



PROJECT MUSE®

---

1916 and the Radicalization of the Gaelic Athletic Association

Richard McElligott

Éire-Ireland, Volume 48, Issue 1&2, Spring / Summer 2013, pp. 95-111 (Article)



Published by Irish-American Cultural Institute

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2013.0003>

➡ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/510688>

BY 1916 THE GAA HAD established itself as perhaps the largest nationalist organization in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the GAA's history having received far more attention than any other sporting body in the country, there remains a dearth of academic study of the association and its interaction with Irish social and political life. This is especially surprising when we think of the size and scale of the organization. In particular, historians of the Irish Revolution remain somewhat reluctant to study in detail the GAA's broad membership in order to assess how the changing nature of Irish nationalism during these years impacted ordinary but politically conscious Irishmen. William Murphy's study of the GAA during this period is an all too rare exception to this lack of focused scholarly discussion of the association and the impact of revolutionary politics on it as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

However, the GAA's heterogeneous and abundant membership and its presence in almost every parish offer perhaps the best data from which we can assess the political radicalization of Irish society during this time. Although Murphy is correct that the association represented more a playground of, rather than a player in, the Irish Revolution, the fact remains that hundreds of the association's members were caught up in the struggle, while the impact of broader

1. The GAA was founded in 1884 to preserve and promote the indigenous sports of Ireland—namely, hurling and Gaelic football. It consists of a central council that administers the games nationally, under which are individual county boards that administer competitions within their own county bounds. By 1916 its membership numbered 170,000, the overwhelming majority of whom were constitutional nationalists who supported Irish Home Rule. See W. F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics, 1884–1924* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 175.

2. William Murphy, "The G.A.A. during the Irish Revolution, 1913–23," in *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009*, ed. M. Cronin, W. Murphy, and P. Rouse (Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2009).

developments in Irish politics had turned the GAA by 1919 into an active opponent of British rule in Ireland. This article will investigate the role of members of the GAA in the execution of the 1916 Rising. It will assess why the British government targeted the GAA in the fallout of Easter 1916, and the consequences of the authorities' response to the uprising on the ordinary membership of the GAA. It will examine how, in the three years following the Rising, the changing political climate in Ireland led to the political radicalization of many within the association, a development that was mirrored across Irish society as a whole. Finally, it will endeavor to show the processes that changed the GAA from a body that in 1916 had members who happened to be politically active, into an organization that by 1919 was, of itself and in its actions and pronouncements, supportive of the separatist stance of those who wished to secure independence for an Irish republic.

In September 1915 the revolutionary Fenian organization, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), began to plan an insurrection in Ireland against British rule by using the Irish Volunteers.<sup>3</sup> To aid the rebellion, a German arms shipment was to land in Kerry in the days before the outbreak.<sup>4</sup> Aware of the potential of the GAA to facilitate its designs, the IRB had long sought to gain influence in the association. As Kerry was a vital linchpin in the success of the venture, close links were established between the Rising's planners and local Volunteer leaders, many of whom were prominent local GAA officials. The IRB had remained a nearly constant influence within the leadership of the Kerry GAA since the formation of its county board in 1888.<sup>5</sup> In this sense the Kerry GAA contrasted with much of the rest of Ireland, where there were few overt links between the IRB and local GAA leaders. For example, by 1915 Austin Stack, the Kerry GAA

3. F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 330. The Volunteers had been formed in 1913 as a military movement to protect the cause of Home Rule against unionist aggression. By 1916 a smaller and more radical group called the Irish Volunteers had split from the main movement and was effectively controlled by the IRB.

4. T. Ryle Dwyer, *Tans, Terror, and Troubles: Kerry's Real Fighting Story, 1913–23* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2001), 60.

5. By 1890 the IRB was said to hold every position on the Kerry GAA county board, while a reformed Kerry board in 1900 was said to contain seven IRB members. See NAI, CBS Index, 126/S; CBS, Home Office Precis Box 2, 22189/S.

chairman, had become the acknowledged head of both the IRB and the Irish Volunteers in the county.<sup>6</sup> Kerry thus represented a county where the IRB could reasonably expect the cooperation of the local GAA leadership.

In preparation for the Rising, Stack used the occasion of the All-Ireland final between Kerry and Wexford in November 1915 as cover for an operation to smuggle a sizeable consignment of weapons from Dublin to Kerry in order to properly arm the local Volunteers.<sup>7</sup> Tadhg Kennedy, a lieutenant in the force and a member of the Kerry county board, was put in charge of a group of Volunteers ostensibly traveling as supporters to the match. Once the weapons were secure, they were smuggled aboard the returning supporters' train to Tralee on the following evening.<sup>8</sup> These weapons provided the bulk of the Kerry Volunteers' armament during Easter week in 1916.<sup>9</sup> On a national level a growing connection between the leadership of the GAA and the Volunteers was apparent when on the night of that All-Ireland final an informal conference between Volunteer leaders and the GAA's Central Council took place.<sup>10</sup> The police had no doubt that the Volunteers were increasingly supported by extremists within the GAA, and that many of the association's members were enlisting in the organization.<sup>11</sup> However, nationally, it is difficult to say how significant at this point cross-membership between the GAA and the Volunteers was as an indication of the former's support for physical-force nationalism. It is likely that many GAA members enrolled in the Volunteers simply to protect themselves from the growing prospect of British army conscription owing to the losses being sustained in the war against Germany.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the leadership of the GAA in Kerry would play a significant role in the final plans for revolt. In February 1916 Stack was informed that the German arms consignment would be landed

6. Anthony J. Gaughan, *Austin Stack: Portrait of a Separatist* (Dublin: Kingdom Books, 1977), 30.

7. The All-Ireland final was the biggest match in the GAA's calendar; since 1905 it was a competition that the Kerry county football team had dominated.

8. NAI, Bureau of Military History, WS 135: Tadhg Kennedy, Tralee, 3–4.

9. Ibid., WS 132: Michael Spillane, Killarney, 2.

10. Mandle, *Gaelic Athletic Association*, 175.

11. NAI, CO 904, MFA 54/58, 10893/S.

12. Ibid., 10664/S.

near Tralee from the *Aud*, a ship that would arrive during the Easter weekend. Once the arms were ashore, they were to be distributed among the Volunteers in Munster and used to prevent the movement of British reinforcements from the countryside into Dublin, where the main uprising would take place.<sup>13</sup> Stack effectively used local GAA connections to plan the landing. Patrick O’Shea, an All-Ireland winner with the Kerry team, was tasked with securing a trusted local harbor pilot to rendezvous with and guide the German ship when it appeared off the Kerry coast.<sup>14</sup> In fact, so seemingly preoccupied had members of the county board become with Volunteer activity that it was stated that the GAA itself had become dormant in Kerry.<sup>15</sup> Yet despite the involvement of many within the Kerry GAA, the vast majority of GAA members nationally and locally had little idea that an insurrection was being contemplated. Even in Kerry those members who were part of the Volunteers’ rank-and-file had little notion as to what their leaders were undertaking.

The Rising would prove a failure in military terms, and its repercussions would have serious consequences for the association. The IRB’s plans for revolt began to fail almost as soon as they had been put into action. For example, the *Aud* was intercepted by the Royal Navy before it could land in Kerry.<sup>16</sup> Despite this setback, in Dublin it was decided to press ahead with the rebellion. On Monday, 24 April 1916, Volunteer forces seized control of several buildings around the city center and proclaimed an Irish republic. Hopelessly outnumbered, they held out for several days before finally surrendering on 29 April. The insurrection came as a huge shock to public opinion in Ireland; 450 people were killed and 2,614 wounded.<sup>17</sup>

Like the greater Irish public, the vast majority of GAA members were caught off-guard by the Rising. Though the contrary was often forcefully argued by writers of the GAA in the years after Irish independence, it is clear that the association as a body was no active participant in the rebellion, nor had its national leadership possessed

13. Lyons, *Ireland*, 353.

14. Gaughan, *Austin Stack*, 45.

15. *Kerryman*, 11 Mar. 1916.

16. Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 131.

17. Lyons, *Ireland*, 375.

any inside knowledge of the secret planning of the Rising.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, there were significant numbers of politically active members within the GAA who fought as rebels that Easter. The commander of Volunteer forces in north Dublin was Thomas Ashe, a former captain and secretary of the Lispole GAA club in Kerry who represented the club on the county board.<sup>19</sup> In all, five of the fifteen men executed for their part in the Rising had GAA connections.<sup>20</sup> Other prominent rebels captured, such as Stack, Harry Boland, Michael Collins, J. J. Walsh, and Ashe, had been prominent local and national administrators within the organization. Some 300 members of the Dublin GAA were active in the Rising.<sup>21</sup> There is evidence of a large degree of participation by individual Dublin GAA clubs, with sixty-nine members of the St. Laurence O'Toole club alone taking part in the fighting.<sup>22</sup> In Galway, 500 Volunteers assembled on Easter Monday and carried out some limited attacks on local police barracks. The majority of these men were hurlers and members of local GAA clubs.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, in Wexford, Volunteers led by prominent local GAA men Sean Etchingham and Seamus Doyle used the pretext of an Easter Sunday GAA match in Wexford Park to cover their turnout for the Rising.<sup>24</sup> They managed to advance upon and hold Enniscorthy for several days before surrendering.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, most of these prominent GAA rebels were radical nationalists, in the main IRB men, long committed to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland. They neither represented nor reflected the political views of the national membership of the GAA in 1916. Yet despite the apparent contradiction, the overlap between radical nationalists and GAA members is perhaps easy to explain. Because of their political outlook, men such as Stack would naturally have joined any movement with nationalist credentials, either to cement their own

18. Murphy, "G.A.A.," 63–64.

19. Seán Ó Lúing, *I Die in a Good Cause* (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1970), 80.

20. Mandle, *Gaelic Athletic Association*, 178.

21. William Nolan, ed., *The Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin, 1884–2000*, vol. 1, 1884–1959 (Dublin: Geography Publications, 2005), 126.

22. *Ibid.*, 158–59.

23. Fergus Campbell, "The Easter Rising in Galway," *History Ireland* 14, no. 2 (2006), 24.

24. Robert Brennan, *Allegiance* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1950), 51–64.

25. *Freeman's Journal* (hereafter cited as *FJ*), 6 May 1916.

identity or to use them as cover for recruitment into the IRB.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in addition to attaining office in the GAA, such men were just as likely to be fervent supporters of bodies such as the Gaelic League.<sup>27</sup> Historically, many prominent officials within the association had been given to delivering pronouncements that seemed to support a brand of physical force nationalism: the impression given (and often intended) was that the speaker's views were also those of the GAA.<sup>28</sup> The tenor of such declarations could only serve to attract men of the physical force persuasion into the association, and those advocates often became proportionately more prominent in the affairs of the GAA than, for example, the moderate constitutional nationalist supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party.<sup>29</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Rising, public opinion across Ireland decried the rebels. Likewise, the vast majority within the rank-and-file membership of the GAA censured their actions.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the months after the Rising witnessed the GAA and its members becoming increasingly politically radicalized. This radicalization was in part due to the response of the British authorities to the association in the aftermath of the revolt. In their attempts to discover the cause for the rebellion, the GAA quickly came to the attention of the British government. It is easy to understand why they would have targeted the association as an active participant in the rebellion. Many of its leading figures were men of extreme nationalist views. Such men as Stack, Boland, and Walsh had been arrested and sentenced for their roles in the Rising.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the GAA, since its inception in

26. Mike Cronin, "Defenders of a Nation? The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Identity," *Irish Political Studies*, no. 11 (1996), 7.

27. The Gaelic League was established by Douglas Hyde in 1893 and sought to revive Irish as a spoken language and as part of a literary movement. Stack was a prominent member of its Tralee branch. See *Kerry Sentinel* (hereafter cited as *KS*), 6 Feb. 1909.

28. For example, in 1911 the future GAA president Dan McCarthy stated that he wanted GAA men "to train and be physically strong [so that] when the time comes, the hurlers will cast away the camán for the steel that will drive the Saxon from our land." See *Wicklow People*, 21 Jan. 1911.

29. Marcus de Búrca, *The GAA: A History* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2000), 96.

30. Alvin Jackson, *Ireland, 1798–1998: Politics and War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 206.

31. *KS*, 10 May 1916.

November 1884, had been actively identified as a semiseditious body. An IRB element was noticeably apparent among the attendance at its inaugural meeting. In 1887 the revolutionary body succeeded in taking full control of the GAA's ruling Central Council, a move that led to the association's near-destruction as politically moderate members became alienated from its ranks while the Catholic church began actively to denounce it.<sup>32</sup> When the GAA experienced a period of renewed revival and growth in the early twentieth century, the IRB began again to secure key positions within it. However, learning from the mistakes of the past, the IRB adopted a more subtle strategy, forgoing any open recruitment of GAA members, preferring to use its influence to get members elected to the Central Council and county boards. Given this continued element within the GAA's higher echelons, it was only natural that the authorities would target the association in connection with the rebellion.

Martial law was proclaimed across the country and the holding of matches or sporting tournaments was strictly prohibited. As a result, Gaelic games were suspended.<sup>33</sup> Some 3,400 men across Ireland were arrested and deported in the days following the Rising for their supposed involvement with the rebellion.<sup>34</sup> Because of the close connection between some leading members of the GAA and the Irish Volunteers, those targeted for arrest included hundreds of ordinary members of the GAA.<sup>35</sup> Many found themselves deported to special internment camps such as Frongoch in north Wales. The detention of so many young men, many with little previous involvement in organizations such as the IRB or Irish Volunteers, brought them into contact with the emerging revolutionary political doctrine.<sup>36</sup> As a result of their shared incarceration, many GAA members also became politically radicalized. Internment proved an excellent training camp for the Volunteers. It allowed officers to subject their men to proper military drill. The realities of incarceration also turned them into a

32. NAI, CBS, DICS Reports, Box 2, 521/S/8031.

33. *KS*, 29 Apr. 1916.

34. Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party, 1916–1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53.

35. *FJ*, 8 May 1916.

36. Lyons, *Ireland*, 376.

mentally tougher force.<sup>37</sup> William Mullins, an internee and footballer with the Tralee Mitchels GAA club, stated: “I am fully convinced that Frongoch made our whole organization into what it eventually reached. The comradeship that developed and the knowledge . . . [of] . . . the military aspect of things was a binding force for the future. John Bull made an awful blunder when he put us all together there.”<sup>38</sup>

Owing to the numbers of Gaelic players interned in the camp, Gaelic football contests were arranged to keep up the discipline, fitness, and morale among prisoners.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the boredom of prison life and lack of other distractions ensured that even former skeptics took up Gaelic games. Dick Fitzgerald, the former All-Ireland-winning Kerry captain, and Michael Collins, a previous member of the London GAA who had fought in the General Post Office, organized a series of GAA tournaments.<sup>40</sup> Two matches were played daily, and a league competition was also organized among four teams, with each competing in six games. The teams were named after the leaders of the Rising. The fourth team, nicknamed “The Leprechauns” because of the small stature of their players, was coached by Dick Fitzgerald and actually won the competition.<sup>41</sup> Intercounty contests were also arranged, and the main pitch in Frongoch was renamed Croke Park. The final of one tournament pitted the Kerry and Louth internees against each other, with Kerry winning by a point.<sup>42</sup> If Frongoch became a school of revolution, it is significant that Gaelic games were predominant. William Murphy argues that the concentration on Gaelic games was intended as a symbolic and deliberate statement “of the prisoners’ commitment to Irish nationalism and a rejection of Britain.”<sup>43</sup>

A royal commission set up to investigate the rebellion concluded that the whole affair was perpetrated by the Irish Volunteers, and asserted that its entire leadership consisted of separatists drawn mainly

37. NLI, J. J. O’Connell Papers, MS 22, 117, 3.

38. NAI, BMH, WS 801: William Mullins, Tralee, 1.

39. Joseph E. A. Connell, “Sport in Frongoch,” *History Ireland* 20, no. 4 (July–Aug. 2012), 66.

40. Mandle, *Gaelic Athletic Association*, 178.

41. Thomas B. Looney, *Dick Fitzgerald: King in the Kingdom of Kings* (Cork: Curraх Press, 2008), 123.

42. *KS*, 22 July 1916.

43. Murphy, “G.A.A.,” 71.

from four anti-British bodies, of which the GAA was one.<sup>44</sup> The Irish Volunteers were said to have practically full control over the association.<sup>45</sup> Yet, as a consequence of the government's internment of the more extreme nationalists within the association, it was the moderates within the Central Council who were left to deal with the charges leveled by the commission.<sup>46</sup> In response, it issued a press statement vehemently denying the accusations.<sup>47</sup> In the political climate of the time it was obvious that the GAA wished to dissociate itself as much as possible from the Rising in order to avoid any further government crackdown on it or its members. As Marcus de Búrca noted, the statement was devoid of any sympathy for the rebels or their deaths. The GAA, like every other major nationalist body in Ireland, showed no immediate empathy with those who had taken part in the rebellion or with their cause.<sup>48</sup>

The Irish parliamentary party did not consider the GAA itself as having played any role in the rebellion. Indeed, the Irish MP Thomas Lundon called on the prime minister to let GAA games resume in those parts of the country unaffected by the Rising in Dublin.<sup>49</sup> Yet some within the GAA were proud that the association had been implicated, an act that seemed to reaffirm its nationalist credentials. The former GAA secretary Maurice Moynihan noted that any national organization worthy of its name had been drawn into the inquiry, and that it would "be most uncomplimentary to the association if it were omitted."<sup>50</sup>

Between July and August 1916 the majority of the internees were released. By now Irish public opinion had begun to turn against the British establishment. This public reaction was influenced by the harsh execution of the rebel leaders, the mass arrests, and internments without trial, as well as the continued imposition of martial law and the undiminished fear that Irish men would soon be forced into

44. *The Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland: Report, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix of Documents* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1916). See NLI, Ir 94109 12, 3.

45. Ibid., 58.

46. De Búrca, *GAA*, 102.

47. CPA, GAA/CC/01/02, Central Council Minute Books, 1911–25: 28 May 1916.

48. De Búrca, *GAA*, 103.

49. *KS*, 7 June 1916.

50. *KS*, 12 Aug. 1916.

conscription for the British army.<sup>51</sup> As early as June the authorities were reporting a shift in nationalist opinion in Ireland toward empathy with the rebels.<sup>52</sup> Once restrictions on sports events were lifted, GAA matches provided some of the earliest instances of this growing surge of sympathy.<sup>53</sup> In July the Tipperary hurlers played a match wearing rosettes symbolizing their sympathy for the executed leaders of the Rising, an action greeted with wild cheers by the crowd.<sup>54</sup> By September the authorities were noting that a “discontented and rebellious spirit is widespread [that] frequently comes to the surface at Gaelic Athletic Association tournaments.”<sup>55</sup> The months following the rebellion had seen British authorities conduct a campaign of harassment toward the GAA on both a local and a national level. In Kerry police frequently forced entry into games.<sup>56</sup> The arrest and detention of many within the association hardened members’ views of the British government. The rise of the Sinn Féin party between 1917 and 1918 would provide the catalyst for the political radicalization of Irish society and with it the GAA.

The Rising had initially been greeted with disbelief and anger by the Irish people. The membership of the association had overwhelmingly shared these sentiments. However, the brutal repression by the authorities swiftly changed public perception and generated a renewed hatred of British rule in Ireland. With popular opinion moving against the Irish parliamentary party and its links with the British government, Sinn Féin was in a unique position to capitalize on the new national mood.<sup>57</sup> Though Arthur Griffith’s organization had no involvement with the Rising, the British authorities succeeded in empowering his Sinn Féin party with a role of authority in Irish nationalism that it had never achieved itself, simply by branding all rebels as

51. Paul Bew, “The Real Importance of Sir Roger Casement,” *History Ireland* 2, no. 2 (1994), 45.

52. NAI, CO 904, MFA 54/58, 11179/S.

53. Joost Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare: The Radicalisation of the Irish Republican Army—A Comparative Analysis, 1916–1921* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 1994), 252.

54. Mandle, *Gaelic Athletic Association*, 180.

55. NAI, MFA CO 904, 54/60, 12427/S.

56. KS, 20 Sept. 1916.

57. Sinn Féin was formed in 1905 as a political grouping that advocated the establishment of an independent Ireland. See Kevin Rafter, *Sinn Féin, 1905–2005: In the Shadow of Gunmen* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005), 43.

“Sinn Feiners.”<sup>58</sup> Moderates such as Griffith thus had an opportunity to exploit this newfound if misplaced fame for the small organization.<sup>59</sup> As early as the autumn of 1916 the authorities were identifying a widespread public belief that political freedom from Britain could be achieved more quickly by adopting the Sinn Féin policy of defiance rather than the old Irish party policy of cooperation.<sup>60</sup> By 1917 it was apparent that the transforming political landscape was impacting the membership of the GAA. In fact, GAA matches frequently showed the first evidence of this changing political mood. In Kerry in January 1917 a Lispole supporter coming from a match in Dingle was arrested and sentenced to six weeks’ hard labor for shouting “Up the Sinn Feiners, [they] are winning and they’ll win.”<sup>61</sup>

In June 1917 the British government commuted the sentences of all those arrested after the Rising. GAA men such as Austin Stack and Thomas Ashe were given a hero’s welcome on their return home.<sup>62</sup> In the weeks that followed, Stack and Ashe toured Ireland, eulogizing the Sinn Féin message and imploring young men to reform the Volunteers and make it a powerful force again.<sup>63</sup> Such appeals were the beginning of an attempt within Irish nationalism to unite the Irish Volunteers under the Sinn Féin banner. This process was cemented in October 1917 when Eamon de Valera, the new president of the Irish Volunteers, replaced Arthur Griffith as president of Sinn Féin.<sup>64</sup> In August both Stack and Ashe were arrested for making seditious speeches in public.<sup>65</sup> In protest they began a hunger strike that resulted in Ashe’s death owing to injuries sustained while being force-fed by prison officers.<sup>66</sup> Nationalist public opinion in Ireland was outraged.<sup>67</sup> Those within the GAA were similarly appalled by the death

58. J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 38.

59. Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 155.

60. NAI, CO 904, MFA 54/60, 12427/S.

61. KS, 13 Jan. 1917.

62. KS, 23 June 1917.

63. KS, 11 Aug. 1917.

64. FJ, 26 Nov. 1917.

65. KS, 25 Aug. 1917; FJ, 1 Sept. 1917.

66. *The Death of Thomas Ashe: Full Report of the Inquest* (Dublin: J. M. Butler, 1917), 84.

67. Dwyer, *Tans, Terror, and Troubles*, 121.

of their former member. The Dublin county board issued a damning statement “deplored the killing” and resolving to have representatives of every GAA club in the city at the funeral.<sup>68</sup> Ashe’s public funeral in Dublin was the largest ever seen in the city;<sup>69</sup> his death was a major catalyst for a huge expansion of the Sinn Féin movement. By December police reported that nationally the party had over 1,000 clubs and 66,000 members.<sup>70</sup>

It is clear the death of Ashe had just as profound an effect on the membership of the GAA as it had on broader Irish nationalism. Increasingly resentful of the British authorities’ attempts to curb the popularity of Sinn Féin, many of its adherents within the association used their influence at both national and local levels to indoctrinate members into the new political grouping. Peter Hart has argued that there was a significant correlation between GAA and Sinn Féin membership throughout 1917, while David Fitzpatrick has acknowledged that the GAA bequeathed an army of zestful followers to the movement.<sup>71</sup> By May, Sinn Féin’s popularity was said to be so great that it “virtually dominated” the GAA.<sup>72</sup> In Clare the county board began the process that saw de Valera nominated to contest the by-election for Sinn Féin in July 1917.<sup>73</sup> During that same year the Clare footballers entered their matches under a banner proclaiming “Up De Valera.”<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, prominent GAA officials such as Stack and Boland were appointed to Sinn Féin’s ruling executive bloc.<sup>75</sup> The association also hoped to capitalize on the new patriotic spirit that was inflaming Irish public opinion. Its Central Council issued letters to county boards to reform clubs no longer in existence “and take advantage of the present feeling throughout the county by establishing such clubs with the object of wiping out soccer and other foreign games.”<sup>76</sup>

68. *FJ*, 29 Sept. 1917.

69. *Irish Times*, 1 Oct. 1917.

70. NAI, CO 904, MFA 54/62, 17685/S.

71. Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. at War, 1916–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 55; David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913–1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 112.

72. NAI, CO 904, MFA 54/62, 14679/S.

73. Fitzpatrick, *Politics*, 130.

74. Jim Cronin, *Munster G.A.A. Story* (Ennis: Munster History Committee, 1986), 107.

75. De Búrca, *GAA*, 109.

76. *KS*, 13 Oct. 1917.

However, the rising tide of Sinn Féin nationalism did not lift all GAA boats. In Kerry there is evidence of some resentment toward the status that Sinn Féin had achieved by undermining and destroying the popular support of the Irish Home Rule party. For example, 1917 marked the reappearance of widespread agrarian disturbances in rural Ireland as thousands of farm laborers and uneconomic land-holders became both increasingly politicized by the Sinn Féin movement and increasingly envious of the wartime profits that many farmers were accumulating.<sup>77</sup> Within the Keel GAA club differences arose between the younger farm laborers who fully supported Sinn Féin and older members, mostly local farmers, who had greatly profited from the prosperity that the war had brought them and were happy with the political status quo. Such men retained a strong allegiance to Irish party MPs. The dispute resulted in the club splitting in 1917. The Sinn Féin supporters renamed their team the Keel Sinn Féiners in reference to their political allegiance.<sup>78</sup>

Likewise, studies of the Irish Revolution have concluded that there was no direct link between the local strength of the association and the growing violent republicanism spreading across the country.<sup>79</sup> A strong GAA was not necessarily a prerequisite if an area were to develop into a center of revolutionary activity.<sup>80</sup> Yet one cannot deny the involvement of hundreds of Gaelic members in the reorganization of the Volunteers that occurred during 1917. Fitzpatrick has argued that it was inevitable that many of the local leaders would be young men of some social stature. These “natural leaders” were in many cases the captains of the local Gaelic team.<sup>81</sup> Such an example in Kerry was Michael Leen, captain of the Castleisland hurling team, who reorganized the local Volunteer company in 1917.<sup>82</sup>

In April 1918 the British government attempted to extend conscription to Ireland. This caused outright revolt among representa-

77. Terence Dooley, ‘*The Land for the People*: The Land Question in Independent Ireland (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), 31–34.

78. Maurice O’Connor, *Keel G.A.A.: A Club History* (Nass: IMT Publications, 1991), 74.

79. Augusteijn, *Public Defiance*, 16–22.

80. Murphy, “G.A.A.” 69.

81. Fitzpatrick, *Politics*, 169.

82. NAI, BMH, WS 1190: Michael Pierce, Castleisland, 2–3.

tives of all shades of Irish national opinion.<sup>83</sup> A special meeting of the GAA's Central Council unanimously declared "that we pledge ourselves to resist by any and every means in our power the attempted conscription of Irish manhood, and we call on all members of the GAA to give effect to the terms of the following resolution."<sup>84</sup>

Huge public demonstrations were held across Ireland to resist conscription, and on 23 April a general strike effectively ground the country to a halt.<sup>85</sup> In the face of such mass public resistance, the British government was forced to postpone its implementation indefinitely.<sup>86</sup> The attempts to enforce conscription led to an enormous upturn in enlistment in the Irish Volunteers to resist the measure, by force if necessary. This had the natural effect of feeding large numbers of GAA members into the Volunteers. In north Kerry it was reported that hurling matches were being used to mask the convening and drilling of several local Volunteer contingents.<sup>87</sup>

In the face of growing political unrest, emergency rule was introduced into Ireland, and all public gatherings and political rallies were banned. In addition, the Sinn Féin party was outlawed along with the Irish Volunteers and the Gaelic League.<sup>88</sup> William Murphy argues that the absence of the GAA from the list of proscribed organizations is evidence that even though the association's membership undoubtedly overlapped with that of Sinn Féin, up until this point the GAA was able to officially maintain a recognizable distance between itself and the party.<sup>89</sup> Yet the English *Daily Chronicle* argued that the authorities had made a grave error in not proclaiming the GAA, as it was "an eager and lively organization of revolutionary propagandists."<sup>90</sup> Although the GAA was not suppressed, the rules banning public gatherings were framed to include GAA matches. Within a week games run under its auspices were being broken up by the police.<sup>91</sup>

83. *FJ*, 8 Apr. 1918.

84. GAA/CC/01/02, 14 Apr. 1918.

85. *FJ*, 23, 24 Apr. 1918.

86. *Kerryman*, 4 May 1918.

87. NAI, CO 904, MFA 54/63, 18085/S.

88. *FJ*, 5 July 1918.

89. Murphy, "G.A.A.," 68.

90. Quoted in *KS*, 13 July 1918.

91. De Búrca, *GAA*, 111.

Until now it had seemed clear that despite the changing political stance of many within the association, at an official level the GAA had remained cautious of committing itself too strongly ahead of the political opinions of the majority of Irish nationalists for fear of alienating its own more moderate members. By the summer of 1918 this position had altered significantly. The aftermath of the conscription crisis highlighted the extent to which a broad swath of Irish society had become fundamentally opposed to the continuation of British rule. The protests and strikes held that April had shown the way forward for those within the GAA who hoped to utilize the organization to discredit the British administration in Ireland. Emboldened by this example, the GAA followed the same template and began to organize its own mass, peaceful protest. In response to its games being banned, the GAA ordered all its clubs and county boards to organize an extensive program of Gaelic matches to be held across every county on Sunday, 4 August.<sup>92</sup> This mass protest of games, dubbed “Gaelic Sunday,” initiated a trial of strength between the government and the GAA. At 3 p.m., between 1,500 and 1,800 matches took place, with almost every county in Ireland represented. The newspaper *Sport* reported that as many as 4,000 teams participated in the matches, and that practically every affiliated hurling and football club in the country was involved.<sup>93</sup> Faced with such mass disobedience, the authorities were powerless to resist. The success of the event put an end to the British government’s interference with the running of the GAA, and by the following week Gaelic matches had resumed as usual. Marcus de Búrca makes a convincing argument that Gaelic Sunday represented the largest, most widespread, and most successful act of public defiance against British rule in Ireland during the 1916–22 period.<sup>94</sup> While this can certainly be debated, Murphy states that it is noteworthy that the association acted with greatest vigor to oppose the British state when the state threatened the very business of the GAA—its games.<sup>95</sup>

92. GAA/CC/01/02, 20 July 1918.

93. *Sport*, 10 Aug. 1918.

94. De Búrca, *GAA*, 111.

95. Murphy, “G.A.A.” 72.

Ireland's political landscape underwent a significant upheaval in late 1918. In unison with greater Irish nationalist opinion, the broad membership of the GAA fully supported this power shift. The attempted introduction of conscription by the British government cemented Sinn Féin's place at the head of Irish popular political opinion. In that December's general election the party won 65 percent of the vote outside of Ulster.<sup>96</sup> Fulfilling their electoral promise, the Sinn Féin representatives assembled in Dublin and established a new legislative assembly, Dáil Éireann, dedicated to creating a free Irish republic.<sup>97</sup>

With the broad base of Irish nationalism now fully in support of Sinn Féin, the GAA began to firmly align itself within the movement. During the same week that de Valera took his place at the head of Ireland's new legislative assembly, the association held the final match of its tournament in aid of the Republican Prisoners' Dependents' Fund at Croke Park.<sup>98</sup> De Valera attended and received a rapturous reception from the crowd of 25,000 present.<sup>99</sup> Further evidence of the GAA's Sinn Féin leanings, especially among its leadership, was provided by the 1919 annual-congress ban on civil servants who had been required to take an oath of allegiance to the king.<sup>100</sup> This ban was an instance of the GAA being used directly as a weapon against the British state in Ireland.<sup>101</sup> The episode clearly shows how those in control of the association had adopted elements of the policy of ostracization advocated by Sinn Féin. They used it against sections of their own membership, whom they saw, by their employment, as contributing to the British administration in Ireland. In view of such polices there can be little doubt that by 1919 the GAA had taken an increasingly radical position and had in effect become an ideological opponent of British rule in Ireland.

During the three years after Easter 1916 much of the GAA's membership had gone through a process of political radicalization.

96. Laffan, *Resurrection of Ireland*, 164–66.

97. *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, 25 Jan. 1919.

98. This was a political fund set up to support political prisoners jailed because of their Sinn Féin activities.

99. *Kerry Weekly Reporter*, 12 Apr. 1919.

100. CPA, Annual Congress Minute Books, 1911–27: 20 Apr. 1919.

101. Murphy, "G.A.A.," 65.

Within the association widespread support for the Irish party had been destroyed; in its place support for republican aspirations for an independent Ireland was overwhelming. By 1919 the GAA as an organization had become firmly committed to Sinn Féin's aspiration of establishing an Irish republic. During the subsequent Anglo-Irish War hundreds of the association's members would be active in the fight for Irish independence.