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‘Quenching the Prairie Fire’

The Collapse of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1890s Ireland

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Abstract

The establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association in November 1884 ushered in a sporting revolution in Ireland. Within four years it was by far the largest sports body in the country. Yet despite this remarkable initial success, the 1890s would witness its almost total disintegration. The accepted historiography has tended to concentrate disproportionately on the impact of idiosyncratic factors such as the Parnell split on the GAA’s fortunes at this time. Instead, this article argues that the effects of political dissension represented only the Association’s death knell. It contends that by 1890, the GAA was already in a virtual state of collapse due to the effects of economic recession and mass emigration, and the impact of factors affecting other contemporary sports bodies such as poor administration, ill-defined playing rules and alcohol fuelled hooliganism.

Key words: Gaelic Athletic Association, Ireland, 1890s, decline, Parnell, IRB, Catholic Church

In the past four years, several reports have highlighted the grave impact the twin scourges of recession and its by-product, emigration, are having on GAA activity, most notably in bastions of the Association like County Kerry.[1] They sketch a stark picture of the problems facing the Gaelic Athletic Association in modern, rural Ireland. However, this is not the first time the country’s greater social and economic situation has seriously threatened the viability of the organisation.

While its devastating and near total collapse in 1890s Ireland has been frequently examined, perhaps predictably, national and local histories of the Association have tended to concentrate disproportionately on the impact of

[1] See *Irish Examiner*, 10 November 2010.

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the broader political climate to explain this.[2] In many ways this merely reflects their arguments for why the GAA had become so popular in the first place. Traditionally, historians of the era have argued that the GAA's extraordinary success was the result of the Association's kinship with Irish nationalism. It therefore stands to reason that they would highlight the political rupture in Irish nationalist politics, which resulted from the downfall of Charles Stewart Parnell, as the key factor in the GAA's remarkable decline less than a decade later. As Parnell was one of the Association's first patrons, the bitter split which ensued within nationalist public opinion was mirrored within the GAA's largely nationalist membership at both local and national level. The historical significance accorded to this event has largely obscured the wider socio-economic reasons behind the GAA's startling implosion.

In 2004, Neal Garnham wrote an illuminating article which postulated some of the more 'mundane reasons' as to why the GAA was initially so popular and hence far more successful, than its sporting rivals, in attracting members. His study demonstrated how the GAA's success in Ireland was due to its ability to tailor what it offered to suit the everyday social and economic reality of its intended sporting constituency. He argued persuasively that the GAA's achievement has to be seen as part of the wider developments in modern commercialised sport and leisure in late nineteenth-century Europe.[3] Similarly, the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the GAA's sudden and dramatic national decline is called for.

This article aims to challenge the accepted narratives of the GAA's decline in 1890s Ireland. By utilising new research conducted on the Association in areas like County Kerry, it will argue that the Parnellite split was just one of a number of factors which explain the GAA's national collapse. The article will demonstrate that in addition to internal political dissension, important socio-economic issues – chiefly, economic downturn and concomitant increase in emigration along with a myriad of secondary, sporting and administrative concerns – all contributed to the Association's disintegration at this time.

I

On 1 November 1884, Michael Cusack presided over a meeting to establish the Gaelic Athletic Association. The assembly was a small affair with between seven and thirteen present. Yet from these inauspicious beginnings, the GAA became the dominant sporting body in Ireland within four years.[4] Its establishment ushered in a sporting revolution and initiated mass participation in organised

[2] See, Marcus De Búrca, *The GAA: A History* (2nd edn, Dublin, 1999); W. F. Mandle, *The GAA and Irish Nationalist Politics 1884–1924* (Dublin, 1987).

[3] Neal Garnham, 'Accounting for the Early Success of the Gaelic Athletic Association', *Irish Historical Studies*, 34:133 (2004), 65–78.

[4] To use Cusack's own words, the Association spread across Ireland 'like a prairie fire'. See *United Irishman*, 4 March 1898.

sport among Irishmen. By 1889, it was reported that there were 777 affiliated clubs in Ireland and the All Ireland Championship was already two years old.[5] In contrast, in 1890, the Irish Football Association had only 124 clubs affiliated while there was a mere 47 rugby clubs registered in the country in 1885.[6] Despite this extraordinary initial success, within a further three years the GAA neared ruin. For an organisation which today has become so integral to Irish life and culture, it is truly remarkable just how close the Association came to total disintegration.

The decline of the GAA in the early 1890s was directly linked to a major downturn in the wider Irish economy. It is important to remember that agriculture represented the most dominant employment industry in Ireland at that time. More than 56 per cent (845,691) of the total economically active male population of the country was directly employed in farming in 1891, while in rural counties like Kerry that figure was as high as 72.5 per cent.[7] The problem for Irish agriculture was its almost total dependence on favourable conditions for its main produce of beef and butter in its principal market of mainland Britain.[8] By the summer of 1890, an economic depression had descended on Ireland caused by a wider recession in the world economy which led to weak aggregate demand for Irish produce, resulting in a sustained slide in prices.[9] Conditions in the rural economy deteriorated further due to the widespread reappearance of the potato blight.[10] Over the next five years rural Ireland would witness a prolonged depression, interspersed with frequent potato crop failures.

Nationally, direct employment in agriculture accounted for at least 61.8 per cent of GAA members.[11] Yet that statistic does not include the thousands of other members employed in businesses which were heavily geared towards a supporting role for the agricultural economy. The impact of a large scale depression on Ireland's most dominant industry was a major factor in the decline of the GAA both locally and nationally during the 1890s.

[5] National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), Crime Branch Special (hereafter CBS) Index, 4467/S. In the absence of any surviving GAA records from this time which contain comprehensive lists of actual affiliated clubs per individual county, Royal Irish Constabulary reports remain the only national systematic source for affiliated club numbers, hence why I have chosen to rely on their figures for most of this study.

[6] Garnham, 'Early Success', 5; Liam O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster: A Social and Cultural History* (Cork, 2011), p. 40.

[7] *Census of Ireland, 1891*. Part II. General report, with Illustrative Maps and Diagrams, Tables, and Appendix, [C. 6780], H.C. 1892, XCI.1, p. 356.

[8] James Donnelly, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land* (London, 1975), p. 313.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[10] It was reported that in parts of the south-west the blight was so bad in the harvest of 1890 that famine was inevitable in the region. NAI, CBS, District Inspector Crime Special (hereafter DICS) Reports Box Two, 521/S/1065.

[11] Tom Hunt, 'The GAA: Social Structure and Associated Clubs', in M. Cronin, W. Murphy and P. Rouse (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009* (Dublin, 2009), pp. 184–5.

By November 1890 Maurice Moynihan, the national secretary of the GAA's Central Executive, was already highlighting the apparent indifference that many clubs were displaying towards affiliation with their governing county boards. He mused over a number of reasons for such apathy. Disputes over match results during the previous year's county championships and decisions by county boards against certain clubs may all have cast a 'dampener', as he termed it, over the Association in many areas. Given the deepening economic recession, the fact that players were growing tired of bearing the travel expenses of their club out of their own pockets may also have been a factor. In response Moynihan urged clubs to expand membership and let expenses be paid out of the club exchequer 'which ought in most places [to be] supplemented by voluntary donations'.[12] Due to the difficult economic climate, Moynihan suggested that smaller clubs should amalgamate. The 'efficiency of the club will thereby be increased, its status will be raised, and the working expenses will be spread over a more extended constituency'.[13] In spite of such measures, RIC reports soon noted that across Ireland the GAA appeared to be 'crumbling'.[14]

The economic situation led to the reappearance of mass emigration as a feature in rural Irish life. The striking increase in emigration accounted for an almost 15 per cent (716,000) decrease in the Irish population between 1881 and 1900.[15] Better economic opportunities in Britain and North America for those families decimated by the agricultural situation in Ireland, accounted for this steep rise.[16] In 1896 alone, 39,226 people left Ireland – 83.7 per cent of who were aged between fifteen and thirty-five.[17] This was exactly the age group of young rural men upon which GAA membership largely depended.[18] Emigration had a devastating impact on the GAA resulting in the lifeblood of many clubs being swept away.

II

Across Ireland the number of GAA clubs had fallen by 438 between 1889 and the end of 1891, with the most severe declines occurring in the west and south of the country. In Connacht, the total number of clubs had declined from a height of 129 to fifty-seven, with numbers dropping from 30 to three in Mayo alone.[19] In an early attempt to check what seemed like a terminal decline,

[12] *Kerry Sentinel*, 1 November 1890.
[13] *Ibid.*, 8 November 1890.
[14] NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 521/S/5433.
[15] W. E. Vaughan and A. J. Fitzpatrick (eds), *Irish Historical Statistics, Population, 1821–1971* (Dublin, 1978), p. 3.
[16] See David Fitzpatrick, 'Irish Emigration in the Later Nineteenth Century', *Irish Historical Studies*, 23:86 (1980), 126–43, see 129.
[17] *Kerry Sentinel*, 20 March 1897.
[18] During the period 1886–1905, 96.7 per cent of GAA members were aged between fifteen and thirty-five. See Hunt, 'Social Structure', p. 192.
[19] NAI, CBS Index, 4467/S.

Moynihan invited all counties to attend a general meeting of the Association in Dublin

> consisting of one member of each affiliated club during the year 1890, and now in existence, for the purpose of taking into consideration the present position of the Association, with the view of re-organising and uniting all its scattered forces in a solid phalanx for the preservation of the National pastimes: and also to take such action as may be deemed advisable under existing circumstances in support of the integrity of the National cause.[20]

The proposed assembly took place in the Rotunda Hospital on 22 July 1891. It agreed to appoint a paid secretary to look after the organisation and running of the GAA nationally.[21] By the following October, however, Moynihan had resigned from his position, moving to Cork for business reasons.[22] Deprived of his immense talents as an organiser, administrator and gifted journalist, the GAA was further eroded. At the Association's 1891 Annual Convention, a mere six counties were represented, while only three clubs entered that year's All Ireland Hurling Championship. Its financial position was said to be dire, the sixth annual All Ireland Athletics Championship, held the previous August, was a particular financial disaster.[23] P. P. Sutton, the Gaelic correspondent for *Sport*, stated:

> Among the causes which have contributed to the decline of the Association in general may be mentioned emigration, expenses of teams contesting for championship and tournament honours; and last though by no means least, the bad management of the County Committee. County Boards are largely responsible for the disappearance of many clubs, which, smarting under the bungling and unjust treatment of the governing body became disorganised, and eventually disbanded.

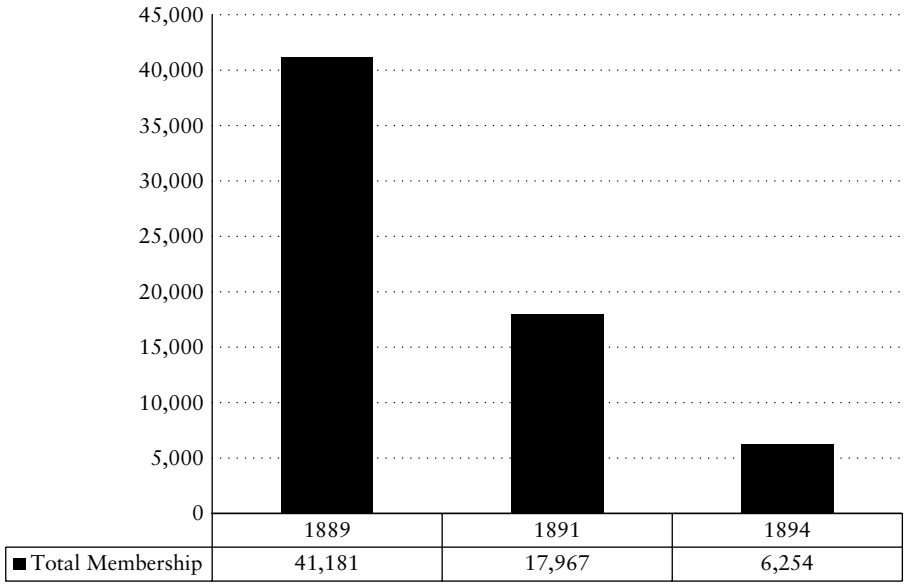
Emigration was, he argued, the 'deadliest enemy of all'. In the south, he claimed, between 20 per cent and 50 per cent of the 'old hands in clubs' were now missing from their teams.[24] In response to the ravages of rural depopulation, the Convention decided to reduce the numbers of players on a GAA team from twenty-one to a maximum of seventeen and a minimum of fourteen. It also decided to allow winning county championship teams the right to select a representative county side, from among all the GAA players in that county, when competing in the All Ireland championships.[25] However, such reforms did little to stem the tide of decay. At its next annual convention, held in April 1893, just fifteen delegates from the three counties of Cork, Dublin and Kerry attended.[26] The revenue from affiliation fees, which heretofore had been the principal source of the GAA's income, suffered disastrously, declining from a

[20] *Sport*, 11 July 1891.
[21] *Ibid.*, 25 July 1891.
[22] T. F. O'Sullivan, *Story of the G.A.A.* (Dublin, 1916), p. 93.
[23] *Sport*, 23 January 1892.
[24] *Ibid.*, 2 January 1892.
[25] *Ibid.*, 23 January 1892.
[26] *Ibid.*, 22 April 1893.

stream worth 'hundreds of pounds' to a mere £32.[27] Only three county boards held annual meetings in 1893 and apart from the six counties which contested the football championship, the Association remained practically defunct elsewhere.[28] A report compiled on the estimated national strength of the GAA in January 1894 graphically illustrated its collapse. It found that only thirty-eight clubs survived in the midlands, thirty-three clubs in the south-west, seventeen in the south-east and a further twenty-nine in the west of the country. In Ulster, only one affiliated club still existed in Belfast. Thus, the rest of the province along with Carlow, Clare, Kilkenny, Laois, Leitrim, Limerick, Longford, Louth, Mayo, Meath, Offaly, Roscommon, north Tipperary, Wicklow, Westmeath and Wexford was said to have no active branch of the GAA.[29] In Dublin, the Association was in turmoil with many clubs refusing to fulfil fixtures.[30] Club numbers affiliating to the Kerry County Board dropped from thirty-four in 1890 to a mere ten in 1894.[31] It is noteworthy that 1894 was also the year when the Irish Football Association voted to legalise professionalism.[32] In contrast to the GAA's misfortunes, the advent of professional soccer in Ireland indicated the growing strength and vitality of the Association's main sporting competitor in major urban centres like Belfast.

The Association's decline can be further understood if we examine the actual playing population of GAA members in Ireland. Police statistics on the GAA's strength in 1891 indicated that there was an average membership of fifty-three men per affiliated club.[33] Some 96.7 per cent of GAA members were aged between fifteen and thirty-five years at this time.[34] According to the 1891 census, the male population of Ireland, in this age bracket, stood at 786,423.[35] Taking fifty-three as an average, the national GAA membership of 777 clubs in 1889 amounted to 5.2 per cent of the Irish male population aged between fifteen and thirty-five. In contrast by 1891, GAA clubs had decreased to 339 and membership to 2.2 per cent of this total male population. By 1894, GAA club numbers had fallen to 118 or 0.79 per cent of this Irish male population (see Figure 1).[36] The 1890s, coinciding as it did with the reappearance of large scale emigration and a deep recession in the Irish economy, presented a challenging environment for any sporting organisation. Nevertheless, given the socio-economic backgrounds of the vast majority of GAA members, it is no surprise that the Association was worst affected by these developments.

[27] *Freeman's Journal*, 17 April 1893.
[28] O'Sullivan, *G.A.A.*, p. 102.
[29] NAI, CBS Index, 6247/S; NAI, CBS Index, 7828/S; *Sport*, 24 March 1894.
[30] William Nolan (ed.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin 1884–2000, Vol. 1 1884–1959* (Dublin, 2005), p. 42.
[31] Figures for Kerry are based on a survey of the *Kerry Sentinel* newspaper from 1890 to 1894.
[32] Neal Garnham, *Association Football and Society in Pre-Partition Ireland* (Belfast, 2004), p. 72.
[33] NAI, CBS Index, 2792/S.
[34] Hunt, 'Social Structure', p. 192.
[35] *Census of Ireland, 1891*, Part II, pp. 340–1.
[36] NAI, CBS Index, 4467/S; NAI, CBS Index, 7828/S.



Source: National Archives of Ireland, Crime Branch Special Index.

Figure 1 Decline in the Total National Membership of the GAA, 1889–94

The GAA's vulnerability was largely due to the *ad hoc* nature of the vast majority of its clubs. In early 1888, the GAA published its constitution and its fifth article stated that only one club per parish was allowed.[37] In spite of this, it is evident that across Ireland in the early years of the Association several clubs did co-exist in the same parish or district. Tom Hunt argues that though county boards tried to enforce the parish rule many, such as the Cavan County Board, found it impossible to police, while earlier inter-parochial divisions proved highly resistant to such change.[38] Indeed, he contends that during these early years, people more readily identified their sense of place with their local townlands rather than their parish.[39] At the heart of rural Ireland there existed a system of informal alliances between members of the farming community within such small territorial units like townlands. These alliances were used to pool resources during times of intense labour, such as the threshing season. Thus, the nucleus of many early rural GAA clubs can often be traced from such farming coalitions.[40] Utilising such townland networks as the principal basis

[37] *Sport*, 21 January 1888.
[38] Tom Hunt, 'Parish Factions, Parading Bands and Sumptuous Repasts: The Diverse Origins and Activities of Early GAA Clubs', in Dónal McAnallen, David Hassan and Roddy Hegarty (eds), *The Evolution of the GAA, Ulaidh, Éire agus Eile* (Armagh, 2009), p. 86.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] Hunt, 'Social Structure', p. 193.

for young men to form Gaelic sides inevitably led to rural GAA clubs having a much more transient nature.[41] As a result, most early teams were 'ephemeral combinations', coming and going almost in an instant rather than being permanent organised clubs.[42]

In most counties then, a Gaelic club hierarchy developed, whose base consisted of these transient non-affiliated clubs. At its apex stood a small group of semi-permanent, formally constituted clubs.[43] In addition, many rural Gaelic clubs were often at a severe disadvantage compared to their sporting rivals. Unlike sports such as cricket, Gaelic games, due to their implied nationalist outlook, did not attract the patronage of local landlords and gentry. In stark contrast to areas such as central Scotland, where 89 per cent of sports club patrons and presidents were either members of the nobility or large landowners, patronage of GAA clubs by such groups was almost non-existent.[44] For example, the Killarney Cricket Club boasted the patronage of the local landlord, Lord Kenmare, and used a cricket field in his own demesne for which they were able to afford to pay a rent of £10 per year.[45] Such clubs had their own meeting rooms and dedicated secretaries and treasurers. This was a far cry from the experience of most rural GAA clubs, often formed from a core group of athletic neighbours. Some larger urban clubs like Tralee's John Mitchel's managed to acquire their own rented grounds and club rooms and had their own elected officers.[46] Yet, the membership of the GAA in market towns like Tralee was so closely tied with the agricultural fortunes of their country brethren that, especially in economically bleak times such as the 1890s, these clubs could never match the financial clout of their cricket or rugby counterparts. For these reasons GAA clubs were far more vulnerable to the effects of emigration. The lacklustre performance of the Killarney Dr Croke's team in the 1890 Kerry championship was explained by the emigration of its 'crack players'.[47] The loss of even one of the more talented players or organisers from smaller rural clubs often had a devastating effect. The Lispole St John's GAA club in west Kerry mourned the departure of their member James Casey when he left the village to seek a new life in North America. The young man was described as giving

> impetus to his favourite game which enabled the Lispole team to enter the field with any other, and often the . . . team carried off the laurels of victory which must, in justice to Jim Casey, be ascribed to him and the interest taken by him in the club.[48]

[41] Hunt, 'Parish Factions', pp. 87–8.
[42] Dónal McAnallen, 'The Greatest Amateur Association in the World? The GAA and Amateurism', in Cronin, et al. (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, p. 160.
[43] Hunt, 'Parish Factions', p. 87.
[44] See Neil Tranter, 'The Patronage of Organised Sport in Central Scotland, 1820–1900', *Journal of Sport History*, 16:3 (1989), 232.
[45] *Kerry Sentinel*, 15 February and 12 March 1890.
[46] *Ibid.*, 15 November 1890.
[47] *Ibid.*, 1 November 1890.
[48] *Ibid.*, 28 September 1898.

No record of this club was uncovered in the months and years after his departure and it is assumed that like so many teams before it, St John's simply disbanded through want of organisation and interest.

III

The devastating impact of emigration and widespread economic recession on the Association was further exacerbated by the fraught relations between the GAA and the Catholic hierarchy. By the 1870s the Catholic Church was perhaps the most dominant and influential body in Irish popular opinion.[49] Any movement, political or cultural, would have been advised to court its blessings. The GAA was no different in this regard. When he founded the Association, Michael Cusack had been quick to enlist the patronage of Archbishop T. W. Croke of Cashel, almost instantly identifying his fledging organisation with the prestige of the Catholic Church. Indeed, statements from the clergy in support of Gaelic games were common throughout the first years of the Association's existence and received widespread publicity in those newspapers which supported the GAA.[50] Yet, such harmony was not to last.

The revolutionary Fenian organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), had supplied two of the GAA's seven original founding members. At the Association's third annual convention in November 1887, the Brotherhood succeeded in gaining control of the GAA's ruling Central Executive by supplanting the former president, Maurice Davin.[51] The Fenian's coup caused uproar, especially among the clerical and other constitutional nationalist representatives. In the fallout from the convention, Croke publically disassociated himself from the Executive.[52] Letters to the press from outraged clergymen accused the body of being against Croke and the priesthood of Ireland.[53] It looked for a time like the GAA would disintegrate but Croke was persuaded to meet with the IRB faction. Following talks, a compromise was agreed at a special convention in January 1888 and Davin was reinstated as president.[54] Despite this many within the Church remained suspicious of the Fenian element linked with the GAA

[49] Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–75', *American Historical Review*, 77:3 (1972), 652.

[50] 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*, 15:3 (1998), 50–71, see 52.

[51] The IRB had effectively rigged the Convention, piling in its own members by claiming them to be representatives of fictitious clubs. This enabled their swelled representatives to elect one of their own to the presidency of the GAA. See De Búrca, *The GAA*, pp. 28–30.

[52] *Freeman's Journal*, 10 November 1887.

[53] *Ibid.*, 12 November 1887.

[54] In addition only two officers from the IRB retained their positions on a newly elected Executive. See O'Sullivan, *G.A.A.*, p. 63.

and in Armagh Archbishop Michael Logue continued strongly to condemn the Association.[55]

Although Davin was able to work in an uneasy alliance with the IRB faction throughout 1888, events by the end of the year altered matters.[56] At its next annual convention, Davin was held personally responsible for the GAA's dire financial situation. Under this pretext, the IRB launched a second attempt to take control. Clerical delegates and their supporters, disgusted at the takeover by the physical force faction, left to set up a rival meeting in an adjacent room. In response, the main body elected Peter Kelly, an IRB officer from Loughrea as president.[57] The fallout led to a significant split within the GAA with several counties, like Kildare, severing their links with the Central Executive.[58] In both Cork and Limerick two rival county boards emerged, one staying loyal to the Executive, the other supporting the clerical-led moderates.[59] Across Ireland GAA clubs were reported to be falling into opposing clerical and 'Fenian' controlled factions.[60]

Clerical opposition became widespread in many areas as resident clergy sought to denounce the Association and urged clubs not to affiliate with it. In Portlaoise, a local priest ordered shopkeepers to tear down the advertisements for a GAA tournament from their windows while he stood at a prominent crossroad on the way to the venue and ordered spectators to return to their homes.[61] In Monaghan and Fermanagh, extensive clerical opposition was responsible for the collapse of the GAA there.[62] In an interview with the *Freeman's Journal* in August 1889, William J. Walsh, the Archbishop of Dublin, stated he was fully aware that efforts were being made in parts of Ireland to engraft upon the GAA a secret society of a political character.[63] The RIC attributed much of the GAA's subsequent collapse to such clerical influence being directed against the Association once it became obvious to them that the IRB was utilising it to entice Ireland's young men into their secret society.[64]

IV

Emigration, economic stagnation and clerical denunciation were conspiring to undermine the foundations of what had once promised to be an imposing

[55] Simon Gillespie and Roddy Hegarty, 'Camán and Crozier: The Church and the GAA 1884–1902', in McAnallen, et al. (eds), *Evolution of the GAA*, p. 114.
[56] Davin had pushed for an athletics tour of fifty GAA athletes to America, which he hoped would raise £5,000 for the Association. However, the tour, dubbed the 'American Invasion', had turned into a financial disaster, incurring debts of over £400. See O'Sullivan, *G.A.A.*, p. 71.
[57] *Sport*, 26 January 1889.
[58] *Ibid.*, 16 February 1889.
[59] O'Sullivan, *G.A.A.*, p. 82.
[60] See NAI, CBS Index, 127/S.
[61] NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Three, 1 October 1890.
[62] NAI, CBS Index, 2562/S.
[63] Reprinted in *Sport*, 3 August 1889.
[64] NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 3 February 1890.

edifice in Irish life. Yet, outside of these major forces, there were a myriad of secondary reasons as to why the GAA specifically found itself in such terminal decline. Like other contemporary sports bodies, the Association was struggling with issues such as the poor administration of its games, the imposition of standardised playing rules, the ill-discipline of teams competing in its competitions and frequent crowd disturbances at matches. By the 1890s, the combination of these factors had resulted in the GAA losing much of its sporting popularity.

In addition to the loss of key personnel through emigration, a lack of success on the field or disputes with county boards often contributed to clubs' disbandment. Moynihan, writing in January 1890, suggested that county boards should give runner-up prizes for unsuccessful clubs to encourage them to compete in competitions:

> It is a fault peculiar to many individuals as well as to clubs that, seeing no fair prospect of becoming champions, they throw up the game in disgust . . . [the] word 'perseverance' should be written large in every club room.[65]

In Kerry, forty-one Gaelic games matches were reported as having taken place in the 1890 season, including nineteen county championship matches.[66] However, no fewer than eighteen games were either awarded as walkovers owing to a team not turning up or ended before the allocated time as disputes erupted over a scoring decision or the sending off of a player and county board objections were sought.[67]

Given their quality, it is no surprise that early Gaelic games failed to sustain the interest of GAA supporters. One noticeable feature was their low-scoring nature. Until 1892, GAA matches, similar to soccer, were decided by the highest number of goals scored. The number of points registered was used only to determine the outcome of a match in the event that no goal had been scored.[68] As a result early GAA teams played a heavily defensive game with physicality encouraged, the basic tactic being to prevent a team registering a goal. The overcrowded nature of a then forty-two man game militated against any sense of positional play, leading simply to mass scrimmages for the ball. The poor quality playing fields, deep grass, unskilled players, a heavy water-absorbing football and use of everyday footwear, also combined to ensure

[65] *Kerry Sentinel*, 11 January 1890.

[66] Based on survey of GAA matches reported in Kerry from *Kerry Sentinel* and *Sport*.

[67] That same year the RIC remarked that the GAA, which had once threatened to expand widely, was rapidly declining owing to clubs openly quarrelling with each other. See NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 521/S/658.

[68] In January 1892, in an attempt to combat the overly defensive nature of its games, the GAA adapted its scoring system whereby a ball going over the crossbar was registered as one point, and a ball being driven under the crossbar was registered as a goal which was equal to five points. See *Sport*, 23 January 1892. In 1896, the scoring system was further recalibrated to make a goal equal to three points. See Joe Lennon, *The Playing Rules of Football and Hurling 1602–2010* (Gormanstown, 2001), p. 10.

matches were kept to low scores.[69] Despite Wexford and Cork managing only five scores between them in the 1893 All Ireland Football final, the Dublin press declared that 'rarely has a better exhibition of football been witnessed in the metropolis'![70] Although it was the premier occasion in the GAA's sporting calendar, the final displayed the endemic problems which afflicted Gaelic games at this time. During its second half, an altercation between one of the Cork players and his opponent resulted in a large section of the crowd invading the pitch to exact retribution. When the referee then tried to send off the Cork player responsible, his teammates refused to play on and left the field, an action which resulted in Wexford being awarded the game.[71]

Another major problem for the GAA was that compared to their international rivals of rugby and soccer, Gaelic games lacked clearly defined and universally understood playing rules. In December 1884, the GAA formally adopted the rules for their newly codified creations of Gaelic football and hurling. Yet, only four of the rules actually dealt with the mechanics of the game.[72] Richard Blake, one of the GAA's most prominent referees, argued that the principal reason for the declining popularity of Gaelic games was the vagueness surrounding its rules which, he wrote, continually caused uncertainty and forced referees to interpret the laws for themselves. This varied interpretation by individual referees negated a common understanding, resulting in players losing all confidence in these officials while spectators were left bewildered by their decisions. As a result 'the referee in a Gaelic match is like the "fool in the middle" his decisions degraded, because in the most cases they are the outcome of his right of private judgement'.[73]

In the absence of standardised and universally enforced playing rules, GAA teams were very quick to exploit this hesitancy on the official's part. Reporting on one match between Tuogh and Laune Rangers in the Kerry championship, the local Gaelic games correspondent declared:

> if I called it a football match I would probably leave myself open to an action for libel. The game lasted two hours and in all that time there were not five minutes of uninterrupted play.

In response to Laune Rangers scoring a goal their opponents threatened to quit the field in protest, prompting the referee to disallow it. After that the Tuogh players disputed every score by Rangers, 'seemingly under the impression they could get every score cancelled by ganging up on the referee'. When Rangers finally managed another goal the Tuogh team, realising the match result was

[69] During thirty-six football matches played in Westmeath in 1890, one side failed to register a single score on twenty-two occasions. See Tom Hunt, *Sport and Society in Victorian Ireland: The Case Study of Westmeath* (Cork, 2007), p. 153.

[70] *Freeman's Journal*, 25 June 1894.

[71] *Sport*, 30 June 1894.

[72] Hence as regards giving an insight into how a match in either code was in practice played, the rules were vague in the extreme. See Lennon, *Playing Rules*, pp. 10–11.

[73] *Sport*, 28 January 1893.

getting beyond them, refused to play on and simply walked off the pitch and headed home.[74] Often disputes like this led to courtroom-like battles between representatives of the clubs involved, played out at county board meetings and in the rigorous exchange of letters to the local papers, which could continue for weeks on end. National competitions were little different. For example, in March 1893 Laune Rangers faced Dublin's Young Irelanders in the All Ireland Football final. Rangers lost by four points, a result which the southern press blamed directly on the conduct of the Dublin supporters who

> acted towards the Kerrymen . . . in a scandalous and utterly un-Irish fashion. In the midst of play they did not content themselves with cheering for the Dublin men, but actually indulged in vigorous hooting and groaning at the Kerrymen, the inevitable result of which was, of course, to take the spirit out of them.[75]

Over the following weeks, the national sporting media was inundated with letters from both clubs and their supporters regarding the 'unsatisfactory' manner of the All Ireland final. However, attempts by Laune Rangers to compel the GAA and the Young Irelanders club to replay the final on a point of honour came to nothing.[76] Objections and counter-objections to the awarding of matches would be a feature of local and national contests throughout the 1890s and beyond. Often this led to bitter recriminations between local clubs and their county boards and between those boards themselves and the Central Executive. It is also perhaps not surprising that players and supporters quickly became disheartened by witnessing decisive results on the field of play being subsequently overturned on some technicality, the almost inevitable result being a replay. Often this was taken to farcical extremes. Another championship match in Kerry was left unfinished when the Keel team walked off in protest of a foul committed by the Aghadoe captain on a member of their side. At a subsequent county board meeting their objection was upheld and it was decided that the last ten minutes of the match should be replayed in Killorglin in two weeks' time. The Keel club duly undertook the difficult eleven mile journey to the match venue by horse and car only to find Aghadoe had failed to turn up, and were awarded a walkover.[77]

The frequent holding of fixtures, especially important inter-county contests, at times of the year most vulnerable to the effects of unseasonable weather, also contributed to a growing disenchantment among patrons. The 1892 Munster Football final was contested in a blizzard during the depths of that winter, with the teams forced to play the match in a field already covered in several feet of snow.[78] In addition, poor administration frequently resulted in local and

[74] *Kerry Sentinel*, 21 June 1890.
[75] *Ibid.*, 29 March 1893.
[76] See *Sport*, 8, 15, 26 April, 3 May 1893.
[77] *Kerry Sentinel*, 5, 19 April 1890.
[78] The severe weather was given as the main cause for the abysmal attendance. See *Sport*, 10 December 1892.

national competitions dragging on for months and years at a time. At the 1893 Annual Kerry GAA Convention a resolution was adopted declaring:

> that the recurrent and general violation of the rule which restricts the playing of football and hurling matches to stated periods of the year is in our opinion, and for the following reasons, a cause of serious concern to the G.A.A. . . . that ultimately [causes] a reaction against football and hurling, which diminishes the number of clubs, as teams become disgusted with the necessity of playing through the whole year.[79]

The constant poor quality of matches, the bad weather in which they were often contested, and the incessant disputes over match decisions tested the commitment of even the most enthusiastic GAA follower. Yet, along with these specific causes, there appeared to be a growing apathy for the Association itself. The GAA had spread across Ireland on a wave of popular enthusiasm. Its momentum was fuelled by the Association being viewed as something new, unheralded and distinct. Since it was the first organised sporting organisation to successfully infiltrate local Irish rural society *en masse*, it brought a colour and pageantry to Irish life seldom seen in the decades before it. It became a focal point for communities to congregate and celebrate the athletic prowess of their men. Yet, by the early 1890s, this initial burst of enthusiasm seemed to have faded. P. R. Cleary, a former secretary of the GAA articulated as much in 1892:

> No matter how magnificent or imposing anything earthly may be, people weary of admiring it in the end. It was the same with the G.A.A. We admired the games; we grew excitedly enthusiastic in our admiration of them, but it being the same thing every day, we ultimately failed to go see a match.

Cleary saw that the novelty of the GAA had worn thin among the people of Ireland and hence why it found itself in such a precarious position.[80]

Another contributory factor to the growing indifference towards the GAA was the often dangerous nature of the games for both players and public alike. During one Kerry championship game played in the Tralee Sportsground in May 1891, overcrowding in the elevated grandstand caused the palisade at the front to weaken and then give way due to the press from the crowds behind. As a result, over a hundred people fell from the stand on to spectators standing in the terraces below. Rumours swept the town that people had been crushed to death and maimed in the accident. Relatives and friends of those attending the matches converged on the scene adding to the confusion. No fatalities occurred but several people were severely injured.[81]

The GAA's early administrators strove to highlight that Gaelic games were serious and acceptable alternatives to rival sporting codes. This required the GAA to adapt its games to bring them more in line with the contemporary

[79] *Kerry Sentinel*, 21 January 1893.
[80] *Ibid.*, 10 September 1892.
[81] *Ibid.*, 18 May 1891.

thinking on sport which emphasised greater order and control.[82] Tied in with this emphasis on minimising of rough play was the promotion of the good natured conduct of players and supporters to make the sport more attractive to potential spectators. In this the GAA took its place among other sports bodies of the Victorian era. Though the nationalist press which supported the organisation would often declare that the Association had effectively 'killed that spirit of factiousness' which used to define football and hurling matches 'in the days not so remote', the reality was that such passions ran deep. [83] Often they erupted in the form of mass disturbances at major matches. Such incidents were a constant source of embarrassment for those who administrated the GAA, who were inevitably influenced by the ideals of fair play and proper conduct which the Victorian society they lived in emphasised.

For example, the closing stages of the 1898 Wexford football championship brought the Association there into disrepute. A match between the Enniscorthy Vinegar Hill '98s and the John Street Volunteers ended abruptly when a riot broke out among the rival supporters who stormed the field and began engaging in pitched battles, which eventually extended from the ground all the way to the local village of Blackwater. The Enniscorthy supporters, brandishing sticks, iron bars and large stones, drove at the Volunteers' players forcing them to seek cover in the coach they had journeyed to the match in.The Enniscorthy followers then laid siege to the vehicle pelting it with rocks and smashing the windows, causing severe injuries to several of the players. The Volunteers were forced to flee the ugly scene and the match was left abandoned.[84] In another incident at Glin in west Limerick, a vicious fight broke out after a football match between supporters of the local team and those of the travelling Abbeyfeale side, resulting in one Glin native having his hand stabbed.[85]

Often the wide availability of drink was the immediate cause of these disturbances. With a drinking culture already so prevalent within Irish society, it is unsurprising that those who were members of the GAA were any less disposed to the draw of the pub. Garnham has noted that the GAA's decision to hold its games on Sundays meant players and spectators could often make use of the 'bona fide traveller' clause in the existing licensing laws, ensuring they could legally be served alcohol on the Sabbath. This, he argues, was a significant factor in the GAA's initial success in attracting spectators.[86] Thus the consumption of alcohol at GAA events by supporters and players alike became

[82] Mandle, *GAA and Politics*, p. 33.

[83] *Kerry Sentinel*, 29 March 1890.

[84] Nuala Carroll and Des Waters, 'When Moore Soared in the Sky', *Journal of the Taghmon Historical Society*, 3 (1999), 29.

[85] *Kerry Sentinel*, 6 August 1889.

[86] In 1878, the sale of alcohol in rural Ireland on Sundays was prohibited. However, under this clause, anyone travelling more than three miles from his place of abode the previous day was entitled to be served at a pub or inn. Journey distances to rival parish and inter-county GAA matches were usually more than enough to ensure a legal drink was available. See Garnham, 'Early Success', 73.

very much part of the match day experience.[87] Indeed the RIC argued that the GAA's popularity was much in debt to the 'exertions of the publicans whose trade is benefited by the movement'.[88]

As a result of this widespread drinking culture, Gaelic games differed little from contemporary sports like soccer, where drink-fuelled spectator violence was a common element of the game in Victorian Britain.[89] However, what was different for the GAA was the often intense condemnation of the practice by the Catholic Church, especially given the already strained relations between it and the Association. Priests loathed the excessive consumption of alcohol which was all too frequently connected with games held on Sundays. Archbishop Logue frequently condemned the GAA's links with intemperance and their desecration of the Sabbath. A number of parish priests in his diocese also decried the negative impact of the GAA's drink culture, its facilitation of interaction between the sexes, and its effect on church attendance.[90] In Laois, the local Bishop of Ossory issued strong denunciations of the alcohol consumption prevalent in Gaelic matches and ordered the faithful to avoid its games.[91]

Yet players faced hazards more serious than the scorn of the local clergy. For some unfortunates, GAA matches could prove fatal. During a hurling contest in Cork city in April 1897, Willie John O'Connell, the captain of the St Finbarr's GAA club, was struck in the head while challenging for the ball and immediately dropped dead.[92] In August 1891, David Irons of the Benburb's club in Dublin was killed by a kick to the abdomen in a game against the Clondalkin Round Towers.[93] Meanwhile at a match in Limerick between Doon and Cappamore, an outsider rushed from the crowd fatally stabbing a Doon player called Connell through the heart.[94]

V

By the close of 1890, the GAA was in debt, in dispute and, most assuredly, in decline. Yet Charles Stewart Parnell's downfall as the leader of a united Irish Parliamentary Party had huge implications for the Association nationally. In November 1890, his affair with his married mistress Kitty O'Shea made headline news across Britain and Ireland. The scandal caused outrage among

[87] Paul Rouse, 'Journalists and the Making of the Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–1887', *Media History*, 17:2 (2011), 128.
[88] NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 521/S/889, 3 July 1890.
[89] See E. Dunning, P. Murphy and J. Williams, *The Roots of Football Hooliganism* (London, 1988).
[90] Gillespie and Hegarty, 'Camán and Crozier', p. 119.
[91] Pádraig G. Lane, 'Government Surveillance of Subversion in Laois, 1890–1916', in Pádraig G. Lane and William Nolan (eds), *Laois History and Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (Dublin, 1999), p. 603.
[92] *Cork Examiner*, 26 April, 1897.
[93] *Sport*, 19 August 1891.
[94] *Ibid.*, 2 September 1893.

political and church leaders. Parnell's allies in parliament disowned him while on 6 December forty-three members of his own party voted to remove him as leader.[95] The action ruptured not just the party, but Irish nationalist opinion. Parnell was one of the three original patrons of the GAA. Like other sections of Irish society, the Association became deeply divided on the issue.

The first GAA club publically to declare its support for Parnell was Dunmore in County Galway.[96] A meeting of the Castlegregory GAA in west Kerry likewise affirmed 'its implicit confidence in the leadership' of Parnell and 'condemned the action of the Irish Party who severed their connection with him'.[97] Once the Parnell affair erupted, the IRB decided to use its influence among the upper echelons of the GAA to throw the support of the Association behind Parnell.[98] When he returned to Ireland on the 9 December 1890, Parnell was greeted off the boat in Kingstown by a GAA delegation led by J. K. Bracken of the IRB and one of the original founders of the Association.[99] During 1891, Parnell took the fight to Ireland to regain his leadership of Irish popular politics. But in the three by-elections campaigns held that year Parnell's candidates were defeated. Despite this, the backing of the national GAA remained strong. Wherever Parnell went in his punishing circuit of public appearances he could count on a reception by the GAA, either on its own or as an important constituent part of a wider group.[100]

But even among the IRB within the Association, support for Parnell was not unanimous. Despite local members of the Brotherhood holding every position on the Kerry County Board, a vote of confidence in Parnell's continued leadership, proposed at the first Kerry GAA Board meeting of 1891, was refused by the Chairman Thomas Slattery and Treasurer M. Hanlon. This was in spite of the fact that Slattery was the local head of the IRB in Tralee and Hanlon was another prominent IRB officer.[101]

When Maurice Moynihan, the leading figure in the IRB in Kerry, organised his national general meeting of the GAA in Dublin in July 1891, the representatives present agreed to pledge their support to the leadership and ideals of Charles Stewart Parnell.[102] Some saw this moment as the definitive break from the cautious former politics of the GAA hierarchy. They had now declared themselves not only in favour of Parnell but also in full sympathy with the Fenians.[103] While this view drastically oversimplified the political leanings of GAA members and completely overstated the influence the IRB

[95] Frank Callanan, *The Parnell Split 1890–91* (Cork, 1992), p. 53.
[96] *Freeman's Journal*, 2 December 1890.
[97] *Kerry Sentinel*, 17 December 1890.
[98] NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 521/S/2493, 1 January 1891.
[99] *Freeman's Journal*, 11 December 1890.
[100] W. F. Mandle, 'Parnell and Sport', *Studia Hibernica*, 28 (1994), 103–16, see 111.
[101] *Kerry Sentinel*, 3 January 1891; NAI, CBS Index, 126/S.
[102] *Sport*, 25 July 1891.
[103] Anon., *Sixty Glorious Years 1886–1946: The Authentic Story of the G.A.A.* (Dublin, 1946), p. 37.

had within is grass roots membership, it did result in the alienation of those in the Association opposed to Parnell. In Louth, the Dundalk Young Ireland Club decided to disassociate itself from the GAA owing to divisions created over the controversy. They opted instead to concentrate on pastimes of a non-controversial nature.[104] Nationally, police reports claimed that the Association was being torn asunder due to internal dissension and that this breach if not acted upon would soon become irreparable.[105] At least two county championship matches in Laois witnessed large scale disturbances between players and spectators owing to the connection between the rival teams and the pro- and anti-Parnellite factions.[106] *Sport* declared that the rupture in Irish politics was having a profound effect on the GAA across rural Ireland where it was causing 'our people to devote all their attention . . . to politics and to fighting one another'.[107] Indeed, RIC District Inspector Jones regarded the Parnell split as giving the previously popular GAA its *coup de grâce*.[108]

Parnell's rigorous electoral campaigning broke his health and, exhausted, he passed away in October 1891. At his funeral in Dublin the support of the GAA remained firm to the end. Six GAA officials shouldered his coffin into Glasnevin cemetery while nearly two thousand GAA members were prominently placed in his funeral cortège.[109]

Nevertheless, Parnell's death brought little resolution. The political fissure that cut open the Irish Party would continue to haunt Irish nationalist politics throughout the remaining years of the decade. Its effects on the GAA proved to be as catastrophic as those of the economic climate in which it took place. As 1892 dawned, the rival political camps were preparing for a bitter struggle in that summer's general election. Many within the GAA remained loyal to their 'Lost Leader'. However, the moral scandal had already aroused the ire of the Catholic Church in Ireland. While there remained enmity between the clergy and the Association in many areas following the IRB coup in 1887, in the wake of the Parnell split the Catholic hierarchy turned its full force against the Parnellite camp and in particular its allies in the GAA. With the Association already reeling from internal strife and seeing its membership melt away, the hostility of the Church would deal it a near mortal blow.

The political alliance constructed by Parnell between the Catholic hierarchy and the Irish Parliamentary Party had been shattered by his refusal to bend to the will of the clergy who had called for his resignation, and despite Parnell's own death, Church opposition to the Parnellites became increasingly acrimonious during the 1892 general election. Reports of clerical intimidation came in from

[104] John Mulligan, *Dundalk Young Ireland's G.F.C.: An Historical Record of the Green and Black* (Dundalk, 2004), p. 41.
[105] NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 521/S/2817.
[106] Lane, 'Subversion in Laois', p. 609.
[107] *Sport*, 2 January 1892.
[108] NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 521/S/3563, 1 May 1891.
[109] *Freeman's Journal*, 12 October 1891.

almost every town in Ireland, with priests frequently heard telling parishioners that voting for the local Parnellite candidate, was 'voting against God'.[110] Throughout the election the Parnellite camp had been fighting a losing battle. The weight of the clergy was against them and with the prospect of a victory for the Liberal party under William Gladstone and the introduction of a new Home Rule bill in exchange for Irish MP support, it was hardly likely that the electorate would endorse the Parnellite repudiation of the Liberal alliance. The election resulted in a comprehensive victory for the anti-Parnellites. The clergy responded with glee. One parish priest, welcoming the election results, labelled locals who had supported the Parnellites as nothing more than 'bastard makers'.[111]

The decision of the GAA's ruling body to declare in favour of Parnell ensured the Church's hostility was also directed at the Association. In Ulster, the Catholic hierarchy began to vehemently oppose the GAA, seeing it as nothing more than 'a flag of convenience' for 'secret societies'.[112] Whereas in many areas (such as Clare and Kerry) the clergy had shown little interest in the GAA before the Parnell scandal, in its aftermath they put considerable energy into opposing what they had begun to see as little more than a Fenian cover organisation. The clerical fight against Parnell's supporters was exercised through both the pulpit and the local GAA club.[113] Following the IRB takeover of the Central Executive, the RIC in Kerry reported in mid-1890 that only two GAA clubs there had firmly sided with the clerical opposition.[114] Yet, within nine months, fifteen of the twenty-four clubs then affiliated in Kerry were described as being under control of the clerical opposition.[115]

The Association's backing of Parnell, after his affair became public, deprived the organisation of the national support of the local priesthood. It was thus robbed of a powerful ally and organiser in the local community. By April 1891, it was reported that county championship matches in Kerry were being abandoned because of local GAA teams were warned by their respective parish priests not to participate in GAA competitions.[116]

According to the RIC's Midland Division, after the nationalist split the clergy redoubled their vigilance and their denunciations against Parnellism and secret societies:

[110] *Kerry Sentinel*, 9 July 1892.
[111] *Ibid.*, 20 August 1892.
[112] David Hassan, 'The GAA in Ulster', in Cronin, et al. (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, pp. 80–1.
[113] For example in Galway, the Belclare Parnell's GAA club had joined others in voicing their support for Parnell on 14 December 1890, despite a letter from the Catholic hierarchy which condemned him being read out at masses across Ireland that very morning. Yet within two weeks the local parish priest, Father Mark Eagleton, was leading the club in opposition to Parnell. By mid-1891, it dropped the name Parnell from its title, becoming the Belclare Harpers. See Noel O'Donoghue, *Proud and Upright Men* (Tuam, 1987), p. 132.
[114] NAI, CBS Index, 127/S GAA.
[115] *Ibid.*, 2792/S.
[116] *Kerry Sentinel*, 4 April 1891.

> Through fear of the clergy many Gaelic Clubs, whose members were Parnellites and Extremists, were [being] reorganised under the patronage and personal conduct of the clergy, and now they support the [opposing] side.[117]

As Paul Rouse has observed, when GAA members were forced to choose between clerical denunciation and non-involvement in the GAA, the pro-clerical choice proved by far the most popular.[118] Though the GAA as a body remained loyal to the Parnellite faction, the actions of the clergy ensured that this was a diminished, hard core element, entirely in the hands of the IRB.[119]

VI

With Parnell's death and the defeat of his faction in the 1892 general election, the IRB slipped away into the background of Irish nationalism for much of the 1890s, biding its time until the popular mood in Ireland would be more congenial to plans for an IRB-led insurrection. By 1893 police reports showed that in Kerry and Cork the GAA, though in decline, was operating without any noticeable IRB influence and that the latter organisation was thoroughly disorganised.[120]

The brutal impact of the Parnell split meant that the GAA was denied a strong coherent leadership at the very time the organisation needed it most. Only with such unity could the GAA have hoped to face and overcome the devastating effects mass emigration and widespread economic depression were having on its membership. The bitter fallout over the Parnell affair was compounded by the renewed enmity of the Catholic Church which dealt the Association a near fatal blow. The Church's hostility was retained for much of the remaining years of the 1890s and this forced hundreds of devout Catholics to cut their ties with the Association. Although 1894 marked the GAA's nadir, any sign of long term recovery in the years which followed proved illusory. While the GAA's fortunes managed to stabilise and even show signs of growth between 1895 and 1896, the Association remained a spectre of its past glories. The GAA's continuing dismal financial situation was a key factor.[121] Coupled with such internal problems was the broader economic reality. Mass emigration from rural Ireland continued unabated while the exceptionally wet summer of 1897

[117] NAI, CBS Index, 4467/S.

[118] Paul Rouse, 'The Politics of Culture and Sport in Ireland: A History of the GAA Ban on Foreign Games 1884–1971. Part One: 1884–1921', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 10:3 (1990), 344.

[119] Mandle, 'Parnell and Sport', 112. Nevertheless, bitterness towards the Church, especially among the advanced nationalists who made up the GAA's ruling body, remained strong. When Parnell was buried in October 1891 the GAA's Central Executive laid a wreath on his grave. It was sure to be read by those who in their opinion had destroyed Parnell. It quoted the Apostle Matthew and read 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. *Freeman's Journal*, 12 October 1891.

[120] See NAI, CBS Index, 6205/S.

[121] For example, the GAA's Annual Convention in 1898 found that the Association's debts amounted to a total of £403. See *Sport*, 28 May 1898.

heralded the return of the potato blight, causing another catastrophic failure of the potato crops and resulting in near famine-like conditions across Connacht and Munster.[122] The GAA would limp on in a demoralised state for the remaining years of the decade. Only in the years after 1900 would the greater revival in Irish cultural nationalism feed into the GAA a new generation of politically radicalised officials who would succeed in rejuvenating the Association.

[122] De Búrca, *The GAA*, p. 61; Jim Cronin, *Munster G.A.A. Story* (Ennis, 1985), p. 50.