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# "Boys indifferent to the manly sports of their race": nationalism and children's sport in Ireland, 1880–1920

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**ABSTRACT**

The late nineteenth century saw Irish children being exposed to formal sport in an unprecedented fashion. This era coincided with Ireland's so-called Gaelic Revival and the emergence of a virulent nationalism that helped fuel the Irish Revolutionary period which followed. Yet little research has been conducted on how nationalists used sport in their efforts to entice children into their campaigns for Ireland's cultural and political independence. This study examines the part which sport, particularly Gaelic games, played in attempts to inspire devotion to the ideal of an Irish-Ireland among the nation's children. It explores the efforts to promote native sports as the games of choice for children across the school grounds and playing fields of Ireland and the influence of nationalist media propaganda in this endeavour. Finally, it considers the role of sport in the training and physical culture of an array of Irish youth movements which arose at this time.

**KEYWORDS**

Children; sport; education; cultural nationalism; Gaelic Athletic Association; Gaelic games; Na Fianna Éireann

## Introduction

The past 20 years has seen an unprecedented upsurge of academic interest in children's history in Ireland. Since 2006, several major edited collections have been produced which focus on themes as diverse as adolescence and Irish society, the history of Irish children's literature, childhood illness and, most recently, the various constructions of Irish children in the decades surrounding Irish independence.[1] Such research has stimulated the foundation in 2014 of both the History of Irish Childhood Research Network and the Irish Museum of Childhood project.[2] The targeting and indoctrination of Irish children by various nationalist organisations during the Gaelic Revival and subsequent Irish Revolutionary period have also been rewarding subjects for scholars. Historians such as Marnie Hay, Elaine Sisson and Brendan Walsh, among others, have produced fascinating works on cultural and political nationalists' appropriation of children throughout this time.[3] Yet one aspect of their campaigns has been largely ignored. To date, little research has been conducted on whether organised sport was utilised by nationalists in attempts to inspire devotion to their struggle for a culturally and politically independent Irish state among the next generation. This omission is of course reflective of the limited historiography of youth and children's sport in Ireland generally.

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The emergence of cultural nationalism as a dominant ideology in Irish society at the twilight of the nineteenth century coincided with an era which saw Irish children being exposed to formal sport in an unprecedented fashion. Taking their lead from developments in Victorian Britain, church and lay authorities and an assortment of organisations in Ireland now looked to sport to project the values they wished to incubate among society's youth. This was one symptom of a societal preoccupation with childhood naturally stimulated by the high percentage of children among the general population of the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century.[4] Irish educational institutions played a vital role. Like their British counterparts they began to embrace and promote sporting activity, seeing it as a means of developing children's virtuous and physical character.[5] However, while these institutions' concentration on "British" sports was at complete variance with nationalists' advocacy of an Irish-Ireland, the coming of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) offered a native sporting alternative attuned to their needs.

This article examines nationalists' attempts to expose Irish children to facets of the new Gaelic renaissance through the promotion of Gaelic games both within and beyond Irish education in the decades before Irish independence. It explores how nationalist newspapers and periodicals supported this endeavour, producing a wave of propaganda targeted at children which attempted to exalt Gaelic games at the expense of British sports, which were presented as being culturally and morally inferior. Finally, it considers the part which Gaelic games played in the training and cultural activities of a range of nationalist youth organisations which emerged to politically proselytise children at this time. For the time period under consideration, there is a noticeable dearth of material relating specifically to the promotion of school or children's sport in many of the surviving archival records, particularly those in relation to the GAA. However, contemporary newspapers, including columns and periodicals aimed at children, and some early GAA publications help to illuminate the discussion and development of children's sport in Ireland at this time.

## I

The late Victorian era witnessed the first widespread attempts to introduce formal or codified sports to children across Britain.[6] Educational institutions were crucial to this enterprise, with the British public school system becoming, in effect, the nursery for the modern, global, mass-spectator sports which developed in the later nineteenth century.[7] 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 filtered down through all strata of the British education system.[8] Athleticism, a concept which embraced notions of muscular Christianity, social Darwinism and British imperialism, saw team sports being increasingly revered.[9] They were perceived as being an ideal way of imposing social control over students, moulding their moral and religious character and preparing them physically and mentally for the challenges of the modern, industrial world.[10]

Recent scholarship has shown that Irish schools were not immune to the craze of athleticism coursing through the British education system.[11] By the early 1900s, numerous educational institutions in Ireland had also begun to foster sport in an effort to shape students' ethical character. This was especially true of the approximately sixty elite colleges among Ireland's 489 secondary schools, catering to children from the upper

echelons of Irish society.[12] Many consciously aped the British public school model and made a determined effort to introduce the team sports emanating from their role models in Britain.[13] While cricket and soccer were promoted, the sport of rugby would become most associated with elite education in Britain and Ireland.[14]

The arrival of formal sport in Irish education overlapped with the sweeping tide of the Gaelic Revival in Irish society at the end of the nineteenth century. It represented Ireland's cultural response to the perceived ever-growing threat of outside, alien influence.[15] The British games which had seeped into Irish elite education symbolised another manifestation of this. However, the foundation of the GAA in November 1884 proved to be a transformative moment in the history of Irish sport. The GAA aimed to preserve and promote the native Irish games of hurling and Gaelic football, thereby acting as a bulwark against the encroaching Anglicisation of Irish life, particularly in the realm of sport.[16] In the process, Michael Cusack's creation became the first body in Ireland to open up organised competitive sport to the masses.[17] Its success meant Gaelic games became a hugely popular expression of Irish cultural uniqueness and identity.

A teacher by profession, by the time he established the GAA Cusack was already a zealous convert to the cult of athleticism, having spent over a decade working in elite Irish schools. When he founded his own grinds school, Cusack's Academy, in 1887, he embedded sport deep within the curriculum.[18] His own philosophy on sport's place in education was articulated through the pages of his short-lived newspaper, the *Celtic Times*, in 1887:

> Can any sight be more pitiable that that of the youth with the fragile frame and feeble health, who spends his days and nights constantly in the study room, without paying the slightest attention to the strengthening of his physical condition? […] In England the physical education of the pupils is carefully provided for, and the result is that when the boy becomes the man and leaves school he has plenty of stamina and vitality in him to battle his way through life […] When we consider the fierceness of the fight, in thec struggle for existence, which is going on at the present moment […] 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.[19]

Cusack's athleticism was an athleticism crafted for an Irish nationalist audience. Remarking on the importance of encouraging Gaelic games among children, the noted contemporary journalist P.J. Devlin wrote:

> We once could boast of a nation of robust agile, joyous youths: we must re-create that nation. Sickliness of body and sinister minds, begotten of modern customs, are the deadliest menace to the enduring Gaelic State. The healthy natural environment and the warm-blooded 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 the splendid traits and glorious past.[20]

The GAA was a natural bedfellow of the Irish-Ireland cultural nationalist movement spawned by the widespread rediscovery and public engagement with all aspects of Irish culture and heritage. Its games quickly took their place alongside the new enthusiasm for the Gaelic language, traditional dress and music, Irish folklore, archaeology and history as the major hallmarks of Ireland's Gaelic reawakening.[21] Yet it would take more than 20 years before any concentrated effort was made by the Association to infiltrate Ireland's schools. In his history of the Association, published in 1935, Devlin

acknowledged that for "many years the GAA did not make any provision for younger players [...] for the contests were deemed unsuitable for youths [...] no matter how fast or skilful they might be".[22] Another factor was Cusack's dismissal from his role as national secretary of the Association in July 1886.[23]

Nevertheless, in the decade after 1900, many nationalists now assumed that it was of crucial importance to try and promote Gaelic games within Ireland's Catholic-run secondary schools and elite colleges. After all, these institutions, which catered for the offspring of the middle and upper classes, represented the training grounds for the future leaders of the nation.[24] By exposing their students to Gaelic games at the expense of imported British sports, such nationalists believed, another fundamental aspect of native culture could be cultivated among the rising generation. They might have expected that institutions run by the Christian Brothers would have been particularly receptive to their efforts, but such hopes were frequently dashed.[25] At its heart, Irish cultural nationalism decried the perceived immorality and perversion of modern industrial societies, notably England, and looked for inspiration instead to an idealised, rural and spiritual Irish past. The ideals of the new Gaelic renaissance resonated deeply with many devout Catholics – clerical and lay – who saw it as reinforcing their views on the low nature of English mass popular culture and its insidious influence on the Irish people.[26] Educationalists such as the Christian Brothers had thus come to the fore in their championing of various forms of nationalist cultural expression.[27] Their schools placed an emphasis on a nationalist-Catholic education which celebrated Irish history and heritage and endorsed the Irish language.[28] Yet a critical reason for the Brothers' lack of enthusiasm at this time was the Catholic Church's open hostility towards the GAA. This was due to the alleged close links between the leadership of the Association and revolutionary organisations such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).[29]

Nevertheless, the growth of kindred cultural organisations and societies inspired by the Gaelic Revival, in particular Douglas Hyde's Gaelic League, would help facilitate and motivate the promotion of Gaelic games across the Irish education system.[30] For example, local Gaelic League branches became instrumental in organising Gaelic games contests between national schools in areas such as South Kerry. Likewise, school GAA competitions were begun in Cork and Tipperary in 1902 and 1903, respectively.[31] By 1904, a Dublin schools league was also operating, which eventually catered for 80 affiliated youth teams across three football and four hurling competitions.[32] The stipulation that no teams were eligible for trophies unless they showed "to the Committee's satisfaction that they have made an endeavour to use the Gaelic language", demonstrated the close ties with the aspirations of the Gaelic League.[33] Another major development came in December 1907 with the creation of the Munster College League for hurling and Gaelic football, which was open to teams from secondary schools across the province. Though it was unaffiliated with the GAA, the secretaries of the Cork and Dublin GAA, J.J. Walsh and Lorcan O'Toole, respectively, had worked closely with the principals of various Munster schools in inaugurating the competition.[34] Following this example, a Leinster Colleges Council was founded in Dublin in November 1910.[35]

Like their male counterparts, Irish girls were also being exposed to formal sport, primarily through education, though on a much more limited basis. While small numbers of mostly upper-class Protestant girls played tennis, croquet and hockey within the school system, organised sport assumed an inconsequential role in the lives of the

majority of young Irish women.[36] This was not only down to more limited female attendance in Ireland's secondary education system, but was also due to the widely held societal belief that excessive sporting or physical activity was damaging to women's health and diminished their capacity to procreate.[37] Yet the emergence of formal codified sports for men did begin to stir interest in women to emulate them.[38] 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.[39] 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 its Keating branch in Dublin drew up the first formal rules for a female version of hurling called camogie. By 1905, a national association, An Cumann Camógaíochta, was begun. With hockey already entrenched as the sport of choice in Protestant girls' schools, the Camogie Association fostered links with middle-class Catholic institutions.[40] For the next 60 years, camogie, especially in rural counties, would provide one of the few organised sports open to female participation. Welcoming its appearance, one female teenager noted that without it there was no other "form of outdoor amusement or pastime with which we can while away an hour in God's open air. There is nothing in the evenings but the same mild monotonous walk in the boreen or on hilly dusty roads".[41]

## II

By the turn of the twentieth century, the GAA had firmly aligned itself with the broader cultural nationalist movement.[42] Perhaps the greatest illustration of this was a series of rules passed by the Association between 1901 and 1905, which effectively banned any member who participated in what were now designated "foreign games".[43] This represented a practical application in the realm of sport of the policy of de-Anglicisation, which had been publicly advocated by Douglas Hyde in 1892.[44] The ideology of the Irish-Ireland movement and the existence of the "Ban" now supplied a powerful tool to those who wished to promote Gaelic games at the expense of all others. The next 20 years would witness an ideological battle of supremacy, fought across the media, the school grounds and the sports fields of Ireland. In this war between native and "foreign" games, children's sport became a prominent battleground.

In Cavan town, the establishment of a boys' soccer club in 1908 led to intense 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".[45] Retorting to this inflammatory rhetoric, a respondent abhorred "the contemptible and sarcastic manner" in which these boys were criticised and suggested soccer was a far more suitable game than the "pugilistic encounters" of the GAA, which assured spectators witnessed both "football and boxing for threepence".[46] This rebuke promoted a hysterical response, with one letter writer deriding with contempt the views of "so despicable a creature as a West Briton".[47] Another critic denounced the youths that looked to soccer as "empty-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".[48]

Nonetheless, to the vexation of many nationalists, Gaelic games remained peripheral to the experience of most children in Ireland's elite schools and colleges. An article in

the 1909 *Gaelic Athletic Annual* highlighted that within Ireland's elite educational institutions:

> 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 has kept alive our National language [...] it is the same peasantry, likewise, that preserves the physical qualities of the race, and sends forth men who, in athletic prowess, surpass the products of the whole world.[49]

To the author of the *Athletic Annual*, this active discrimination demonstrated a clear class bias, with elite schools (and those attempting to ape them), rejecting Gaelic games because of the supposed close connections between such pastimes and the poorer echelons of Irish rural society. Many others shared this view of Irish elite schools being nothing but bastions of Anglicisation, given their energetic eulogising of British games in Ireland. D.P. Moran, one of the most publicly influential exponents of the Irish-Ireland concept, accused such institutions of being the "greatest enemies to the national game of Ireland".[50] The membership of the GAA certainly agreed. At its annual congress in 1911, the Association passed a motion strongly condemning:

> The action of certain colleges in Ireland which deny their students the right of playing national games in their colleges, and persist in fostering upon them foreign games, with all their denationalising influences; and that it appeals to members [...] and to all others 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.[51]

In a further attack, the *Gaelic Athlete* argued that in Ireland's most prominent 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".[52]

In Cork, the Association became embroiled in an acrimonious dispute with local Catholic-run colleges. Due to their active promotion of rugby, the local GAA chairman, J.J. Walsh, accused the city's Christian Brothers of being "the biggest enemies of Gaelic culture in Cork".[53] Walsh's memoir fancifully recounts that after he assumed control of the Cork GAA, "war was declared on foreign games which were made to feel the shock so heavily that, one by one, soccer and rugby clubs began to disappear".[54] The Christian Brothers were clearly in his sights and he describes organising a "threatening demonstration of Gaels, armed with camans" to appear outside the gates of one of their institutions, to compel the Brothers to give up rugby in favour of Gaelic games.[55] The impact of such posturing is debatable. Due to Walsh's well-known IRB connections the local Christian Brothers would have nothing to do with the GAA in the city. Indeed, one Brother who was opposed to the continued playing of rugby in the school was transferred out to another teaching position.[56]

If some Catholic schools remained 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 Irish Catholic colleges like Blackrock.[57] In his wholehearted promotion of Gaelic games and other physical activity within Scoil Éanna's curriculum, Pearse again demonstrated the

impact which British athleticism was having on Irish educational thinking. The 1910 Scoil Éanna prospectus detailed how "careful attention is devoted to Physical Culture".[58] Pearse firmly believed that by nurturing their health and fitness, boys could withstand the depravities and temptations of modern society.[59] However, his was an 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.[60] The cult of Cúchulainn was heavily promoted and contributed 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 ancient sport of Gaelic Ireland.[61] One past pupil, Desmond Ryan, vividly recalled Pearse striding "down the hurley field, his black gown flying in the wind", encouraging his school boys "against some hostile team".[62] In the 1909 edition of *An Macaomh*, the Scoil Éanna magazine, Pearse proudly recounted:

> Nothing has given me greater pleasure during the past season than to watch Scoil Éanna developing as it has been doing on the athletic side. 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.[63]

Pearse would describe Scoil Éanna as "emphatically a hurling school" with pupils practising the sport "morning, noon and evening".[64] Indeed, the emphasis on hurling was such that one former student, C.S. Andrews, indignantly recalled being bullied by classmates for his personal dislike of Gaelic games.[65] For a zealous cultural nationalist like Pearse, the playing of Gaelic games – much like speaking Irish, studying Irish history and performing Irish theatre – was a constant exhortation to his students "that we have a country of our own".[66]

## III

A 1909 editorial in *Bean na hÉireann* lamented that "the consistent neglect of the children has been the big mistake of all national organisations".[67] Echoing this, numerous cultural and political nationalists increasingly believed that the indoctrination of children was fundamental to any successful effort to transform Ireland into an independent state where indigenous culture, language and traditions would be predominant. For many, it simply made more sense to focus their energies on children rather than adults. Pearse, for instance, understood that it was far easier for children to learn fluency in Irish than it was for adults and he was a strong advocate of the Gaelic League setting up junior club branches.[68] Likewise in his attempts to promote hurling, Bulmer Hobson argued that it was vital to acquire its skills at as young an age as possible.[69] If a truly Gaelic Ireland was to be achieved, educating children along nationalist lines was a vital first step and this was even more imperative in an era which saw Irish children increasingly exposed to a tsunami of British cultural influences. In particular, men such as Pearse and Douglas Hyde were deeply troubled by the corrupting influence of mass-produced imperial fiction, which targeted children and glorified the British imperial project. Typically this amounted to the fictionalised adventure stories of British soldiers

and explorers, carried in cheap, popular publications such as *The Boy's Own Paper*, that were widely consumed in Ireland.[70] In response, a host of nationalist organisations focused their attention on children, endeavouring to expose them to various aspects of Ireland's cultural renaissance while also transmitting to them the ideals of the Irish-Ireland movement.[71]

By 1908, successful campaigns, waged by the likes of the Gaelic League, had seen the Irish language and Irish history formally included in the National School curriculum.[72] 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, most cultural nationalists were as convinced of sport's importance for the development of a vigorous physique 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 citizens of the nation.[73] As one nationalist newspaper 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".[74] Nationalist publications began to feed to children a torrent of propaganda, attempting to instruct them along appropriately patriotic lines, including a zeal for Gaelic games. One early example was the "Irish Fireside Club for Boys and Girls", published from 1887 in the *Weekly Freeman*. The column, written under the pseudonym "Uncle Remus II", spawned the Irish Fireside Club which became the largest children's association in Ireland at that time.[75] Through its pages, "Uncle Remus" frequently exalted the ideals of the GAA, encouraged its games and, echoing Cusack, stressed the value of sport and physical health in equipping his young readers for the challenges of modern, adult life.[76] In later decades, the more radical mouthpiece, *Irish Freedom*, featured a children's section entitled "Grianán na nÓg" (the Sunroom of Youth) written under the pseudonym "Neasa".[77] Neasa frequently ran competitions which invited young readers to submit answers to a particular question or topic. In response to the competition question, "Are Irish Boys and Girls Justified in Playing Foreign Games?", the winning entry declared:

> The native games are fitted for the temperament and physique of our people and belong to the national life and tradition of the Irish race and from which they cannot be separated. 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 [...] are inferior to our national ones, both physically and mentally. They contaminate the minds of young people [...] they induce them to renounce home and patriotism, and inspire some with contempt for their native land. Alien games were introduced by West British snobs [...] as this dry rot of Anglicisation has invaded the field of our native sports and pastimes, it is the duty of all Irish boys and girls, who are working for the regeneration of Ireland, to do their utmost to rescue the ancient pastimes of the Gael from oblivion.[78]

The response graphically illustrates the impact on some young minds of the increasingly intolerant rhetoric of the Irish-Ireland ideology towards anything looked upon as un-Irish.

The Christian Brothers were equally fearful of the apparent damaging influence on the nation's youth caused by exposure to cheap, English-produced weekly children's magazines, viewing them as manifestations of British imperial propaganda which were deeply corrosive to the flowering patriotism of the next generation.[79] Their response

was an Irish alternative, whose material was more adapted to the needs of a Catholic nationalist audience. Thus in September 1914, the first monthly issue of *Our Boys* magazine appeared. As Michael Flanagan argues, *Our Boys* looked to seduce the hearts and minds of Irish children away from its British rivals by focussing on content which relied on a native frame of reference and drew heavy inspiration from Irish history and culture.[80] While it featured many staples of this genre of literature, historical adventure stories set during key events in Ireland's past were prominent.[81] Opinion pieces which eulogised Ireland's Catholic heritage and the ideals of cultural nationalism were also common, with one calling on Ireland's "palpitating youth chastened under the influence of Catholic thought and tradition" to make an Irish-Ireland a reality by "restoring to esteem and reverence, the Gaelic tongue".[82]

Despite the Christian Brothers' earlier, often antagonistic, relationship with the GAA, a magazine which sought to inspire children's devotion to Irish cultural supremacy could ill afford to ignore such a visible expression of Irish cultural identity. From October 1917 a dedicated Gaelic games column appeared. The stated aim of its author, G.O.T.G., was to "plant firmly on our sod the games of the Gael [...] so long neglected by the boys of Ireland".[83] It carried news and reports on major GAA games and events, as well as frequent accounts on the progress of youth competitions such as the Dublin School League. It also devoted much space to the promotion of hurling, in particular, publishing and explaining its rules, offering advice on developing the right skills and technique and giving practical guidance to boys organising their own under-age clubs. Hurling was seen as a perfect medium to encourage the native version of muscular Christianity emphasised by a Christian Brothers education, while also being a conduit for advancing other major aspects of Irish culture. G.O.T. G. declared that there was no better way a young Gael could "refresh his body and mind than the manly [...] national game of hurling" and pleaded for every new club his readers formed "to make it part of its programme to encourage the study of the [Irish] language and its use, particularly on the field of play".[84]

## IV

The decades preceding Irish independence also witnessed the rise of a range of youth organisations, which sought to use sport as a means of proselytising Irish children for numerous designs. Many were religious and sponsored sporting activity to induce devotional observance amongst children, particularly those viewed as trapped amid the moral decay of modern urban life and its consequent negative effects on youths' moral fibre. One notable example was the Boys' Brigade, a Protestant youth movement founded in Glasgow which had spread to Ireland by the 1890s.[85] The Brigade heavily endorsed soccer, particularly in the larger cities of Dublin, Belfast and Cork, to attract working-class boys to its mission to support "the advancement of Christ's Kingdom [...] and the promotion of obedience, reverence, discipline, self-respect, and all that tends towards a true Christian manliness".[86] Its emergence promoted the establishment of a Catholic equivalent in 1894, the Catholic Boys' Brigade, which looked to "safeguard the rising generation from the evils and vices of the age" and "promote the moral and physical welfare of the members".[87] Each company had a gymnastics class attached and also held annual sports days.[88]

Radical nationalist movements, targeted at children, also now appeared and began to encourage the sporting aspects of Ireland's Gaelic past as a means of awakening Ireland's

youth towards its nationalist destiny. Such movements reflected the wider rise of pseudo-military youth movements across Europe in the decade before the Great War.[89] In Ireland, the most notable example of this impulse was the advent of Na Fianna Éireann.[90] Na Fianna Éireann was the brainchild of Bulmer Hobson, who was 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.[91] As a member of the Tír na nÓg Gaelic League branch in Belfast, he became heavily involved with the hurling team which they formed in July 1901.[92] In the following month Michael Cusack visited Belfast, and arising from this visit the first Antrim GAA County Board was formed, with Hobson elected its secretary.[93] Nevertheless, the Board's refusal to support his attempts to encourage underage hurling and administer youth competitions led to Hobson's departure from the role.[94] In June 1902 he called a mass meeting of 300 local boys to establish the first iteration of Na Fianna Éireann, a junior league to promote hurling which also sought to expose local children to the Irish language and history in order "to make the boys sound nationally".[95] Nationalist newspapers such as the *United Irishman* viewed it as a timely antidote to the perceived British Army recruiting platforms which the Boy Scouts and the Boys' Brigade represented.[96] Yet a lack of finances and Hobson's other political commitments meant that Na Fianna Éireann soon lapsed.

In August 1909, Hobson partnered with Constance Markievicz to launch a second, more militarised incarnation of Na Fianna Éireann in Dublin. Like the Boy Scouts, Na Fianna Éireann emphasised to its members the importance of values such as discipline, trust, obedience, loyalty, manliness, and self-sacrifice.[97] However, it promoted these in an Irish nationalist rather than British imperialist context and it displayed a far more militant ideology.[98] A Fianna Éireann recruiting notice from 1914 declared that: "England has no business in this country at all [...] Ireland belongs to the Irish [...] The object of Na Fianna Éireann is to train the boys of Ireland to fight Ireland's battle when they are men".[99] Its establishment was enthusiastically endorsed, with one newspaper declaring:

> some nationalists think that the boys don't count in the nation, but the founders of Na Fianna Éireann rightly consider them of supreme importance [...] All through our history the boys of the country have played the parts of heroes ... Now that Na Fianna Éireann has started the boys of Ireland will again come to the front.'[100]

Hobson's organisation would develop into the largest youth movement in the country and claimed to have a membership in excess of 30,000 by 1917.[101] Na Fianna Éireann's training promoted a strong cultural element and "instruction in Irish and in Irish history [and] lectures on historical and literary subjects" were accentuated.[102] Its members were actively encouraged to participate in all aspects of the Irish cultural revival such as language, sport, theatre and music.[103] Thus the ideal Fianna member was envisaged as a patriot who "learns all about his country, knows its history and language, its resources and industries [...] plays Gaelic games, sings the songs of his country, and supports and encourages the purchase of goods of home manufacture".[104] Much like Pearse's students in Scoil Éanna, this exposure to all facets of Irish heritage was to cultivate Fianna members' sense of a separate national identity.[105] Indeed the foreword of the second edition of the *Fianna Handbook*, printed in the aftermath of the IRA's defeat in the Civil War, informed its readers that "the only freedom worth striving for is the freedom that Pearse visioned [sic] for Ireland when he said that he would have her 'not free merely but Gaelic as well'".[106]

The promotion of Gaelic games among Fianna members served the dual purpose of endorsing Irish cultural hegemony while fostering physical fitness. Prospective recruits were told that physical culture, boxing, swimming, hurling and Gaelic football were all incorporated into the Fianna's programme.[107] A year after its formation, its two Dublin based companies had established a hurling and Gaelic football team.[108] By February 1914, an inter-company hurling league was started within the Dublin Battalion, with several games being played on the grounds of Scoil Éanna.[109] A troop of the Fianna had been formed there by Con Colbert, who worked as the school's physical fitness master. Colbert used his position to recruit several older pupils into the IRB.[110] The Fianna would go on to play a prominent role in the 1916 Rising, with seven current or former members being killed in the insurrection, while Colbert was subsequently executed.[111] In one of the first actions of the rebellion, a section of the Fianna was tasked with blowing up the 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.[112]

Na Fianna Éireann was only the largest of several nationalist youth organisations which now materialised in Ireland.[113] In 1911, the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) started its own male youth body, the Hibernian Boys' Brigade.[114] The Irish Party's mouthpiece, the *Freeman's Journal*, warmly welcomed its foundation, declaring that it was essential "that there should be some systematised method of counteracting the evil effects of [. . .] the glamour of the 'Penny Horrible'". Through enlistment in the Brigade, boys would develop their "physical system to the extent necessary to enable them to successfully withstand the struggle of life in these strenuous times".[115] Reflecting the narrow Catholic/Nationalist base of its parent organisation, the Brigade was open to "Catholic boys of Irish parentage" aged 10–17 and promoted their "physical and moral welfare".[116] Within a year, six battalions existed in Dublin with others being subsequently established in Bray, Kells, Cork, Limerick and Belfast.[117] The Hibernian Boys' training included "physical and military drill, first aid, swimming, gymnastics, scouting [and] camping". The Brigade also required members to pledge to abstain from smoking and alcohol. Echoing the Fianna, their training emphasised elements of cultural nationalism such as "the study and practice of the Irish language [. . .] the promotion of Irish industries" and the study of Irish history.[118] This also included Gaelic games and by May 1913, the Brigade had football teams affiliated to the County Dublin Schools League.[119]

The appearance of nationalist youth movements targeted at boys encouraged the formation of female equivalents. Inspired by the formation of the Girl Guides Association, a female version of the Boy Scouts, the Irish National Girl Scouts emerged in Dublin around 1910–11.[120] In 1915, it renamed itself the Clann na Gael Girl Scouts and developed close links with the AOH.[121] 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 organisation's training included the study of Irish and the playing of camogie.[122]

## Conclusion

During the period under consideration, Irish children were exposed to organised sport in an unparalleled manner. Influenced by developments in Britain, many Irish educationalists

saw in sport an ideal medium to sculpt children's behaviour. Various Irish elite schools, aping their British counterparts, began to embrace an ethos of athleticism, heavily promoting team sports as a means of developing children's ethical, mental and physical character. Rugby, embraced with gusto by Ireland's elite colleges, was seen as the sporting embodiment of the British imperial project, and was celebrated by one Belfast newspaper as "the nursery of Empire-builders".[123] The promotion of such games in elite Irish institutions, and those schools looking to imitate them, was seen by many nationalists as another demonstration of Ireland's submergence under British cultural domination.

However, the same period which witnessed sport's materialisation in Irish education coincided with Ireland's Gaelic reawakening and the advent of its most significant sporting manifestation, the GAA. Gaelic games offered a means of subverting British athleticism for an indigenous purpose: utilising native sports to infuse the next generation with a sufficiently patriotic nationalist spirit. Across the school grounds and playing fields of early twentieth-century Ireland, nationalists fought a campaign to usurp the popularity of British games. The promotion of hurling and Gaelic football fed into their larger campaign of culturally and politically preparing the rising generation to take their place as leaders of the nation. Nationalist propaganda, targeted at children, played a prominent part in this enterprise. This was further facilitated by the GAA's own decision to demarcate itself in opposition to British sports by banning its members from participating in what were designated as "foreign games". The appearance of quasi-military youth groups in Ireland, most notably Na Fianna Éireann, offered further opportunities to utilise sport as a method of political indoctrination. Their encouragement of Gaelic games was part of a holistic training of the future manhood and womanhood of Ireland. For many advocates, sport became another means of awakening Ireland's youth to their nationalist fate by leading the cultural and political struggle which would break British control of Ireland.

## Notes

1. See Thompson and Keenan, *Treasure Islands*; MacLellan and Mauger, *Growing Pains*; Luddy and Smiths, *Children, Childhood and Irish Society*; Cox and Riordan, *Adolescence in Modern Irish History*; and Boylan and Gallagher, *Constructions of the Irish Child*.
2. For more information visit https://irishchildhood.wordpress.com and http://museumofchildhood.ie.
3. See Hay, "This Treasured Island"; Hay, "The Propaganda of Na Fianna Éireann"; Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*; Walsh, *Boy Republic*.
4. Holt, *Sport and the British*, 141.
5. Hunt, *Sport and Society in Victorian Ireland*, 45.
6. See note 4 above.
7. Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism*, 140.
8. 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": Mangan, *Athleticism*, 9.
9. For an overview of the emergence of the cult of athleticism in the British school system see Gathorne-Hardy, *The Public School Phenomenon*, 145–154; Holt, *Sport and the British*, 74–86; and Mangan, *Athleticism*, 13–28.
10. Tranter, *Sport and Society*, 58; and Holt, *Sport and the British*, 94.

11. The extent to which the ideology of athleticism in Irish schools led to the promotion and popular appeal of modern sport in Ireland at this time has been keenly debated. See Finn, "Trinity Mysteries"; Cronin "Trinity Mysteries"; Hickey, "Evolution of Athleticism".
12. Hickey, "Evolution of Athleticism," 1403. In addition, Ireland had 8,649 national primary schools. *1911 Census of Ireland*, 42/58.
13. Pašeta, *Before the Revolution*, 40; Finn, "Trinity Mysteries," 2264; O'Neill, *Catholics of Consequence*, 51–53. In Ireland the same rhetoric was used to justify the integral place of sport in these elite institutions. For example, the Castleknock College *Chronicle* asked: "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?": *Castleknock Chronicle* (June, 1890), cited in Hickey, "Athleticism," 1398.
14. Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 215.
15. Flanagan, "Western Ocean," 43.
16. Mandle, *The GAA*, 5.
17. Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *A People's History*, 19.
18. Finn, "Trinity Mysteries," 2271. The institution was set up specifically to tutor students wishing to pass the civil service examination.
19. *Celtic Times*, May 14 1887.
20. Devlin, "The Schools League," 14.
21. Flanagan, "Western Ocean," 43.
22. Devlin, *Our Native Games*, 52.
23. Rouse, "Why the GAA was Founded," 81.
24. Pašeta, *Before the Revolution*, 40.
25. The Christian Brothers were a Catholic lay order founded in 1803 whose mission was to serve the poor, principally by supplying an education to young boys. By 1911, they operated fifty-three secondary schools across Ireland. Flanagan, " Western Ocean," 43; *1911 Census of Ireland*, 56.
26. Hutchinson, *Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism*, 136.
27. Flanagan, "Western Ocean," 44.
28. Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland*, 113.
29. For a detailed discussion of the hostility between the Catholic Church and the early GAA see McElligott, *Forging a Kingdom*, 84–100.
30. McAnallen, *The Cups That Cheered*, 16. The Gaelic League strove to preserve and revive the use of the Irish language as part of a larger crusade to reverse the Anglicisation of Irish life and help transform Irish society into a populist Gaelic culture: McMahon, *Grand Opportunity*, 2; and Hutchinson, *Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism*, 119.
31. *Kerry Sentinel*, May 17 1905; and O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster*, 152.
32. Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland*, 192. The League was open to teams of boys aged between 12 and 17. In 1917, plans to establish an under 12's league competition were begun: *Our Boys*, November 1917.
33. The Dublin Schools League also had a special cup which was presented to the team "which makes the best endeavour to spread the use of our native tongue on the field of play and in the club-rooms". *Our Boys*: November 1917.
34. O'Sullivan, *Story of the GAA*, 185.
35. De Búrca, "Irish Colleges," 74. The meeting was chaired by Reverend John Doody, the president of the prestigious St Kiernan's College, Kilkenny. Patrick Pearse, representing his own Scoil Éanna, was appointed vice-chairman of the Council.
36. Nic Congáil, "Gaelic Feminism," 169.
37. Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 45.
38. For example, the Irish Ladies Hockey Union was formed in 1894: Nic Congáil, "Gaelic Feminism," 170.
39. Fitzpatrick, Rouse and McAnallen, "The Freedom of the Field," 124.

40. Nic Congáil, "Gaelic Feminism," 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*, 20.
41. *Kerryman*, June 19 1915.
42. Indeed the Royal Irish Constabulary, always wary of any overtly nationalist organisation which appeared in Ireland, had noted in their intelligence reports the, perhaps unsurprising, close bond between the Gaelic League and the GAA, with one "educating the mind" while the other trained "the body": National Archives of Ireland, Crime District Special Branch: Inspector General and County Inspector Reports, Box 2, 24242/S, March 12 1901.
43. In reality, "foreign games" meant specifically the British sports of soccer, rugby, cricket and hockey, which were now off limits to GAA members. See Rouse, "The GAA Ban on Foreign Games," 334.
44. De Búrca, *The GAA*, 71. In Devlin's history of the GAA he insisted that the leaning of Irish men towards imported games was simply "the desire, born of serfdom and all its venalities, to ape and pose as a superior caste": Devlin, *Native Games*, 65.
45. *Anglo-Celt*, November 28 1908.
46. *Anglo-Celt*, December 12 1908.
47. "West Briton" was a derogatory term used to describe an Irish person who imitated British culture and fashions. The term came to prominence within the pages of the influential nationalist newspaper, *The Leader*, edited by D.P. Moran: Hutchinson, *Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism*, 119.
48. *Anglo-Celt*, 26 December 1908. *Sasanach* is the Irish for an English person.
49. De Búrca, "Irish Colleges," 72–73, 76.
50. Pašeta, *Before the Revolution*, 44.
51. Croke Park Archive, Annual Congress Minutes 1911–1927: April 16 1911.
52. *Gaelic Athlete*, September 13 1913.
53. Walsh, *Recollections of a Rebel*, 17.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland*, 193.
57. Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*, 34.
58. *Scoil Éanna Prospectus,1910*.
59. Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*, 113.
60. Ibid., 79–82.
61. In the earliest literary references to hurling, it is the sons of kings and other nobles who play the game: Ó Maolfabhail, "Hurling," 154.
62. Quoted in Walsh, *Boy Republic*, 134.
63. *An Macaomh*, Christmas 1909. 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.
64. *An Macaomh*, Christmas 1910.
65. Andrews, *Dublin Made Me*, 43.
66. See note 64 above.
67. *Bean na hÉireann*, July 1909.
68. Hay, "Children and the Irish Cultural Revival," 6.
69. Hobson, *Ireland*, 15.
70. O'Neill, "Children, Childhood and Irish Society," 183–184; and Condon, "The Patriotic Children's Treat," 176.
71. Hay, "This Treasured Island," 36.
72. See Fitzpatrick, "Knowledge, Belief and the Irish Revolution"; and Fitzpatrick, "The Futility of History."
73. Hay, "Children and the Irish Cultural Revival," 9.
74. *Anglo-Celt*, November 28 1908.
75. Nic Congáil, "Irish Fireside Club," 92.

76. Ibid., 99.
77. *Irish Freedom* was a monthly paper produced by the IRB.
78. *Irish Freedom*, February 1913.
79. Flanagan, Western Ocean, 45.
80. Ibid., 46–47.
81. One example was *The Story of Cúchulainn: The Boy-Hero of Ancient Ireland* which appeared as a regular serial throughout the autumn of 1916. See *Our Boys*, September 1916.
82. *Our Boys*, April 1917.
83. *Our Boys*, November 1917.
84. *Our Boys*, November 1917, December 1917.
85. Power, "Boys' Brigade in Ireland," 41.
86. Falconer, *Dublin Charities*, 247.
87. Falconer, *Dublin Charities*, 248. Like the Boys' Brigade, it was open to children aged 10–17 years and had an estimated membership of nearly 800 by 1902.
88. *Freeman's Journal*, September 19 1902.
89. Fitzpatrick, "Militarism in Ireland," 382–383. Internationally, one of the most famous examples of this phenomenon was Robert Baden-Powell's Boy Scout movement.
90. There was, perhaps naturally, a degree of animosity between the nationalist Fianna and the imperialistic Baden-Powell Boy Scouts. In Ballybunion, Co. Kerry, the local companies of the Fianna and Scouts were embroiled in a street brawl in 1914. The Fianna boys won and threatened the Scouts never to appear out in public again, after which their company disbanded. Bureau of Military History Interviews (BMH), WS, 1212: William McCabe, p. 2.
91. Hobson, *Ireland*, 3.
92. Hobson, *Ireland*, 14.
93. BMH, WS 82: Bulmer Hobson, 1.
94. Ibid.
95. 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, 1.
96. *United Irishman*, January 24 1903, cited in Hay, *Bulmer Hobson*, 28.
97. BMH, WS, 591: Eamon Martin, 2; Hay, "The Foundation of Na Fianna Éireann," 53.
98. Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*, 123. Na 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: Townshend, *The Republic*, 317.
99. *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, October 10 1914.
100. *Bean na hÉireann*, September 1909.
101. Hay, "Scouting for Rebels," 279.
102. *Fianna Handbook*, 6; and *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, October 10 1914.
103. Eamon Martin remembers how "special attention" was given to the study of Irish and that officers regularly attended Irish classes given by Patrick Pearse. BMH, WS 591: Eamon Martin, 4.
104. *Fianna Handbook*, 153.
105. Hay, "Irish Cultural Revival," 11–12.
106. *Fianna Handbook*, 5.
107. *Nationalist and Leinster Times*, October 10 1914. Gaelic sports were reported to be a prominent feature of an early three-day training camp which the Fianna held outside Dublin in August 1910: *Bean na hÉireann*, September 1910.
108. *Bean na hÉireann*, October 1910.
109. *Irish Volunteer*, February 14 14 March 1914 1914.
110. BMH, WS 31: Bulmer Hobson, 5; Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots*, 126.
111. Hay, *Bulmer Hobson*, 123.
112. BMH, WS 32: Garry Holohan, 58–59.
113. A letter writer to the *Irish Independent* in June 1913 openly wondered why any son of a nationalist would join the Baden-Powell Boy Scouts, a known "recruiting ground for

England's Army and Navy", given the nationalist alternatives now available. He went on to list six such organisations – the Irish National Guard, Na Fianna Éireann, Macraidh na Éireann, Clan Colm Boys Scouts and the Hibernian Boys' Brigade. Reprinted in the *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, June 21 1913.

114. See *Freeman's Journal*, December 13 1911. The AOH was a Catholic nationalist fraternal society that spread to Ireland from Irish-American communities in the years surrounding 1900. It was closely aligned to the Irish Parliamentary Party and became a major influence in their Home Rule movement. McCluskey, "Make Way for the Molly Maguires," 33.
115. *Freeman's Journal*, December 13 1911.
116. Ibid.
117. *Freeman's Journal*, September 14 13 May 1912 23 November 1913 21 May 1914 16 October 1915 1915; *Meath Chronicle*, September 19 1914.
118. *Freeman's Journal*, December 13 26 February 1911 1912.
119. *Freeman's Journal*, May 22 1913.
120. Hay, "Scouting for Rebels," 271.
121. Mary Chadwick claimed to have been instrumental for this development and increasingly the Clann na Gael Girl Scouts morphed into a female version of the Fianna. Military Service Pension Collection, MSP 34, REF 20098, Mary Chadwick: sworn statement made before the Advisory Committee, 23 February 1937; BMH, WS, 934: Mary McLaughlin.
122. *The Hibernian*, July 17 1915.
123. *Belfast News-Letter*, March 27 1919.

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