4-9.

Via the peculiar combination of bodily and spiritual advancement and ideological reactionism, the public schools regulated “the pulse and speed of the transition of modern sport.”⁸¹ This perfect accommodation within the transient nature of modern sport was also due to the fact that they not only created an educational habitat for upper middle-class students, but also for the sons of a rising industrial class that played an ever more important role within the entrepreneurial society of the time. Through this, the culture of gentlemanly athleticism that drew on older notions of aristocratic pedigree, privilege and duty, merged with newer bourgeois ideas about the importance of self-help and self-improvement.⁸² This development attracted students from all corners of the Empire. A poem in the *Lorettonian* exemplified not only the nostalgic sentiment and sense of honour that was generated by public school education; it is also an indication of the influx of students from other parts of the Empire:

When we see the Lorettonian, we are boys and young once more,
And our thoughts fly back to Scotland from some far Pacific shore,
From the neighbouring green island
Or some distant frontier highland
And we long to see again the red jersey once we wore.⁸³

1.2.2 The penetration of Irish education by the public school model

However much the British acculturation of Ireland was consciously expedited, adaptation to the public school model of educational institutions in Ireland was the prime means with which to acquaint Ireland with British sporting traditions. Consequently, most of the pioneers of British games in Ireland were educated either in Britain or in institutions in Ireland that had closely followed the British example.⁸⁴

At university-level, it was Trinity College, Dublin that set out to be the first and most persistent proponent of the British sporting ethos in Ireland. A rugby club was established there in 1854, making it the second oldest rugby club still in existence anywhere in the world. By the end of the 19th century Queen’s Colleges in Cork, Galway and Belfast had also internalised much of the Victorian formalism that had been “imposed” upon sport in Britain.

⁸¹ Tony Collins, “Amateurism and the Rise of Managerialism: The Case of Rugby Union, 1871-1995,” *Sport in History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2010), 106-109.

⁸² Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 566.

⁸³ *Lorettonian*, Vol. xx, No. 8 (1898), 38 quoted in Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, 184.

⁸⁴ Alan Bairner, “Political Unionism and Sporting Nationalism: An Examination of the Relationship Between Sport and National Identity Within the Ulster Unionist Tradition,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, Vol. 10 (2003), 519.

In contrast to the sportive curriculum at Irish elite schools, participation in sport was not compulsory at universities – but the allure to participate in British sports was tempting and most often of a very practical nature: students whose educational backgrounds exhibited engagement with and merits in British sports were provided with the prospect of employment as imperial administrators. This prompted many Catholic students to leave their religious bias to one side and engage in genuinely Protestant forms of recreation. Through this, they could not only be integrated into British sports, but also be won over for identification with the Empire as a whole.⁸⁵ It is this convergence with British value structures that prompted Joseph M. Bradley to assert that “Irishness has been rendered invisible in the educational sphere.”⁸⁶ The transfer-channels on the educational level were all but confined to the universities. Catholic schools facilitating the upper middle-classes were not “constrained” by an ideological agenda preventing them from emulating the educational philosophies of the genuinely Protestant public schools in Britain.⁸⁷ Catholic institutions predominantly in and around Dublin, such as Blackrock or Castleknock, but also colleges outside Ireland’s capital city, like Mungret College (Limerick), and even Jesuit establishments like Clongowes Wood (James Joyce’s school and known as the “Eton of Ireland”), took them up with great enthusiasm and catered for the dissemination of a specific type of education and its emphasis on sportive tuition not only amongst Protestant students. Accentuating the “dilution” of Irish education with British values, Cronin declares: “As if to remind us that there is no neat explanation of the relationship between religion, education and sport in Ireland, the most prestigious schools run by Catholic priests gave their allegiance to rugby football and not to Gaelic games.”⁸⁸

In *The Celtic Times*, Michael Cusack, founder of the first genuinely Irish sporting institution, took a firm stance towards the Anglicisation of Irish schools. On 8 October 1887, one of his articles carried the following message:

In too many of our upper schools and colleges there lingers yet the bad old tradition that things Irish are of little value or interest, and that things English or foreign are alone worthy of consideration. [...] We can fairly say that it is not only in the colleges and schools of the

⁸⁵ Dann, “British sports in Ireland,” 113, 117, 153.

⁸⁶ Joseph M. Bradley, “Sport and the Contestation of Ethnic Identity: Football and Irishness in Scotland,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 7 (2006), 1191.

⁸⁷ Dann, “British sports in Ireland,” 77.

⁸⁸ Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse (eds.) *The GAA – a people’s history* (Cork: Collins, 2009), 256.

minority or old ascendancy faction that the formula, ‘a superior English education’, only too truly describes the character of the training given.⁸⁹

His deprecation of the Anglicisation of Irish schools was designed on similar lines as the one of famous nationalist D. P. Moran, who denoted Castleknock College as being “that cricket and ping-pong college” and an enemy of the concept of an Irish Ireland.⁹⁰

It ranks among the most blatant contradictions of the whole Gaelic athletic movement that Michael Cusack, who was so adamant and explicit in his assertions to keep Irish schools clear from British influence, was engaged in and owed the ascendancy of his career to an educational environment that was vitally instrumental for the propagation of British sporting values in Ireland. Not only was his school (“Cusack’s Academy”) the most prolific Irish institution to prepare students for the examinations which brought entry into the civil service of the British Empire; Cusack personally was fully committed to playing and fostering British games such as rugby or cricket to enhance the versatility of his students.⁹¹ In this respect, he truly admired the British public schools and how physical recreation provided their students with the stamina for working life (see Chapter 2.1).⁹²

Nevertheless, he was utterly defiant towards the characterisation of Irish schools as “English”. His sullen proclamation leaves no room for equivocation:

If an Irish youth is educated in England, France or Germany, he can justly say that he has received an English, French or German education. But that an Irish youth, trained in Ireland by Irish masters, with Irish surroundings, presumably in Irish habits and modes of thought, should feel that he was receiving, in any sense, an ‘English’ education, may well puzzle the thoughtful. Why ‘English’? Is it because the English language and some English literature are taught in Irish schools and colleges that they feel entitled to dub the education they give an ‘English’ one?⁹³

That Cusack, who so passionately believed in the societal relevance of sport, seemed to have not taken into consideration that it was the infiltration of British sports that was responsible for the prevalence to dub Irish schools as “English”, is puzzling in itself. It immediately begs two very important questions: Did he disguise his appreciation of British education in order to live up to the deeply nationalist stance of the GAA? Or was he just naïve, not recognising that

⁸⁹ “A superior English education,” *The Celtic Times*, October 8, 1887.

⁹⁰ Dann, “British sports in Ireland,” 88.

⁹¹ Paul Rouse, “Michael Cusack: Sportsman and Journalist,” in *Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, edited by Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 47.

⁹² Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 16.

⁹³ “A superior English education,” *The Celtic Times*, October 8, 1887.

much of what made Irish schools “English” was demonstrated on the playing fields in the form of cricket, rugby or association football matches?

1.3 “Natural rejection” and “inevitable assimilation”

The interrelation between Ireland and the United Kingdom on the sporting level is complex. The implications that the respective peculiarities rendered for the institutional history of the Gaelic Athletic Association (Chapter 2), as well as for more specific parameters of Irish sport (Chapter 3), are elaborated and discussed in subsequent sections of this work. The following sub-chapter is dedicated to more general issues and consequences of the arrival of modern sport in Ireland. Such an analysis has to be based on the fact that modern (Gaelic) sports in Ireland – especially their institutional breakthrough – cannot be dissociated from the time and space in which they emerged. Hence, any scrutiny of modern sport’s encroachment on Ireland is bound to adhere to the bigger picture of the historical underpinnings that framed the Anglo-Irish relationship at this time. It adds to the relevance of this study that Gaelic sport – more so than other cultural institutions – seems to exhibit a model image of Irish society as a whole. P. J. Devlin neatly stated: “The history of our native games and pastimes is largely a tale of vicissitudes reflecting almost every phase of our insular existence and influenced by each digression in our national progress.”⁹⁴

The watershed of sporting institutionalism in England was to unfold its tremendous impact at a time, when the Irish had recovered from the biblical cataclysm of the Great Famine (1845-1852) and the driving forces of Irish nationalism signalled their willingness to engage in co-operative actions rather than secluded sectarian feuds. Consequently, the contestation of Ireland’s constitutional status within the United Kingdom merged into a mass-movement and became a tremendously unifying force within Irish society.⁹⁵

Much of the political and social discontentment in Ireland derived from the implementation of the union with Great Britain in 1801, which the Catholic majority in Ireland had anticipated not only in unfavourable terms. However, most of their hopes were frustrated: especially the prospect of Catholic emancipation, which they thought would be linked to the enactment of the union, was protracted for nearly thirty years (Catholic Relief Act, 1829). Ambitious ventures by the British administration in Ireland, such as the colony’s incorporation into a free

⁹⁴ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 69.

⁹⁵ On a political level, the time is often referred to as the “New Departure”, signifying a grand coalition – forged in 1878 by John Devoy and Michael Davitt – between Fenians, the Parliamentary Party under Parnell, tenant farmers and the clergy. See Owen McGee, “From the Files of the ‘DIB’: Originator of the ‘New Departure’,” *History Ireland*, Vol. 16, No. 6 (2008).

market economy or the introduction of poor-law legislation either failed or malfunctioned and did not bring stability to an already unsettled society.

The main grievance was undoubtedly the unfair distribution of Ireland's main natural resource – arable land. This agrarian unrest in Ireland from the late 1870s is commonly called the “Land War” – a period that saw large-scale politicisation of the countryside and the transformation of Charles Stewart Parnell into a national leader. The all-embracing issue of land-(re)distribution – the struggle to establish peasant proprietorship over the landlordism of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy – shaped a whole generation of Irish people. Because this coincided with the spread of new forms of British sport, it was now confronted with the encroachment of the new flagship of British acculturation: modern sport.

Nevertheless, in spite of the “natural rejection” that had thus been evoked by British rule in Ireland, an “inevitable assimilation” of initiatives that were advocated by the British administration was neither avoidable nor categorically repudiated – especially on a sporting level. Hence, the questions that need to be asked in relation to the British “ingredients” of modern Gaelic sport in Ireland do not only concern the question of whether British sporting values had penetrated Ireland. After all, the linkages between the two entities were simply too close (even if not always voluntarily so) to provide for anything like one-sided seclusion. The study at hand is therefore composed in a way not only to verify the inter-dependence between Britain and Ireland, but, more specifically, to substantiate the peculiar deflections that British designs and values in sport were exposed to in Ireland.

In order to really grasp the extent and ratio of “natural rejection” to and “inevitable assimilation” of the Victorian sporting model in Ireland, one surely needs to go beyond not only the level of sport, but also beyond the sphere of mere ideology. The prevalence in recent and especially in earlier Irish sport-historiography of interpretations in predominantly political – and hence – ideological terms has contributed to blur the perspective on “plain” socio-economical discrepancies that couldn't but prevent anything like duplication or isolation – in sport as in other spheres of society. Michael Mullan's essay “Opposition, Social Closure, and Sport: The Gaelic Athletic Association in the 19th Century” (1995) was seminal in detailing how the deviation of Ireland from the industrialising trajectory of Britain prompted concomitant effects on the development of Irish sport. In similar terms, Dónal McAnallen makes the revisionist assertion that rather than being ideologically reluctant to many features of British sport, the Irish economy was just not strong enough to provide for the accommodation of large-scale patronage of leisure-ventures and the exertion of semi-

professional games as has been the case in Britain.⁹⁶ In contrast to the 18th century, the small circle of landed and moneyed classes that existed in Ireland simply had no interest in encouraging organised leisure activities. The sports of the upper-class were either the exclusive preserve of the wealthy (such as hunting or shooting) or played inside the walls of elitist bastions like Trinity College (such as football, rugby or hurley⁹⁷).⁹⁸ The commitment of the GAA to extend the social margins of the *original* modern sporting model was simply unavoidable in order to sustain the viability of the association. Hence, it has to be always kept in mind that British sporting incentives in Ireland had to face not only ideologically and politically hostile mindsets, but also different circumstances of an explicitly economic and social nature (see Chapter 3.2.4).⁹⁹

To delineate Ireland's response to the encroachment of modern sport, it is necessary to first analyse the British phenomenon in terms of its dissemination within the United Kingdom (1.3.1) – this will set the background for the “natural rejection” (1.3.2) and “inevitable assimilation” (1.3.3) in Ireland. That the renunciatory and assimilative processes that accompanied the transfer of modern sport from Britain to Ireland are analysed separately in this sub-chapter should not be understood as an indication that the dividing line between the two sets of cultural reflexes is clear-cut or unequivocal. Nearly every academic treatise of the matter comes to an assertively paradox conclusion. W. F. Mandle, one of the leading GAA-historians, describes the response of the GAA to the penetration of Ireland by modern sport as an “unconsciously imitative hostility.”¹⁰⁰ In similar lines, Sara Brady says that by responding to the growing British trend of codifying athletics, the founding fathers of the GAA “ended up imitating the British in order to produce difference.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Dónal McAnallen, “The Greatest Amateur Association in the World – The GAA and Amateurism,” in *Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, edited by Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 160.

⁹⁷ A hybrid of Ireland's native pastime hurling and the English version of hockey.

⁹⁸ Cronin, “Fighting for Ireland: playing for England?” 49.

⁹⁹ Guttmann asserts that the capacity of a nation to imbibe modern sporting features can even be employed as an index of that nation's industrial development (Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*, 61).

¹⁰⁰ Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 115.

¹⁰¹ Sara Brady, “Home and Away: The Gaelic Games, Gender, and Migration,” *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2007), 30-31.

1.3.1 Ludic diffusion and imperial dispersion of British sports

Ireland, like the USA and Australia, has acquired its own distinct games that are not shared with other countries and so cannot provide a forum in which to vie with the rest of the world. But games confined to one country have other ways of serving nationality, particularly by acquiring designation as native and as expression of the Herderian national soul, a phenomenon of particular interest in the Irish case.¹⁰²

The rising demand for recruits in Britain's overseas colonies and the increasing cultural importance of athleticism did decisively contribute to the sports-(gentle)man becoming one of the most important and influential products of the British Empire in the latter part of the 19th century. As the colonial elite represented a "leisure class" as well as a ruling class, it mediated and disseminated not only the "manly" aspects of its games, but also their potential for distraction and entertainment.¹⁰³ To this effect, it was crucial that "despite considerable evidence to the contrary, sport gained a reputation as an egalitarian and apolitical agency which alone transcended the normal sectional divisions of the colonial social order."¹⁰⁴

If we look at the inter-dependency between Ireland and Britain along Guttman's seminal matrix of the socio-geographic spread of sports and games (*ludic diffusion*), it is vital to take into account that it does not necessarily imply a mere duplication of sporting models. Guttman asserts:

The adoption by one group of a game popular among another is only partly the result of recognising the intrinsic properties of the game. In the long run, a modern sport may become so thoroughly naturalised that the borrowers feel that it is their game, an expression of their unique national character.¹⁰⁵

Hence, the generation of a deflected and, at times, overtly defiant set of identity markers by British sports' *ludic diffusion* in Ireland was not an anomaly. Aberrations have always been intrinsic traits not only of *ludic diffusion*, but also of modern sport as a whole in that they provide for the characteristic dichotomy between localised and globalised manifestations.

Within an imperial context sport can be seen as a "powerful but largely informal social institution that can create shared beliefs and attitudes between rulers and ruled, while at the

¹⁰² R. V. Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), 214.

¹⁰³ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 206-207.

¹⁰⁴ Stoddart, "Sport, Cultural Imperialism and Colonial Response," 813.

¹⁰⁵ Guttman, "The Diffusion of Sports and the Problem of Cultural Imperialism," 126.

same time enhancing the distance between them.”¹⁰⁶ When Australian cricketers beat the English at London’s Oval in 1882, they simultaneously affirmed their membership of the British Empire and their claim to a national identity of their own.¹⁰⁷ After all, one of the main sources for the complexity of imperial sporting transfers lies in the fact that numerous athletes within the Empire did not see any contradiction in supporting British forms of recreation while, at the same time, denouncing forms of British cultural annexation.¹⁰⁸ Sport played its part both in holding the Empire together and, paradoxically, in emancipating the subject nations from tutelage.¹⁰⁹ Hence, the crux of the imperial dispersion of modern sport does also apply to the fact that the transfer of genuinely British values did not necessarily make the Empire more British (in a cultural sense). What was dispersed and readily assimilated was not so much Britishness per se, but rather the potential of modern sport as an instrument to devise an autonomous approach towards national identity.

It has already been indicated that modern sport’s ignition of a “first globalisation” in sports largely occurred on an imperial level. In formal terms, Ireland must therefore be perceived as being part of a wider frame of intra-dependency that included contiguous parts of the Empire such as Scotland and Wales as well as overseas dominions and colonies such as Canada, India, Australia or South Africa. It would be erroneous though, to analyse the sporting transfers to different parts of the Empire on equal terms. A form of de-linearity in the distribution process applied to nearly all of them, but the “refraction” manifested itself in a variety of different ways. In most cases (such as in South Africa, Australia or India) it became apparent by the colonies’ striving to gain respectability by “turning the ludic tables” and beating the colonial masters at their own games.¹¹⁰ While itself embedded in imperial exchange mechanisms, the process of *ludic diffusion* in Ireland – during the timeframe under consideration (1874-1913) – didn’t fit into this pattern. Rather than beating the British in their own sports, Irish national identity was exhibited by rejecting these games altogether and demonstrating sporting prowess via indigenous sporting practices. Hence, the anticipation and conviction of the imperial “sport proselytisers” that “competing in the same games under the same rules will give rise to forms of cultural intimacy capable of furnishing shared

¹⁰⁶ Stoddart, “Sport, Cultural Imperialism and Colonial Response,” 813.

¹⁰⁷ Guttman, “Diffusion of Sport, Global,” 7.

¹⁰⁸ Holt, “Ireland and the Birth of Modern Sport,” 220-221.

¹⁰⁹ Bairner, “Political Unionism and Sporting Nationalism,” 519.

¹¹⁰ Patrick F. McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism: Nationalism, Masculinity and Gaelic Team Sports, 1884-1916,” *Gender & History*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1997), 266-269.

experiences, understandings, idioms and identities”¹¹¹ and thus forging an “informal British Empire”¹¹² was considerably hampered.

However, the idea that Ireland was home to its own distinctive sporting culture before the imperial project was carried through¹¹³ should be treated with extreme caution. The particular sporting culture in Ireland – if seen as epitomised by the GAA – was strongly linked not only to its own history, but also to the sporting revolution in Britain. While there is little reason to deny the untainted purity of Gaelic games’ ancient origins, it is inaccurate to view their nationalist utilisation via the GAA as the progeny of the confrontation of two diametrically opposed cultural concepts. On an official (and ideological) level, this might be true (“The Ban” – see Chapter 2.2.3). But looked at from the perspective of the “technical” aspects of Gaelic games – and the incentives that made them so popular – the British were (vicariously) responsible for their popularisation (even if it was only the geographical proximity to the centre of the sporting revolution that was conducive) just as much as for their almost obliteration.

This complex dynamic makes it very difficult to discern the distinction between imperial agency (and its disaffirmation) and “self-regulated” *ludic diffusion*. In part, this is also due to Ireland’s constitutional status within the Empire, which is not always easy to define as either imperial or colonial;¹¹⁴ Kibberd even asserts: “Only a rudimentary thinker would deny that the Irish experience is at once post-colonial and post-imperial.”¹¹⁵ The geographical proximity of Britain and the presence of an Anglo-Irish elite in Ireland made the “geographical and stratificational diffusion”¹¹⁶ between Ireland and Britain even more complex. These inherent peculiarities may have deterred historians from exploring more profoundly the mechanisms that made the Irish case so special. By any standards, there is a huge void of research as to where *ludic diffusion* ends and cultural imperialism begins. The questions that Richard Cashman raised as long ago as 1988 have not yet been satisfactorily answered: “Where does the promoting hand of the colonial master stop and where does the adapting and assimilating indigenous tradition start? Is it merely adaptation and domestication or does it go beyond that to constitute resistance and even subversion?”¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Noel Dyck, “Playing Like Canadians: Improvising Nation and Identity Through Sport,” in *The Discipline of Leisure: Embodying Cultures of ‘Recreation’*, ed. by Simon Coleman and Tamara Kohn (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 109.

¹¹² Dunning, Maguire and Pearton, *The Sport Process*, 115.

¹¹³ Alan Bairner, „Sport, Nationality and Postcolonialism in Ireland,” 161.

¹¹⁴ See K. Jeffrey (ed.), *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

¹¹⁵ Declan Kibberd, “Modern Ireland: Postcolonial or European?” in *Not On Any Map. Essays on Postcoloniality and Cultural Nationalism*, ed. by S. Murray (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 97.

¹¹⁶ Dunning, Maguire and Pearton, *The Sport Process*, 115.

¹¹⁷ Richard Cashman, “Cricket and Colonialism: Colonial Hegemony or Indigenous Subversion,” in *Pleasure, Profit and Proselytism: British Culture and Sport at Home and Abroad, 1700-1914*, ed. by J. A. Mangan (London: Cass, 1988), 271.

Ireland did not constitute the only nation that drew upon a counter-conception of what it perceived as British in sport. In fact, the Scottish and Welsh manifestations of autonomy towards the heart of the British empire and its sporting values prompted Holt to perceive the sporting revolution in England to have flourished “amidst so much Celtic passion.”¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, if we take Scotland for example, the differences to the Irish mode of correspondence with British identity structures in sport are significant. First of all, Scotland did not – in its symbolic and sportive quest for emancipation – draw upon its own ancient and native sport as did Ireland with Gaelic games in general and hurling in particular.¹¹⁹ The prime outlet of Scottish national pride on the playing field was the inherently British game of association football, which more than anything else – particularly in the early 20th century – epitomised the antagonism towards centralist and hegemonic British persuasions. Holt also points to the fact that Scottish supporters at association football contests against England might have waved the Stuart flag, but by no means in continuation or tradition of anything like a *Jacobite* legacy.¹²⁰ Hence, the second major difference derives from the fact that overtly political invocations – such as references to Culloden or Bannockburn for example – were not part of this particular form of symbolic Scottish nationalism. This has always been the case, in one form or other, with the GAA in Ireland and in relation to its own conflict-ridden history with Great Britain.

Whereas Irish athletes strived to exert and magnify their anti-British resentments on the playing field (however “real” or “imagined” these resentments were), the imperial frictions on the sporting level elsewhere in the Empire occurred in much less confrontational terms. Even though the relationship with England and English games was also ambiguous for Indians and West Indians who found it difficult to penetrate the hierarchy presumed by the games ethos,¹²¹ the allurements of truly “hegemonic” games in the contemporary sporting spectrum have always been to the fore. India, for example, put major caveats aside to compete in the sports that the (colonial) elite brought with them. When Indians were introduced to cricket, they were horrified at first when their teachers admitted that cricket balls were made of leather, a material that was offensively “unclean” for Hindus.¹²² Nevertheless, the prospect to play with, or even beat, the “home” country’s elite in a popular sport was just too promising to reject. In order to take on the colonial elite in hockey, India even renounced its own distinctive stick-and-ball game that was established in the early 19th century. That India

¹¹⁸ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 262.

¹¹⁹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 15.

¹²⁰ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 257.

¹²¹ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 12.

¹²² Guttmann, “Diffusion of Sport, Global,” 2.

subsequently became a major force in hockey – the British version of stick-and-ball – gives evidence of the disparity of this particular transfer-process when compared to the Irish case.¹²³ Some of the mechanisms that shaped the sporting landscape in India do indeed disclose similarities with the trajectory of Irish sport. However, the major difference is still significant: in India, the conduct of affairs (the propagation of a certain sporting culture) remained largely in the hands of the colonisers, in Ireland it did not.

1.3.2 “Natural rejection”

If we continue travelling for the next score years in the same direction that we have been going in for some time past, condemning the sports that were practised by our forefathers, effacing our national features as though we were ashamed of them, and putting on, with England’s stuffs and broadcloths, her masher habits and such other effeminate follies as she may recommend, we had better, at once, and publicly abjure our nationality, clap hands for joy at sight of the Union Jack, and place ‘England’s bloody red’ exultantly above the green.¹²⁴

Whereas the view that the GAA was “the most consistently anti-British force in Ireland for the last generation of British rule”¹²⁵ is eminently debatable, there can be no doubt about the latent anti-Britishness that underlined much of what the association, and its games, stood for. The categorical defiance becomes more descriptive in the words of Patrick F. McDevitt who found that “by creating the GAA, Irish men were performing a deliberate act of heresy in the face of the cultural imperialism and political domination of Great Britain.”¹²⁶

Above all, and put into the context of the timeframe under consideration, the “natural rejection” refers to the fact that the British progeny of modern sport unfolded its tremendous and global impact at a time, when cultural nationalism and Gaelic revivalism in Ireland were about to put the detested connections with the British to the ultimate test. The Anglican clergyman and historian Charles Kingsley felt entitled, in 1848, to state that, through the modern sporting revolution, “the true English stuff came out (...) the stuff which had held Gibraltar and conquered Waterloo, which had created a Birmingham and a Manchester, and colonised every quarter of the globe.”¹²⁷ It is comprehensible that such a statement must have alienated every proud Irishman- and woman, menial citizens of one of the Empire’s “vassals” themselves. Neither is it surprising that the GAA was therefore created as a “bulwark against

¹²³ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 217-218.

¹²⁴ From Archbishop Croke’s famous reply to Michael Cusack accepting the invitation to act as patron of the GAA. *United Ireland*, December 27, 1884 quoted in Padraig Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics, 1850-1990* (Ballinamore: Marathon Publications, 1990), 15.

¹²⁵ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 15.

¹²⁶ McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 266.

¹²⁷ Holt, “Ireland and the Birth of Modern Sport,” 36.

the rising tide of Anglicisation that threatened to submerge Irish culture.”¹²⁸ With his book *Our Native Games* (1935), P. J. Devlin took up this dogma with passionate vigour. His arguments place the foundation of the GAA right into the centre of a heroic underground movement which succeeded against huge odds in re-establishing native political and cultural identity in the face of British oppression.¹²⁹ Devlin appealed to the patriotism of his sporting peers by stating: “The suppression and destruction of the inspiring assets of our inheritance had not been the result of accident or internal evolution, but of a policy pursued by an alien power for the humiliation of the race and country they would conquer and make ignoble.”¹³⁰ This national commitment corresponded to the mindsets of many of the earliest GAA-officials. They were deeply convinced that the association “owed its position to the fact that it had drawn a line between the Garrison and the Gael,”¹³¹ and promoted a large-scale “de-ritualisation” of British sport in Ireland. The vocabulary of Gaelic games soon acted as crystallisation of Irish views; not only of themselves, but also of its “opposite self” – the British.

The societal impact of sport in general is a matter of debate and varies according to different circumstances of time and “space”. However, in Ireland from 1874 to 1913 sport obviously exerted an impact in the most comprehensive of terms. After all, it was a time in Irish history when there was little else other than sport that Irishmen could lay claim to: law and literature as well as government basically came from Britain and the Irish language had not recovered from the decline it suffered in the aftermath of the Great Famine and in the wake of rising urbanisation. It was against the background of this cultural deprivation that the early GAA set out to ride, as Tom Humphries puts it, “the crest of a wave of revived Irish political and cultural self-awareness, tapping into the new feeling of collective identity designed to put a spiritual if not physical gulf between Ireland and its British rulers.”¹³² The extensively referenced manifesto of the immediate pre-GAA delegation, called “A Word About Irish Athletics”,¹³³ was much more a blistering attack on Anglicisation than a celebration of Irish sport. True, the minutes of the GAA’s Annual Conventions exhibited attempts to invigorate “Irishness” in a more positive way, for example by promoting Irish made goods¹³⁴ or

¹²⁸ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 50.

¹²⁹ Cronin, “Fighting for Ireland: playing for England?” 39.

¹³⁰ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 94.

¹³¹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 188.

¹³² Tom Humphries, *Green Fields – Gaelic Sport in Ireland* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 5.

¹³³ Published in *United Ireland* on 18 October 1884.

¹³⁴ The record of objections and applications for tournament permits, for example, were required to be written on Irish paper. Similarly, all prizes of sports meetings should exclusively be of Irish manufacture (Minute Books GAA/CC/01/02, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 5).

supporting the spread of the Irish language.¹³⁵ But they cannot conceal the fact that the anti-British agenda of the GAA defined its image in much more pronounced and distinctive terms.

Most cultural and social impulses that the Irish perceived to be detrimental to native and emancipatory aspirations came from the British nerve centre. However, the Irish proved to be particularly insistent in demonstrating and magnifying the allegedly wilful and demonic intentions with which the British rulers burdened the Irish people. These interpretations often transcended the sphere of mere ideology: much of the antipathy towards British sports derived, for example, from the discomfort felt by Irishmen easily beaten in games that have been branded “British” and that would simply not suit Irish athletes. At an international Athletic Championship between Ireland and England in May 1877, the Irish team won only two (hammer and tug-o’war) of the dozens of disciplines that had been carried out.¹³⁶ This inferiority was construed as an alleged conspiracy, in which the British would purposefully stage degradation of Irishmen by inveigling them into varieties of sporting competition in which they might easily be defeated.¹³⁷ Cusack complained in a letter to former colleagues:

My opponents have favoured nothing but what an Englishman can beat an Irishman at. Rugby football has been played on many an international field, but Ireland has never yet scored against England. Therefore of course we are inferior to the English. I have not the smallest doubt but that we could beat them at our game of football, and no man will say that we could not sweep them off the field at a game of hurling.¹³⁸

The source of origin for this type of animosity illustrates the thin red line of anti-British defiance in Irish sport – between historical grievances on the one hand and more trivial frustrations on the other.

¹³⁵ Report of the Annual Convention, GAA Minute Book GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive, Croke Park, 85-92, 453.

¹³⁶ Griffin, *The Politics of Irish athletics*, 7.

¹³⁷ W. F. Mandle, “The I.R.B. and the Beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association,” *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 80 (1977), 418.

¹³⁸ Eoghan Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2009), 25.

1.3.3 “Inevitable assimilation”

In the introduction to a compilation of essays, dealing with the inheritance of the relationship between Ireland and Britain, Roy Foster declares: “The Irish polity and its culture have sometimes been seen as created apart from Britain, and in deliberate defiance of British values and British influence. On one level, this is quite true; on another, it is impossible.”¹³⁹ This impossibility is nowhere more obvious than within the bounds of the British sporting ethos that had been devised and infiltrated Irish society alongside the creation of modern sport.

W. F. Mandle, author of the first extensive and differentiated history of the GAA, is pretty straightforward in his assertion that any analysis of Gaelic sport in exclusively anti-British terms is doomed to be fragmentary. He acknowledges: “Britain’s oldest colony might rail as much as it chose against the effects of those many centuries of occupation, but iron laws of paradox dictated that the sports revolution, when it finally came late in the 19th century, would follow the pattern of the dominant culture.”¹⁴⁰ However much the GAA tried to distance itself from Anglicisation, it could not escape the contemporary impact of the revolution in games-playing and games-organisation that has proved to be one of Victorian England’s most enduring legacies. The association was forced, reluctantly or unconsciously as it might have been, to imitate many features of Victorian sport – its emphasis on morality, on health, on organisation, on codification and competition. Even the use of sport to proclaim national distinctiveness was a British invention, without which Gaelic sport would have followed a completely different trajectory.¹⁴¹

Considering the urbanising drive of industrialised Britain, it is not apparent at first glance that eulogising of games through an emphasis on peasant virtues – something the GAA was to pick up with great vigour – was previously “exploited” by the British depiction of cricket as the embodiment of pastoralism.¹⁴² Within the GAA, this rural romanticism was deployed in order to set the peasantry, their culture and religion in specific and visible contrast to British modernism. This reactionary element therefore ranks among the numerous aspects of Gaelic sport in Ireland that utilised British sporting mannerisms, but is refracted in its meaning to counter an equation with the British.

¹³⁹ R. F. Foster, *Paddy & Mr Punch: connections in Irish and English history* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), xii.

¹⁴⁰ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 14.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴² Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 113-114.

In contrast to the commercialist connotations of early institutionalised sport in America – in many respects “closer” to Ireland than Britain at the time – the Victorian sporting values also offered Irish people an immensely attractive moral example;¹⁴³ especially so, if perceived as against the background of a society surrounded by nationalist ferment. Epitomised by the coalescence of the amateur ethic in competition and a powerful sense of national destiny, it generated something that Cronin identified as such a crucial and unifying incentive for late-19th-century Ireland: a public space, in which nationalist sentiment could be expressed without being forced to exert “special” qualities, such as in high literature or high politics. The good sense of the GAA to utilise this momentum of transforming ideological persuasions into a “truly communal experience”,¹⁴⁴ is probably the most sustainable and enduring legacy of the association – however British or anti-British it might have been.

In the light of the deeply nationalist, and at times even racist, declarations that followed the establishment of the GAA, one should also not forget that the specific intellectual climate – the parallels to continental thinkers such as Fichte, Gobineau or Mazzini – and the enlisting of sport to that syndrome was originally a British phenomenon. It was an aspect of Anglicisation the GAA could not and did not wish to escape.¹⁴⁵ The ascription of a moral worth, over and above the physical benefit to be derived from sport, was as evident in Gaelic games as in British.¹⁴⁶ If the ideal Gael was said to be a “matchless athlete, sober, pure, self-respecting, loving his religion and his country with a deep and resistless love, earnest in thought and effective in action,”¹⁴⁷ British sportsmen would have most certainly agreed if such a characterisation had been attributed to them (see Chapter 2.3.1).

The benefits that sporting Ireland could acquire by adopting many of the modern sporting inducements from Britain are obvious. Nevertheless, the continuities between Irish and British sport that derived therefrom – such as the focus on moral purity – should not be perceived as mere and affirmative emulations on the part of the Irish. If part of transfer processes (*ludic diffusion*), sporting cultures, identities and attributes are necessarily enriched – and therefore also transmuted. On the surface, many local phenomena appear to be duplications of (hegemonic) models. In reality, they more often than not have been marginally – but still decisively – transformed. In the course of this study, numerous aspects will be discussed to substantiate this conversion within the particular transfer-mechanism in sport between Britain and Ireland.

¹⁴³ McAnallen “The Greatest Amateur Association in the World,” 164.

¹⁴⁴ Cronin, *Sport and nationalism in Ireland*, 151.

¹⁴⁵ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 154.

¹⁴⁶ Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 113.

¹⁴⁷ *Gaelic Athletic Annual 1907-8*, 16 quoted in Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 113.

Holt rightly alludes to the fact that, apart from all the politicised distractions it was confronted with, British sport in Ireland never – as is often indicated – withered away. That it not only survived, but even managed to prosper in a modest fashion, was, according to him, due mainly to the affection towards typically British sports held by the landed classes in Ireland and “the elements of the middle class who distrusted Catholic or radical nationalism.”¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, whereas this part of (Anglo)-Irish society naturally played a crucial role for the establishment and acceptance of British sport in Ireland, the evidence clearly indicates that the faction of Irish society that promoted, or at least accepted British sport (consciously or unconsciously), was even broader than Holt has suggested (see Chapter 3.2.4).

Ireland’s “natural rejection” of British sporting values is underpinned by the reference to the different set of circumstances that British assets had to face in Ireland. In turn, the “inevitable assimilation” can be corroborated by modern accomplishments that existed and flourished concurrently in both, Ireland and Britain. Referring to some of the most important social dynamics that penetrated Ireland as well as Britain, Holt alludes to the fact that the reception of modern sporting influences in Ireland would have been more significantly hampered, had it not been for the extension of the railway-network, the rise of literacy and the sophistication of communication via telegraph or the rotary printing-press there.¹⁴⁹

Whether early GAA-members were fully aware of these cohesions is doubtful. However, many must have been confronted with a substantial predicament: there was a successful British model to emulate, but in the nationalist mind of most GAA-members no facet of Britishness could ever be embraced. Ultimately, the British inspiration was repackaged so that it could be presented in nationalist terms. However, the model remained British in essence.¹⁵⁰

Bairner’s assessment that the historical legacy of sport in Ireland is one of “interaction with colonisation, resistance, and unremitting tension between Irish and English sport”¹⁵¹ mediates essential caveats that lined the relationship between Ireland and Great Britain in sporting quarters. However, the prevalence of the anti-British notion in Gaelic sport that he alleges may also hamper the depiction of a more balanced view of sporting Ireland and its relation to/with Great Britain. After all: the hostility bequeathed by the sporting interdependency between Ireland and Britain in the late 19th century did not nullify the unifying and cosmopolitan aspects of (modern) sport. On the contrary: the evolution of modern sport into a

¹⁴⁸ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 243-244.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁵⁰ Cronin, “Fighting for Ireland: playing for England?” 51-55.

¹⁵¹ Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 194.

value system that is bigger in itself than all the components that it comprises, was probably more apparent in Ireland, than anywhere else in the (sporting) world.

Within Ireland's public sport arena, the emphasis on the Irish *Sonderweg* was always predominant. In relation to future research in this field of study, I would suggest examining to what extent overtly anti-British provisions and paradigms were deliberately designed as populist tenets of a "people's association" that could clearly benefit so much from its anti-British stance. By the same token, one could examine how assimilative processes fell victim to deliberate concealment. This is not to say that any conclusion will have to come up with an over-assertive pronouncement of Anglo-Irish continuities in sport such as that of Mandle in which he claims that "much of what the GAA regarded as distinctive about the meaning of its games was merely the result of the substitution of the word 'Ireland' for 'Britain' or 'England'."¹⁵² However, in contrast to the aspects that separated Irish from British sports, many facets of (vicariously) British values in Irish sport have yet to be fully explored.

¹⁵² Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 14.

2. Gaelic games and the GAA in the wake of modern sports

The history of Gaelic sport in Ireland is inextricably linked with the GAA – an association that set out, in 1884, to lay the foundations for an institutionalised and sustainable future of the two main Gaelic games in Ireland: hurling and Gaelic football.¹⁵³ Any analysis of the Gaelic sport experience in Ireland is therefore bound to start with the initiatives that merged into the formation of the GAA. The quasi monopoly that the association soon claimed over a substantial sector of the Irish sport spectrum, secured its key position forever after.

After the association had been hit by substantial political upheavals during the first decade of its existence, the crucial modernisation at the turn of the century paved the way to unprecedented popularity and success that has not waned till the present day. If the GAA as an institution is credited with the modernisation of primordial sporting traditions, the major personal contribution is bestowed upon Michael Cusack. Without his efforts to help a Gaelic athletic movement get on its feet, the history of Irish sport would have very likely been a different story.

Consequently, Chapter 2 about the institutional history of Gaelic sport in Ireland begins slightly prior to the actual foundation of the GAA in order to substantiate Cusack's motivation in engaging in the bold effort to re-invigorate the passion for Gaelic games (2.1). This opening section is followed by developments in the constitutional initiation of the GAA from 1884 to 1886, when the creation of the association's nationalist image was established (2.2). Then, we examine what circumstances caused the internal and politicised struggle for control of the association from 1886 to 1893 – with the IRB, Parnell and the Catholic Church playing “leading roles” in these years of institutional crisis (2.3). Eminently important for the gist of the thesis – and therefore most extensively elaborated at the end of this chapter – is the period of modernisation of the GAA and its games from 1894. The secretaryship of Dick Blake, who prepared the ground for large-scale GAA-reformation in the late 19th century, as well as the dynamism that followed his tenure are employed to substantiate the GAA's coming of age as a truly modern institution in the early 1900s (2.4).

¹⁵³ Initially concerned primarily with track and field athletics, the G.A.A. moved towards the team sports of hurling and Gaelic football (until 1887 usually subsidiary events at athletic meetings) as the Irish sporting community showed more and more affection towards them.

2.1 Pre-GAA ventures in Irish athletics

The nexus of sport and nationality was not an incipient and central element of the nascent Irish romanticism of the 1860s, when the country's recovery from the devastations of the Great Famine induced a renewed vigour into the people's mindsets. The decline of the Gaelic pastime hurling before the British importations quoits and cricket was indeed deplored here and there – but without conveying a conviction that nationality was at stake.¹⁵⁴ At the time, Fenians usually held their informal meetings not only at Gaelic gatherings, but also at (fake) cricket matches, patently not considering that this might be interpreted as a “violation” against the Gaelic sporting ethos.¹⁵⁵

2.1.1 Michael Cusack's early efforts at nationalisation in sport

That the foundations for a nationalist re-definition of Irish sport were laid from the early 1870s is commonly attributed to the impetus of Michael Cusack. After he had left his native County Clare to pursue a career in the teaching-profession, it is probable that it was during his tenure at St. Colman's College in Newry from 1871 to 1874 that he became convinced of the need for action, faced with the unrelenting Anglicisation of Irish life and sport in particular.¹⁵⁶ In the face of the rampant development of sporting institutionalism in England, he apprehended that the “assorted snowball throwers and brawlers” of the Irish sport spectrum were “condemned to remain behind the ropes of the Victorian sporting revolution,”¹⁵⁷ if the Irish nation would not take its sporting fortunes in her own hands:

It looked indeed as if the 700 year struggle of the Gaelic nation for freedom was on its death bed. The hurling, dancing, native music - aye, and the Gaelic tongue itself were threatened with oblivion. Then Michael Cusack from the Barony of the Burren, Co. Clare, sounded his clarion call, and at once the nation rallied.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 216.

¹⁵⁵ William Murphy, “The GAA during the Irish Revolution, 1913-23,” in *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, ed. by Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 64-65.

¹⁵⁶ David Hassan, “The GAA in Ulster,” in *Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, ed. by Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 77.

¹⁵⁷ Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 17.

¹⁵⁸ P. D. Mehigan, *Gaelic Football* (Tralee, 1941), 18 quoted in Mike Cronin, “Fighting for Ireland: playing for England?” 41.

When he took the bold step in 1877 to set up his own school in Dublin – the Civil Service Academy (“Cusack’s Academy”) – the nationalist potential of sport was clearly gathering momentum. However, it was not predetermined, what sports the Irish would choose to propagate as a means of national re-invigoration.¹⁵⁹ The rural traditions of the game of hurling had made an impression on Cusack’s sporting enthusiasm at a very early stage in his life; whether the regularisation and standardisation of the ball-and-stick game was part of his “masterplan” already in the late 1870s is equivocal, though. By any standards, if he really wanted to activate the hidden potentials of the sport, he could have taken the easy way by turning to Trinity College.¹⁶⁰ The game of hurley that was cultivated there was only a slight “aberration” of hurling¹⁶¹ and rules had been laid down in the “Lawrence’s Handbook of Sports” as early as 1878. Nevertheless, Cusack perceived the renaissance of the game at Trinity College as a warning sign rather than an inspiration – because hurley, intrinsically connected with the Protestant ascendancy, was bound to be adjusted along the civilising and codifying standards of the British game of hockey.¹⁶² That it was indeed very tempting for young Irish athletes to delve into hurley, nurtured Cusack’s apprehension that the Irish version of the game would soon be abandoned altogether. It was this awareness that prompted him to re-endow the game with a genuine Irishness and thereby forge a distinctive path for Irish sport. When traditional hurling was revived and given a constitutional basis with the institutionalisation of the GAA a few years later, the Trinity-game of hurley effectively vanished.

Cusack’s organisational ventures in the early 1880’s give no evidence of the distaste that he would later project onto British sports.¹⁶³ Far from following a deeply nationalist and anti-British trajectory (something the GAA would soon be destined to adhere to), Cusack’s vision for athletics of a more specifically Irish hue had not prevented him from indulging in overtly British pastimes. If there was a favourite sport among the many disciplines he had tried himself, it was – up until 1882 – the inherently British game of cricket. He was introduced to it by the sappers who plotted the ordinance survey at his native County Clare and he took it up with great vigour.¹⁶⁴ As member of the Leinster Football Association he later played a good deal of rugby as well. Organisationally, he threw in his lot with the Cusack’s Academy Football Club in 1879 and the Phoenix Rugby Club in 1881.

¹⁵⁹ McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 269.

¹⁶⁰ David Greene, “Michael Cusack and the Rise of the GAA,” in Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1960), 76.

¹⁶¹ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 25.

¹⁶² Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 90-91.

¹⁶³ Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics*, 7.

¹⁶⁴ Padraic O’Laoi, *Annals of the GAA in Galway, 1884-1901 vol. 1* (Galway: Emerald Printers Ltd., 1984), 3.

Cusack's access to the Dublin press was extensive. It is therefore possible to locate precisely the crucial shift in his organisational propositions towards the revitalisation of hurling. Whereas his articles for the *Irish Sportsman* in 1881 had called for nationalist inclusion in athletics,¹⁶⁵ the columns for various Home-Rule-journals from 1882 document his focus on the "national pastime" of hurling.¹⁶⁶ He later recalled that the impulse to reactivate the game ensued in a dream he had in 1882. The epiphany in this dream reputedly symbolised Mother Erin and prompted him to make an effort "to brighten the burdened Irish people's lives with the music of the camán [hurling-stick]." He then took an oath before Mother Erin "to take hold of the first camán that comes his way and call the boys together."¹⁶⁷ And calling them together he did: not dispirited by the breakdown of his first venture with the Dublin Hurling Club, Cusack intended to "test the pulse of the nation" by setting up, in December 1883, the Metropolitan Hurling Club. The brisk participation in the project convinced him that it was time for an administrative committee for both, Irish athletics and the preservation of native games in Ireland.

Because of his vocational background as head of a cramming institute preparing students for the entry into the imperial administration, Cusack was convinced that it was the lack of an administrative framework that obviated an engagement of many proud Gaels in their native pastimes. Together with Maurice Davin, one of the dominant Irish athletes in the 1870s, he now began to set up the necessary preparations for the conversion of his endeavour into an institutional body. As hurling had become the lynchpin of their campaign, the initiative first made inroads in the traditional hurling strongholds in County Galway. The first informal meeting of a panel of supporters (including Cusack) was held in Loughrea and Ballinasloe was the stage for the first inter-county challenge match of his Metropolitan Hurling Club against Kilimor. The latter occasion was to play – unheeded as it might have been – a significant role for the subsequent evolution of Irish sport (see Chapter 3.1).

¹⁶⁵ GAA Museum, Croke Park, "The Gaelic Athletic Association through History and Documents 1870-1920," Factsheet I.

¹⁶⁶ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 4.

¹⁶⁷ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 16-19.

2.2 1884-1887: The initiation of the GAA

2.2.1 The constitutional foundation of the GAA

A circular of 27 October 1884 called for the formation of a panel “for the preservation and cultivation of our national pastimes.”¹⁶⁸ On 1 November 1884 these aspirations were finally realized with the foundation of the “Gaelic Athletic Association” (GAA). Considering the massive impact this organisation was to exert in the course of subsequent decades, the constitutional initiation appears to be rather unspectacular. At its founding convention at Miss Hayes’s Commercial Hotel in Thurles not more than 13 people, and possibly only seven, were present.¹⁶⁹ In a triumvirate with John Wyse Power and John McKay, Michael Cusack was appointed General Secretary; Maurice Davin was entrusted with the presidency. At that stage, there was little that suggested the breadth of nationalist appeal the association would engender. Among the attendants of the inaugural session in Thurles sat a George McCarthy – RIC District Inspector in Thurles and Irish rugby international to come.¹⁷⁰ In fact, every single attendant of the first conference seems to have been affiliated with either a rugby or a cricket team¹⁷¹ – two of the games that were soon to be declared “foreign” and hostile towards GAA philosophy (see Chapter 3.3.3).

The GAA’s actual “take-off” as a publicly respected sporting body was certainly assisted by the acceptance to serve as official patrons of the association by four figures of prestigious stature: Land League leader Michael Davitt, *United Irishman* editor William O’Brien, the leading Home Rule politician Charles Stewart Parnell and Thomas William Croke, Archbishop of Cashel. The latter confirmed his commitment to the revitalisation of Gaelic games in a flamboyantly pro-Irish circular that ever since has been justifiably regarded as the de facto charter of the GAA.¹⁷²

After the institutional inauguration, the collective mood of Gaelic revivalism in Ireland was unconditionally in favour of Cusack’s venture. At the same time, the GAA founder must have been duly aware that his intention of transforming a previously wild and unregulated form of recreation into an institutionalised sporting body resembled the upsurge of sporting clubs and bodies in Britain some twenty years earlier. In Ireland, Cusack was a pioneer. James Boland

¹⁶⁸ GAA Museum, Croke Park, “The Gaelic Athletic Association through History and Documents 1870-1920,” Factsheet II.

¹⁶⁹ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 13.

¹⁷⁰ Mandle, “The I.R.B. and the Beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association,” 420.

¹⁷¹ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 21.

¹⁷² De Búrca, *The GAA*, 18.

and the later influential GAA-man Pat Nally attempted – but failed – to create a nationalist athletics’ association in the 1870s; Fenian attempts to organise Irish games in Dublin were equally unsuccessful.¹⁷³ Hence, for the establishment of a sporting body of distinctively Gaelic character, the GAA could not rely on an available institutional blueprint. The setting-up of an Irish Rugby Football Union (1879), an Irish Football Association (1880), an Irish Cyclists’ Association (1882) and a number of other sporting bodies prior to the foundation of the GAA prove that it was not necessarily the alignment of cultural nationalism that caused sporting Ireland to strike a new institutional path in the first place. It was rather the institutional advancement of the modern sports movement in England that prompted sports bodies in Ireland to adopt modern structures. According to Comerford, both incentives – sport institutionalism and cultural nationalism – represent two sides of the same coin. For him, the intersection of sport and nationalism, a global phenomenon at the time, indicates that only after a sport/discipline has been governed on a modern basis, can its organisational structures become a truly genuine reflection of the nation.¹⁷⁴ The ambivalent notion of the peculiar path that Irish sport was about to take becomes strikingly obvious here: the adoption of modern-sports-institutionalism from Britain was necessary to establish a deeply national institution – which would, in turn, publicly renounce the British influences that have helped to create it in the first place.

Even though Cusack would later recall that in the first two years of its existence “the Association swept the country like a prairie fire,”¹⁷⁵ references to the GAA’s enormous impact and countrywide penetration are contradictory. The *Celtic Times* of 26 February 1887 not only reports that “within recent years no popular movement has met with so brilliant a success, in such a remarkably short period of time, as that which had for its objects the revival of our national pastimes and games; branches and ramifications have spread themselves over the whole land, from sea to sea.”¹⁷⁶ It also carries a note that “County Tournaments are progressing very slowly and the Central Executive and the Patrons of the Association are invisible on the public stage.”¹⁷⁷ While the number of clubs was rising steadily, their growth seems to have been confined to distinct regions that could build on vestiges of the hurling tradition.¹⁷⁸ The attendance figures published in *The Celtic Times* are indeed impressive. In March 1887 alone, 8000 people are said to have gathered for a “Championship Meeting” in

¹⁷³ Mandle, “The I.R.B. and the Beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association,” 419-420. According to Corry, there had been eight previous (pre-GAA) attempts to set up a controlling body for Irish sport. Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 24.

¹⁷⁴ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 213.

¹⁷⁵ “The Gaelic Athletic Association,” *Nation*, October 12, 1889.

¹⁷⁶ “Onward! Onward!” *The Celtic Times*, February 26, 1887.

¹⁷⁷ “Address to Our Friends,” *The Celtic Times*, February 26, 1887.

¹⁷⁸ “Inter-County Matches,” *The Celtic Times*, March 12, 1887.

Wexford,¹⁷⁹ 7000 came to see a “splendid Gaelic tournament” in Waterford,¹⁸⁰ and an “immense gathering” between five- and ten-thousand people followed a Championship game in Dublin.¹⁸¹ Due to the bias of Cusack’s newspaper that was set up for the purpose of popularising Gaelic games (see Chapter 2.3.1), the figures should be treated with caution. Many of the journal’s value-judgements were prone to be masqueraded as facts to reinforce commitment. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the progress of the GAA within just a few years was indeed remarkable if compared to the evolution of acceptable codes and institutions in rugby and association football in England.¹⁸²

However, the fact that Gaelic games merged into formalised sports within a comparatively short timeframe does not imply that the conduct on the pitch had been revolutionised and matched the modern sporting endeavours in Britain. Given that even the first and carefully organised inter-county contest in Gaelic football, between Wexford and Wicklow in 1886, was a most chaotic affair, one can only imagine how tumultuous altercations on remote parish fields must have been. The sidelines at the Wexford-Wicklow encounter were so badly roped that crowds constantly burst through them. The spectators literally filled the goals and end lines, what, according to the *Freeman’s Journal*, “rendered it difficult to decide in cases of scoring.” When the two Leinster rivals met again in 1888, the match had to be abandoned altogether after supporters stormed the field to join in a fracas. A Wicklow-player was forced to leave his clothes behind as he escaped the mob only by climbing over a wall.¹⁸³

Even though Mandle estimates that in 1886 ancient Gaelic games were beginning to succumb to the all-pervading influence of modernisation of contemporary Irish life,¹⁸⁴ it was the defiantly anti-modern attitude and outlook of the GAA that long epitomised the rejection of anything British. This is vividly apparent in a letter to the editor of *The Celtic Times*: “Hurling reminds of the pastime amongst our ancestors,” writes the author, “when parish used to meet parish on Sundays in friendly contests and when the modern invention of points and overs would be looked upon as frivolities.”¹⁸⁵ The implications of regularisation, one of the decisive factors of modernisation in sport, on the development of the GAA is further examined in Chapter 3.1.

¹⁷⁹ “Great Championship Meeting in Wexford,” *The Celtic Times*, March 5, 1887.

¹⁸⁰ “Splendid Gaelic Tournament at Kilmacthomas,” *The Celtic Times*, March 12, 1887.

¹⁸¹ “The County Dublin Championships,” *The Celtic Times*, March 19, 1887.

¹⁸² Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 22.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 29-34.

¹⁸⁴ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 33.

¹⁸⁵ “Letters to the Editor,” *The Celtic Times*, April 30, 1887.

After the “devotional revolution” in Irish Catholicism from the 1850s to the 1880s,¹⁸⁶ the GAA must be seen as one of the driving forces in the succession of the devotional revolution by a cultural one. Attentive contemporaries must have sensed the potential that lay within the scope of Irish sport. It not only engendered popular appeal by communicating through rhetoric (albeit often of a debased or tendentious nature) a justificatory philosophy that tries to engage a necessary popular response.¹⁸⁷ The really striking asset of the early GAA was that the fare it offered Irish people was fitted perfectly to the cultural and social aspirations of the time. On an island, where native culture had for centuries been subordinated to political imperatives and where many forms of Irishness have been stamped out by the British coloniser, the people yearned for communal ways to express their anti-British persuasion or separatist sentiment. Humphries gives a picture of the peculiar coalescence of this defiance with the enthusiasm about the renaissance of a native sport:

Through a long history, during which native language and native law were driven underground, the door to freedom always remained ajar for people who could express themselves through play [...] The influence of the GAA cannot be measured in units of membership or revenue, through attendances or viewing figures. Its impact is emotional, visceral. The GAA is more than a sports’ organization, it is a national trust, an entity which we feel we hold in common ownership.¹⁸⁸

The love for the old Irish pastimes had never been eradicated from the hearts of many Irish people. But the local traditions of the games differed from area to area and it was difficult to share the delight with fellow Irishmen. With the GAA, the Irish people were provided with a platform that enabled them to canalise their dedications and ambitions in a specific and tangible direction – this was a first step towards modernisation of Gaelic sport in Ireland. How this modernising process has to be assessed in the wider picture of the association’s evolution in the first 30 years of its existence will be of more detailed concern in Chapter 2.4.6.

¹⁸⁶ Originally depicted in Emmet Larkin, “The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (1972), 625-652.

¹⁸⁷ Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 104.

¹⁸⁸ Humphries, *Green Fields*, 3.

2.2.2 The nationalist imputation

The struggle for the neglected preservation of Irish institutions of not overtly political character – the spirit of the nation as expressed in its ancient language, arts, games, and social system – has been resumed by the GAA on a broad and vigorous basis so far as the distinctive pastimes and all that they meant in the life of the people were concerned, and it thus became linked with the struggle for national freedom in its highest and only safe goal – absolute independence for Ireland, whole and entire.¹⁸⁹

Although the GAA was devised on clearly nationalist terms and as a “bulwark against the rising tide of Anglicisation that threatened to submerge Irish culture,”¹⁹⁰ the degree of nationalist fervour ascribed to the association must have surprised Cusack, who viewed the nationalist agenda of the association rather pragmatically. He accepted that if athletics and sport were to be democratised, and if emphasis was to be given to traditional Irish forms, then there must be opposition to British organisational control and to particular British games; but that should be as far as nationalism went.¹⁹¹ That the GAA was considered to be a spearhead of Irish nationalism literally overnight underlines the impact that a particular time in Irish history had on this process. Comerford acknowledges:

The acceptance of the idea that the country, and not a geographical region or some ad hoc division, provided the proper and obvious organisational boundaries for a voluntary associational activity typified the way in which the nation, simply by its availability as a conceptual framework, passively appropriated facets of life on which it has no intrinsic claim.”¹⁹²

Humphries even thinks that the GAA “stumbled on the key to its own success [nationalist appeal] almost accidentally.”¹⁹³

However, when it became clear that sport was no more considered as a peripheral issue only slightly interfering with the major rupture lines along political and religious sentiments, the incipiently hesitant GAA-officials were now ready to “exploit” the nationalist imputation of the association to the full, allegorising the initiative not as the new start (that it actually was), but as a return to the glorious past of the Gaels.¹⁹⁴ Especially the revitalisation of hurling was “bristling like a porcupine with protective nationalist quills on which its perceived opponents

¹⁸⁹ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 35.

¹⁹⁰ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 50.

¹⁹¹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 8.

¹⁹² Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 213.

¹⁹³ Humphries, *Green Fields*, 7.

¹⁹⁴ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 219.

would have to impale themselves.”¹⁹⁵ It was no coincidence that hurling’s success was most comprehensive in south Leinster and east Munster, the very regions which spearheaded Irish nationalist sentiment – from the O’Connell campaign, to the devotional revolution in Irish Catholicism, from Fr. Matthews’ temperance campaign, to the Fenians, to the take-over of local government.¹⁹⁶ Hence, the GAA was conceived as a movement, which was mobilised for and then embraced nationalism as its sole *raison d’être*. The whole tenor of the games became one in which the Irish nation, actual or perceived, rejected “West Britonism” and exalted Irishness.¹⁹⁷ Murphy tellingly summarises the GAA’s adaptation to political nationalism by stating that “if the GAA’s unloved father was the Victorian sporting revolution that swept Britain and Ireland, then Irish nationalism has been its doted-upon mother.”¹⁹⁸

It is doubtful if Michael Cusack really stood firmly behind this nationalist radicalisation. In many instances, his ideological caveats seem to be much less rabid than those of most members within the GAA-fraternity (see Chapter 2.1 and 2.2.2). That he felt obliged to adhere to the energised nationalist agenda of the association was probably due to a decision that the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood) had taken in 1883. That year, the secretive organisation came to the conclusion that armed insurrection was not an option in current circumstances and opted to get involved in the athletics movement instead. From then on, the Supreme Council of the IRB has always backed Michael Cusack’s position as front man on the athletic field¹⁹⁹ – which makes it very likely that Cusack felt that he owed something to it. The first public proposal of Cusack to convene a panel for Irish athletics, published in *The Irishman* on 11 October 1884, must have appealed to the IRB. Cusack’s manifesto begins with the following statements:

No movement having for its object the social and political advancement of a nation from the tyranny of imported and enforced customs and manners can be regarded as perfect if it has not made adequate provision for the preservation and cultivation of the National pastimes of the people. Voluntary neglect of such pastimes is a sure sign of National decay and of approaching dissolution, smoking and card-playing.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ Kevin Whelan, “The Geography of Hurling,” *History Ireland*. Vol. 1, No.1 (1993), 29.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Cronin, “Fighting for Ireland: playing for England?” 43-44.

¹⁹⁸ Murphy, “The GAA during the Irish revolution,” 62.

¹⁹⁹ Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics*, 10.

²⁰⁰ “A word about Irish athletics,” *The Irishman*, October 11, 1884, quoted in Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics*, 10.

Nevertheless, when the GAA's announcement of its exclusively nationalist patrons aroused plenty of dissatisfaction, he felt prompted to vindicate the measure by indicating that it was not the initial intent of the movement to neglect public figures of British persuasion. On 14 March 1885 he published an article in *United Ireland* in which he argued:

It has been stated that the founders of the GAA requested only one class of Irish leaders to patronise the Association. When, as a member of the Dublin A.C. [Athletic Club] in 1882, I proposed the Lord Mayor of Dublin with the Lord Lieutenant as patron of the Club, the latter did not accept. With these facts staring Irish athletes in the face we fail to see why any thoughtful man should blame the founders of the GAA for not having again consulted in any way those who so emphatically opposed what is now considered so very desirable – the union of classes of athletes.²⁰¹

Cronin illustrates that the written history of the GAA that cemented its place at the heart of Irish nationalism began with T. F. O'Sullivan's *Story of the GAA*, published in 1916.²⁰² However, journalists and writers of assertively nationalist persuasion initiated a dissemination of the nationalist doctrine within the sporting sphere long before 1916. They helped the association to move from its position on the cultural wing of Irish nationalist reawakening to the centre stage of ideological anti-Britishness. Analysts vary considerably in their interpretation of these early contributions to GAA historiography. Whereas these writers were sometimes credited for their "canny ability to anticipate the national zeitgeist,"²⁰³ many of their propositions were also accused of "manipulating the past in an attempt to justify contemporary actions."²⁰⁴ Mike Cronin in particular thinks that the GAA has been poorly served by these "historians". This is the case, because the bulk of the history written in the early years of the association was compiled – pace Cronin – by people who can generally be considered to be "on the inside". Beside the reluctance of the GAA to open its archives to the general public, this was the main reason why the written history of the association has not developed an agenda beyond that which considers only its role in the emergence of Irish nationalism.²⁰⁵

By any standard, this political exaltation of Gaelic games was helpful in providing Irish nationalists with a symbolically defiant act broad enough to project aspects of ritual and nostalgia for a legendary Irish past onto more tangible objectives of nationalist imprint. It was

²⁰¹ *United Ireland*, March 14, 1885, quoted in Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics*, 17.

²⁰² Mike Cronin, "An Historical Identity: Historians and the Making of Irish Nationalist Identity in the Gaelic Athletic Association," *Football Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (1998), 92.

²⁰³ Ronnie Bellew, *GAA – The Glory Years of Hurling and Football* (Dublin: Hodder Headline Ireland, 2005), 245.

²⁰⁴ Cronin, "Fighting for Ireland: playing for England?" 45.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 37. Cronin, "An Historical Identity," 90-91.

general practice to reserve the terms “Gael” and “Gaelic” – although they can rightfully be applied to numerous Celtic peoples – for Irish Catholics who supported the nationalist movement and the cultural renaissance. Hence, nationalism – for the purists within the GAA – was not totally equivalent with Irishness. After all, they ostracised those who may have been Irish but lacked certain cultural, political, and sectarian credentials.²⁰⁶

P. J. Devlin, nationalist hardliner among early GAA commentators, was confident that “the Gaelic body, be it club or council, that puts camáns into the hands of boys can do as much for a future Ireland of ideal dreams as those who would arm a battalion in the same area.”²⁰⁷ The “secularisation” that would creep in with advancing modernisation was, to him, an outright threat to Gaelic sport. In *Our Native Games* he proclaimed: “National apathy fosters indifference, indifference blunts the edge of defeat, defeat excuses disorganisation – this is the insidious disease threatening the games.”²⁰⁸ Devlin was exceptional in that he criticised the nationalist agenda of the GAA for not going far enough. According to him, the GAA grew in number without a corresponding advance in cohesion and *esprit de corps*.²⁰⁹ Thereby, the association had hidden itself behind the “modern shedding of the ‘archaic’ tokens of nationhood.” While he conceded that this “may be keeping pace with ‘world movements’,” he would have liked to see the emphasis directed more to the racial purity of the games.²¹⁰ Either way – as instrument of racial consciousness or modernised “protectionism” – nationalism as “justificatory philosophy”²¹¹ of the GAA turned out to be an asset as well as a stigma.

Cronin’s historical treatises account for the stimulus that was induced into the association by its nationalist appeal – an asset still thriving today. He attributes this nationalist legacy not only to the explicit complications that arose when the GAA, with its nationalist commitment, crossed the path of the loyalist community in Ireland. According to him, the nationalist ferment of the formative years of the association inveigled it to be built on a myth. His conclusion is probably the most comprehensive challenge that the core of GAA ideology – and the officers and historians who endorsed it – have ever been exposed to.

²⁰⁶ McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 267-268.

²⁰⁷ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 69.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 78.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

²¹¹ Neal Garnham, “Accounting for the early success of the Gaelic Athletic Association,” *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 133, (2004), 68.

“Gaelic games and their followers,” says Cronin,

have emerged as a result of an officially sanctioned manipulation of history. The production of an identity within the GAA is not solely the product of spectators identifying with their team, but is a process that has used Ireland’s troubled history as a way of tying the spectator into a specific political and cultural identity, that of Irish nationalism, which the games personify because of their nature and their past.²¹²

In the late 19th century, outlines of a overwhelmingly nationalist direction in sport were not confined to Ireland. Sporting endeavours all over the world ceased to be simply optional and sociable leisure activities and became instead emotionally and symbolically charged markers of ethnic difference, opposition and intolerance.²¹³ Where nationalism penetrated the cultural sphere, the technique of using athletic movements for political purposes could be discerned almost everywhere. In Bohemia, for example, the typically German institution of *Turnen* was transformed into the *Sokol* movement, aiming to give Czech men physical training and spiritual development to facilitate them with physical prowess and defiance vis-à-vis the Austrian sovereign.²¹⁴ Against the background of the time, when nationalist propositions in Irish sport were first articulated, and considering the nationalist potential that must have been accumulated by the Irish in the course of the 19th century, nationalist representation of sport in Ireland may even be seen as comparatively delayed. However, the commitment of the subsequent campaigns and the explicit declarations of the British “enemy”, whose sports were allegedly “foreign”, were exceptional to Ireland. Assessing the position of Gaelic sport within an imperial context, Holt rates the formation and early history of the GAA as “arguably the most outstanding example of the appropriation of sport by nationalism in the history of the British Isles and Empire.”²¹⁵

To a certain extent, the GAA’s exceptional propensity for nationalism was surely also due to a general atmosphere of Gaelic revivalism in Ireland at the time. The association is seen as a hallmark of the “Gaelic Renaissance” from the 1880s to the 1910s in that it furthered the retreat from explicitly political agitation in favour of the ideological work of building a nation from the bottom up.²¹⁶ If the foundation of the GAA marked the ignition of the “Gaelic Renaissance”, or if the association has rather been the beneficiary of an already established

²¹² Cronin, “An Historical Identity,” p. 90.

²¹³ Dyck, “Playing like Canadians,” 110.

²¹⁴ Greene, “Michael Cusack and the Rise of the GAA,” 78.

²¹⁵ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 240.

²¹⁶ McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 263.

notion, as de Búrca asserts,²¹⁷ is a matter of debate. In any case, the overlaps with other cultural initiatives and societies such as the language movement of the Gaelic League were extensive. This particular cultural alliance was most tellingly expressed by Douglas Hyde, the founder of the Gaelic League, in the *Gaelic Annual* of 1908/1909 where he stated that “while well-developed Irish brains in well-developed bodies is the true ideal of the Gaelic League, well-developed bodies with well-developed Irish brains ought to be the ideal of the GAA.”²¹⁸

Even though GAA historiography rarely includes works attempting to de-politicise the association in the sense of examining it from outside the centre of Irish nationalism, the vulnerability and limits of portraying the GAA as a political actor have become more evident in recent times. Bairner (2001a, 2001b, 2003) and Cronin (1999) for example show that Irish nationalism in sport is a very sensitive affair that tends to be blurred by exchangeable references to concepts such as nationality, national identity, and nationalism. With the employment of a large variety of different approaches towards the nationalist pull of the GAA, R. V. Comerford’s essay on sport in *Inventing the Nation* (2003) set a new standard in scrutinising the association’s nationalism within a multilayered frame. In this treatise, Comerford also suggests “to bear in mind that a political or ‘national’ agenda would not of itself have secured and retained the enormous popularity of the games – especially in the open market place of recent decades – if they were not highly enjoyable to play and to watch.”²¹⁹

The depiction of the GAA on clearly defined political lines has deflected attention from other, less “obvious”, implications of the association’s nationalist outlook. While the links between the cadres of the GAA and radical nationalist movements such as the IRB, Sinn Féin or the Volunteers are undisputable, it has almost been completely neglected that the pivotal role the association had played within Irish nationalism could equally have caused a containment of radical nationalist potential that might have found less “playful” expressions elsewhere.

The benefits that the association is said to have gained from its nationalist outlook not only blurred effectively beneficial influences from Britain, but also “secular” incentives that had nothing to do with nationalism whatsoever. Cronin alludes to one such element by pointing to the fact that the rapid growth of the fledgling association was not only due to its nationalist appeal, but also because sporting organisations that were not ready to accept the new GAA-legislation would have simply been left isolated.²²⁰ The affiliation of the Freeman’s Journal

²¹⁷ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 45.

²¹⁸ Fullam, *The Throw-In*, 92.

²¹⁹ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 222.

²²⁰ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 38.

Athletic Club to the GAA for example was, after participation in the rival IAAA (Irish Amateur Athletic Association) until 1886, dictated by a “desire simply to follow the lead of others.”²²¹ Institutional conformism towards the GAA should therefore not be automatically equated with specific ideological alignments. Likewise, the GAA-members’ unconditional devotion for the Irish language should not be taken for granted. Breandán ÓhEithir concurs with Conor Cruise O’Brien in that the GAA was able to attract the aspirations of the Irish people “more than the Gaelic League, more than Arthur Griffith’s Sinn Féin, more than even the Transport and General Workers’ Union and of course more than the movement which created the Abbey Theatre.”²²² But he also points to the fact that within the part of the Irish community that claimed a genuine Gaelic identity, the perception of the natural advocacy by the GAA was not always unchallenged, as it might seem to appear in vast parts of GAA historiography. The staunch supporters of the association that didn’t speak a word of Irish, for example, happened to be despised by the Irish speakers for being hypocritical towards *Gaeldom*. In addition, Irish speakers questioned the cultural purity of GAA supporters who rendered homage to the Irish language, but not as a medium of communication in their everyday lives.²²³

2.2.3 The Ban

The early GAA was an archetypical example of an institution that defined cultural identity as a matter of negation and exclusiveness.²²⁴ From the very inception of the association, one instrument was to be the main institutional indicator for the way the GAA intended to mediate its anti-Britishness towards its own members and also vis-à-vis the wider public. This instrument, often referred to as “The Ban”, comprised a number of explicit inhibitions that were supposed to stifle British ideology of either political or cultural hue. The compilation of statutes and ban-rules excluded British security forces from membership in the GAA (Rule 21), impeded GAA-members from taking part in (or even watching) overtly British (“foreign”) games such as association football or rugby (Rule 27) and prohibited GAA-property to be used for “foreign” games (Rule 42). According to Holt, the ban policy of the GAA was “the most audacious and successful challenge to British sports mounted anywhere in the world.”²²⁵

²²¹ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 27.

²²² Breandán ÓhEithir, *Over the Bar* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press Ltd, 1991), 201.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 153.

²²⁴ Garnham, “Accounting for the early success of the GAA,” 71.

²²⁵ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 240.

These clauses, many of which were in place way into the 20th century, made the GAA an easy target for upholders of cultural and religious liberalism. However, this – and the deterrence of members who wanted to engage in sports other than Gaelic – was a price that the association was ready to pay. The GAA mercilessly expelled some of the staunchest supporters of the Gaelic cause such as the then President of Ireland Douglas Hyde (official patron of the GAA since 1902), who was expelled for attending an international soccer match between Ireland and Poland in 1938. Nevertheless, for most followers “The Ban” was an essential source of identification with the GAA and stood as testimonial for the body’s republican credentials.²²⁶ This notion is vividly epitomised in P. J. Devlin’s bitterness vis-à-vis any violation of the codex. He states: “The bypassing of the ban-clauses is a blow to the general morale of the competition; and the use of recreant Gaels is an affront to the constitution and principles of the Association.”²²⁷

One of the “practical” effects of “The Ban” was the categorical prohibition of competition between Irish athletes and members of the Crown Forces, who often had much leisure time on their hands and were thus well trained in a way to make the opponents look ridiculous.²²⁸ That the GAA’s ban policy strengthened the British view that the association was subversive made the defiance towards British sports even more attractive for athletes who proudly and openly carried their nationalist heritage. It is generally acknowledged that the exclusiveness that resulted from the numerous banning clauses were both a help and a hindrance for the thriving of the association.²²⁹ In this respect, the GAA’s ban-agenda can be compared with boycotting, the most popular form of agrarian defiance that appeared in the 1880s in the context of the Irish land struggle. Michael Cusack seemed to have been compliant with the association’s ban-policy only as long as it was advantageous for the popularisation of its games.

While the GAA’s ban-policy was commonly perceived as a synonym for the association’s exclusiveness and its defiance of foreign influences, it was forgotten that the sustainability of the early GAA was threatened more by non-conformist members rather than by influences from “outside” (see Chapter 2.3). Devlin argued:

²²⁶ Paul Healy, *Gaelic Games and the Gaelic Athletic Association* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998), 113.

²²⁷ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 92.

²²⁸ Garnham, “Accounting for the early success of the GAA,” 76.

²²⁹ ÓhEithir, *Over the Bar*, 85.

Desertion may have been unconscious often; but it has been none-the-less disruptive, and when it brought men into an atmosphere subversive of national allegiance, under an alien flag, to the strains of an anthem that proclaimed racial subjection and in contact with men notoriously hostile to Irish traditions and aspirations, a barrier had to be raised to protect the legal from the indifferent and secure the organisation against part-time use by those who can only have had a half-hearted attachment to its basic aims.²³⁰

The Celtic Times of June 4 1887 summarised this apprehension as follows: “The GAA has a lot of enemies and those within its own ranks are by far the most dangerous. It can defy the most malignant attacks from outside; but when it has among its defenders those who will stealthily open the gates to the enemy, it stands in imminent peril.”²³¹ This constant state of alertness must be seen as a corroboration of the GAA’s concern not only about the “racial” purity of its games, but also about the monopolistic pretension to use them as a promotion for a specific type of sporting competition and recreation.

In relation to the rejection of anything British, “The Ban” might have elevated the exclusiveness of the GAA on a public and highly visible level. Nevertheless, it was simply impossible for the GAA not to undermine its own directives that comprised the ban agenda. This applies to the adoption of the British model of sports-institutionalism (see Chapter 3.1 and 3.2), as well as to the incorporation of elements of overtly British sports into its own portfolio (see Chapter 3.3).

²³⁰ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 49.

²³¹ “Enemies within the walls,” *The Celtic Times*, June 4, 1887.

2.3 1886-1893: Institutional crisis

2.3.1 Cusack's dismissal and the inception of the All-Ireland era

By 1886, Cusack's legacy as capable organiser was widely acknowledged as seminal within the GAA. Yet, his ill-tempered character and his dictatorial mannerisms, conducive to promote the association in the first place, now made him unbearable within the ranks of a burgeoning mass movement that needed other men for mundane and administrative groundwork.²³² It was little wonder, then, that he found himself dismissed from his post as secretary at a convention in Thurles on 4 July 1886 for allegedly neglecting his managerial duties.

But Cusack wouldn't have been immortalised in James Joyce's *Ulysses* ("The Citizen"), if he hadn't defiantly fought against his removal. With *The Celtic Times*, he set up his very own journal from which he could launch permanent attacks on the new leadership of the GAA. By astutely delving into the media business and exploiting it for his own purpose, he internalised a technique that was deployed in nearly all modern sports at the time. Cusack's journalistic endeavour – which was facilitated by the Scots businessman A. Morrison Millar – also prompted the GAA to establish its own journal, *The Gael*, only a few months later. Whereas no files of *The Gael* seem to be publicly accessible, the James Hardiman Library of the National University of Ireland in Galway holds a facsimile edition of the surviving issues of *The Celtic Times* and allows access to this indispensable source. The newspaper survived not much longer than a year (January 1887 to January 1888), but it reflects in archetypal style Cusack's endeavours to assert the strength and glory of a Celtic people in the face of Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic traditions in sport. Still, however unique the journal was in style and purpose, it must be seen in the context of the times, when English writers were doing the same for a "Saxon" tradition, for a Protestant faith and for sports such as cricket.

Even without Cusack – its natural leader – the GAA continued to make steady progress on the playing field in 1886 and 1887. The organisational ethos of "one-parish-one-club" linked up with clerical structures and animated many remote villages to affiliate to the association. In 1887 it was supplemented by an organisational venture that lifted Gaelic sport on to a different level altogether. The success of a number of challenge matches between teams from Wicklow and Wexford on 1 October 1886 prompted the GAA to set up a network of

²³² Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1960), 78.

committees to put some order on competition schedules.²³³ The scheme of the tournament that it sought to implement was based on the central unit of the county and turned out to be one of the most important and successful initiatives in the history of the GAA. Annual competitions, the legendary “All-Ireland Championships”, soon emerged as the most promising perspective of the association. Initially, the club winning the county championship progressed to represent its county in competitions against others. Since 1892 county champions were allowed, if they so wished, to select players from other clubs with a view to strengthening their ranks for the All-Ireland campaign. In 1911, the GAA executive initiated another enhancement of the system of selecting inter-county teams by giving county committees the option of placing responsibility in the hands of a special selection committee.²³⁴ This mode of selection is still in place today.

People instantly showed great affection towards matches and tournaments at inter-county level, recognising vestiges of traditions that seemed to have been long gone. Devlin recounts:

The All-Ireland Championships were suggested as the nearest practical approach to the old contests which took place in many areas and at special times throughout the country, those matches which kept the games alive in years when there was, indeed, very little pleasurable relaxation mingled in the lives of the people.²³⁵

At the same time, the institutionalisation of one single and countrywide championship followed the typically modern trajectory of sport; it “held the prospect of enticing GAA clubs to process their affiliations, just as the establishment of the FA Cup had done so much in the 1870s to promote the development of the Football Association in England.”²³⁶ Although the growth of the GAA was retarded in 1888 by the loss of financial and human resources because of a programme of matches and a fundraising tour in the USA (“Invasion Tour”), the inter-county formula, with its ingenious combination of parochial and territorial rivalries, initiated extraordinary enthusiasm in connection with Gaelic sport in Ireland. Holt attributes the new popularity of the GAA at this time to its ability to “neatly harness the old parish and provincial loyalties of rural Ireland and thus create a liberated area of national life where the Gael was free of the garrison.”²³⁷

Through Gaelic games, the county became the defining mark of place in the Irish mind. Until the GAA started its inter-county competitions, county boundaries had little more than legal

²³³ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 28-29.

²³⁴ GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/02, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 5.

²³⁵ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 50.

²³⁶ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 42.

²³⁷ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 241.

significance.²³⁸ After the momentous advancement of the association towards the All-Ireland era, the spirit of county community merged with the Catholic corporatist tradition of Irish institutionalism²³⁹ and became the prime indicator of local patriotism.²⁴⁰ Always an integral part of the national fabric, the GAA could now fully penetrate and harness local identity structures as well. In this, the association utilised an existing network of territorial and social loyalties, rather than being a component in the creation of new civic identities.²⁴¹ It profited, for example, from the structures of Parnell's Irish National League that gave the association instant access to a network of local community activists throughout Munster, Leinster and Connacht.²⁴² In this way, the association latched on to those influential structures at the heart of political mobilisation.²⁴³

It must be ranked among the long range of paradoxes inherent in Gaelic sport that the county, on which GAA alignments were to rest upon, had been implemented as administrative entity by the Normans and drawn up by the British coloniser (King John) as early as 1210.²⁴⁴ This irony did not go unnoticed, and a short-lived newspaper, *The Gaelic Athlete*, called, in 1912, for the abolition of the county system that would have been formed by the disdained British "in varied sizes and most irregular and absurd shapes."²⁴⁵ However, by then, the GAA didn't dare to throw away what had become a winning formula.

However much the inter-county era initiated a new community spirit and spurred the appeal of Gaelic games, there is little reason to be overly positive about the actual conduct of the tournaments during the timeframe under investigation. As many match reports of the time depict in detail, participant teams most often progressed via walk-overs or belated appeal rather than by actually beating the opponent on the field through points and goals. A number of clubs didn't even have to play a single match to reach an All-Ireland final. Although the championship was supposed to display the assets of a proudly formalised sport, it must have been apparent to anyone involved that many of the exalted regulations were not taken

²³⁸ Greene, "Michael Cusack and the Rise of the GAA," 80-81.

²³⁹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 143.

²⁴⁰ Ironically, at the turn of the century, even Britain was incorporated into the county-scheme to get a London Irish team involved in the championship.

²⁴¹ Garnham, "Accounting for the early success of the GAA," 76.

²⁴² Not before 1892 were the champion clubs of a given county allowed – as is the case until today – to select players from any club in their own county for respective inter-county tournaments.

²⁴³ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 223.

²⁴⁴ Mark Duncan, "The Camera and the Gael: The Early Photography of the GAA, 1884-1914," in *Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, edited by Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 101.

²⁴⁵ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 29-30.

seriously. Few matches were played on full-size pitches or on their scheduled dates.²⁴⁶ Rather than indulging in orderly play, most contests ended up as mud-wrestling bouts.²⁴⁷

Cusack's effort to organise a hurling encounter between representative sides from Tipperary and Galway at the Phoenix Park in Dublin as early as 16 February 1886 was subsequently tagged as the "forgotten All-Ireland final".²⁴⁸ The first official All-Ireland hurling final under the auspices of the GAA came off nearly two years later. The match in Birr (Co. Offaly) on 1 April 1888 that saw Tipperary victorious against Galway is said to have been "a neatly symbolic blending of the old and the new."²⁴⁹ The premiere of the new championship decider conveyed a sense of departure into a brighter future. The conditions on the pitch, on the other hand, could not quite spur similar encouragement. Pre-match preparations had been so negligent that the goals had to be hastily framed by tree branches.²⁵⁰ The first All-Ireland football final between Limerick and Louth was staged in Dublin on 29 April 1888 and was won by the Commercials from Limerick. Since 1910, the highlight of Ireland's sporting calendar is regularly staged at Dublin's Croke Park (former Jones' Road). The mecca of Gaelic sport epitomises the dichotomy of GAA philosophy between the *rural* and the *urban*. After all, however important it is to defend the pride of the parish by winning on one's home ground, it is only the representation at an All-Ireland final in Dublin's Croke Park that opens the gate to the pantheon of hurling and football giants. Keith Duggan neatly transcribes the myth of the edifice. He says: "When two counties gather to play contests that will define a season and for some, a lifetime, Croke Park becomes localised again."²⁵¹

The peculiar county alignments in Gaelic sport stood in stark contra-distinction to the city and suburban club loyalties that underpinned other modern sports at the time, as Mandle has established: "Whereas in the English football leagues, in American baseball, in rugby union in Wales, or in rugby league in the north of England the development of the game revolved around clubs, the GAA continued to act more as a national co-operative entity with strong county overtones."²⁵² The GAA's exceptionalism in this regard has lost nothing of its significance to the present day. That a club is becoming bigger than the game itself, an early "trait" of modern sport, is naturally impossible in such an environment.

²⁴⁶ Not before 1909 were the All-Ireland finals played within their proper years.

²⁴⁷ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 41-42.

²⁴⁸ O'Laoi, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 25.

²⁴⁹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 47.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Keith Duggan, *The Lifelong Season – At the Heart of Gaelic Games* (Dublin: Town House, 2004), 31.

²⁵² Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 142-143.

2.3.2 IRB-takeover, Parnell split and the breach with the Catholic Church

The GAA's "saddled advocacy" of nationalist Ireland put enormous pressure on the association when the level of explicit agitation and campaigning for (more) Irish independence could no longer be kept out of any but the most insignificant movement.²⁵³ The compilation of forces, both open and concealed, that followers of the GAA encompassed – the church, parliamentarianism, agrarianism and Fenianism – operated in the same uneasy and, as it proved, transitory alliance that existed on the political front.²⁵⁴ And it was in these circumstances that the GAA revealed for the first time its tendency to dissipate much of its energy in internal dissension. Analysing the institutional turmoil from 1886 to 1891 and referring to Cusack's famous allegory (see Chapter 2.2.1), Devin stated: "If Gaelic games ever spread like a prairie fire, they were now permitted to almost burn themselves out."²⁵⁵

As the politically nationalist preferences of the association were never doubted, the contentious issue at stake was the question to what particular section of Irish nationalism the GAA could be associated with.²⁵⁶ Whereas the early patronage of Charles Stewart Parnell moulded the political agenda of the fledgling GAA within the framework of constitutional Home Rule, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), the physical force faction of Irish nationalism, soon detected the potential of the GAA as a recruiting ground for more militant campaigns. The existence of a large body of healthy young men, organised on a countrywide basis and devoted to nationalist aspirations seemed to provide for something previous organisations with revolutionary potential most often lacked – a prospective army.²⁵⁷ The secretive IRB tightened its grip on the GAA in the course of 1886. The *Nation* retrospectively specified this infiltration as an "infusion of those disintegrating agencies that burst up the Young Ireland Society in Dublin and whose dreary motto seems to be 'Rule or Ruin'."²⁵⁸

After the first take-over at a turbulent convention in Thurles on 9 November 1887, a comprehensive schism was averted due to Archbishop Croke's efforts to negotiate a compromise between the politicised IRB-men and the so-called "reconstructionists", who envisaged a more federal and non-political GAA. But another, more implicit, coup d'état early in 1889 left the moderates in the executive completely out in the cold and the association seemed now to have passed into Fenian hands. The I.R.B. triumph was rounded

²⁵³ Alan Bairner, "Sport, Space and National Identity in Ireland: The GAA, Croke Park and Rule 42," *Space & Polity*, Vol. 11, Issue 1 (2007), 60.

²⁵⁴ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 13.

²⁵⁵ Devin, *Our Native Games*, 70.

²⁵⁶ Mandle, "The I.R.B. and the Beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association," 425.

²⁵⁷ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 44.

²⁵⁸ "The Gaelic Athletic Association," *Nation*, October 12, 1889.

off by the acceptance of John O'Leary, a leading Fenian activist, to serve as patron of the association. Just as the initial choice of Croke, Davitt, Parnell and O'Brien in 1884 reflected the balance of nationalist aspirations within the GAA, the appointment of O'Leary cemented a new "fundamentalism" among the leadership.²⁵⁹

But almost as if to "cure" the division between Fenian and constitutional camps with an even more comprehensive casualty, the Parnell-split of 1891 fuelled the animosities and grew into outright hostility. After an extramarital affair exposed Charles Stewart Parnell as an adulterer, the full moralising fervour of a church (with Archbishop Croke to the forefront) that had long committed itself to the constitutional nationalist struggle of the home rule leader was now directed against him and all who chose to come to his support.²⁶⁰ Paradoxically enough, it was the anti-constitutional – and originally anti-Parnellite – IRB, and with it the "official" GAA, that lined up solidly behind Parnell. With his patronage, the IRB-dominated GAA envisaged a brighter future – even if it would be forced to proceed without the backing of the Catholic Church. These hopes were dashed with the death of Parnell in October 1891.

The GAA, already torn apart by four years of internal dissension, literally collapsed.²⁶¹ In 1888, the GAA was in the heyday of its existence, with close to 1000 affiliated clubs. In 1890 they had fallen to one-half that number, and in 1891 the total number of affiliated clubs fell to 220. Apart from a few pockets in Dublin, Cork and Galway, the association basically vanished until 1892. The pattern of disorganisation within the GAA was self-contained. Dublin Castle, constantly monitoring the political aspirations of the association, documented in its intelligence papers: "The GAA is a thing with a name but no reality."²⁶²

Moral and logistical assistance by the Catholic Church was a constitutional feature of the early GAA. Archbishop Thomas Croke of Cashel was its first and by far most influential patron. The linkage between faith and bodily manliness accruing from this alliance was not too dissimilar to the persuasions with which Britain's public school system has gradually been endowed from the mid-19th-century. Many aspects of the GAA's moral doctrine constituted an emulation of the Victorian credo that every Christian has a moral responsibility and needs the physical characteristics to defend – if it became necessary – right against wrong and good against evil.²⁶³ With this emphasis on solidarity, duty and service, Irish sport also adopted the

²⁵⁹ Mandle, "The I.R.B. and the Beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association," 427.

²⁶⁰ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 84.

²⁶¹ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 45-47.

²⁶² Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 92-94.

²⁶³ Dann, "British Sports in Ireland," 31.

British preference for team-sports over individual ones.²⁶⁴ Hence, the intrinsically Protestant concept of “muscular Christianity” that spurred public school boys to embark not only on a sporting, but also on a civilising mission, can be considered to have been only slightly refracted – by the GAA – into a form of “muscular Catholicism”.²⁶⁵

The growing political dispute among the association’s officials was the only thing that could drive a wedge between the GAA and the Catholic Church. “Fear and apprehension of what the Fenians might do to an organisation of idealistic young men,” says Mandle, “has ever been a factor that would play a major part in forming the clerical opposition to the GAA’s course of action.”²⁶⁶ The Catholic hierarchy may not have been desperately anxious to keep the association clear from any political imprint altogether,²⁶⁷ but the basic pretension of the clergy was clear: the GAA should be prevented from evolving into another neo-Fenian front in the political struggle with the bastions of British administration on the island. The IRB-take-over clearly undermined the “natural alliance” between the Gaelic athletic movement and the Catholic Church; it was a corollary that the deprivation of this pillar would have devastating effects for the association. In 1887, when it became obvious that the IRB-dominated GAA was determined to exploit fully the association’s potential for mobilisation against the British oppressor, the GAA’s relation to its clerical facilitators deteriorated at once. In fact, the Church moved to the very forefront of the agitation against a Fenian-led GAA. The clergy denounced the IRB-dominated association from pulpits all over the country. Defections and withdrawals soon disrupted the organisational network nearly everywhere. If it needed proving, the evolution after the take-over in 1889 now showed that the GAA could exist, but not flourish indefinitely without clerical support.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 205.

²⁶⁵ McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 264.

²⁶⁶ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 42.

²⁶⁷ The Church itself was prominently involved in those politicised factions of the Land War against landlordism that wanted to solve the land question once and forever rather than to negotiate half-baked conciliations.

²⁶⁸ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 37-39.

2.4 1894-1913: Modernisation

From 1894, developments within and around the GAA initiated a number of innovations and adaptations that can be attributed to a burgeoning process of modernisation in Gaelic sport in Ireland. The first modernising leap was marked by the recognition of Gaelic games' financial profitability, a development inextricably linked to the secretaryship of Dick Blake from 1894 to 1898. His tenure laid the foundations for a large scale reformation of the GAA which set in – after a delay of about four years – around 1901. Mandle delineates what the mass-following demanded from a Gaelic sporting association that asserted the claim not to fall short of other spectacles of modern sport. Coinciding with sentiments that were prevalent in all modern sports, Mandle says, “[GAA] people wanted exciting, skilful, readily observable play; they wanted stadiums designed to let them see the spectacle; they wanted transport to get them there; they wanted to read about the games, and they wanted to praise famous men.”²⁶⁹

2.4.1 The secretaryship of Dick Blake

The Parnell-split had deprived the GAA of nearly all its assets. That it survived the political watershed at all is little short of a miracle. However, in the interlude between the political upheavals of the early 1890s and the reform age of the early 1900s, the GAA laid some solid foundations for the prospering and modernised association of the future. Many of the incentives that helped to sustain the viability of the association at this stage were consistent with developments in other modern sports of the time. Those who defied the difficult circumstances and were still committed to keep on fighting for the maintenance of GAA activity must have been particularly encouraged by developments of sport institutionalism in Britain. There, many modern sports had succeeded – by the 1890s – to merge into ventures of high popularity and profitability. The monetary influx caused by the rising number of spectators set in motion a commercialist cycle that energised an ever expanding sports market. Because the GAA collapsed as an effective fee-gathering agency in 1891, this was an encouraging prospect to escape the institutional deadlock. Consequentially, gate receipts were soon becoming the most substantial income of the association. In 1895, the well-known GAA ground Clontarf Park in Dublin was dropped as a venue for a big championship fixture, because enclosures could not be arranged to deter gatecrashers from watching the game from “unofficial” spots around the venue. Maurice Butcher's Pleasure Ground at Jones's Road (the

²⁶⁹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 158.

site where Croke Park was later to be erected) had the big advantage of being accessible through one gate only – it was now becoming the preferred venue for big Gaelic contests.²⁷⁰ Hence, the officials could see more clearly now that the future of the GAA lay in its capacity to transform sport from rustic play into urban display; from recreation into organised competition and from unwatched (and largely unwatchable) exercise into spectacle geared to the turnstile.²⁷¹ Mandle characterises the evolution of the association in the mid-1890s as a “shift from the GAA being an association of Irishmen gathered together to advance Irish cultural and political interests, to its being an organisation providing profitable mass spectator sport.” Especially in the city, where identification with the Gaelic emphasis in sport was limited, the potential to attract new strata of spectators was huge. The temporary reprieve of the ban on foreign sports and policemen from 1893 was symbolic in that regard. Treasurer William Field, who was in London at the time and experienced the success of modern sport first hand, encouraged the new administrators to press ahead with their non-political objectives. In 1896, he addressed a GAA-convention in this spirit: “Here, in England, the young men, bitterly opposed to one another in politics, are loyally bound together in football clubs. What is to prevent us from adopting that method?”²⁷² The GAA seems to have been receptive to impulses of this kind. Still IRB-dominated, its overtly anti-British outlook in institutional terms was clearly moderated on the field of play. That the IRB got caught up in a self destructive battle for control within its own ranks was “helpful” in that it prevented the clandestine body from exerting the same kind of debilitating influence on the GAA as has been the case in the late 1880s.²⁷³

However, whereas much of what initiated the gradual rehabilitation of the GAA’s sportive and de-politicised vigour in the years 1894-1898 was not due to conscious and explicit GAA policy (popularity of modern sports in Britain, IRB-crisis), the reversal of the association’s fortunes is also attributed to the organisational efforts of Dick Blake. Since the early 1890s the Meathman had worked his way up to the highest ranks of the GAA and was awarded with the post of secretary in 1894. He stood at the head of a progressive faction within the GAA who identified the inflexible advocacy of political objectives as a major hindrance. During his tenure, the political stance of the association was not eradicated, but “the sense of nationalism

²⁷⁰ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 46, 49. In the early days of the GAA, championship finals were played at a variety of different locations in Ireland, including Athy, Birr, Dungarvan, Kilkenny, Thurles, Clontarf, Inchicore and Dublin. At the GAA’s Congress held in Dublin’s City Hall on Easter Sunday 9th April 1914 a resolution was passed that all future All-Ireland Senior Championship Finals were to be played in Croke Memorial Park on fixed Sundays each year. See GAA Museum, Croke Park, “The Gaelic Athletic Association through History and Documents 1870-1920,” Factsheet V.

²⁷¹ Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 105.

²⁷² Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 96-101.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 101.

within the GAA has diffused itself into culture, rather than repeatedly sharpening itself in politics.”²⁷⁴ Apart from his mission to rid the GAA of political factionalism, Blake grasped and internalised, more than any other GAA-official before him, the allurements of modern sport and what was necessary to get people involved in it. He himself excelled in patently British (“foreign”) pastimes such as association football and rugby, which definitely added to his experience in terms of modern sporting incentives. Nevertheless, the era of restoration and expansion that Blake helped to initiate did not secure his tenure as secretary. Similar to Cusack’s departure in 1886, he was ousted from his post in 1898 over the issue of financial mismanagement. The GAA had to pay the bill, though – the structural modernisation of the association was curtailed at once. The four-year-period that followed the ousting of Blake in 1898 was notable for the lack of solid achievement or growth.²⁷⁵

2.4.2 Re-politicisation and railway boost

It is tempting to believe that the first wave of modernisation within the GAA was inextricably linked to the de-politicising influence of Blake and his companions. This may well have been the case, but the subsequent evolution of the GAA suggests rather that this was not an indispensable prerequisite of institutional progress. The GAA-reformers of the new century turned out to be the most successful modernisers of the early GAA – and they did so by instigating a political backlash, promoting the return of the IRB to the forefront of the association.²⁷⁶ It might have been the key to the success of the “new” GAA that it made of the association a nationalist as distinct from an openly revolutionary organisation. After all, it renewed interest on the part of the clergy and Archbishop Croke’s successor Thomas Fennelly.²⁷⁷

The annual convention on 22 September 1901, in which the ban on foreign games was emphatically reinstituted, came to be regarded as the foundation of “the Association as we know it today – well-officered, intelligently-governed and wisely-directed.”²⁷⁸ The modern GAA of the early 20th century was led by two men who both served through the whole period of modernisation: President James Nowlan and secretary Luke O’Toole.²⁷⁹ When they took office in 1901, the GAA was neither flourishing nor disciplined, and only few were eager to

²⁷⁴ Humphries, *Green Fields*, 59.

²⁷⁵ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 56-61.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁷⁷ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 130-133.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 118-123

²⁷⁹ O’Toole only narrowly defeated GAA-figurehead Cusack – 19 votes to 17 – at the 1901 elections to become the first full-time secretary of the GAA.

shoulder the burden and the duties that came with it. The instant success of the new leaders to re-endow Gaelic games – and the respective political alignments – with a renewed vigour is best exemplified by the 1903 centenary events of Robert Emmet’s execution, which were celebrated “solely [by] young men carrying hurls on their shoulders.”²⁸⁰

Breaching Blake’s anti-political agenda, Nowlan and O’Toole followed up on another vision of the former secretary: they were committed to endorse the popularity and growth of the GAA through transforming Gaelic games into attractive and modern spectator occasions. They understood that, in order to keep the interest alive, it would be necessary to manage the affairs of the association in a way to maximise its sporting appeal. The design and conversion of these aims prompted Mandle to conclude: “Gradually in these years, the GAA took on the aspect of a modern sporting organisation.”²⁸¹

The social and economic environment within which the modern GAA was forced to exert its new agenda was rapidly changing and increasingly volatile. As pertains to so many other aspects of its modernisation, the GAA was not exceptional in regards to the respective exigencies. Hassan acknowledges that “even the most benign and erstwhile organisations eventually encountered problems as their mode of governance became outdated and ineffective in the face of demands placed upon it from modern-day sport.”²⁸² Devlin summarises the challenges with which the GAA were confronted as follows:

Hurling might be an invention of yesterday, for all most modern devotees can learn. Its intrinsic appeal may need no sentimental stimulation for those who have once experienced its thrills and enchantment; but its historic glamour and romance are lost in this fast-moving and swiftchanging age, if the popular institution of a people [the GAA] is not facilitated with explanation and protection.²⁸³

The coverage of gradually increasing distances that the inter-county scene demanded from players and spectators alike directed the attention of the new leadership to enhancements in terms of mobility. As few factors so greatly influenced mobility in late Victorian and Edwardian times as the combination of sport and cheap rail transport,²⁸⁴ the GAA swiftly detected where it had to apply. The association was well aware of the potential benefits of a rapidly advancing railway network in Ireland. When County Boards were set up in 1886, they

²⁸⁰ Art Ó Maolfabhail, *Caman – two thousand years of hurling in Ireland: an attempt to trace the history and development of the stick-and-ball game in Ireland during the past 2,000 years*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan-Press, 1973), 53.

²⁸¹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 142.

²⁸² David Hassan, “Governance and the Gaelic Athletic Association: time to move beyond the amateur ideal?” *Soccer & Society*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2010), 426.

²⁸³ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 76.

²⁸⁴ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 153.

had centres usually at localities easily accessible by train (such as Athenry in Co. Galway).²⁸⁵ In the early 1900s, the coordination of GAA events with the schedules of railway companies reached a new dimension. In an attempt to harness the railway network in Ireland to augment the influx of spectators to the big Gaelic occasions, an adjourned convention of 13 December 1901 carried the motion that “the secretary be requested to ask the Secy [sic] of the Great Southern and Western Railway Company to convene a meeting of the directors of the Company with regard to train guaranties and facilities in connection with Gaelic Contests throughout the country.”²⁸⁶ In fact, the proximity of railway stations became such a crucial factor for the financial viability of GAA clubs that the quarterly meeting of the Central Council on 6 April 1902 decided to grant recompenses for teams from areas a long distance from railway junctions.²⁸⁷

The dependency on the cooperation of railway companies elicited a good deal of friction as well. When the Great Northern Railway Company refused to run an excursion train for the Ulster football final between Cavan and Armagh on 10 April 1905, the match was pre-emptively postponed as it was not likely that many spectators would turn up.²⁸⁸ The 1910 All-Ireland football final fell victim to an extraordinary row over the price of train tickets. The Kerry team that was supposed to perform in the final was furious that the Great Southern and Western Railway Company would not give a cheap excursion fare to Dublin for the Kerry delegation. It demanded travel vouchers for the players and at least twelve close supporters and mentors. But the railway company refused to give in and so the team boycotted the trip to Dublin altogether. The Nationalist Party, who permanently complained about the difficulty in obtaining special train facilities for Home Rule meetings, supported the move and the Kerry players’ stance became a huge political issue. Veteran *Kerryman* correspondent Paddy Foley wrote in 1945: “If players in our time can journey in comfort to Dublin in first-class travelling facilities, the credit must all go to Kerry’s gallant 1910 stand-down, for which the team sacrificed an All-Ireland title.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ O’Laoi, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 37.

²⁸⁶ Adjourned Convention 13 December 1901, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 97.

²⁸⁷ Quarterly Meeting of the Central Council 6th April 1902, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 104.

²⁸⁸ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 62.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

2.4.3 The 1903 “Home Finals”: a new dimension of Gaelic sport

The second and third replay of the “Home Final”²⁹⁰ in the 1903 All-Ireland football championship between Kerry and Kildare are commonly referred to as the occasions that gave birth to modern Gaelic sport. First of all, the games brought gate receipts of nearly £ 200 each and placed the finances of the GAA on a sound footing again.²⁹¹ Other – more subliminal – evolutions are even more striking: both sides were endowed with the label “champions” at the time and were regarded as invincible – a mystification of sporting contests and an elevation of the personality and team cult that was typical for the popularisation of modern sport. For the first time ever in Ireland, special trains were put on to bring spectators not only from interested counties, but also from areas where the anticipation was nurtured by the prospect of “just” a big sporting occasion. Whereas Gaelic contests had heretofore occupied and hastily marked literally any piece of ground that became available to them,²⁹² delegates, like then GAA president Jim Nowlan, at least tried to acquire proper fencing and embankments for the matches.²⁹³ Officials, who were as yet notorious for their lack of sticking to time-schedules, were anxious to start the games punctually; and the press seemed to have figured out ways to promote Gaelic games – not only as manifestation of nationalist sentiment, but also for their own merit as modern spectacles. All these incentives combined to attract a crowd of over 20,000 to the second replay at Cork Showgrounds – probably the largest gathering in rural Ireland since Daniel O’Connell’s repeal meetings in the 1840s. Mass spectator sport had arrived in Ireland.²⁹⁴

That the “Home Finals” of 1903 have been used as benchmarks of the GAA’s entry into an era of modernisation is also due to another factor: they were representative of the supersession of hurling by Gaelic football as the favourite spectator sport in Ireland. Whereas most followers will always refer to hurling as the only true Gaelic game, Gaelic football clearly overtook Ireland’s native pastime in popularity – perhaps because it stood for a glorious future rather than for ancient heritage. Establishing itself as the sport of choice in the whole country (and beyond the rural parts of Munster and Leinster), it won what Corry called the

²⁹⁰ In 1903, the team of exile footballers in London (London Hibernians) that was added to the list of championship contenders was granted with an automatic appearance in the All-Ireland final. The deciding fixture to determine the opposition from Ireland became therefore be known as the “Home Final”. As the Londoners could never really threaten the Irish teams they faced in their appearances at the All-Ireland finals, the “Home Finals” effectively determined the All-Ireland champion. Due to the constant delays and disruptions of fixtures, the particular Home Final of the 1903 football championship – and its two replays – is seen as the occasion giving birth to modern Gaelic sport, came off not before the second half of 1905.

²⁹¹ Fullam, *The Throw-In*, 73.

²⁹² Mike Cronin, “Enshrined in blood: the naming of Gaelic Athletic Association grounds and clubs,” *The Sports Historian*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1998), 95.

²⁹³ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 63-64.

²⁹⁴ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 145-149.

“battle of the balls.”²⁹⁵ With their display in the 1903 “Home Finals” and the championships thereafter, Kerry is said to have set the standards for the modernised game of Gaelic football. That a single team was collectively idolised and dominated a decade-long period of Gaelic football hysteria is no coincidence. It fits all too well into the personalising propensity (not only of athletes, but also of teams) that was characteristic for all modern sports at the time.²⁹⁶ If it was essential that one single team stood out amidst the burgeoning enthusiasm for football, it was equally important that the catharsis took place far away from the urban centre of the capital city. The rise of modern Gaelic football could be depicted as having originated at the heart of rural Ireland rather than in urban settings with which most modern sports were intrinsically associated.

The staging of occasions for mass spectatorship and the collective euphoria that surrounded them were by-products of the institutional progress that the GAA traversed at the time. However – as already mentioned in relation to the first inter-county matches – the sense of “departure” should not be equated with a revolutionary amelioration of standards on the pitch. Especially the “Home Finals” of 1903 were all but orderly affairs and it must be noted that the scenes of irrepressible commotion and fracas even added to the fascination of the occasions rather than deterring the audience. Considering the fact that the biggest prize in Gaelic sport was at stake, the circumstances that led to the replay of the first “Home Final” seem utterly grotesque. Kildare objected to a late Kerry goal, because the ball had gone over the touch line and been kicked back onto the pitch by a spectator in the build up to the goal. The absurdity of the moment was complete when a spectator (not the umpire) put up the green flag to signal the legality of the goal. The referee concurred with the spectator who had taken the conduct of affairs into his own hands, but was later overruled by the Central Council that ordered a replay.²⁹⁷

As much as they benefited from modern sporting incentives from Britain, the “Home Finals” of 1903 can therefore also be employed as verification of the instance that the British “suit” did indeed not always fit perfectly on the Irish model. Modern sport demanded codification not only of rules, but also of sporting philosophies. This acceptance clearly took time within the GAA.²⁹⁸ Considering the level of violence that characterised so many of the Gaelic encounters, the Victorian principle of banning violent behaviour from the pitch was often not adhered to on GAA grounds at the time (see Chapter 3.1.3). Although the GAA formalised

²⁹⁵ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 59-60.

²⁹⁶ In hurling, the Kilkenny-team of the early 1900s reached similar cult status by winning seven all-Ireland titles in eleven years.

²⁹⁷ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 63.

²⁹⁸ Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 43.

much of what has previously been customary, most hurling- and Gaelic football-matches were – up to the 1920s – unorganised blood and thunder battles. Enclosure of grounds constitutes another thorny issue – Irish sport was particularly slow in adapting to this central feature of the Victorian sporting revolution. As late as 1912, a witness of the highly “official” All-Ireland final of that year lamented: “By the start of the second half, the crowd on the pitch had swelled to the point that the angles of the field were converted into perfect curves.”²⁹⁹ Pitch invasions, which interrupted the play, were a recurring ritual with no proper fencing to keep spectators off the field.³⁰⁰ Even though the meticulous preparation for the second replay of the 1903 “Home Final” prompted considerable improvements in that regard, the idea of confining the space of Gaelic contests was ignored by many competitors who were used to local traditions yet untouched by the “profoundly innovative perception of the spatiotemporal framework”³⁰¹ of modern sport. The hurlers from Kilimor, for example, were reluctant to accept the directive of the GAA to stipulate clear sideline-boundaries. The Galway hurlers grasped that this restriction would force them into “spending a great deal of time off the field arranging sideline pucks.”³⁰² Hence, proper marking of the ground was an early indication of which clubs did not adhere to GAA-legislation. The deficient adherence to GAA regulations often prompted teams to boycott the commencement of play altogether through so-called “walk-offs”. In 1908, the GAA was forced to react to these frequent and tedious disruptions – the Central Council stipulated that “any team leaving the field of play before the expiration of the game and without sanction of the referee should be suspended for six months and no council or committee of the association shall have the power to modify this penalty.”³⁰³

2.4.4 Scientific immersion and new training routines

The process of revamping the legislation and perception of Gaelic games prompted Dick Fitzgerald, the best-known Gaelic footballer of his age,³⁰⁴ to accentuate an attribute that so vividly symbolises the transformation of a primordial (pre-modern) into a modern sport: the Gaelic code, wrote Fitzgerald in the first ever coaching manual for Gaelic football (1914), had taken on a *scientific* character. His audacious propositions in the introductory section of the book left no room for ambiguity. He acknowledged: “Gaelic Football of the present day is a scientific game. Assuredly no one would be found foolish enough who can now maintain that

²⁹⁹ Duncan, “The Camera and the Gael,” 109.

³⁰⁰ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 111-116.

³⁰¹ Dárbon, “An Anthropological Approach to the Diffusion of Sports,” 17.

³⁰² O’Laoi, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 15.

³⁰³ GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 380.

³⁰⁴ Fitzgerald was – as a 17-year-old – part of the Kerry team in the legendary Home Final saga of 1903.

our national Football Game is not scientific.” There would have been a time, indeed, when the game was anything but a *scientific* exposition – such as within the “rough-and-tumble and go-for-the-man system” of the 19th century. This, however, would be “all long gone since.”³⁰⁵ It is particularly noteworthy that Fitzgerald rated Gaelic football to be even more advanced and sophisticated than the games that have then been commonly perceived as “modern” (i. e. cricket, rugby, association football). However, although he never refers to Gaelic football as a “modern game”, his postulations are very much in tune with the modernising thrust that underpinned most other contemporary modern sports.

What Fitzgerald indicated by stressing the *scientific* character of Gaelic football mirrors the tendency of modern sport to emphasis precision, accurateness, quickness and guile rather than brute strength. This, in turn, vividly reflects Gruneau’s assertion that “modern sport was characterised by controlled force and competence rather than more disruptive and dangerous forms of physicality.”³⁰⁶ At the same time, this *scientific* propensity of the game reflects a wider sociological phenomenon of technological advancement in urban industrial societies.³⁰⁷ Eric Hobsbawm shows that the term *science* itself was highly convergent with the obsession about “scientific management” that penetrated economic theory in America in the 1880s and swept liberalist Europe from the 1890s. One cannot but detect analogies between the exigencies for a sporting institution like the GAA at the dawn of the 20th century and Hobsbawm’s characterisation of the economic environment of the time. He asserts:

Pressure on profits in the depression, as well as the growing size and complexity of firms, suggested that the traditional or rule-of-thumb methods of running business, and especially production, were no longer adequate. Hence the need for more rational or ‘scientific’ ways of controlling, monitoring and programming large and profit-maximising enterprises such as exerted by ‘Taylorism’.³⁰⁸

Analysing the incorporation of the GAA into an increasingly *scientific* (work) ethic, Mandle concludes: “With up to 20,000 spectators in attendance, the press waiting to despatch its reports and the railway specials due to leave on the return journey at a scheduled time, the careless ways of pre-commercial sport could no longer be sustained.”³⁰⁹ That the euphoria that followed the triumph of Kildare over Kerry in the 1907 All-Ireland football final was –

³⁰⁵ Dick Fitzgerald, *How to play Gaelic Football* (Cork: Guy and Co. Ltd., 1914), 13-14.

³⁰⁶ Gruneau, “The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 90.

³⁰⁷ Ireland did not quite fulfil the requirements of an “urban industrial society”, but was affected by their repercussions in sport due to the linkages with Britain – archetype of an “urban industrial society.” Gruneau, „The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 87.

³⁰⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 44-45.

³⁰⁹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 157-158.

for the first time ever – conveyed to the ecstatic natives of Kildare via telephone,³¹⁰ vividly symbolises how *scientific* play and technological advancements merged into a collective atmosphere of departure.

Since the exertion of *scientific* play not only enhanced the standards on the pitch, but also created a more exciting exhibition for spectators, Guttmann estimates that the emergence of a *scientific* worldview was the “primary causal variable in the social development of modern sport.”³¹¹ The seminal commentators of Gaelic sport have all taken up the issue. De Búrca, for example, predicates that with the rejuvenation of the GAA, the games would have been made more *scientific* as public spectacles;³¹² Mandle purports that the very accommodation of the GAA with modern sport would have been marked by the inflation of the attribute *scientific*;³¹³ and McDevitt estimates that the inclination towards *scientific* play was “the most prominent trend in the evolution of the games themselves in the first three decades of the GAA.”³¹⁴

The prime motivation to excel in the *science* of GAA-games was the same as for any other modern sport of the time and, in fact, for “scientific management” in all other spheres of life in the early 20th century: success. Consequentially, GAA-clubs started to perceive “military” training camps as vital to penetrate the *science* of the games and strive for inter-county glory. Maurice Davin, the GAA’s first president, set the tone in that regard. The remarks in his notebooks reflect his meticulous attention to training routines.³¹⁵ His obsession with training practices was taken up by GAA personalities like Limerick’s hard-man Con Fitzgerald, who dedicated his managerial career to conditioning his players during brutal training sessions.³¹⁶ In *How to play Gaelic football* (1914), his namesake Dick Fitzgerald made clear that “every Gaelic footballer should be sufficiently well-trained on all occasions.”³¹⁷ It had become clear that organised selection, organised club competitions and organised training could win an All-Ireland.³¹⁸ For the first time in the history of the game, the preparation for the 1903 “Home Finals” saw Kerry and Kildare engage in regular three-times-a-week practice sessions.³¹⁹ In this, McDevitt detects analogies between the inclination to physical conditioning and the religious – predominantly Catholic – persuasion of GAA-players. The inherent physical discomfort associated with intense training and the playing of contact games would have been

³¹⁰ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 67.

³¹¹ Gruneau, „The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 87.

³¹² De Búrca, *The GAA*, 66.

³¹³ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 145.

³¹⁴ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 31.

³¹⁵ GAA Museum, Croke Park, “The Gaelic Athletic Association through History and Documents 1870-1920,” Factsheet II.

³¹⁶ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 50.

³¹⁷ Fitzgerald, *How to play Gaelic Football*, 21.

³¹⁸ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 87.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

meshed with wider Catholic (and general Judeo-Christian) teaching on pain and the salvation brought about through suffering.³²⁰

In this respect, the GAA clearly transcended the middle- and upper-class confines of modern sport in Britain, such as epitomised by rugby union for example, which was conservative in neglecting and marginalising – both philosophically and practically – the impact of training and managers. H. H. Almond, the headmaster of Loretto School, argued that “if boys and men live as they should do, and keep constantly in good condition, they do not require training of any kind.” In the minds of British gentlemen, playing sport was what kept one fit – one did not get fit to play sport.³²¹ As much as the advocates of *original modern sport* in Britain were part of the *scientific* trend in modern sport, philosophically they rather inclined to engage in “good sport” and play with style, rather than to train *scientifically* to win.³²²

In the 1910s, the obsession with dictatorial training regimes merged with the indoctrination of tactical skills that the increasing *science* of GAA games demanded from its players. Kerryman Eamonn O’Sullivan was a pioneer of a more forensic and futuristic approach to Gaelic football in that regard. His rigorously framed positional game was based on the enormous confidence he had in the superiority of Kerry footballers. To take full advantage of their skills, O’Sullivan tried to provide them with as much space on the pitch as possible; indiscriminate wandering of players to other sectors that leads to bunching was to be avoided at all cost.³²³ A phalanx of forwards trying to rush the ball in the opposite direction was ultimately pushed to the margins of Gaelic games. What codified Gaelic games still lacked though – despite the gradual “scientification” – was an established vocabulary that described the matches in primarily technical terms. In other modern sports, especially in cricket, this was to become one of the key markers of “modernity”. Gaelic games, in turn, were still largely discussed in relation to moral and social values.³²⁴

³²⁰ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 24-25.

³²¹ Collins, “Amateurism and the Rise of Managerialism,” 104-105.

³²² Holt, *Sport and the British*, 275.

³²³ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 3-5.

³²⁴ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 16.

2.4.5 Enhanced administrative, journalistic and financial foundation

Between 1901, when James Nowlan became President, and 1913, when he reached only the middle of his tenure, the Gaelic Athletic Association had been rallied, the championships reorganised and brought up-to-date, lost counties regained, Provincial Councils established, finances restored, new competitions started and, finally, the Jones's Road arena had been secured for native games under Gaelic control.³²⁵

Many of the policies that the GAA deployed to generate popular support for its games constituted replicas of something that has been tried out in Britain before. Nevertheless, after 1905 it is fair to say that Gaelic games in Ireland were more than just an adjunct to the conception of mass spectator sport of British provenience. Major Gaelic contests even exceeded the average attendance of English Football League matches (16,000 in 1908) – and this in a country, whose population figures were eight times lower than those in Britain. On a per capita basis, the attendances at Gaelic games would rival those at Melbourne football for the largest in the world at the time.³²⁶ In 1913 the highly successful Croke Cup tournament final was played first before 26,000; then the replay before 50,000 at Jones's Road ground, soon to be named Croke Park.³²⁷ By then, the GAA had clearly merged into an organisation that was proud of its past, but – first and foremost – confident of its future. With the panel Cusack had summoned in 1884 it had little in common.

Modernisation also meant the advancement of internal administration. The influx of members from the Gaelic League – and the experience of the Civil Service they brought with them – was eminently important for the gradual improvement of the GAA's inner-organisational standards³²⁸ (see Chapter 3.2.4). After the turn of the century, the Central Council convened – for nearly two successive years – meetings on a regular and monthly basis to deal with the ever growing volume of intra-GAA affairs.³²⁹ That it felt obliged, in 1903, to have its accounts audited by chartered accountants shows that the association was fully committed to an optimisation of its internal structures.³³⁰ After the 1901 Annual Convention has prioritised the matter “with regard to the reformation of the organisation,”³³¹ the GAA succeeded in setting up devolved and largely autonomous councils in all four provinces of Ireland. The

³²⁵ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 27.

³²⁶ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 151.

³²⁷ Mandle, “The Gaelic Athletic Association and Popular Culture,” 112.

³²⁸ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 68.

³²⁹ GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin. In *Our Native Games* (p. 42), Devlin described the Annual Congress – in reference to the Irish form of self governance – as the “Gaelic Athletic Dáil”.

³³⁰ Adjourned Convention 11th May 1903, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 130.

³³¹ Report of the Annual Convention, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 85.

good sense to restructure on provincial lines – an extension of, rather than a deviation from the county-structure – proved to be an initial success, organisationally as well as financially. The Provincial Councils streamlined the GAA’s administrative structure and by 1909 the vision of a 32-county GAA had effectively become reality.³³² When the association had recovered from most of the political in-fighting of the 1880s, it also realised the necessity to introduce graded competitions in order to avoid debarring players from active membership who could not attain top status. Junior-, school-, and college-teams were instituted and gradually integrated in new tournament patterns. The extension of active GAA-membership that ensued could not have been expected under the original organisation, in which many counties – for various reasons – could never hope for even partial success in an open-to-all competition. Especially the Junior Championships soon rendered formidable rewards for many counties which had failed, whenever they tried, to secure senior honours.³³³ The institutional enhancements of the GAA in the first decade of the 20th century were remarkable, but they didn’t prevent a mass-spectatorship from craving for further attractions that have become commonplace elsewhere in the world of modern sport. Especially the absence of a systematic record of winners in hurling- and Gaelic football tournaments became an increasing source of frustration. As always, the national press bore the brunt of the blame. In a rare gesture of humility, the GAA also conceded some responsibility, attributing gaps in record-keeping to its own slackness.³³⁴

The contributions of journalistic commentators of the 1880s, sometimes from the GAA’s staff itself, were pivotal for establishing the image of the association as genuinely nationalist (see Chapter 2.2.2). The leading Gaelic journalists of the early 20th century, like Paddy Mehigan (“Carbery”, *Cork Sportsman*), P. J. Devlin (“Celt”) or James Upton (“Vigilant”, *Kilkenny Journal* and *Gaelic Athlete*), now also added to the modernised vigour of the GAA in that they directed the attention to personalities that furthered the creation of a star system within the GAA universe. A pantheon of footballers and hurlers such as Dick Fitzgerald from Kerry, Tom Semple from Tipperary, Paddy “Fox” Maher from Kilkenny or Paddy Casey, a Kerryman who captained Dublin, entered GAA history.³³⁵ The sporting press in Ireland – as in England – became more than a vehicle for reporting games. In the light of the invigorating effects of media coverage, an adjourned convention of 1903 decided that “this Congress is of the opinion that the time is now opportune when the Gaelic Athletic Association should be

³³² De Búrca, *The GAA*, 75.

³³³ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 53.

³³⁴ Duncan, “The Camera and the Gael,” 100.

³³⁵ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 155-157.

represented in the press by a weekly official organ as we consider such a course most desirable in the interests of the organisation owing to its increasing strength.”³³⁶

Due to the rising attendance figures, the income of the GAA started to increase steadily. Just as in Britain in the latter third of the 19th century, the casual commercialism of earlier years was becoming much more systematic within the GAA during the opening stages of the 20th century.³³⁷ This, in turn, enabled the association to engage in a number of initiatives. As early as 1901, the preceding weeks of All-Ireland final day saw the GAA engaging in concerted efforts to announce the occasion as widely as possible. For the Gaelic football final of that year between Dublin and London, the Central Council ordered 10,000 Land Bills and 500 Window Cards to make sure “to have the match fully advertised.”³³⁸

The decision to use a part of the memorial fund for the late Archbishop Croke for the purchase a permanent home ground for the GAA in Dublin turned out to be a crucial one for the development of the association.³³⁹ In 1913 the GAA moved its headquarters from O’Connell Street to the estate at Jones’ Road that became to be known as Croke Park. It became a symbol of Irish national identity in sport and became “drenched in patriot blood” eight years later.³⁴⁰ The purchase of the site also represented a coming of age for the GAA as a commercial organisation and property-owning company – which saw her closing the gap to international precursors in that regard. After all, modern sporting fixtures throughout the world, and also in Ireland, demanded facilities that enabled the spectators to watch games if not in conditions of comfort, at least with the ability to see the action and, if they were willing to pay more, to be seated whilst doing so.³⁴¹ The GAA may have dragged behind British or continental initiatives in that regard – but with the acquisition of Jones’ Road, prospects were encouraging.

³³⁶ GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 164. It was not before 1912 when the GAA published the *Gaelic Athlete* – the first journal catering exclusively for Gaelic sports that survived longer (until the 1916 Rising) than just a few months (as *The Celtic Times* and *The Gael* in 1887/1888).

³³⁷ In 1907, the GAA had made a mere profit of £1,273 (GAA Museum, Croke Park, Factsheet V) – which was quite substantial for the time. However, Corry (p. 74) asserts that the monetary revenue at a GAA tournament was smaller than at rival spectator attractions such as the yearly staging in Dublin of an international rugby match.

³³⁸ GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 66.

³³⁹ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 91.

³⁴⁰ P. D. Mehigan (quoted in Cronin, “Fighting for Ireland: playing for England?” 41) used this paraphrase to signify the trauma of “Bloody Sunday”. On this day, 20 November 1921, the GAA found itself caught up in the military confrontation of the War of Independence. After a republican death-squad had wiped out 14 British intelligence officers in the morning, the Black and Tans (part of the RIC) chose Croke Park as venue for retaliation. Shortly after kick-off in the Gaelic football match between Dublin and Tipperary, it raided the stadium, shot randomly into the crowd and left 13 people dead – involving Michael Hogan of the Tipperary-team.

³⁴¹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 152.

2.4.6 Historiographic reflections on the GAA's modernity

The GAA's anti-British intransigence and the references to the mythological origins of its games, as well as the rural base of support and the strictly amateur basis of participation, have often been employed as a vindication for the backwardness and anti-modernity of the association.³⁴² To these negative ascriptions can be added the institutional lethargy and the mono-culturalism of its officials. However, as inward-looking as many GAA-policies might have been (and still remain to be), some manifestations – not least the swift adaptations of the 20th century reformers – counter this assessment. McDevitt says that “while it is certainly true that the GAA endeavoured in all ways to be anti-English, this cannot necessarily be equated with ‘anti-modern’ unless ‘Englishness’ and ‘modernity’ are conflated.”³⁴³ The GAA was forced into – but also willing to undertake – numerous reinventions during the first 30 years of its existence. Cronin says, the association has constantly been “shaped and reshaped by rule changes, by the genius of generations of players and by a flow of new ideas on training, team preparation, tactics and skill development;”³⁴⁴ and most of the respective refinements would have made the games a much better public spectacle for players and spectators alike.³⁴⁵ De Búrca similarly credits the association with an exceptional “readiness to adapt to changing circumstances,” without which it would have never survived the Parnell crisis.³⁴⁶ If the institutional outlook of modern sports is characterised by a “permanent correspondence of bureaucracy and traditionalism on the one hand, and innovation and entrepreneurial esprit on the other hand,”³⁴⁷ the GAA might even be regarded as a perfection rather than an aberration of modern sport.

The GAA's obvious deviations from the typical phenomena of modern sport should not be equated with backwardness or primordialism. Markovits' assessment that “a major characteristic of modernity in sports is that followers have gradually – and massively – outnumbered the doers”³⁴⁸ might prove a point in that regard. Even though I cannot back the estimation with statistical data, I assume that the ratio between “followers” and “doers” in Gaelic games is much more balanced than in most other modern sports; and this can by no means be seen as an anti-modern, let alone harmful, influence. It contributed, instead, to the association's success and is still one of its main assets.

³⁴² McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 35.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people's history*, 75.

³⁴⁵ Cronin, *Sport and nationalism in Ireland*, 106.

³⁴⁶ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 45.

³⁴⁷ Markovits, and Hellerman, *Offside*, 57.

³⁴⁸ Markovits, Andrei S. and David T. Smith, “Sports culture among undergraduates: a study of student-athletes and students at the University of Michigan,” The Scholarly Publishing Office, The University of Michigan University Library, 2007.

The GAA is often chastised for vindicating its legitimacy and popularity via references to the past rather than to the present or the future. The constant coquetry of the early GAA with the post-British future tells another story though. McDevitt rightly acknowledges: “The spiritual aspects of Gaelic games were considered partial compensation for lack of Irish independence in the present, while the physical benefits were viewed as guarantors of that independence in the future.”³⁴⁹ What Guttman says about baseball and its role as the United States’ national pastime, counts for Gaelic games just as much: They are “ludic symbols of the ambivalence about a nation’s abandoned past and the unknown future.”³⁵⁰ The specifically Irish form of sporting nationalism – the homage to Gaelic games – indulged in archaic criteria like “blood ties” and “soil” as well as in legitimisations of modern nation states. Bairner suggests that the agenda of the GAA should therefore be considered as an “attempt to bestow historic legitimacy on what are essentially modern responses to particular political and socio-economic exigencies.”³⁵¹ With this fusion of the past and the present, the coalescence of a nostalgic sentiment with a sense of renewal and progress, the agenda of the GAA was not too dissimilar to the symbolism and rhetoric of British public schools – the epitomes of modern sport (see Chapter 1.2).³⁵²

The general importance of British incentives for the Gaelic sporting scene in Ireland and their impact on the gradual modernisation of the GAA in the early 1900s have widely been acknowledged in academic treatises. Assessments do however differ in regards to the period that marked the actual “take-off” of the GAA as a modernised institution. Mandle is pretty clear in that respect. For him, it was the early 20th century re-organisation that marked the entrance of the GAA into “the mainstream of the games revolution and the ascendancy of popular mass spectator sport that was affecting the European and Imperial world at the time.” In the course of its “first heyday” in the late 1880s, the GAA would have been “more of an exercise in nationalism than one in sport.”³⁵³ Garnham concurs by asserting that Gaelic games after 1903 “have been codified and modified to the extent that they could become genuinely popular and no longer simply an adjunct to revolutionary nationalism.”³⁵⁴ Comerford, instead, does not follow the modernising theory that focuses on the early 20th century innovations. In his shrewd depiction of the role of sport in the process of inventing the Irish nation, he emphasises the very foundation of the GAA as the major modernising step of Gaelic sport in

³⁴⁹ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 23.

³⁵⁰ Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, 114.

³⁵¹ Alan Bairner, “National sports and national landscapes: In defence of primordialism,” *National Identities*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2009), 228-229.

³⁵² Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school*, 183.

³⁵³ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 142.

³⁵⁴ Garnham, “Accounting for the early success of the Gaelic Athletic Association,” 66.

Ireland.³⁵⁵ Another hypothesis stems from Dick Fitzgerald. He links the modernity of Gaelic games to the reduction of players on the pitch – first from 21 to 17 in 1892, and then from 17 to 15 in 1913, “when the science became the order of the day.”³⁵⁶

Players and spectators alike have always projected their own views on the GAA and on what it should stand for. In regards to the “modernity” of the association, these aspirations have more often been reactionist than overtly progressive – even if they have not been discussed in the context of modern sport back then. This “anti-modern” mentality is paradigmatically reflected in Devlin’s *Our Native Games*, in which the author proclaims: “We want an Ireland distinct politically, culturally, physically and morally: a living Entity, as God placed it, apart from all this jumble of modernism which, while it develops the traits and qualities of beasts of utility, is rapidly itself becoming a monstrosity.”³⁵⁷ At the same time, Devlin’s comments reveal the pride that derived from the incorporation of the GAA into the wider movement of modern sport. He stated: “Most modern nations have come to value the productive vigour of sports and organise them for their practical worth. The Gael has recognised this aspect ages ago. The ancient Fianna did not go scouring the plains and tracking in the woods for mere idle amusement.”³⁵⁸ In the light of this ideological dualism, the immense popularity of the association, then and today, seems to lie in its halfway-status between history and modernity. After all, it is one of the key assets of the GAA to compound historical rituals with modern attitudes.

³⁵⁵ See Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*.

³⁵⁶ Fitzgerald, *How to play Gaelic Football*, 13.

³⁵⁷ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 81-82.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

3. Parameters of Gaelic sports’

(anti)-Britishness and (anti)-modernity

In the course of this thesis, I’ve suggested that the evolution of Gaelic sport, at least in the formative period of the GAA, can only be descriptively scrutinised if set in relation to what happened with sport in Britain at the time – however much of this relation may have transpired through a reflex of defiance. It has also been outlined why this precondition necessarily implies that Gaelic games can only be adequately analysed if set in the context of what was to be called “modern sport”. So far, these paradigms have been investigated and employed in relation to general and definitional implications (Chapter 1) and as part of the institutional history of the early GAA (Chapter 2). This chapter is dedicated to more specific components of the Anglo-Irish interdependency in sport that demand closer and separate inquiry.

3.1 Rules and regulations

Rules are, in essence, what define the very existence of every sport, as well as its potentially universal legitimacy and attractiveness. Joe Lennon even depicted playing rules in a way as to constitute *the game* per se.³⁵⁹ By any standard, a particular set of rules is essential for a distinctive identity of a given sport and its boundary vis-à-vis all others.³⁶⁰ From a practical viewpoint, the implementation of written rules – together with the carrying out of accordant sanctions for misconduct and a body to conceptualise and enforce the rules – can be seen to signify nothing less than a precondition of civilised and modern sports.³⁶¹ On a more abstract and defining level, it would be simply impossible, without rules, to distinguish between two common sets of sports’ inner logic as stipulated by Guttmann that are deployed as standard vectors by sport sociologists ever since: “(spontaneous) play” (rules not necessarily required) and “games/contests/sports” (not conceivable without rules).³⁶² Accordingly, the British

³⁵⁹ Joseph F. Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games* (Gormanstown: Recreation Consultants, 2000), 42.

³⁶⁰ Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 46.

³⁶¹ Eric Dunning, “Sport in the Civilising Process: Aspects of the Development of Modern Sport,” in *The Sport Process – A comparative and developmental approach*, ed. Eric Dunning, Joseph A. Maguire and Robert E. Pearton (Human Kinetics Publishers, 1993), 53.

³⁶² Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*, 9.

origins of modern sport have been highly dependent on the regulating impact of rules. Holt acknowledges:

When industrial England was rapidly taken over by the urban sprawl in the 19th century, a new paternalism arose to replace the old sporting practices with original forms of recreation and entertainment. This paternalism could only be forged by an emphasis on and institutionalization of the ‘rules of the game’ that were agreed across social cleavages.³⁶³

The “meritocracy of ability” that was thus being created on the pitch ignited a pivotal motivation behind the success of modern sport.³⁶⁴

Reflecting on Guttman’s characteristics of modern sport (see Chapter 1.1), codification must be considered to be a structure of rationalisation as well as a precondition for specialisation and quantification in sport. The introduction of rules was essential for modern sports to evolve into universal instruments of “communication and negotiation”. Markovits equated this trait with the quality of a distinctive language.³⁶⁵ This “sport language” resonates and mediates not only between the different parts involved in the actual game (players, referees, spectators, officials), but between wider cross-sections of society. Especially the language of modern sport has clearly transcended the confines of sport alone.

3.1.1 Rules and the early popularisation of Gaelic games

Against the backdrop of the significance of rules in the context of modern sport, it is not surprising that they had a significant role to play within the institutionalisation, evolution and popularisation of Gaelic games. When the legendary P. J. Devlin stated his belief that “the creation of proper control was the first and most important task of the GAA,”³⁶⁶ he most certainly alluded to the lack of regulations for Gaelic sports in the pre-GAA era. It is very likely that the founding fathers of the GAA were fully aware of the significance of this “task” in order to help the infant sporting organisation on its feet. However, Michael Cusack’s conviction that the game of hurling should be standardised via the introduction of new rules was realised only very shortly before the actual foundation of the GAA. When Cusack founded the Metropolitan Hurling Club late in 1883, hardly a year before the launch of the GAA, he seemed to have aspired to a reduction rather than an increase in regulations. He

³⁶³ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 268.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁶⁵ Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 51.

³⁶⁶ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 12.

articulated his intention to restore the manly game of hurling “in all its glorious simplicity and freedom from restraining rules.”³⁶⁷ It was not before his club took on the Kilimor team from East Galway to compete for a championship cup that his anti-rule attitude began to crumble. When the two sides lined out at the Fair Green in Ballinasloe on Easter Monday, 13 April 1884, already the first few pucks of the encounter exposed a major flaw of the game: it was obvious that without a consistent rulebook, a contest between a city and a parish side on level terms was a “mission impossible”.³⁶⁸ There was no need to persuade Maurice Davin, the second key figure in the run-up to the foundation of the GAA, that rules were essential to ensure higher standards of play – because he was involved in and benefited from standardised regulations all through his illustrious career as an athlete. When he was approached by Michael Cusack about forming a national body for Gaelic games, he stated – in his first enthusiastic response – that it was high time for a handbook with rules for all Irish games to be published.³⁶⁹ In his opening speech of the inaugural GAA-meeting in Thurles, Davin accentuated that Gaelic games need “laws for the guidance of those who were patriotic enough to devise schemes of recreation for the bulk of the people.”³⁷⁰

Distinctiveness, exclusiveness and mechanisms for social control were important functions, if not definitions, of the institutionalised versions of Ireland’s national games³⁷¹ – rules were absolutely essential to that end. The monopolistic pretension of the association regarding the regulation of its games has therefore been meticulously perpetuated. The first “ban” of the association that prohibited members to compete under rules that were not sanctioned by the GAA caused much ill feeling, but was never really questioned. Any breach of the charter was perceived as a degeneration of the core values of the association. This contested – but not unusual – measure to exert control over the membership was clearly secondary to the benefits of regulation: the intrinsically democratic notion of rules – “they are binding for rich and poor, employer and employed, noble and commoner alike”³⁷² – was very much in tune with the alleged social permeability of Gaelic games. After all, the discourse of amateurism took its institutional and cultural form through clearly observable social practices of which rulemaking was probably the most important³⁷³ (see Chapter 3.2). Even though the regularisation of Gaelic games was supposed to forge distinctive brands of sport, the appeal of the early GAA also benefited from the universalistic implications of rules. For the first time in

³⁶⁷ O’Laoui, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 5.

³⁶⁸ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 32.

³⁶⁹ GAA Museum, Croke Park, “The Gaelic Athletic Association through History and Documents 1870-1920,” Factsheet II. Mandle, “The I.R.B. and the Beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association,” 419.

³⁷⁰ Cited in Fullam, *The Throw-In*, 21.

³⁷¹ Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*, 18.

³⁷² Holt, *Sport and the British*, 268.

³⁷³ Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 561.

the history of Gaelic games in Ireland, a standardised rule-book catered to the feasibility of contests between hurlers from such distant regions as Donegal and Wexford. The spatial stretch of this institutional frame was limited, however. Because its international dispersion (as has been the case in other modern sports) was neither possible nor intended (see Chapter 1.3), the GAA rules' universalism must be perceived in strictly Irish terms – but a form of universalism it was.

Hence, the pioneering role that British sport institutionalism occupied in relation to the law-making process in sport, was probably the prime incentive that the GAA couldn't help but adopt for its own agenda. After all, it was a distinctive set of rules that could ultimately distinguish Gaelic football and hurling from other football and ball-and-stick-games such as association football, Australian Rules, hockey, lacrosse, rugby (both types) and shinty. In his treatise about the significance of rules for the early GAA, Joe Lennon repeatedly advises us to bear in mind that if the skill of tackling in Gaelic football, for example, were to be replaced by the type of tackle used in American, Australian or rugby football, Gaelic football, as such, would cease to exist.³⁷⁴ That Maurice Davin, who was responsible for the original draft of rules, and Dick Blake, who revamped and sophisticated them in the 1890s, both excelled in some of those sports from which the Gaelic movement was so anxious to distance itself, is an indication for the fact that the dissociating (anti-British) aspiration of giving Gaelic games (allegedly) distinctive rules was pristine in theory rather than in practice (see Chapter 3.3.2). That the law-making process of the GAA was by no means a mere anti-British agenda becomes obvious if one considers the conduct in Ireland's athletic arenas, where the association confirmed all the rules that had been stipulated in Britain. Comerford concludes:

The GAA had staked its claim for 'Home Rule' athletics on the basis of maximising its share of control of a common code. By contrast, in field games it was to serve the nationalist interest by inventing distinctive codes – this has to be considered as one of the major incentives for the GAA to have succeeded as an organisation of hurling and Gaelic football and not – as its name indicates – as an athletic association.³⁷⁵

In his doctoral thesis *Towards a Philosophy for Legislation in Gaelic Games*, Joe Lennon has scrutinised how the identity and survival of the Gaelic games of hurling and Gaelic football were dependent upon the distinctive legislation they have been endowed with. In doing so, he

³⁷⁴ Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*, 19.

³⁷⁵ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 221. Following the recognition of the Irish Free State in 1922 by the International Olympics Committee, the GAA completely handed over control of athletics to the newly formed National Athletics and Cycling Association and concentrated entirely on its team games.

was purportedly “sailing into uncharted waters”³⁷⁶ for taking on the evaluation of the philosophy of legislation of a particular sport – something no philosopher would have engaged in before him. Even though his findings are exceedingly technical for a philosophical approach and therefore difficult to “translate” into wider implications for Gaelic sport overall, he must be credited for substantiating the general significance of rules for Gaelic games.

The endowment of hurling and Gaelic football with official and standardised rules was one of the first tasks that the founding fathers of the GAA set for themselves. Even though the first rule book seems to have been drawn up by different people or, perhaps, different committees,³⁷⁷ it was Maurice Davin in particular who was commissioned, at the second meeting of the association in Cork on 27 December 1884, to make use of his expertise and draft a first set of rules for hurling and Gaelic football – a task he was well equipped to undertake. Once the ten football and twelve hurling rules were stipulated, they were published in the national newspapers and also printed in booklet form.³⁷⁸ Such was the impact of this original legislation, that this was commonly perceived as the official genesis of the codes that were governed by the GAA.³⁷⁹ In subsequent years, the rules have been permanently revised and amended, which was consistent with other modern sports at the time.³⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the association was very hesitant in heralding the introduction of rules as the groundbreaking achievement that it actually was. Useful as it was for inculcating a sense of unity among Irish nationalist sport enthusiasts, the mere concept of regularising an archaic sporting tradition didn’t quite fit into the alleged continuation of the GAA-games with the ones that were played by the ancient Gaels. The emphasis of their “naturalness” by many luminaries of the sport can be interpreted to have been an attempt to curb the sense of ambiguity that has thus been created.³⁸¹ However, in somewhat revisionist fashion, Lennon has made clear that Gaelic games, after their embedment into a set of regulations, constituted mere “designer games”.³⁸² In congruence with Markovits’ postulation that the rules of sport (just as the rules of language) follow little rhyme or reason,³⁸³ Brady asserts that the move of uniquely Irish games “out from the shadow of the foreign and fantastic” required a good deal of

³⁷⁶ Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*, 11.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 64.

³⁷⁸ GAA Museum, Croke Park, “The Gaelic Athletic Association through History and Documents 1870-1920,” Factsheet II.

³⁷⁹ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 50.

³⁸⁰ Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*, 108.

³⁸¹ This is the reason, why the GAA has never been happy to see its games discussed in a highly specialised language and in primarily technical terms, as is the case in cricket for example. The newly codified Gaelic sports retained their position in more morally shaped spheres. McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 263.

³⁸² Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*, 16.

³⁸³ Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 45-46.

invention.³⁸⁴ McDevitt concurs in stating that the reference of Gaelic games to earlier practices as a means of establishing themselves as authentically Irish cannot conceal their designed character. He additionally alludes to the imperial component of the “games revolution”, by showing that the act of invention itself – since lack of initiative and originality were key characteristics ascribed to colonised peoples – was absolutely crucial, because it countered English stereotypes of the Irish.³⁸⁵ For Tadgh Ó hAnnrachain, the regularisation of Gaelic sport was such a fundamental breach with Ireland’s ancient pastimes that the GAA, who “invented” the legislation, was “despite its mythology, just as much a force for the remodelling and perhaps destruction of traditional pastimes as for their preservation.”³⁸⁶ Nevertheless, that new sets of rules necessarily imply an inventive character is not to say that practitioners are impeded to truly identify with them. At the end of the day, it was symptomatic of all modern games that once this “legal fiction”³⁸⁷ is established and accepted, the randomly deflated structure is “Catholicised” and universalised to a degree that everyone can possibly understand and be attracted by them.

The introduction of standardised rules constituted nothing less than a revolution for Gaelic sport. Nevertheless, the impact of regularisation did not transform the games at once. The earliest draft of rules, however crucial it may have been in a symbolic sense, was by no means a sophisticated set of regulations that signified anything like distinctive Irishness; in many respects, it couldn’t even match an unofficial compilation of rules that had been stipulated as early as 1869 (“Kilimor Rules”³⁸⁸). Whereas many important matters, such as the carrying of the ball or the imposition of penalties had been left untouched, most of the rules that were implemented were clumsily formulated and arguably dispensable. The original Gaelic football Rule 5, for example, read: “The captains of each team shall toss for choice of sides before commencing play and the players shall stand in two ranks opposite each other, until the ball is thrown up, each man holding the hand of one of the other side.”³⁸⁹ In contrast to the Kilimor Rules, the original Gaelic football Rule 8 records only one single scoring option – the goal (“when the ball is kicked through the goalposts under the cross-bar”).³⁹⁰ There was no indication that scoring would ensue if the ball was hit over the crossbar. Instead, Davin’s

³⁸⁴ Brady, “Home and Away,” 30.

³⁸⁵ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 16.

³⁸⁶ Tadgh Ó hAnnrachain, “The Heroic Importance of Sport: The GAA in the 1930s,” *Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 25, No. 10 (2008), 1335.

³⁸⁷ Guttman, “The Diffusion of Sports and the Problem of Cultural Imperialism,” 128.

³⁸⁸ In contrast to the first GAA rule drafts, the Kilimor Rules stipulated that “there shall be boundary lines all around the ground at a distance of at least five yards from the fence.” O’Laoi, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 12.

³⁸⁹ GAA Museum, Croke Park, “The Gaelic Athletic Association through History and Documents 1870-1920,” Document 6.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

“half-baked” rule-design was content to specify such things as size of ground and goals. On the basis of the information it contained, it would be impossible to reconstruct what a hurling or football match under GAA rules looked like. If the sports were supposed to further the carrying or the propelling game is not quite clear.³⁹¹ Mandle purports that “for games that were intended to provide alternatives to rugby, soccer and hockey, the first set of rules was almost entirely without distinctive form or substance.”³⁹² The more urgent problem for contemporary GAA-athletes was the scarcity of scores. Six matches at a Gaelic festival in Thurles in April 1886 produced just one goal from among them. On 14 June, Maurice Davin was forced to declare a winner in a scoreless hurling match and picked the team that succeeded in hitting the ball over the end line (probably the crossbar) more often than the other one. After this incident, referees started to count “overs” as scores. A GAA meeting of 4 July 1886 made this routine official. It stipulated that “going over the end line five times should count as a point.” For a short time, these “overs” have also been notified as “tries”³⁹³ before, later that year – and for the subsequent history of Gaelic games – it was goals and points that were recorded. Additionally, the scoring range for a point was narrowed down by two posts that were erected 21 yards on each side of the goal (later to be confined to the area over the crossbar).³⁹⁴

However, in spite of these technical advancements in the GAA’s on-field-legislation, irregularities, unconformities and – most importantly – the lack of a distributive network to supply officials with rule amendments hampered the institutional progress of the infant GAA. Hence, the actual benefit that the association could aspire to gain from the approximation towards modern (British) standards – to further a distinctive code of Irish games – was not quite utilised to the full extent in the very formative period of the GAA. This directs our attention, once again, to the truly modernising era of the association after the turn of the century.

3.1.2 The impact of rules on the modernising revolution of the GAA

The substantial sophistication of Davin’s skeletal drafts in the closing years of the 19th century was the work of Dick Blake, who served as General Secretary of the GAA from 1895 to 1898. For Gaelic football, he instigated a series of reforms including the use of a standard size ball, linesmen to assist referees, a square around either goalmouth, and the radical notion that any

³⁹¹ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 22.

³⁹² Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 27.

³⁹³ This can be seen as verification of the GAA’s borrowings from the British game of rugby, where the “try” is still the main scoring option.

³⁹⁴ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 27-29.

player ordered off should not return to the action. His reforms made football safer, more *scientific* and – as they met many of the requirements of modern spectator sport – hugely popular.³⁹⁵ Together with men like Michael Crowe, who – with his consistent application of the playing rules – helped to standardise the style of play and propagate a uniform interpretation of the rules, he additionally arrested the decline of the entire association.³⁹⁶

By 1903 the GAA authorities seem to have come to the conclusion that the insatiable urge to change the rules in rampant succession ran counter to their regularising and standardising impact. An adjourned convention at the end of that year carried the motion “that in future the hurling and football Rules be revised triennially instead of annually as alterations in the rules year after year is calculated to confuse players and leads to endless discussions at the Conventions.”³⁹⁷ At the same time, the dispersion and inculcation of the rules among participants was intensified. The records of a special meeting of the Central Council in 1903 indicate that 2,000 copies of the new rule book must have been in circulation.³⁹⁸ Shortly thereafter, the price of the official guide of the association was reduced from sixpence to twopence, in order “to bring the rules within the reach of every Gael”.³⁹⁹

The substantial sophistication of the GAA rules by Dick Blake in the late 19th century, together with the prudent institutional efforts of the association after 1903, can be considered as decisive for the empowerment of the GAA to fully harness the standardising impact of regulation in sport. This is not to say that this process was not hampered by serious misjudgements and major setbacks. But all the challenges that the GAA was confronted with at this stage were conspicuously similar to the ones that arose because of the codifying process of modern games in contemporary British, imperial and American practice.⁴⁰⁰ This must be seen as a corroboration of the necessity to deconstruct the early GAA and its affairs not as an isolated Irish case, but as a global phenomenon.

In regards to the general attitude of GAA athletes, officials and observers towards the restrictive impact of on-field-legislation, the picture is not quite clear. The scope ranges from exaltation to rejection. Devlin, who assumed that proper control is the most important task of the GAA, also believed that “it’s only the spirit of the game that can repress abuses and outbursts in which mere athleticism regularly indulges in games played for gains’ sake.” He went on to state: “We have not yet freed ourselves from such tendencies; and rules and

³⁹⁵ “125 Influential People In GAA History,” *Sunday Tribune*, January 4, 2009.

³⁹⁶ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 68.

³⁹⁷ Adjourned Convention 13th December 1903, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 166-167.

³⁹⁸ Special Meeting of the Central Council 8th March 1903, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 135.

³⁹⁹ Adjourned Convention, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 160-161.

⁴⁰⁰ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 34.

penalties alone cannot terminate them.”⁴⁰¹ Generally, rule extensions and amendments would reflect an undesirable tendency amongst those playing a competitive game. All arguments successfully put forward from time to time for the introduction of new restrictions would have been based on the methods of incompetent players, who seek to make up for lack of skill by devices foreign to the spirit of the game.⁴⁰² Many traditionalists still articulated major caveats towards any obstruction of the natural freedom of movement and despised artificial restrictions like offside⁴⁰³ that required players to “devote practically all their time to learn how to play.”⁴⁰⁴ For Fitzgerald, it was not the regularisation of Gaelic football per se, but its distinctive legislation in comparison to other football codes that made it so popular. That he emphasises Gaelic football’s scoring system – by then (1914) allowing to go either for a goal (three points) or a point (one point) – for being superior to most other modern games, shows that much of the defiance towards “foreign” games was based on ignorance rather than profound reasoning. After all, the diversity of scoring in many other modern sports was at least been as sophisticated as the one in Gaelic games. However, Fitzgerald’s stance towards rules and regulations in *How to play Gaelic football* is particularly interesting from a sport-philosophical viewpoint. “In other forms of football,” said Fitzgerald, “such is the constitution of rules governing them that there is very often too much of the element of luck.”⁴⁰⁵ No such preponderance of luck would burden the game of Gaelic football. Given that rules are usually perceived to be the prime instruments to reduce the “element of luck”, Fitzgerald seemed to exalt the regularising process that Gaelic football had been subject to over more than two decades. But at the same time, he repeatedly emphasised the “naturalness” of the game, what must be seen as a reference to its intrinsic and “pre-regulated” characteristics.⁴⁰⁶

3.1.3 Regularisation and the perception of violence in Gaelic contests

The challenge-match between the Dublin Metropolitan Hurling Club and Kilimor in Ballinasloe in April 1884 was, quite literally, a painful experience for the visitors from the capital city – for their skipper Michael Cusack it was also a revelation: not long after the ball was thrown in, Cusack was forced to concede that his men were not equal to the task. “In the blandest manner possible,” he hinted that the style of the Kilimor men would simply be too

⁴⁰¹ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 74

⁴⁰² Ibid., 90–91.

⁴⁰³ The allusion of GAA-critics to the offside-rule (of association football) must be understood to have been vicarious – the GAA itself never enforced an offside-rule.

⁴⁰⁴ McAnallen, “The Greatest Amateur Association in the World,” 158.

⁴⁰⁵ Fitzgerald, *How to play Gaelic Football*, 14.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

rough to provide for an orderly game.⁴⁰⁷ The chaotic nature of the Ballinasloe game must have convinced him that the regularisation of Gaelic games necessarily implied the curbing of arbitrary violence.

The GAA relied from its very inception on similar regulations like the British rule-sets that were supposed to further the “civilising” notions of sport.⁴⁰⁸ Hurling and Gaelic football needed to be organised and standardised in order to coexist with the self-perception of Irish men as civilised counterparts to their Anglo-Saxon overlords despite British claims to the contrary.⁴⁰⁹ Likewise, this was supposed to counteract the “Victorian English characterisations of the Irish as either simian, drunken ruffians or effeminate and feckless, child-like inferiors in need of Anglo-Saxon domination.”⁴¹⁰ In Chapter 2.5, I have already mentioned that the adherence to rules was exhibited by many Gaelic athletes in an overassertive way in order to “prove” the civilised nature of their behaviour. It must therefore be considered as all but probable that the penetration of rules and regulations into Gaelic sports was perceived as a British, and therefore hostile, intrusion into an existing system of arbitrariness. I’ve also indicated the role that the media played in this orchestration. Ever since inter-county contests attracted mass-followings, some newspapers and journals emphasised in a conspicuously assertive way the sportsmanlike attitude and the “almost religious observance of the rules” by the players.⁴¹¹ A symptomatic match-report in *The Celtic Times* read:

In those great contests now going on throughout the country, one of the most pleasing and, at the same time, one of the most hopeful omens for the future of our country, is the excellent order almost everywhere maintained. Harmony, unity, and universal good feeling have supplanted the petty bickerings which were the reproach of Irishmen half a generation back.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁷ *The Western News*, April 18, 1884; quoted in O’Laio, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 6.

⁴⁰⁸ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 21. McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 268. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 33.

⁴⁰⁹ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 20.

⁴¹⁰ Foster, *Paddy & Mr Punch*, 14-15.

⁴¹¹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 32. According to Corry, the enthusiastic media reports during the rapid expansion of GAA events stood in stark contrast to the indignant pronouncements of earlier newspaper reports that commented on sporting occasions. They would have usually been accompanied by reports of how the matches degenerated into drunken faction fights. Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 17.

⁴¹² “Splendid Gaelic Tournament at Kilmacthomas,” *The Celtic Times*, March 12, 1887.

Archbishop Croke heralded in the *Tuam News*:

I was glad to notice the disappearance of faction [fighting] in the country in connection with the Gaelic sports. (...) I saw lamentable exhibitions of that kind; but now there is nothing of the sort. No quarrelling but man against man in natural and manly competition.⁴¹³

Nevertheless, it is very doubtful if the frequent emphases of the orderly commencement of Gaelic matches really reflected what was happening on the pitches throughout the country. After all, there is also evidence that the regularisation of the games had done little to change the tumultuousness of affairs that characterised so many Gaelic contests. Close rush ground play and brutal encounters were dominating features of GAA matches long after the introduction of a cohesive rule-book.⁴¹⁴ Fitzgerald's assertion that the nature of Gaelic football did not encourage rough play⁴¹⁵ must be seen as romantic rather than realistic. Orderly play was the ideal, but definitely not the reality.

By projecting it on the GAA's immanent aspiration of "Gaelic manliness", McDevitt delineates a very instructive picture of the association's ambivalent stance towards violence. He shows that the discrepancy in relation to the perception of the conduct on the pitch was also due to the fact that the GAA wanted to have it both ways, speaking of the allegedly civilised nature of its games but also flirting with the reputation deriving from their inherent violence. The permitted moves of tackling the opponent and the ball are quite distinct in Gaelic football compared to similar team games (American football, rugby, soccer). By any standards, the amount of physical contact is considerable. *The Gaelic Athletic Annual* of 1911 explains that hurling, "while infinitely safer in its modern form than in its folk and ancient forms, is still perhaps the most hazardous game in the Western world and has been described as 'the nearest approach to warfare consistent with peace'."⁴¹⁶

In regards to the ambivalent stance of Gaelic games and its promoters towards violence, Lennon believes that fragments of it might be discerned in the texts of the old Brehon Laws, which were recorded in the 7th century AD and are often employed as a reference point of early Irish legislation. Violence in games is explicitly addressed in them, even if mostly in relation to fines and compensations that had to be discharged for it. Violence for its own sake and for the purpose of hurting an opponent is categorically condemned. In fact, the Brehon Laws reflect a very caring attitude towards those injured in games, and provided for the

⁴¹³ *Tuam News*, March 26, 1886; quoted in O'Laoi, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 27.

⁴¹⁴ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 33.

⁴¹⁵ Fitzgerald, *How to play Gaelic Football*, 15.

⁴¹⁶ *The Gaelic Athletic Annual and County Directory 1910-1911*, No. 3 (Cahill & Co, Dublin, 1911), 58; quoted in McDevitt, "Muscular Catholicism," 265.

injured to receive compensation while sick, or for the dependants if death ensued. However, as long as it is deployed “in the rule of the game,” violence is not depicted as something that had to be necessarily banned from the games altogether.⁴¹⁷ Remnants of this posture towards violence can indeed be discerned in early GAA-matches. After Gurteen and Menlough met in Garbally (Co. Galway) on 15th November 1885 to play a hurling match, a witness reported paradigmatically: “Though there was many a bruised shin, many a wounded ankle, and many a bleeding knuckle, there was not so much as an angry frown to be seen on a single face.”⁴¹⁸ In this regard, it is interesting that Football Rule 14 and Hurling Rule 7 of the amended GAA rule-book – that were supposed to stifle physical contact off the ball – were introduced only shortly prior to the bloom of the “modern” GAA at the turn of the century (1896/97).⁴¹⁹ Hence, there seems to be a clear correlation between the curbing of violence and the modernisation of the games. Even if rough and tumble methods remained a constant feature of the modern GAA in the early 20th century, efforts to curb the fracas on the pitch were unavoidable in order to reconcile the game with the “aestheticisation” that modern sporting values demanded from its participants. In this, the Irish codes can be perceived to be even more “progressive” than other contact sports at the time. The feasibility to send off players for retaliation and allow for replacements if a player was injured was issued much earlier as has been the case in association football for example. As early as 1906, foul language and deliberate kicking of an opponent were described as “ungaelic” – which was an absolute sacrilege for any Gaelic athlete.⁴²⁰ However, at the end of the day, the attractiveness for the GAA in regulating its games seems to have lain not only in the defusing of violent scenes, but also in the “translation” of archaic violence into more modern expressions of pugnacity that were evidently converging towards the ethos that was devised by the propagators of the modern sporting movement in Britain. English ruralist Arthur Young unconsciously indicated this hybrid character of Gaelic games and its stance towards violence as early as 1780, when he described hurling as the “cricket of savages”.⁴²¹ McDevitt astutely concludes:

Since controlled and organized violence was, in fact, much more powerful than its disorganized counterpart, the advent of the GAA and modern Gaelic games increased the potential for violence in Irish society. Here then, we see the transformation rather than reduction of violence that characterized the evolution of modern Irish sport.⁴²²

⁴¹⁷ Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*, 4.

⁴¹⁸ O’Laoi, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 20.

⁴¹⁹ Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*, 39.

⁴²⁰ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 31-33.

⁴²¹ Derek Birley, *Sport and the Making of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 157.

⁴²² McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 33.

In this sub-chapter, the institutionalisation of standardised rules has mainly been employed as a means to make Gaelic games distinctively Irish (as opposed to British) – however much this might have been possible in the first place. I want to round off the section with an assessment by Mandle that is remarkable in that it turns this perspective upside down. Rather than having been made distinguishable, he asserts that the rules of the GAA transformed Gaelic into essential similarity with, for example, cricket and football in England, baseball in the United States and ice hockey in Canada.⁴²³ Although these analogies appear to be a bit too far-fetched, they recognise a basic truth that is pivotal for any understanding of the GAA within the wider framework of modern sport: the original regularisation of games makes them similar to other (modern) games that have already been regularised.

3.2 Amateurism and class distinction

The concept of amateurism in sport offers a large spectrum of analytical devices. Its impact on early sport institutionalism as well as its role as indicator of the social values mediated via sport are of particular interest for the task of this thesis. In the context of modern sport, amateurism played a pivotal role in its very creation (*original modern sport*), but was exposed to clear limitations when its core values appeared to be increasingly diluted in a rapidly changing and expanding environment (*advanced modern sport*). I’ve already indicated in Chapter 1 that the pure amateurism of mid-19th-century Britain must be considered to have forfeited much of its orthodoxy at the dawn of mass spectator sport from the 1890s.

Hardly any term in sport is afflicted with so many half-truths as is the case with amateurism. Collins bemoans “a huge discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality.”⁴²⁴ Much of this discrepancy seems to be due to the inherent anachronisms in perceptions of what amateurism actually stands for. At the core of this anachronistic construct lies its initial countenance of vast differences in power (class, gender, ethnicity) while it simultaneously sought to embody a new type of egalitarianism in sport. The “vitiation” of the original British amateur ethos and its adaptations within the transformation of *original* to *advanced* modern sport further complicate the delineation of a mono-causal concept of amateurism. Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard have been pioneers in grasping and depicting 19th-century-amateurism not as

⁴²³ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 14-15.

⁴²⁴ Tony Collins, “The Ambiguities of Amateurism: English Rugby Union in the Edwardian Era,” in *Amateurism in British Sport – It matters not who won or lost?*, ed. by Dilwyn Porter and Stephen Wagg (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 54.

a confined entity, but as a modern ethos that is constantly exposed to ideological and class discourses.⁴²⁵

Given that amateurism was therefore a highly transitory and contradictory matter for itself, Gruneau saw little surprise in the fact that national and international sports governing bodies who took responsibility for promoting and regulating the ideal of amateurism – such as the GAA – were “mired in controversy” over the matter.⁴²⁶ Devising a distinctive approach towards amateurism, it was inevitable that the GAA agenda in that regard would turn out to be hostile to the British class-based concept that was so essential to spark the modern sporting movement in Britain. In this sub-chapter, I will first try to delineate British amateurism along the rupture line “original modern sport – advanced modern sport”. I will refer to the class-based structure of British amateurism, its imaginations of how to play games and the contradictions that evolved thereof. Thereafter, it will be illustrated how “Irish amateurism” deviated from this pattern, which role it had to play in the establishment of the GAA as a sporting institution and why the social stratification of Irish society did not provide the conditions to duplicate British amateurism.

3.2.1 The transformation of the British amateur ethos

The amateurism that emerged with *original modern sport* in mid-19th-century Britain played an essential role in the “civilising” transformation of pre-modern games into more regulated and socially worthwhile forms of creative physical expression. This establishment of amateurism as a hegemonic concept for participation in sport was accompanied by the introduction of an allegedly meritocratic element. As elitist as its main constituents might have been, class divisions could – at least in theory – be dissolved on the playing field, where a “meritocracy of ability” was the logical adjunct to fair play. That’s why young men from underclass families were not categorically excluded from this form of amateurism, but were also motivated by the hope that their status in society could be enhanced by their adherence to it.⁴²⁷

Nevertheless, the core values that were projected into the concept of amateurism by a largely elitist stratum soon spawned a unique pastiche of both progressive and reactionary ideas. The tenets of amateurism became to be intrinsically connected to two seemingly contradictory impulses: the class-conscious desire to exclude from sport people who might be defined as

⁴²⁵ Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 560. Gruneau particularly alludes to E. Dunning and K. Sheard. *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979).

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 574-575.

⁴²⁷ Gruneau, „The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 91.

social inferiors; and the belief that sport can accommodate young men within a set of rational and positive values of respectfulness. Gruneau acknowledges: “Amateurism was supposedly a hymn to fairness and equality, but it preached these virtues through a policy that implicitly favoured the wealthy.”⁴²⁸ Not only the theoretical framework, but also the actual proceedings in sport within the amateur community spawned a good deal of friction. The growing division in the nascent industrial class between leisure and work that was to signify the emergence of *advanced modern sport* saw sport as a mere leisure time pursuit, as propagated by its upper-class advocates, appear increasingly problematic.⁴²⁹ Whereas early amateur contests also promoted cross-class contacts, the social prejudices with which amateurism was always supplemented came to the forefront in the increasingly volatile and contested social environment in the latter part of the 19th century. It was at this time that organised games spread from the confines of the recently reformed public schools to wider constituencies of a rapidly changing British society. It was inevitable that groups other than the elites, whether they be colonial subjects or the working-class, would begin to excel at games and challenge the interpretational monopoly of the elites.⁴³⁰ The Establishment, in turn, sought to circumvent the challenge to their social status posed by democratic processes and the industrial masses that started to make use of them. In this environment of uncertainty, amateur sport was deployed as a shield with which to keep the forces of change at bay.⁴³¹ Consequentially, and in reaction to this “threat” of mass-participation, the caveats of the upper-class now began to crystallise into a set of more formal rules of exclusion. Amateur sporting competitions were less likely to include large sections of people who the Establishment viewed as their social inferiors and who it began to fear.⁴³² However, at this stage, the decline of the upper classes’ interpretational monopoly in sport was irreversible. By 1890, association football for example – in its modern form certainly the product of the upper-middle class exponents of the public schools – was also the game of the people, especially as spectators.

In regard to the stance of the rugby union fraternity in Britain, Collins uncovers the preconceptions that were ascribed to pure amateurism. To believe that its original form was a neutral and value-free philosophy would be just as deceptive as the notion that early amateurs did not play to win. It would be much closer to reality to grasp the concept of amateurism as a response by middle-class sportsmen to the perceived threat to their dominance of sport by

⁴²⁸ Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 563-574.

⁴²⁹ Simon Coleman, “Of Metaphors and Muscles: Protestant ‘Play’ in the Disciplining of the Self,” in *The Discipline of Leisure – Embodying Cultures of ‘Recreation’*, ed. by Simon Coleman and Tamara Kohn (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 41.

⁴³⁰ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 13.

⁴³¹ Collins, “The Ambiguities of Amateurism,” 43.

⁴³² Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 563-574.

working-class competitors. Paradigmatically, the RFU (Rugby Football Union) only declared itself an amateur organisation fifteen years after its foundation and in response to the huge influx of proletarian players and spectators into the sport.⁴³³ However, the abstinence from the commercial exploitation of sport that went with this retreat into pure amateurism was partly compromised after the First World War when rugby union was accommodated to “professionalism with a small p”.⁴³⁴ The high moral principle of amateurism that was supposed to be in contrast to financial and bureaucratic rationality in sport had largely vanished by then.

Due to the crucial role of amateurism for the dissemination of modern sporting values, it grew – notwithstanding the intrinsic ambiguities – worldwide. By the end of the 19th century, amateur sport had become a key organisational and cultural expression that transcended the British sphere of influence.⁴³⁵ This was also due to the concurrence of the “re-design” of amateurism with a first phase of globalisation in sport.⁴³⁶ Amateurism had always been one of the crucial markers of modern sport. As ever more people and cultures considered themselves being “amateurs”, it was not surprising that the controversies about the intrinsic contradictions of amateurism would flare up, rather than petering out. Just as sport overall entered a globalising trajectory, the original concept of British amateurism was exposed to a much more international dimension at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. In amateurism there was a trend to interpret it in the context of local, regional and national historical traditions and it was therefore exposed to a myriad of selective, fluid and dynamic dimensions.⁴³⁷ It was a corollary that amateurism forfeited much of its intrinsic Britishness in the course of this multidirectional debate that modulated amateurism clearly along the (new) realities of a consumer-oriented sport- and entertainment-business. Pope has shown that at the turn of the century, hardly any two sporting bodies or communities adhered to the same approach in respect of amateurism. Especially in the course of the hugely successful Olympic revival – which propagated amateurism as one of its core values – the rule regarding amateurs had proven to be especially difficult to enforce, let alone define, because each national federation nuanced the term as it wished.⁴³⁸ Phillips consequentially suggests that we should

⁴³³ Collins, “The Ambiguities of Amateurism,” 44.

⁴³⁴ Collins, „Amateurism and the Rise of Managerialism,” 110.

⁴³⁵ Gruneau, “The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 90.

⁴³⁶ Phillips, “Diminishing Contrasts and Increasing Varieties,” 22.

⁴³⁷ Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 560.

⁴³⁸ S. W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876-1926* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54.

talk about “amateurisms” rather than a single compound that is stuffed with sundry value-structures.⁴³⁹

Notwithstanding the early globalisation and vitiation of amateurism, one should not forget that much of the contemporary hegemonic ethos in sport – largely non-amateur – still corresponds with values that were initially advocated by the staunchest supporters of pure amateurism. Its capability to usher in a sense of universalism was definitely one of the key momentums of modern sport overall. The recognition of its universalistic impact is not straightforward though: on the one hand, some “superficial” traits of amateurism proved – more so than most other value-structures in sport – that they are predestined to function as a universal mediator of sporting identities. In this respect, amateurism can be considered to have exerted a virtue on its own terms. On the other hand, the universalism of more micro-level characteristics of pure amateurism was severely limited, because the evolution of the civilising mission of amateur sport emerged out of a very clear set of western, masculine, and class-based moral conceptions. In this regard, there was never anything inherently universal about it.⁴⁴⁰

3.2.2 Irish amateurism

Phillips shows that the various interpretations of amateurism that emerged over time have all been consistent with the formation of national identity.⁴⁴¹ Ireland is no exception in that regard. It devised a form of amateurism that sat very comfortably with the myths of national identity: the detachment from the commercial implications of industrialism and the emphasis of honour and pride suited very well the revivalist nationalist sentiment in late-19th-century Ireland. And so did the ideals “higher than victory” clearly converge with national aspirations. Devlin stated:

While the [materially] invigorating benefits of competition will always be part of their recompenses, we would wish to stir a deeper impulse with our Gaelic games. We would have our people play the native games because they are *native*; because they connote a racial tradition, proclaim a national identity and help to conserve the ambition of a separate existence and a distinct historical destiny.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁹ Phillips, “Diminishing Contrasts and Increasing Varieties,” 23-24.

⁴⁴⁰ Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 577.

⁴⁴¹ Phillips, “Diminishing Contrasts and Increasing Varieties,” 25.

⁴⁴² Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 73.

Just as so many other things were “historicised” to that end, so was the distinctive type of Irish amateurism depicted not as the modern derivation that it actually was, but as a moral doctrine of the early Gaels. It was heralded as “having first given the lead to humanity in the art and science of athletics, before the Greeks and before Saxon influence tainted it.”⁴⁴³ To open the backdoor for “vagabonds and outlaws of the sporting fraternity”⁴⁴⁴ – presumably addressing professionals and gamblers – was seen as a subversion of racial purity. The inculcation among Irish people of the notion of pure and selfless amateurism was therefore among the main remits of the early GAA. This was in order to endow its sports with a certain value-structure, as well as for the protection of monopolistic pretensions over them. The repercussions of a rapidly transforming society that challenged the dogmatic designs of amateurism as extolled in Britain naturally confronted the GAA with similar predicaments as on the other side of the Irish Sea. What Hassan identified as the prime source of organisational deficiencies within the transformation of a fraternal sporting body to a fully commercial organisation at the dawn of the new millennium, resembles the situation when the association made its first attempts to reconcile its approach to amateurism with the commercial propensity of *advanced modern sport*: “Its principle difficulty is managing a vibrant, professional and modern sporting body within the confines of a historically determined and fundamentally amateur context.”⁴⁴⁵

While the commercialist propensities of the GAA should not be understood as a (concealed) commitment towards professionalism, we argue that they were not fully reconcilable with pure amateurism. Compensation for players to cover their travel expenses or the use of revenues through gate-receipts to maintain organisational structures were self-evident and might not be subsumed under the “commercial encroachment” of amateur sport. However, the centrality of the financial aspect within the association just didn’t fit into a purely amateur ideology that the GAA claimed to follow. McAnallen concludes: “The desire to provide entertainment to attract crowds and to fund the modernisation of the GAA was bigger than to drastically curb those tendencies.”⁴⁴⁶ By the time hurling and Gaelic football competitions were proceeding in earnest, the GAA had already reached its own rational compromise on amateurism for athletics.”⁴⁴⁷ He thinks that the GAA’s ability to manage the boom in top-level games and retain a general amateur ethos owed largely to the prevailing national mood. “The mission , to which the GAA was pledged, to turn the Free State into an all-Ireland

⁴⁴³ McAnallen, “The Greatest Amateur Association in the World,” 162.

⁴⁴⁴ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 220.

⁴⁴⁵ Hassan, “Governance and the Gaelic Athletic Association,” 425.

⁴⁴⁶ McAnallen, „The greatest Amateur Association in the World,” 165.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 157.

Catholic and Gaelic republic or even a corporatist state reinforced opinion to the defence of Irish amateur sport against the advance of the evils of professionalism.”⁴⁴⁸

If the overt commercialist claims – irreconcilable with pure amateurism – didn’t undermine the authority of the Central Council and appeared to be conducive for the interests of the association and/or its members, the GAA soon showed that it was ready to turn a blind eye to deeds that overtly breached the amateur code. The sporadic un-amateur gifts were ignored: “The games were too tied up with national sentiment to enforce a high moral line on the odd present,” says McAnallen.⁴⁴⁹ Amateurism, within the GAA, has therefore never been a fixed concept, but one that shifted its meaning according to the circumstances in which the GAA sought to define the community and ideology of its sports. Fairly recent examples of the GAA’s ambivalent stance towards amateurism are the wearing of jerseys with the sponsor’s logo or the huge marketing-campaign of Guinness for the All-Ireland hurling championships. Beyond the actual field of play, the GAA’s social commitment at various levels contributed to the depiction of the association as cordially “amateur”. This commitment had implications that were not only of moral significance for the association and its members, but were also vital to the institutional growth and the countrywide expansion of its branches. In this respect – and in accordance to the focus of this thesis on the era of determined modernisation and institutional progress – two aspects stand out: the first one pertains to the revenues that started pouring into the association’s pockets when the inter-county scene took off in the early 20th century, drawing ever more spectators to the big Gaelic contests. The collected entrance-fees on these occasions were reinvested in the development of the association rather than the payment of players.⁴⁵⁰ This, more than anything else, enabled the GAA – financially and logistically – to cement its place in Irish life by acquiring new grounds and accelerating the establishment of localised structures.⁴⁵¹ The second aspect that is seen as a corroboration of the GAA’s adherence to a wider definition of “amateurism” relates to the exertions of volunteers providing the required human and facility resources to increase participation in GAA-games. Without them, the GAA would have never been able to prepare pitches and venues for mass spectator occasions and benefit from what Harvey called “Enhanced Capacity”.⁴⁵² The ramifications of this approach are still part of the “GAA-experience”. In impressive fashion the association proves, year in year out, that sport events and clubs,

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁵⁰ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 34.

⁴⁵¹ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 220 and McAnallen, “The Greatest Amateur Association in the World,” 164.

⁴⁵² Jean Harvey and Maurice Lévesque, “Sport Volunteerism and Social Capital,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Vol. 24 (2007), 207.

especially if they are connected with some form of volunteerism, have always been useful sites for social networking and bases for both the creation and expression of social capital.

Evidence of overtly commercialist aspirations have never been alien to the GAA since its very inception. Already, the very first All-Ireland hurling final between Thurles (Tipperary) and Meelick (Galway) in Birr on 1 April 1888, evoked a row over expenses in the Thurles camp and led to the defection of several players.⁴⁵³ Commercial sponsorship, albeit limited, made inroad through businesses donating trophies for competition.⁴⁵⁴ At the same time, the promoters of these semi-commercial sports-events saw no contradiction in borrowing the rhetoric of self-improvement and classicist bodily imagery with which amateurs in Britain have been promoting their games.⁴⁵⁵

Adapting to the commercialist exigencies of modern sport, the GAA sought to avoid a trajectory towards full professionalism by condemning “Pay for Play”, the paying of players for taking part in a sporting contest. The remuneration of players through “travel expenses” was one way to compensate the team-members without setting up professional contracts. Already in one of the first announcements of the fledgling association, at a committee meeting in Thurles on 17 January 1885, the “vicious external professional influence”⁴⁵⁶ was deemed a sacrilege within the GAA. With this early commitment, the association manoeuvred itself into a serious predicament and was soon trapped in a negative feedback-process. After all, its popularity and commercial potential soon revealed that rigid amateurism could turn out to be a major obstacle for the upsurge of the association. “It became necessary to compromise the more puritanical edges of the totalizing vision of an amateur organisation to win consent among those groups whose commitment to amateur sport had nothing to do with anti-commercialism and did not extend to imbibing the morality, the preferred cultural vision, or the classicist male bodily aesthetic.”⁴⁵⁷ By the beginning of the 20th century, the growth of the association ultimately engendered an income “beyond the capacity of well-meaning amateurs to manage”⁴⁵⁸ – and the affiliated clubs and members started to demand their share. As soon as 1900 the Geraldines claimed expenses for travelling to Tipperary the night previous to the All-Ireland final. It was an early indication for the fact that the GAA’s amateur status – as far as the commercial implications are concerned – was eroding. “At first it was most commonly breached by urban clubs, but with the gradual growth of the intercounty Gaelic games scene it

⁴⁵³ Duncan, “The Camera and the Gael,” 101.

⁴⁵⁴ McAnallen, “The Greatest Amateur Association in the World,” 159.

⁴⁵⁵ Gruneau, “The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 92.

⁴⁵⁶ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 22.

⁴⁵⁷ Gruneau, “The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 92.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

was challenged primarily by the intensification of training schedules, increases in teams' travelling and encroaching commercialism."⁴⁵⁹ This erosion must be seen mainly in terms of concealed payments and deliberate commercialisation. The amateur dogma in regards to the curtailment of betting and gambling at GAA-events seems to have prevailed much longer. In 1902, the Central Council clearly defined that licenses would be granted to sport promoting bodies "only on the distinct understanding that bookmakers or betting are not permitted."⁴⁶⁰ At the 1909 Annual Convention, the motion was passed that "with a view to putting a stop to betting at athletic meetings, it is resolved that in future no handicapper be permitted to start an athletic meeting while bookmakers are on the grounds."⁴⁶¹

As unique as the strategies of the GAA to circumvent a large-scale debate about amateurism may have been, the association was not exceptional in that regard considering the more global context of sport institutionalism at the time. All sport associations that believed their amateurism made them immune from the pressure of commercial forces were frustrated.⁴⁶² Many clubs and bodies adopted a pragmatic stance like the GAA and adhered to an amateur ideal that was tempered by the need to maintain organisational strength. "Travelling expenses" offered the potential of practical ambiguity to those seeking a way around the amateur regulations – not only for the GAA, but also for rugby union in Britain.⁴⁶³ When GAA training-camps became commonplace after 1905, it wasn't long before demands for expenses were articulated. If GAA athletes, who were presented as selfless amateurs, did not exactly contemplate turning professional, some of them came at least close to adopting the "broken-time" payments that characterised rugby league players in both England and Australia.⁴⁶⁴ By 1914, expenses for teams participating in inter-county or inter-provincial matches were so common and extensive that a special sub-committee was appointed to deal with it.⁴⁶⁵ In that same year, the Annual Convention passed a motion that can be seen as a breach against the anti-commercialist ethos: it was carried that "for the purpose of enabling the objects and business of the Association to be more effectually carried out, a Company be formed in which property and assets of the association, including the premises at Croke Park, Jones Road, Dublin, be vested."⁴⁶⁶ What was to be created here was, bluntly speaking, a joint-stock corporation to which each GAA-member, as "shareholder", should contribute a sum

⁴⁵⁹ McAnallen, "The Greatest Amateur Association in the World," 181.

⁴⁶⁰ GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 104.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 452.

⁴⁶² Gruneau, "The Critique of Sport in Modernity," 92.

⁴⁶³ Collins, "The Ambiguities of Amateurism," 45-49.

⁴⁶⁴ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 145.

⁴⁶⁵ 1914 Annual Convention, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/02, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, p. 158.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

“that was not to exceed one pound.”⁴⁶⁷ At this stage, the moral mission of the GAA had long become an entrepreneurial one as well.

3.2.3 Irish amateurism as opposed to British amateurism

I shall now turn to the question, what distinguished “Irish amateurism” from the British archetype. If the peculiar relationship between Ireland and Britain in the context of modern sport is characterised as “deflected assimilation”, the acquaintance with amateurism is probably one of the best instruments to corroborate this assessment. The influences of modern sports’ initial concept of amateurism on the agenda of the GAA were palpable. The broadly defined self-image, as in relation to the rejection of participation for financial award for example, was hardly distinguishable from the original brand.⁴⁶⁸ However, the GAA was overtly antagonistic towards every form of amateurism that was publicly discernible as “British”. When the Irish Amateur Athletic Association (IAAA), a “branch” of the British AAA (Amateur Athletic Association), was founded in 1885, the GAA instantly tried to pronounce the stark contrast of its own approach to amateurism. The two rival organisations were subsequently involved in a fierce battle over institutional superiority of sport in Ireland. The GAA had on its side all the advantages accruing to an organisation avowedly nationalist, ostentatiously Irish, and, crucially, church-supported. On that account, the struggle lasted not much longer than a year, when it had become clear that the GAA was by far the stronger of the two.⁴⁶⁹ This pre-eminence was shown most imposingly at a sports meeting in Tralee in June 1885. Cusack deliberately staged it on the same day as a gathering of the County Kerry Amateur Athletic and Cricket Club (affiliated with the AAA). When the rival meetings came off, the GAA field was packed with over 10,000 spectators, while the Kerry AACC venue was almost deserted.⁴⁷⁰

The difference between the Victorian amateurism of the elites and the amateurism as embraced by the early GAA was crystallised in their different attitudes to money. Cronin states: “The Spartan Puritanism of English amateurism was absent from the GAA. On the contrary, Gaelic games were awash with commercial activity. Admission fees for games, advertisements in programmes and sponsorships for trophies were common from the

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 219. In *Our Native Games* (p. 68), Devlin made clear that “a Gaelic team that would put a price upon participation in a championship final is unfitted for the privilege of such a competition”.

⁴⁶⁹ Mandle, “The I.R.B. and the Beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association,” 421.

⁴⁷⁰ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 21.

outset.”⁴⁷¹ However, as much as this aspect reveals a fundamental discrepancies between British and Irish doctrine, one should not forget that amateurs in Ireland did not have the amount of money and leisure time on their hands as British amateurs of *original modern sport* did. Therefore, the margins to reject commercial implications in sport were, for the Irish, considerably tighter.

In contrast to British amateurism, the connective ties in early Irish sport were driven by ideology and principle rather than by class or status.⁴⁷² Not least, because an overtly upper-class conception of amateurism was simply incompatible with a native Irish population that was mainly excluded from higher class status. Hence, Irish amateurism differed from the original British brand of amateurism particularly in respect to occupational criteria. What the GAA openly repudiated was a social implication of British amateurism: namely, that only gentlemen can be real amateurs. In Britain, the merits of amateurism were extolled in such a way as to justify and support the existing social hierarchy and the dominance of the upper- and middle-classes. British sport tended to dramatise and embody the prevailing logic of social hierarchy.⁴⁷³ The GAA’s approach towards amateurism clearly transcended this social focus. In fact, it diametrically opposed it in that it by aiming at an extension of the social spectrum of active participants in sporting contests.⁴⁷⁴ Comerford takes account of this objective when he asserts that thwarting the growth of elitism in sport can be considered as one of the few explicitly anti-British intentions of the GAA and Michael Cusack.⁴⁷⁵ McDevitt interprets this divergence as a manifestation of what he calls “the two versions of Christianity”: a British version based on Protestant elitism and class, and an Irish version dominated by Catholic communalism.⁴⁷⁶

Hence, whereas the GAA was highly exclusive in terms of banning members of the security forces on nationalist grounds, it was inclusive as regards the social permeability of its association. In this sense, Cusack’s mission can be interpreted as not only nationalising, but also democratising sport in Ireland.⁴⁷⁷ This specific approach towards sport and amateurism, and its vision of social permeability, was heralded by the GAA as unparalleled in the world of sport.⁴⁷⁸ For that matter, the representative role of the association succeeded in engendering a form of communalism that Irish people otherwise did not experience at the time (see Chapter 1.3). Garnham, who has examined the social sphere of Gaelic sport exhaustively,

⁴⁷¹ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 215-216.

⁴⁷² Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 143.

⁴⁷³ Gruneau, “The Critique of Sport in Modernity,” 90.

⁴⁷⁴ The rigid ban-clauses threatened to undermine this agenda and have therefore been kept apart from the social sphere of the GAA.

⁴⁷⁵ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 218.

⁴⁷⁶ McDevitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 265.

⁴⁷⁷ Greene, 80. Greene states that the GAA was the first modern example of a great democratic movement under completely Irish auspices.

⁴⁷⁸ McAnallen, “The Greatest Amateur Association in the World,” 157.

acknowledges this merit of the association⁴⁷⁹ just as does Cronin, who identifies the major thrust of the GAA in its policy “to transcend the barriers of class distinction and creating its own aristocracy of merit.”⁴⁸⁰ In similar fashion, Mandle points to the potential of Gaelic games (as opposed to organisations like the Gaelic League) to bring the myth and self-consciousness of a Celtic past to the “common people”.⁴⁸¹ Although it’s quite probable that the “Special Reporter” of *The Celtic Times* was observing what he wanted to observe, his report from a “splendid Gaelic tournament in Kilmacthomas” is instructive in that regard. He recapitulated: “I noticed with satisfaction how all classes were interested in the day’s proceedings. The well-to-do farmer, the newspaper editor, the schoolmaster, the shopkeeper, the struggling farmer, and the labourer worked in complete harmony.”⁴⁸²

Nevertheless, there are ample reasons to challenge the veracity of “Irish amateurism’s” social policy. Some criteria that appear to have been much less penetrative and comprehensive as was often depicted demand closer scrutiny. It needs to be asked, for example, if players, members and officials of the early GAA really represented a cross-section of Irish society.

3.2.4 The social background of the GAA

Looked at against the societal and class-demarcating implications of the initial concept of amateurism in Britain, it is not surprising that “Irish amateurism” was based on social propositions of the ethos it tried to inculcate among its members. Long before he was assigned Secretary General of the GAA, Michael Cusack made clear that he was committed to broadening accessibility to Gaelic sport in Ireland. This was also a major concern of Archbishop Croke, the first and most influential patron of the GAA. He was not “in the least opposed to foreign games as such” (!), but rather objected to British sports on the ground that “they were favoured by a certain class of our people to the utter exclusion of those well known Irish exercises which were formerly so common here.”⁴⁸³ According to him, Irish sport should be repatriated “especially to the humble and hard-working people, who seem now to be born into no other inheritance than an everlasting round of labour.”⁴⁸⁴ Such statements of leading GAA sponsors ostensibly confirm that the formation of a

⁴⁷⁹ Garnham, “Accounting for the early success of the GAA,” 71.

⁴⁸⁰ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 29.

⁴⁸¹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 154-155.

⁴⁸² “Splendid Gaelic Tournament at Kilmacthomas,” *The Celtic Times*, March 12, 1887. The classless imprint of Gaelic sport is not exactly consistent with the forerunners of the modern games of hurling and Gaelic football. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it has predominantly been the gentry that patronised the games. See <http://www.gaarules.com/tag/caid/page/2> (accessed 10.04.2011).

⁴⁸³ Dann, “British sports in Ireland,” 13.

⁴⁸⁴ Mandle, “The I.R.B. and the Beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association,” 421.

comprehensive sporting body was also socially and not merely politically motivated.⁴⁸⁵ In contrast to other aspirations, such as political nationalism, untainted Catholicism and the rather abstract construct of pure *Gaelicism*, this has been granted surprisingly little attention by the historians of Gaelic sport in Ireland.

If rural Ireland formed the mythological and numerical centre of the Irish nation, the GAA's pretension of creating a self-image of Irish society was, initially at least, misguided. Ireland's native games did of course never intrude on the predominantly British landed classes – nor were they expected to.⁴⁸⁶ However, the majority of Irish population spread over the rural areas of the country did not exactly form the social foundation that the GAA originally built upon. Instead, it was the social caste that meandered within the chasm between the Anglo-Irish elite and the dispossessed country-folk that was most profitable for the ascendancy of the GAA. Mullan denoted this vocational segment as the “ascendant Catholic petty bourgeoisie”.⁴⁸⁷ Cusack's version of the allegedly class-less impact of the GAA, as depicted in an article of *The Celtic Times*, gives proof of the occupational cluster that he had originally targeted: he claimed that after the Irish athletic movement of the 1860s was started “on purely English lines and exclusively for gentlemen amateurs,” he succeeded, in 1882, “in repealing the Saxon penal law that excluded labourer, tradesmen, and artisans from the athletic arena.” According to the manifesto, “this was the first blow dealt at English ascendancy in the sporting line; the time when the division bell rang out.”⁴⁸⁸ The vocational group Cusack addressed in this statement was really the broad middle class. There is no reference to the rural peasantry, the “lowest” caste on the social ladder, the overwhelming majority of Irish people and the group that is usually considered to be the “transmitter” of Gaelic Ireland.

However, like other factions of the Irish-Ireland movement, most notably the Gaelic League and the Abbey Theatre, the GAA also stood under the impression of the nostalgic and sanitised vision of rural Ireland. Consequentially, the GAA put great emphasis on its rural roots. The success of this strategy was due not only to the stature of its first president Maurice Davin, a down-to-earth farmer from rural Tipperary and former member of the Land League, and the reputation of patron Michael Davitt, agrarian agitator and founder of the Land League.⁴⁸⁹ More importantly, it was the time and “space” in which the GAA was founded that made a statement of solidarity with the “victims” of the land grievances practically

⁴⁸⁵ Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 18.

⁴⁸⁶ Duncan, “The Camera and the Gael,” 95.

⁴⁸⁷ Michael Mullan, “Opposition, Social Closure, and Sport: The Gaelic Athletic Association in the 19th Century,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Vol. 12 (1995), 286.

⁴⁸⁸ “Michael Davitt and the Gaelic Athletic Association,” *The Celtic Times*, August 6, 1887.

⁴⁸⁹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 4-5.

unavoidable. Right in the middle of the Land War and in the wake of one of its major offensives – the Plan of Campaign (1886-1891) – the prospect of “exploiting” the heated atmosphere in relation to the land question was just too promising to neglect. It fitted perfectly into the fascination with an idealised rural past and the execration of urbanism that was perceived to be a threat of the mythological centre of the Irish nation.⁴⁹⁰

Looking back from the 1930s, P. J. Devlin, a prominent Irish sportswriter wrote, “it was from the pestilential and maddening atmosphere of the countryside, from where the soul of our race arose with revived body and answered the call of the Gaelic Athletic Association.”⁴⁹¹ At least for the very formative period of the GAA (1884-1892), this image was as yet inappropriate, because the core of the GAA’s membership was only partially tied to rural Ireland. The first generation of GAA-members, and particularly those who engaged in Gaelic football, was drawn from a narrow economic constituency in urban areas (confined mainly to shop assistants)⁴⁹² – many of them albeit from a rural background.⁴⁹³ Allusions to the central role of this cluster within the early GAA are numerous in recent historiography. However, the actual reasons for that are insufficiently illustrated. In his treatise about labour in the west of Ireland in the late 1900s, John Cunningham indicates that the dreadful working conditions of shop assistants could have been an impulse to immerse into the type of leisure distraction that was proffered by the GAA. At many shops, a 84-hour working week would have been common for apprentices – with hardly any holiday-breaks in between. Keeping in mind that the high expectations of farmer’s sons may have been severely frustrated in the urban work-situation, it makes sense that they were eager for other possibilities to enhance their social status. According to Cunningham, shop assistants were increasingly confident in demanding special holidays from their employers in the 1890s – considering his allusion that the idea of time-off for its own sake would have been completely alien at the time, it is quite probable that their engagement with the GAA prompted them to raise their claims for extended holiday breaks. Another socio-economic factor that fits into the picture of the shop assistant as active member of the early GAA is the non-involvement of this occupational group in the nascent trade-union activism of the time.⁴⁹⁴ It is conceivable that the GAA was a useful instrument to fill this void – if not to improve the working-conditions of shop assistants, then at least to enhance their social status and self-esteem. Due not only to ideological reasons, the affiliation to “foreign” sporting associations was not an option. The Cork Drapers’ Association, for

⁴⁹⁰ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 24.

⁴⁹¹ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 35-36.

⁴⁹² Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 35.

⁴⁹³ Irish towns and cities had an enormous influx of rural males at the time.

⁴⁹⁴ John Cunningham, *Labour in the west of Ireland: Working life & struggle, 1890-1914* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1995), 91-95.

example, tried to join the Irish Rugby Union, but couldn't meet the tight financial and social requirements of Anglo-Irish sport⁴⁹⁵ – in their frustration, the GAA must have constituted an attractive surrogate.

It was not before the modernisation of the GAA in the early 1900s that a completely new stratum of largely non-manual workers enlisted for the association. Predominantly from the branches of the Gaelic League exponents of the lower intelligentsia, mainly civil servants of respectable educational attainments, poured into the association. This occupational reallocation within the GAA spawned a considerable improvement in the standards of administration and can therefore be seen not only as an adjunct, but as a decisive factor for the modernisation of the GAA.⁴⁹⁶

Whereas Cunningham's findings offer a hypothesis about the major constituency of early GAA-membership from the perspective of its demands and grievances within the working environment, Michael Mullan analyses the vocational composition of the early GAA in relation to the modern sporting model in Britain. In this context, he attributes the crucial role that shop assistants and (later) minor civil servants played for the evolvment of Irish sport to the fact that economic and occupational realities in late-19th-century Ireland obviated a replication of the Victorian sporting model "from top down". The failure to industrialise beyond the north-eastern regions in and around Belfast had left the highest professions comparatively isolated and depleted in Ireland. This, in turn, would have prevented them from leading Irish sport institutionalism in an effective alliance with the landed classes as has been the case in Britain.⁴⁹⁷

In their desperation to find new grounds for the manifestation of their social relevance, the urban Catholic lower middle-classes engaged in comparatively high numbers in the formation of rank and file within the GAA. Their massive influx into the infant association is underscored by the fact that hardly any GAA-encounters were scheduled during weekdays. After all, most of the constituents from this sector were busy at work at that stage of the week. When the Munster football final of 1888 was scheduled outside the corridor of the weekend, the Limerick side failed to turn up. The team was based exclusively on shop assistants and it may well have been the case that they were unable to obtain the necessary time off work to go and play the match.⁴⁹⁸ Corry comments on the foundation of the Limerick Commercials, consisting largely of drapers: "Drapers' hours were long. They worked six days a week and

⁴⁹⁵ McDevitt, *May the best man win*, 30.

⁴⁹⁶ De Búrca, *The GAA*, 68.

⁴⁹⁷ Mullan, "Opposition, Social Closure, and Sport," 285-286.

⁴⁹⁸ Brendan Fullam, *The Final Whistle* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2000), 25. Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 35.

although Limerick was regarded as a rugby city, the drapers affiliated their football club to the GAA for the opportunity to play football matches on their one free day, Sunday.”⁴⁹⁹

If the staging of Gaelic football matches on Sunday met the demands of urban shop-keepers and other lower middle-class constituents, it also ensured that agricultural labourers, who could not be assured of a day of rest on Saturdays, were able to participate.⁵⁰⁰ After all, however influential the contributions of the “petty bourgeoisie” to the ascendancy of the GAA might have been, it was still very scarce in number compared to the mass of rural peasantry in Ireland. In order to come up to the ideal of a nationwide institution, it was a logical development for GAA officials to cooperate with neo-traditionalist clerics, who, in turn, promoted the games at parish level. What made the concept of Sunday matches even more popular was its symbolic value for Gaelic sport in Ireland. It was a sign that the GAA was strong enough to resist the attempts of the Protestant hegemony to curb sporting activity on Sundays in deference to the devotional obligations of Sabbatarianism. The *Leinster Leader* heralded in December 1906: “It is no longer vulgar to witness Gaelic games on Sundays.”⁵⁰¹

3.3 The disciplines – hurling and Gaelic football

Looking at different sport philosophies, one should not lose track of the attributes that make the respective disciplines for what they actually are. The notions that are mediated by the GAA are, after all, a combination of the characteristics and peculiarities of the sports it governs. A more differentiated analysis of the fascination of hurling and Gaelic football – the two main assets of the GAA – has to take into consideration that their appeal derives from considerably different quarters. The label “Gaelic games”, in turn, mediates a synthesis that activates nationalist awareness – just as “foreign sports” have long symbolised the embodiment of cultural rejection.

⁴⁹⁹ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 30.

⁵⁰⁰ Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 38.

⁵⁰¹ *Leinster Leader*, December 1906, quoted in Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 67.

3.3.1 Hurling

However much its actual practice fell into decline after the famine – with hurling, the GAA could build on a symbolic and mythologized concept of a pastime that would never be doubted in its genuine Irishness. Hurling was always too firmly rooted in the Irish imagination to ever get washed away by the tides of popular “foreign” sports. Hurling’s legendary grandeur has long been “resonating through the ages in Ireland, flitting between mythology and history”. In the old texts, hurling became a metaphor for the bravery and ability of the greatest figures of Ireland’s lost past such as Cuchulain (then known as Setanta).⁵⁰² The game itself would have “grown out of the soil of Ireland”.⁵⁰³ To endow the modern version of the game with a Gaelic-traditionalist stance that fitted into the revivalist notions of late-19th-century Ireland was therefore a pretty straightforward affair. The contemplation that the explicit origins of hurling, like those of most other sports, are very difficult to trace and most probably involve cultural contributions from more than just one quarter,⁵⁰⁴ has never been an option for Ireland’s hurling-community. The symbolic value of the seemingly continuous tradition of the specifically Irish version of ball and stick was just too important to let it be vitiated.

Many of these popular and mythologized features of the game were exalted by the GAA as essential to ultimately free Ireland from the British yoke.⁵⁰⁵ Even though there are no indications that deviated versions of the game, like hurley (the ball and stick game played at Trinity College), were less “Irish” than the GAA-game (unless having been practised mainly by Protestants is deemed to make them so),⁵⁰⁶ this nexus between sporting prowess and national liberation was fully internalised by the Irish sporting community. Not long after the foundation of the GAA any nationalist with a sporting propensity was convinced that “no parish with a branch of the GAA should be without a hurling club, the existence of which may be taken as a guarantee that such a parish is inhabited by men of the true Gaelic stamp.”⁵⁰⁷ Accordingly, it was only the Irish “race” that was considered to be able to handle a camán (hurling-stick).

⁵⁰² Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 21.

⁵⁰³ *The Celtic Times*, February 26, 1887. Hurling is said to have been played at the ancient fair Aonach Tailltin in County Meath as early as 1800 BC – predating the days of the Greek and Roman empires. References to hurling encounters also include a game between the Tuatha de Danann and the Firbolgs during the Battle of Moytura in 1272 BC.

⁵⁰⁴ Games with a small ball and crooked sticks have been played in numerous different locations throughout history. Especially in medieval games, the use of sticks was not uncommon. That one of those sporting practices in Britain was called “Cornish hurling” shows that the derivation of the GAA-game might be linked to evolutions that have not been confined to Ireland. Dunning, “Sport in the Civilising Process,” 52.

⁵⁰⁵ When a hurling team entered the pitch in military formation with the players shouldering their camans like rifles, the imagery of war superseded the one of sport.

⁵⁰⁶ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 222.

⁵⁰⁷ *The Celtic Times*, April 30, 1887.

An analogy in *The Celtic Times* speaks for itself:

Hurling is a game which only Irishmen themselves could play as it ought to be played, for put a camán into the hands of an Englishman or a Frenchman, and let them practice for any length of time, you would find in the end that neither of them would be qualified to get a place on a fourth-rate team of Tipperary boys.⁵⁰⁸

The modernisation and formalisation of the game did indeed arouse controversy, especially from those quarters that always perceived Gaelic games as a sacrosanct cultural treasure. Many of the distinctive styles that evolved over centuries – and sometimes differed from one parish to the next – must have fallen victim to the standardising impact of the GAA. Much debate was provoked, for example, by the decision to forbid the element of wrestling in the game – a major requirement for an expert hurler in “the great days of hurling”. However, the wrestling style in the traditional forms of the game was just too rude for late-19th-century codifiers of sport, to whom the rule-makers of the GAA had to conform.⁵⁰⁹

Nevertheless, it would have been too much to expect that all the local traditions that the game had spawned over the centuries would soon vanish. Especially in the hurling strongholds of East Galway, hurlers clung to their local mannerisms such as in Kilimor, where Gaelic contests were staged under the local “Kilimor Rules” long after the GAA had devised its own rule book. A hurling match in that area (Meelick) on 26 April 1885, played under GAA rules, prompted a reporter to state: “I think the rules of the GAA are not suited for Country hurling. It looks very much like the English game of lawn tennis. Such rules were never known in the good old days of hurling.”⁵¹⁰ The Kilimor team refused to accept a challenge of the Craughwell hurling club altogether, because they regarded the GAA-game to resemble the “importation” hurley rather than the Irish game of hurling.⁵¹¹ Nevertheless, despite these isolated interventions, it is remarkable how willingly most areas left centuries of local traditions to one side in favour of GAA standardisation. It soon became clear that the amount of compromise that had necessarily accompanied the process of turning an age-old pastime into a modern sport would not constitute a major threat to the rocketing ascendancy of the game and its governing institution. By the spring of 1886, reports suggest that all hurling played in Ireland was played under GAA-rules.⁵¹² That the potential of dissension could be contained was not only due to the nationalist momentum of the time; it also accrued from the

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 33.

⁵¹⁰ O’Laoi, *Annals of the GAA in Galway*, 13-14.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, 18-19.

⁵¹² Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 37-38.

pragmatic approach of Michael Cusack. Even though his vision of hurling was strongly influenced by the traditional forms of the sport he had witnessed in his native County Clare, he realised that if Irish team games were to prove acceptable rivals to rugby and association football, they must be adapted to contemporary thinking on sport, not least regarding to the imposition of greater order and control.⁵¹³

Equipping hurling with a particular set of rules (and the threat that this could undermine the historic legacy of the sport) was countered by an emphasis on the mythological charm of the game. Devlin descriptively framed this attitude: “The giants with which oral tradition peopled the country side,” said Devlin, “were not to our childish mind entirely fabulous and, as we advanced in years, we did not entirely discard them; but we simply took them as hero-sized impersonations – apotheoses the learned would call them – of very human and singularly native qualities of value and athletic prowess.”⁵¹⁴ Nevertheless, as much as the nostalgic element of the sport allegorised something genuinely Irish, the intention to gain contemporary legitimacy for a sport by construing a sense of historical authenticity is (and was) a common feature of modern sports all over the world.⁵¹⁵ Gruneau even asserts that with this proclivity of “regulating a sport in the interests of a self-professed moral universalism,” sport promoters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries “spun a web of historical illusions.”⁵¹⁶ Already Devlin had accentuated the universality around that issue. He wrote in the 1930s: “The intrinsic merits of most modern games played under proper conditions differ little. It is the atmosphere, the centuries-old history and the spiritual associations of our native pastimes and traditions that give them a claim, besides their worth, to our adherence.”⁵¹⁷

Confronted with existential menaces of developmental or structural nature just like Gaelic games and the GAA had to deal with in Ireland, other sporting entities often exhibit intriguingly similar – and highly historicist – strategies to lead the sport/discipline/organisation towards institutional strength and public affirmation. At a time, when the gentlemanly control of rugby was threatened by rising professionalism, rugby union, for example, benefited from the “myth of origin” around the alleged inventor of the game, William Webb Ellis – a Tipperary-born son of a British army officer who excelled at Rugby College in England.⁵¹⁸ England’s orchestrated effort to be recognised as the heartland of

⁵¹³ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 33.

⁵¹⁴ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 93.

⁵¹⁵ Garnham, “Accounting for the early success of the GAA,” 75. McDervitt, “Muscular Catholicism,” 266.

⁵¹⁶ Gruneau, “Amateurism as a sociological problem,” 578.

⁵¹⁷ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 74.

⁵¹⁸ Holt, *Sport and the British*, 35. Dunning, Maguire and Pearton, *The Sport Process*, 1. Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, 91, 127. The winner’s trophy at the rugby World Cup is still named after Ellis.

(association) football contains no less equivocal elements. Andy Mitten comments the myth as follows:

That Britain has given football to the world is at best an exaggeration; at worst, a lie. True, moustachioed young Victorian graduates may have exported the game to many corners of the Empire, but often all they did was present the locals with an organized set of rules for what had hitherto been a random kickaround.⁵¹⁹

Similar “designed histories” exist for many other sports and disciplines. Even the mythological aura of the Olympic Games, deriving from a seemingly linear continuation of ancient Greek tradition, might be identified as part of that pattern. Particularly the United States’ native pastime baseball seems to reveal parallels to the sense of pastoralism that revolves around the myth of Gaelic games. Guttman even asserts that “societies which do not cover the pastoral and primitive elements in sport with baseball must have some equivalent with which to enact the mythical rites of a people.”⁵²⁰

Garnham fittingly concludes: “Creation myths abound in the history of sport are as useful as they are ubiquitous.”⁵²¹ A sense of *historicity* seems to have been decisive for the institutional growth and the public affirmation of almost all modern sports. It proved to be highly beneficial not only by the emphasis on references to the mythological sphere of ancient history, but also by accentuating a continuous tradition in relation to the initiation of the sport in its modern and institutionalised form. It is astonishing how GAA-authorities of today are still doggedly trying to keep alive many of the institutional benchmarks that have been outlined in Chapter 2 (nationalist ethos, parish structure et al) by constantly re-evaluating them in front of the mythological past and the post-modern present.

3.3.2 Gaelic football

If the conversion of hurling into a modern sport may be described as straightforward, the stakes are altogether different with Gaelic football. There was no consistent blueprint for a revitalisation of the game, as has been the case in hurling. A ball game that resembled the type of Gaelic football under GAA rules and was clearly distinguishable from other games that involved the kicking and carrying of a ball cannot be discerned before 1885 – herein lies the major cultural difference of Gaelic football in relation to the only “true” Gaelic game of

⁵¹⁹ Andy Mitten, *The rough guide to Cult Football* (London and New York: Rough Guide Ltd., 2010), 4

⁵²⁰ Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, 91, 115.

⁵²¹ Garnham, “Accounting for the early success of the GAA,” 75.

hurling. Evidence of footballing activity in pre-GAA Ireland is quite substantial; the games seem to have been spread over a geographical area even bigger as the dispersion of hurling practices. However, the actual resemblance of all these games can hardly be inferred from reports that are useless in giving any indication of the specific characteristics such as rules or style.⁵²² The attempts to graft distinctive and continuous traits upon Irish versions of football most often refer to the game *caid*.⁵²³ From medieval times up until the 19th century it seems to have indeed been practised regularly, especially in county Kerry. However, it could do little to conceal the “shared history” of the football game in Ireland.⁵²⁴

Violent and unorganised forms of (Shrovetide) football existed in Ireland throughout its history – just as they had in Britain, across Europe and in other regions. Consequentially, Gaelic football shares a common ancestry with “traditional” football, the game that spawned association football, rugby league and rugby union.⁵²⁵ It is startling from an ideological perspective, but not so from a sport-historical viewpoint, that before 1885, when Gaelic football had been formally arranged as a distinguishable brand, Gaelic football in Cork was still referred to as “Rugby”.⁵²⁶ In the “rebel county”, Gaelic football has always been more orientated towards rugby than anywhere else in Ireland and it took quite some time to obliterate the carrying game by inculcating the GAA-rules among the local footballers.⁵²⁷ In counties Antrim and Louth, in turn, the football game in the late 19th and early 20th centuries conspicuously resembled association football from Britain. The defeats of Louth by old-fashioned Kerry in the 1909 All-Ireland final, and of Antrim by Cork in 1911 were hailed as a symbolic triumph for the true tradition over a false imported one.⁵²⁸

Garnham concludes that all claims of Gaelic football to an exclusive and native origin are spurious. Just as soccer and rugby, the game would have been the product of the Victorian shift towards reinvention and codification.⁵²⁹ In similar terms, Brady can’t detect any tangible indications for the continuity from the ancient game to the modern in Ireland.⁵³⁰ Joseph

⁵²² Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 15-16.

⁵²³ Some people in Kerry, especially among Irish speaking communities, still use the word *caid* to refer to modern Gaelic football.

⁵²⁴ One of the few incidents that Corry could discern as distinctively Irish in early (pre-GAA) football contests in Ireland is the fact that competitions were often staged between county-teams. Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 17.

⁵²⁵ Eoin Kinsella, “Riotous Proceedings and the Cricket of Savages: Football and Hurling in Early Modern Ireland,” in *Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, ed. by Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 16.

⁵²⁶ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 27.

⁵²⁷ Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*, 17. Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 26, 49. Corry explains that throughout the closing decade of the 19th century, Cork was in constant struggle with the GAA over its propensity to integrate the rugby-style into their football game. One of the county’s football teams (Nils Desperandum) spent most of the decade interpolating between rugby and Gaelic.

⁵²⁸ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics*, 145.

⁵²⁹ Garnham, “Accounting for the early success of the GAA,” 75.

⁵³⁰ Brady, “Home and Away,” 30.

Lennon concurs by repeatedly referring to Gaelic football as a “designer game” of the late 19th century.⁵³¹

Gaelic football was invented virtually from scratch by Maurice Davin, the outstanding Irish athlete of his time and vital part of the “GAA-tandem” beside Michael Cusack. As an internationally successful competitor, he was very much in tune with British innovations in regularising sporting disciplines. Accordingly, he did not hesitate to adopt incentives of “foreign” disciplines such as association football (soccer) and rugby.⁵³² But at the same time he seems to have been aware that the popularity of Gaelic football would also be dependent upon its distinctive Irishness. That is why he additionally drew from the traditions of the Irish countryside and tried to make sure that the wrestling-skills of Irish footballers were not disparaged altogether.⁵³³

Dick Fitzgerald was an exceptional figure in Gaelic football in more than just one respect. With Kerry he played in no less than eight All-Ireland finals and – nationalist GAA devotee through and through – he was captaining teams in various jails during the War of Independence. His efforts to uncover the specifically Irish ingredients of Gaelic football are of particular significance in that he was not referring to Irish football practices of the distant past, but – instead – to the *science* of the modernised GAA-game (see Chapter 2.5.). This *science*, as he described it, does not converge with the sense of teamwork and combination on the pitch that was heralded by most modern sports.⁵³⁴ Gaelic football would be exceptional, said Fitzgerald, in that it does not “reduce the individual player to the level of a mere automaton. In other modern games the individual is a disadvantage to his side, if his individuality asserts itself strongly (...) and has too little of a mere machine.” Fitzgerald goes on to assert: “In these matches, in which perfect combination alone is the only thing commended, there is no hero – no great individual standing out from the whole field. Gaelic Football fortunately does not tend in the direction of reducing its players to the mere machine level.” Eventually, he put his abhorrence towards team-play into perspective by stating: “Such is the genius of the game [Gaelic football] itself, that while combination will always be prominent, the brilliant individual gets his opportunities to stand out. After the match is over,

⁵³¹ See Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*.

⁵³² Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 221.

⁵³³ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people’s history*, 37. In *Annals of the GAA in Galway* (p. 23), O’Laoi showed that a certain element of wrestling accompanied many of the early GAA encounters: When a stiff football match between Leitrim and Mullagh in January 1886 ended in a draw and it became evident that both teams were too evenly matched to decide the tie, a member proposed that the muscle and strength ought to be tried in a game of wrestling. In *The History of Gaelic Football* (p. 47), Corry shows that even ten years later, at the 1895 All-Ireland football final, Dublin lined up with the Irish wrestling champion Dick Curtis in their side.

⁵³⁴ The match-report in the *Irish Independent* of 6 July 1908 corroborates this notion. The correspondent remarks: “Science was not lacking, but something like combination was, and that was not exactly on the part of the enthusiastic representatives.” Quoted in Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 71.

you will generally have a hero or two carried enthusiastically off the field on the shoulders of their admirers.”⁵³⁵ This alleged propensity of Gaelic games towards the individual is even more intriguing if one takes into account that Devlin was proposing the same notions 20 years later, when the rampant transformation of modern sports was in full flow. He said: “In all Gaelic contests the calibre of the individual contender is the only true basis for his pretensions. True, every parish is impelled by the impulse to field a team for its prestige. But Gaelic games could not live in the continued supremacy of any couple of combinations.”⁵³⁶ Even though Fitzgerald’s and Devlin’s emphasis on the realisation of the individual in Gaelic football should not be overrated, it is an indication of the propensity of GAA followers to accentuate aspects that did allegedly stand in stark contrast to other modern sports.

As weird as some of his views may appear to the reader, Fitzgerald’s remarks must be perceived as representative, as he was a key figure of the Kerry team that set the standards in Gaelic football in the early 1900s. No other team has so meticulously internalised the *science* of the game, the sophistication of which accompanied the period of rampant GAA modernisation. The legendary status of Kerry, signifying the non-plus-ultra of how the modern game should be played, still thrives today.⁵³⁷

Paradoxically, it is this “designed” football game and not the ancient ball-and-stick pastime of hurling that carries the term “Gaelic” in its label. Even though the institutionalisation of hurling must be considered as the most remarkable transformation of a native pastime into a modernised game, it was the designed character of Gaelic football that most vividly reflects that the GAA was committed to exploit assets that have made modern sports so popular in Britain and elsewhere. In Ireland, the vogue of Gaelic football soon transcended the dedication for hurling and all other sports.⁵³⁸ It is remarkable that there is hardly any evidence that this was highly irritating for those who projected the exaltation of Gaelic games first and foremost on their potential to revive ancient traditions and mythological sentiments (such as in hurling). One of the very scarce incidents of the kind stems from a match report in *The Celtic Times*.

⁵³⁵ Fitzgerald, *How to play Gaelic Football*, 14-15.

⁵³⁶ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 69.

⁵³⁷ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 3-7. Corry outlines the revolutionising impact that the Kerry team had on the advancement of tactics, fitness and technique – and how it became to be outdated and overlapped by innovations from other corners of the country after the Second World War.

⁵³⁸ Notwithstanding the view of *The Celtic Times* (5 March 1887) that “Nowhere should English games be more rigorously boycotted, and Irish games more vigorously promoted, than in Limerick – the city of the ‘violated treaty’ [of 1691],” Limerick became the only Irish city where rugby could preserve its status as the most popular football game.

Commenting on a Gaelic tournament in Carrick-on-Suir and the rising popularity of Gaelic football, the author stated:

There was one drawback to today's tournament to which I wish to direct special attention. There is no excuse whatever for the fact that out of the four matches on the programme there was not a single hurling contest. Now, if this kind of thing continues long, and if hurling does not get more attention from those responsible for arranging these monster tournaments, that sport, which is pre-eminently the national game, will soon be a thing of the past. In every tournament held under the laws of the GAA, hurling should get a fair representation.⁵³⁹

3.3.3 Gaelic games (as opposed to "foreign" games)

However the two Gaelic disciplines differed in their relation to ancestry and their reflection of nostalgic sentiments, the focus of the GAA on both, hurling and Gaelic football, turned out to be a master stroke. Michael Cusack and Maurice Davin were not to know it in the course of the turbulent inception of the association, but they turned Irish sport on its head with the promotion of these Gaelic games.⁵⁴⁰ Even though Archbishop Croke referred – in the letter accepting his patronage of the GAA – to a number of other allegedly typical Irish pastimes ("leaping in various ways, wrestling, handy-grips, top-pegging, leap-frog, rounders, and tip-in-the-hat"⁵⁴¹), the truly Irish brand of Gaelic games soon accounted only for hurling and Gaelic football and not for athletics which was "lost in the long shadows cast by the appeal of the field games."⁵⁴²

I have already indicated in Chapter 2 that in the quest of Ireland's native pastimes for "ludic legitimacy",⁵⁴³ it was essential to devise them in opposition to "foreign" games. Since the constitution of the GAA in 1884 one politically shaped imperative was carved in stone: every Gaelic athlete naturally repudiates British games, because they are "foreign" and don't suit the nature of Irish athletes. In his famous letter to Michael Cusack, Archbishop Croke concurs with the Gaelic athletic movement in assessing that English games and pastimes just would not be "racy of the [Irish] soil" and would be played largely by "degenerate dandies of the day."⁵⁴⁴ Devlin even lamented that the basis of national strength is shattered by the deviation

⁵³⁹ *The Celtic Times*, March 19, 1887.

⁵⁴⁰ Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people's history*, 32.

⁵⁴¹ Cited in Fullam, *The Throw-In*, 44.

⁵⁴² Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA – a people's history*, 40.

⁵⁴³ Guttmann, "The Diffusion of Sports and the Problem of Cultural Imperialism," 133.

⁵⁴⁴ Cited in Fullam, *The Throw-In*, 44.

and weakness of Irish athletes who indulge in “foreign” games and “elect to make Ireland the arena of their athletic exploits while seeking external commendation.”⁵⁴⁵

Appeals for technical amendments of early constitutional drafts were inexorably rejected by the GAA if they were bound to approximate the sports to the “Anglo-Scotch” games.⁵⁴⁶

Association football (and also rugby) was commonly titled as the “Garrison Game”. The sight of a soccer ball outside the garrison wall was considered to be a reprehensible incident. After the decline of the GAA in the 1890s spawned efforts to curb the ban-clauses against “foreign games”, the politically conscious officials of the early 20th century re-implemented them as ideological core of the association (see Chapter 2.4.2). An adjourned convention late in 1901 promulgated an unambiguous invocation:

We call on the young men of Ireland not to identify themselves with Rugby or association football or any other form of imported sport which is likely to injuriously affect the national pastimes which the GAA provides for self-respecting Irishmen, who have no desire to adopt foreign manners and customs.⁵⁴⁷

The categorising pattern of “foreign” and “native” sport was additionally emotionalised by translating it into other spheres such as the military: *The Celtic Times* reported: “In the Soudan Campaign the Irish regiment won the hundred pound prize offered to those who would first reach the Arab quarters. Scotland came second, while West Kent was a bad third. In other words, Hurling was first, Shinty second, and Football last.”⁵⁴⁸

While the emphasis on the “racial” distinctiveness of Irish sport by early GAA enthusiasts was gravely undermined by the undefinable reference to “Celtic” or “Gaelic”,⁵⁴⁹ this same arbitrariness also shaped the ostracisation of “foreign” games. Notwithstanding the “obligatory” rejection of typically British sports, some disciplines of minor popularity (such as tennis) were silently dropped from the list and others, like soccer and rugby, were added. Against the backdrop of the close ties between Ireland and Britain on an administrative level and many other spheres, the “foreignness” of allegedly British disciplines for itself was hardly tenable. Comerford alludes to the fact that tennis and cricket, two of the games initially coined as “foreign”, were “no more foreign than tea-drinking, train engines, rosary beads or other

⁵⁴⁵ Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 66.

⁵⁴⁶ Corry, *The History of Gaelic Football*, 28.

⁵⁴⁷ Adjourned Convention 13th December 1901, GAA Minute Books GAA/CC/01/01, The GAA Museum Archive Croke Park, Dublin, 98-99.

⁵⁴⁸ *The Celtic Times*, February 26, 1887.

⁵⁴⁹ Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 77.

things that Irish people don't felt the need to renounce."⁵⁵⁰ He also suggests to treat with great caution the seemingly definite classificatory systems such as the one that "soccer has been played by the 'townies' who had joined the British Army for the Great War, rugby by the upper-middle classes, unionist and Redmondite, and Gaelic games by the 'boys' who won Ireland's freedom."⁵⁵¹ In theory, this pattern provides for clearly arranged cleavages. In practice, and on a more personal level, variations and bifurcations would have been considerable.⁵⁵²

In relation to the sporting landscape in Ireland as a whole, Bairner suggests a tripartite distinction between British or "foreign" (cricket, rugby, soccer), universal (golf, tennis), and Gaelic (hurling, Gaelic football).⁵⁵³ At the end of the day, the popularity of spectator sport in Ireland seems to depend, first and foremost, on the ability to combine the representation of core values of the Irish nation with a touch of sporting greatness on international level. Gaelic games were such an ideal icon of the first requirement that it compensated for the lack of international prowess because there was a lack of an international stage for Gaelic games. In rugby, instead, the Irish international side advanced right to the top of the world level at the end of the 19th century ("Triple Crown" – victories over England, Scotland and Wales in the same year – in 1897), but could not conclusively be adopted as national game due to the "foreign" connotations of the sport.⁵⁵⁴ Cricket, whose popularity and (social) dispersion in Ireland has long been underestimated, does not quite meet either of the requirements. The popularity of the game in late-19th-century Ireland suggests that the potential to become the people's game was definitely within reach. Nevertheless, since it was the ultimate passion of pastoral England, cricket was probably the most "foreign" of all British games, even though its exertion in Ireland has not evoked such rabid rejection as has been the case with other "foreign" sports. What's more, in cricket – unlike other "foreign" sports such as association football and rugby – Ireland has never really been world class.

With this pattern of sport popularity, Ireland did, once again, not stand apart from the global sporting scene. In fact, it resembles the "glocalisation" that is often perceived to be a constitutive element of modern sport within a globalised world, signifying that the craving of a sporting body for mass following gains real traction only if it incorporates universal (global)

⁵⁵⁰ Comerford, *Ireland – Inventing the Nation*, 220.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁵² In *The History of Gaelic Football* (p. 46), Corry portrays Tom Irwin, the outstanding Cork sportsman of turn of the century Ireland. He was exceptional in that he excelled in both, Gaelic and "foreign" sports, at the highest level. He won an 1892 All-Ireland hurling medal, played in three Gaelic football finals, was one of the best cricketers in the country and was, at one stage, in line for an Irish rugby cap.

⁵⁵³ Bairner, "Political Unionism and Sporting Nationalism," 520-521.

⁵⁵⁴ Rugby is one of the few sports that have always been governed by an All-Ireland body, though. It therefore mediates – even if the sport is technically "foreign" – a sense of Irishness.

elements – such as the basic principles of modern sport – and is, at the same time, somehow linked to the local.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵⁵ Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 91.

Conclusion

The M.A. thesis “Gaelic games and the upsurge of modern sports in Britain – The GAA and its ambivalent contribution to Irish identity (1874-1913)” sought to tackle the key issues of the unique sporting culture in Ireland that evolved from the re-vitalisation of Gaelic sport from 1873 to 1913. The concept of modern sport that emerged in Britain at the time was employed as the central model for our analysis. This was a corollary as the modern sporting revolution caused a watershed for sporting entities all over the world and – in the Irish case – even transcended the remarkable impact in “technical” terms. This was the case, because its proliferation coincided with a highly sensitive period in Anglo-Irish relations. The general defiance towards “West Britonism”, to which the authorities of Irish sport were committed, was undermined by the recognition of the potential benefits of modern sporting incentives from Britain. The way in which this dilemma saw Irish sport being caught up in a highly precarious design and how Gaelic games harnessed exactly this ambiguity to become a national sanctuary are carefully laid down in this work.

To substantiate what the modern transformation of sport meant in the first place, the study commenced with the illustration of the “games revolution” in England by expounding the key characteristics of modern sport. Via the decisive transfer-mechanisms and Ireland’s ambivalent response to modern sport the attention was directed to the specifically Irish scene. It was then examined how the GAA emerged, in 1884, as the main institution to represent Ireland’s *Sonderweg* in sport. Along with the institutional history of the organisation, it was demonstrated how it was strengthened by nationalist sentiment and made the two major Gaelic games – hurling and Gaelic football – the most popular spectator sports in Ireland. Against the background of a large-scale modernisation of the GAA in the early 20th century, it was asked in how far this could be seen as the ultimate convergence with the key tenets of modern sport. The adherence to rules and regulations or the amateur codex was one of the main indicators of the GAA’s stance towards modern sport. Their evolution and re-evaluation within the early GAA is analysed in detail. Finally, it is examined how hurling and Gaelic football fitted into the interplay between Gaelic revivalism and modern sport.

Referring to the uniquely Irish way to linking the fascination of modern mass-spectator sport with the remnants of ancient sporting practices, Holt neatly summarises the trajectory of Irish sport by saying:

Ireland picked its way through the maze of sport by rejecting the monotony of mass gymnastics but also refusing to follow the dominant forms of British sport. It adopted amateur values but rejected the social distinctions that went with them. It embraced spectator sport but refused the American model of sport as commercial entertainment. In doing so, Ireland created a unique blend of the traditional and the modern, which has survived and prospered for 125 years.⁵⁵⁶

With this statement, Holt indicates the overtly contradictory foundations upon which modern Gaelic sport was created – a recurring theme in this thesis. This contradiction not only refers to the extent of Britishness which accompanied the creation of hurling and Gaelic football in the late 19th century. Because Gaelic games work on many intersecting planes and provide a forum where different symbols of Irishness could be produced, contested and synthesised, it must also be seen in a wider context of sporting identities. Joseph Lennon suggests that the innate linkage between a national sport and its people – as is so vividly epitomised by the affection of the Irish towards Gaelic sport – must lead us to formulate the question “whether the games we play are part of what we are or we are part of the games we play.”⁵⁵⁷ If not providing definite answers for the specific Irish case, this thesis should stimulate further discussion on exactly this question.

⁵⁵⁶ Holt, “Ireland and the Birth of Modern Sport,” 45.

⁵⁵⁷ Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games*, 17.

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APPENDIX

Zusammenfassung

Die Diplomarbeit “Gaelic games and the upsurge of modern sports in Britain – The GAA and its ambivalent contribution to Irish identity (1874-1913)” untersucht die historisch-konstitutive Phase des modernen gälischen Sports in Irland. Es wird gezeigt, wie sich die beiden Hauptdisziplinen Hurling und Gaelic football unter der Patronanz der Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) zu einem Nischenphänomen in der internationalen Sportlandschaft entwickeln konnten. Besonderes Augenmerk wird dabei auf die Rückwirkungen der historischen Umstände des zum britischen Königreich gehörenden Irlands im späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert gelegt. Ausgehend von den Eigenheiten gälischer Sportarten in Irland wird die kulturelle und gesellschaftliche Relevanz von Identitätskonstruktionen im Bereich des Sports in größerem Zusammenhang diskutiert und erörtert.

Im Zentrum der historischen Analyse steht das ambivalente Verhältnis der irischen (gälischen) Sportszene zu den sport-politischen Pionierleistungen des Erzfeindes aus England. Speziell unter der mehrheitlich katholischen Bevölkerung Irlands hatte sich durch die konfliktbehaftete Vergangenheit der anglo-irischen Beziehung ein anti-britischer Grundkonsens etabliert. Gleichzeitig machte es die institutionelle Verflechtung mit dem Königreich unmöglich, sich der Sportrevolution zu entziehen, die Mitte des 19. Jahrhundert in England ihren Ausgang nahm und die Dogmen des modernen Sports salonfähig machte. Dies führte dazu, dass gälischer Sport in Irland trotz seiner offen anti-britischen Ausrichtung viele Elemente in sein Portfolio integrierte, die als archetypisch britisch bezeichnet werden können.

Um die Bewegung des modernen Sports als komparatives Instrument einsetzen zu können, wird im ersten Kapitel zunächst darauf eingegangen, wann, wo und von wem die britische Sportrevolution losgetreten wurde und worum es sich bei dem Ausdruck „modern sports“ eigentlich handelt. Es wird gezeigt, dass die inhärente Widersprüchlichkeit dieser Konzeption insbesondere im Zuge ihres Exports nach Irland zum Vorschein kommen musste. Im zweiten Kapitel wird der Fokus dann ausschließlich auf Irland gelegt und die Geschichte des modernen gälischen Sports anhand der Gründungsphase der GAA nachgezeichnet. Im dritten

und abschließenden Kapitel werden zwei zentrale Aspekte des Themenkomplexes genauer unter die Lupe genommen: die Schlüsselfunktion von Regeln im Rahmen moderner Sportbewegungen wie der GAA und die Rolle des Amateurismus als ideologische Rechtfertigung sportlicher Initiativen.

In ihrer Gesamtheit zielt die Diplomarbeit darauf ab, die historisch belastete Sportgeschichte Irlands im späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert in einen weiteren – und vor allem positiv besetzteren – Bezugsrahmen globaler Sportidentitäten zu setzen. Durch die separate Abhandlung einzelner Teilaspekte soll zukünftigen Forschungsinitiativen damit ein analytisches Grundwerkzeug zur Verfügung gestellt werden. Die Erörterung des vielschichtigen Themenkomplexes versteht sich auch als essentieller Beitrag zur außer-irischen Sportwissenschaftsszene, in der das Phänomen „Gaelic sports“ bisher kaum Berücksichtigung gefunden hat.

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