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Contesting the fields of play: the Gaelic Athletic Association and the battle for popular sport in Ireland, 1890–1906

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The Gaelic Athletic Association's (GAA) meteoric rise to dominance in the 1880s reflected its success in tapping into an Irish sporting constituency left largely untouched by the games of the British Empire. However by the early 1890s, the GAA verged on extinction as the broader economic, social and political climate conspired against it. In its wake, sports as diverse as rugby union, cricket and soccer sought to capitalize and gain increasing popularity among Irish sportsmen. This article sets out to explore sporting developments in provincial Ireland during the 1890s to illustrate how the Association's demise was a major factor in the consolidation and spread of rival sports at that time. With the rejuvenation of the GAA in the years after 1900, it will explore the campaign conducted by the Association and its membership against those games that now gravely endangered its once powerful local and national monopoly.

Introduction

The establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in November 1884 ushered in a sporting revolution in Ireland. Its inaugural meeting was the harbinger for the democratization of modern, codified and competitive sport on the island. Previously the sporting creations of the British Empire, introduced to Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century, had struggled to make an impact outside of the country's larger urban centres (Bracken 2004; O'Dwyer 2006; Hunt 2007).[1] Sports such as cricket, rugby and soccer remained predominantly the plaything of either a largely Protestant, educated, upper class or the garrisoned police and military forces in the country (see Cronin 1999, 104). As Mike Cronin (2011, 2758) has recently argued, before the coming of the GAA, organized sport in Ireland was mostly controlled by, and in the interests of, a social and sectarian elite. The Association's advent dramatically altered this situation. For the first time, the majority of Irish sportsmen had access to competitive games that were overseen by a national organization. In addition, many enthusiasts were given their first opportunity to administer clubs and local governing boards affiliated to the new sports body.[2] The GAA's arrival thus signified a fundamental shift in organized sports participation in Ireland (Cronin, Duncan, and Rouse 2009, 19).[3] The GAA's success in tapping into a sporting constituency, left largely untouched by the sports of the British Empire, explains its stellar rise to prominence. Within five years, the Association numbered 777 affiliated clubs with over 41,000 members across the island of Ireland (NAI, CBS Index, 4467/S; 2792/S).[4] Such statistics are all the more impressive when compared to its biggest sporting rivals.[5]

While few scholars dispute the Association's achievement in introducing organized sport *en masse*, much ink has been spilled on postulating the reasons why.[6] Traditional histories have sought to explain the Association's success in terms of its kinship with Irish political nationalism (see O'Sullivan 1916; Devlin 1935). More recently, Irish sport

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historians have sought to place the GAA's development in the wider international context of the Victorian Sports Revolution and have highlighted the GAA's achievement in terms of its ability to ape contemporary developments in British sport while also appealing to native social, economic and cultural idiosyncrasies (see Rouse 1993; Mullan 1996; Cronin 1999; Garnham 2004a; Hunt 2007; Cronin, Duncan, and Rouse 2009).[7]

Nevertheless, few studies have been devoted to the GAA's ruinous collapse in 1890s Ireland.[8] Within 10 years of its formation, the GAA neared extinction, the victim of a ceaseless tide of broader economic, social and administrative problems. With some notable exceptions, little has been done to explore the interplay between Gaelic games and its sporting rivals at this time (see Hunt 2007; O'Callaghan 2011; Curran 2012b). Ireland was a rare example internationally of how the global sports of the Victorian Sporting Revolution were confronted by codified and nationally administered native games. This article will assess sporting developments in provincial Ireland during the 1890s to firstly illustrate how the Association's demise was a major factor in the consolidation and spread of rival sports. Concentrating on the rejuvenation of the GAA in the years after 1900 spurred on by the emergence of a strong Irish cultural nationalist movement, it will analyse the fight-back conducted by the Association and its membership on ideological and practical grounds against those sports that now gravely endangered its once powerful local and national monopoly.

National decline of the GAA in 1890s Ireland

From a seemingly unassailable position of dominance over Irish popular sport in 1889, it is extraordinary that within a further five years the GAA neared ruin. This remarkable implosion was directly related to the broader economic situation. It is important to remember that agriculture represented the dominant employment industry in Ireland at that time.[9] By 1890, an economic depression had descended on Ireland, which resulted in weak aggregate demand for Irish agricultural produce in its principal market of mainland Britain (Donnelly 1975, 151/313).[10] Since its foundation, the GAA had evolved as a predominantly rural organization in terms of its membership profile and club structure and nearly 62% of its players were directly employed in agriculture (McDevitt 1997, 269).[11]

The economic situation led to the reappearance of mass emigration, which accounted for an almost 15% (716,000) decrease in the Irish population between 1881 and 1900 (Vaughan and Fitzpatrick 1978, 3).[12] In 1896, 39,226 people alone left Ireland, 83.7% of who were aged between 15 and 35. This was precisely the age group of young rural men upon which GAA membership largely depended.[13] Emigration had a devastating impact on the Association resulting in the lifeblood of many clubs being swept away. The popular newspaper, *Sport* bemoaned that emigration was now the 'deadliest enemy of all' for the GAA (*Sport*, January 2, 1892).

Already labouring to stem the haemorrhaging of its membership, the Association's ability to combat the devastating effects of mass emigration and widespread economic decline was severely compromised by the great schism in Irish nationalist politics caused by the downfall of Charles Stewart Parnell as leader of the Irish Home Rule movement in December 1890.[14] Parnell was one of the three original patrons of the GAA and like other sections of Irish society the Association became bitterly divided over the issue. The revolutionary Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) decided to use the influence it had gained among the upper echelons of the GAA to throw the official support of the Association behind Parnell and his political supporters (NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 521/S/2493).[15] However, such actions resulted in the alienation of those in the

organization opposed to Parnell politically.[16] *Sport* lamented that the rupture in Irish politics was having a profound effect on the GAA across rural Ireland where it had caused 'our people to devote all their attention … to politics and to fighting one another' (*Sport*, January 2, 1892). By January 1894, the combination of all of these factors had reduced the Association to a spectre of its past glories. Club numbers had collapsed from a height of 777 to 118 and its national membership now numbered as little as 5183.[17]

The GAA's organizational structure made it particularly susceptible to the impact of emigration and economic volatility. A principal cause for the GAA's vulnerability was the ad hoc nature of the vast majority of its clubs. Reflecting the structure of rural Irish society, many GAA teams formed around a nucleus of local town land farming communities and as a result most were little more than 'ephemeral combinations', rather than permanent organized sports clubs (McAnallen 2009, 160).[18] In addition, GAA clubs were often at a severe financial disadvantage compared to their sporting rivals. Unlike rugby or cricket, Gaelic games, due to their implied nationalist outlook, did not attract the patronage of local landlords and gentry.[19]

Another major problem for the GAA was that compared to rugby and soccer, Gaelic games lacked clearly defined and universally understood playing rules. Richard Blake, one of the GAA's most prominent referees, argued that the principal reason for declining popularity was the vagueness surrounding its rules, which, he wrote, continually caused uncertainty and forced referees to interpret the laws for themselves (*Sport*, January 28, 1893).[20] As a consequence of its ill-defined rulebook, early Gaelic matches were plagued by contests being abruptly ended as disputes with referees over a scoring decision or the sending off of a player erupted and objections were sought.[21]

The broader economic and social situation would have tried the strength of any mass sporting organization, especially one whose membership relied mostly on the rural, lower-middle and working classes. Yet, the incompetence and bungling of the Association's administrative structure was also pinpointed as the major cause of teams and players withdrawing in droves. Objections and counter-objections to the awarding of matches would be a persistent feature of local and national contests throughout the 1890s. Often this led to bitter recriminations between local clubs and their county boards and between those boards themselves and the Central Executive.[22] The *Kerry Sentinel* argued that what lay behind the decimation of the Association was:

> [T]he 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. (*Kerry Sentinel*, January 2, 1892)

The *Anglo-Celt* echoed these sentiments arguing that the collapse of the GAA was caused by a combination of emigration and those left at home showing 'a coldness to' Gaelic games:

> One way or another people commenced to tire of the Association and the manner in which it was conducted … Incompetent referees, small unsuitable playing bounds, and bad management of committees conducting local tournaments, were greatly to blame. (*Anglo-Celt*, October 14, 1893)

The threat of rival sports to the Association's dominance had precipitated the introduction of a rule in September 1886, which banned members from playing non-Gaelic games (O'Sullivan 1916, 35).[23] A year later, the GAA, under heavy IRB influence, introduced a prohibition on members of the police and British military joining the organization (*Sport*, February 26, 1887). While this action had a much more implicit ideological imperative, it was rescinded in April 1893 as the GAA desperately sought to bolster its

dwindling membership following the catastrophic consequences of the Parnell split (O'Sullivan 1916, 103). Its leadership was forced to revoke the ban on members playing rival sports in 1896 in another attempt to augment its national membership (Rouse 1993, 345–346). While the removal of both the police and non-Gaelic games bans was intended to augment the GAA, instead it often had the opposite effect. As a consequence of the bans' initial introduction, police and British army personnel serving in Ireland had tended to concentrate their sporting activities on rugby, cricket and Association football. They continued to provide a powerful local impetus for those sports during the GAA's decline in the 1890s.[24]

With the effective collapse of the GAA in many areas, thousands of would-be athletes found themselves without a sporting outlet. Doubtlessly due to the economic situation, many had more pressing matters than simple sporting considerations. However, there remained a sizeable proportion of former GAA members who were able to retain their sporting interests. Across Ireland those who could afford to, turned to other sports. Economic downturn and mass rural emigration impacted less significantly on cricket, rugby and soccer. The national collapse of the Association would thus prove to be a significant stimulus to the consolidation and spread of such games across provincial Ireland. This helps to explain the marked growth in popularity of rugby in southwest Munster, soccer in the northeast and cricket across much of the Irish midlands.

Rugby Union's expansion in Southwest Ireland

O'Callaghan (2011, 146–147) has highlighted the remarkable fluidity between popular footballing codes in Ireland at this time and how, particularly in Munster, sports clubs often switched affiliation between rival sports bodies. For example in Kerry, the Killorglin Laune Rangers club had initially played rugby before transferring to the GAA in 1887 and becoming one of the most renowned early Gaelic football teams (Foley 1945, 172). In Munster, the collapse of the local GAA allowed rugby union to make significant inroads into the sporting constituency of urban and rural workers who had been predominant within the GAA there. In the aftermath of the Parnell split, the Limerick County Board disbanded for most of the 1890s due to a bitter internal power struggle (Ó Ceallaig 1937, 82). In Kerry, the County Board became defunct in the mid-1890s due to continued dissention within the local GAA's leadership (*Kerry Sentinel*, March 31, 1897). As a result, rugby began to expand and thrive in the larger urban centres of the southwest. For instance before 1914, the Tralee RFC was the most successful team based outside the cities of Cork and Limerick to compete in the Munster Senior Cup, the premier rugby competition in the region (O'Callaghan 2011, 36). In the absence of organized Gaelic games activity in Kerry, those young men who were socially and economically in a position to, switched to rugby.[25] The significant uptake in rugby, despite the harsh economic conditions, can be explained by examining the social profile of a sample of rugby players in Kerry.[26] This sample used the same class categories employed by the census. Therefore, we find that Class I, or professionals, amounted to 17.5% of rugby players examined. Class II, which were defined as those engaged in various commercial activities such as merchants and clerks, totalled 42.5%. Class III, those employed in agriculture, made up 2.5%. Class IV was defined as those in industrial labour, of which 2.5% were unskilled and 30% skilled. Corroborating these findings with a survey of 308 Kerry GAA players from 183 clubs (61.2% of which were urban based) active between 1896 and 1905, we find an enormous disparity between the 40.7% of GAA members engaged in agriculture as opposed to 2.5% in rugby (see McElligott 2013, 140–141).

Likewise, those in commercial activity are more than double their equivalents in the GAA: 19.2%. More than three times as many professionals were involved in rugby as opposed to GAA: 4.7%. Finally, both skilled and unskilled industrial labourers amounted to 32.5%, strikingly similar to the 32.1% for GAA members. The evidence suggests that in contrast to their GAA counterparts, most rugby players in Kerry were engaged in occupations that were less directly affected by the harsh agricultural situation. Many were also higher up the social echelon and had a more stable income than GAA members. Thus, they could afford to play sport even in economically bleak times. The almost equal participation of industrial labourers in both sports in largely urban teams indicates that there were few socio-economic barriers to GAA players from such background's crossing over to the rival code. It is likely that many of the 19.2% of white collar workers (often young clerks and shop assistants) previously involved in the GAA would also have found little difficulty in switching codes. With no organized Gaelic activity, men in the larger Kerry towns who may otherwise have played GAA turned to rugby.

From the mid-1890s, public meetings were held in larger Kerry towns such as Castleis land and Dingle to form rugby clubs. The attendances were comprised primarily of members of former Gaelic football teams (*Kerry Sentinel*, November 26/December 31, 1893). In 1898, a large gathering of Killarney GAA supporters established a rugby club there under the guidance of Dr William O'Sullivan.[27] Significantly it was expressly stated that the club was being formed in response to the local collapse of Gaelic games and potential members were assured that involvement would not hinder them participating in Gaelic games if they were reorganized in the town.[28] The status rugby was attaining in the county was apparent when Tralee was chosen as the venue for the high-profile inter-provincial test match between Munster and Leinster in January 1900. Media reports highlighted the large crowd that attended and how gate receipts were 'beyond all expectation'. The town was selected by the Irish Rugby Football Union's (IRFU) Munster branch 'which urged that such a match would tend to stimulate Rugby in County Kerry' (*Kerry Sentinel*, January 17, 1900).[29] That April, Tralee caused the shock of the Munster Senior Cup by beating Cork Constitution in the semi-final. They therefore qualified for their first final appearance (*Kerry Sentinel*, April 7, 1900). The local press commented that: 'Up to the present Rugby football [in Kerry] had a chequered existence … Now things have begun to look up … and the interest taken in the sport is keen' (*Kerry Sentinel*, March 17, 1900).

As O'Callaghan (2011, 76) has shown, the introduction of junior competitions and Sunday play in both Limerick and Cork by local rugby authorities also led to a significant increase in the number of clubs and the expansion of the geographical and social appeal of the game across the province. The facilitation of Sunday play also allowed rugby advocates in Limerick to encroach significantly on the social and cultural territory of the GAA (32/81). Larger rugby clubs in Limerick City took a prominent role in helping to spread the code in the towns of west Limerick and north Kerry, which, up until then, had been strongholds of Gaelic football.[30] Indeed in west Cork, where competition for players between rugby and GAA clubs was intense, the resurgence of rugby clubs in local towns was seen as a grave threat to the GAA's survival in the area (*Southern Star*, December 24, 1892). By 1900, rugby was revelling in a new found popularity across much of south and west Munster.

A cricket revival

Undeniably, the unprecedented boom in cricket in several counties during the1890s illustrates that the game was able to take advantage of the decline in the local GAA to

boost participation in such areas (Bracken 2004, 108; O'Dwyer 2006, 55–62). In counties like Tipperary, Kilkenny and Westmeath, the sport reached its peak of popularity between the years 1894 and 1900. During those years, the number of active cricket clubs in Tipperary and Westmeath remained in the high 20s, while in Kilkenny numbers peaked at 50 in 1896 (Bracken 2004, 109; O'Dwyer 2006, 157; Hunt 2007, 119). Several factors explain why cricket was in a position to benefit from the turmoil within the local GAA there. The early nature of GAA competitions often meant that there were few competitive hurling or football matches for rural GAA teams in a typical playing season. Once a team was defeated in the knock out county championship structure, they were frequently denied another competitive match until the following year.[31] However, Tom Hunt (2007, 156) has argued that cricket offered players a competitive structure, which ran the length of a summer and guaranteed a comprehensive series of matches. Furthermore, while Sunday play was a major stimulus to the popularity of the GAA among the Irish working class, in Westmeath, Sundays had already been well established as the principal playing day for cricket since the 1880s (2007, 157). It is therefore not surprising that many former GAA members turned to cricket to maintain their interest in organized sport following the GAA's decline. This is further supported by the fact that in counties such as Westmeath, the economic background of the majority of cricket players at this time corresponded broadly to the same economic classes previously involved in the GAA. For example, a study of 312 Westmeath cricket players conducted by Hunt illustrates that 53.5% were classified as farmers, farmers' sons or farm labourers (2007, 136).

Evidence for sportsmen turning to cricket in the GAA's absence is widespread. In Westmeath, the Mullingar GAA club, after winning the 1892 county championship, retired from football activities for the summer and established the Mullingar Cricket Club, which was comprised of players from the two Gaelic football teams in the town.[32] In Kilkenny, the popularity of cricket was such that the *Kilkenny Journal* argued its clubs should be utilized as a base to reform the local GAA. The paper believed that it was up to the local cricket captains and club secretaries to spearhead a revival in the county's native games (*Kilkenny Journal*, September 21, 1895).[33]

Soccer's growth in Northwest Ireland

The final major sport to show significant growth in parts of provincial Ireland following the GAA's collapse was soccer. Particularly in Ulster, soccer began to gain popularity among the working class of the region, principally due to the relative proximity of Belfast, which became the main stronghold of the sport on the island (Garnham 2004b, 5). There the GAA had been much slower to organize than elsewhere in Ireland.[34] Also the GAA's reliance on Sunday play had initially deterred participation by Sabbatarian and evangelical Protestants who formed a significant majority of the population in much of the region (Garnham 2004a, 40). In contrast to the GAA's misfortunes, the Irish Football Association's (IFA) decision in May 1894 to legalize professionalism indicated the growing strength and vitality of the Association's main sporting competitor in major urban centres like Belfast and the numbers of clubs affiliating to the IFA showed a steady progression throughout the 1890s (43/72). Again, the economic situation and effects of mass emigration seemed to have been far less damaging to soccer's popularity.[35]

In the northwest of Ulster, especially in counties Donegal and Derry, the decline of the local GAA secured the dominance of soccer in the region (Curran 2012b, 135). In Derry, a Football Association was established in 1886 and its influence allowed soccer to spread through neighbouring northeast Donegal in the early 1890s. Meanwhile in 1888, a GAA

county board was organized in Derry (*Derry Journal*, October 29, 1888). As with soccer, Derry's influence also had a telling effect on the spread of the GAA in those areas of Donegal close to the city (Curran 2010, 36–38). Such was the popularity of soccer, however, that a number of Derry GAA clubs were actively fielding soccer players and incidents of players transferring between the rival codes was said to be a major problem (*Derry Journal*, August 18/27, 1890).[36] Moreover, in the wake of the Parnell split, the Catholic clergy in Derry City began to strongly support and actively promote the game of soccer among the city's catholic working class, not least as a way of countering what they saw as the subversive political influence of the GAA (Murphy 1981, 171).[37] The intense clerical opposition had a profound effect on the Derry GAA with prominent clubs such as the Young Emeralds, the McCarthy's and the Young Irelands electing to reorganize themselves as soccer clubs (Curran 2012b, 127). By 1892, the GAA had effectively collapsed in the city and within three years soccer had completely monoplized the sporting interests of the Catholic working class there (Murphy 1981, 172). The downfall of the Derry GAA heavily contributed to the Association's collapse in Donegal. In its absence, sportsmen looked to soccer to fill the void. As Conor Curran (2012b, 111) has shown, the number of soccer teams in Donegal began to increase significantly in the early 1890s. In 1891, there were at least 17 and this figure more than doubled in the following year. This illustrates a significant growth from the handful of teams in the county in the mid-1880s. The dominance of soccer in Derry meant the city's teams played an increasing role in spreading the code into Donegal. Seven northeast Donegal clubs were already affiliated with the Derry FA when an independent Donegal FA was formed in March 1894 (*Derry Journal*, March 9/30, 1894). While soccer went from strength to strength, only two Gaelic football matches were recorded in Donegal between the years 1891 and 1892 (Curran 2012b, 119).[38]

The revival and reorganization of the GAA, 1898–1905

By the mid-1890s, the GAA had effectively collapsed across most of rural Ireland. Thousands of its members had been forced to break their ties with the Association due to economic necessity, emigration or because of the effects of bitter political in-fighting. With the disbandment of the local GAA, many other would-be athletes had turned instead to cricket, soccer and rugby to satisfy their sporting passions. The year 1894 represented the GAA's nadir and in reaction to its national impotence those in charge now looked to recast the Association along more inclusive and less confrontational lines. In 1895, Richard Blake was elected as the GAA's National Secretary (*Sport*, April 13, 1895). Observing its poor health and regarding the influence radical nationalists exercised on its ruling body as the primary cause for this, Blake was determined not to let another political upheaval wreak havoc within the GAA. A month after his appointment, the GAA declared their organization to be non-political and non-sectarian.[39] Blake realized that the Association's survival was dependent on it distancing itself from nationalist politics and instead reorganizing as a governing body of sports that would attract 'mass spectator support' (Mandle 1987, 95). He immediately set about restructuring the playing rules for both hurling and football in order to eliminate their glaring defects. This, he hoped, would increase interest and popularity in the games at the expense of their growing rivals: soccer and rugby.[40] The changes pioneered by Blake would lead to a faster, more open, scientific and higher scoring game, which could now compete with more illustrious, international rival sporting codes for public interest. Blake represented the first of a new breed of GAA administrators: those drawn increasingly from the growing Irish professional Catholic middle classes who

wished to restructure the Association on a more proficient model and govern it according to the best practice of contemporary sporting bodies. His administrative competence and energy salvaged the GAA at a time when it faced extinction and laid the foundations for the GAA's remarkable renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century.[41]

Ironically despite Blake's efforts to keep the GAA apolitical, the Association's national revival was greatly stimulated by the organization fully integrating itself into the emerging Irish cultural nationalist movement that was already becoming the dominant ideological force in Irish politics and society.[42] The development of popular cultural organizations, such as the Gaelic League, helped to stimulate the widespread reorganization of the GAA across much of provincial Ireland in the years surrounding 1900.[43] Police reports noted the symbiotic relationship between the Gaelic League and the GAA as the former spread rapidly with one 'educating the mind' while the other trained 'the body' (NAI, CBS, IG & CI Box 2, 24242/S).[44] In Longford, Westmeath, Dublin, Derry and Donegal, Gaelic League clubs played an instrumental role in forming hurling clubs and promoting the popularity of the game among its membership and the general public (Hassan 2009, 81; Hunt 2009, 200–201). Likewise, the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) also played a key role in the reorganization of the GAA, especially in Ulster.[45] At its 1905 National Convention, a unanimous motion was passed asking its branches across Ireland to help foster Gaelic games in their localities (*Derry Journal*, September 6, 1905). In Tyrone, the AOH voted to fine or expel members taking part in sports other than Gaelic games and the organization was praised for being 'the backbone' of the GAA in the county (*Fermanagh Herald*, October 6, 1906).[46]

The emergence of cultural nationalism as a force within Irish society fostered an atmosphere among the country's youth that was conducive to the GAA's message. But even more significantly, it would feed into the Association a new generation of educated, professional officials who would become prominent at both a local and national administrative level. In place of the farmers, labourers and tradesmen, who had hitherto composed the bulk of its national membership, a new class of members emerged drawn increasingly from teachers, office clerks and civil servants, or in effect those within Irish society for whom the emerging ideology of cultural nationalism exerted its most powerful psychological appeal (Hutchinson 1987, 152; De Búrca 1999, 66; Nolan 2005, 69). For example, in Kerry, participation in the Association by members drawn from the professional classes increased by 67.5% between 1888 and 1916, while the numbers classified as shop assistants and clerks quadrupled (McElligott 2013, 140–141). This new class of enthusiastic and well-educated young men rejuvenated the Association in the years after 1900.Their professional and administrative talents helped to turn the Association into a profitable, ordered and efficient organization at all levels. In 1900, the Association approved what would prove to be one of its most important pieces of administrative legislation: the formation of provincial councils to deal with the running of the GAA in the country's four provinces.[47]

With its resurrection, the Association was now in a position to again contest the control of popular sport in Ireland. This fight would take place on both an ideological and practical level. The new breed of cultural nationalists who now infused the leadership of the GAA was determined to place it at the heart of Ireland's nationalist revival. These individuals fervently believed that the Association should be engaged primarily in a project of national and cultural liberation (Rouse 2010, 289–290). By 1901, much of the GAA's leadership found themselves caught up in the all-encompassing cultural nationalism of the era. Little wonder that at its Annual National Convention, delegates approved a motion proposed by Thomas F. O'Sullivan of the Kerry GAA that members would:

> pledge ourselves to resist by every means in our power the extension of English pastimes to this country as a means of preventing the Anglicisation of our people. That County Committees be empowered to disqualify or suspend members of the Association who countenance sports which are calculated to interfere with the preservation and cultivation of our distinctive National pastimes. (Croke Park Archive (CPA), GAA/CC/01/01, 15 December 1901)[48]

With this motion, the GAA reintroduced its ban on foreign games, specifically the British sports of rugby, soccer, cricket and hockey. If the administrative evolution of the GAA by1901 gave the Association its platform, the ideology of cultural nationalism and the existence of the 'Ban' now gave it a weapon to wrestle back control of popular sport in Ireland. For many, presenting the Ban as a crusade against the Anglicization of Ireland's culture could also ensure the survival and triumph of native games in areas where its popularity was being undermined. In the following years, a bitter struggle, cloaked in the ideology of the cultural revival movement, would take place across the media and sports fields of provincial Ireland; a struggle to destroy the threat of rival codes to the previous dominance of Gaelic games.

Campaigns against rugby and cricket

Eoghan Corry (2009, 100) has contended that the Irish press was arguably the most important catalyst in sustaining the GAA through its early crisis-ridden years. Many within the Association were deeply aware of the immense potential of the print media to reach and influence a far wider audience than at any other time in Irish history. Profoundly affected by the cultural nationalism of the time, a new class of GAA journalists emerged who utilized the press as a stage to attack what they saw as the corrupting influences of Anglicized sports. This propaganda campaign, conducted throughout provincial Ireland, played its role in helping to divert large numbers of athletic young men back into the GAA's ranks. Sports perceived as British were now challenged and their supporters stigmatized (Hunt 2007, 194–195).[49]

Thomas F. O'Sullivan was typical of this new breed of journalists. After being appointed secretary of the Kerry GAA following its re-establishment in May 1900, O'Sullivan became the *Kerry Sentinel*'s official GAA correspondent.[50] From its pages, O'Sullivan launched a crusade to secure the county as a Gaelic games stronghold. Given the real danger that rugby was posing to the pre-eminence of Gaelic games there, it was no surprise that the sport's advocates bore the brunt of O'Sullivan's wrath. In a heated debate with one correspondent on the necessity of a foreign games ban, O'Sullivan declared 'I am not in favour of crushing all imported sports … merely … athletic exercises like rugby … which are calculated to injuriously affect National pastimes' (*Kerry Sentinel*, February 22, 1902). In December 1901, O'Sullivan lamented that the game had a foothold in most Kerry towns and it was necessary that decisive action should now be taken before it spread into rural districts 'bringing with it the pestilential spirit of Anglicisation' (*Kerry Sentinel*, December 18, 1901). O'Sullivan was instrumental in the Ban being reactivated within the GAA's constitution. By presenting it as a crusade against the Anglicization of Ireland's culture, he also wished to ensure the survival and dominance of Gaelic games in Kerry through undermining the threat posed by rugby's popularity there. He argued that:

> the persons who are promoting the extension of Rugby, Association, and the other anglicising agencies … are doing more to blot out our Nationality than the British Government. If our people were self-respecting, … if instead of hob-nobbing with the avowed enemies of their country, and aping foreign manners and customs, and as a result, degenerating from sterling Irishmen into contemptible West Britons … they endeavoured to realise the passionate

> aspiration of nationhood, there would be no fear of the ultimate triumph of our National cause, the success of which is imperilled not by British treachery or brute force, but by the recreantcy of un-Irish and anti-Irishmen … [We have] every desire to prevent our young men from becoming anglicised cads … Irish games which are superior from an athletic standpoint should be good enough for self-respecting Irishmen who have no ambition to renounce their nationality. (*Kerry Sentinel*, January 11, 1902)

Following Tralee's RFC's defeat in the 1902 Munster Cup, O'Sullivan, with unmistakeable glee, inserted a mock obituary into his column proclaiming that the team had succumbed and 'died … after an hour's painful illness. Regretted by a large circle of shoneens – R.I.P' (*Kerry Sentinel*, March 22, 1902).[51] In the aftermath of this defeat, O'Sullivan reported satisfactorily that many of Tralee's players 'have given up the ghost as far as rugby is concerned' (*Kerry Sentinel*, March 29, 1902). He also mocked the attempts by the Listowel Rugby club president Jack Macaulay to keep the sport alive by applying for a £50 grant from the IRFU to try and promote the sport in the district, claiming that he could 'not even get his own employees to play the game' (Kerry Sentinel, 29 March 1902). The patrons of rugby in Kerry, lacking the countywide organization of the revitalized local GAA and without a voice in the increasingly nationalist popular media, could not hope to fight off such a determined attack on its status.[52] Kerry was distant from the heartland of Munster rugby, and the province's branch of the IRFU, based in Cork city, was dominated by officials from there and Limerick city. Weak local administration of the game was compounded by O'Sullivan's persuasive tirades. In Kerry, O'Sullivan helped to change the popular perception of rugby by arguing that it represented simply another extension of the 'British garrison' in Ireland. Among the local nationalist press, the reporting of the game virtually ceased after late 1902. Once the county captured its maiden All Ireland football title in 1905, rugby effectively slipped into the background of Kerry's sporting history.

In the southwest, it was the organizational strength of the revitalized GAA at a local level that allowed the Association to benefit in membership terms from the propaganda campaign conducted by the likes of O'Sullivan. Outside the cities of Cork and Limerick, rugby was in want of a strong administrative structure. In rural areas, the combination of the GAA's ban, along with accompanying press campaigns that vilified British sports, decidedly stymied rugby's potential development and those clubs that survived struggled for any level of permanence (O'Callaghan 2011, 52). In west Limerick, many GAA clubs were reformed, including the Newcastle West Boer GAA club that declared their intention 'to do away with English pastimes that had lately been making serious encroachments to the determinant of national pastimes in the area' (*Limerick Leader*, May 13, 1901). However in Limerick City, where rugby had its strongest foothold in the region, many Gaels looked with envy at the success of the re-established Kerry GAA in combating its popularity. The *Limerick Leader* found it:

> depressing to contemplate that the fire of athleticism which kindled such a brilliant blaze wherever a branch of the GAA sprang into life in Limerick some two years back, and which has been instrumental in touching those sterling Kerry Gaels into their former life and strength, should now have burned so low, that the void from which the present splendid board of the Kingdom sprang, is now threatened to become the destiny of that of Garryowen' rugby. (*Limerick Leader*, October 30, 1901)

In November 1902, O'Sullivan was instrumental in a more stringent resolution on foreign games being adopted by the national GAA. This rendered it compulsory for county boards to expel Gaelic players 'participating in, or encouraging in any way West-British pastimes' like rugby, cricket, and Association football (CPA, GAA/CC/01/01, 30 November 1902). Yet conscious of the popularity of rugby among the city's working class, the Limerick County Board feared the effect that the rule would have on its membership

who played both Gaelic and rugby (*Limerick Leader*, December 1, 1902). Similarly in Cork, the popularity of rugby among GAA members in the city meant that resistance to the Ban by those who controlled the Cork GAA was marked. The *Cork Weekly Reporter* argued that 'enforcement as far as Cork city and a large part of the county is [*sic*] concerned, will result in the disorganization of many prominent clubs'.[53] The County Board's tolerance of foreign games received censure from many rural Cork clubs. A meeting of representatives from those in east and south Cork in April 1901 rued that at a time 'when anti-Irish sports such as hockey, soccer and rugby were everyday increasing and gaining ground in county, the good old native games were becoming unknown and fast dying out', a situation 'chiefly due to the unsportsmanlike and unpatriotic actions of the so-called Cork County Board' (*Cork Weekly Examiner*, April 13, 1901). O'Sullivan enjoyed remarkable success in destroying the appeal of rugby among the GAA's sporting constituency in Kerry. However, similar campaigns in Cork and Limerick cities proved less successful, as a consequence of rugby's stronger organizational structure there. Nevertheless, the combination of the ban and media campaigns against rugby played a key role in halting the spread and appeal of rugby in rural districts of the southwest.

Areas of provincial Ireland where cricket had overtaken the GAA in popularity were similarly targeted by those who wished to reassert the dominance of Gaelic games. Individuals, especially those from Catholic and therefore ostensibly nationalist backgrounds who continued to play and promote the game, were especially pilloried.[54] In Kilkenny, the local GAA sought to wrestle back control over popular sport in the wake of the reintroduction of the Ban. Dan O'Connell, the Kilkenny GAA Secretary, denounced the widespread practice of illegal tournaments and games being held by GAA clubs that had not affiliated with the county board because cricket players on their teams would then be liable for automatic expulsion. He called for this practice to be eradicated and for the Ban to be 'utilised for the purpose of organizing means in different districts against the furtherance of games of Saxon invention' (*Kilkenny People*, June 24, 1905). The number of active cricket clubs there did decline significantly from 30 to 21 between 1905 and 1906. Despite this, cricket, though weakened by the resurgence of the GAA in Kilkenny, was still played relatively widely in the county for several years after (O'Dwyer 2006, 66–67). However in Tipperary, where cricket enjoyed similar popularity, Bracken (2004, 120) has concluded that the introduction of the foreign games ban and the ideological fervour that accompanied it represented 'the death knell' for the previous success of cricket in rural areas.

Westmeath offers one of the best examples of how the combination of local GAA reorganization and intense media campaigns eliminated the threat posed by cricket to Gaelic games. On the back of the reestablishment of the Westmeath County Board in 1904, local nationalist newspapers like *The Midland Reporter* began a determined assault on cricket's credibility (Hunt 2007, 194). The newspaper declared that it 'constantly advocated the upholding of Gaelic pastimes and preached a crusade against the games of the foreigner'(*Midlands Reporter*, September 29, 1904).[55] Commenting on a cricket match near the village of Stoneyford, the paper announced:

> English and imported games … in the larger centres … have been slowly but surely eradicated by the voice of popular opinion; and even as a beaten enemy will retire to their mountain fastness in the hour of defeat, so the thrust-out-of-place game of cricket in Westmeath betakes itself to obscure villages like Stoneyford and others of that ilk to sulk in their obscurity. (*Midlands Reporter*, June 30, 1904)

Such places were condemned as 'simply useless so far as Ireland is concerned' (*Midlands Reporter*, July 28, 1904).[56] So effective was the paper's campaign against cricket that at a meeting of the Westmeath GAA in March 1905, delegates declared the no one had done

more than the editor of the *Midland Reporter* 'to place the GAA in its present sound state, it has practically annihilated West British games in our county' (*Midland Reporter*, March 25, 1905). As Hunt has shown, once the GAA revived in Westmeath, cricket clubs proved an important source for players of the game.[57] By 1905, cricket's dominant position in rural Westmeath was eclipsed by Gaelic games (Hunt 2007, 215). As in Kerry, much of this was due to the administrative weakness of the game once the county's GAA had been reorganized.

The GAA versus Association football

What is significant about the campaigns against cricket and rugby is that invariably the game subjected to harshest denouncement in a given area was the one that had the most success in penetrating the former sporting consistency of the GAA. Where soccer's popularity had usurped the local GAA, advocates of the game were similarly targeted and like other parts of provincial Ireland, it was in the pages of the local press that the propaganda campaign between both was most keenly contested. In April 1906, the nationalist *Donegal News* argued that soccer's 'evil effects on the moral of the people would of themselves call loudly for their suppression'. Gaelic sports imbued players:

> with a good national and healthy moral spirit … [and] not only do they develop the muscular parts of the body in proper proportion and thereby lend grace and easy dignity to their movement, but also … strengthen the voice and lend a greater facility for its development, [yet] the foreign game … has done for the Irish physique what the foreign language has done for the Irish mind. (*Donegal News*, April 21, 1906)

As exemplified in the above passage, the dominant image constantly being reinforced was Gaelic players who were morally and physically superior athletes and whose skill and bravery contrasted sharply with practitioners of Anglicized sports, tainted as they were by their associations with professionalism, modernity and social degeneration. This imagery fitted into the developing national consensus of the superiority of traditional Irish life over modern and increasingly Anglicized society.[58]

However, soccer would prove an entrenched opponent and tackling its popularity proved a much sterner challenge. A principle reason was that more so than rugby and cricket, the social base that comprised the GAA and IFA and from which they sought to enhance their membership, was, generally, the same socio-economic group. This ensured that by the1900s, the IFA was seen as the main challenge to the GAA in terms of club strength, while soccer was clearly the most popular sport in many regions, particularly Ulster (Connolly and Dolan 2013, 856). There, the battle between both codes for the affections of young Irishmen was often most intense. Soccer's popularity in Ulster had much to do with the continued organizational weakness of the GAA there. It was only in 1903 that an Ulster GAA Council was finally formed and it took until 1906 before all nine counties had a functioning County Board (Curran 2012a, 139). Writing in 1905, R.A. Whyte, a member of the GAA's Central Executive, acknowledged that the province had been 'thoroughly and effectively saturated with the glamour of foreign games' (*Anglo-Celt*, August 12, 1905). Calls by Monaghan delegates to exempt the province from the Ban at that year's Ulster GAA Convention is evidence of how much its membership in such areas still relied heavily on teams backboned by soccer players.[59]

In Fermanagh, the reorganization of the local GAA in 1904 resulted in soccer promoters there petitioning the IFA for a £50 grant to reassert the game in the region. In turn, the Fermanagh Division of the AOH called a meeting 'to tackle the Belfast Mongrels who would dare to bribe with £50 the boys of the county to forsake the game of

their forefathers'. With the help of the Fermanagh County Board, they resolved to organize a GAA club in every single parish (*Fermanagh Herald*, October 6, 1906). Despite this, the Fermanagh GAA struggled and by April 1905, only 10 clubs had affiliated to the body (*Derry Journal*, April 19, 1905).[60] For much of the next decade, soccer's growth in the county curtailed the development of the GAA (Brock 1984, 22/32). This was largely due to the relatively strong local organization of the game there. The donation of £50 from the IFA allowed a new Fermanagh and Western League to be created in 1907, giving soccer players access to a competitive football programme.[61] Yet as Curran has observed, such financial assistance on the part of IFA was exceptional (Curran 2014, 80).[62]

Donegal serves as perhaps the most interesting example of a region where the attempted resurgence of the GAA failed to impact on soccer's popularity. The battle against soccer there was taken up by Seamus MacManus, a prominent local IRB member and leading local organizer of the Gaelic League (Curran 2010, 80). As with O'Sullivan's campaign in Kerry, MacManus used the local nationalist press to publicly attack the popularity of soccer in the region. In March 1905, he declared it:

> a great pity that while the other counties of Ireland have awakened to the fact they are Irish, and have adopted again their own Irish games in preference to games introduced by the foreigner, Donegal alone, one of the most Gaelic counties in Ireland, should not realise its duty. There are many great football clubs in Donegal, almost all of them playing football under foreign rules … the time has come, however, when they must fall into line with the rest of Ireland, or else seem to take sides against their country. (*Derry Journal*, March 1, 1905)

MacManus utilized his position within the local Gaelic League to continue his appeal and in April 1905, he put forward a resolution for its members to discard the playing of Association football in the region (*Derry Journal*, April 14, 1905). He also demanded that representatives of soccer clubs in Donegal should hold a meeting and resolve to introduce Gaelic games throughout the county. This, he felt, would see 'the conclusion of the Association regime' (*Derry Journal*, March 1, 1905). An added spur to MacManus' efforts was news that a County Board had been re-established in neighbouring Derry (*Derry Journal*, May 26, 1905). Following this, a meeting of members of the Donegal United Football Club decided to abandon soccer and revive a GAA club in the town. The *Derry Journal* also reported that in Mountcharles, Dunkineely and St John's point, GAA clubs were being formed (*Derry Journal*, April 19, 1905). Nevertheless the problems MacManus would face in Donegal were foreshadowed at a meeting of the revived Derry GAA that September. Its secretary complained that popularizing Gaelic games in the county was very difficult as 'the roots of the foreign games have struck very deep' and the work of undoing its success will 'undoubtedly be long and arduous' (*Derry Journal*, September 11, 1905). As the summer progressed further reports of soccer teams willing to change allegiance were not forthcoming and Curran has speculated that MacManus' failure to immediately offer any competitive alternative to local soccer tournaments was a factor (Curran 2012b, 245). Only in late October did MacManus succeed in establishing a working County Board in Donegal (*Derry Journal*, February 12, 1906). Despite its formation, Gaelic games there, similar to the experience in Derry and Fermanagh, struggled against soccer's popularity among the local population.[63] At the end of 1905, 32 soccer clubs were recorded in Donegal, while the County Board had affiliated just three teams (Curran 2012a, 431). Local Unionist papers, such as the *Derry Sentinel*, also began to attack the reformed Derry GAA, stating that its members were nothing but 'parochial humbugs and tin-pot warriors' and that 'sensible Irishmen' would not support it (*Derry Journal*, February 12, 1905).[64]

Notwithstanding the best efforts of men like MacManus neither the Donegal nor Derry GAA succeeded in establishing itself as a serious threat to the popularity of soccer in the region at this time.[65] By October 1908, the *Donegal Independent* reported that GAA matches there were 'a thing of the past' (Curran 2010, 114).[66] Donegal thus represents a prime example of how the entrenched popularity of foreign games and the lack of strong local GAA administration limited the influence of cultural nationalists to spread Gaelic games at the expense of British sports and reassert control over popular sport in the region.

Conclusion

In the 15 years under consideration, an earnest, often bitter, battle for supremacy between native and imported sports was played out across much of provincial Ireland. Ireland was a unique case where the global sports of the Victorian sporting revolution came up against popular native games that had successfully aped the codification and administrative templates of their rivals. This was the GAA's great strength. It offered its members the chance to run and administer clubs affiliated to a national sports body and the chance to participate in local and national competitions according to standardized rules while simultaneously catering for the idiosyncrasies of Irish life and culture (see Garnham 2004b). Yet, perversely, this was also the Association's weakness. When the GAA collapsed, there were few impediments for many of its former sportsmen to become actively engaged in rugby, soccer or cricket. The club and competitive structures of those sports were easily recognisable to Gaelic athletes. In the absence of Gaelic games activity, former players became increasingly involved in rugby in the rural southwest, cricket across the Irish midlands and soccer in many parts of the northwest. It is evident that the surge in interest and participation in these sports in the three regions considered bears a direct correlation with the local collapse of their main sporting rival, the GAA.

Once the Association began to restructure itself and, crucially, reaped the benefits of the emerging cultural nationalist movement, it was again able to contest control of popular sport in Ireland. The pervasive ideology of the Gaelic Revival and determination to eradicate the vestiges of Anglicization within Irish life gave advocates of Gaelic games a powerful weapon to brandish at supporters of 'British' sports. Yet it is surely significant that while all 'British' games were denounced, only specific sports were actively targeted in each of the regions studied here. These were the sports that had most successfully appealed to would-be GAA members and that threatened most seriously the Association's sporting monopoly on a local level. Media campaigns and patriotic considerations took their toll, but it is noteworthy that the counties in which such appeals had the most success, (Kerry/Westmeath) were areas where the GAA's rival (rugby/cricket) was weakly organized. For the likes of Donegal or Limerick city, the strong organizational structure of soccer and rugby respectively and the continuing feebleness of local County Boards ensured that despite the cultural atmosphere of the day, the games of the 'Saxon' remained dominant.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Although in the case of cricket, by the 1870s the game had reached a level of popularity in many rural parts of counties such as Westmeath, Tipperary and Kilkenny.
2. The GAA's administrative structure consists of a Central Executive (later renamed the Central Council), which administers the games nationally under which are individual county boards, which administer and run competitions within their own county bounds.

3. For a discussion on motivations behind the GAA's formation and Michael Cusack's determination to open up Irish sport to the ordinary working Irish men, see Rouse (2009).
4. Membership numbers are estimated from police statistics on the GAA's strength, which indicated that there was an average membership of 53 men per affiliated club (NAI, CBS Index, 2792/S).
5. By 1889, the Irish Football Association (IFA) numbered only 65 clubs eventually rising to 199 by 1902. The Irish Rugby Football Union meanwhile had a mere 47 registered clubs by the time the GAA was formed (Garnham 2004b, 43; O'Callaghan 2011, 40).
6. A recent exception is Gerry Finn (2010, 2255–2287) who has argued that elite public schools in Ireland and Trinity College actually played a key role in disseminating sports of British origin among the Irish population.
7. Yet as more regional studies of the Association emerge the likes of Dónal McAnallen have begun to further critique this view, arguing that the peculiarities of the GAA's development and expansion across Ireland show it 'was, in fact, more counter-Victorian than Victorian'(McAnallen 2014, 63).
8. A notable exception is Mandle (1994).
9. More than 56% of the total economically active male population of the country was directly employed in farming in 1891, while in more rural counties that figure was as high as 72.5% (*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).
10. The inevitable result was a sustained slide in prices for Irish farmers. Over the next decade, rural Ireland would witness a prolonged depression, interspersed with frequent potato crop failures.
11. A total of 61.8% of GAA members depended on agriculture for employment, a figure that does not include the thousands of GAA players whose employment was geared towards a supporting role for the agricultural economy. For example, occupations such as shop assistants and office clerks were a popular career choice for younger farmer's sons and these groups formed the majority of the 16.2% of the GAA's membership identified in Hunt (2009, 184–186) national survey as belonging to the commercial class.
12. Better economic opportunities in Britain and North America for those families decimated by the agricultural situation in Ireland, accounted for this steep rise (Fitzpatrick 1980, 129).
13. During the period 1886–1905, 96.7% of GAA members were aged between 15 and 35 (Hunt 2009, 192).
14. In November 1890, Parnell's political power was at its zenith but it quickly unravelled once his affair with his married mistress Kitty O'Shea made headline news across Britain and Ireland. The scandal caused outrage among political and church leaders. Parnell's allies in Parliament disowned him while on the 6 December 43 members of his own party voted to remove him as leader (Mandle 1994, 103–105).
15. For example, a national conference of the Association's affiliated club representatives in July 1891 pledged its memberships support 'to the leadership and ideals of Charles Stewart Parnell'. *Sport*, July 25, 1891.
16. Before long police reports were observing that the GAA was being torn asunder due to this internal dissension and if this breach was not soon repaired it would become inseparable (NAI, CBS, DICS Reports Box Two, 521/S/2817).
17. Only three County Boards held annual meetings during the 1893 and apart from the counties of Kerry, Cork, Dublin, Waterford, Kildare and Roscommon, which contested that year's All Ireland football championship, the Association remained defunct elsewhere. By January 1894, only 38 clubs survived in the midlands, 33 clubs in the southwest, 17 in the southeast, only 1 in Ulster and a further 29 in the west of the country (NAI, CBS Index, 4467/S/ 7828/S; *Sport*, March 24, 1894).
18. To take the example of Kerry, there were no less than 539 separate GAA teams recorded as being active between 1890 and 1905 (see McElligott 2013, 467–468).
19. This was in stark contrast to areas like central Scotland where 89% 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 (Tranter 1989, 232).
20. Blake stressed that the varied interpretation of the GAA's limited rules by individual referees negated a common understanding, 'resulting in players losing all confidence in these officials while spectators were left bewildered by their decisions' (*Sport*, January 28, 1893).

21. One famous example was the 1893 All Ireland Football Final between Cork and Wexford when, following an altercation with an opponent, the referee sent off the Cork player responsible. However, his team-mates refused to play on and left the field, an action which resulted in Wexford being awarded the game and title (*Sport* June 30, 1894).
22. For example, the Kerry County Board refused to affiliate with the Central Executive and take part in the All Ireland in 1896 owing to a dispute with officials in Dublin over the match venue for that year's Munster final (*Kerry Sentinel*, February 15, 1896).
23. As Rouse (1993, 341) argues, there was no political or ideological motivation to the ruling, rather it was simply a measure designed to force GAA clubs to affiliate to the ruling body so as to gain as much revenue as possible from their affiliation fees.
24. In Kerry, the local RIC played a key role in the resurgence in popularity of cricket in the county in the mid-1890s. Meanwhile, association football was first introduced to the county at this time by military regiments, such as the Durham Light Infantry being stationed in the military barracks in the county's capital Tralee (*Kerry Sentinel*, February 10, 1894/June 19, 1895/April 8, 1896).
25. Indeed, before its collapse many within the Kerry GAA were already concerned at the growth of the rival sport. When one attendee asked at a meeting of the County Board in 1894 if the organization was being too 'conservative' in not allowing its members to play rugby, the members response was that the class of men who run that game 'would poison and hang everything Gaelic' given the chance'(*Kerry Sentinel*, April 17, 1894).
26. The sample consisted of selecting a pool of 32 players from various rugby combinations from 1897 to 1900 and matching them to census material from 1901. Players names taken from following teams: Tralee RFC 1897/1899/1900, Tralee Wreckers 1900, Tralee Pioneers RFC 1900, Killarney RFC 1898/1899, St Brendan's Seminary Killarney team 1899.
27. O'Sullivan was a Killarney native who had gained fame in 1895 by captaining Queen's College Cork to victory in the Munster Senior Cup. He also became the first Kerry man to be capped internationally by Ireland (Larner 2005, 259).
28. Indeed the meeting chairman argued 'that the rugby game improved the condition of players who had afterwards looked to play in Gaelic matches' (*Kerry Sentinel*, November 26, 1898).
29. Such was the growing local enthusiasm for the sport that for the first time, the rail network arranged special match day services travelling from Kerry to Dublin for the upcoming Irish rugby internationals (*Kerry Sentinel*, February 10, 1900).
30. For example, the inaugural meeting of the Listowel rugby club in October 1899 was presided over by John Macaulay, one of the founding members of the Garryowen RFC (Dillon 2010, 13).
31. This lack of competitive matches became all the more common as local county boards became inactive and championships were abandoned or left to drag on for years at a time. The Kilkenny County Board collapsed in 1891, while the Westmeath county board suffered a similar fate in 1893 (O'Dwyer 2006, 54; Hunt 2007, 150).
32. That May, the local Independent Wanders GAA club also decided to change their allegiance to cricket (Hunt 2007, 156–157).
33. Meanwhile in Galway, the collapse of the local GAA helped to inject new life into cricket's appeal in the county. The Tuam Stars club had been favourites to win the 1891 Galway football championship but were defeated in its early rounds. Following their bitter defeat, the club quickly disbanded due to inactivity and the growing acrimony within the county's GAA leadership over the Parnell split. In the club's absence, the Tuam Cricket Club prospered, being augmented by players from Stars. The influx of these trained and competitive players emboldened the club to affiliate to the Connacht Cricket Union and subsequently win the inaugural Connacht Senior Cricket Cup that same year (O'Donoghue 1987, 132).
34. For example, by January 1894, only one affiliated GAA club, located in Belfast, was recorded as still being active (CBS Index, 7828/S, 31 January 1894).
35. Garnham (2004b, 95–96) study has shown that 63.6% of contemporary professional soccer players in Ireland were registered as either skilled labourers, artisans or white collar workers, occupations that in large urban centres like Belfast or Dublin would be little impacted by decline in wider agricultural economy.
36. This is further evidenced by the Derry Board's decision to ban the handling of the ball in Gaelic football matches, contrary to the GAA's own rules. The intention was to help facilitate soccer players (*Derry Journal*, March 12/26, 1890).

37. In November 1891, the Bishop of Derry publicly denounced the playing of Gaelic games on Sundays (Corry 1993, 55).
38. The decline of GAA clubs at the expense of soccer in the region can be traced using the example of Buncrana club, Cahir O's from the Inishowen peninsula. They were the most active GAA club in the area, playing 13 matches in 1889. Yet in 1890, the Cahir O's participated in only eight matches and in August were said to have become inactive. In April 1893, a Derry soccer team played a match against Buncrana and this indicates that the GAA club had since switched to soccer (Curran 2012b, 126–127).
39. Likewise, a rule was passed stating that 'no political questions of any kind shall be raised at any of its meetings and no GAA club shall take part as a club in any political movement' (*Sport*, May 4, 1895).
40. For example, he clearly defined the previously continuous rules surrounding the catching of and running with the ball in Gaelic football, stating that once caught, the ball must now be kicked immediately and cannot be hopped, thrown or carried. Carrying was defined as moving more than four steps with the ball in hand. He also introduced comprehensive rules empowering referees to terminate matches due to interference of players and spectators. Clubs were also now expected to take precautions to prevent spectators from threatening or assaulting referees, officials or players during or after matches (*Sport*, May 4, 1895; Lennon 2010, 42–52).
41. During his tenure, the number of clubs affiliated to the Association grew from 114 to 357, while income mushroomed from £284 to £1176 (See Blake 1900). However, Blake's tenure was not to endure. In 1898, he was dismissed from office over claims of his mismanagement of the GAA's finances (4–6). Yet both RIC reports and Blake's own account claim this was only a pretext and in fact, IRB elements within the GAA, led by its president, Frank Dineen, wanted him deposed because of his hostility to their own influence (NAI, CBS, Precis Box 2, 11 February 1898, 15506/S).
42. This 'Gaelic Revival', as it was termed, would ultimately transform the entire cultural, political, economic and social fabric of Ireland. This reawakening of cultural nationalism within Irish society had already been given an impetus by the Home Rule campaign itself which had encouraged many Irish intellectuals to give serious thought as to what shape the society and culture of a politically independent Ireland would be (Hutchinson 1987, 155/168).
43. Douglas Hyde had established the Gaelic League in 1893 to preserve and revive the Irish language. Hyde also wished the organization would stand as a bulwark against the increasing Anglicization of Irish society before the country and its people lost forever a sense of their separate nationality (Comerford 2003, 141). The energetic idealism generated by the League was seen as having the potential to revive the ailing fortunes of the Association (Nolan 2005, 69).
44. This close relationship is not surprising, considering the Association's stated mission to preserve and promote native games against the encroaching Anglicization of Irish sport was for many cultural nationalists a natural extension of their promotion of an independent Gaelic culture and identity personified in the growth of organizations such as the Gaelic League.
45. The Ancient Order of Hibernians was an Irish Catholic and nationalist society that emerged in Ulster in the late nineteenth century and was closely associated with membership of the Irish Parliamentary Party (Garvin 2005, 107–110).
46. At the 1906 Tyrone Annual GAA Convention, up to 65 members representing almost every local AOH branch were recorded as attending the meeting.
47. Their formation resulted in a much greater degree of organization and control at provincial level than the GAA's Central Executive alone could provide. It was a key factor in the revival of the GAA nationally from 1900 onwards. CPA, GAA/CC/01/01, 9 September 1900. By 1907, the number of affiliated GAA clubs stood at 784, with 101 in Ulster, 124 in Connaught, 222 in Munster and 337 in Leinster (De Búrca 1999, 73).
48. As De Búrca (1999, 71) argued, this re-imposition of the ban on GAA members playing foreign games 'was a practical application in the realm of sport of the policy of de-Anglicization, which had been advocated by cultural nationalists like Hyde as far back as 1892'.
49. Any connection with the British establishment could now leave GAA members open to media condemnation. In Kilkenny, a prominent GAA referee and Gaelic Leaguer, Jack McCarthy, drew the scorn of the *Kilkenny People* because he attended a ball being held to celebrate the return from the Boer War of a local British Army Colonel. 'Union-Jack', as he was labelled,

was accused 'of the base perfidy, the unforgiveable treachery, the downright double-dyed traitorism'. Following the publication of the story, the Thomas town GAA club refused to play a match which McCarthy had been appointed to referee while the Kilkenny GAA itself proposed that McCarthy be thrown out of the organization (*Kilkenny People*, June 8/15, 1901).

50. The *Kerry Sentinel* was at that point the most popular paper in Kerry and its editor, Edward Harrington, was a staunch support of Irish Parliamentary Party.
51. *Shoneens* and *West Britons* were pejorative terms for Irishmen who imitated English ways. Moreover, they were men 'who never shied away from toasting the health of the English King' (see for example *Kerry Sentinel*, January 11/March 22, 1902).
52. Under O'Sullivan's shrewd administration, the Kerry GAA blossomed and as secretary he laid the foundation for the county's dominance of Gaelic football in the years after 1905 (McElligott 2013, 124–127).
53. Indeed, while O'Sullivan argued that the time had come 'when a line should be drawn between the friends and the enemies of the GAA, and the more coercion that was applied, the better', Mat O'Riordan, representing the Cork Board, said every club in Cork would suffer if rugby men were excluded from GAA's ranks (*Cork Weekly Examiner*, December 6, 1902).
54. In his autobiography Patrick Heffernan, a Catholic middle-class doctor from rural Tipperary, bitterly recalled how he was decried as an 'imperialist' and 'shoneen' for his continuing involvement with the game (Heffernan 1958, 1/9). Prominent local advocates of the Irish revival who engaged in such exports of British cultural colonialism were subjected to particular social ostracization. In Claremorris, a prominent member of the local Gaelic League who joined the town's cricket team was heckled by the *Connaught Telegraph* as 'the latest addition to the ranks of West Briton shoneens' who had betrayed his conviction by 'joining the nation killers'. The paper threatened that he had 'one week to withdraw from the cricket club' or else they would expose him to the whole community (*Connaught Telegraph*, June 2/16, 1906). Evidently he heeded this warning and within a few weeks the paper was reporting that the individual was no longer involved with the club (*Connaught Telegraph*, July 14, 1906).
55. The paper began to carry a weekly satirical column entitled 'In Lighter Vein' written by the anonymous 'The Man in the Street', which specialised in taunting Westmeath cricketers.
56. Moreover such people were accused of looking

> to the Saxon with admiration, and they imitate him in every respect … They are incapable of thinking for themselves, and like a moth around a candle, they hanker after English ideals, although their limited intelligence does not allow them to successfully imitate. (*Midland Reporter*, September 7, 1905)

57. To take one example, the Ringtown hurling club was founded in February 1904 and shared direct lineage with the area's cricket team (Hunt 2007, 199–201).
58. McDevitt (1997, 263) argues that such constant reinforcement of the supremacy of Gaelic games allowed them to become a 'hallmark of the Gaelic Renaissance', with hurling and football producing examples of Irish masculinity which gave contemporary Irish society an image to be proud of. Such romantic views, especially of hurling, remained common with historians of the GAA well into the 1940s. Carbery (1946, 57–59), for example, credited the establishment of the GAA and the ensuing popularization of hurling, as bringing about the regeneration of Irish culture and the 'spiritual emancipation' of the Irish people.
59. The Monaghan delegates argued that the GAA was still only finding its feet in a district that was 'run all over' by soccer and such draconian measures would set back the GAA's progress terminally. In the end, the Ulster convention decided to recommend to the Central Executive that the foreign games ban should not apply in Ulster (*Anglo-Celt*, December 30, 1905). Despite this when the motion came before the GAA's annual convention on 27 January, it was defeated by an overwhelming majority (*Anglo-Celt*, February 3, 1906).
60. Indeed the body blamed much of this on the local press for not giving enough prominence to GAA matches, while instead devoting most of its sports pages to soccer (*Derry Journal*, January 29, 1906).
61. I am indebted to Dr Conor Curran for allowing me to use some of his most recent research.
62. During this period, the IFA failed to take the lead in establishing county football associations to effectively administer soccer in individual counties. As a result, only five local football associations were registered with the IFA by 1900.

63. In mid-November, a meeting of the Donegal GAA stated that the Killybegs and Barnesmore football clubs had voted to remain playing soccer as their players considered it to be a superior game to Gaelic football (*Derry Journal*, November 17, 1905). The rules of soccer certainly seem to be far more commonly understood in the region. A report of a Gaelic football county championship match held in Derry City in December 1906 complained that not only were both clubs unable to gather together a full side, but both goalkeepers persisted in picking the ball off the ground and throwing it to their players, soccer style, which is illegal under Gaelic rules (*Derry Journal*, January 1, 1906).
64. There was obviously a degree of sectarian tensions between both codes, with the *Derry Journal* remarking that opposition to the GAA 'by the Unionist people … simply arises out of religious and political prejudice towards everything Irish and Catholic … Are the Derry Catholics going to allow this Irish movement to be killed by Protestant objectors?' (*Derry Journal*, April 16, 1906).
65. In May 1906, the Donegal Board was reported to have 20 clubs affiliated but by 1907, this number had fallen to seven with Donegal and Derry sharing the lowest number of affiliated clubs to Ulster Council (Curran 2012b, 140–141).
66. Significantly MacManus' decision to emigrate to the USA precipitated the collapse of the County Board less than two years later.

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