‘A Youth Tainted With The Deadly Poison Of Anglicism’? Sport and Childhood in the Irish Independence Period

Abstract

Research into the history of sport and childhood in Ireland remains embryonic. In this study, McElligott explores how developments in the relationship between sport and children in contemporary Britain both heavily influenced and stimulated strong reaction in Ireland. Various organisations would now look to formal sport to project the values they wished to incubate among Irish society’s youth. McElligott investigates how schools, religious and lay youth movements, nationalist bodies and Irish sporting associations used sport as a means of appropriating the Irish child in the decades surrounding the creation of the Free State and the political partition of Ireland.

Introduction

Chronicling the evolving relationship between sport and children in Ireland is no easy task. If academic inquiry into the history of Irish childhood is still only emerging from its infancy, the study of children and sport on the island is, at best, embryonic. While the impulse to play is as old as human civilisation itself, such “frivolous” activities were rarely deemed worthy of historical record, at least until the emergence of modern, global codified sports in the latter nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly then, the games which occupied children for centuries were seen as even less deserving of document. For the most part, we have to infer children’s participation from what little references were made to sporting activity more generally. Edward III’s decree in 1365 ‘forbidding handball, football and hockey and cockfighting and all other useless games which can be of no profit’ was no doubt aimed as much at the hordes of unruly children as the adults who participated in informal games like mob football.[1] A year later Edward’s son Lionel would issue the Statues of Kilkenny, prohibiting the subjects of England’s colony in Ireland from indulging in various native customs and practices, including the popular sport of ‘horlinge’ (hurling).[2] The clause presumably applied as much to children as young adults.

It is to the Victorian era we must turn to witness the first widespread attempts to introduce formal or codified sports to children across Britain and Ireland. From the mid-nineteenth century on, church and lay authorities and an assortment of other organisations would look to sport to project the values they wished to incubate among society’s youth. The Victorians’ concern with childhood and the nurturing of children’s physical and moral character is hardly

[1] William Joseph Barker, *Sports in the Western World* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press,1988), pp. 54-5.
[2] Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 17.

surprising considering that one third of the British population at this point was under the age of fourteen.[3] Educational institutions would now play an especially critical role in utilising formal sport to construct new perceptions of childhood.[4]

By the early twentieth century, elite Irish schools had embraced an ethos of athleticism, heavily promoting team sports as a means of developing a child's ethical character.[5] For both Catholic and Protestant run establishments, the encouragement of such games was also a valuable means of demarcating the exclusivity of their institutions. Many educationalists likewise recognised the power of sport to indoctrinate feelings of fidelity towards the British Empire among Irish children. Conversely, Irish cultural nationalists would adapt British athleticism for an indigenousness purpose; utilising Gaelic games to infuse the next generation with a sufficiently patriotic nationalist spirit. Religious organisations would also quickly appreciate the appeal of sport in campaigns to promote religious devotion. In contrast to such voluntary exertion neither the British Government nor the Free State administration which replaced it, devoted much energy to the provision of sport for Ireland's youth. Voluntary bodies and sport's organisations themselves would be almost solely responsible for providing a sporting outlet for Irish children in the years under consideration. This chapter will therefore investigate how schools, religious and lay youth movements, nationalist bodies and Ireland's own sporting associations used formal sport as a means of proselytising the Irish child in the decades surrounding the creation of the Free State and the political partition of Ireland. Their motives were varied, but their common goal was to represent and appropriate Irish children for their own specific ends.

Sport and Education in Pre-Independence Ireland

Irish educational institutions became the means by which many children were first introduced to formal, organised sports. This was a development heavily influenced by what was occurring across the Irish Sea in Victorian Britain. The British public school system became the nursery for the modern, global, mass-spectator sports which emerged in the later nineteenth century.[6] How and why this occurred was down to a ubiquitous culture of athleticism which soaked itself into the very fabric of elite schools from the 1860s and gradually percolated down through all strata of the British education system by the turn of the

[3] Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 141.
[4] In Ireland evidence of the link between education and sport goes back to at least 1620, when a school established in Newcastle, Co. Down made reference to a green space provided for students for archery and a local form of football. Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 42.
[5] Tom Hunt, *Sport and Society in Victorian Ireland, The Case Study of Westmeath* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), p. 45.
[6] Mike Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland, Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity Since 1884* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), p. 140. The students of Rugby School drew up the first rules of the eponymous sport in 1846 and it was the products of the public school system that were instrumental in the formation of organisations such as the English Football Association (FA) and the English Rugby Union (RFU). Edmund Van Esbeck, *One Hundred Years of Irish Rugby: The Official History of the Irish Rugby Football Union* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1974), p 6; Neil Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society in Britain 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 26.

twentieth century.[7] Anxieties over the need for greater respectability and social control in Victorian life saw formal sports being initiated in these institutions as a way of imposing discipline on their fractious students and diverting the energy of young boys, in particular, away from less desirable impulses.[8] One notable aim was a desire to use programmes of sport to supress students' sexual urges.[9] From their origin as a means of social control, school sports soon became an essential, and often compulsory element, in the curriculum and daily life of public schools.[10] Yet the increasing worship of sport forced those in charge of these institutions to seek an ethical and educationally justifiable ideology to envelop their obsession. Hence the cult of athleticism was born – a heady cocktail which embraced notions of muscular Christianity, social Darwinism and British imperialism.[11] The disciples of Thomas Arnold at Rugby saw participation in team sports as a vehicle to develop a boy's religious piety and mental facilities.[12] Meanwhile G.E.L. Cotton, the headmaster of Marlborough school, argued that a well-maintained physique was essential for fostering a Christian boy's moral, virtuous and manly character.[13]

The mantra "a healthy body breeds a healthy mind" quickly became the slogan for athleticism. Meanwhile increasing apprehensions about the complications and challenges of a modern, urbanised and industrialised world ensured that justifications for sport's dominance in public schools were wrapped around emerging notions of social Darwinism and the linking of success in life with prevalent naturalist theories surrounding the survival of the strongest.[14] There was a growing belief that sport, especially team sport, would instil in boys the principles of moral and physical courage, teamwork, loyalty and fair play. It would also teach them to accept defeat, to be modest in victory and show them how to both command and obey.[15] Such values were considered vital for navigating the treacherous waters of adulthood.[16] Feeding into this rhetoric were growing concerns about the intense competition Britain now faced as it strove to maintain its position as the world's dominant economic and military power. Team sports were seen as instrumental in honing the physical and mental qualities essential for future victories on the battlefield and for the continued successful

---

[7] J.A. Mangan defined athleticism as: 'Physical exercise taken, considerably and compulsorily, in the sincere belief … that it was a highly effective means of inculcating valuable instrumental and impressive educational goals'. J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 9.

[8] Ibid., p. 23.

[9] Holt, *Sport and the British*, p. 91.

[10] Ibid., p. 81.

[11] For an overview of the emergence of the cult of athleticism in the British school system see Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Public School Phenomenon* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), pp. 145-154; Holt, *Sport and the British*, pp. 74-86; Mangan, *Athleticism*, pp. 13- 28;

[12] Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863-1915* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 12; Mangan, *Athleticism*, p. 27.

[13] Tranter, *Sport and Society*, p. 58.

[14] Holt, *Sport and the British*, p. 94

[15] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 126.

[16] The novelist Charles Kingsley wrote that through sport, 'boys acquire … self-restraint, fairness, honour … all the ''give and take'' of life which stand a man in good stead when he goes forth into the world'. Cited in David G. McComb, *Sport in World History* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), pp. 75-76.

governance of an ever-expanding British Empire.[17] The simplistic, yet pervasive notion emerged that sport trained young boys for war.[18]

The ideology of athleticism became so dominant that by the early twentieth century, playing for the school team became the highest honour a public schoolboy could achieve.[19] The cult of athleticism spilled over the walls of the elite schools, and was carried by its past pupils into British universities, on to teacher training colleges, other secondary schools and finally down to elementary school level. At each stage, it adapted to the prevailing physical as well as educational conditions. By 1906, sport had become an official part of the primary school curriculum in Britain.[20]

Ireland's education system could not remain immune to these developments. Recently there has been much debate about the extent to which the ideology of athleticism infiltrated Irish schools in the Victorian era and the consequent significance of the role of elite and other educational institutions in the development, spread and popular appeal of modern sport on the island.[21] The overall evidence suggests that the ripples of British athleticism certainly lapped the shores of Irish education. By the early 1900s, numerous educational institutions on this island had begun to foster sport as a means of moulding their student's moral character.

By 1911, Ireland had 489 'superior' or secondary schools with 29,159 students.[22] The majority were run by Catholic and Protestant religious orders. Among this number were around sixty Irish elite colleges catering to children from the upper echelons of Irish society.[23] Though athleticism took longer to bear fruit within Irish education, its seed was borne by factors such as the estimated 1,500 Irish boys who travelled annually to receive education in English public schools.[24] Here they were exposed to the prevailing ethos of sport and took this knowledge back with them across the Irish Sea.[25] In addition, the public school model was consciously aped by elite Irish colleges such as the Catholic-run Clongowes in Kildare and the likes of the Protestant Royal Schools of Armagh and Portora, Enniskillen.[26] While informal games were probably played in each, from the 1870s a determined effort was made in many to introduce the team sports which were emanating from their role models in

---

[17] Tranter, *Sport and Society*, p. 58.
[18] Gathorne-Hardy, *The Public School*, p. 147.
[19] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 126.
[20] Holt, *Sport and the British*, p. 139.
[21] See the debate carried in, Gerry P.T. Finn, 'Trinity Mysteries: University, Elite Schooling and Sport in Ireland', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27:13 (2010), pp. 2255-2287; Mike Cronin, 'Trinity Mysteries': Responding to a Chaotic Reading of Irish History', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 28:18 (2011), pp. 2753-2760; Colm Hickey, 'The Evolution of Athleticism in Elite Irish Schools 1878–1914. Beyond the Finn/Cronin Debate', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 30:12 (2013), pp. 1394-1417.
[22] In addition, Ireland had 8,649 primary schools. *1911 Census*, p. 42/58.
[23] Hickey, 'Athleticism', p. 1403.
[24] Liam O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster A Social and Cultural History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), p. 21.
[25] For example Thomas Kirkwood Hackett, who became a founding member of the Leinster Football Association, had been introduced to the game of soccer while studying at a public school in Dorset. Cormac Moore, *The Irish Soccer Split* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2015) p, 19.
[26] Neal Garnham, *Association Football and Society in Pre-Partition Ireland* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2004), p. 21; Senia Paseta, *Before the Revolution: Nationalism, Social Change and Ireland's Catholic Elite, 1879-1922* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p.40; Finn, 'Trinity', p. 2264.

Britain. In Ireland, the same rhetoric was used to justify the integral place of sport in these elite institutions. The Castleknock College *Chronicle* wrote: 'Is it not in their school games boys must learn that manliness, energy, enthusiasm and ingeniousness which they must afterwards show in the battle of life?'[27] Meanwhile the president of St Jarlath's College, Tuam stressed the importance the school placed on the cultivation of 'manly games' among its boys.[28] The conscious effort to foster sports was also another means of defining the superiority of these institutions as the preferred training grounds for the future ruling class of Ireland.[29]

Cricket, perhaps the most popular sport in Ireland in the three decades following the Great Famine, became the principal summer game of Irish elite schools.[30] It was seen by principals and headmasters as an ideal way of promoting a moral education.[31] Michael Cusack, the founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), was a staunch believer in the character building proprieties of the game. Cusack had taught at several elite institutions, including Blackrock, and in 1882 wrote: 'You may be certain that the boy who can play cricket well, will not, in after years, lose his head and get flurried in the face of danger.'[32] From the 1880s soccer also became a feature in many elite schools and, like cricket, was valued for the principles of team building, group loyalty and fairness it promoted amongst young boys. By 1884, the Irish Football Association (IFA) had inaugurated a Schools Cup.[33] In Leinster both Clongowes and Castleknock College played a prominent role in the game's spread and popular appeal. Castleknock's students were instrumental in the establishment of the Bohemians Football Club in 1890, the first team outside Ulster to compete in the Irish Football League.[34]

However, rugby was to become the sport most associated with elite education in Britain and Ireland; a development instrumental to the diffusion of the game among the Irish middle classes.[35] Within two years of the formation of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) in 1874, the Ulster Schools Cup was inaugurated and Armagh Royal School won the trophy in seven out of the first ten years.[36] The Leinster Senior Cup, begun in 1887, saw another bastion of athleticism, Blackrock College, win the competition twenty times before 1914.[37] Schools rugby was described in the *Belfast Newsletter* as 'the nursery of Empire-builders'.[38]

---

[27] *Castleknock Chronicle* (June, 1890), cited in Hickey, 'Athleticism', p. 1398.
[28] *Tuam Herald*, 7 October 1911.
[29] Paseta, *Before the Revolution*, p. 40.
[30] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 122.
[31] Hickey, 'Athleticism', p. 1408.
[32] *Shamrock*, 8 July 1882.
[33] Garnham, *Association Football*, p. 23.
[34] George Briggs and Joe Dodd (eds), *Leinster Football Association 100 Years: Centenary Yearbook, 1892-1992* (Dublin: Leinster Football Association, 1993), p. 25; Moore, *The Irish Soccer Split*, p, 19.
[35] Its desirability as the sport of choice of the upper and middle classes was evident when even students at Castleknock and Clongowes voted to abandon soccer in favour of the game between 1907 and 1909. Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 215.
[36] Finn, 'Trinity', p. 2264.
[37] Hickey, 'Athleticism', p. 1401. A Connacht School's Senior Cup was inaugurated in 1913 while the Munster branch of the IRFU established the Munster Schools Cup and Munster Junior Cup in 1909. The competitions were dominated by teams from two of the elite Catholic Cork Colleges, Presentations Brothers College and Christian Brothers College. O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster*, p. 43.
[38] *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 March 1919.

In eulogising rugby and other team sports' prominence within these schools, and their value to the students who played them, the ideology of athleticism was constantly invoked. Addressing the pupils of the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen as 'an old rugby captain', the head of the Church of Ireland, Archbishop Reverend Dr Crozier stated:

> The men and women who played the game of life really began to ''play the game'' in school, by learning to play the game for others as well as for themselves they learned at school that the game was better than the result ... The team that was capable of playing the game up to the last moment, no matter how many goals or points there were against them, was the team that was composed of boys who would do their duty afterwards in that state of life in which it should please God to call them.[39]

Yet the nature of secondary education in Ireland meant that athleticism could never be as pervasive a creed as it became in Britain. Even elite colleges were dependent on fees awarded by the Board of Education which were based on students' results in the inter-cert examinations.[40] Academic and not sporting achievement was thus the priority.[41] The demands of the inter-cert examination system gave teachers and principals very little scope to indulge in extra-curricular activity.[42] The physical constrains in which many schools operated also negated the provision of sports for pupils.[43] Thus the diffusion of modern games from these elite colleges into other secondary schools and down to the national school level in Ireland was not a simple or uniform process. One prominent feature of the calendar for many schools across the education spectrum was the annual sports day. In Westmeath, the Castlepollard national school sports day was sponsored by the local Countess of Longford who hosted the boys and girls on her estate.[44] In Tuam, St Jarlath's College held a popular annual sports meeting with athletic prizes being donated by successful past pupils.[45] From the 1890s, formal games were also being introduced to national and other secondary schools on an *ad hoc* basis – often down to the personal whims of those who ran a particular school.[46]

The British Government meanwhile, showed little appetite for any formal endorsement of sport in Irish education. It was only in 1901 that a Government report recommended that some physical activity be included in the Irish national school curriculum and this was to consist primarily of drill exercises rather than team sports.[47] Such counsel was in part a response to the alarm felt by British military and political leaders over the poor physical conditions of recruits to the British army and the corresponding fears of the physical

---

[39] *Belfast Newsletter*, 22 December 1915.
[40] D.H. Akenson, 'Pre-University Education, 1870-1921', in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland VI: Ireland Under the Union 1: 1870-1921* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 525.
[41] As Liam O'Callaghan has shown, while winning sports trophies added to the prestige of these institutions, indulging in the anti-intellectual, moral glorification of games prevalent in British public schools, was a luxury that elite Catholic schools in Ireland could not afford. O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster*, p. 119.
[42] Akenson, 'Pre-University Education', p. 525.
[43] In Dublin in 1903, no national school had a sports field of any kind while it was also estimated that across Ireland a fifth of schools lacked a playground. Garnham, *Association Football*, p. 22.
[44] *Westmeath Examiner*, 5 September 1903.
[45] See *Tuam Herald*, 17 April, 1909.
[46] For example, at St Michael's College in Listowel, Co. Kerry, the clergy that ran the school promoted cricket among the students. Anthony J. Gaughan, *Listowel and its Vicinity* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1973), p. 249.
[47] *The Sixty-Seventh Report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, Year 1900*, p. 8.

deterioration of the British race, which recent military campaigns in South Africa had brought sharply into focus.[48]

Children, Sport and Cultural Nationalism

The foundation of the GAA in 1884 ushered in a sporting revolution and initiated mass participation in organised sport among the Irish people.[49] Its influence would be no less transformative for children's sport both inside and outside the school yard. By now, Michael Cusack had over a decade of experience teaching in Irish elite schools. His exposure to these institutions meant he was a fully-fledged advocate of the cult of athleticism. When he established his own grinds school to tutor students wishing to pass the civil service examination in 1877, sport was heavily embed into his Academy's curriculum. Little wonder that in 1887 he wrote approvingly:

> In England the physical education of the pupils is carefully provided … When we consider the fierceness of the fight, in the struggle for existence, which is going on at the present moment, in all parts of the globe, the keenness of the competition for positions of life … we can hardly fail to appreciate the importance of physical training in the life of man and to fix its proper place in his education.[50]

Nevertheless, it would take more than two decades before any real attempt was made by the GAA to infiltrate Ireland's education system and promote its games to the nation's youth. Writing in 1935, the prominent Gaelic games journalist P.J. Devlin acknowledged that for 'many years the GAA did not make any provision for younger players … for the contests were deemed unsuitable for youths'.[51] It might have been expected that schools run by the Christian Brothers would have been early converts to Gaelic games.[52] Their emphasis on a nationalist education which highlighted the value of Irish history and promoted the Irish language would seem to imply they would be sympathetic to the Association's own aims.[53] Yet a critical reason for the Brothers' lack of enthusiasm was the Catholic Church's open hostility towards the GAA. This was due to the perceived close links between the initial leadership of the Association and revolutionary organisations such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).[54]

However, with the dawn of the new century came the sweeping tide of the Gaelic Revival. The emergence of the Irish-Ireland movement and the growth of kindred cultural organisations such as the Gaelic League would both facilitate and inspire the promotion of

---

[48] Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood* (Cambridge: Wiley Press, 2005), pp. 29-30; Elaine Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots: St Enda's and the Cult of Boyhood* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004), p.120.
[49] Richard McElligott, *Forging a Kingdom: The GAA in Kerry, 1884-1934* (Cork: Collins Press, 2013), p.28.
[50] *Celtic Times*, 14 May 1887.
[51] P.J. Devlin, *Our Native Games* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1935), p. 52.
[52] By 1911 there were fifty-three CBS secondary schools in Ireland. *1911 Census*, p. 56.
[53] Barry M. Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland: The Christian Brothers and the Development of Irish Nationalism 1838-1921* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), p. 113.
[54] For a detailed discussion of the hostility between the Catholic Church and the early GAA see McElligott, *Forging a Kingdom*, pp. 84-100.

Gaelic games within Irish education.[55] Schools GAA competitions were organised in Cork, Tipperary and Dublin between 1902 and 1904.[56] In December 1907, the Munster Colleges Council was formed to oversee hurling and football competitions among the province's secondary schools while three years later a Leinster Colleges Council was established.[57] In much the same way that the GAA took its example from the structures and characteristics of rival sports emerging out of Victorian Britain, but cut them to fit an Irish nationalist cloth, so too did the promoters of Gaelic games in education recraft the ideology of athleticism to suit an Irish audience. In a contemporary essay on the progress of the Dublin School League, P.J. Devlin argued:

> Sickliness of body and sinister minds, begotten of modern customs, are the deadliest menace to the enduring Gaelic State ... the warm-blood pastimes beloved of Cúchulainn and his companions … are the only mediums which will keep that danger away ... Otherwise we invite racial decay, expose our nation to effeminacy and supineness of spirit and turn our backs on … our glorious past.[58]

For Irish girls meanwhile, exposure to formal sports was still uncommon. Small numbers of mostly upper-class Protestant girls played tennis, croquet and hockey within the school system, but organised sport assumed an inconsequential role in the lives of most Irish women.[59] This was not only down to the more limited numbers of females attending Ireland's secondary education system but also a consequence of widely held societal beliefs that excessive sporting or physical activity was damaging to a woman's health and diminished her capacity to procreate.[60] Yet the emergence of formal codified sports for men did begin to stir interest in women to emulate them.[61] This process was further stimulated by the increasing numbers of women gaining access to higher education in Ireland by the beginning of the twentieth century.[62] However for nationalist women, sports such as hockey were tainted with the brush of Anglicisation. A nationalist female alternative was sought. The Gaelic League would prove crucial and in 1904, members of the Dublin Keating's branch drew up the first formal rules for a female version of hurling called camogie. By 1905 a national association,

---

[55] Dónal McAnallen, *The Cups That Cheered, A History of the Sigerson, Fitzgibbon and Higher Education Gaelic Games* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), p 16.
[56] Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland*, p.192. Meanwhile in Kerry, branches of the Gaelic League were promoting Gaelic football matches between national schools. *Kerry Sentinel*, 17 May 1905.
[57] The meeting was chaired by the Rev. John Doody, the president of the prestigious St Kiernan's College, Kilkenny while Patrick Pearse, representing Scoil Éanna, was appointed vice-chairman of the Council. Dáiti de Búrca, 'Irish Colleges and National Pastimes', *Gaelic Athletic Annual and County Directory, 1909-1910* (Dublin, 1910), p. 74; T.F. O'Sullivan, *Story of the GAA* (Dublin: Printed at 49 Middle Abbey Street, 1916), p. 185.
[58] P.J. Devlin, 'The Schools League', in T. O'hAongusa (ed.), *Games of the Gael: An Gaedeal Og, Dublin Schools League GAA* (Dublin: An Gaedeal Og, 1923), p. 14.
[59] Ríona Nic Congáil, '"Looking on for Centuries from the Sideline": Gaelic Feminism and the Rise of Camogie', *Éire-Ireland*, 48: 1&2 (2013), p. 169.
[60] Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 45.
[61] For example, the Irish Ladies Hockey Union was formed in 1894. Nic Congáil, 'Rise of Camogie', p. 170.
[62] Regina Fitzpatrick, Paul Rosue and Dónal McAnallen, 'The Freedom of the Field: Camogie before 1950' in Donal McAnallen, David Hassan and Rody Hegarty (eds) *The Evolution of the GAA, Ulaidh, Eire agus Eile* (Belfast: Stair Uladh, 2009), p. 124.

An Cumann Camógaíochta, was set up.[63] With hockey already entrenched as the sport of choice in Protestant girls' schools, the Camogie Association fostered links with middle-class Catholic institutions.[64] For much of the twentieth century camogie, especially in rural counties, would provide one of the few competitive sports which young girls could participate in.

Despite these developments, an article in the 1909 *Gaelic Athletic Annual* highlighted the perceived widespread discrimination towards Gaelic games in Ireland's secondary schools and elite colleges:

> Native games were regarded as degrading and inferior … this antipathy was begotten of the impression persistently forced upon them that the native games were the unskilled pastimes of a savage and uncontrollable peasantry. Yet it is that same peasantry … that preserves the physical qualities of the race, and sends forth men who, in athletic prowess, surpass the products of the whole world.[65]

A clear class bias was apparent to the author with elite schools, and those attempting to ape them, rejecting Gaelic games because of the close connections between such pastimes and the poorer echelons of rural Irish society. Nevertheless, the prevailing atmosphere of the Irish cultural revival convinced a growing number of nationalists that if the ideal of a truly Gaelic Ireland was to be achieved, it was vital that children be educated along nationalist lines. This was even more imperative at a time when children were being exposed to a tsunami of British cultural influences.[66] Therefore a raft of nationalist organisations would focus their attention on children, endeavouring to expose them to various facets of Ireland's cultural renaissance while also transmitting to them the ideals of Irish-Ireland and the Sinn Féin philosophy.[67]

By 1908 successful campaigns had already been waged against the lack of a sufficient Irish content in the State approved school curriculum, resulting in the introduction of the Irish language and Irish history as formal subjects in the national school system.[68] Marnie Hay has observed that the encouragement of youth participation in Gaelic games was another means of promoting a vital aspect of native culture to children. Likewise, nationalists were as

---

[63] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 323.
[64] Nic Congáil, 'Rise of Camogie', p. 179. Camogie also became part of the curriculum of St. Ita's school, a short-lived girls school founded by Patrick Pearse in 1911 and modelled on Scoil Éanna. Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*, p. 20.
[65] De Búrca, 'Irish Colleges', pp.72-73/76.
[66] Nationalists like Patrick Pearse and Douglas Hyde were deeply concerned about the corrupting influence that mass produced imperial fiction, which targeted children and glorified the British imperial project, was having on the nation's youth. Typically this amounted to the adventure stories carried in cheap, popular publications such as *The Boy's Own Paper* which were widely available and read in Ireland. Ciaran O'Neill, 'The Irish Schoolboy Novel' in Mary Luddy and James M. Smiths (eds), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society, 1500 to the Present* (Dublin, 2014), pp. 183-4; Janette Condon, 'The Patriotic Children's Treat: Irish Nationalism and Children's Culture at the Twilight of Empire', *Irish Studies Review*, 8:2 (2000), p. 176.
[67] Marnie Hay, 'This Treasured Island: Irish Nationalist Propaganda Aimed at Children and Youth, 1910-16', in Mary Shine Thompson and Celia Keenan (eds), *Treasure Islands: Studies in Children's Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), p. 36.
[68] See David Fitzpatrick, 'Knowledge, Belief and the Irish Revolution: The Impact if Schooling', in James Kelly and Susan Hegarty (eds), *Schools and Schooling, 1650 – 2000: New Perspectives on the History of Education* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017) and David Fitzpatrick, 'The Futility of History: A Failed Experiment in Irish Education' in Ciaran Brady (ed.), I*deology and the Historians: Historical Studies XVII, Papers Read Before the Irish Conference of Historians* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1991).

convinced of sport's importance for the development of a healthy body and moral character as the disciples of British athleticism. Moreover, participation in Gaelic games would build social bonds and help prepare the country's male youth, in particular, for their future role as virile soldiers and citizens of the nation.[69] As one newspaper contributor observed:

> The boys of today will be the men of tomorrow. And it would not be natural to hope that the boys indifferent to the manly sports of their race will, in the future, become patriotic citizens – men capable of any great efforts in the National cause. [70]

Nationalist newspapers would feed a torrent of propaganda which sought to instruct Irish children along patriotic lines. The radical mouthpiece, *Irish Freedom,* carried a children's column entitled 'Grianán na nÓg' (the Sunroom of Youth) written under the pseudonym 'Neasa'.[71] Frequently Neasa would run competitions inviting readers to submit short essays on a particular question or topic posed. In response to the question 'Are Irish Boys and Girls Justified in Playing Foreign Games?' the winner, Padraig S. Frínreac of Dublin, wrote;

> native games are fitted for the temperament and physique of our people and belong to the national life and tradition of the Irish race ... They also strengthen national ideas and give to the young, wholesome minds and healthy bodies. On the other hand, foreign pastimes have been forced upon us … They contaminate the minds of young people … they induce them to renounce home and patriotism, and inspire some with contempt for their native land.[72]

In this statement, we observe the influence of the increasingly intolerant rhetoric of the Irish-Ireland dogma towards anything perceived as un-Irish in the years leading up to 1916. By now the GAA had firmly aligned itself within the greater cultural nationalist movement. Between 1901 and 1905, the Association passed a series of rules effectively banning any member who partook in what were now designated 'foreign games'.[73] The ideology of Irish-Ireland and the existence of the 'Ban' now supplied a powerful weapon to those who wished to promote Gaelic games at the expense of others. Over the next twenty years an ideological war of supremacy would be fought across the media and sports fields of Ireland. In this conflict between advocates of native and 'foreign' games, children's sport became a prominent battleground. For example, the establishment of a boys' soccer club in Cavan town in 1908 led to heated and bitter debate within the local press. Reacting to the news, one contributor declared that 'the youth of Cavan are tainted with the deadly poison of Anglicism', and blamed 'Intermediate and University students', the well know 'promoters of soccer and hockey'.[74] Another denounced those Cavan youth who looked to soccer as 'empty

[69] Marnie Hay, 'Children and the Irish Cultural Revival', UCD-scholarcast Series 12 (Spring 2015), p. 9.
[70] *Anglo-Celt,* 28 November 1908.
[71] *Irish Freedom,* was a monthly paper produced by the IRB.
[72] *Irish Freedom,* February 1913.
[73] In reality, 'foreign games' meant specifically the British sports of soccer, rugby, cricket and hockey which were now off limits to GAA members. See McElligott, *Forging a Kingdom,* pp. 145-9.
[74] *Anglo-Celt,* 28 November 1908.

headed dandies' who have 'mixed so much with the [British] Garrison that they believe the greatest luck that could have befallen them was to have been born Sasanach'.[75]

In this frenzied atmosphere it was inevitable that cultural nationalists would come into conflict with those elite schools seen as bastions of British games in Ireland.[76] In 1911, the GAA passed a motion condemning those schools which persist in fostering foreign sports and 'deny their students the right of playing national games' and appealed to all those 'interested in the promotion of Irish-Ireland ideals, to endeavour, by every means in their power, to persuade parents or their guardians to send their boys to colleges at which national games are played.'[77] In Cork, the Association become embroiled in an acrimonious dispute with local Catholic-run colleges. Due to their active promotion of rugby the Cork GAA chairman, J.J. Walsh, accused the Christian Brothers in the city of being 'the biggest enemies of Gaelic culture in Cork'.[78] Walsh's memoir recounts how in 1911 he organised a 'threatening demonstration of Gaels, armed with camans' to appear outside the gates of the North Monastery school to force the Brothers to give up rugby in favour of Gaelic games.[79] In any case rugby survived there, though by 1918, North Monastery was a school synonymous with the promotion of hurling.[80]

If Christian Brothers' schools were sometimes lukewarm in their support of Gaelic games, that accusation could certainly not be made against Scoil Éanna. Patrick Pearse's institution, established in 1908, was seen by nationalists as the Irish-Ireland version of elite colleges like Blackrock.[81] In his wholehearted promotion of Gaelic games and other physical activity within Scoil Éanna's curriculum, Pearse again demonstrated the impact British athleticism was having on Irish educational thinking. He firmly believed that by nurturing their health and fitness boys could withstand the depravities and temptations of modern society.[82] However his was athleticism moulded for an Irish-Ireland purpose. Pearse chose the figure of Cúchulainn, the boy hurler turned legendary Gaelic warrior, as the role model of Irish masculinity he wished to encourage among his pupils.[83] The cult of Cúchulainn was heavily promoted contributing to hurling, in particular, being prized as the school's main sporting passion. Though Pearse had little interest in the game itself, like many of his colleagues in the Gaelic League, he viewed hurling as a present-day link to the pure and ancient sport of the pre-Norman, Gaelic nobility.[84] Pearse would describe Scoil Éanna as 'emphatically a hurling school.' In the 1909 edition of *An Macaomh,* the Scoil Éanna magazine, he wrote:

---

[75] *Anglo-Celt*, 26 December 1908.
[76] The GAA's organ, the *Gaelic Athlete*, stated that in Ireland's elite schools, 'games controlled by the GAA are rigorously banned from the curriculum … [students] may adopt the West British pastimes if they choose, or, … they may voluntarily condemn themselves to a life of inaction so far as athletics are concerned.' *Gaelic Athlete*, 13 September 1913.
[77] Croke Park Archive (CPA), Annual Congress Minutes 1911-1927: April 16 1911.
[78] J.J. Walsh, *Recollections of a Rebel* (Tralee: The Kerryman Ltd, 1944), p. 17.
[79] Walsh, *Recollections of a Rebel*, p. 17.
[80] Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland*, p. 193.
[81] Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*, p. 34.
[82] Ibid, p. 113.
[83] Ibid, pp. 79-82.
Art Ó Maolfabhail, 'Hurling, An Old Game in a New World' in Grant Jarvie (ed.), *Sport in the Making of Celtic Cultures* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1999), p 154. Desmond Ryan, recalled that one his abiding memories as a student there was Pearse striding 'down the hurley field, his black gown flying in the wind, to

> Our boys must now be among the best hurlers and footballers in Ireland. Wellington is credited with the dictum that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. I am certain that when it comes to a question of Ireland winning battles, her main reliance must be on her hurlers.[85]

Capitalising on the new patriotic spirit that was enflaming Irish public opinion in the years following Pearse's failed uprising in 1916, the GAA made a determined push to try and undercut the popularity of rival sports. In 1917, its Central Council issued letters to county boards to 'take advantage of the present feeling throughout the country … with the object of wiping out soccer and other foreign games'.[86] Representations were made to the administrators of elite schools such as Blackrock and Terenure, and many now embraced Gaelic games, at least temporarily.[87]

Sport and Youth Movements

Outside of educational establishments, the decades surrounding Irish independence would see a range of organisations – religious, social and political – attempt to use sport as a means of proselytising Irish children for numerous designs. Religious youth organisation now spread to Ireland hoping to use sport to promote devotional observance amongst children, particularly those perceived as trapped amid the moral decay of modern urban life and its consequent effects on youth's moral fibre. At the same time radical nationalist movements, targeted at children, began to heavily promote the sporting aspects of Ireland's Gaelic past as a means of awakening Ireland's youth towards their nationalist destiny.

One example of the former was the Boys Brigade founded in Glasgow in 1883 and open to Protestant boys aged 12 to 17 years. The Brigade would become one of the largest youth movements in the United Kingdom and "companies" were established in Belfast and Dublin between 1888 and 1891.[88] Its stated aim was to promote the 'habits of obedience, reverence, self-respect and all that conduces to Christian manliness'.[89] The Brigade's goal was fundamentally religious and it used sport as a means of attracting working-class children to organised faith.[90] The Brigade's leadership intentionally sought to disseminate the ideology

---

encourage the Scoil Éanna players to beat some hostile team'. Brendan Walsh, *Boy Republic: Patrick Pearse and Radical Education* (Dublin: History Press Ireland, 2013), p. 134.

[85] *An Macaomh*, Vol 1, No 2, Christmas, 1909, p.17. In 1910 the school's senior hurling and football teams reached the finals of the Dublin Schools Championship, a remarkable achievement for a school established less than two years before.

[86] *Kerry Sentinel*, 13 October 1917.

[87] Seán Farragher, *Blackrock College, 1860-1995* (Dublin: Paraclete Press, 1995), p. 172; Fergus A. D'arcy, *Terenure College, 1860 – 2010: A History* (Dublin: Terenure College, 2010), pp. 169-70.

[88] Marnie Hay, 'An Irish Nationalist Adolescence: Na Fianna Éireann, 1909-23' in Catherine Cox and Susannah Riordan (eds), *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), p, 107.

[89] Brendan Power, 'The Functions of Association Football in the Boys' Brigade in Ireland, 1888 – 1914' in Leeann Lane and William Murphy (eds), *Leisure and the Irish in the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 41.

[90] Ibid.

of athleticism among its members as a means of moral instruction.[91] It promoted a range of sports and leisure activities but it would become most associated with the provision of soccer. It was granted honorary affiliation to the Leinster FA in 1892 and by 1905 there were twelve company teams playing in three Boys Brigade Leagues in Dublin, while soccer clubs attached to the organisation were also active in Belfast and Cork.[92] Soccer was seen as both a useful distraction from other morally corrupting influences and a means of attracting members in the first place.[93] It was also praised as a sport which showed a boy 'how to take punishment cheerfully, to control his temper even when provoked, to keep his body in a good, healthy state'.[94] The Brigade's eulogising of the moral benefits of soccer was strongly underpinned by the ethos of amateurism now widely prevalent in Britain.[95] A former member, recalling how one inter-company game ended 18-0, bemoaned that 'such a score is surely more of a disgrace to the winning team than to the losers'.[96] Yet despite the moral values the Brigade hoped to instil through its promotion of team sport, Brendan Power has shown that the history of the Brigade's soccer leagues was frequently besmirched by accusations of spectator violence, rough play and a win at all costs mentality.[97] The arrival of the Boys Brigade in Dublin prompted the emergence of a Catholic equivalent, the Catholic Boys Brigade which was founded by Fr Benvenutus, a Capuchin priest, in 1894. Its aims were similar, hoping to 'suppress vice and evil habits of every kind' amongst working-class children. They also promoted sport as a means of attracting members and a popular annual sports day was hosted by its Rathmines company.[98]

Like other Western European countries, Ireland would witness the rise of pseudo-military youth movements in the decade before the Great War. These organisations were both a manifestation of the cult of discipline, training and manliness that grew out of the anxiety about the coming war and a reaction to a widely perceived 'decadence' prevalent among the youth of Western societies.[99] Internationally, one of the most famous examples of this phenomenon was Robert Baden-Powell's Boy Scout movement which was established in

---

[91] For example William Monk Gibbon, the founder of the Dublin Brigade, was a past pupil of the Royal School Armagh and argued that the Brigade 'created an esprit de corps which has made battalions the equivalent of public schools'. Power, 'Boys' Brigade', p. 45.

[92] Briggs, *Leinster Football Association*, p. 60; David Toms, *Soccer in Munster: A Social History* (Cork: Cork University Press , 2015), p. 15.

[93] Power, 'Boys' Brigade', p. 46/53.

[94] *Dublin Evening Mail*, 27 Sept 1902.

[95] Amateurism can be distilled into the simple principle that sport should be played for love not money and according to the concept of fair-play - where one would not simply play by the rules of the game but also the spirit intended by those rules. Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 141.

[96] Power, 'Boys' Brigade', p. 49.

[97] One game in Belfast ended with a mob invading the pitch, assaulting the rival goalkeeper, tearing down telephone poles and forcing one team to seek shelter in nearby houses from a barrage of sticks and stones. Power, 'Boys' Brigade', p. 51.

[98] *Freeman's Journal*, 19 Sept 1902.

[99] David Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland, 1900-1922', in: Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds) *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 382-3.

1908.[100] Yet in an Irish context, the most notable manifestation of this compulsion was the emergence of Na Fianna Éireann.[101]

Fianna Éireann was the brainchild of John Bulmer Hobson, who would become a leading member of both the IRB and the Irish Volunteers in the years before 1916. During his adolescence, Hobson had become a committed nationalist and staunch Irish-Irelander.[102] As a member of the Tír na nÓg Gaelic League branch in Belfast, he became heavily involved with the hurling team they formed in July 1901.[103] Later that year Hobson was elected as secretary of the first Antrim County Board but fell out with that body over its refusal to promote youth hurling.[104] In June 1902, he called a mass meeting of 300 local boys to establish the first iteration of Fianna Éireann, a junior league which would promote hurling but also the Irish language and history in order 'to make the boys sound nationally.'[105] However a lack of finances and Hobson's other political commitments meant that Fianna Éireann soon lapsed.

In August 1909, Hobson teamed up with Constance Markievicz to launch a second, more militarised incarnation of Fianna Éireann in Dublin. Like the Boy Scouts, Fianna Éireann emphasised to its members the importance of values such as discipline, trust, obedience, loyalty, manliness, and self-sacrifice.[106] Yet it displayed a far more militant ideology.[107] A recruiting notice from 1914 declared that: 'England has no business in this country at all … Ireland belongs to the Irish … The object of Fianna Éireann is to train the boys of Ireland to fight Ireland's battle when they are men.'[108] By 1916 it had units in nineteen counties and would reach a peak membership of over 30,000 in June 1917.[109]

Fianna Éireann also promoted a strong cultural element and its members were encouraged to participate in aspects of the revival movement through language, theatre, music and sport. This would cultivate their sense of a separate national identity.[110] Aside from the promotion of physical fitness, a dedication to Gaelic games became a key part of its programme. Prospective recruits were told that physical culture, swimming, hurling and Gaelic football were all incorporated into the Fianna's training along with 'instruction in Irish and in Irish history [and] lectures on historical and literary subjects'.[111] In February 1914, an inter-section hurling league was started within the Dublin Battalion.[112] In March, several games were arranged to be played on the grounds of Scoil Éanna, where a troop of the Fianna had been

---

[100] Marnie Hay, 'The Foundation and Development of Na Fianna Éireann, 1909–16', *Irish Historical Studies*, 35: 141 (2008), p. 53.
[101] I am very grateful to Dr Marnie Hay for her help in highlighting sources for this particular section.
[102] Bulmer Hobson, *Ireland Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Tralee: The Kerryman Ltd, 1968), p. 3.
[103] Ibid, p. 14.
[104] Bureau of Military History (BMH), Witness Statement (WS) 82: Bulmer Hobson, p. 1.
[105] The organisation's name came from the legendary company of warriors headed by Fionn Mac Cumhail' and each club took the name of one of its members. BMH, WS 31: Bulmer Hobson, p. 1.
[106] BMH, WS, 591: Eamon Martin, p. 2; Hay, 'The Foundation of Na Fianna Éireann', p. 53.
[107] Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*, p. 123. Fianna Éireann was the first nationalist organisation to begin open military training in Ireland and its members would soon become a byword for republican purity. Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 317.
[108] *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 10 October 1914.
[109] Marnie Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 204.
[110] Hay, 'Irish Cultural Revival', pp. 11-12.
[111] *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, 10 October 1914.
[112] *Irish Volunteer*, 14 February 1914.

set up in 1910.[113] Fianna Éireann would go on to play a prominent role in the 1916 Rising with seven current or former members being killed.[114]

Irish girls were similarly targeted by nationalist youth movements. Inspired by the formation of the Girl Guides Association, a female version of the Boy Scouts, the Irish National Girl Scouts was established in Dublin and linked to the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), a Catholic fraternal society that supported the Irish Party's quest for Home Rule. The AOH's official journal, *The Hibernian*, declared it was as much the duty of Irish girls, 'to learn the art of war, so as to be able to fight for your country as it is for boys'. Aside from military instruction, the Irish National Girl Scouts' training included the study of Irish and the playing of camogie.[115]

Youth Sport in Post-Independence Ireland

In the years following independence, Ireland's largest sporting organisations would make renewed efforts to bring their sports to the nation's youth. A flurry of new school and junior competitions would be inaugurated which would see more and more children exposed to formal sport both at school and community level.

In the decade after the Civil War, the GAA established itself as the largest and most popular sporting organisation on the island. The role of teachers, especially those in national schools, proved vital for the expansion of Gaelic games across the education system at this point. Of crucial importance was the successful infiltration of Gaelic games into teacher training colleges like St Patrick's Drumcondra.[116] In Donegal, for example, 50% of positions on the County Board were held by teachers at this time.[117] In 1928 Cumann na mBunscol, a national federation of Primary Schools promoting Gaelic Games, was established.[118] Following this, the GAA's Central Council approached the Department of Education to recommend that all new national schools should contain an acre of playing ground to encourage Gaelic games.[119] The initiative failed and the Irish Government, like its British predecessor, displayed little interest in the active promotion of any sport in the education system in the decades after independence. What few schemes the State did sponsor were rudimentary in nature. From the 1920s, Free State Army instructors provided training in the basics of physical education at teacher training colleges, while an *ad hoc* programme of

---

[113] *Irish Volunteer*, 14 March 1914; Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*, p. 126. Con Colbert, who was a prominent member of a special Fianna Éireann circle in the IRB, worked as the school's physical fitness master. BMH, WS 31: Bulmer Hobson, p. 5.

[114] Hay, *Bulmer Hobson*, p. 123. In one of the first actions of the rebellion a section of Fianna Éireann was detailed to blow up the explosives and ammunition store at the magazine fort in the Phoenix Park. They brought along several footballs and approached the entrance, pretending to be a football team going to practice in the park, before successfully rushing the sentries. BMH, WS 32: Garry Holohan, pp. 58-9.

[115] *The Hibernian*, 17 July 1915.

[116] Commentating on the jubilee anniversary of the GAA's founding in 1934, the *Irish Press* noted, 'you'll find a national school teacher in every club – because the [teaching] colleges where these men are trained are truly Gaelic'. *Irish Press*, 'GAA Golden Jubilee Supplement', 14 April 1934.

[117] Conor Curran, *The Development of Sport in Donegal, 1880-1935* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2015), p. 146.

[118] M. Cronin, M. Duncan and P. Rouse (eds) *The GAA: A People's History* (Cork: Collins Press, 2009), p. 257.

[119] CPA, GAA/CC/01/04, GAA Central Council Minute Book 1929-1932: 25 May 1929.

military drill sergeants visiting national schools to conduct classes was also carried out.[120] In the 1930s, basic in-service training in physical education for teachers was conducted in army barracks across the State. In 1938, the Committee on Physical Education in Schools, set-up by the Department of Education, issued a report which highlighted that the majority of Irish children were receiving no form of physical education and made several recommendations. However, a lack of State resources meant none of these were ever implemented.[121] State intervention would not be attempted again until the 1960s.

In the absence of the State taking any leadership in sports provision, it would fall on Irish sporting organisations themselves to promote their games within Ireland's education system. In this the GAA was particularly adept and thanks to its own voluntary initiatives, the Association would successfully infiltrate all levels of Irish education in the two decades after 1922. During the late 1920s renewed efforts were made to spread the gospel of native games in post-primary education. In February 1927, Dr Eamonn O'Sullivan established a Munster Schools and Colleges Board to oversee competitions for teams in the under seventeen and under nineteen year grades in both football and hurling. O'Sullivan was also instrumental in forming an All-Ireland Colleges Council to promote secondary school games on a national basis.[122] By now camogie was also making steady progress, especially in schools run by female religious orders. In Ulster, a college camogie championship was inaugurated in 1929 while the establishment of a Brigidine Sisters Convent Camogie League in Leinster did much to popularise the sport among school goers.[123] Added impetus was given by the relaunch of the Cumann Camógaíochta na nGael in 1932 and camogie finally came to establish itself as a national game.[124]

Yet in post-independent Ireland, the issue of schools promoting foreign games remained a heated point of contention within the GAA's ranks. In 1927 the Association's president, W.P. Clifford, insisted that:

> Influence must be used to see that public grants do not go to schools that seek their inspiration, either on the playing fields of Eton or Rugby or Timbuctoo, and forget that there are games native to the soil of Ireland, evolved in her chequered and storied past, and inspired by the genius of her civilisation.[125]

In Galway, the GAA succeeded in having the Ban enshrined in a County Council secondary school scholarship scheme ensuring that students applying to those institutions promoting Gaelic games were the only ones eligible for the award. Despite criticism that such a move would only hurt children from poorer backgrounds and not the institutions in question, the following year the Dublin GAA passed a motion requesting the city's corporation to enforce

---

[120] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 316.
[121] Ibid.
[122] *Kerryman*, 7 May 1927. In January 1928, an Ulster Colleges Council was founded and Dr. Joseph MacRory, Bishop of Down and Connor, presented a trophy for its annual competitions. A year later a Colleges Council was finally established in Connacht.
[123] Fitzpatrick, et al., 'The Freedom of the Field', p. 129.
[124] By 1935, camogie had 10,000 registered players on 423 teams in 28 counties. Cronin, et al., *A People's History*, p. 328.
[125] Letter by GAA President W.P. Clifford to the Annual Congress, 16 April 1927, quoted in Cronin, et al., *A People's History*, p. 257.

a similar scholarship ban.[126] Notwithstanding such controversies, the GAA would come to dominate formal games at all school levels. By the mid-1940s, the Croke and Hogan Cup competitions were launched as All-Ireland contests for secondary schools in hurling and football respectively [127] The promotion of its games outside the school yard was also nurtured by the establishment of national underage competitions such as the minor All-Ireland Championships for players less than eighteen years of age in 1927.[128]

Rugby Union however continued to be the sport of choice for many of Ireland's most prestigious schools. By 1929, there were fifty-nine affiliated to the IRFU.[129] The continuous growth of the game at school level was crucial to the overall expansion of the sport across the island in the 1920s. Rugby's progress was also greatly aided by a raft of new competitions introduced at county and provincial level to cater for junior and underage boys' clubs which helped spread the game to many country towns.[130] Similarly, soccer's popularity among underage boys flourished in the country's larger urban centres where the game had usually become the sporting passion of choice among working-class communities. Following the formation of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) in 1923, a plethora of new junior competitions were inaugurated. The cramped and inadequate housing conditions prevalent in inner-city areas like Dublin and Cork fostered the emergence of a vibrant street soccer culture which helped to reinforce the bourgeoning appeal of the sport among the country's urban working class.[131]

Conclusion

During the decades under consideration, Irish children were exposed to formal sport in an unprecedented fashion. Individual educationalists of all hues, if not necessarily the State itself, considered sport an ideal medium for constructing a student's moral and virtuous character. Both Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and imperialist, saw the immense potential of athleticism to sculpt children's behaviour. Many elite Irish schools also looked to sport to inculcate children as future leaders of the British Empire. The promotion of team games like rugby was seen as a perfect vehicle to achieve this end. Celebrating the city's school-rugby culture in 1919 a writer in the *Belfast Newsletter* opinioned that rugby

> was perhaps the one great thing which the ancient Romans lacked. They had their public games… but what were they in comparison with this clean, manly, healthy sport which every boy was playing as hard as he knew how? Under the circumstances I think the next great power which endeavours to wipe out the British Empire will have much the same experience as the last.[132]

---

[126] Cronin, et al., *A People's History*, p. 223.
[127] Gerry Buckley, *Fifty Years of the Hogan Cup* (Nass: Leinster Leader, 2003), p. 11.
[128] CPA, GAA Annual Congress Minute Books GAA/CC/01/04, Central Council Minute Books, 1928-1938: 29 May 1929.
[129] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, p. 279.
[130] O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster*, pp. 51-53
[131] Toms, *Soccer in Munster*, p.140.
[132] *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 March 1919.

Wrapped up in such notions was also a clear element of class prejudice. Rugby was understood as another demarcation of the exclusiveness of these institutions. By contrast, the increasing popularity of soccer among Ireland's urban working class led one Irish headmaster to describe the game as 'beneath contempt'.[133] Meanwhile the tepid encouragement of Gaelic games in such schools was also seen by on-looking nationalists as branding as 'inferior the inherited manly pastimes in which our peasantry have exercised for ages'.[134] Proponents of Ireland's cultural revival naturally viewed native sports as one means of nurturing a diametrically opposed patriotism. Newspaper, as we have seen, played a prominent role in targeting children and promoting Gaelic games as part of an overall campaign to incubate among the next generation allegiance to the ideal of an Irish-Ireland.

A succession of youth organisations, both religious and political, were equally aware of the allure of sport to proselytise children. The Boys Brigade's promotion of soccer was a naked attempt at fostering religious devotion among Ireland's Protestant urban working-class youth. It spurred a range of Catholic copycats, one later example being the St Joseph's Boys Club. Formed by local clergymen in Waterford city in 1923, the society organised soccer and athletic competitions as a means of developing the physical and spiritual well-being of inner-city boys.[135] The manifestation of quasi-military youth groups in Ireland at this time, most notably Na Fianna Éireann, offered further opportunities to utilise sport as a method of political indoctrination. Fianna Éireann's encouragement of Gaelic games among its members played a prominent part in the organisation's holistic training of the future manhood of Ireland in the coming struggle for independence.

Once independence was achieved, the following decades witnessed an unparalleled expansion of children's sport across this island. Ireland's major sports bodies initiated a host of new competitions and tournaments aimed at encouraging youth participation. In the twenty-six counties, the absence of any direct lead taken by the Irish Government itself meant the onus on promoting formal games within the Free State's ever-expanding education system would continue to be met by native sports organisations. In this the GAA was particularly successful. During the 1920s, the Association gradually awoke from its previously lethargic embrace of children's sport and began to aggressively promote its codes within primary and post-primary education. By the 1940s, Gaelic games were the most widely played formal sports in the Irish school system. Despite this, rugby would continue to be seen as the sport of preference in the majority of Ireland's most exclusive schools. Yet in contrast to the voluntary work of these sporting organisations, the Irish State's record in encouraging youth sport at either school or community level in the decades following independence was distinctly underwhelming. The repercussions of this disinterest are still being widely felt today.

---

[133] Garnham, *Association Football*, p. 24.
[134] De Búrca, 'Irish Colleges', p.72
[135] Toms, *Soccer in Munster*, pp. 164-5.