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THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION IN MEATH, 1884–1934

by

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Abbreviations

AC	*Anglo-Celt*
BMH	Bureau of Military History
CC	Cricket Club
CE	*Cork Examiner*
CI	County Inspector, R.I.C.
CO	Colonial Office
CPA	Croke Park Archive
DA	*Drogheda Argus*
DI	*Drogheda Independent*
DICS	District Inspectors' Crime Special Reports
DD	*Dundalk Democrat*
DE	*Dundalk Examiner*
EH	*Evening Herald*
FJ	*Freeman's Journal*
IRB	Irish Republican Brotherhood
IG	Inspector General
II	*Irish Independent*
IPP	Irish Parliamentary Party
IT	*Irish Times*
MCL	Meath County Library
MC	*Meath Chronicle*
MSCL	Meath Sunday Cricket League
MSPC	Military Service Pensions' Collection
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
NV	*National Volunteer*
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
RMAS	Royal Meath Agricultural Society
RO	Nominal Rolls I.R.A. in Military Service Pensions' Collection
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, London
UCDA	University College Dublin Archives
WS	Witness Statement, Bureau of Military History

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Introduction

This thesis traces the development of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in county Meath in the five decades from its foundation to its golden jubilee in 1934. Despite its significant role in Irish life, it is only in recent decades that the history of the GAA has begun to receive extended, scholarly attention from historians. Writing in 2009, in a publication to mark the 125th anniversary of its foundation, Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh commented that 'Detailed, scholarly case studies of the GAA's history in the context of wider social development at a regional or indeed county or city level are still awaited.'[1] To date the only counties where the early growth and development of the GAA has been researched at doctoral level are Donegal and Kerry.[2] William Nolan has edited a comprehensive study of the GAA in Dublin and Tom Hunt's analysis of sport in Westmeath includes research on the GAA, but concludes in 1905.[3] This thesis on county Meath is intended as a further contribution to the gap in the historiography identified by Ó Tuathaigh.

While the GAA was established to revive traditional Irish sports, such as hurling, and to open up athletics to the working man who was often excluded under existing rules, its formation also paralleled developments in England, generally referred to as the Victorian sporting revolution. This revolution involved the codification and standardisation of rules, the formal organisation of sport into clubs, and the formation of national bodies to regulate individual sports. The GAA replicated many features of the sporting revolution and experienced a rapid initial growth followed by an equally precipitous decline that almost resulted in its premature demise by the turn of the century. Despite this setback, it reorganised after 1900 and went on to have a profound impact on Irish social, political and cultural life.

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[1] Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'The GAA as a force in Irish society: an overview' in Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009* (Dublin, 2009), pp 237–56; p. 237.

[2] Conor Curran, 'Why Donegal slept, the development of Gaelic games in Donegal, 1884–1934' (PhD thesis, De Montfort University, Leicester, 2012); Richard McElligott, *Forging a kingdom: the GAA in Kerry 1884–1934* (Cork, 2013).

[3] William Nolan (ed.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin, 1884–2000* (3 vols, Dublin, 2005); Tom Hunt, *Sport and society in Victorian Ireland: the case of Westmeath* (Cork, 2007).

Thesis aims and structure

The aim of the thesis is to chart and analyse the development of the GAA in county Meath during the organisation's first half century. In that period, the GAA experienced rapid initial growth and a sudden, almost terminal, decline during the 1890s, followed by a subsequent revival early in the twentieth century. The reasons for such rapidly changing fortunes will be examined and evaluated. The thesis will also explore the GAA's role during the political upheaval of the Irish revolution, 1912–23, and assess its activities and attitudes in independent Ireland, 1922–1934. The limited research undertaken to date indicates that the GAA did not experience uniform patterns of growth and decline, but fared differently from county to county. It was slow to take root in Westmeath and Donegal, but established itself quickly in Dublin and Kerry. Thus, while providing a case-study of the GAA in one county, this thesis will complement and contrast with the existing research, confirming some findings, and challenging and questioning others.

The first chapter examines the origin and rapid spread of GAA clubs in Meath in the period 1886–1890. It analyses the location of the earliest clubs, the reasons for their establishment, and the subsequent diffusion of clubs throughout the county. The chapter also uses a database of games from the period, compiled from newspaper reports, to investigate the frequency of games, the pattern of scoring and the style of play.

The second chapter explores the subsequent decline of the GAA in the county in the late 1880s and 1890s, caused by a combination of internal weakness and external opposition. It will examine the growing opposition of the bishop of Meath and his priests to alleged social abuses at games, such as over-indulgence in drink, and political abuses including the alleged recruitment of players into secret societies. The role of the Parnell split in the decline of the GAA in the county will also be assessed. The second section of the chapter will outline the efforts to reorganise the GAA during the final decade of the century, focusing in particular on the central role of Richard T. Blake, who became chairman of Meath GAA and national secretary of the organisation for periods during the 1890s.

The GAA experienced a revival in the early 1900s and chapter three will describe and explore the reasons for this. While the GAA was in decline in the county cricket was its chief sporting rival. Cricket became the most popular field sport in Meath at the turn of the century, and it was a game dominated by farmers and agricultural labourers. The chapter will chart the growth and later decline of rural cricket as the new century was marked by a resurgence of cultural nationalism, spearheaded by the Gaelic League. The League placed an emphasis on the revival and promotion of all things Irish and its role in the establishment of hurling clubs and the revival of the GAA in the county was particularly significant.

Chapter four will examine a database of hurlers and footballers active in Meath in the period 1900 to 1915, compiled from team lists in contemporary newspapers and club histories. It will utilise the census enumerator forms from 1901 and 1911 to analyse the age, social background, and occupational status of these players.

The fifth and sixth chapters focus on the GAA during the 1912–23 period, a time of great political upheaval. Politics and war took centre stage in Ireland and this presented many challenges to the GAA, as the playing of Gaelic games had to proceed alongside momentous events in an ever-changing political landscape. Chapter five will discuss the formation of the Volunteers and the GAA's involvement in that organisation and in the 1916 Rising. It will also assess the extent to which GAA members in the county enlisted in the British Army to fight in World War I, an under-explored area in the historiography of the GAA, with the exception of work by Ross O'Carroll and Dónal McAnallen.[4]

The sixth chapter will evaluate the approach of the GAA to political events after 1916, its attitude to the British government, and the extent of its support for the republican movement. The GAA itself and many of its early historians portrayed the association as a major protagonist and player during this transformative period. However, evidence presented in this chapter will suggest that while a number of

[4] Ross O'Carroll, 'The GAA in the First World War, 1914–18' in Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923* (Cork, 2015), pp 85–104; Dónal McAnallen, 'From Croke Park to the trenches: the forgotten GAA heroes of World War 1' https://www.the42.ie/gaa-heroes-world-war-one-donal-mcanallen-4412540-Dec2018/ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2019).

GAA members utilised their influence and standing in the GAA to advance and promote independence, the majority of club members had no such involvement.

The final two chapters will focus on the GAA during the first decade of national independence, when the government and the forces of the state, such as the police and army, were no longer hostile to it, as had previously been the case under the British administration. Chapter seven will examine the issue of the GAA's ban on its members playing or supporting games it categorised as foreign, such as rugby, soccer and cricket. With the attainment of a degree of national independence some in the organisation sought to remove the ban. The chapter will outline the debates that resulted from these efforts and assess the reasons for the ban's retention. The chapter will also illustrate that cricket survived in Meath into the 1920s and 1930s as a significant recreational outlet that proved attractive for many GAA members despite the ban.

The final chapter will analyse the interaction between the GAA and three important organisations in post-independent Ireland: the new police force, An Garda Síochána, the Catholic Church and the Gaelic League. It will conclude by returning to a consideration of a recurring theme, the procurement of suitable grounds and venues for the playing of Gaelic games, and especially the dealings of the GAA with the Irish Land Commission in the provision of such facilities.

Historiography of the GAA

Prior to recent decades, the GAA's history was left, in the main, to sports journalists or GAA members, whose chief aim was to preserve and celebrate the personalities, games and records of the GAA. Their contributions rarely brought a questioning or an analytical approach to the organisation's role in Irish history. As a result, general histories of Ireland gave limited attention to the role of the GAA, or sport generally, until R.V. Comerford devoted a chapter to sport in *Ireland* while Diarmaid Ferriter, in *The transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000*, gives extended consideration to the role of sport, including the GAA.[5] Paul Rouse, in his recent *Sport and Ireland*, provides the most comprehensive survey to date that encompasses a range of sports

[5] R.V. Comerford, *Ireland* (London, 2003), pp 212–35; Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London, 2005), pp 101–2, 354–5.

and places their development in the context of political, economic and social change.[6]

The historiography of the GAA has expanded greatly in recent years and the following review focuses on the most significant developments. The earliest attempt to record the association's history was Thomas F. O'Sullivan's *Story of the GAA*. The book's subtitle, *First history of [a] great organisation*, reveals that critical consideration did not figure high among his priorities.[7] The book's greatest value is as a source of information on the early decades of the association, as it contains material from contemporary newspapers and recollections of those involved. Efforts to produce an official history of the organisation for its fiftieth anniversary failed,[8] and it wasn't until 1980 that Marcus de Búrca published the first comprehensive history of the GAA, concisely entitled *The GAA: a history*. His brief was to write his 'story of the GAA, and particularly its role in the national movement of the pre-1922 era.'[9] The book represented a significant departure from the emphasis on the heroes of the GAA and accounts of important games, with a focus instead on the development of the organisation. Despite being commissioned by the GAA, de Búrca did not shy away from referring to incidents and issues that some members might have preferred to gloss over, such as its lack of support for the 1916 Rising. However, the book's overall focus was on a top-down analysis of the GAA as an organisation. Footnotes are sparse, and the source of numerous assertions and statements of fact are unidentified. Thus, while it provides a detailed overview, it is of limited use for the historian hoping to contextualise the history of the GAA using a single county case-study approach.

The Australian historian, W.F. Mandle, contributed to the expanding historiography of the GAA with a number of important articles and a book, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish nationalist politics, 1884–1924*.[10] As the title suggests, he focused on the political aspects of the organisation, emphasising the role of the Irish

[6] Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: a history* (Oxford, 2015).
[7] Thomas F. O'Sullivan, *The story of the GAA* (Dublin, 1916), p. iii.
[8] Anthony Keating, 'A politically inconvenient aspect of history: the unpublished official history of the Gaelic Athletic Association of 1934' in *Sport in History*, xxxvii, no. 4 (2017), pp 448–68.
[9] Marcus de Búrca, *The GAA: a history* (1st ed., Dublin, 1980), preface, not paginated.
[10] W.F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish nationalist politics, 1884–1924* (London, 1987).

Republican Brotherhood (IRB) at leadership level while giving much less attention to its role as a sporting body. His focus was on the upper echelons of the GAA leadership while giving very little consideration to the views and attitudes of the broader membership. His research relied heavily on police files, which are not without bias.

By the time of the GAA's 125th anniversary in 2009 there had been a substantial increase in books and articles on the association, while developments in sports writing in Britain began to influence the approach taken by historians of Irish sport. Two seminal publications were Richard Holt's *Sport and the British* and Neil Tranter's *Sport, economy and society in Britain 1750–1914*.[11] A collection of essays edited by Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse, *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884–2009*,[12] was wide-ranging and ground-breaking, featuring topics such as the social structure of clubs, the role of journalism and other media in the sport and the complexity of the organisation's links with the Irish language movement. A contribution by Holt argued that while the GAA was created to revive traditional Irish forms of sport, it 'was also part of a much wider international phenomenon: the creation of modern sport.'[13] The most notable omissions from this volume are a consideration of the association's tumultuous relationship with the Catholic Church, and a reappraisal of its links with nationalist organisations, especially the IRB, before 1913.

There is, however, a substantial gap in the history of the GAA at county level, as scholarly, wide-ranging county histories are scarce. Almost from its inception the GAA based its competitions on the county, even though counties were initially a British-inspired construction developed to assist in the colonisation of Ireland. The GAA established county committees to oversee its games, and the champion club represented each county in the provincial and All-Ireland contests. One of the most comprehensive county histories is a three-volume survey of Dublin edited by William Nolan and published in 2005. Although using a strictly chronological

[11] Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: a modern history* (Oxford, 1989); Neil Tranter, *Sport, economy and society in Britain, 1750–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).
[12] Cronin *et al*, *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–*2009.
[13] Richard Holt, 'Ireland and the birth of modern sport' in Cronin *et al*, *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009*, pp 33–45; p. 33.

format, with each chapter subdivided into 'Administration' and 'Games', the first fifty years in the capital city and county are well documented. While the main focus is on the teams and games, the political, social and economic contexts are also considered with analysis of the provenance of club names and the geographical distribution of clubs.[14]

Three relatively recent histories focus on the development of sport in Westmeath, Donegal and Kerry. The latter, Richard McElligott's *Forging a kingdom*: *the GAA in Kerry, 1884–1934*, is the only one of the three to focus solely on the GAA but the others devote substantial analysis to it.[15] Tom Hunt covers a wide range of sports in Westmeath during the 1850–1905 period and examines the early years of the GAA to its eventual emergence as a major force after 1900. He also analyses the place of cricket in the county, conclusively proving that it was much more extensive and broadly based than previously believed.[16] This is an exceptionally well-researched work and provides a clear blueprint for the study of sport in any county.

Conor Curran's study of Donegal covers fewer sports than Hunt's work, but brings the narrative from 1880 to 1935. His main focus is on soccer and the GAA and he clearly demonstrates the failure of the latter to establish itself in the county until the 1920s in comparison to the success of soccer.[17] Richard McElligott confines himself to the history of the first half-century of the GAA in his study of Kerry. Similar to Hunt's and Curran's work, it is underpinned by meticulous research and is a comprehensive examination of the GAA in Kerry and the political, social and economic backdrop to its development.

All three works provide signposts and questions for research in other counties. They clearly point to the conclusion that sporting organisations developed differently for various reasons in diverse locations. Donegal and Kerry are geographically peripheral counties on the western seaboard, a long way from Dublin, and in Donegal's case with a poorly developed railway network. Sporting organisations and competitions were slow to develop there and even the cultural revival of the early

[14] Nolan (ed.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin*.
[15] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*.
[16] Hunt, *Sport and society in Victorian Ireland.*
[17] Conor Curran, *The development of sport in Donegal* (Cork, 2015).

1900s did not persuade the population to desert the 'foreign' game of soccer for the native Gaelic sports.[18] Kerry was closer than Donegal to the early centres of the GAA in Cork and Tipperary. Nevertheless, Kerry faced similar challenges to Donegal in attempting to establish clubs in remote areas. Both studies emphasise the importance of committed individuals and the power of personality or its absence. Often, individuals mattered more than movements. In both counties competitive sport generally remained localised and attempts to bring in or unite a wider sporting community throughout the county were often unsustainable. In Donegal, in particular, links with sporting bodies in bordering counties were more important than internal links between clubs.

Westmeath was very different to Donegal and Kerry. Located much closer to Dublin in an undulating landscape, compared to the mountainous terrain and peninsulas of Kerry and Donegal, it also had an extensive rail network. Its agricultural economy was second only to Meath's as a grazing county and large farms concentrated on fattening cattle and sheep. Yet, despite its proximity to Dublin and its superior rail network, the early GAA in Westmeath suffered many of the same problems as those experienced further west, and the organisation, after limited initial progress, went into decline. This was due mainly to poor management at county level and constant dissension over the interpretation of rules and the outcome of games. The revival of hurling and football as part of the cultural, nationalist movement after 1900 was much more successful than in Donegal, if not on a par with Kerry.

Marcus de Búrca and Richard McElligott have shown that after its initial success the GAA foundered in the 1890s due to a combination of factors: mismanagement, political infiltration by the IRB, emigration, especially in Kerry, clerical opposition and the division in nationalist politics following the Parnell split. What was the relative importance of each of those factors in Meath? The bishop of Meath, Dr Thomas Nulty, was a vocal opponent of Parnell from 1891, but even before that the Catholic Church had expressed its disapproval of certain aspects of the GAA, especially the alleged danger of infiltration by secret societies and the evils of

[18] Ibid., pp 26-7, 102-5.

alcoholic drink at games. Was the role of the bishop and the clergy more significant in Meath than in other counties?

In each of the three counties referred to the GAA eventually experienced a revival in the late 1890s and early 1900s, especially after the healing of political divisions created by the Parnell controversy and the cultural and nationalist revival spearheaded by the Gaelic League. The revival was particularly strong in Kerry, reasonably successful in Westmeath but failed ultimately in Donegal. How did Meath fare in this period? Richard Blake was the most significant figure in the Meath revival. What was his role in the revival of Meath GAA and how did it function after his removal? How important was the Gaelic League, which was part of a broader Gaelic revival, in the formation or revival of clubs in the county?

When the GAA declined in Donegal, Kerry and Westmeath, other sports filled the vacuum. In Donegal it was soccer; rugby was more successful in Kerry; and in Westmeath the dominant sport in the 1890s was cricket. Meath was slow to turn to rugby or soccer, and, as in its western neighbour, cricket was the biggest rival of the GAA. Historians of sport have, until recently, ignored the importance of cricket. Paul Rouse in *Sport and Ireland* states that 'the claim that cricket crossed the classes is essentially true' while prior to Hunt's publication Patrick Bracken and Michael O'Dwyer, in Tipperary and Kilkenny respectively, had shown that cricket was played in numerous parishes during the second half of the nineteenth century.[19] Cricket had a central role in Meath gentry society for many years but the resurgence late in the nineteenth century reflected the Westmeath experience where it became the most popular game in the county and the majority of clubs were comprised of farmers and labourers. To what extent did GAA players turn to cricket when the GAA was in decline and was there any geographical pattern to the formation and location of cricket clubs? Finally, why did cricket decline in Meath?

The role of the GAA during the decade of upheaval, 1913 to 1923, is well documented in *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923*, edited by Gearóid Ó

[19] Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland,* p. 119; Patrick Bracken, *'Foreign and fantastic field sports': cricket in county Tipperary* (Thurles, 2004); Michael O'Dwyer, *The history of cricket in county Kilkenny: the forgotten game* (Kilkenny, 2006).

Tuathaigh, and in a number of articles by McElligott and William Murphy.[20] Practically no research has been done on the GAA in Meath in this period, but there is a range of possible approaches. To what extent were members of GAA clubs involved in World War I, the Volunteers, Sinn Féin, the War of Independence and the Civil War, or did they maintain a sports-oriented focus? Dónal McAnallen and Ross O'Carroll have provided some detail on participation by GAA members in World War I and this thesis will add to that by describing the situation in Meath. Later, when Seán Boylan was elected as chairman of Meath GAA in 1919–20, while also Officer Commanding the First Eastern Division of the IRA, it was claimed that the Meath GAA committee was controlled by 'men of an extreme political party.'[21] How accurate was this claim?

In the 1920s the GAA could, and did, claim with some justification that it had helped to achieve freedom by its opposition to anglicisation, its promotion of national games and culture and its role in the revolutionary period. However, because the chief focus has been on the political aspects of the GAA, most writers have confined their research to the years before independence. Consequently there is a dearth of studies of the organisation in the 1920s and 1930s.[22] Questions arise as to how the GAA viewed itself in an independent Ireland. Was it able to maintain or strengthen its position as the premier sport in Meath? What was its attitude to the ban on foreign games? What influence did the new police force, An Garda Síochána, have in the GAA and what was the attitude of the Catholic clergy in the county to it, given their earlier opposition under Bishop Nulty?

The historiography of the GAA in Meath itself is very limited. The centenary of the GAA in 1984 acted as a prompt for the production of a number of club histories but

[20] Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923*; Richard McElligott, '1916 and the radicalization of the Gaelic Athletic Association' in *Éire-Ireland*, xlviii, no. 1&2 (2013), pp 95–111; Richard McElligott, 'The GAA, the 1916 Rising and its aftermath to 1918' in Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), *The GAA and revolution,* pp 129–52; Richard McElligott, '"An abundance of first-class recruits", the GAA and the Irish Volunteers 1913–15' in John Crowley, Donal Ó Drisceoil and Mike Murphy, *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* (Cork, 2017), pp 177–80; William Murphy, 'The GAA during the Irish revolution, 1913–23' in Cronin *et al*, *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, pp 61–76; William Murphy, 'The Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish revolution' in Crowley *et al*, *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, pp 895–9.
[21] Michael O'Brien, *Royal and loyal: Meath's GAA history, part 1, 1884–1940* (Navan, 2002), p. 111.
[22] See Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin, 'The heroic importance of sport: the GAA in the 1930s' in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, xxv, no. 10 (2008), pp 1326–37.

most of these are anecdotal in nature, consisting of repetitive accounts of games and scores, combined with partisan commentary, while context and causation are often ignored. Nevertheless, the better ones delve into the social and cultural role of the organisation locally and contribute significantly to a deeper understanding of the GAA. These include two important works by Michael O'Brien. *Royal and loyal* is a general survey of the GAA in the county from 1884 to 1941, similar to the period covered in this thesis. It is useful on the early years of the GAA in Meath, identifying many of the personalities involved, and judicious in placing developments in Meath in the national context. However, its chief focus is on the fortunes of teams representing the county and the outcome of the annual club championships, which is an important part of the GAA's history, but far from the full story.[23] O'Brien also authored *The struggle for Páirc Tailteann*, a well-researched account of the efforts of the Meath GAA county committee to establish a GAA-controlled playing ground in Navan.[24] It offers an insight into the attitude of the better-off elements in Navan who controlled the grounds and illustrates the relationship between the GAA clubs and supporters of cricket, who had preferential use of the grounds prior to the GAA acquiring them in 1934.

Many of the club histories produced in 1984 were little more than small souvenir booklets, containing potted histories, memories of past players and lists of the clubs' achievements. Nevertheless, a number of well-researched club histories were produced. The previously mentioned Michael O'Brien was again to the fore, penning *Perseverance brings success*, a history of football in Walterstown parish near Navan.[25] It is valuable for the detail it sheds on Meath's most successful early club, Dowdstown, and surrounding clubs, and enables one to identify many of the players and their backgrounds. A history of Rathkenny GAA is important because of GAA founder Michael Cusack's influential visit to the area and the rapid growth of clubs in the locality, although much of it consists of reports transcribed from the local press.[26] As in O Brien's work, local knowledge is used to excellent effect to identify players and officials. Castletown GAA club produced a detailed history, which is

[23] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal.*
[24] Michael O'Brien, *The struggle for Páirc Tailteann* (Navan, 1994).
[25] Michael O'Brien, *Perseverance brings success: the GAA in Johnstown, Walterstown, 1887–1987* (Navan, 1987).
[26] Tom Mongey, Mick Mongey and Damien McBride, *Rathkenny GAA history* (n.p., 1984).

helpful for the post-1900 period, but it neglects the pre-1890 era when at least one club represented the area.[27] *Black and amber*, originally published in 1984, and co-authored by the present writer, was completely rewritten and extended in 2015 and sets the history of the GAA in the parish of Dunshaughlin in the wider social, cultural, economic and historical context.[28]

Other clubs have also produced histories since 1984, notably Skryne, Longwood and Trim. The Skryne history is a mammoth production of two volumes, but is essentially an annual record of the club that is short on analysis but comprehensive as a source book.[29] Trim's history gives a comprehensive account of the club's early history but also has a strong focus on the games.[30] The most unusual club history is that of Longwood GAA by J.P. Farrell.[31] It is an unconventional, tongue-in-cheek account, that is a welcome change from the drudgery of interminable accounts of long forgotten games, a feature of the worst club histories. Farrell's work contains interesting insights into aspects of the GAA not always explored, such as the importance of cricket in the area and the effect of World War I, while he doesn't shy away from commenting on the foibles and failings of his own and other clubs. The county's urban clubs are under-represented. There were at least six clubs in Navan in the 1890s and four in 1914 while Kells Campaigners was one of the earliest clubs in the county, yet neither town has produced a history to date.

However easy it is to be critical of club histories, one must take account of the fact that they are written with a specific audience in mind, the local supporter, and that they are aimed at a small market, so that financial realities dictate the production values. Practically all of them, nevertheless, are useful to the historian at a county level, as their strength lies in their authors' knowledge of the local landscape and personalities.

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[27] Barbara and Colm Smyth, *100 years of Castletown GFC, 1896–1996* (Navan, 1996).
[28] Jim Gilligan, Patsy McLoughlin, *Black and amber, the history of the GAA in the parish of Dunshaughlin, 1886–2014* (Dunshaughlin, 2015).
[29] David Carty, *A history of the GAA in Skryne, 1887-2010: the blue kings of Tara* (2 vols, Skryne, 2012).
[30] Frank McCann, Seamus Brennan, *Wielding the ash, kicking the leather: a history of Trim GAA 1896–2006* (Trim, 2011).
[31] J.P. Farrell, *Strong backs: Longwood county Meath and the GAA, beginning to about 1940* (Longwood, 2004).

Sources

A diverse range of source material was used to research this thesis, including a variety of local and national newspapers, minutes of the GAA's Central and Leinster Councils, police reports and census enumerator forms. Unfortunately, neither the minutes of the Meath county committee nor its clubs have survived from the early years of the GAA. This gap in the records is a significant drawback, as club minutes could provide details on officers, membership fees, financial statements and social events connected with the clubs. In the absence of such records, the chief resource for the current research was the local, provincial and national press, and in many instances these contain the only available information, especially for the early years of the GAA. However, newspapers have a number of advantages and pitfalls that the researcher has to bear in mind. On the positive side, newspapers frequently provide more detail than club or county committee records often offer, as the latter usually contain a recital of proposals and decisions without any detail of the debate or flavour of the discussion. In addition, newspapers often contain correspondence regarding sporting controversies giving both sides an opportunity to air their views. On the negative side, the most problematic issue is that of under-reporting of events. Newspapers depended on clubs to forward information about their activities, as reporters could not cover all events. As a result, some clubs' activities may be understated or ignored, especially in peripheral areas of the county, and this, in turn, has an impact on efforts to quantify the number of clubs and games played in a given period. It also has to be borne in mind that newspaper reports may have been subject to bias. Newspapers usually held strong views on political issues, and this was particularly true at the time of the Parnell split. Consequently it is essential to identify a newspaper's stance and to follow Marie-Louise Legg's advice to treat their reports with caution.[32]

A number of newspapers were consulted for this thesis, the main ones being the *Drogheda Independent* and the *Meath Chronicle.* The former began publication in 1884 but the *Chronicle* did not commence until 1897, and each available edition of both publications was examined up to 1934. Both were nationalist in outlook and gave substantial coverage to GAA affairs. Initially, both also covered cricket in some

[32] Marie-Louise Legg, *Newspapers and nationalism: the Irish provincial press 1850–1892* (Dublin, 1999), p. 11.

detail, but there is strong evidence that cricket was under-reported in the *Chronicle* in the mid 1900s under the editorship of Tom Daly, who had a strong nationalist outlook. The *Drogheda Argus* supplemented the coverage of those newspapers and the *Dundalk Democrat* and *Anglo-Celt* were used to mitigate the under-reporting of activity in north Meath by the *Independent* and the *Chronicle*. The national weekly *Sport* was an invaluable source for the early years of the GAA as it contained a regular section devoted to GAA activities throughout the country.

Minute books of the Central Council and the Leinster Council were also consulted. The former date from 1899 while the latter only begin in 1915.[33] These are useful for ascertaining Meath's representatives at various meetings and confirming when important decisions were made. However, in some cases the minutes consist of reports culled from the newspapers, making the point that such reports are often a more accurate summation of the business of meetings than minutes compiled by the GAA itself. The Leinster records are helpful for assessing the number of players who were reinstated for breaking the GAA's ban on playing or attending foreign games and also for the level of assistance given to counties for the purchase of grounds.

Because the GAA was viewed with suspicion by the authorities, police and special branch reports are a valuable source of information on it prior to independence. These, however, need to be treated with great caution. They give valuable quantitative information on clubs when the GAA was in decline in the late 1880s and early 1890s and those can be cross-checked for accuracy with newspaper-based evidence.[34] Such a procedure suggests that the police underestimated the number of active clubs. This may be due to ignorance of the existence of the clubs or because the police were concerned with IRB infiltration of the GAA and focused on clubs with this profile. The IRB was a secret oath-bound society, founded in 1858, with the aim of ending British rule in Ireland by the use of physical force if necessary.[35] The majority of players and supporters probably had little interest in the struggles between the IRB and the constitutional elements for control of clubs and over-

[33] Croke Park Archive, Central Council minute books, 1899–1938, GAA/CC/01/01–05; Leinster Provincial Council minute books, 1915–39, GAA/LEIN/01/01.
[34] Crime Branch Special files; Précis of monthly reports (NAI).
[35] Owen McGee, *The IRB: the Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Féin* (Dublin, 2005), p. 15.

reliance on police reports results in a skewed and biased picture of the organisation. Many of the monthly police reports compiled by the local County Inspector are general rather than specific where the GAA is concerned, and of limited assistance in compiling a history of the GAA.

The census enumerator returns of 1901 and 1911, now available online from the National Archives of Ireland, are an essential source for the compilation of a database of players and an analysis of their age, occupation and social status. These returns provide information at the level of the individual household, listing the names, ages and occupation of the inhabitants, and the quality of housing. In the case of GAA players who were identified as farmers in the census, the cancelled land books in the Valuation Office were used to assess the extent and value of their farms.[36] Further detail on age and occupation was confirmed from the civil records of births, marriages and deaths, now online.[37]

The Bureau of Military History witness statements provide a rich source for details of activity during the revolutionary era, but references in them to the GAA are scant. Nevertheless, a number of prominent Meath GAA personalities provided statements, especially Seán Boylan, who was chairman of Meath GAA, and Seamus Finn, who was involved as a player and administrator with Meath and Athboy. Due to the effects of flawed memory and the time lapse between the recording of the statements and the activity recollected in them, the researcher needs to query and cross reference such sources where possible. For instance, Boylan's claim that all Meath's delegates to the GAA's annual congress in 1919 were IRB members is not borne out by other sources, as shown in chapter six.

Meath is the focus of this thesis, but the county did not exist in isolation and the development of the GAA there is considered throughout in the context of developments at national level and in other counties. General histories of the organisation, such as de Búrca's, cannot take account of the regional diversity that is evident in Curran's, Hunt's and McElligott's work. While there were some general trends in the growth of the GAA it is reasonable to assume that similar variation

[36] Valuation Office, Dublin, Cancelled land books for county Meath.
[37] The civil records of births, marriages and deaths can be accessed at www.genealogy.ie.

existed in other counties and regions and this thesis aims to add to an understanding of that diversity.

Chapter 1

The Emergent GAA in Meath, 1884–1890

Introduction:

This chapter examines the origin and development of GAA clubs in Meath in the period up to 1890. It will illustrate the importance of athletics rather than football or hurling in the formation of the GAA. The establishment and rapid spread of GAA clubs in Meath from 1886 is analysed and it is argued that the earliest clubs were located in four localities. These were east Meath, close to, and influenced by, developments in Drogheda; the Rathkenny–Stackallen area close to county Louth; the neighbourhood of Kells in north Meath; and an area near Tara, south of Navan. The naming of clubs and the extent to which the titles chosen are indicative of a club's political stance is also explored.

The second part of the chapter uses a database of over five hundred matches played by Meath clubs in the 1886–90 period compiled from press reports, to analyse the importance of challenge and tournament games as opposed to championship contests. An analysis of the pattern of scores recorded in the database suggests that the rudimentary rules had a major impact on the style of play and that games were akin to attritional confrontations, in which the prevention of a goal was paramount to success.

The final part of the chapter examines the social, cultural and commercial aspects of the games. The issue of travel to and from games for players and spectators is considered and the vital importance of the railways is noted. The role of local marching bands to attract attention and highlight the games is probed, as is the importance of the hospitality provided for visiting clubs, which sometimes resulted in clerical condemnation of the drinking culture at such events. Finally, the development of some aspects of the commercialisation of sport in the form of admission charges, advertising, provision of playing gear and equipment is identified.

Establishment and spread of GAA clubs in Meath

The local press carried references to GAA clubs in Duleek and Yellow Furze in 1885 but it was well into 1886 before any account of an inter-club game appeared. The

first game that can be conclusively traced involved Dowdstown, near Navan, hosting and being defeated by CJ Kickhams from Dublin in early September 1886. Dowdstown reversed the result in the Phoenix Park a fortnight later.[1] It is unlikely that this was the first game in the county but the lack of a complete set of local newspapers means that it is impossible to be definitive about this. The Dowdstown v Kickhams games took place eighteen months after the foundation of the GAA in Hayes' Hotel, Thurles on 1 November 1884. Michael Cusack, who, along with Maurice Davin, was the inspiration behind the formation of the organisation, later stated that 'the association spread with the devastating rapidity of a prairie fire.'[2] In Meath, as in many counties, however, the fire took time to spark into life.

Following years of involvement in a variety of sports in Dublin, including cricket, rugby, hurling and athletics, Cusack was convinced of the need to re-organise athletics on democratic lines, to control it through a national organisation and to revive the games of hurling and football.[3] His co-founder, Maurice Davin from Tipperary, the first president of the GAA, was a multi-talented athlete, especially skilled in weight throwing. He believed that football and hurling required a set of codified rules and regulations, stating: 'I would not like to see either game now as the rules stand at present.'[4] The new organisation bore the lengthy title of 'The Gaelic Athletic Association for the Preservation and Cultivation of National Pastimes', soon to be shortened to the Gaelic Athletic Association. The few reports of the Thurles meeting that appeared in the press focused almost exclusively on athletics, and, in its formative years, athletics remained the prime concern of the organisation.[5] Indeed, its formation can only be understood in the context of the contemporary athletic scene. Sports days, with athletics as the main attraction, became common features of Irish life in the final quarter of the nineteenth century.[6] Organised athletics quickly spread to many Irish towns and by 1877 John Lawrence, who produced a cricket handbook, noted that 'the rapid expansion of athletics in the

[1] *Sport*, 2 Oct. 1886.
[2] *The Nation*, 12 Oct. 1889.
[3] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 17.
[4] Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, p. 4.
[5] Newspapers reports of the meeting can be found in *CE*, 3 Nov. 1884; *United Ireland*, 8 Nov. 1884; *Leinster Leader*, 8 Nov. 1884.
[6] For a detailed account of these developments see Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: a history*, pp 135–8.

provinces is something remarkable … Scarcely a village now does not go in for its athletics' festival.'[7]

There were, however, a number of problems with athletics as then organised. While most meetings in rural Ireland featured traditional events of running, jumping and weight throwing, many of the newer meetings, especially in the 1880s, followed the rules of the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) based in London. The AAA focused on running rather than on contests such as weight throwing and upheld an amateur ethos, opposing the awarding of prize money.[8] The definition of amateurism, however, often proved controversial. A meeting planned for Dundalk in 1881 under AAA rules required participants to declare that they had never competed for public money or admission money and nor were they 'a Mechanic, Artisan or labourer; and further, that I have not since 1 January, 1879, taken part in Athletic Sports on Sunday.'[9] The unstated aim of such conditions was to exclude the working man. Even if the labourer and artisan had not been specifically excluded by name, the rule in relation to Sundays excluded him, as it was the only day working class people were free to participate. The planned Dundalk meeting was met with outrage, and a 'Public Indignation Meeting' was held to protest at the 'exclusiveness' of the sports.[10] The outcome was the organisation of a popular athletic sports for 29 June.[11] Cusack abhorred the discrimination implicit in sports like those originally planned for Dundalk and succinctly summarised his views in evidence at a libel trial in 1885, stating: 'The object of the Gaelic Athletic Association was to change the nature of the programme of athletic sports, and to admit artisans and others to compete.'[12]

Very few GAA clubs were formed in 1884–85 and most of those in existence focused their efforts and energy on athletics, with football or hurling games a subsidiary element at some sports meetings. Athletic events were easier to organise and unlikely to cause the degree of dissension over rules that often bedeviled football and hurling due to the lack of standardised rules. The GAA held large sports meetings during 1885 in Clonmel, Blarney, Cork, Tralee and New Ross and in

[7] John Lawrence, *Handbook of cricket in Ireland, 1877–78* (Dublin, 1877), p. 150.
[8] Seamus Ó Riain, *Maurice Davin 1842–1927: first president of the GAA* (Dublin, 1994), pp 49–50.
[9] *DD,* 4 June 1881.
[10] *DD,* 4 June 1881, 11 June 1881.
[11] *DD*, 2 July 1881.
[12] Cusack sued Mary Dunbar, proprietress of the *Irish Sportsman* for libel. See *FJ*, 5 June 1885.

October the first national GAA athletic championships took place in Tramore. Numerous smaller meetings were also held throughout the country.[13] The intrusion of the GAA into the world of Irish athletics was not universally welcomed and a number of existing clubs formed the Irish Amateur Athletics Association (IAAA) in February 1885, which adhered to the rules of the London-based AAA. An acrimonious row followed, but by the end of the year the GAA had established itself as the premier organiser of athletics in the country.[14]

The first GAA clubs established in county Meath owed much to the efforts of Cusack himself. At the end of May 1885, he visited Drogheda to establish a club there, following which he made his first foray into county Meath. It is unclear who Cusack's contact was, but it was probably Fr John Anderson OSA, as a reading of Cusack's publication *The Celtic Times* shows that he held Anderson in high regard.[15] Anderson, a native of Drogheda, and head of the local Augustinian Priory, was prominent in the formation of the Drogheda Independent Club, set up to replace the suppressed Land League Club in the town. The president of the Drogheda Independent Club and Roman Catholic curate in St Mary's parish, Fr William Kearney, held similar, if less forcefully expressed views, and may also have been Cusack's contact. Both were instrumental in establishing the *Drogheda Independent* newspaper as a voice of nationalist opinion, but some members of the clergy, including the Bishop Nulty, regarded both with suspicion because of their 'advanced nationalist' views.[16] The meeting in Drogheda resulted in the formation of a GAA club later known as the Drogheda Gaelics.

The new club organised a sports meeting in the town two months later. It attracted a

[13] De Búrca, *The GAA*: *a history*, p. 24.
[14] Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse, *The GAA: a people's history* (Cork, 2009), p. 40.
[15] *The Celtic Times*: *Michael Cusack's Gaelic games newspaper* (Ennis, 2003). Dates referenced: 14 May 1887; 18 June 1887. *The Celtic Times*, published by Michael Cusack during 1887 was republished in large book format by Clare Local Area Project in 2003.
[16] *Drogheda Independent Centenary Supplement*, Drogheda, 1984, pp. 7–9. See Kirby papers, Irish College, Rome, 25 Nov. 1883 (KIR/1883/229) and 18 Dec. 1883 (KIR/1883/254) for opposition to Anderson and Kearney. The bishop of Meath, Dr Thomas Nulty, informed Bishop Kirby in Rome that 'I am looking out for some pretext for Kearney's removal' and Fr Robert Murphy, the archdeacon of Drogheda in the Armagh archdiocese, sought the removal of both 'to places where they will have fewer opportunities of ventilating at once their vanity and their political opinions.' Both were transferred by 1887, Anderson to Fethard in Tipperary, and Kearney to Oldcastle in Meath. I wish to thank Monsignor Ciarán O'Carroll of the Irish College in Rome for sourcing copies of the documents.

large crowd and combined track events with contests in weight throwing, jumping, tug-o-war and wrestling. Soon a number of new clubs were active in east Meath. For areas like Bellewstown, Donacarney, Donore, Duleek, Julianstown and Laytown, the town of Drogheda, rather than Navan, was the focal point for shopping and commerce, and events in Drogheda were more influential than those in Navan. In addition, the southern part of Drogheda, St Mary's parish, was part of the diocese of Meath whereas the area north of the river Boyne was in the diocese of Armagh. It is likely that the sports held there influenced the establishment of GAA clubs in Duleek and Yellow Furze soon afterwards. Fr Grennan of Yellow Furze was present at the Drogheda Sports and he became president of the new club in his parish.[17] Both new clubs held their own sports under GAA rules a few weeks later, in September 1885. The Duleek sports attracted crowds from 'Drogheda, Slane, Beauparc, Navan, Garristown, Ratoath, and even Dublin' and the course was 'gaily decorated with flags of every colour, while from the winning post a crownless harp on a green surface, trimmed with gold, waved gently in the breeze.'[18] Almost 300 athletes and a 'multitudinous attendance' graced the Yellow Furze event with many of the traditional events favoured by the GAA on the programme.[19] By October, the local press noted that the Duleek branch was practising football every Sunday while Yellow Furze held the final of its wrestling contest in December of that year.[20] Thus, by the end of 1885, over a year after the foundation of the GAA, no inter-club football game had been played in Meath and the focus remained firmly on athletics.

It is believed that Cusack visited two locations in Meath the day after his arrival in Drogheda, accompanied by Anderson and Kearney. The evidence for this is somewhat tenuous, but such evidence as exists is plausible. While the local press gives some detail on the Drogheda meeting, it does not allude to the Meath visits the following day. However, Cusack's visit to Stackallen National School, about thirteen miles from Drogheda, and his reception there, was often recalled by a pupil who was present at the time, Michael Allen of Dunderk.[21] Cusack spoke to the pupils before

[17] Joe Coyle, *Athletics in Drogheda, 1861–2001* (Victoria, Canada, 2003), p. 24.
[18] *DA*, 12 Sept. 1885.
[19] *DA*, 3 Oct. 1885.
[20] *DI*, 24 Oct. 1885, 2 Jan. 1886.
[21] Mongey *et al*, *Rathkenny GAA history*, pp 11–12.

continuing on to Kells, which was to be his final destination. It would take some time, however, before these visits bore fruit.

Almost exactly a year later, on 30 May 1886, an athletic meeting under the auspices of the Gaelic Athletic Association took place in Ballina, near the Hill of Tara. *United Ireland* noted that:

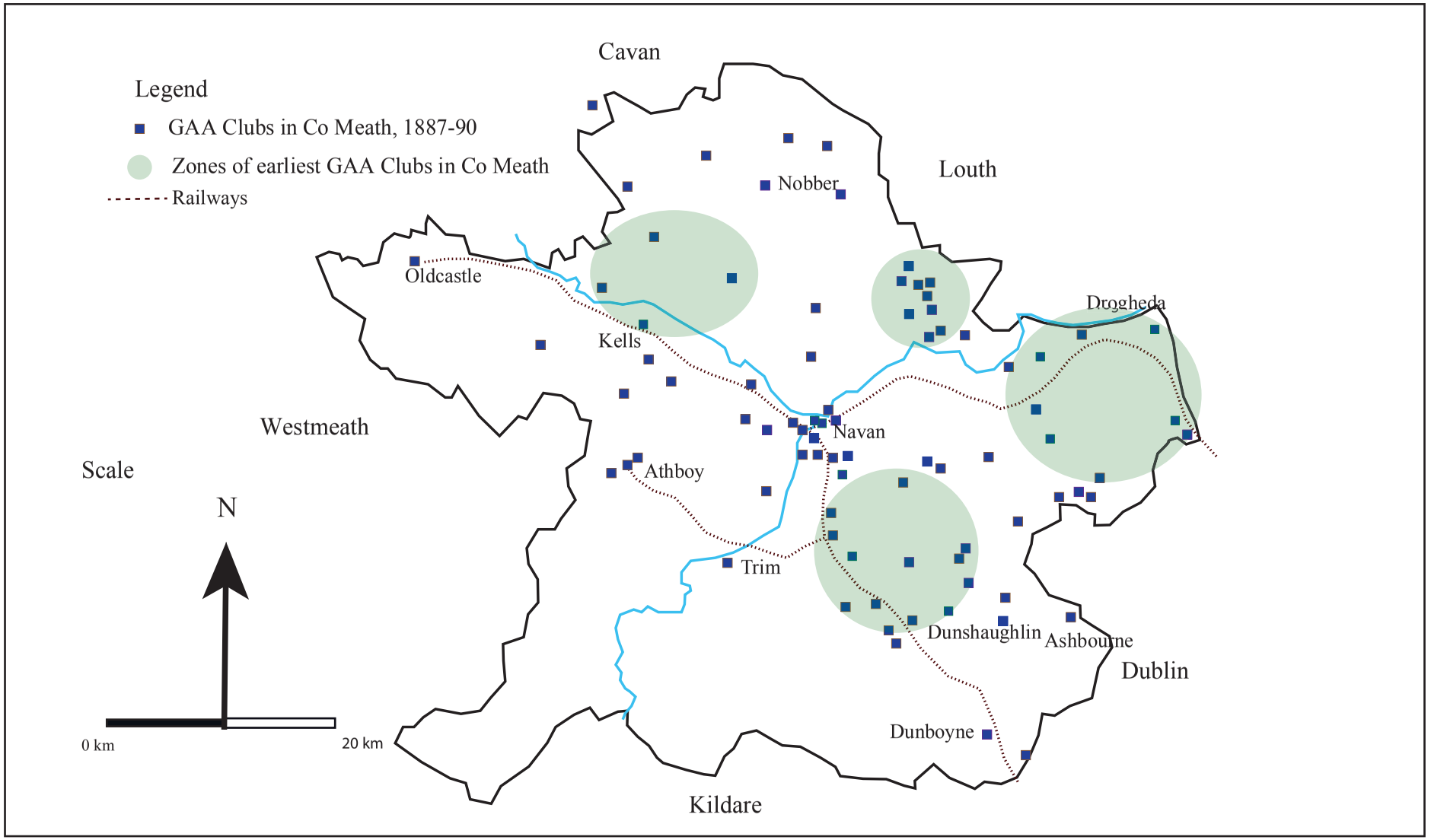
> Mr Michael Cusack, honorary secretary GAA initiated the volunteer officers and competitors into the mysteries of athletic sports. As might be expected in a district where athletics are almost unknown, the performances were not particularly brilliant. The material was there, however, and in a few years we have no doubt the young men of Royal Meath will hold their own.[22]

It is highly likely that Cusack himself, then the newspaper's GAA correspondent, wrote the report, but it was a typical piece of self-promotion to claim that athletics were almost unknown in the area and that he had to advise on proper procedure. It ignored the fact that sports had been held in Duleek and Yellow Furze the previous year, that the latter held another meeting a fortnight prior to the Ballina event and that the Corcorans from Skryne were already well known national athletes.

Although Cusack was dismissed as GAA honorary secretary in July 1886 for delays in dealing with correspondence, failing to maintain proper accounts and offending those who disagreed with him,[23] his visits to Stackallen, Kells and Ballina eventually had an impact. His successor, John Wyse Power, wrote to a number of contacts in Meath to offer advice on the setting up of clubs and enclosed a copy of the rules. It appears that most of those contacted were men Cusack met on his two earlier visits to the county. Christopher Smith of Kells certainly received a letter and it is claimed that Edward Connolly, the principal teacher of Stackallen school, and Peter Harper of Dowdstown, near Ballina, were other recipients.[24]

[22] *United Ireland*, 5 June 1886.
[23] De Búrca, *The GAA*: *a history*, p. 33.
[24] For Smith see *Meath Herald*, 16 Oct. 1886, *Sport,* 16 Oct. 1886; for Connolly see, Mongey *et al*, *Rathkenny GAA*, p. 12; for Harpur see, O'Brien, *Perseverance brings success*, p. 26.

Figure 1.1: GAA Clubs in Meath, 1886-1890



Following the formation of Dowdstown in September 1886, the nearby areas of Corballis, Kilmessan, Ross, Grange, Dunshaughlin and Merrywell St Martins had clubs before the end of the year. The activity in Dowdstown and Ballina must have influenced the formation of these clubs as some of those involved, such as Pat O'Brien, founder member of the Dunshaughlin St Seachnall's club, were regular athletes. In addition, Harry Doran, one of the founders of the Kilmessan club, was a brother of John Doran, who helped establish the Dowdstown club. Before the end of 1886, clubs were also formed in Stackallen, as well as nearby Grangegeeth and Rathkenny, with Ladyrath following soon after. All were in the Roman Catholic parish of Rathkenny and within a few miles' radius of Stackallen National School. The principal of the school when Cusack visited, Edward Connolly, played for and was secretary of the Grangegeeth club and also acted as a field umpire at games.[25]

On 10 October 1886, a club was established in Kells, with Patrick Shanahan as chairman and Christopher Smith as secretary. Smith read John Wyse Power's letter to the inaugural meeting as well as correspondence from J.A. Hearn, the secretary of the Drogheda Gaelics, apologising for his non-attendance at the meeting, as no trains ran between Drogheda and Kells on Sundays.[26] The Drogheda connection adds weight to the belief that Cusack had travelled to Kells following his visit to Drogheda and Stackallen the previous year. Initially known as the Kells Branch, it soon became the Kells Campaigners, taking its title from the ongoing Plan of Campaign.[27] Early in 1887 three new clubs sprang up within a five-mile radius of the town, Kilbeg Volunteers, Moynalty Owen Roes and Carnaross St Kierans. Michael Tevlin, a large farmer and auctioneer, was the Kilbeg captain and chief organiser and local tradition says that members of the Kells Campaigners visited the club to demonstrate the game of football to them.[28]

These four areas, east Meath close to Drogheda, the Rathkenny-Stackallen area also near Drogheda, Kells in the north of the county, and the Dowdstown-Kilmessan zone to the south of Navan, formed the core of the earliest GAA clubs in Meath (see

[25] Mongey *et al*, *Rathkenny GAA*, pp 21, 23.
[26] *Meath Herald*, 16 Oct. 1886; *Sport,* 16 Oct. 1886.
[27] The Plan of Campaign was a strategy to force landlords to reduce rents by offering a lower rent, which, if refused, was paid into an estate fund to support tenants facing eviction. See Laurence Geary, *The plan of campaign, 1886–1891* (Cork, 1986).
[28] Jack Fitzsimons, *The parish of Kilbeg* (n.p., 1974), p. 238.

Figure 1.1). The spread of the game in these areas is an example of diffusion, a theory used to explain the introduction and growth of sport, or other innovations, to an area. It usually involves one person or group of people adopting an idea and then spreading it to a wider population nearby. The theory has been used to explain the spread of soccer and other games in various parts of Britain.[29] Once the sport was established in an area other clubs followed suit, sometimes with the benefit of support and advice from the older clubs in the locality. This had obvious benefits in terms of shorter travelling distances for competitors.

Local tradition states that Oldcastle was an even earlier locus of GAA activity in the county. The town is situated in north-west Meath, close to counties Cavan and Westmeath. A hand written document purporting to be an acknowledgement of a bank balance of £0 0*s* 7*d* to the credit of Oldcastle GAA dated March 1885 suggests that a club existed there prior to the formation of clubs in other parts of Meath.[30] However, no references to any club in Oldcastle can be traced in contemporary newspapers. The earliest club in neighbouring Cavan, JG Biggars of Ballyconnell, was formed in March 1886, while Westmeath's first club, Kinnegad Slashers, was not founded until December 1887.[31] In addition, the *Freeman's Journal* reported in August 1887 that the 'Gaelic element is but newly revived' in Oldcastle.[32] While Oldcastle was on the railway line from Dublin, and news of the foundation of the GAA could have reached the area, it seems, on balance, unlikely that a club would have formed there, well in advance of adjacent branches. The club in existence there in August 1887 had local businessman, T.M. Grace, as honorary secretary, while the transfer of Fr William Kearney from Drogheda to Oldcastle may be also be linked to the formation of the club.

Throughout the period 1887–8 the number of clubs in the county continued to grow. An analysis of the relevant newspapers gives a total of sixty clubs active during 1887, and eighty-one in 1888 (see appendix three). Thirty-six of the latter were new

[29] See Mike Huggins, 'The spread of association football in north-east England, 1876–90: the pattern of diffusion' in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vi (1989), pp 299–318; Hunt, *Sport and society*, pp 195–7, 285–6.
[30] Thomas Sheridan (ed.), *The story of Oldcastle GAA club, 1884–1984* (Cavan, 1984), p. 7.
[31] Joseph Biggar, an Irish nationalist M.P. for Cavan, was noted for obstructing legislative measures in the House of Commons; *AC,* 13 Mar. 1886; Hunt, *Sport and society*, p. 144.
[32] *FJ*, 18 Aug. 1887.

clubs while fourteen of those active during the previous year were not recorded during 1888.[33] Thus, many clubs had limited life spans and most were not officially affiliated to the GAA. There was an element of irrational exuberance in the formation of clubs. New ones were established in close proximity to existing branches and often two or three developed within the same parish. Given that teams required twenty-one players and that many parts of Meath were very sparsely populated, this was not sustainable. Based on an average of twenty-five players per club – and some had more, as they were able to field second teams – there were about 2,000 players in the county by 1888. This represents 15% of Meath's male population between the ages of sixteen and thirty-nine based on the 1891 census, a proportion almost three times that calculated in the case of Kerry in 1891.[34] The numbers may be inflated due to players playing for more than one club. This was sufficiently common to cause the Meath county committee to amend its bye-laws to require a player changing clubs to give a month's notice to his current club and to be one month a member of the new club before playing for it.[35] Even allowing for some degree of 'double jobbing', the percentage of the population playing football is a remarkable one and it implies that there was a huge pent-up demand for sport among the population.

Unusually for a sporting organisation, many GAA clubs, when selecting their names, used historical and political nomenclature extensively. Rugby, soccer and cricket clubs made minimal use of such names, in either Britain or Ireland. Even when soccer clubs incorporated historical imagery into their names they tended to be traditional motifs rather than political personages or movements, such as Glasgow Celtic, Partick Thistle, Hibernians, West Bromwich Albion etc. An analysis of the Meath clubs identified in 1887–88 (see appendix three), indicates that over one third of them took saints' names traditionally associated with the locality, such as St Patrick in Kilmessan, Rodanstown and Slane, St Kieran in Carnaross, St Martin in

[33] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history* quotes a figure of forty, p. 56. The figure of sixty above is based on reports in *Sport*, *Drogheda Independent*, *Drogheda Argus*, *Meath Herald* and *Dundalk Democrat* and may be an underestimate, as full runs do not exist for all these publications and none of them gave detailed coverage to the western part of county Meath.
[34] For census see *Census of Ireland, 1891, pt. i: Area, houses and population, also the ages, civil or conjugal condition, occupations, birthplaces, religion and education of the people for each county; with summary tables and indexes, vol. i, county of Meath* [C6515-VIII], H.C. 1890–91, xcv, 708, and for Kerry see McElligott, *Forging a kingdom* (Cork, 2013), p. 70.
[35] *DA*, 17 Nov. 1888.

Merrywell, near Dunshaughlin, St Ultan in Ardbraccan, outside Navan, and St Seachnall in Dunshaughlin. Just less than a fifth used names based on traditional Irish emblems or icons, mainly Shamrocks, Emeralds, Gaels and Shillelaghs. Between them those two categories accounted for about half of the clubs. The remainder took overtly political names, with the majority utilising historical events or personalities and the rest appropriating the names of contemporary political events or personages. Examples of the former were Volunteers, Geraldines, Sarsfields, Brian Borus, O'Connells, John Mitchells and Emmets while clubs with contemporary names included two Davitts, two O'Mahonys, named for Pierce O'Mahony the MP for North Meath, two Parnells and two William O'Briens, one of the leaders of the Plan of Campaign. In addition there were two Campaigners and a couple of Home Rulers.

The selection of such names emphasises the determination of clubs to link themselves to the nationalist agenda, to promote Irish culture, and by extension to reject British influences. The Special Branch of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) took a particular interest in the GAA from 1887 due to the pervasive influence of members and supporters of the IRB within the upper echelons of the organisation at national and county level. However, it would be unwise to assume that clubs whose names honoured physical-force personalities or events were themselves supporters of the physical-force tradition. Following the takeover of the central executive of the GAA by IRB supporters at the 1887 convention in Thurles and the departure of Maurice Davin as president, there was widespread reaction against the change, with most counties holding conventions to consider their attitude to it. Of the sixty Meath clubs active during 1887, thirty-one attended the combined Louth-Meath convention in Drogheda in late November. The meeting was unanimously opposed to the IRB influence at Thurles and passed a motion favouring the reinstatement of Maurice Davin as president. Many of those clubs, and others not represented at the Drogheda meeting, condemned the Thurles convention in resolutions published in the press. This suggests that the IRB had very little influence in, and attracted minimal support from, the vast majority of Meath clubs. Patrick Fullam, the first chairman of the Meath county committee, whom the Special Branch alleged was active in the IRB, acted as joint secretary to the Drogheda meeting and described the Thurles

convention as a 'packed assembly.'[36] Two others who were alleged in 1890 to be members of the IRB, Michael Tevlin of Kilbeg Volunteers and Andrew Murphy of Donacarney (see appendix one), attended the Drogheda meeting but neither spoke against the prevailing mood of the meeting, which was decidedly anti-IRB.[37] Davin was reinstated in 1888 and de Búrca described the reaction in his favour as 'an authentic reflection of feeling in the GAA as a whole.'[38]

At national level the GAA faced a number of challenges in the years after its foundation. Initially there was no intermediary tier between clubs and the national executive, but as club numbers expanded rapidly it was agreed, in November 1886, that county committees would be established to manage clubs within each county.[39] This decision was crucial to its future success as it later helped in the development of county identity and inter-county rivalry that was to be a distinctive feature of the GAA.

Meath established a county committee in February 1887 when J.B. O'Reilly, secretary of the national executive, chaired a meeting in Navan. Fifteen clubs were represented, although the press records only nine of them: Donore, Dowdstown, Kells Campaigners, Kilbeg Volunteers, Kilmessan St Patricks, Mullagh, Rathfeigh Emeralds, Stackallen and Yellow Furze.[40] Patrick Fullam of Donore, who was elected as chairman, was active in politics and was then vice-chairman of the Drogheda Board of Guardians. Five years later he was elected MP for South Meath, but was unseated following a court petition by his opponent.[41] Christopher Smith, a founder member and secretary of the Kells Campaigners, became county secretary. Fullam, however, chaired no further meetings even though he remained as chairman to the end of the year. The following year Fr Michael Woods, a native of Collinstown in Westmeath, then the administrator of Navan parish, became chairman and he was to play an important role in the GAA in subsequent years.[42]

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[36] Crime Branch Special, 4 July 1892 (NAI, 5403/S). Hereafter referred to as CBS.
[37] CBS, 26 Jan. 1891 (NAI, 2452/S); *Sport*, 26 Nov. 1887.
[38] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 42.
[39] *Sport*, 20 Nov. 1886.
[40] *Sport*, 19 Feb. 1887. Mullagh on the borders of Meath and Cavan played its championship football in Cavan in later years.
[41] The objection was on the grounds of undue clerical influence. See David Lawlor, *Divine right? the Parnell split in Meath* (Cork, 2008), pp 99–146.
[42] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 19.

Playing the games

Despite the emphasis on athletics in the early years, some progress was made in the significant challenge of formulating and codifying rules for football and hurling. Michael Davin presented a set of rules in early January 1885, barely two months after the foundation of the GAA. However, there were only ten football rules, less than half of which dealt with the regulation of play.[43] Teams could consist of fourteen to twenty-one players, but the latter figure seems to have been almost universal. A goal outweighed any number of points until 1892 when five points became equivalent to a goal. Prior to that, points counted only when both sides scored an equal number of goals or no goals were scored. 'Forfeit' points, awarded when the defence played the ball over its own goal line, were never mentioned in the playing rules, but were in use in some areas, including Meath, until abolished in 1888. They were replaced by a free kick to the attacking team forty yards out from the goal posts.[44] In 1886, the size and layout of the scoring area was increased and side posts were added, each twenty-one feet from the goalposts.[45] The initial rules made no reference to kicking or carrying the ball although Cusack claimed that the ball must not be carried.[46] The lack of clarity regarding the interpretation of the few rules that existed gave referees substantial discretion in deciding what was within the regulations and this led to controversy and objections to the result of games. In addition many clubs probably did not have a copy of the rules, as shown by the fact that when *Sport* printed several thousand copies in 1888 there was a huge demand for them and by mid-March they were all gone.[47]

An analysis of a database compiled from press reports of games involving Meath clubs in the period 1887–90 leads to a number of conclusions.[48] The vast majority of the earliest games were informal challenge or friendly contests, usually confined to neighbouring clubs and generally involving home and away fixtures over two or

[43] Joe Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation in Gaelic games, appendix 2* (Gormanston, 1999), p. 624.
[44] *Sport*, 14 Jan. 1888.
[45] For a detailed analysis of the playing rules see, Lennon, *Towards a philosophy, appendix 2*.
[46] Lennon, *Towards a philosophy, appendix 2,* p. 626; Eoghan Corry, *An illustrated history of the GAA* (Dublin, 2005), p. 14.
[47] *Sport*, 17 Mar. 1888.
[48] The newspapers surveyed in full were *Sport*, *Drogheda Independent*, *Drogheda Argus* and *Meath Reporter* with some evidence from the *Westmeath Examiner* and *Anglo-Celt* also used. A number of *Drogheda Independent* issues for the period are missing, while only occasional issues of the *Meath Reporter* exist.

three weekends. Thus, teams in the hinterland of Drogheda like Duleek, Bellewstown, Donore and Julianstown played each other regularly and the same held true for teams situated around Kells and the cluster of clubs in the Kilmessan-Dowdstown area. The distances involved were relatively short, in many cases no more than five miles, and the home-and-away system meant that long-distance travel was minimised.

Towards the end of 1887 tournaments organised by some clubs became an increasingly important part of the GAA clubs' menu of games. Individual clubs arranged tournaments at their grounds over a number of weekends, inviting other clubs to participate, some from outside the county. Entry fees were charged, usually five shillings per team, and the tournament culminated in a final tie between the two best teams, with prizes for the winners. These generally took the form of twenty silver crosses for the winning team and one golden cross for the successful captain, while his losing counterpart often received a consolation award of a silver cross. Sets of jerseys in the winning club's colours and footballs were also presented at some tournaments. Many of those events attracted large entries. Navan Harps and Shamrocks claimed that thirty clubs entered their competition in 1888, while Donacarney, Kells and Moynalty also held successful tournaments.[49]

Championship games organised by the elected county committee, which later became the most important feature of the GAA, represented a small, if important, proportion of the games played. Clubs were eligible to participate only if affiliated to the county committee and twelve entered the first championship in 1887. These were Donore, Donacarney, Stackallen, Rathkenny, Grangegeeth, Kells Campaigners, Kilbeg Volunteers, Mullagh, Dowdstown, Yellow Furze, Kilmessan St Patricks and Merrywell St Martins, reflecting the four core areas of GAA development in the county. The committee followed the pattern already established among clubs of pairing neighbouring teams to play each other rather than opting for an open draw. This had the double advantage of emphasising local rivalry and ensuring that travel was kept to a minimum. The draw was very well organised with venues, dates and times allocated for each game, and referees, field and goal umpires appointed. The

[49] *DA*, 8 Sept. 1888.

games ran relatively smoothly and concluded within two months, with Dowdstown defeating the Kells Campaigners in the final. However, an issue that was to bedevil the GAA in Meath and elsewhere arose after the game when Kells lodged an objection to a number of the referee's decisions. The county committee referred the issue to the central executive, which decided that Kells had no case and confirmed Dowdstown as the first county champions.[50] The committee had limited influence in other aspects of the nascent GAA; clubs not participating in the championship continued to play challenges and tournaments and as clubs were eliminated from the championship, many after just one game, they did the same. This lack of power and influence over the clubs would cause problems in the near future.

In line with the expansion in club numbers in the county forty-two clubs entered for the 1888 championship, but with more clubs came more objections, causing the *Drogheda Argus* to comment: 'The general custom now prevailing is to have it out with your opponents on the field, and after a fair and square beating have the match gone over again at the county committee.'[51] The committee, however, did not inspire confidence. Only rarely did attendance exceed five members. The first chairman never attended another meeting following his election, while the first secretary was replaced in 1888 owing to his continued absence from meetings and five different individuals acted as secretary during the first three years. Fr Michael Woods provided some leadership and continuity in 1888 and 1889 but before the end of the latter year he departed the scene as the bishops and clergy turned against the GAA, an aspect treated in the next chapter. Numerous objections were heard following championship and tournament games: controversy over whether a score had been made; dissatisfaction with the referee's decision; complaints about the condition of the grounds and allegations that certain players were playing for more than one club. The county committee heard ten objections regarding the 1889 championship by May so it became difficult to conclude the competition.[52] It tried to gain some control over the clubs by adopting bye-laws requiring its permission to organise a tournament, by regulating player transfers to other clubs, and by giving referees power to suspend a player from play 'for as long a time as the referee may think fit'

[50] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, pp 12-13.
[51] *DA*, 31 Mar. 1888.
[52] *DI*, 15 June 1889.

for using abusive or threatening language.[53] However, the members were slow to enforce their own rules and the committee's decisions lacked consistency, with verdicts made at one meeting often overturned at the next. Following one decision, the *Drogheda Argus* mockingly declared that the

> county Meath Committee should be backed against all others for a decision. No other county committee can come near the royals. Where would you find in the annals of Gaelic decisions on the field or in committee one to equal the latest of the Meath Committee?[54]

No club owned a playing field. All were dependent on members or sympathetic farmers to provide a suitable field and the location could change from game to game. Only a select few had access to the same ground for an extended period. Kells Campaigners used a good quality playing field at Loyd, just outside the town, that was also the venue for the annual Kells races, while the Drogheda Gaelics' ground at Bryanstown in Meath near the border with Louth was regarded as one of the best. It was rented annually from a Mrs Moore and was the venue for the 1888 All-Ireland championship game between Louth's Young Irelands and Meath's Dowdstown. According to a report in the *Drogheda Argus,* the ground was 'subjected to the process of a close shave that has left it that fit for the ball that it would gladden the eyes of even a lawn tennis player.'[55] Other clubs with access to suitable grounds included Dunshaughlin which had 'a beautifully level field kindly given to the club since last Christmas,' Nobber with a 'beautiful track' and Donore which had use of Patrick Fullam's land.[56]

However, many venues were unsuitable for games, with most suffering from defects that often led to conflict and controversy. A tongue-in-cheek account of a Stamullen Rovers game stated that it was played 'over a beautifully undulating landscape, plentifully strewn with picturesque rocks across which the contestants somersaulted in graceful confusion.'[57] Many pitches were roped off and stewarded, but despite this, they were prone to incursions by excited or disgruntled spectators. Until 1892, a goal outweighed any number of points so it was important to prevent the concession

[53] *DA*, 17 Nov. 1888.
[54] *DA*, 22 June 1889.
[55] *DA*, 18 Aug. 1888.
[56] *Sport*, 19 Feb. 1887; *DI*, 3 Mar. 1888.
[57] *DA*, 18 Feb. 1888.

of a goal and spectators sometimes assisted their team in doing so. The 1887 championship meeting of Rathfeigh Emeralds and Ross came to a premature end 'when the spectators became excited and aided the Emeralds in their resistance', while at a tournament in Laytown in 1888 some officials left their posts and 'allowed spectators to grab not only a large slice of the ground along the side lines, but also the railed in plot around the goals.'[58] Consequently there were often complaints of intimidation, if not assault. Bellewstown Crockafothas complained that a number of their opponents' supporters, the Ratoath Shillelaghs, were 'armed with those stout sprigs which bear the same name as their club, and which come in so handy when a person wants to practically assert his opinions.'[59]

There were other sources of disputes also. The use of a tape or rope instead of wooden crossbars produced constant disagreement over whether a goal or a point had been scored. The crucial importance of goals exacerbated the issue. Athboy Dalgais contested a goal awarded to Rathmore Davitts in 1889 with the referee claiming: 'I did see the ball go under the tape, or I would not have given a goal.'[60] In the early years referees did not always use a whistle to signal decisions but in 1888 a rule making them a requirement was introduced. This was welcomed by *Sport* as 'heretofore cries of "take up the ball," "time is up" were often heard from spectators,' and it was difficult for a player to know whether it was the referee or a spectator indicating a decision and this led to many disagreements.[61] The new rule did not entirely prevent controversy as spectators blowing whistles in imitation of the referee took place on occasion.[62]

Using a database of games played by Meath teams in the period 1886–90 it was possible to ascertain the score in 440 matches (see Table 1.1). Almost exactly half of them – 215 out of the 440 – failed to produce a goal. It was a rarity for both sides to score a goal in a game. This happened in just 5.9% of the games. In other words, only in one game in twenty could a spectator expect to see both sides scoring goals. Teams failing to score at all was also very prevalent and this was particularly true of

[58] *DI*, 3 Mar. 1887; *DA*, 28 July 1888.
[59] *Sport*, 3 Dec. 1887.
[60] *DI*, 9 Mar. 1889.
[61] *Sport*, 11 Feb. 1888.
[62] *DI*, 3 Mar. 1888.

newly-formed teams. It was much more likely to happen when the team was playing away from home. In 199 of the 440 games played at least one of the teams failed to record any score. While scoring a goal was important, preventing the concession of goals was paramount. Thus, teams placed an emphasis on defending their goals rather than on attacking play. This was aided by the number of players on the field, forty-two men on what were often small fields, narrowed by the tendency of spectators to encroach onto the playing area.

Table 1.1: Frequency of scores in GAA games in Meath, 1886–90

Number of games recorded in the press	591	
Games with scores known	440	
Games in which only one team scored a goal	225	51.1%
Games in which both teams scored a goal	26	5.9%
Games which produced no goals	215	48.9%
Games where one team failed to score	199	45.2%

Source: *Drogheda Argus*, *Drogheda Independent, Meath Reporter* and *Sport*, 1886–1890.

Other aspects that did not assist open play included the fact that most games were played in winter and spring, when grounds were heavy and the grass surface was generally uneven and uncut. Reports contain numerous references to scrimmages near the goal area, where large groups of players attempted to force the ball into the goal, their efforts hampered by the presence of so many bodies in close proximity. In addition, many of the players were unskilled, and all those factors turned most games into wars of attrition. Teams used a number of ploys to prevent goals. In the early years a defender could deliberately concede a 'forfeit' point by playing the ball over his own end line. As forfeit points were only reckoned in deciding the game's outcome when both teams were equal on goals and points – a relatively rare occurrence – the concession of forfeit points rarely decided the outcome of games. Another ruse to protect the goal was the deliberate kicking of the ball over the sideline. This put the ball out of play for a time and instead of resulting in a sideline free kick to the opposition, as is currently the case, the ball was thrown in by the field umpire among players from both sides. Kicking the ball out of play became known as 'Giving it Tullyallen' as the Tullyallen club, from near Drogheda, gained a

reputation for the ploy and their supporters regular shout was 'Tullyallen. Over the line.'[63]

Playing the Games: Social, Cultural and Commercial Aspects

If clubs wished to play games against opponents from outside their own immediate vicinity or to attract spectators to sports and games, travel arrangements were critically important. The majority of early games involved limited travel, as they were played between local teams and usually involved return fixtures within a week or two. Clubs in border areas of the county were more likely to cross into a neighbouring county for a game than to travel longer distances within Meath to play opponents. Thus, teams in north Meath often played their counterparts in Cavan, while those in the east and north-east regularly travelled to Louth for games. Similarly, clubs in the south and south-west met teams like Crom a Boos from Maynooth and Kilcock O'Connells in county Kildare. The most important source of outside opposition however, was Dublin, with Meath teams often travelling into the capital and vice versa.

The railways were a crucial factor in the growth of the GAA as they enabled teams and supporters to travel distances that would not have been possible a generation earlier. Meath's railway infrastructure was well developed by the late 1880s, with twenty-two stations in the county. All the main towns had access to Dublin while the Navan-Drogheda line was important in developing links with Louth clubs.[64] As the GAA developed earlier in Dublin than in Meath, many of the newly-established Meath clubs sought challenge or friendly games with metropolitan clubs. When Dowdstown and the CJ Kickhams from Dublin played each other in September 1886, first in Meath and later in Dublin's Phoenix Park, it is likely that both teams travelled by train.[65] The following year St Patrick's from Kilmainham travelled from Dublin by special train to play in the Kells Campaigners' tournament and prior to their return to the capital, 'The St Patricks were accompanied to the train by the members

[63] The Faughs from Dublin originally used the ploy according to the *Drogheda Argus,* but Tullyallen, having been on the receiving end of it in the first half of a game against the Faughs, used it in the second period to turn the tables on their opponents and the ploy was thenceforth associated with the Louth club. See *DA*, 14 Jan. 1888.

[64] Stephen Johnson, *Johnson's atlas and gazetteer of the railways of Ireland* (Leicester 1997), pp 16–17.

[65] *Sport*, 2 Oct. 1886.

of the other clubs and the band, and a parting cheer was given as the train left the station.'[66] A similar event took place when the Drogheda Gaelics travelled by rail to Virginia Road station in north Meath, where they were met by the Mullagh Gaels who then escorted them the remaining five or six miles from the station 'which was negotiated on cars.'[67] The reception wasn't always so welcoming. In 1888 five Dublin teams travelled to east Meath to play in a tournament at Bettystown, but, on arrival at Laytown station, they discovered there was no one to meet them and they had to walk three miles to the ground.[68] The inability of officials to run games at the scheduled time could also cause difficulties. Kilbeg Volunteers travelled by rail from Kells in 1889 to play Dublin Young Irelands at Inchicore, but as the previous games finished later than planned, Kilbeg could not remain for their game 'due to train arrangements'.[69]

The railway was also important in attracting spectators and competitors to sports meetings. Those in charge of the events often drew attention to the availability of rail transport. An advertisement for the first Oldcastle GAA sports in 1887 noted the availability of trains from Amiens Street in Dublin while trains from Navan, Newry and Dublin served the Drogheda Gaelic sports in 1889 with cars available to convey spectators between the town and the field during the day.[70] The following year Dunshaughlin's annual sports attracted a crowd 'numbering fully four thousand from the adjoining counties and the Metropolis.'[71] The railway companies often laid on special trains for such events and usually provided reduced fares, selling return tickets for the price of a single. When the Navan Harp and Shamrock club organised a tournament that involved Meath and Dublin clubs, it arranged a return train at the single fare with the Midland Great Western Railway (MGWR) and Great Northern Railway (GNR).[72] Not all long-distance travel was by rail. The Julianstown Stars journeyed to Navan for a game with Nobber 'on a brake and cars' while the newspaper *Sport* announced that a great number of parties were arranging 'drag excursions' to the Dunshaughlin sports and that the 'iron road' had no monopoly in

[66] *DI*, 11 June 1887.
[67] *DA*, 1 Sept. 1888.
[68] *Sport*, 8 Sept. 1888.
[69] *DI*, 27 July 1889.
[70] *Sport*, 13 Aug. 1887; *DI*, 14 Sept. 1889.
[71] *DI*, 5 July 1890.
[72] *DA*, 25 Aug. 1888.

bringing a large contingent of Dubliners to the Batterstown sports as 'two heavily laden brakes rattled down the Queen's highway.'[73]

Without the railways GAA games would have remained much more locally based and consequently would have attracted fewer supporters. Certainly, inter-county championships would have been almost impossible to organise in the absence of railways. Meath's first foray into the All-Ireland championship in 1887, represented by Dowdstown, featured a game with Limerick at Elm Park in south Dublin. About three hundred supporters travelled from Navan by rail to the game.[74] However, relations between the GAA and railway companies did not always run smoothly. In this case Dowdstown had difficulty arranging a train, as the Great Northern Railway (GNR) demanded what were deemed exorbitant terms, and when the Midland and Great Western Railway (MGWR) agreed to provide a train it was described as having 'the dirtiest carriages to be seen on any line in Ireland'. Moreover, a deposit of £75 had to be paid the previous week.[75] Despite the importance of the railways to the GAA and the revenue that accrued to the railway companies, there is no evidence that companies sponsored Gaelic tournaments. It was only in the 1900s and 1920s that they supported the inter-provincial Railway Shield and Cup competitions with the donation of trophies.[76]

By the 1880s cycling was growing in popularity with the invention of the 'Safety' Bicycle but there are no references to players or supporters cycling to games in Meath in the 1880s. A number of cycling clubs were formed in Meath during the decade and cycling races became a popular item at sports held under GAA and Irish Cycling Association (ICA) rules. A press report of the Bellewstown sports in 1888 notes that there was great interest in the bicycle race due to its novelty.[77] As very few people had bicycles it is likely that some players walked to games when the ground was in close proximity. There is evidence of this for a Stackallen v Yellow Furze

[73] *DI*, 6 July 1889; *Sport*, 6 July 1889.
[74] *Celtic Times*, 30 July 1887.
[75] O'Brien, *Perseverance brings success*, p. 39.
[76] The football shields were played for between 1905 and 1907 and the hurling shields from 1905 to 1908 while competitions for the cups commenced in 1927 and were sponsored by the Great Southern Railway. See GAA, *The complete handbook of Gaelic games* (Dublin, 2014), pp 96, 115, 226, 258.
[77] *DA*, 1 Sept. 1888. For more detail on cycling in Meath see Brian Griffin, 'The early history of cycling in Meath and Drogheda' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, xv (2004), pp 123–151.

juvenile (Under 16) game in 1887, a report noting that 'notwithstanding the fatiguing walk the Furze youths played with great skill and determination.'[78] The distance walked was about four miles. Walking distances of five or six miles to play a game is also mentioned when a Rathkenny school team played Stackallen.[79]

Practically all the games included in the database referred to earlier took place on Sundays or Church holydays. This was an important factor in the success of the GAA as most people worked in agriculture or service industries and their only day of rest was Sunday. Neil Garnham has argued convincingly that too much emphasis has been placed on the GAA's close link with nationalism and too little on the attractions of the games themselves, such as Sunday play.[80] The promoters of Gaelic games tried to ensure that sports and matches were an attractive proposition and combined them with pageantry and spectacle in the form of flags, musical bands and processions. Marching bands or other forms of musical entertainment were regular features of nineteenth century sports events. Bands predated the GAA and their performances were among the most popular sources of public entertainment. Many bands developed in association with the temperance movement, which was at its height in the 1840s, while O'Connell's Repeal meeting in Tara in 1843 featured upwards of forty bands, and military bands were common in garrison towns.[81] By the 1880s, many towns in Meath had bands and these were to the fore at games and political gatherings. Areas that did not have their own band usually invited a neighbouring group to perform at games or sports. The social and cultural roles of sports clubs and musical bands were very similar. Both provided entertainment and spectacle, they represented localities and communities, and they often represented particular values and political movements. Some GAA clubs had their own band that travelled to games. The Kells Young Ireland Brass Band regularly supported the Kells Campaigners at home and away matches. The Navan Emmet Brass Band performed at sports meetings in Tara and Navan in 1890, while the Drogheda Independent Band, associated with the Drogheda Gaelics GAA club, was a regular performer at the annual Bellewstown sports. Other bands that took part in sports or

[78] *DI*, 5 Nov. 1887.
[79] Mongey *et al*, *Rathkenny GAA*, p. 33.
[80] Neil Garnham, 'Accounting for the early success of the Gaelic Athletic Association' in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxiv, no. 133 (2004), pp 65–78.
[81] For the Tara meeting see *The Nation*, 19 Aug. 1843.

political meetings included the Oldcastle Brass Band, the Drumconrath Band, the William O'Brien Brass Band from Clonee, probably linked with the football club of the same name, and fife and drum bands in Ballinacree, Breakey, Kingscourt, Kilmainhamwood and Slane.[82] Brass bands seem to have been more common in the larger towns while the cheaper to equip fife and drum bands were found in smaller towns and villages.

The role of the band at GAA games was to provide spectacle and entertainment. The parade of players and musicians acted as street theatre that attracted crowds who followed the sound and colour to the appointed playing ground. A report of a tournament game between Trim John Mitchells and Mullingar in Ballivor in 1894 records the arrival of the Trim team accompanied by the John Howard Parnell Fife and Drum Band of Trim, a 'splendid corps of musicians' who 'delighted everyone who heard it with the splendid programme which it discoursed, the now famous "Boys of Wexford" being warmly cheered. When the start for the field was made a very large crowd followed the band.'[83] Dublin bands often travelled to games in Meath, with the Phoenix Brewery Band normally joining their team. In 1887 they attended a Bellewstown tournament and the Duleek Sports and marched in front of the teams onto the field prior to the start of the game. There were other musical genres on display at the Bellewstown event, a press correspondent acidly declaring that 'There were fiddlers, banjoists, piper and amateur concertiniasts by the dozen, and that horrible instrument of torture facetiously termed the "melodeon" reminded you of its presence with unpleasant frequency.'[84]

Very little detail is given on the music performed by the bands. At race meetings and other events patronised by the gentry military bands usually provided the music and their programme consisted of classical and operatic airs. Generally the music played at GAA games is described as 'stirring national airs' or a 'choice selection of national airs' but at the local GAA sports in 1887 the Oldcastle Brass Band 'discoursed a choice selection of national and operatic airs.'[85] Clearly the music

[82] See for example, *Sport*, 18 Dec. 1886, 3 Mar. 1888; *FJ*, 18 Aug. 1887; *DI*, 23 Aug. 1887, 1 Oct. 1887; Danny Cusack, *Kilmainham of the woody hollow* (Kilmainhamwood, 1998), p. 148.
[83] *Westmeath Examiner*, 8 Dec. 1894.
[84] *DI*, 7 May 1887.
[85] *FJ*, 18 Aug. 1887.

performed was intended to complement the nationalist ethos of the GAA and it is likely that 'God Save Ireland', the unofficial anthem of nationalism, was often played.

The provision of hospitality for visiting teams, usually after games, was another common feature. While the references to this are usually of a general nature – the home team entertaining the visitors, or hospitality that 'could not be excelled' being shown – it is possible to find some specific detail that gives a glimpse of the camaraderie involved. When Warrenstown played Sextons from Dublin in 1891, they entertained the Dubliners to dinner 'and had a high old time of it till the hour for returning to the city arrived.' The Sextons reciprocated a month later by entertaining the Meath men for 'a pleasant few hours in the Foresters' Hall in Bolton Street.'[86] The Castletown O'Connells also entertained the Navan Harps and Shamrocks to luncheon and there were 'many hearty wishes on both sides over the flowing bowl.'[87] It is unlikely the bowl was brimming with water. The O'Connells spent a further hour together performing songs after the Navan side left. Sometimes a prominent personality in the host club, such as the chairman or captain, provided entertainment at his residence. When the Clan na Gael club from Martry, north of Navan, played the Harp and Shamrocks, Michael Sheridan, the secretary of the Clans, entertained the teams at his residence, as did James Weldon of Drogheda Gaelics following a game in 1888.[88] The captain of the Killana Shamrocks is reported to have entertained visitors in the clubroom after a game against St Seachnalls, but this must have been a private house or outhouse, as few if any clubs had their own premises. This suggests that important club officers needed to be men of means. Such entertainment usually involved a number of elements. Following a game in Tullyallen, both teams went to the Mayoralty Rooms in Drogheda where toasts to the visiting and host captains were proposed. Songs such as 'The harp and shamrock of Ireland' and 'The wearing of the green' were performed before the visitors left for the station amid ringing cheers. The entertainment continued on the train with singing and dancing a jig.[89] The surviving minutes of the Kilcock O'Connell's club, which often played Meath opposition, gives some detail on the social aspect of games. For a match against

[86] *Sport*, 28 Feb. 1891, 18 Apr. 1891.
[87] *DA*, 5 Jan. 1889.
[88] *Sport*, 18 Feb. 1888, 31 Mar. 1888.
[89] *DA*, 21 Jan. 1888; *Sport*, 5 Feb. 1887.

Clondalkin in 1888 the expenditure included two half barrels of porter at £1 10*s.*, four dozen minerals at 6*s.*, bread 3*s.* 1*d*. and hams 16*s*., amounting to £2 14*s*. 1*d*. A later committee meeting agreed to procure two half barrels of porter, four dozen minerals, twelve loaves and four pounds of butter for another game.[90] The local public house was often the rendezvous for teams and grounds were sometimes situated close to pubs. After an on-field disagreement in 1887, a number of the Slane team left the field and went to the adjacent pub.[91] The hierarchy and parish clergy regularly expressed their concern about the culture of drinking associated with the games and this was one of the reasons the clergy turned against the GAA in the late 1880s, as will be explored in the next chapter.

A notable feature of match reports was a focus on the behaviour of crowds. Correspondents were at pains to assure their readers that spectators were well behaved and the most commonly used description was 'orderly.' All the following examples date from games played in Meath in 1887. The spectators at a game in Kells with near neighbours Mullagh were 'orderly, good humoured and enthusiastic' and when Dowdstown played Young Irelands in the inter county championship the *Drogheda Independent* claimed that there was

> No element of disorder to mar the success of the day, and the canting parasites who prate about the dangers of renewed faction fights were confounded by the splendid temper in which all the contests were concluded.[92]

This theme also featured in reports on other sports and political meetings. The *Meath Herald* declared of the Kells Steeplechase that it had 'seldom if ever witnessed such an orderly gathering on this course. Good order was the rule of the day . . . Sixty policemen were on duty but their labours were light indeed.'[93] However, violent incidents did occur and were sometimes reported. *The Drogheda Argus* recorded that an 'extraordinary and disgraceful incident' took place at the end of a championship game between Pierce O'Mahonys and Donore. The Navan players shouted to close

[90] Micheál Ó Muineog, *Kilcock GAA, 1887–1987: a history* (Clane, 1987), pp 40–41.
[91] Mongey *et al*, *Rathkenny GAA*, p. 33. A culture of drinking linked to games can be found in other counties also. For Louth see *DA*, 7 Sept. 1889, 29 Mar. 1890. For Kerry, see McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 96. For Monaghan, see Fr Michael Gilsenan, *Hills of Magheracloone, 1884–1984* (Monaghan, 1985), p. 31.
[92] *Sport*, 5 Feb. 1887; *DI*, 30 July 1887.
[93] *Meath Herald*, 28 May 1887.

the gates, rushed at the referee and one of them 'struck him full in the face and others kept nagging him with sticks whilst he was endeavouring to beat a retreat.' The reporter blamed the local officials from the Yellow Furze club for their cowardice in failing to intervene while the police 'luckily rushed from the village and were just in time to avert serious consequences.'[94]

Such scenes were an embarrassment to the GAA and to the reporters, many of whom were members of the local club who provided copy for the press. The emphasis on good order had a twofold function. As a nationalist organisation, the GAA wanted to send out the message that Irish people could run their sports and games in a competent, orderly and non-violent manner and by extension that they could run their own country. The need for police involvement to maintain or restore order was anathema to them as it implied they were incapable of conducting their own affairs competently. Secondly, attitudes to riotous or anarchic behaviour had changed by the second half of the nineteenth century and norms of middle-class respectability were being established. Many of the traditional forms of public entertainment such as fairs and patterns had been curtailed. John Cantwell, bishop of Meath from 1830 to 1866, exerted his influence to quash annual patterns or at least minimise the drunkenness and fighting associated with such events.[95] At this period a variety of other forces were also tending to alter popular attitudes and behaviour. Fr Matthew's temperance movement had a significant impact in promoting abstention from alcohol, elementary education became more widely available in the national schools and the Royal Irish Constabulary enforced law and order. Crowds were more likely to attend if the games adhered to the norms of middle-class respectability and the promoters of games wanted to convince the public that their sport was suitable for the respectable element of society.

The GAA was founded at a time of revolution in sport that focused on the formation of clubs, the establishment of national co-ordinating bodies and the codification of rules, all of which can be discerned in the GAA. Another aspect of the sporting revolution was the increase in the commercialisation of sport. This included the emergence of a sporting press, the use of advertising to promote games and sports

[94] *DA*, 18 May 1889.
[95] Paul Connell, *The diocese of Meath under Bishop John Cantwell* (Dublin, 2004), pp 239–43.

equipment and the charging of admission fees to spectators. The first of the Irish sporting newspapers was the weekly *Irish Sportsman and Farmer*, established in 1870, whose main focus was on equine-related pastimes. It also carried athletic news but very little on the GAA until the latter's popularity encouraged occasional items. Its main rival, *Sport,* arrived on the scene a decade later and from October 1886 it appointed a dedicated GAA correspondent who contributed information and opinion pieces weekly under the banner 'Gaelic Pastimes'. The writer was P.P. Sutton, secretary of the Metropolitan Hurling Club and a member of the Dublin county committee.[96] In Meath, *Sport* was available from outlets in Athboy, Dunshaughlin, Enfield, Kells, Navan and Trim, while neighbouring towns such as Drogheda and Maynooth also stocked the newspaper, so there was clearly a burgeoning demand for sporting news.[97] It cost what the editor described as 'the people's price' of one penny.[98] Michael Cusack established his own newspaper following his dismissal from the post of GAA secretary but his *Celtic Times* survived for just one year.[99] *Sport* in particular was not just a provider of information. Its articles also attempted to cajole lethargic clubs into activity and revive dormant ones while it accepted entries for sports events and distributed rule books to clubs. Local newspapers were also important in the spread of the GAA but Meath was not very well served by a local press until late in the century. The *Meath Herald*, based in Kells from 1845, carried little or no sports news and focused on the advancement of agriculture and commercial interests in the county, while the *Meath Reporter* devoted significant space to the GAA but only occasional issues have survived. Drogheda was the focal point for residents of east and north-east Meath and two newspapers based there reported regularly on the GAA. The *Drogheda Independent*, established in 1884, promoted a strong nationalist line and promoted the GAA but took a virulent anti-Parnell stance from 1891. The rival *Drogheda Argus* also provided substantial levels of sports coverage. None of those newspapers circulated in west and north-west Meath and consequently reports of GAA activity in those areas is lacking. The *Meath Chronicle* did not commence publication until 1897.

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[96] Paul Rouse, 'Journalists and the making of the Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–1887' in *Media History*, xvii, no. 2 (2011), pp 117–132.
[97] *Sport*, 3 Jan. 1885.
[98] *Sport*, 24 Dec. 1880. For the importance of journalists and the press in the development of the GAA see Rouse, 'Journalists and the making of the Gaelic Athletic Association'.
[99] For many years it was believed no copy of *The Celtic Times* survived but almost a full run of copies of the newspaper came to light in 1969 and they were reprinted in 2003. See footnote 15.

Sport and the *Drogheda Independent* reflect the growing importance and commercialisation of the GAA in their advertising columns. From 1887 GAA clubs such as Donacarney, Duleek, Bellewstown and Dunshaughlin were to the fore in placing large advertisements in the press giving notice and details of their sports days and tournaments. The placing of advertisements implied that clubs were alert to the importance of making the wider public aware of their activities. It is clear they hoped to gain support from outside their own locality and they anticipated much of it would be provided via the railways. Thus, many of the advertisements referred to the opportunity to travel to the events by rail. Julianstown Stars highlighted the fact that its ground was just a five-minute walk from the station and Duleek noted that a special train would run to and from Drogheda to their sports.[100]

The teams and tournaments provided new retail opportunities for drapery, hardware and specialist stores, which in turn led to additional newspaper advertising. Advertisements for footballs, jerseys, trophies, medals and even admission tickets featured in the local and national press. Thus, the advertiser and the newspaper served each other's interests. Shops specialising in sports equipment existed, for example Murray and Company of Cork, which headlined its advertisements with a Gaelic football, but more often businesses diversified as they identified a new commercial opportunity. Drapery stores such as Arnotts, Kennedy and McSharry and Clerys in Dublin began to stock jerseys, socks and caps for sale to GAA clubs as did provincial outlets such as Keelan's drapery shop in Drogheda.[101] Sets of jerseys were a favoured prize for winners of larger tournaments and with the explosion of clubs in 1887–88 there was probably a regular demand. Kilcock O'Connells bought a set from Clerys in Dublin in 1887 costing £3 13*s*. 6*d*., while caps amounted to 18*s*. 4*d*. The club also placed an order for flags and rosettes.[102] Branigan's ironmongery in Drogheda and Kangley's in Navan availed of the demand to add footballs, bladders, inflators, and shin guards to their range of goods.[103] As the GAA declined in the late 1880s so did the advertisements. James Weldon, a shopkeeper and prominent GAA official in Drogheda, promoted footballs on the front page of the *Drogheda Independent* and *Argus* up to 1890 but by 1891, as interest in the GAA waned, he

[100] *DA,* 5 May 1888, 4 Aug. 1888.
[101] *DI*, 16 July 1887.
[102] Ó Muineog, *Kilcock GAA,* pp 34, 36.
[103] *Meath Reporter*, 14 Jan. 1888; *DI*, 19 Jan. 1889.

replaced them with even larger advertisements for bicycles, as the popularity of cycling grew.[104]

A further example of commercialisation is seen in the charging of entrance fees to spectators. This was not always possible as most grounds were farmers' fields, with no paling or means of excluding those who declined to pay. Many of the advertisements for games make no reference to entrance charges for the general public, but, at many venues patrons were obliged to pay. Kilmessan St Patricks organised a tournament in 1889 and admission to the ground cost 2*d*. This seems to have been the most common charge, but, where there were a number of games at the venue on the same day this could rise to 3*d*.[105] Members of the host club attending the Tara GAA Sports in 1887 were given free entrance and this implies that other spectators had to pay. Many spectators at sports and games tried to avoid the imposition. The *Drogheda Argus* correspondent noted in 1888 that even though the Bryanstown ground near Drogheda was well roped in, there were always a number of people who 'would take a precipice sooner than face the ticket box.'[106] At times there were complaints that clubs were over zealous in collecting the gate money with Pierce O'Mahonys claiming that for the host club Kentstown 'The "gate" was the grand centre of attraction, and towards the realization of the great "Two D" [two pennies] all the energies of the local club were successfully directed.'[107]

Conclusion

By the end of 1888 the GAA was the premier sporting organisation in Meath. From just two clubs in 1885 it had expanded to eighty within three years. The GAA initially established itself in four areas in the county, east Meath close to Drogheda, the Rathkenny-Stackallen area, Kells in the north of the county and the Dowdstown-Kilmessan zone south of Navan. From there the game spread to other areas. The earliest games consisted of challenge and tournament matches, and championship games represented a small proportion of the games played. Clubs generally played other teams from the locality but the railway network and proximity to Dublin were crucial factors in the growth of the GAA in Meath, and games against teams from the

[104] *DI*, 11 May 1889, 19 Oct. 1889; *DA*, 31 Jan. 1891.
[105] *DA*, 20 Oct. 1888, 22 June 1889; *DI*, 9 Mar. 1889.
[106] *DA*, 27 Oct. 1888.
[107] *DA*, 18 May 1889.

capital were regular features. An analysis of a database of games played in Meath in the period indicates that a lack of clarity regarding the rules, and the importance of goals dictated the style of play. Preventing the concession of a goal was paramount to success and games were low-scoring, defensive affairs.

A county committee to oversee the game in Meath was established in 1887 but apart from organising the initial championships it had little influence, and a regular turnover of officers and its inability to deal with objections to the outcome of games meant that it was an ineffective ruling body. As in other counties Meath clubs adopted a range of names. Many associated themselves with local saints or used traditional emblems such as Emeralds and Shamrocks while others adopted names based on historical events or personalities. While clubs were nationalist in their outlook there is very little evidence that Meath clubs supported the IRB and there was a substantial majority in Meath opposed to the IRB's takeover of the upper echelons of the GAA in 1887 and 1888.

In reality, before the arrival of the GAA, sport was not accessible to the majority of Irish people. Many organisations excluded the lower classes, either directly in their rules in the case of athletics, or because they played their games on days that did not suit those classes. Gaelic games and sports appealed to the lower classes as they provided an opportunity to engage in sport, whether as players or spectators, and at the only time during the week when they were free to do so. The games were associated with pageantry and spectacle as many of them featured musical bands, parades and after-match entertainment supplied by the host team or the local public house. Crucially, the organisation also benefitted initially from the support of the Catholic clergy and while only a minority of Meath clubs had priests as chairman or patron, clerical approval or at least neutrality was essential for success. The importance of this support became plain once it was withdrawn from 1889 onwards, a topic to be considered in chapter two.

Chapter 2

In the doldrums. The GAA in Meath, 1891–1900

Introduction

Although the GAA successfully took root in Meath in the 1880s, it had a number of weaknesses that contributed to its later decline. These included the ineffectiveness of the county committee, regular appeals over such matters as scores in games, constant recourse to objections by defeated teams and the gradual disenchantment of the clergy with certain aspects of the organisation. This chapter examines the opposition of the bishop of Meath and his priests to games being played outside a club's parish, which, they alleged, resulted in over-indulgence in drink, players missing Mass, and the danger of players being recruited into secret societies. The active opposition of the clergy had a significant impact on the GAA and, combined with the factors outlined above, led to its virtual collapse in Meath. The Parnell split, which followed the revelation of Charles Stewart Parnell's affair with Mrs Katherine O'Shea, sounded its death knell.

The second section of this chapter explores the difficulty the GAA experienced in attempting to reorganise and re-establish itself during the final decade of the century. Richard T. Blake of Ladyrath, who became chairman of the Meath county committee and national secretary of the GAA during the decade, made a successful but short-lived effort to revive the GAA. He was eventually removed from both posts and the reasons for his removal and its impact on the revival are explored. The relative importance of other broader influences such as emigration, the continuing division in the political arena and ineffective administration at county committee level are also evaluated to assess their contribution to the GAA's failure to re-launch itself as the premier sporting organisation in Meath in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

Clerical Opposition

When Michael Cusack established the GAA in 1884, Thomas W. Croke, Archbishop of Cashel, Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) and Michael Davitt, the founder of the Land League, agreed to act as its patrons. Thus, the fledgling GAA had the support of the three pillars of nationalist Ireland: the Catholic Church, the constitutional political movement, and the land movement. Many of the Catholic clergy were staunch supporters of the GAA in its early years.

Following the lead of Dr Croke, the parish priest or curate often played a prominent role in the local club. In Meath, Fr Michael Woods became chairman of the Meath county committee in January 1888 while priests who were club officers included Fr Eugene Rickard in Grangegeeth and Duleek, Fr Michael Guilfoyle in Duleek and Fr Eugene Grennan in Yellow Furze. Following the latter's accidental death in 1887 the club was renamed Yellow Furze Fr Grennans.[1]

However, the bishops and clergy disapproved of a number of aspects of the GAA. In a letter read at the January 1888 reconstruction convention in Thurles, Dr Croke deplored the fact that consumption of alcohol was on the increase among young men who competed at, or attended, games. He recommended a strict prohibition on selling alcoholic drinks on and near sports fields and advised that playing fields should not be in the immediate neighbourhood of public houses and that no prizes should be accepted from publicans. Those proposals were received with prolonged applause and adopted. The fact that Croke felt obliged to make those remarks indicates that over-indulgence in drink was a problem. Numerous reports in the local press bolster this view, with regular references to 'refreshments' after games, while the minutes of the Kilcock O'Connell's club, referred to in chapter one, note the purchase of a number of half barrels of porter for consumption after games. Croke was also critical of players travelling to away games as they 'habitually lose Mass in consequence', and asserted that juveniles were missing catechism classes in church as 'they accompany their adult friends and neighbours to the hurling or football grounds.' He also advised that parochial or inter-parochial competitions should not begin before two o' clock.[2] This latter proposal was implemented in a number of Meath tournaments and was added to the revised Louth bye-laws for 1889.[3]

The greatest challenge to the GAA was an internal one, as the national executive became a battleground between members of the IRB and moderate nationalists such as the president, Maurice Davin. At the 1887 annual convention the IRB element succeeded in electing E.M. Bennett as the new president, but such was the nationwide opposition to this that a 'reconstruction' convention was called for

[1] Mongey *et al*, *Rathkenny GAA,* pp 44–45; *DI*, 30 July 1887; *DA*, 22 Dec. 1888.
[2] *Sport*, 7 Jan. 1888.
[3] *DA*, 2 Feb. 1889.

January 1888 that re-elected Davin as president.[4] However, a year later, amidst disorder at the annual convention, Davin walked out and IRB members dominated the incoming executive, headed by Peter Kelly of Loughrea.[5] The controversies at national level were reflected locally and had major implications for the GAA in each county.

Following the IRB takeover of the national executive in January 1889, many bishops mounted a concerted attack on the GAA. However, many priests, including a number in Meath, had been critical prior to this. In September 1888, Fr Michael Woods, the chairman of Meath GAA, declared from the altar in Navan that IRB influence 'was working its way into the Association, and that if this were to continue the Association should be suppressed, and he would advise the farmers to refuse to give ground for matches'.[6] Earlier in the year Fr Laurence Gaughran, the parish priest of Kells, who later became bishop of Meath, stated that efforts were being made to induce GAA members into the IRB.[7]

Matters escalated in 1889. In January, Dr Michael Logue, archbishop of Armagh, made plain at Mass in St Malachy's church in Armagh his opposition to men travelling to play where they might mix with members of secret societies.[8] The archdeacon of Drogheda, Fr Robert Murphy, repeated those warnings later in the year and in July the *Drogheda Argus* announced that clergy in all the chapels in the diocese of Meath were critical of the intemperance associated with the GAA and repeated Dr Logue's warning about secret societies.[9]

The archbishop of Dublin, Dr William Walsh, took a more conciliatory line in an interview with the *Freeman's Journal* in August. The interview took place in response to a letter printed in *The Times* from George Murphy of Grange, county Meath, asserting that the local priest had claimed that 'at a recent meeting of the Bishops of Ireland it had been decided that the Catholic Church should set its face

[4] For full details see de Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, pp 35–49.
[5] Ibid., p. 49.
[6] The political aspect of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ireland, no. 2, proofs of its connection with Fenianism (TNA, CO 904/16).
[7] Ibid.
[8] *DA*, 2 Feb. 1889.
[9] *DA*, 27 July 1889.

against the further playing of the game of football, recently made so popular under the auspices of the Gaelic Association.' The priest gave two reasons for this: firstly, that injury and loss of life had resulted from the games, partly due to immoderate consumption of drink; secondly, that the government was bribing captains of football teams to induce them to enrol the members as Fenians to discredit the GAA and the Home Rule movement. [10] Archbishop Walsh denied that the bishops had condemned the GAA but then went on to list 'certain abuses' in the organisation, which included games interfering with religious duties, intemperance, deplorable accidents and efforts to 'engraft upon the Gaelic Athletic Association a secret society of a political character.'[11] While Walsh may have been technically correct in asserting that the bishops had not formally decided to condemn the GAA, it is clear that the hierarchy generally, and Dr Thomas Nulty, bishop of Meath, in particular, was now opposed to it. Nulty and his clergy stated their position in Meath churches on 21 July 1889 when prohibiting the playing of matches outside the parish, because of the increase in drunkenness and secret society activity. [12] He spoke in Navan rather than the cathedral town of Mullingar, which emphasised that this was a problem in the Meath portion of the diocese and not in the Westmeath part where the GAA was almost non-existent.[13]

Bishop Nulty seems not to have had any sympathy for the GAA from its foundation. In numerous addresses and sermons in the period he never alluded favourably to the organisation and was one of the Irish bishops who took the strongest line against it. Born in Fennor, Oldcastle, in 1818, the son of a tenant farmer, he claimed to have witnessed the eviction of 700 people in Mountnugent in Cavan. Consequently, his chief interest was reform of the system of land tenure. [14] He pursued an interventionist role in politics, claiming the right to nominate members to the Poor Law Board and directing his flock how to vote in the bitter elections of 1892 and 1893. [15] While his contemporaries, like Archbishops Croke of Cashel, Walsh of

[10] *The Times*, 29 July 1889. It appears that Horace Plunkett wrote the letter for Murphy. See Diaries of Sir Horace Plunkett, 21 July 1889, 31 July 1889 (NLI, MS 42,222/9).
[11] *FJ*, 31 July 1889.
[12] CBS, DICS reports, Midland Division, 1887–1894, 5 Aug. 1889 (NAI, S21/10305).
[13] Hunt, *Sport and society*, p. 142.
[14] Thomas Nulty, *Back to the land* (Melbourne, 1939).
[15] Lawlor, *Divine Right?*, pp 9–10; C.J. Woods, *Nulty, Thomas* in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish biography* (9 vols, Cambridge, 2009), vi, pp 989–90.

Dublin and MacHale of Tuam, were favourably disposed towards the GAA, at least initially, Nulty held aloof from giving it his endorsement and then used his position to virtually suppress it in Meath.

On 21 July 1889, the day that Bishop Nulty announced a prohibition on the playing of matches outside the parish, priests in churches throughout the county made a similar announcement. At least one priest got his timing wrong and made the announcement a week early. Fr Peter Everard announced at Mass in Nobber on 14 July 1889 that the local team was not to travel to play the county semi-final in Navan as the bishops had condemned the playing of football. Nevertheless, some players travelled, as a special train had already been hired. On arrival in Navan, Fr Woods told them Fr Everard had no authority to speak on that Sunday but on the following Sunday the GAA would be condemned. Woods and the county committee nevertheless insisted on the game proceeding and the depleted Nobber team lost by a point.[16] Another writer who signed himself 'A Meath Gael' complained in *Sport* in September of 'the suppression of the Gaelic Association by the ecclesiastical authorities, throughout the length and breadth of the diocese of Meath.' The writer was L.J. McGrath, the secretary of Curraha Davitts.[17] Even Fr Kit Mullen of Moynalty, who had strong nationalist views and would later support Parnell against the wishes of the hierarchy, condemned Gaelic games on Sundays.[18] Fr Woods remained on as chairman of the Meath county committee of the GAA until September 1889 but he did not attend the convention in November at which a new committee was elected.

It is clear then that there was a concerted effort to curb the GAA in the county and that it was successful. Alan Bell of the RIC's Crime Branch Special, reported on a number of occasions on the success of the bishop's intervention as a 'great check upon the Secret Societies' and 'a great blow to the members of the IRB'.[19] Table 2.1, based on an analysis of all the games reported in the *Drogheda Independent*, *Drogheda Argus* and *Sport* in the period 1887–91, gives the number of clubs active

[16] *DA*, 10 Aug. 1889.
[17] *Sport*, 28 Sept. 1889; *DA*, 26 Oct. 1889.
[18] *DI*, 28 Sept. 1889.
[19] CBS, DICS reports, Midland Division, 1887–1894, box 4, 5 Aug. 1889 and 5 Sept. 1889 (NAI, S21/10305 and S21/10583).

in each of those years. It is probable that the number is a slight under-estimate as clubs may have existed without their exploits appearing in the press. This is particularly true in the west and north-west of the county as both local newspapers were based in the east, in Drogheda.

Table 2.1: Number of GAA clubs in Meath recorded playing football games, 1887–91

	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891
No of Clubs	60	81	64	18	10

Source: *Drogheda Argus*, *Drogheda Independent* and *Sport*, 1887–1891.

1888 represents the zenith in terms of the number of clubs. However, many of them were temporary and transitory and were competing for players with other clubs in a small area and consequently did not have long-term prospects of survival. In addition, issues alluded to in the previous chapter, such as constant objections and appeals against match results, and an ineffective county committee probably led to a decline in enthusiasm in some clubs and, thus, their consequent collapse. However, there can be little doubt that clerical and episcopal condemnation had a huge impact. Club numbers dropped by twenty-one percent overall in 1889, the year when church opposition was at its strongest, and most of the decline occurred from August onwards. This was the period immediately following the condemnation of the GAA from the pulpits. Of the 126 games reported in the press in 1889 only fifteen took place in the final five months of the year and almost half of those were against clubs in Louth and Dublin, indicating that clubs had to travel outside the county to get games. The following year represented a catastrophic decline. The few games that were reported took place in the early part of the year and police files state that twenty-five clubs collapsed in Meath in 1890 'owing to the opposition of Bishop Nulty and his Clergy.'[20] This figure is an underestimate, as an analysis of the figures from the press outlined in Table 2.1 suggests that the situation was much worse than that, with thirty-eight clubs that had played in 1889 defunct by 1890.

While Nulty may have had good grounds for opposing the GAA due to its association with drunkenness and its effect on Mass attendance, the evidence for IRB

[20] CBS, DICS reports, box 4, 26 Jan. 1891 (NAI, 2452/S).

involvement is slim. The police reports rarely give specific evidence of IRB influence or involvement in the GAA in Meath. The report for November 1888 refers to inquiries into the working of secret societies in Meath on the borders of Louth near Drogheda but gives no indication of the outcome of these inquiries.[21] The August 1889 report states that 'In County Meath and Westmeath there is not much Secret Society work going on at present', ascribing this to the bishop's intervention.[22] Bell contradicts this the following month when claiming that 'In County Meath also the connection between GAA and IRB men is very marked', but gives no supporting evidence.[23] In the period 1888–1891 the reports identify only eight GAA men in the county as IRB members. In fact, it is questionable how much credence can be given to police reports on the matter. Their list of forty-six officers of the fourteen clubs still in existence in late 1890 contained the names of only six men, representing a mere three clubs, whom they identified as IRB men (see appendix one). Yet nine months earlier the RIC Crime Branch claimed that there were fifteen clubs in the county, all 'under Fenian control' and none under clerical control. Both sets of statistics cannot be correct and one is left to assume that any club not under clerical control was considered to be under Fenian/IRB control.

Many of the fourteen clubs noted in police files as in existence in 1890 did not survive much longer. Clerical opposition continued to take its toll and then at the end of 1890 an event that would effectively sound the death-knell of the GAA in Meath occurred. On 17 November, Captain William O'Shea, MP, was granted a divorce from his wife Katherine, on the grounds of her adultery with Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the IPP. The event divided Irish public opinion into Parnellite and anti-Parnellite factions and the division lasted for a decade. Although initially re-elected as leader of the IPP in the immediate aftermath of the judgment, Parnell rapidly lost support. The British Liberal Party under William Gladstone rejected its previous alliance with the IPP, the Catholic hierarchy condemned him and in December the majority of the IPP opposed him after a rancorous debate at Westminster.[24] There was bitter dissension in Meath on the issue as Parnell had been elected as MP for the

[21] Ibid., 7 Dec. 1888 (NAI, S21/9036).
[22] Ibid., 4 Sept. 1889 (NAI, S21/10442).
[23] Ibid., 5 Oct. 1889 (NAI, S21/10583).
[24] D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth century Ireland: the search for stability* (Dublin, 2005 [1990]), pp 194–6.

county in an 1875 bye-election and was re-elected in 1880, although he opted to represent Cork. Now Bishop Nulty turned on his former protégée and he and his clergy vehemently opposed Parnell on moral grounds.[25] Despite this, Parnell retained substantial support in towns like Navan and Kells and among some elements of the GAA.[26] However, by the time the Parnell controversy was at its height in 1891 the GAA in Meath had already fallen into an abject state.

The police summary for 1890 states that fourteen clubs existed in Meath but research in the newspapers as per Table 2.2 provides some conflicting evidence. While the two sets of statistics overlap to a substantial extent, the police files name two clubs that do not appear in the newspapers while eight clubs recorded in the newspapers as active are not included in police files. Ten clubs appear on both lists: Ballivor Charles Russells, Dunshaughlin St Seachnalls, St Patrick's Kilmessan, Warrenstown, Navan William O'Briens, Navan Pierce O'Mahonys, Round Towers Donaghmore, Ardbraccan St Ultans, Bohermeen Geraldines and Donacarney Parnells. The disparity between the two sources reinforces the fact that both sources may be understating the number of clubs in existence at any given time and that they need to be treated with caution.

The area of strongest activity, according to police files, was in, or close to, the towns of Navan and Kells. Five of the clubs listed were in Navan and its environs and two were near Kells. A further three were in the Dunshaughlin area, accounting for ten of the total. Most of these disappeared subsequently. In 1891, Warrenstown played challenge games at home and away to Dublin opposition as the club faced 'the great disadvantage of having no clubs in their district with which they can play matches.'[27] At the end of the year an effort to reconstitute the Warrenstown and Dunshaughlin clubs as a new Drumree club was a short-lived venture and during the following decade many of the players gave their sporting allegiance to cricket.[28] The Duleek club, which is not listed in the police files for 1890, existed in some form early in 1890 but members abandoned plans for sports in 1891 and donated their remaining

[25] Lawlor, *Divine right?*, pp 24–29.
[26] Ibid., pp 38–40.
[27] *Sport*, 18 Apr. 1891.
[28] *Sport*, 21 Nov. 1891. For cricket, see for example, *DI*, 2 June 1900.

funds to the Duleek Race Meeting.[29] Prior to this Ladyrath, one of the original clubs in 1886, had turned to soccer and played Slane and College Rovers in a number of games early in 1891.[30]

Table 2.2: Meath GAA clubs in 1890

	Police Files	Newspapers
Athboy Davitts	•	
Ballivor Charles Russells	•	•
Dunshaughlin St Seachnalls	•	•
St Patrick's Kilmessan	•	•
Warrenstown	•	•
Kilbeg Volunteers	•	
Moynalty Owen Roes	•	
William O'Briens, Navan	•	•
Pierce Mahony's of Navan	•	•
Round Towers Donaghmore	•	•
Ardbraccan St Ultans	•	•
Bohermeen Geraldines	•	•
The Donacarneys of Donacarney	•	•
Barley Hill		•
Carnaross		•
Curraha Davitts		•
Drumconrath Brian Borus		•
Kells Campaigners		•
Ladyrath Parnells		•
Martry Clan na Gael		•
Ratoath Shillelaghs		•
Totals	13	□8

Source: CBS, DICS reports, box 4, 26 Jan 1891 (NAI, 2452/S); *Drogheda Argus*; *Drogheda Independent*; *Sport*.

Based on this evidence one can conclusively state that the decline of the majority of the GAA clubs in Meath predated the Parnell split and rather than causing the decline the split finished off an already weak organisation. The IRB element in the GAA's upper ranks at national level and in certain county committees ensured that the association nationally supported Parnell, but Meath was not represented at a GAA national convention in Dublin in July 1891 that unanimously adopted a motion 'to support the policy of independent opposition and freedom of opinion under the

[29] *DI*, 25 Apr. 1891, 27 June 1891.
[30] *DI*, 24 Jan. 1891, 25 Apr. 1891; *DA*, 9 May 1891.

leadership of Mr. Parnell'.[31] Parnell himself referred to 'the Gaelic clubs of Meath who to a man have rallied to our side' when addressing a crowd of supporters in Navan in March 1891.[32] That is a claim of dubious validity. Firstly, there were few active clubs in the county at that stage and among those clubs that still survived the members probably reflected the divisions among the broader community in the county and the 1892 general election proved that opinion was fairly evenly divided on pro- and anti-Parnell lines.[33] Only one GAA club, Kells, is recorded as presenting an address of welcome and support to Parnell at the meeting in Navan. Some GAA men joined Parnell Leadership Committees in Meath or attended the Parnellite convention in Navan in 1891, including Patrick Kane, the treasurer of St. Ultans GAA club and Michael Tevlin the captain and founder of Kilbeg Volunteers, while Pat Fox, the captain of the Warrenstown club, was a committed Parnellite.[34] It can also be assumed that the Pierce O'Mahony's club supported Parnell as Pierce O'Mahony MP, after whom they were named, was one of Parnell's strongest supporters. On the opposite side of the fence was Patrick Fullam, the first chairman of the county committee and a member of the Donore Go Aheads GAA club. Although police reports had previously claimed he was an IRB member, he took a strong anti-Parnell line and won the South Meath election in 1892 by fewer than a hundred votes from his Parnellite opponent, James Dalton.[35]

The clergy, apart from Fr Kit Mullen in Moynalty, were strongly anti-Parnell. Fr Michael Woods, former chairman of the GAA county committee, was one of Parnell's most vocal opponents as was Fr Patrick Briody, the curate in Athboy and previously a member of the county committee. Such was the bitterness of the 1892 election that Bishop Nulty was booed in Navan. Violence erupted in the town on polling day, resulting in the reading of the Riot Act, and numerous injuries followed police baton charges. Fr John Fay, parish priest of Summerhill, was later jailed for a month for contempt. The defeated Parnellite candidates successfully issued petitions

[31] *Sport*, 25 July 1891.
[32] *DI*, 7 Mar. 1891.
[33] The South Meath constituency election resulted in 2,207 votes for Patrick Fullam, the anti-Parnellite candidate, and 2,126 for James Dalton, while in North Meath Michael Davitt defeated the Parnellite Pierce O'Mahony by 2,549 to 2,146. See David Lawlor, *Divine right?*, pp 85, 88.
[34] *DI*, 7 Mar. 1891, 7 Nov. 1891; Dunshaughlin and District Historical Society, *James Fox* (Dunshaughlin, 2016), pp 8, 18.
[35] Brian M. Walker (ed.) *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801–1922* (Dublin, 1978), p. 148.

to have the results overturned on the grounds of clerical intimidation but a further round of elections resulted in renewed success for the anti-Parnellites and continued bitterness. The original victor in South Meath, the anti-Parnellite and GAA member Patrick Fullam, was declared bankrupt and temporarily lost his farm while Pierce O'Mahony, a staunch Parnellite, lost both contests in North Meath.[36] Thus, GAA members and clubs found themselves on opposite sides of a bitter political feud. The bitterness continued to inhibit the GAA for a decade.

Although the reporting of games played in the local and national press cannot be taken as a complete record of all games played, the pattern indicated by such reports gives an accurate barometer of an organisation in decline. Whereas 124 games were recorded in 1889 there were only twenty the following year, and for the years 1891–1893 there were just eight, eleven and nine respectively.[37] There was neither a county committee nor a championship in Meath throughout this period.

Clerical opposition and the Parnell split were not the only factors contributing to the decline of the GAA. Emigration and migration were also significant influences. Similar to many counties, Meath's population decline did not cease in the decades following the Famine. Instead the population continued to fall, dropping from 87,469 in 1881, just prior to the formation of the GAA, to 67,497 in 1901, a decline of 22.8%.[38] Emigration figures show that almost 16,000 emigrated from the county in those two decades and the years prior to the collapse of the GAA saw particularly high levels of departure, with over 1,000 leaving annually from 1887 to 1889.[39] Of the twelve Leinster counties Meath recorded the third highest rate of emigration in the 1851–90 period.[40] The levels of emigration are reflected in regular advertisements placed by a variety of shipping lines in the local press advertising sailings from Drogheda to Liverpool and thence by rail to other English cities or by transatlantic steamer to America and Canada. The shipping lines had agents in the

[36] For a full account see Lawlor, *Divine right?*, especially pages 76 ff. Fullam was evicted but reinstated following a collection to meet the costs awarded against him, *DA,* 9 May 1896.
[37] Calculated from *DA, DI, Sport, AC, DD* for the period 1889–93.
[38] *Census of Ireland, 1901, pt. i, area, houses and population, also the ages, civil or conjugal condition, occupations, birthplaces, religion and education of the people, vol. i, no. 8, county of Meath*, 1 [Cd. 847-VII], H.C. 1902, cxxii, 107.
[39] Ibid., 127, 223.
[40] Based on emigrants to every 100 of the average population, see *Emigration statistics of Ireland for the year 1890*, 5 [C. 6295] 1890–91, xcii, 61.

chief towns of Meath such as Duleek, Kells, Navan, Oldcastle and Trim, as well as Drogheda.[41]

The weekly 'Gaelic Pastimes' column in the newspaper *Sport* described emigration as 'the deadliest enemy of all' when referring to causes of the decline of the GAA.[42] In 1890, 81 percent of emigrants were between 15 and 35 years of age, the group most likely to take an active part in sporting pastimes.[43] The effect on the cohort most likely to participate in sport can be seen by analysing the decline in numbers in the census returns between 1881 and 1901. In 1881 in Meath there were 4,433 males in the 15 and under 20 cohort, a decade later when aged 25 and under 30 this cohort had dropped to 2,671, a decline of 39.7%. Even allowing for some deaths and misreporting of ages this represents a huge drop and must be mainly accounted for by emigration or migration. A decade later in 1901 the cohort totalled 1,969, a drop of 26.3% over the decade, an indication of continuing movement out of the county.[44] The emigrants carried their interest in Gaelic games with them and thus the GAA established itself in London and the United States. Six London clubs affiliated to the GAA by 1896 while the organisation also took root in New York, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco.[45]

Meath's proximity to Dublin and its railway network linked to the capital facilitated migration to the metropolis. It is not possible to put accurate figures on the extent of this migration on an annual basis or to establish during which years it was most prevalent, but there is some evidence that the level of migration was substantial. In 1901, there were 6,353 persons resident in Dublin city whose birthplace was Meath. This was second only to Wicklow among the thirty-two counties of Ireland. This pattern was repeated for county Dublin. Wicklow born residents were again the most numerous but Meath, with 3,940 natives resident in county Dublin, again held

[41] See *DA*, various dates in 1892.
[42] *Sport*, 2 Jan. 1892.
[43] *Emigration statistics of Ireland for the year 1890*, p. 6.
[44] Calculations based on *Census of Ireland, 1881, pt. i: area, houses and population, also the ages, civil or conjugal condition, occupations, birthplaces, religion and education of the people, vol. i, county of Meath* [C 3042-V], H.C. 1881, xcvii, p. 708, and Census of Ireland, 1901, p. 54.
[45] Pat Griffin, *Gaelic hearts: the GAA in London, 1896–1996* (London, 2011); Paul Darby, *Gaelic games, nationalism and the Irish diaspora in the United States* (Dublin, 2009).

second position.[46]

There is anecdotal evidence of this migration in Dublin GAA clubs in the 1890s and 1900s. Bill Sherry, born in Bellewstown in 1875, settled in Dublin and played with Isles of the Sea and Geraldines. He won two All-Ireland senior championship medals with Dublin in 1898–99 and another in 1902 when playing with Bray Emmets, who affiliated to the Dublin GAA county committee. Two former Bellewstown brothers, Seán and Richard Flood, also won All-Ireland honours with Dublin in 1891 and 1892.[47]

A common source of employment was in the grocery and drapery businesses in the city and many of these companies established their own GAA teams and competed for the Power Cup. The Clery's department store team that played Arnotts in the 1890 final featured three Meath men, McNally, Skelly and Nugent.[48] Jim Clarke, a native of Slane, moved first to Drogheda and then in 1889 to Dublin, where he helped establish a football team called the Stars of the West, confined to grocers' assistants. He also acted as the club's delegate to the Dublin GAA county committee.[49] Clarke's younger brother, Philip, also moved to Dublin and joined the newly-formed John Boyle O'Reilly club.[50] This club consisted mainly of men born in Meath and Louth but resident in Dublin and won the Dublin intermediate league in 1903–04. Philip Clarke died during the Easter Rising of 1916, fighting in St Stephen's Green as a member of the Irish Citizen Army. Three others who died in 1916 – James Fox, Thomas Allen and Philip McCormack – were all born in Meath but settled in Dublin in the 1890s or 1900s.[51] Of these only Fox had a GAA background.

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[46] *Census of Ireland 1901, pt. i, area, houses and population, also the ages, civil or conjugal condition, occupations, birthplaces, religion and education of the people, vol. i, city of Dublin*, 36 [Cd. 847-1a] H.C. 1902, cxxii, 272; and *Census of Ireland 1901, county of Dublin*, 93 [Cd. 847-I], H.C. 1902, cxxii, 193.
[47] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal,* p. 59.
[48] Nolan (ed.), *The GAA in Dublin*, i, pp 32–3.
[49] James (Jim) Clarke (BMH, WS 1026), p. 1.
[50] Boyle O'Reilly was a native of Dowth, near Slane, who was transported to Western Australia in 1867 for IRB activity before escaping to the United States where he later became editor of the *Boston Pilot* newspaper and helped establish the GAA in the city.
[51] Noel French, *1916, Meath and more* (published privately, 2016), pp 41–43, 47–51, 53–55.

Richard T. Blake and the GAA

By 1892, the GAA was in decline, not just in Meath, but nationally as well. That year's annual convention took place months behind schedule in April 1893 and only three counties were represented – Cork, Dublin and Kerry – and only fifteen delegates and five officers attended. These three counties played in the hurling championship and only six – Cork, Dublin, Kerry, Kildare, Roscommon and Waterford – competed in the football competition. The following year was no better. Fourteen delegates from six counties attended the convention and six counties participated in the football championship, while the number of affiliated clubs plummeted from nearly 1,000 in 1888 to 220 in 1891.[52]

The GAA's annual convention of 1893, though sparsely attended, featured two significant initiatives to revive a moribund organisation. A rule excluding members of the RIC and the Dublin Metropolitan Police from GAA membership was revoked and Frank B. Dinneen's proposal of a committee to advise clubs wishing to affiliate and to 'advance the revival of the association in counties where local committees are not in existence' was adopted.[53] De Búrca, in his history of the association, viewed the move to allow policemen join the GAA as a sign of its weakness at that time and a softening of its previous support for the extreme wings of nationalism,[54] while Rouse states that the GAA believed that 'revoking the rule would benefit the Association'.[55] Later in the year Central Council issued a lengthy circular that amounted to a revised statement of the GAA's aims and ethos. While stressing its nationalism, the statement emphasised the need to avoid party politics and acknowledged that 'in many parts of Ireland political differences have caused the disbanding of a very large number of clubs.'[56] It appealed to former clubs and old Gaels to return to the fold and exhorted county committees to hold conventions. The circular was welcome news to Richard T. Blake, who had been advocating a non-

[52] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, pp 62–3; Nolan (ed.) *The GAA in Dublin*, i, p. 36.
[53] *CE*, 17 Apr. 1893; *FJ*, 17 Apr. 1893. Although most historians record his name as Dineen I have used Dinneen, as that was his preferred spelling. See Nioclás Ó Duinín, *Frank B. Dinneen of Ballylanders and the Croke Park story* (Ballylanders, 2009).
[54] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history,* pp 63–67. The association's policy on banning members of the police and army and the playing of other sports will be considered more fully in chapters three and seven.
[55] Paul Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland: a history of the GAA ban on foreign games 1884–1971, part one: 1884–1921' in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, x, no. 3 (1993), pp 333–360; p. 345.
[56] Quoted in Pádraig Puirséal, *The GAA in its time* (Dublin, 1982), p. 107.

political approach and a revision of the playing rules for many years.

Blake was born on 15 January 1868, the son of Philip Blake of Ladyrath, Rathkenny, county Meath, a grazier farmer and justice of the peace. The Blakes were a well-off Catholic middle-class family with an interest in land extending to 1,000 acres. Richard attended St Vincent's College, Castleknock, from 1883 to 1888. There he displayed a great interest in a variety of sports, participating in athletics, rugby and cricket.[57] He was a natural sporting organiser from his youngest days and was secretary of the college sports in 1888.[58] A year earlier he was a central figure in the formation of Ladyrath GAA club, acting as its captain, and probably founder, as a nineteen year old.[59] There were already three clubs in the parish – Rathkenny, Grangegeeth and Stackallen – and it was one of the four areas identified in chapter one as a centre of GAA development in the county.

Blake played for Ladyrath until at least June 1890 but there is no reference to the club after that, as, like most others in the county, it went into terminal decline. However, Blake's appetite for sport remained, and by January 1891 he was a playing member of a soccer club in Ladyrath. He and his brothers, James and Thomas, as well as the former secretary of Ladyrath Parnells, James Caffrey, played against neighbours Slane in what the *Drogheda Independent* described as the first game under Association rules ever played in Meath. The Blakes also played cricket regularly.[60]

Blake identified two causes for the decline of the GAA: the unsatisfactory state of the playing rules and the introduction of political issues into the association. In November 1890 in a letter to *Sport* he declared that the rules were too few and too general, left many technical matters unexplained, and gave the referee too much discretion. Blake proposed a number of remedies, many of which were subsequently adopted. These included: a reduction in the number of players on teams from twenty-one to fourteen; a minimum sized playing area; cutting or marking sidelines with

[57] James Caffrey, 'Richard T. Blake and the GAA: villain or hero?' in Arlene Crampsie and Francis Ludlow (eds), *Meath history and society* (Dublin, 2015), pp 633–55.
[58] *DA*, 7 Apr. 1888.
[59] Mongey *et al*, *Rathkenny GAA*, p. 36.
[60] *DI*, 24 Jan. 1891, 21 Feb. 1891; *DA*, 4 July 1891, 14 May 1892.

whitewash; use of a regulation size football; any player sent off by the referee to remain off the field for the remainder of the game; and the referee to report all cases of misconduct to the county committee. He wanted all breaches of the rules punished by the award of a free kick against the offending team rather than the common practice of throwing up the ball, which gave the offending team the same chance of winning possession as the opposition. He also suggested that carrying the ball be defined as taking more than two steps with it and proposed that bouncing the ball against the ground be a foul, on the basis that it constituted a throw.[61] He repeated many of these ideas in a further letter to *Sport* in 1893.[62]

In late 1893 and early 1894 there were signs that clubs in Kells, Kilmessan, Navan, Trim and Dunderry were playing challenge games and, probably taking its cue from the Central Council circular referred to earlier, Kells Campaigners urged the re-establishment of a county committee in Meath. In March 1894, a former secretary of the GAA, Patrick Tobin, presided over a meeting in Navan attended by delegates representing fifteen clubs. The outcome was the formation of a provisional committee, and although it was only seven years since the first Meath committee had been established, none of the men who formed the initial organisation was present in 1894. Richard Blake criticised the 'introduction of political issues especially in the nomenclature of clubs' and said public opinion should be roused against roughness. Ironically, Blake's own club was named Ladyrath Parnells. Tobin discounted Blake's fears regarding politics, asserted every club's right to choose its name, and reminded them that Meath was an historic county that 'furnished a fund of suitable names.'[63] Blake's views obviously impressed his audience, as a month later, when a formal convention was held, he was elected chairman of the county committee. He was also the Meath delegate to the annual convention of the GAA, which paved the way for him to take a central role in the organisation. He was then just twenty-six years old.

Meanwhile, Blake oversaw the arrangements for the Meath championships. Eight clubs entered (Kells Campaigners, Kilmessan, Dunderry, Pierce O'Mahonys, Navan Independents, Yellow Furze, Trim John Mitchels and Navan Emmets) and Blake

[61] *Sport,* 6 Dec. 1890.
[62] *Sport,* 28 Jan. 1893.
[63] *DI*, 10 Mar. 1894.

availed of his new-found influence to implement the ideas he had earlier promoted. He proposed nineteen bye-laws for Meath that were passed unanimously, including clear pitch markings, the use of a size-six football only, neutral linesmen with flags and a neutral umpire at each goal (see appendix two). In an effort to reduce the controversies over scores he introduced a number of practical proposals such as the mandatory use of crossbars instead of tapes, the provision of point posts at least sixteen feet high and a rule that no score was made until the whole ball crossed the line. Rough play was to be curtailed by directing referees to award a free for all breaches of the rules, especially the 'vicious practice of "going for the man"' and players were to be ordered off for violent conduct or improper language. To address technical issues the bye-laws stated that the ball could not be carried for more than three steps and throwing the ball against the ground while running was to be illegal apart from one such throw at the start of the run. To improve presentation all players were to wear club colours in championship games.[64] This may have been an example of Blake's initiative and administrative capacity, but it also demonstrated his authoritarian streak. The changes clarified many of the rules and assisted in the smooth running of the championships but they also ran counter to efforts to standardise the rules nationally. As Joe Lennon has pointed out, if each county adopted its own set of rules the ambition to achieve uniformity in the rules nationally would have been placed in jeopardy.[65]

The championship was successfully completed by August, with Blake refereeing the majority of games, including the final where Pierce O'Mahonys overcame their fellow townsmen, the Independents. He also found time to take charge of the Wexford semi-finals and oversee the Navan sports, the local press praising him for 'the splendid organising qualities he displayed.'[66] O'Mahonys easily overcame Kilkenny to qualify for the Leinster final where the Meath representatives drew with Young Irelands from Dublin. This gave Blake an opportunity to further enhance his reputation by proposing that the replay be held in Navan, guaranteeing good grounds and 'fair play'. He then set about delivering on his promise by renting grounds, printing and displaying advertisements, erecting a timber and galvanized wire paling

[64] *DA*, 26 May 1894.
[65] Lennon, *Towards a philosophy for legislation*, appendix ii, p. 647.
[66] *Sport*, 21 July 1894; *DA*, 14 July 1894.

around the playing area and cutting side and goal lines in the turf. He employed five men for two days and arranged lunch for the Young Ireland team, spending a total of £10. Only then did he discover that Young Irelands had declined to travel.[67] *Sport*, whose GAA correspondent was P.P. Sutton, a member of the Dublin county committee, criticized the Young Irelands and declared that Blake was 'responsible for the revival of the sport in his county.'[68] The game was eventually played in Navan in December, ending in a draw, before Dublin proved too strong in the replay.[69]

Blake continued his reforming zeal in early 1895, proposing a junior championship for second teams and overseeing a trebling in the number of clubs affiliated from seven to twenty-two. Detailed draws were made for the championship and Blake again took to the press to propound his views on the rules, highlighting many of the changes made in Meath. He then ventured into the more controversial area of politics in the GAA by stating his intention to propose the following motion at the annual congress:

> That the GAA is a strictly non-political and non-sectarian organisation; that no political questions of any kind shall be raised at its meetings and that no club shall call itself any party or contentious name or take part as a club in any political movement.[70]

His star was in the ascendant as he travelled to Thurles for the GAA's annual congress in April 1895 where a major change took place in the association's leading officers. Frank B. Dinneen of Limerick took over from Peter Kelly as president and the secretary, David Walsh of Cork, became treasurer, leaving a vacancy for secretary. Blake defeated Thomas Dooley of Cork for the latter position by 24 votes to 13.[71] Within a month the GAA issued revised sets of rules covering the games and the organisation's constitution. The new playing rules reflected many of the changes Blake had championed for a number of years and his fingerprints can also be detected in the rule on political involvement. The new rule echoed Blake's motion almost in its entirety. The GAA was to be 'strictly non-political' and 'unsectarian'–

[67] *DA*, 10 Nov. 1894.
[68] *Sport*, 10 Nov. 1894.
[69] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 39.
[70] *Sport*, 2 Feb. 1895.
[71] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history,* p. 69.

Blake had proposed 'non-sectarian' – political questions of any kind could not be raised at its meetings, and no club was to take part in any political movement. The only part of Blake's motion not included in its entirety was the taking of party or contentious names by clubs. There was resistance to this aspect of Blake's proposals when he suggested them in Navan earlier and this opposition obviously continued at congress as his proposal was reduced to the status of a recommendation.[72]

Blake continued in his role as Meath chairman after his election as national secretary and the county committee expressed confidence that 'in his hands the GAA is bound to prosper, believing him to be the right man in the right place.'[73] However, a few months later it decided he was not the right man to chair the Meath committee and he was ousted. Ironically, politics was the cause. At a county committee meeting in August 1895, Barney Clarke, a Navan delegate, unexpectedly proposed that Blake resign due to his support for one of the candidates in the North Meath constituency during the 1895 general election. He stated that Blake had introduced a rule keeping the GAA free of politics yet had issued a pamphlet on behalf of James Gibney, the anti-Parnellite candidate. Clarke claimed that as a result of Blake's action a number of clubs would refuse to play any game that Blake was to referee. John McEntaggart of Navan Emmets seconded the proposal and was supported by two other delegates. Only Harry Coady of Kilmessan acknowledged Blake's record in reviving the association in the county, but he deemed it poor judgment on Blake's behalf. In his defence Blake claimed that his name was used in error on the pamphlet as he merely gave details to the printers on behalf of Fr McNamee of Navan but the printer had put Blake's name on it, as a name was necessary by law. Following further remarks from Clarke, Blake tendered his resignation and left, declaring: 'This whole thing was got up for the purpose of browbeating me simply because I hold different political views from the majority of this board.' He also asserted that he had a right to his own opinion in political matters.[74] The attempt to remove him as chairman of Meath GAA reflected the divisions of the Parnell split, for most of those who attempted to oust him were supporters of Parnell.

[72] *DA*, 11 May 1895.
[73] *DA*, 20 Apr. 1895.
[74] *DI*, 17 Aug. 1895.

Blake's first line of defence is not entirely convincing. Other pamphlets issued during the same election did not carry a name as Blake asserted was required by law.[75] Nor, it seems, did he repeat that explanation when he defended himself later at a Central Council meeting. The council unanimously agreed with his second line of defence, that as a private individual he had a right 'to hold and express any political idea he may wish.'[76] The available evidence suggests that Blake was politically involved in the 1895 election but not to the extent he had been in 1893. He attended a meeting in College Hill, near his home, in 1892 to establish a branch of the anti-Parnellite Irish National Federation, was elected assistant secretary of the branch and a delegate to the national convention, and later represented it at the Meath selection convention in January 1893. The surviving minutes of the branch show that Blake attended branch meetings intermittently during 1895. Although it appears he did not attend the 1895 selection convention, he was certainly active in the branch.[77] Blake was unwise to continue his open political involvement at a time he was proposing that the GAA should be a non-political body, and if he did attend the 1895 selection convention he displayed extraordinary naivety considering the divisive and bitter political atmosphere in Meath at that time.

Blake's departure as Meath GAA chairman gave him more time to focus on his demanding role as national secretary of the GAA. His tenure was marked by the same organisational expertise and reforming zeal that was a feature of his stewardship in Meath. He attended every monthly Central Council meeting from 1895 to 1898 whether the location was Dublin, Thurles or Cork. As noted earlier, within a month of his election the constitution and rules of the GAA were revised. His proposals for fourteen-a-side teams and larger grounds were not implemented and teams continued to consist of seventeen players. The rule regarding carrying the ball was redefined as taking more than four paces while in possession and throwing or hopping the ball against the ground was deemed illegal. All breaches of rules were now to be punished by a free kick to the opposition.[78]

[75] John Sweetman's address to electors of north Meath, 1895 (NLI, Sweetman papers, MS 47578/5).
[76] *DI*, 14 Sept. 1895.
[77] Minutes Rushwee branch, Irish National Federation, 1891–1896 (MCL Archive, Navan).
[78] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, pp 69–70; *Sport*, 4 May 1895.

The Central Council also made efforts to repair the frayed relationship with the Catholic Church. A deputation, including Frank B. Dinneen and Blake, met Archbishop Croke prior to the All-Ireland football final in Thurles in April 1895. The immediate reason for the meeting was the opposition of Dr Coffey, Bishop of Kerry, to a tournament in Killarney on the grounds that the GAA was connected with secret societies. Dinneen argued that a strong political feeling had previously existed among GAA members but it was now a purely athletics body whose members placed the interest of the association above all other matters. Dinneen told Croke that no politics should be brought into football or hurling but every man was entitled to his political opinion. For his part, Croke stated that he did not believe Dr. Coffey's assertion regarding secret societies and indicated it was his intention to remain a patron of the GAA. He then showed his public support by attending the football final refereed by Blake and shook hands with members of both teams. Ironically, to prove that some aspects of the GAA remained the same, the game ended in controversy when a spectator struck a Dublin player within minutes of the final whistle and it proved impossible to remove spectators from the field to restart the game.[79] A year later, to mark the silver jubilee of his consecration as bishop and to further support the GAA, Croke presented two trophies for football and hurling, to be known as the Croke Cups.[80]

Despite this, many bishops and clergy maintained their opposition to the GAA. Bishop Coffey ignored the rebuke from Croke and did not change his views.[81] In 1896 the parish priest of Carrickmacross, county Monaghan, Dean Bermingham, said he would request the bishop to pass a curse upon football playing on Sundays, while in successive weeks Canon Kearney, parish priest of Moate, in Westmeath, preached that clubs were started for the purpose of forming secret societies. The following year Dr Brownrigg, bishop of Ossary, and Dr Browne, bishop of Ferns, denounced the holding of GAA matches on Sundays.[82]

[79] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom,* pp 92–4; *DA*, 27 Apr. 1895.
[80] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 75.
[81] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom,* pp 94–5.
[82] CBS Précis of secret society information, 24 Oct. 1896 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 12633/S); 22 Oct. 1897 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 14461/S); 9 Nov. 1897 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 14592/S).

Nevertheless, under Blake's stewardship the GAA advanced on many fronts. Affiliated clubs almost doubled from 114 in 1894 to 217 the following year and the upward trend continued in subsequent years, to 308 and 357 in 1896 and 1897 respectively. There was a corresponding increase in income from £284 in 1894–95 to over £1,000 in 1896–97 and athletic meetings under the auspices of the GAA went from sixteen to ninety-one in the same period.[83] Blake was forward thinking in terms of publicity and public relations work and issued a booklet containing the hurling, football, athletic and handball rules, lists of records, a plan of a football pitch, and the line out of teams. The *Nation's* GAA columnist 'Tailtean' described it as 'by far the most complete book yet issued'.[84] He also organised games at Stamford Bridge in London in 1896 between hurling and football teams from Leinster and Munster, which helped promote the nascent GAA in the English capital.[85]

He was less successful in the completion of All-Ireland finals to schedule. This was a perennial problem in the early days of the GAA due to teams walking off the pitch over referees' decisions or entering objections after a defeat. Finals normally ran a few months to a year late. The 1894 hurling final was played in March 1895 and soon after Blake's appointment as secretary he refereed the 1894 football final in Thurles in April 1895. He successfully oversaw the completion of the 1895 finals in March 1896 but he failed to conclude the 1896 or 1897 finals by January 1898. Many of the delays were the result of the failure to conclude county championships in a timely manner and consequently beyond Blake's control. Nevertheless, the substantial revenue that usually accrued from the finals was foregone and this was to cost Blake his job.

Blake's position as secretary came to a sudden, abrupt, end in January 1898 when a special Central Council meeting was called for what was described as the 'transaction of urgent, important and general business.'[86] When the meeting began the president Frank B. Dinneen alleged financial mismanagement by Blake and claimed that creditors were seeking payment of money due. Blake defended his financial management by pointing out that much of the debt was beyond his control

[83] R.T. Blake, *How the GAA was grabbed* (Dublin, 1900), pp 2-3.
[84] *The Nation*, 27 June 1896.
[85] Griffin, *Gaelic hearts*, p. 28.
[86] *Sport*, 15 Jan. 1898.

and that the gate money from the unplayed All-Ireland finals of 1896 and 1897 would clear all debts. His attempt to justify his stewardship was unsuccessful and Blake was ousted by six votes to five.[87]

Blake later gave his account of what happened when he published *How the GAA was grabbed* in 1900, an account that, as de Búrca acknowledged, 'convincingly answers many of the charges made against him'.[88] Blake held that Dinneen had engineered a coup to remove him. He explained that the demand for the special meeting did not contain the requisite number of signatories and that two of them were forgeries. He claimed he had no knowledge of the reason for the meeting until after it commenced. Various theories have been put forward as to the actual reasons for his removal and a number of points may be made in relation to his dismissal.[89]

Dinneen, from Ballylanders in Limerick, was an outstanding athlete in his youth. He was vice-president of the GAA from 1891 and became president on the same day that Blake was elected secretary. Dinneen was an IRB man but he recognised in the early 1890s that supporting Parnell and antagonising the clergy was not beneficial to the GAA. As early as February 1893, two years before Blake became secretary, he told members of the Central Council that the introduction of politics had greatly damaged the GAA and that they should bar political disputes within it to restore it to its old standing.[90] There is no evidence that he dissented from the 1893 circular that emphasised the need to avoid party politics or to the change in the rule that debarred police from membership of the GAA. Two years later, when meeting Archbishop Croke alongside Blake, he unequivocally asserted the GAA's non-political stance. However, he may have reverted to his original IRB views later and it appears that Blake believed this was the case. Blake's distrust of Dinneen was clear when he publicly denounced him at the Galway convention in 1896.[91] In July 1897, at the

[87] *Sport*, 15 Jan. 1898; Blake, *How the GAA was grabbed*, p. 7.
[88] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 74.
[89] For a selection of views on Blake's removal see, Richard McElligott, 'Richard Blake and the resurrection of the GAA, 1890–98' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, xxiv (2013), pp 256–69; Caffrey, 'Richard T. Blake and the GAA', pp 633–655; de Búrca, *The GAA: a history,* pp 72–76 and Ó Duinín, *Frank B. Dinneen,* pp 178–93.
[90] Puirséal, *The GAA in its time*, p. 103.
[91] CBS, Précis of secret society information for the month of December 1896, 2 Dec 1896 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 12861/S). The *Tuam Herald* report of the convention, 12 Dec. 1896, carried no reference to Blake's attack.

annual convention in Thurles, Blake stated, in the presence of Dinneen, that he would denounce any man who tried to drag politics into the association.[92] Significantly, when the 1798 Centenary Committee – an organisation replete with IRB men – offered the GAA two places on its executive, Blake and others spoke against acceptance but Dinneen was more cautious, stating that he had great regard for the Centenary Committee. When Spencer Lyons of Limerick proposed that the GAA should not accept the offer as 'we are non-sectarian and non-political', Dinneen ruled his motion out of order.[93] The police had predicted earlier in the year that Dinneen and other IRB men would try to involve the GAA in the 1798 centenary events but that Blake would oppose this.[94] Consequently historians including de Búrca have argued that Dinneen wanted to remove Blake because of his lack of strong nationalist views.[95] However, there is no evidence that the GAA became more nationalistic once Blake was removed, which casts doubt on this thesis. It was not until the early 1900s, after Dinneen had stepped down, that the organisation became overtly nationalist once again. Furthermore, in the vote to remove Blake, not all those on the IRB wing of the Central Council voted for his removal. Indeed, James Nowlan of Kilkenny, an acknowledged IRB man and president of the GAA from 1901 to 1921, not only voted against the proposal but also handed in a notice of motion to rescind the resolution. However, the motion was not put before subsequent meetings, because, according to a Carlow delegate quoted by Blake, Dinneen ensured it was not placed on the agenda.[96] If the IRB was behind the effort to remove Blake one would expect that such a conspiratorial organisation could ensure all its members voted in unison.

Regarding financial mismanagement there had been some discussion on the issue at the annual congress in Thurles in July 1897, six months prior to Blake's dismissal. According to Dinneen, Blake had no balance sheet made out and he asked that two auditors be appointed to report to a special meeting. In his statement Blake also suggested the appointment of auditors and three men were subsequently appointed:

[92] CBS, Précis of secret society information for the month of July 1897, 8 July 1897 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 14049/S).
[93] Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, pp 112–3.
[94] CBS, Précis of secret society information for the month of July 1897, 8 July 1897 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 13909/S).
[95] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 76.
[96] Blake, *How the GAA was grabbed*, p. 8.

Thomas Dooley of Cork, James Halvey of Limerick and John Bourke of Tipperary.[97] No report had been prepared by the time Blake was removed in January 1898. Significantly, Dooley, the only member of the audit committee present, voted against Blake's removal, so he must not have been convinced of Dinneen's case. In the event, no audit was ever published, despite promises at a number of Central Council meetings that it would be and the failure to produce an audit suggests that the claim of financial mismanagement was based on flimsy grounds.

Blake claimed that Dinneen moved against him to grab the position of secretary for himself and did so by means of an illegally convened meeting and forged proxy letters that enabled his supporters to attend. He was correct in asserting that the meeting was called without the requisite number requesting it and he provided evidence that at least one of those present used a forged proxy vote. Four of those who signed the request for the special meeting, presumably on the basis that they were unhappy with Blake, actually voted against or abstained when the motion to remove him was put. Those voting against were Thomas Dooley, James Nowlan and Patrick McGrath of Tipperary, with Michael Deering of Cork abstaining.[98] The Cork delegation had good reason to vote against Blake as the county under Deering's presidency had seceded from the GAA for part of the time Blake was secretary,[99] and Dooley was the defeated candidate when Blake was first elected.[100] Yet Dooley supported Blake and Deering abstained. Those voting for Blake's removal, apart from Dinneen, had a poor record of attendance at Central Council meetings. J. Wall of Waterford had attended eight of them but J.P. Doris of Queen's County (now Laois) and Dan Wood of Dublin had attended only one, while the other two voters were proxies. Thus, it seems that those who were most familiar with Blake and his record did not want him removed whereas the others were obviously swayed by the case Dinneen made against Blake.

There may have been an element of personal animosity and jealousy in Dinneen's attitude, as Blake alleged. The role of secretary must have seemed attractive to Dinneen. From 1896 the holder was entitled to fifteen percent of revenues, and with

[97] *FJ*, 5 July, 1897.
[98] Blake, *How the GAA was grabbed*, p. 4.
[99] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p 73.
[100] *Sport*, 13 Apr. 1895.

affiliations and attendances on the rise, it could be assumed that the salary would increase. In 1897 RIC Special Branch reports refer to Dinneen as being in poor financial circumstances and suggested that he would be forced to sell the family public house in Limerick.[101] Blake also claimed that Dinneen had borrowed money from him and that he paid many of Dinneen's hotel bills 'for the credit of the Association.'[102] It was also alleged that Dinneen took half of the gate receipts from the Offaly hurling final in 1898.[103] Although both men had assumed the two highest offices in the GAA at the same time, practically all of the credit for the revival of the GAA went to Blake. He was an astute publicist and most press reports attributed the improved organisation to him, while Dinneen received little public acknowledgement for his role. Blake, though a superb organiser, could be dogmatic and domineering and had a tendency to do everything himself, from administration to refereeing. Some of his refereeing decisions may have antagonised losing counties and it would have been more astute to retire from refereeing once appointed secretary; but, as the chief architect of the revised rules, he probably believed he was best qualified to implement them.

Given the paucity of evidence from the main protagonists and the dearth of Central Council minutes before 1899 it is impossible to reach definitive conclusions. In summary, it seems unlikely that the case for mismanagement had much validity and that Dinneen probably acted from a combination of political and personal reasons. Blake had been increasingly critical of Dinneen, and the divergence in their views was clear in their differing attitude towards the invitation to the GAA to join the 1798 Centenary Committee. Blake's views were strongly held and he expressed them stridently. Dinneen probably had to temper his real views during the early part of his presidency but they were coming to the fore in 1897 as the 1798 centenary approached. However, he did not have the support of all in the IRB wing of the Central Council, as evidenced by the attitude of James Nowlan, and he needed a valid reason for moving against Blake. The allegation of mismanagement provided this.

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[101] CBS, Précis of secret society information for the month of March 1897, 18 Mar. 1897 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 13307/S).
[102] Blake, *How the GAA was grabbed*, p. 13.
[103] Seán McEvoy, 'The GAA and nationalism in Offaly, 1884–1918' in *Offaly Heritage*, viii (2015), pp 180–201; p. 196.

Meath after Blake

Following Blake's departure as Meath chairman, the GAA in the county gradually declined before collapsing completely in the late 1890s in a repeat of the situation between 1890 and 1893. His departure heralded a changed approach in the committee's attitude to political issues and also in its organisational capability. P.J. Bailey of Dunderry became the new chairman, while Barney Clarke, who had proposed the removal of Blake, became secretary. The new committee adopted an entirely different tone. At the 1895 convention the chairman proposed and the secretary seconded a motion that brought the GAA into the political arena, advocating 'the release of the men now suffering in English prisons for political offences' and calling on the county's MPs to support an amnesty for political prisoners at all times in the British House of Commons.[104]

Blake had in effect combined the role of chairman and secretary but Clarke did not have his administrative and organisational skills. Under Blake's stewardship, the 1895 football championship had reached the semi-final stage and the finalists were known by the end of August. Owen Roes, a team from the St Mary's parish in Drogheda, qualified to meet Navan Pierce O'Mahonys but declined to play at the usual venue in Navan because, as one colourful account put it, they were 'not enamoured of fighting the Navan cocks on their own dunghill.'[105] Finally, the county committee awarded the title to O'Mahonys, only to be embarrassed when Owen Roes lined out at the subsequent Meath v Kilkenny Leinster championship game and refused to leave until a deal was brokered that gave them a re-fixed county final with O'Mahonys. The final attracted 4,000 spectators to the Yellow Furze grounds with the result that the crowd swarmed through the gate, depriving the county committee of much needed revenue.[106] It was an inauspicious start for the new regime.

Matters deteriorated further over the next two years as the number of clubs dropped from a high of forty-four in 1895 to twenty-nine in both 1896 and 1897 (see appendix three). However, these figures include many clubs who played challenge

[104] *Sport,* 14 Dec. 1895.
[105] *DA,* 30 Nov. 1895.
[106] *Sport*, 30 Nov. 1895; O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 44.

games and tournaments but were not affiliated to the county committee.[107] Ironically, this took place at a time when the Meath champions, Pierce O'Mahonys, matched the best clubs in the country. Meath champions for three consecutive years, 1894–96, they lost the 1895 All-Ireland final to Tipperary's Arravale Rovers, by 0–4 to 0–3. However, the following day the referee announced in the press that it should have been a draw, as he should have disallowed one of Tipperary's points.[108] Usually this would have resulted in objections and a refixture but the chairman of Pierce O'Mahonys, J.P. Timmon, stated they would not object. He hoped 'their example may be followed by all Gaelic clubs in time to come so that the GAA may be worthy of the respect and support of all creeds and classes'. Later, Blake's proposal to Central Council that special medals be awarded to O'Mahonys was unanimously agreed.[109]

In 1896, the county committee's competence was called into question by the local press and by a number of clubs, including O'Mahonys, who declared that the committee was 'unworthy of the confidence of the Gaelic clubs of Meath.'[110] The committee had neglected to forward clubs' affiliations to Central Council as required, so O'Mahonys, having affiliated directly with the council, claimed the championship as the only affiliated club in Meath.[111] The matter was eventually resolved and O'Mahonys took their third title in a row, defeating Owen Roes by 1–4 to 0–3.[112] However, by mid 1897 Barney Clarke was ousted due to his continuing inept management and the decline of the GAA. When Clarke resigned, stating that he had done his best, Patrick Daly, representing Navan Emmets, launched a stinging riposte telling him that his best amounted to nothing. They had, Daly asserted, lost seventeen clubs since Clarke became secretary, and they had lost also the respect of enthusiastic supporters of their national pastimes.[113]

The new chairman was J.P. Timmon, the former chairman of Pierce O'Mahonys, while the incoming secretary was Laurence Malone Sheridan. Timmon was a

[107] See for example, *DI*, 15 June 1895.
[108] *Irish Daily Independent*, 17 Mar. 1896.
[109] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 47.
[110] *Sport*, 27 June 1896.
[111] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 50.
[112] *Sport*, 21 Nov. 1896.
[113] *MC*, 3 July 1897.

member of a long-established medical family in Navan.[114] He was a pharmacist who had captained the Rory O'Moores club in Belturbet, Cavan from its foundation in 1888, before settling in his native Navan.[115] Like Blake he had an eclectic taste in sport, with an interest in Gaelic football, athletics, rugby, soccer, hockey and especially cricket. He was chairman, and probably trainer, of Pierce O'Mahonys in the 1890s, president of the Navan Sports and Cycling Club from its inception in 1893, and became Meath's representative on the Central Council of the GAA. In 1896 his standing was acknowledged when he became one of the vice-presidents of the GAA and chaired a number of Central Council meetings.[116] Consequently he brought administrative and leadership experience to complement Sheridan's youthful enthusiasm. He also brought a political philosophy similar to Blake's, which he expounded on his election as chairman. He stated that to revive the association it 'must exclude politics of every kind, shape and description.' They should welcome every Irishman to their ranks and 'should not as Gaels, under any circumstances, take part in any political demonstration.'[117] This was a reference to the 1798 centenary celebrations, which were then being discussed.

Sheridan, from Trim, was a young man of twenty and was an all-round athlete, taking part in running, cycling, cricket and Gaelic football. He wanted an end to what he described as 'petty jealousies, and abominable recriminations, which of late years have destroyed the GAA in Meath' and deplored the fact that only twelve clubs were affiliated while upwards of forty were playing football.[118] This suggests that clubs were interested in playing but had little incentive to affiliate, as very few of them had realistic expectations of winning a championship organised on a knock-out format. As most would be eliminated after one game, it was more attractive to organise local challenge matches and save on affiliation and travel. In addition, the failure of the county committee to forward the few affiliations they received to Central Council meant clubs had no confidence in the committee.

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[114] See Pigot & Co., *City of Dublin and Hibernian provincial directory, 1824* (London, 1824), p. 175 for reference to John Timmon, an apothecary, in the Market Square, Navan.
[115] Seán McElgunn, *A century of the Rorys: Belturbet Rory O'Moore GAA club 1888–1988* (Belturbet, 1988), p. 9.
[116] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 48.
[117] Timmon's remarks were inaccurately reported in *MC*, 17 July 1897. His full speech was printed at his request in *MC*, 31 July 1897.
[118] *MC*, 5 June 1897.

The new appointees lasted less than a year and were unable to halt the decline. To make the championship more attractive to clubs they organised a junior football championship, with the winners qualifying to play the stronger O'Mahonys or Owen Roes in the final. Newtown Round Towers, a club based near Trim, won a rescheduled junior final in February 1898 before losing to Owen Roes in the decider.[119] By then the O'Mahony's club had lapsed, following its exclusion from the Leinster championship after a series of controversial games with Dublin's Young Irelands.[120] The final was the first game Owen Roes had played in twelve months. The fact that they played so infrequently was symptomatic of a serious decline of the GAA in the county. In April, Timmon and Sheridan resigned.

Unfortunately, press reports give no reason for the sudden decision by both men but it may have been due to disillusion with the progress made since their election. In his report to the county committee, Sheridan referred to a sharp decline in affiliations in 1898 and to the inability of the committee to afford medals for the champions 'owing to the financial state of the committee.' [121] Sheridan was also the subject of allegations in the press that he played illegally with Round Towers in the junior final and this may have been a factor in his decision to depart. Timmons' withdrawal is difficult to explain. Strangely, two months before his resignation, in February 1898, Timmon refereed the junior final, chaired a meeting of the county committee where he complimented both teams and looked forward to a resuscitation of the games in Meath, and again spoke of the need to rigidly exclude politics from their ranks. The meeting also agreed to arrange a date for the annual convention.[122] However, the convention never took place and the new century would dawn before the GAA in Meath began to re-organise. Timmon seems to have been a reluctant holder of the chairman's position, as he intimated in 1897 that he might resign, feeling that the convention that elected him was unrepresentative. At the February committee meeting referred to above a delegate told him: 'We are only too anxious to allow you to remain,' which adds to the belief that he had only a tentative commitment to the

[119] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 56; *MC*, 26 Feb. 1898.
[120] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, pp 53-4.
[121] *MC*, 7 May 1898.
[122] *MC*, 26 Feb. 1898.

post.[123] He may also have been influenced by the treatment of Blake in January 1898 as they shared a similar philosophy regarding the GAA, had worked together on the Central Council and as president and secretary respectively of the Navan Cycling and Athletic Sports Club in the early 1890s, and both played cricket.

Regardless of the reasons for their departure, Timmon and Sheridan were deserting a sinking ship. The GAA was then in decline nationally also; only eight counties were represented at the annual congress of 1899 and 1900 with ten present the following year.[124] Meath was not represented at either and there was no county committee between 1898 and early 1902. When Timmon and Sheridan took office there were upwards of thirty clubs in the county (see appendix three), but the majority of them were unaffiliated. This was due to a combination of reasons. The county committee was an ineffective body for most of the decade. Apart from the period under Blake, no chairman lasted for more than a year, and no secretary served for more than two years. The county committee rarely represented more than a handful of clubs and personnel altered from year to year so the constant turnover of membership and officers resulted in a lack of continuity. Secondly, as outlined earlier there was little incentive for clubs to affiliate as very few of them had realistic expectations of winning a championship, and local challenge matches were a more attractive option.

The failure to regain the support of the Catholic Church hindered the GAA also, especially in rural areas. Despite Archbishop Croke's continued backing many clergy remained antagonistic. Bishop Nulty died in 1898 but his successor, Bishop Matthew Gaffney, was no more favourable to the GAA. While parish priest of Clara in Offaly he attacked it, saying that he

> did not object to workpeople amusing themselves, but I object to see outdoor sports made a medium of party organisation. I warn young men against joining any such association, as it is an exclusive one, and they will be entrapped into secret societies.

[123] *MC*, 3 July 1897, 26 Feb. 1898.
[124] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 82.

He later claimed that the GAA was got up by publicans and led to Sunday desecration.[125] His curate, Fr Patrick Smith, a native of Dunderry, county Meath, joined in the denunciation, declaring that the GAA was even worse than Sabbath desecration – it was the forerunner of secret society work.[126] Thus the GAA in Meath faced into the new century weaker than at any time since its formation over a decade earlier.

Conclusion

The final decade of the nineteenth century represented the nadir in the GAA's fortunes. By 1890 it was in crisis in most counties in Ireland but matters were worse in Meath than in many areas. Due to the support of Archbishop Thomas Croke of Cashel as a patron of the organisation many Catholic clergy at local level took positions in the fledgling organisation. In Meath, Fr Michael Woods acted as chairman of the county committee and priests presided over a number of clubs. However, the influence of the IRB in the GAA at national level, as well as the belief that games were associated with excessive drinking and that those travelling outside their parish to play or watch games were missing Mass, resulted in the church turning against the GAA. Thomas Nulty, the bishop of Meath, was outspoken in his opposition and in July 1889 he announced a prohibition on the playing of matches outside the parish due to the increase in drunkenness and secret society activity involved.

The result was a precipitous decline in the number of clubs and games. Based on the local newspaper archives, eighty-one Meath clubs can be identified in 1888 but this dropped to eighteen by 1890 and ten the following year. While the clergy may have had grounds for their opposition to the GAA on the basis that it encouraged drinking and caused parishioners to miss religious services, the evidence for IRB involvement in Meath clubs is slim.[127] Even the police, who were obsessed by IRB involvement in all nationalist organisations could cite little or no evidence of such activity in Meath. Clerical opposition deprived the GAA of the support of the local Catholic parish

[125] CBS, Précis re secret society information, May 1896, 22 May 1896 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 11912/S).
[126] CBS, Précis re secret society information, Sept. 1896, 3 Sept. 1896 (NAI, 3/716/7, box 4, 12533/S).
[127] For evidence of the importance of drinking associated with games see chapter one.

priest or curate and as Paul Rouse has observed when members of the GAA had to chose between the clergy and the games the majority chose the former.[128]

Emigration and migration to Dublin also robbed clubs of players, especially in the under-populated rural areas. Finally, the Parnell split in 1891 was particularly bitter in Meath, and a series of elections between 1892 and 1895 ensured the dissension continued for much of the decade. Although the split was not the cause of the GAA's decline in the county it administered the final blow and the organisation was practically non-existent in the 1891–93 period, with no county committee or championship in those years.

Richard T. Blake spearheaded a revival in the middle of the decade by reforming the playing rules and directing the GAA locally and nationally onto a non-political path. He achieved major success in the former and initial progress in the latter before losing his positions as chairman of the Meath county committee in 1895 and national secretary in 1898. During his period as Meath chairman the number of affiliated clubs trebled, championships were run off efficiently and the playing rules were clarified. Blake had some success with his non-political agenda, but ironically, was forced to resign as a result of allegedly supporting an anti-Parnellite candidate in the North Meath election in 1895. Within three years of his departure, only a handful of clubs were affiliated and Meath was again without a county committee or a championship from 1898 until 1901.

Blake's ideas gained support at national level also and his reforming agenda as Central Council secretary saw changes to the playing rules and a restatement of GAA policy that focused on the games to the exclusion of politics. Even Frank B. Dinneen as GAA president, though a member of the IRB, supported the non-political emphasis for a number of years. The number of affiliated clubs and income more than trebled between 1894 and 1897. Despite this, Blake was removed as general secretary in January 1898, ostensibly for financial mismanagement but more likely for a combination of political and personal reasons. It is likely that Dinneen became increasingly unhappy with Blake's persistent, strident restatement of the non-

[128] Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland' p. 344.

political nature of the GAA and acted to remove him. This occurred on the cusp of the 1798 centenary, the celebration of which Dinneen and many others in the GAA favoured but Blake vehemently opposed. However, Blake made a well-argued case that Dinneen illegally engineered his removal and grabbed the position of secretary for reasons of personal gain. Despite Blake's failure to retain his positions in the GAA it can be argued that if Cusack founded the organisation, Blake set in motion the organisation we know today, both in terms of its playing rules and its non-political approach.

Chapter 3

Revival, 1900–1912

Introduction

Following a decade of decline in the 1890s, the GAA nationally and in Meath experienced a revival in the first decade of the new century. This chapter outlines the extent of this revival and explores the reasons for it. Paul Rouse has written that 'The rejuvenation of the GAA was based on the reorganisation of its sports by a new generation of officials who placed the association on something of an even keel.'[1] Alterations in the administrative structure of the GAA and a changed cultural and political climate benefitted the organisation. A new leadership took over at national level in 1901, with James Nowlan from Kilkenny as president and Luke O'Toole, a native of Wicklow who settled in Dublin as a young man, as secretary, and they remained in their positions for a combined period of forty-eight years. De Búrca argued that they 'found the Association at the lowest point of its fortunes, [and] were to be instrumental in reviving it and guiding it to its first period of real expansion.'[2] Meath also welcomed new officers later in the decade when Seaghan MacNamidhe and Lorcán Ó Cléirigh, both from Navan, were elected as chairman and secretary respectively. Between them they guided the association in the county for twenty-one years.

The new century was marked by a resurgence of cultural nationalism, spearheaded by the Gaelic League, which placed an emphasis on the revival and promotion of all things Irish – the language, traditions, music, industries, games and pastimes. In many counties, and particularly in Meath, the Gaelic League was central to the establishment of hurling clubs. The GAA moved away from Richard Blake's vision of the organisation as a purely sporting and strictly non-political one, to an association committed to the nationalist agenda. An active Gaelic League, the commemoration of the centenary of the 1798 rebellion, the impact of the Boer War and the growth of ideas of self-reliance resulted in a GAA that saw itself, in the words of Thomas F. O'Sullivan, the Kerry GAA secretary and influential voice at

[1] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland,* pp 208–9.
[2] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 86.

congress, as not simply a sporting organisation but 'essentially a patriotic association'.[3]

A Revival of Fortunes

At the beginning of the new century the GAA nationally was in straitened circumstances. Its financial position was precarious and its leadership, mainly men who had been involved in the organisation since its formation in 1884, lacked the energy and ideas to re-build and revitalise it. In Meath, it was dead, if not yet buried. No county committee was formed in 1898 and it was 1902 before formal efforts at revival began. In the interim no teams affiliated with the Central Council, there were no county championships, and only challenge and tournament games were played.[4]

The 1901 congress, held in Thurles in September, set in motion the revival of the GAA nationally. Delegates from a mere ten counties attended, mostly from the south and east, and Meath was not represented. The delegates were eager for change and passed a motion that the business of the association had been conducted in an unsatisfactory manner for some time past. Michael Deering of Cork, the sitting president, had died in March while Frank B. Dinneen, who had been president or secretary since 1895, stood down from the latter position. The new leadership comprised James Nowlan, unopposed for the position of president, and Luke J. O'Toole as the incoming secretary. O'Toole had to fend off a challenge from the old guard with Richard T. Blake and Michael Cusack nominated against him. Blake's nomination was queried, probably on the grounds that he was not a member of an affiliated club – a reflection of the state of affairs in Meath – and on a show of hands the majority voted against his nomination. O'Toole then narrowly defeated Cusack by nineteen votes to seventeen.[5]

Nowlan was a nationalist with strong separatist views and the RIC believed he was a member of the IRB. Representing the Confederate GAA club in Kilkenny city, he was mainly responsible for the revival of the GAA in the county following the

[3] O'Sullivan speaking at the annual congress in 1900, see *CE*, 11 Sept. 1900.
[4] A number of unaffiliated clubs played challenge and occasional tournament games. See for example, *MC*, 16 July 1898, 26 Nov. 1898, 4 Mar. 1899, 20 May 1899, 18 Nov. 1899, 2 Dec. 1899, 20 Jan, 1900.
[5] Central Council minutes, 22 Sept. 1901 (CPA, GAA/CC/01/01) [cited hereafter as Central Council mins]; *MC*, 28 Sept. 1901.

Parnell split. He served as Kilkenny's delegate to Central Council and acted as vice-president from 1899 to 1901. He was active in the Kilkenny branch of the Gaelic League and was the first to sign GAA Central Council minutes in Irish, a practice he followed until his resignation in 1921.[6] O'Toole remained as secretary of the GAA until his death at work in 1929.[7]

The annual congress of 1900 had proposed administrative reform, agreeing to establish provincial councils, and Leinster, in 1900, was the first to be formed. Munster, Connacht and Ulster followed suit in 1901, 1902 and 1903 respectively. The councils improved the organisation and management of the GAA. They were intermediate bodies between the county committees and the Central Council and they provided a degree of decentralisation that relieved the central organisation of numerous administrative tasks. The provincial councils now dealt with appeals by clubs against their county committees and organised the provincial championships. The men in charge of Leinster Council were young, able officials. Wexford provided the first secretary, Walter Hanrahan, who remained in the position until 1916, thereby providing continuity to the fledgling organisation. The first chairman of the council was James Nowlan,[8] but he stepped down in 1904 due to the demands of his position as national president. By 1906–07 the council's annual receipts exceeded £1,000, more than the national organisation collected annually during the 1890s, and the council recorded an average profit of £200 annually up to 1909. This benefitted the counties also, as just half the profits were retained by the provincial council while a quarter was divided among the constituent counties and a quarter went to Central Council.[9]

[6] For a detailed account of his career see Jim Walsh, *James Nowlan: the alderman and the GAA in his time (*Kilkenny, 2013); Cathal Billings, 'The first minutes: an analysis of the Irish language within the official structures of the Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–1934' in *Éire–Ireland*, xlviii, no. 1 & 2 (2013), pp 32–53; p. 47.
[7] Pádraig O'Toole, *The glory and the anguish* (Loughrea, 1984), pp 19–20; see also Cormac Moore, 'Luke O'Toole: servant of the GAA' in Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923*, pp 53–70.
[8] *CE*, 24 Sept. 1901.
[9] Marcus de Búrca, *Gaelic Games in Leinster, forbairt agus fás 1900–1984* (Mullingar, 1984), p. 25; Central Council mins., 8 Nov. 1903.

Revival in Meath

Despite the lack of a county committee, some GAA clubs continued to exist in Meath in the period 1898–1901 and the press carried irregular accounts of local challenge games and occasional tournaments. In January 1901, the Leinster Council secretary, Walter Hanrahan, contacted various counties, including Meath, and, despite its non-affiliation with Central Council, Meath participated in the Leinster football championship. The outcome revealed the extent of the county's decline, as Louth overwhelmed what was mainly a Stamullen team by 6-19 to 0-5. Dublin repeated the punishment the following year by 4-8 to 0-0.[10]

It was March 1902 before efforts were made to re-establish a county committee when Patrick Nash, a Dublin representative on the Leinster and Central Councils, attended a preliminary meeting in Navan for that purpose. The Navan Hurling Club, later known as Navan Hibernians, seems to have been the prime mover in the attempt to re-establish a committee and Christopher Byrne, a member of the club, was selected as temporary secretary while Simon Murray, also associated with the club, became chairman. Finally, in late March, a sparsely attended meeting of five affiliated clubs met, and Richard Blake, who was now a member of the Rathkenny club, was elected chairman by five votes to four. Blake said he was sorry there was a contest, as he had no ambition for the position and attended in the interest of sport. However, he had sufficient ambition to stand for the position and force a vote. Interestingly, he referred to sport rather than Gaelic sport, a view that was consistent with his history. Christopher Byrne of the Navan Hurling Club again agreed to act as secretary *pro-tem*.[11] Three weeks later Blake convened a meeting to make draws for the championships, comprising four teams in both football and hurling. He completed the championships with his customary efficiency, Navan Hurling Club defeating their town rivals, Young Irelands, by 1-3 to 0-1 in June while Castletown won the football title in July. The hurling final took place in Oristown on what was allegedly the site of the ancient Tailteann Games.[12] Blake attended congress in Thurles at the end of the year, seconding Nowlan for President, but both the tone of

[10] *Sport*, 26 Jan. 1901; *DI*, 13 July 1901; *MC*, 8 Mar. 1902. Stamullen was the only Meath club to affiliate in 1901 and thus represented the county.
[11] *MC*, 15 Mar. 1902, 29 Mar. 1902.
[12] *MC*, 7 June 1902, 14 June 1902. The Tailteann Games were prehistoric games believed to have taken place at Teltown, outside Navan. The GAA organised Tailteann Games in Dublin in 1924, 1928 and 1932.

the meeting and many of the decisions taken there were contrary to his philosophy.[13] Early in the following year he stepped down as chairman of the Meath county committee without revealing his reasons; it is reasonable to assume that he realised the GAA was moving in a direction that was contrary to his non-political and game-focused philosophy.

The GAA was both a part of the cultural revival and a beneficiary of it. From the GAA's point of view the most important development was the formation of the Gaelic League in 1893 with the objective of reviving Irish as a spoken language. Douglas Hyde, its first president, outlined his views the previous year in an address to the Irish National Literary Society in a paper entitled 'The necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland'. He believed that Ireland as a nation had lost its dignity and self-respect and that the language was the best way to restore that lost pride. He asserted: 'we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish' and cease imitating England's literature, music, games and ideas.[14] Although slow to attract support initially, the Gaelic League expanded rapidly at the turn of the century, establishing branches throughout the country. It was founded at a time when people were wary of politics following the Parnell split, and its focus on the Irish language, culture and traditions created a flood of energetic idealism. Its non-political stance attracted people who differed in politics but were nationally minded. Hyde was a popular and respected leader of the League, and in 1902 he became a patron of the GAA.[15] This was an honorary position but it was intended as a symbol of the close relationship between the GAA and the Gaelic League.

Although the League's chief objective was the revival of Irish as a spoken language, it also focused on supporting Irish industries, music and dance, and it recognised Irish games and pastimes, especially hurling, as a central aspect of Gaelic culture. Hyde himself declared that the GAA had done more for Ireland than all the speeches of politicians during the previous five years.[16] Many Gaelic League branches

[13] *EH*, 1 Dec. 1902.
[14] Breandán Ó Conaire, (ed.), *Language, lore and lyrics: essays and lectures* (Dublin, 1986), p. 186.
[15] Cormac Moore, *The GAA v Douglas Hyde* (Dublin, 2012), p. 39.
[16] Brian Ó Conchubhair, 'The GAA and the Irish language', in Cronin *et al*, *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009*, pp 137–156; p. 138.

inspired or directly established new hurling clubs. The result was an increase in affiliated clubs and a welcome influx of young, committed members. William Nolan's research in Dublin shows that the number of clubs grew from thirty-three at the end of the century to forty-five in 1901, while in 1902 thirty-four new clubs affiliated. He ascribed the growth in the main to the influence of the Gaelic League, which was particularly active in establishing hurling clubs.[17] A typical example was the St Laurence O'Toole club, which was formed from the Gaelic League branch of the same name in inner city Dublin in 1901.[18] Marnie Hay has outlined a similar pattern in Belfast. The Tír na nÓg branch of the Gaelic League established a hurling team in early 1901 and by mid-August 1901 there were seven hurling clubs in the city.[19] Tom Hunt has also traced the influence of the Gaelic League in the formation of hurling clubs in Westmeath prior to 1905.[20]

Football was the main focus of GAA clubs in Meath until the turn of the century. There is some evidence that hurling was played in Meath prior to 1884 but it is anecdotal, intermittent and infrequent. Liam P. Ó Caithnia is his seminal survey of the game prior to the establishment of the GAA found a number of references to hurling in, or near, Meath, much of it in the northern borderlands, where the game failed to flourish after 1884. He cites recollections of games in Moynalty on Sunday afternoons using hooked sticks hewn from roadside ditches, and big timber spools used for balls.[21] A contributor to the schools' folklore project in 1937 wrote, based on information from his eighty-six-year-old informant, that hurling was played in the Kells area in the decade and a half before 1884.[22]

Despite the possible pre-GAA hurling tradition a number of efforts to establish hurling, usually in conjunction with football clubs, all failed. As early as 1887, two of the most prominent football clubs in the county, Kilmessan and Dowdstown, announced in the press that they had introduced hurling, but there is no record of any games played, while there were also claims that a hurling and football club had been

[17] Nolan (ed.), *The GAA in Dublin*, i, pp 72, 76.
[18] Jimmy Wren, *St Laurence O'Toole G.A.C. 1901–2001: a centenary history* (Dublin, 2001), p. 3.
[19] Marnie Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the nationalist movement in twentieth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2009), pp 26–7.
[20] Hunt, *Sport and society*, pp 190–99.
[21] Liam P. Ó Caithnia, *Scéal na hIomána* (Dublin, 1980), p. 636.
[22] Irish Folklore Commission, Schools' Folklore Project, Kells, Scoil na mBráthar, vol. 703, p. 160.

established in Drumconrath.[23] The following year two teams from the Brian Boru club in Clontarf, Dublin, played an exhibition game at the Navan Harp and Shamrock's tournament and it was noted that 'There is not at the present time a single hurling club in the Royal County'.[24] Dunshaughlin hosted an exhibition in 1889 between Crom a Boos of Maynooth, county Kildare, and Dauntless of Dublin, which was described as 'the first exhibition of our national pastime in that part of the country.'[25] The failure to establish hurling teams is probably due to a couple of factors: it was comparatively easy for newcomers to play football, and the game did not require any special equipment, whereas hurling required a higher level of skill and access to a camán (hurley stick). Secondly, by the late 1880s and throughout the 1890s the GAA was in serious decline in the county. With football clubs finding it difficult to survive, the prospects of initiating hurling were slim.

The game finally established itself in Meath at the beginning of the twentieth century, and, similar to the experience in Dublin, Belfast and Westmeath, many of the clubs formed had strong Gaelic League links. In November 1900, Dunshaughlin was the first town in Meath to establish a Gaelic League branch and in the following year Navan, Kells, Athboy, Slane, Oldcastle, Trim, Rathmore and Warrenstown set up branches.[26] A number of them, including Kells, Athboy, Dunshaughlin, Warrenstown, Kilskyre and Trim, soon established hurling clubs as part of their commitment to Gaelic culture.

The first suggestion for a hurling club in Kells came in late 1901 from Tom Daly, who was the editor of the *Meath Chronicle* and secretary of the local Gaelic League. He proposed that 'a football and hurling club be started in connection with this branch of the Gaelic League' and the club was established in March 1902.[27] It seems that while the inspiration for a hurling club came from the Gaelic League and the two organisations had some overlapping membership, the hurlers operated independently.

[23] For Kilmessan see *Sport*, 9 Apr. 1887, 16 Apr. 1987; for Dowdstown see *DI*, 6 Aug. 1887; for Drumconrath see *Sport*, 23 Apr. 1887.
[24] *Sport*, 22 Sept. 1888.
[25] *Sport*, 26 Jan. 1889.
[26] Daithí Ó Muirí, 'Peter Murray and the founding of the first branch of the Gaelic League in county Meath' in *Ríocht na Mídhe*, xxvi (2015), pp 233–268; p. 255.
[27] *MC*, 19 Oct. 1901, 29 Mar. 1902. Handball had previously been popular in Kells and was reestablished in 1902 also.

This was certainly the case in 1903 when the hurlers declined to support a suggestion that they formally join the Gaelic League.[28] The two organisations co-operated regularly, however, for example lobbying for St Patrick's Day to be designated a national holiday and persuading the businesses in the town to close on 17 March. Initially known as the Faughs, the hurling club soon adopted the name St Columkilles, sharing the local saint's name with the town's Gaelic League branch.[29] A second hurling club, a junior one, was established in Kells in 1904, but it had a short-lived existence.[30] Andrew Russell was its secretary and later held the same position with the Kells Gaelic League branch and also served on the district committee of the League.[31]

In March 1901, the O'Growney Gaelic League branch was established in Athboy. It was named after Fr Eugene O'Growney, a native of the area and a co-founder of the League in 1893. Within a year a hurling club was formed in Athboy, named Fir na Muintire [The men of the people]. Fr Eugene O'Growney's brother, Patrick, chaired both the League branch and the hurling club and he declared that the language revival should go hand in hand with the revival of national games.[32] It was an active club, playing the Young Irelands from Navan on four occasions before the end of 1902.

In Dunshaughlin, P.J. Murray was the inspiration behind the formation of the local Gaelic League branch. He was a shopkeeper with a combined public house, grocery and drapery business, and was acquainted with prominent members of the League in Dublin.[33] Among them were Seán T. O'Kelly, who later became president of Ireland, and Patrick Archer, the manager of *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the Gaelic League newspaper, and a founder member of both the Wild Geese Gaelic football club in Oldtown, county Dublin, and the Shamrocks hurling club in London.[34] P.H. Pearse, the future 1916 leader, addressed an *aeridheacht* [open air festival] in the village in

[28] *MC*, 10 Jan. 1903.
[29] For examples of co-operation see *MC*, 21 Feb. 1903, 7 Mar. 1903, 5 Mar. 1904.
[30] It is unclear if 'junior' meant a team composed of young players or of men deemed not capable of playing with the premier team.
[31] *MC*, 17 Nov. 1906, 29 Aug. 1908.
[32] *MC*, 22 Mar. 1902; *DI*, 28 June 1902.
[33] Ó Muirí, 'Peter Murray and the founding of the first branch', p. 234.
[34] Frances Clarke, 'Archer, Patrick', in McGuire and Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, i, pp 145–6; Griffin, *Gaelic hearts*, p. 32.

1902.[35] A substantial number of those who joined the new branch were members of the Dunshaughlin St Seachnall's football club and eighteen months later the members decided to establish a hurling team, which Murray named Na Fir le Chéile (The United Men). The team soon adopted the name Dunshaughlin Hurling Club but remained separate from the football club and linked to the Gaelic League branch for a couple of years. However, both the Gaelic League and the hurling club failed to maintain their initial enthusiasm and when both lapsed the nearby Warrenstown Gaelic League branch stepped into the breach and formed a new hurling club, which many of the former Dunshaughlin hurlers joined.[36]

The establishment of two more hurling clubs can also be linked to the Gaelic League. Brian O'Higgins, who taught Irish as a travelling teacher for the Gaelic League throughout Meath, is credited as the joint founder of the Kilskyre club, near Kells. His view of hurling is encapsulated in 'Ireland's hurling men', a poem he apparently wrote at the instigation of Michael Cusack.[37] The final club to enter the hurling ranks was Trim. The town had a thriving Gaelic League branch from July 1901 and held a successful *aeridheacht* a year later that included a hurling game between Athboy and Colmcilles of Dublin. The local press agitated for the formation of a hurling club in the town stating that 'The Gaelic League has given Trim the germs of an intellectual force, but *mens sana in corpore sano*, it wants a hurling team as an auxiliary to the Gaelic League'.[38] However, these pleas fell on deaf ears until 1906. Part of the reason may have been disunity in the GAA in the town. For much of the early 1900s there were up to three football clubs in, or near the town – Trim John Mitchells, Newtown Round Towers and Breemount Inisfáils. To further complicate matters, the Kilmessan footballers, also known as South Meath, contained a number of players from the Trim area. When Kilmessan disbanded temporarily in 1905, many of their Trim-based players returned to play in their native parish and this may have been

[35] Ó Muirí, 'Peter Murray and the founding of the first branch', p. 252.
[36] Gilligan and McLoughlin, *Black and* amber, pp 26–9.
[37] See Kilskyre/Ballinlough Historical Society, *A history of the parish of Kilskyre and Ballinlough,* (Kells, 2007), pp 338, 368; *MC*, 14 Feb. 1903, 2 May 1903, 13 June 1903. O'Higgins fought in the G.P.O. in 1916, was elected an MP for Clare in 1918 where he was then teaching Irish, and remained a militant republican until he died in 1963. From 1932 until 1962, apart from one year when it was suppressed, he produced *The Wolfe Tone Annual* covering the movements and personalities of Irish nationalist history since 1798. See Rev Pádraig Ó Tuile, *The life and times of Brian O'Higgins* (Navan, 1966, reissued 2016).
[38] Quoted in McCann and Brennan, *Wielding the ash*, p. 52; *MC*, 23 Aug. 1902.

part of the reason for the formation of Trim Clan na Gaels in early 1906. The Gaels replaced the three former clubs and fielded football and hurling teams.[39] A snippet in the *Meath Chronicle* states that 'The Trim Camán [hurling] Team, which was organised some time ago in connection with the local branch of the Gaelic League, will make its debut in the hurling field on Sunday next, when it will cross camáns with the Warrenstown men.'[40] Laurence Malone Sheridan chaired the Gaelic League branch on its inception and Francis Devey acted as secretary. Devey, a primary school teacher, became the first chairman of the Clan na Gaels and played hurling and football for them, captaining the footballers in their first final in 1906.[41]

By 1903, there was a branch of the Gaelic League in Dunboyne and it is likely that the Dunboyne hurling club, which was established around the same time, had links to the League. Two primary school teachers, William Murtagh and Bob O'Keeffe, were prominent in the formation of the club. O'Keeffe, a native of Mooncoin, county Kilkenny, played in the 1904 hurling and football finals, playing hurling with Dunboyne and football with Kilmessan (South Meath). He moved to Laois soon after and won an All-Ireland hurling medal with the county in 1915, before becoming president of the GAA between 1935 and 1938. His influence was such that for a period the Dunboyne team was known as the Dunboyne O'Keeffes.[42]

The foregoing history of the formation of hurling clubs in the county shows clearly that the critical factor was the presence of a Gaelic League branch and there was a significant overlap between the officers of the League and those of the new hurling clubs. This was clearly the case in Athboy, Dunshaughlin, Warrenstown, Kilskyre, and Trim. While the link is less obvious in Dunboyne and Kells, there is evidence of a shared membership there also. However, not all hurling clubs were Gaelic-League inspired. The Kilmessan club was among the earliest hurling clubs in the county and it is highly unlikely that there was any Gaelic League influence, as no branch existed in the village at the time. Navan Hurling Club, the first hurling club established in the county, had no direct link with the Gaelic League. It was formed on the initiative

[39] McCann and Brennan, *Wielding the ash,* pp 51–60.
[40] *MC*, 24 Feb. 1906.
[41] McCann and Brennan, *Wielding the ash*, pp 59–61.
[42] John Phelan, *In the shadow of the goalpost* (Portlaoise, 2004), pp 472, 502–05; *MC*, 9 May, 1903; *DI*, 9 Apr. 1904, 24 Dec. 1904. The hurling final was played in December 1904 and the football decider took place in March 1905 with a replay in April.

of Christopher Byrne, a native of the town, who played with the Celtics hurling club in Dublin and returned to Navan in July 1901 to establish a business there.[43] The Navan Hurling Club was formed in September 1901 with Byrne as its captain. He later became secretary of the Meath county committee when it was revived. A second club, Navan Young Irelands, was formed in early 1902 and the two met in the first Meath hurling final, with the older club winning by 1-3 to 0-1.[44] There is some evidence in newspaper coverage that yet another hurling club was established in Navan in late 1904 from the membership of the local Gaelic League branch when football and hurling teams named Fianna Éireann made fleeting appearances.[45] Unfortunately, the surviving branch minutes do not cover this period. In subsequent years three members of the Navan Gaelic League branch had central roles in the GAA. These were Seaghan MacNamidhe, his brother James McNamee, and Lorcán Ó Cléirigh. Seaghan MacNamidhe was secretary of Navan Gaelic League from its formation in 1901 until 1906. He was a primary teacher in Navan and later became Chief Executive Officer of Meath Vocational Education Committee. A superb organiser, he was also an acerbic polemicist who wrote a regular column on the League for the *Drogheda Independent*.[46] He became chairman of the GAA county committee in 1907, serving in the position until 1918. His brother, James, and Ó Cléirigh were members of the Gaelic League from its inception and both became secretaries of the county committee of the GAA. McNamee held the post from 1904 to 1908 and Ó Cléirigh replaced him in the role between 1909 and 1919.

A significant event that displayed the close relationship between the Gaelic League and the hurling clubs was the funeral of Fr Eugene O'Growney in 1903. O'Growney, a native of Ballyfallon, near Athboy, was a professor of Irish language, literature, and antiquities at Maynooth College who emigrated to the USA after falling into bad health and died there in 1899. Four years later his remains were repatriated to Ireland with the support of the Gaelic League. The removal of his remains from Queenstown (now Cobh), in county Cork to Dublin's Pro-Cathedral and thence to Maynooth by rail, via Broadstone railway station, was a huge public event attended by thousands of people. It recalled the earlier public funerals of the Fenian Terence Bellew

[43] *DI*, 27 July 1901.
[44] *DI*, 14 Sept. 1901, 14 June 1902.
[45] *EH*, 3 Dec. 1904; *MC*, 29 Oct. 1904, 7 Jan. 1905; *DI*, 7 Jan. 1905.
[46] *MC*, 11 June 1955.

MacManus in 1861 and of Parnell in 1891. The Gaelic League played a central role in the funeral procession, with hurlers from a number of Meath clubs in a prominent role. Fourteen men, drawn from the hurlers of Athboy, Kilskyre and Dunshaughlin, carried the casket at the cathedral in Dublin, onto the train in Broadstone and again in Maynooth. The Athboy men with their camáns draped in black marched at the head of the procession while thirty-three members of the club acted as a bodyguard around the hearse.[47] According to Agnes O'Farrelly: 'All through the streets the hurling clubs maintained the strictest order, keeping the passages clear with locked camáns until it came to their own turn to join the ranks.'[48] The prominent role given to the hurling clubs emphasised the close links between them and the Gaelic League, personified by Fr Eugene O'Growney's brother Patrick who, as noted, was president of both organisations in Athboy.

As the decade progressed, the Gaelic League branches established with such enthusiasm in Meath in the early 1900s failed to maintain their impetus. Meanwhile, the GAA gradually strengthened its position. Despite Hyde's praise for the GAA, relations between the organisations were not always smooth and Hyde often regretted that links were not closer.[49] He queried the GAA's commitment to the language and was unhappy with the amount of Irish in use in clubs and games. Writing in the GAA's county directory in 1908-09 Hyde stated:

> No Gaelic Leaguer that ever I knew of cared to lend his support to foreign games in preference to the native ones encouraged by the GAA. Have the members of the GAA reciprocated to anything like the same extent in aiding the ideals of the Gaelic League, and in running clear of foreign songs, dances, music and language?[50]

However, in the words of Philip O'Leary, a historian of the Gaelic League, the GAA consisted of *Feet Gaels* rather than *Fíor Gaels*, for their primary focus was on the

[47] *MC*, 3 Oct. 1903; Agnes O'Farrelly, *Leabhar an Athar Eoghan* (Dublin, 1904), pp 65–8.
[48] O'Farrelly, *Leabhar an Athar Eoghan*, p. 65.
[49] For a detailed exploration of the relationship between the GAA and the Gaelic League see, Cathal Billings, 'Athbheochan na Gaeilge agus an spórt in Éirinn, 1884–1934' (PhD thesis, University College Dublin, 2015). I wish to thank Cathal for access to this work.
[50] An Craoibhín Aoibhinn (Douglas Hyde), 'Games and nationality' in *Gaelic Athletic Annual and County Directory, 1908–09*, pp 5–7; p. 6.

games and other aspects of Irish culture such as dance, rather than learning the language.[51]

Another factor that is usually referenced as part of the reason for the GAA's revival is the influence of the year-long celebration of the centenary of the 1798 Rebellion. Marcus de Búrca argues that 'The impact of this nation-wide movement of 1898 on the fortunes of the nationalist cause has been widely overlooked' and he makes a persuasive case for his view.[52] Noting that the GAA declined an invitation to join the principal '98 Centenary Committee, mainly due to Blake's vehement opposition, he points out that, nevertheless, numerous officials at county and club level were centrally involved in planning and organising events during the year. He refers to the countless monuments that were erected, graves and birthplaces that were marked, the fact that the commemorations provided a neutral platform where all sections of the nationalist movement could co-operate and that many prominent separatists later acknowledged that their earliest patriotic sentiments arose from the events of 1898.[53] In addition, many counties held football and hurling tournaments to raise funds to erect monuments in honour of the 1798 rebels. However, de Búrca overstates the case, and the impact of the centenary was not uniformly beneficial to the GAA, but varied significantly from county to county. While the commemorations undoubtedly led to an upsurge in nationalist sentiment, there was no immediate revival in the fortunes of the GAA and de Búrca acknowledges that the association was at its weakest in the three years following 1898, when ten counties at most were represented at the annual congress. Meath had ample cause to celebrate the centenary, as it was the scene of the Battle of Tara in May 1798, while many of the defeated Wexford rebels marched into Meath and were arrested or killed there.[54] However, centenary celebrations in the county were muted. A major public commemoration took place at Tara in May when a crowd of 5,000 was present but some speakers noted the absence of groups from the large towns of Meath.[55] Efforts to establish '98 societies or clubs resulted in the formation of eight in the county

[51] Philip O'Leary, *Gaelic prose in the Irish Free State: 1922–1939* (Dublin, 2004), p. 48. A *fíor-Gael*, literally means a true Irishman.
[52] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 78.
[53] Ibid., p. 80.
[54] For details on the location of their graves see Eamon Doyle, *March into Meath* (Dublin, 2011), pp 81–91; Séamus Ó Loinsigh, *The 1798 rebellion in Meath* (Dublin, 1997).
[55] *MC*, 4 June 1898.

whereas thirty-four were established in Wexford.[56] Only a few Meath GAA clubs honoured the centenary in their names, such as Killeen ’98 and Tara ’98 football clubs, both of which were situated close to Tara and survived for just two years. Athboy Dalgais ’98 survived for longer, but there was certainly no revival of interest in Gaelic games in Meath in the immediate aftermath of the centenary celebrations. While the event had an undoubted influence on the GAA in counties like Wexford, Wicklow and Dublin, its impact in Meath was minimal. At best the 1798 centenary was important in reviving and fostering nationalist and separatist sentiment but it had little influence in the revival of the GAA in Meath.

The Boer War between Britain and the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of the Boer republics in South Africa which began in October 1899 also led to a rise in separatist feeling. It resulted in clubs in many counties assuming the names of Boer heroes as a means of expressing their support for the Boer cause. Examples can be found in a number of counties. De Wets were particularly popular, and were found in Dublin, Louth and Cavan. Athenry de Wets were Galway football champions in 1903–04 and 1906 and Nenagh de Wets took the Tipperary hurling championship in 1902. The Galway champions in 1899 were the Tuam Krugers, while there were Kruger Volunteers in Dublin, as well as Tralee Kruger’s Own and Castleisland Kruger’s Own, both in Kerry.[57] Patrick O’Reilly from Moynalty, in north Meath, recalled the interest taken in the war by neighbours who ‘discussed with vigour the pros and cons of the war. All were in favour of the Boers and had the greatest contempt for the British.’[58] However, the direct influence of the Boer War on the GAA in Meath was limited, with only two clubs changing names in support of the Boers, the Bellewstown de Wets and Dowdstown de Wets.[59] This may be explained by the fact that so few clubs existed in Meath at the time as the GAA was at its lowest ever ebb in the county.

[56] CI Meath, May 1898 (TNA, 904/68); CI Wexford, May 1898 (TNA, 904/68). The Meath figures are broadly in line with press reports. The eight branches referenced in the local press were Athboy, Dunboyne, Kells, Kildalkey, Lobinstown, Moynalty, Navan and Slane, but it is likely that Culmullen also formed a branch.
[57] Kruger (1825–1904) was president of the Transvaal and de Wet (1854–1922) was a military leader during the second Boer War.
[58] Patrick O’Reilly (BMH, WS 1650), p. 1.
[59] O’Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 62.

Opposition to Foreign Games

The new leadership at the helm of the GAA from 1901 gradually reversed Richard Blake's approach. The nationalist ideology promoted by the Gaelic League and the broader Irish-Ireland movement was in the ascendant in the early years of the twentieth century and the GAA reflected this shift. At the adjourned congress in 1901 Thomas F. O'Sullivan, secretary of the revived Kerry county committee, proposed a motion that pledged the GAA 'to resist by every means in our power the extension of English pastimes to this country', suggested that counties be given power to disqualify or suspend anyone promoting sports that were not national, and called on public representatives and nationalist organisations to help 'crush English pastimes'.[60] This was the start of a move to consolidate the GAA's status as the guardian of native games by introducing rules against sports it deemed foreign and a threat to the national games. Collectively such rules became known as 'The Ban' and were to be a defining characteristic of the GAA for over six decades.[61]

Such rules were not novel, as from the very start the GAA had passed rules aimed at strengthening the association and weakening its competitors. The first was introduced to ensure that the GAA became the premier power in Irish athletics. As early as January 1885 it declared that 'any athlete competing under other laws than those of the GAA shall be ineligible for competing at any meeting held under the GAA'.[62] Despite the Irish Amateur Athletics Association's (IAAA) introduction of a corresponding edict, the GAA gained the allegiance of the vast majority of athletes by the end of the year. The rule was soon removed following the intervention of Archbishop Croke but by then the GAA was in the ascendant. The first ban was concerned exclusively with athletics, but as its field games became more important the GAA introduced a rule in 1886 stating that club members playing hurling, football or handball under other rules could not be a member of the GAA and that members of any other athletic club could not be affiliated to the GAA. In the late 1880s, further rules were adopted making members of the RIC and the Dublin Metropolitan Police ineligible for membership.[63]

[60] Central Council mins, 15 Dec. 1901.
[61] For a comprehensive overview of the ban issue, see Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland'.
[62] Ibid., p. 339.
[63] Ibid., pp 339–343.

However, circumstances had changed completely by the early 1890s. With the widespread collapse of the GAA following clerical opposition and the Parnell split, its leaders recognised that the political involvement of the IRB had damaged the association. The ban on the police was removed in 1893 and during Blake's period as secretary, 1895–98, the ban on members playing under rules other than those of the GAA was also reversed. Paul Rouse has argued cogently that whereas the ban became a point of principle in later years, initially it was introduced for purely sporting reasons and it was removed during Blake's tenure when it was seen as a hindrance to the organisation.[64]

When the ban returned in 1901 county committees were empowered to disqualify or suspend members 'who countenance sports which are calculated to interfere with the preservation and cultivation of our national pastimes'.[65] It mentioned rugby and soccer, but not cricket, as 'imported' sports, and was more an exhortation than a directive. Over the following years it was strengthened into a definitive set of rules that imposed a severe sanction of two-years' suspension on anyone playing rugby, soccer, hockey or cricket or any imported game while police, militiamen and soldiers were prevented from playing games under GAA rules. The new rules became effective from 1 February 1905.[66]

This policy did not gain immediate general acceptance and its opponents mustered thirty-two votes while its proponents garnered forty-six. The Cork county committee in particular tried for a time to overturn the ruling. In 1906, it attempted to make enforcement of the ban a discretionary matter for county committees and unsuccessfully proposed its removal in 1908 and 1911. The Cork chairman, Matt O'Riordan, described the rules as 'obnoxious' and argued they should 'let the Association be what it should be, purely non-sectarian and non-political'.[67] All those efforts failed, however, and by 1911 opposition had dwindled and only four delegates voted in favour of removing the ban.[68]

[64] Ibid., pp 345–6.
[65] Central Council mins, 15 Dec. 1901.
[66] *CE*, 9 Jan. 1905.
[67] *CE,* 10 Feb. 1908.
[68] Central Council mins, 15 Apr. 1911 (CPA, GAA/CC/01/02).

Cricket

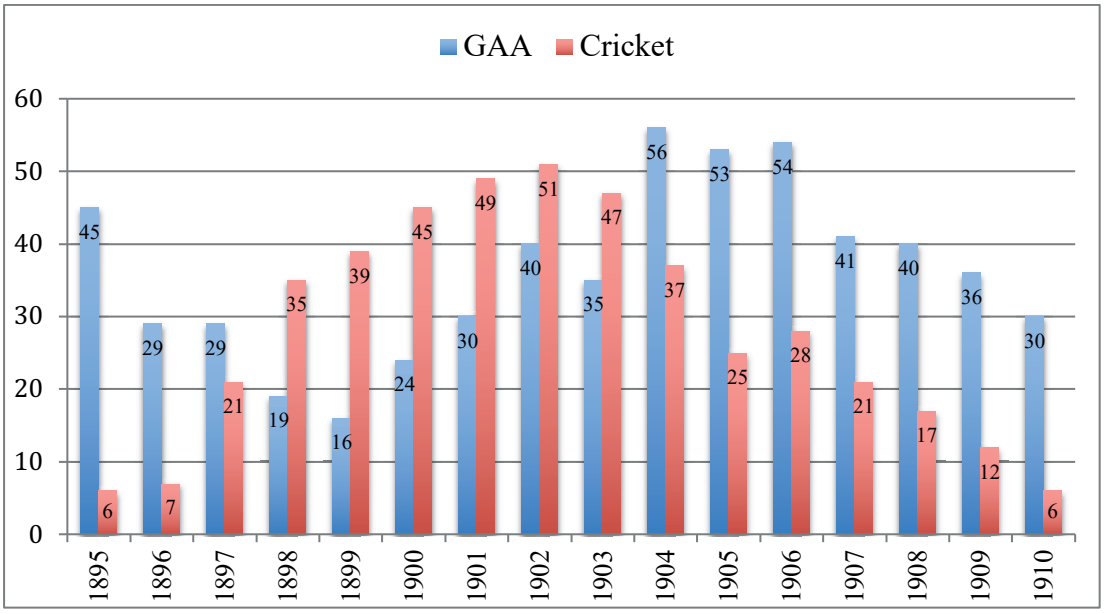
The ban targeted rugby, soccer, hockey and cricket, but the only sport that rivalled the GAA in Meath was cricket and the game prospered when the GAA was in decline in the late 1890s.[69] Tom Hunt's research into sport in Westmeath has established that the period from 1880 to 1905 was the era of peak activity in Westmeath cricket, when the game became the most popular pastime in the county.[70] Pat Bracken and Michael O'Dwyer have also shown that the game was revived and thrived in Tipperary and Kilkenny in the 1890s, before declining again in the early 1900s.[71] Before he helped found the GAA Michael Cusack advised the establishment of cricket clubs in every parish and argued that 'the boy who can play cricket well, will not, in after years, lose his head and get flurried in the face of danger.'[72] Years later, Cusack retained his interest in cricket; en route to a GAA congress in Thurles in the late 1880s he spent the entire journey discussing the game with the Meath representative, Michael Tevlin.[73]

Research into cricket in Meath for this thesis has revealed that Hunt's findings were replicated there (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). An analysis of cricket games reported in the local press between 1895 and 1910 has identified 134 separate teams and references to almost 1,400 games in the period.[74] Figure 3.1 shows that the growth in the number of cricket teams in Meath began from a base of six teams in 1895, increasing steadily to reach a peak of fifty-one teams in 1901, with a gradual decline thereafter (see appendix seven for a list of cricket clubs in the period 1895-1910). In tandem with this there was a gradual and uneven decline in GAA clubs from 1895 to 1900 that was reversed in the new century.[75] Although it is impossible to prove conclusively that the GAA's decline resulted in the revival of cricket, it is hardly coincidental that the declining fortunes of one had a positive impact on the rise of the

[69] For an overview of the history of cricket in Ireland see Seán Reid, 'Cricket in Victorian Ireland 1848–1878: a social history' (PhD thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2014).
[70] Hunt, *Sport and society*, pp 115, 120.
[71] Bracken, *'Foreign and fantastic field sports'*, p. 102; O'Dwyer, *The history of cricket in county Kilkenny*, pp 49–50.
[72] Quoted in Paul Rouse, 'Michael Cusack: sportsman and journalist' in Cronin *et al*, *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884-2009*, pp 47-60; p. 48.
[73] Seán P. Farragher, *The French College Blackrock 1860–1896* (Blackrock, Dublin, 2011), p. 7.
[74] A club that fielded a second team in addition to its first eleven was counted as one club while occasional teams fielded by individuals were not counted. There were at least twenty-two of the latter.
[75] Between 1898 and 1901 practically all the GAA clubs were unaffiliated as no county committee existed during that period.

other. Such growth implies that men opted for whatever game was available and that in the absence of the GAA many turned to cricket.

Figure 3.1: Numbers of GAA and cricket teams in Meath, 1895–1910

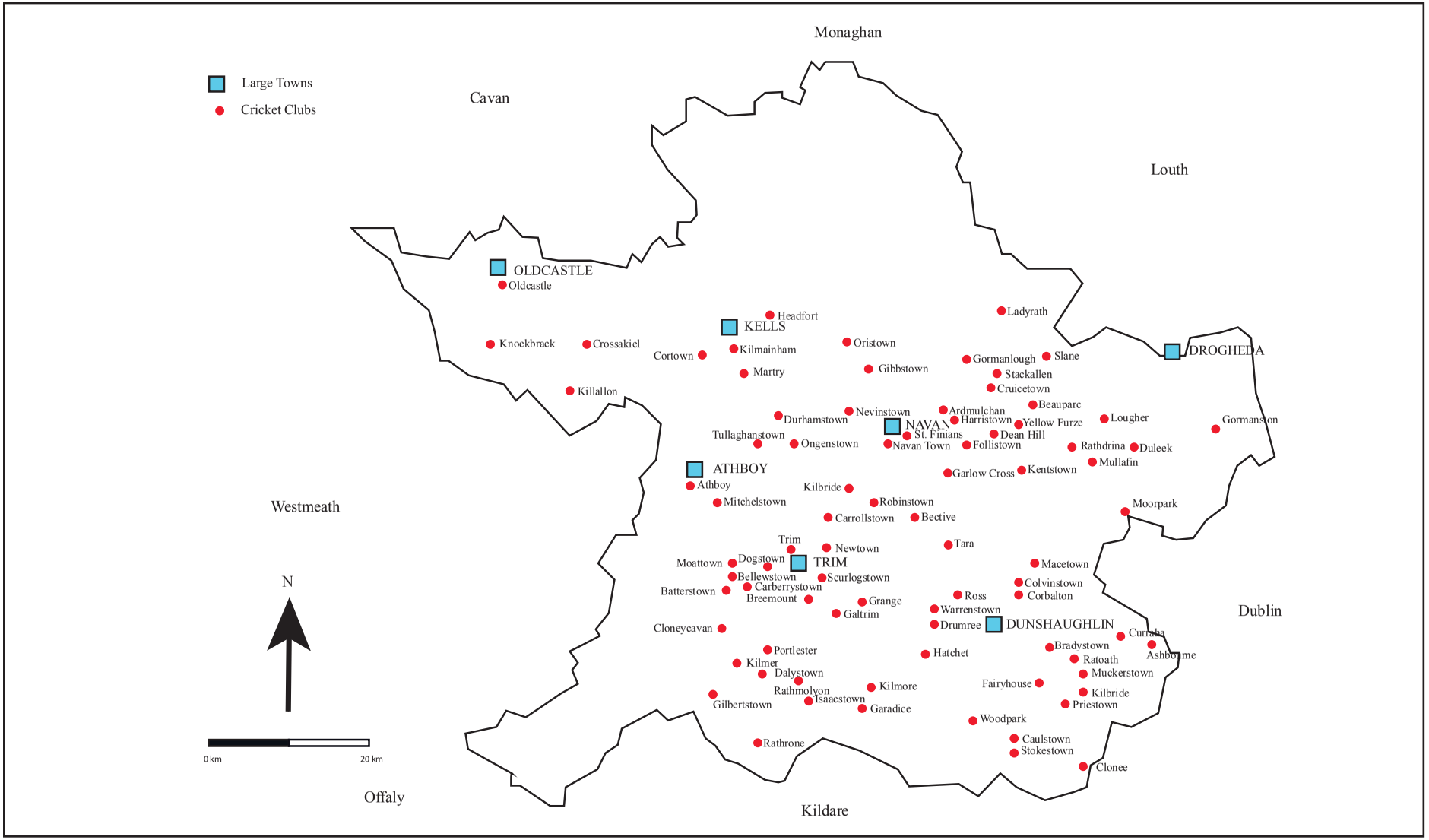


Source: *Drogheda Independent* 1895–1910, *Meath Chronicle* 1897–1910.

At the time there were two distinct types of cricket team in Meath. There were the traditional elite teams, such as the County Meath CC, consisting of well-to-do individuals from a landed background, the professions and business, who played on weekdays. In addition to these there were rural teams based on townlands or parishes throughout the county, consisting mainly of agricultural labourers and tenant farmers whose games were invariably played on Sundays. These clubs were dispersed throughout the county, with areas such as Kentstown, Trim and the border area near Dublin and Fingal heavily populated with teams, as shown in Figure 3.2. It is likely that cricket developed initially in the landed estates in those areas, promoted by the gentry, and featured estate workers, but the game later spread into the surrounding townlands as tenant farmers and workmen on the estates established teams. Some teams such as Gibbstown outside Navan continued to retain strong links to local landed estates, but these were the exception, and the majority had only tenuous links with the local gentry.[76]

[76] Thomas Gerrard of Gibbstown House supported the cricket team financially and visiting teams were often shown around the grounds. See for example, *MC*, 1 Oct. 1898; *DI*, 10 May 1902, 10 Oct. 1902, 14 May 1904.

Figure 3.2: Meath Cricket Clubs, 1895-1908



By comparing team lists from newspapers and individual household returns for the censuses of 1901 and 1911, information was compiled on cricket players in the county when the game was at its strongest between 1898 and 1906. A total of 820 players were identified from the team lists of thirty-one clubs and 424 of those were identified in the census returns, representing just over 50 percent of the total. Players who earned their living in the local agricultural economy dominated these teams. Farmers and farmers' sons accounted for 29.9 percent of the sample, but this category was closely followed by agricultural labourers, who made up 24.3 percent of the total. Farm servants, herds, shepherds and ploughmen made up a further 10 percent. Thirty-eight players returned themselves as general labourers and it is likely that many of those, particularly in rural areas, were agricultural workers. The only other substantial group consisted of skilled tradesmen (such as carpenters, shoemakers, masons etc.) who accounted for 8.5 percent of the total. Thus, the cricket-playing population was based on the agricultural economy and the teams attracted men of a similar status to those who played Gaelic games in the county (see chapter four).

The popularity of the game may be explained by a number of factors. The initial success of the GAA in the mid-to-late 1880s proved that there was a latent demand for sport. There has been a tendency when writing about the history of the GAA to focus on political aspects, with writers such as W.F. Mandle focusing on the links between it and the IRB. However, such a narrow focus ignores the prime reason for the existence of sporting organisations: the promotion and playing of sport, the 'triumph of play' in the words of Paul Rouse.[77] Bracken makes a similar point when he states: 'Sports were popular because they afforded amusement, competition and a break from the social strictures of the working day.'[78] For the labourer and tenant farmer who worked a six-day week, sport was a welcome diversion on Sundays, combining competitive contests and social interaction. When the GAA declined in the late 1890s the interest in sport did not disappear. Instead it took different forms.

[77] Paul Rouse, 'The triumph of play' in Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923*, pp 15–36.
[78] Bracken, *'Foreign and fantastic field sports'*, pp 92–3.

Cycling clubs and athletics were all popular in Meath but cricket was more widespread, and it replaced Gaelic games as the premier sporting pastime.[79]

Men who had been prominent in GAA circles in the 1880s and early 1890s saw no conflict of interest in participating in cricket as the GAA's presence declined. Richard Blake's role has already been referred to. J.P. Timmon, a chemist in Navan, who for a period in the late 1890s was chairman of Meath GAA, also played cricket and claimed the introduction of the ban excluded him from the GAA.[80] The secretary of Meath GAA in the late 1890s, Laurence M. Sheridan, regularly played Gaelic football with Newtown Round Towers, while also taking the field with the Breemount and Trim cricket teams.[81] Harry Coady, as Meath GAA chairman, suggested the county committee should pass a motion in favour of recognising cricket as a legitimate game for GAA members to play at a time when the GAA had deemed it a foreign game.[82]

At least five members of Breemount CC were involved in establishing the Breemount Inisfáils GAA team, including Michael Brien, who presided over the meeting, Michael Murray, who was elected captain, and Frank Devey, a member of the Meath football team in 1904 and also a noted hurler.[83] Tom Hunt notes that a number of clubs in Westmeath played cricket in summer and Gaelic games in winter.[84] There is some evidence for a similar pattern in Meath. In 1901, Follistown CC proposed organising a football club for the winter, while in 1903 Killallon CC reported on a successful season during which the club won eight of eleven matches played but 'the members of the club have taken up Gaelic Football as a winter game'.[85] Rathdrina CC also announced in 1901 that a club meeting 'will propose taking up hurling as a winter game if there is enough support.'[86]

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[79] For cycling and the prevalence of cycling clubs in Meath see Brian Griffin 'The early history of cycling in Meath and Drogheda' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, xv (2004), pp 123–151.
[80] *Dublin Daily Express*, 20 June 1913, quoted in Memoranda and notes on the Gaelic Athletic Association submitted by Walter Long to Reginald McKenna MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer, May 1916 (Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Walter Long papers, 947/402/12).
[81] For details see *MC*, 30 Apr. 1898, 30 July 1898, 27 Aug. 1898; *Sport*, 21 May 1898.
[82] *DI*, 3 June 1905.
[83] McCann and Brennan, *Wielding the ash,* p. 50; *DI*, 3 Sept. 1904, 3 Mar. 1906.
[84] Hunt, *Sport and society*, p. 156.
[85] *DI*, 7 Sept. 1901; *MC*, 10 Oct. 1903.
[86] *DI*, 5 Oct. 1901.

The dual player was to be found in many clubs. A 1902 Rathmolyon cricket team featured Nicholas Fagan, who went on to win senior football championship medals with Kilmessan in 1903 and later played Gaelic football with Trim and Summerhill. Patrick Daly, who played with Pierce O'Mahonys in the 1895 All-Ireland final, was also prominent in cricket circles, and Seaghan MacNamidhe described him as 'at present a renegade, having gone over to the cricket club.'[87] Even after the GAA's annual congress in 1904 decided that GAA members playing cricket would incur a suspension of two years, some GAA players continued to play cricket. There is evidence for this in the regularity of objections to teams allegedly fielding men who had played cricket, and in the applications by clubs seeking to have men under suspension reinstated as members of the GAA after serving part or all of the suspension. When Dunshaughlin defeated Ratoath in the 1908 hurling championship the losers objected on the basis that Dunshaughlin's John Johnson was a member of Corbalton CC. The objection was not successful as the Corbalton secretary stated that Johnson had not played with, or subscribed to the club in 1908. Johnson, in fact, had played cricket in 1907, while a number of others who played football with Skryne in 1910 sought reinstatement having also played cricket with Corbalton CC.[88] Writing in 1964, in reply to a query about the introduction of Gaelic games to Slane over half a century earlier, a local recalled that

> both the footballers and cricketers practised in the same field. It used happen that as soon as a cricketer was bowled out he at once became a footballer, with the result that eventually it often came about that only the bowler and the batsman were left at the cricket, with all those who should be fielding, playing football instead.[89]

The dual player was also common in Westmeath, Kilkenny and Tipperary prior to the ban, with many of the same men featuring on the successful Tullaroan hurling and cricket teams in Kilkenny. Matt Gargan, a winner of six All-Ireland senior hurling medals with Kilkenny from 1905 to 1913, also played cricket for a number of

[87] *MC*, 25 Nov. 1905.
[88] *DI*, 12 Dec. 1908, 12 Mar. 1910.
[89] Letter from Tony Lane to [Seán] Giles re Slane GAA, 4 Sept. 1964 (MCL Archive, Alice Curtayne collection).

Kilkenny clubs. Patrick Bracken has uncovered evidence of similar practices in Cashel and Thurles in Tipperary.[90]

The decline in the number of cricket clubs in Meath became more pronounced following the introduction of the GAA ban. A similar pattern of a resurgent GAA and a cricketing decline is evident in Westmeath, Kilkenny and Tipperary. The Westmeath pattern parallels the Meath experience. Hunt's study concludes in 1905 but it is likely the pattern established early in the century continued. Michael O'Dwyer's investigation of cricket in Kilkenny notes a decline in cricket teams from 1906 onwards, when the number of clubs fell from thirty to twenty-two, with the ban rule, the strength of the Gaelic League, and success of Kilkenny hurling teams in All-Ireland finals given as the reasons for the decline.[91] In the same period, in Tipperary, 1901 represented the high point for the number of cricket clubs, nineteen, but this dropped into single figures from 1907 and Bracken concludes that the GAA ban sounded the death knell for cricket in the county.[92]

Anti-foreign-games rhetoric was another factor in cricket's decline. Cricket, and other forms of sport deemed to be 'foreign games' came under sustained criticism from cultural nationalists in the GAA and the Gaelic League in the early 1900s. In Kerry, rugby was the strongest of the 'foreign games' and Thomas F. O'Sullivan used his position as a journalist to attack those who promoted it.[93] In Westmeath, elements of the local press campaigned against cricket in 1904 and 1905 as an anti-Irish game played by West Britons, and pilloried local communities where cricket was popular.[94] Both the GAA and the Gaelic League frequently used the phrases 'West Britons', 'shoneens', 'alien' games, and 'aping foreign traditions' in press columns in the first decade of the twentieth century to denigrate their opponents.[95] They promoted Gaelic football, and especially hurling, as traditional Irish games,

[90] For Westmeath and Kilkenny see Hunt, *Sport and society*, p. 157; for Tipperary see Bracken, *'Foreign and fantastic field sports'*, p. 109.
[91] O'Dwyer, *The history of cricket in county Kilkenny*, pp 66–67.
[92] Bracken, *'Foreign and fantastic field sports'*, pp 120, 172.
[93] Richard McElligott, '"Degenerating from sterling Irishmen into contemptible West Britons": the GAA and rugby in Kerry, 1885-1905' in *History Ireland*, xviv, no. 4 (July/August 2011), pp 28-31; McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, pp 147–8.
[94] Hunt, *Sport and society*, p. 194.
[95] A shoneen or a seoinín taken from the name Séan, is a derogatory term signifying that one is a little John, or a little Englander, who imitated English manners, customs and behaviour and who has a disdain for native Irish customs.

which they contrasted with 'foreign games' such as association football, rugby and cricket. A report on the Kilskyre *aeridheacht* near Kells, organised by members of the local hurling club, hailed the appearance of the Irish revival movement in places 'that a few years ago were strongholds of Shoneenism and where the apers of Seaghinín Buidhe reigned supreme and undisturbed.'[96] Soon after, the newspaper carried a report bemoaning the poor attendance at a hurling game and claiming that

> A de-nationalising circus, a vulgar travelling show, or a shoneen cycling sports, would be sure to receive support from the patriotic, sports-loving people of Carnaross and its neighbourhood, but when a game which kings were proud to play is being revived . . . it is given the cold shoulder and treated with the contempt that is born of the slavery and imitation which has been bleeding this country to death for years.[97]

In Meath much of the ire arose from the efforts of the Meath County CC to limit the GAA's access to the Showgrounds, where the cricket club held a lease. Seaghan MacNamidhe orchestrated the attacks via his weekly column in the *Drogheda Independent*. He argued that the cricket club, 'in their anxiety for the good old English pastime, are afraid that the vulgar Celt would make a heel mark on the crease.'[98] The cricket club, he declared, was 'composed mostly of gentlemen and bank clerks, [who] have snapped their fingers at the Gaels of Meath.'[99] Many GAA clubs were quick to disassociate themselves from cricket. When the Martry club was revived in 1907 it declared 'too long has the Saxon cricket held sway' and that Martry would be 'True Gaelic once again.'[100] Later in the year the club stated that it wished 'to make it publicly known that no cricket or any other alien game would interfere with our Gaelic pastimes.' [101] When Warrenstown hurling club was established, a note written entirely in Irish declared that its members hoped to see hurling in place of cricket and other English games.[102]

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[96] *MC*, 1 Oct. 1904.
[97] *MC*, 15 Oct. 1904.
[98] *DI*, 6 June 1908.
[99] *DI*, 11 July 1908.
[100] *DI*, 2 Feb. 1907.
[101] *MC*, 18 May 1907.
[102] Translated from the Irish, 'is breá an radharc cluiche ár sinsir dfheiscint 'á imirt arís ar an Talamh Glas na hÉireann in ionad "cricket" agus cluichí eile na Sasana.' *DI*, 21 Jan. 1905.

In 1901, the *Meath Chronicle* carried details of a Kells CC practice match but the writer concluded that **'**Our advice to the young men is to leave this English game of cricket severely alone and to start at once a good Gaelic Football and Hurling Club.'[103] There is some evidence that the *Chronicle* under-reported cricket games in the county, as from the early 1900s the number of such reports declined while the rival *Drogheda Independent* continued to carry extensive match reports. Thus, in addition to the ban rules, the barrage of negative publicity for cricket at a time when the Gaelic League and the GAA were gaining numerous adherents also contributed to the decline of the game.

The lack of a governing body to regulate the game and organise fixtures also hindered the growth and development of cricket. There was no county-wide body in Meath to formulate rules and regulations or to organise formal leagues or championships and clubs were left to their own devices. The *Meath Chronicle's* cricket correspondent, 'Leg Stump', advocated formal competitions in 1897, writing that 'Some time ago it was suggested to hold a cricket championship on the same lines, or something similar to those on which the football championships are carried out.'[104] Similar suggestions were made in subsequent years but it took until October 1905 for the idea to come to fruition when a Sunday cricket league was established. The Meath Sunday Cricket League (MSCL) began the following May with seventeen teams in two divisions.[105] According to a report of a subsequent committee meeting, the league was deemed 'a complete success and fully realises the anticipations of its promoters and all friends of Sunday cricket in Meath'.[106] Addenstown on the Meath-Westmeath border and Fairyhouse, near Ratoath, contested the final, but it is unclear who emerged as winners as the local press carried no report. The *Chronicle* gave no coverage to the competition after the initial draw was made, while the *Drogheda Independent* reported it sporadically.

Despite the initial qualified success of the league, its inauguration had come too late. Participation levels were already declining in some clubs and in 1906 both Dowdstown and Bellewstown decided not to play league matches due to a decrease

[103] *MC*, 31 Aug. 1901.
[104] *MC*, 14 Aug. 1897.
[105] *DI*, 16 Sept. 1905, 12 May 1906.
[106] *DI*, 18 Aug. 1906.

in membership.[107] The local press carried no reports on the league in 1906, so it may have existed for a single year only. As clubs went out of existence the scope for friendly challenge matches for the remaining clubs also declined and, as shown in Figure 3.1, there was a rapid decline in the number of clubs after 1906. If a league had been established at the turn of the century when Sunday cricket was at its zenith in the county, it might have been sufficiently strong to withstand the inroads of a resurgent GAA and establish its own competitive structure.

An analysis of the actions and statements of the three men who dominated the office of chairman of the GAA county committee in the 1902–10 period reveals that their views echoed the gradual evolution of the GAA's outlook regarding the ban on foreign games.[108] Richard Blake, who was chairman in 1902, was strongly opposed to the ban. Harry Coady, from the Kilmessan club, held the position from 1904 to 1907. He had been involved in the GAA since the late 1880s as player, team captain, referee and official. He was opposed to the ban but was not as dogmatic on the issue as Blake. In 1904, when hearing an objection that a player had played cricket, Coady maintained that cricket was not specified as a foreign game and declined to impose a sanction.[109] His opinion was based on the fact that prior to 1905 cricket was not specifically identified in the rules as a banned sport but others claimed that it was included under the phrase 'any other game'. At a county committee meeting some months after the enactment of the ban rule in 1905, Coady encouraged a discussion of the rules, which led to a division of opinion. Paddy Daly, who was also prominent in cricket circles, objected to the rule, and deemed it coercion by the Central Council, declaring: 'If the Tories sent out an order stopping a man playing a game, [they] would be denounced'. On the other hand the county secretary, James McNamee, was very much against allowing cricket, but no decision was taken. The following year Coady reiterated his view, describing it as a 'stringent' rule and stated his wish that some club would hand in a notice of motion to have the rule rescinded.[110]

[107] *DI*, 9 June 1906, 2 July 1906.
[108] Between them, Blake, Coady and Mac Namidhe held the chairmanship from 1902 to 1918, apart from March to June 1903, when Paul Smith of Kells held the position, and June 1903 to March 1904, when Patrick Gibney, also from Kells, was chairman.
[109] *MC*, 26 Nov. 1904.
[110] *DI*, 3 June 1905, 14 Apr. 1906.

Coady's successor, Seaghan MacNamidhe, had a totally different attitude, one that was more in tune with the assertive, separatist outlook of the national GAA leadership. As secretary of the Navan branch of the Gaelic League for many years, he was a strong proponent of the Irish language, as well as of Irish music, games and traditions, and a critic of all forms of foreign entertainment. He used his column in the *Drogheda Independent* as a pulpit to attack 'shoneens' and West Britons. He was a strong supporter of the GAA's various bans and in 1911 had them extended beyond games and athletics to entertainment organised by the police or army. He did so when he proposed a successful motion at the annual congress in Dublin that 'all who participate in dances or similar entertainments got up by or under the patronage of soldiers or policemen' also be suspended.[111] This motion was not discussed at the Meath convention and MacNamidhe proposed it in his capacity as a member of the GAA's Central Council.

Most of the dominant characters on the Meath GAA county committee at this period were strong proponents of the ban, and many were also members of the Gaelic League. They included P.J. Bartley from Oldcastle, co-founder of the *Sinn Féin* newspaper in the town, organiser for the Gaelic League in Meath in 1902 and a prominent referee, and Joe Curran, the Leinster Council delegate and Castletown captain who established a Gaelic League branch there.[112] Other delegates with a strongly nationalist view included Matt O'Toole, of the Skryne and Garlow Cross clubs, who was the county committee's vice-chairman from 1912 to 1917 and Joe Boylan, the Dunboyne delegate.

Conclusion

The revival of the GAA at the start of the twentieth century was driven by a change of leadership at national level, a devolution in administration with the formation of provincial councils, and a revival in nationalist sentiment, powered mainly by the Gaelic League. The new leadership quickly moved the organisation away from Richard Blake's ideal of a GAA whose focus was games-oriented and strictly non-political to one that was committed to the nationalist agenda, using the games to further that commitment. This attitude is clearly seen in the ongoing campaign not

[111] Central Council mins, 15 Apr. 1911.
[112] Bartley lived at Mountnugent in Cavan but was a member of the Oldcastle Harps club.

only to promote Gaelic games but, also, to outlaw and ban their members from any involvement in what were viewed as foreign, that is, English, games. By 1911 the GAA had ratified a set of rules against playing or supporting games such as rugby, cricket, soccer and hockey and while some members had reservations about them, they would remain on the rule book until 1971.[113]

During the GAA's decline in the late 1890s and early 1900s, cricket prospered in Meath and the game gradually replaced the GAA, reaching its zenith in 1901 when there were fifty-one rural clubs, dominated by farmers and agricultural labourers who played on Sundays. This finding, which parallels the conclusions of Hunt in Westmeath, shows that cricket was much more popular and survived much longer than is generally accepted. Those rural clubs attracted players from the same occupational groups as the GAA – farmers' sons and farm labourers – and there is strong evidence that there was an overlap in membership between GAA and cricket clubs in the early 1900s. As Hunt has noted, cricket 'became a sport with widespread appeal and an activity that allowed the workingman the opportunity of enjoying the sporting experience and its integral ancillary activities'.[114] Cricket clubs, however, had no central organising body or overall ruling authority similar to the GAA and when one was formed in the county it came too late to stem the advance of Gaelic games.

By 1905 cricket was specifically declared a foreign game in the GAA's rules and those proven to have played it were suspended from playing Gaelic games. With the revival of the GAA and the growing influence of the Gaelic League, cricket was regularly assailed in the press as a foreign game, played by West Britons who were turning their back on their Irish heritage and aping the manners and customs of England. The growth in cricket clubs while the GAA was weak and their decline when the GAA revived, particularly after 1905 when the ban rule was operative, suggests that the chief causes of the decline of cricket in Meath was the ban rule and the prevalence of negative publicity regarding the game.

[113] Moore, *The GAA v. Douglas Hyde*, p. 204.
[114] Hunt, *Sport and society*, p. 113.

Richard Blake acted as chairman of the revived Meath county committee in 1902 but severed his connection with the GAA at the end of that year, probably due to disagreement with the changed direction of the association. Seaghan MacNamidhe and Lorcán Ó Cléirigh took over later in the decade as chairman and secretary respectively and dominated the association for many years. Both were members of the Gaelic League and supportive of the ban on foreign games. New hurling clubs were crucial in the revival of the GAA in the county; whereas there were no clubs in 1900, there were ten by 1905, and their formation in Kells, Athboy, Dunshaughlin, Warrenstown, Kilskyre and Trim was inspired by the local branch of the Gaelic League. Thus, the GAA in the county was in a much stronger position in the first decade of the twentieth century than it had been in the final decade of the nineteenth. Hurling had been established, football had been revived, and the county committee had been placed on a sound footing while cricket, its main sporting rival, was in decline.

Chapter 4

Meath GAA players and officials: socio-economic status

Introduction

This chapter will focus on an examination of the men who played football and hurling for clubs in Meath during the early years of the nineteenth century. It will provide some answers to the questions posed by Mike Cronin, who has bemoaned the lack of information on certain aspects of the GAA. He notes: 'We have little or no information on the men who have played Gaelic games, their social background, occupations, family ties and so on.'[1] Since Cronin penned those comments Tom Hunt, Richard McElligott and Conor Curran have conducted research to address those aspects of the GAA and this chapter will provide similar information regarding Meath in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century.[2]

Such research has to be confined to this limited period of time due to constraints caused by the nature of the sources. A database of players was compiled using information from newspaper reports and local club histories and details on the ages of players, their occupations, marital status, literacy levels and religious affiliation were analysed using the online enumerators' forms from the 1901 and 1911 censuses. Similar research from a later period must await the release of the 1926 census forms.

Player Profiles

224 footballers and 158 hurlers from the 1900–1915 era were identified. The players came from fifteen football and twelve hurling clubs, and both urban and rural clubs are included in the sample to make it as representative as possible. However, this and other comparable surveys have a number of limitations that need to be borne in mind when drawing conclusions from the database. Firstly, not all players are

[1] Mike Cronin, 'Writing the history of the GAA', in *High Ball: the official GAA monthly magazine*, vi, no. 6 (June 2003), p. 53.
[2] Hunt, *Sport and society*; Tom Hunt, 'The GAA: social structure and associated clubs' in Cronin *et al*, *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009*, pp 183–202; Tom Hunt, 'Tipperary hurlers, 1898–1900: a socio-economic profile' in *Tipperary Historical Journal* (2009), pp 115–128; McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, pp 134–45; Curran, *The development of sport in Donegal*, pp 107-10; Curran, 'Why Donegal slept: the development of Gaelic games in Donegal, 1884–1934'.

recorded in contemporary press reports. Secondly, of the players identified for analysis, a substantial number had to be discarded because it was not possible to identify them in census returns. Clearly, it is possible that if the excluded players were identified and included the outcome could differ from that presented here. Nevertheless, the survey includes a significant number of players from a range of clubs in the county and is supplemented with details from a couple of clubs and the Meath county team in the period 1903 to 1905 to ensure as representative a sample as possible.

While the players ranged in age from fifteen to thirty-nine, the games were the preserve of young men, and almost seventy percent of them were twenty-five years of age or younger. Only seven percent were aged over thirty. Given their age profile it was to be expected that the majority of players would be unmarried and about ninety percent of them fell into that category. Sixty-five percent lived with their parents and a further thirteen percent lived with a widowed mother or father. Just over five percent lived with a wife and were heads of the household, as a number of the married players continued to live with parents or in-laws. Practically all those identified were Roman Catholic, with a mere four footballers and no hurlers returned as Church of Ireland. Few players were born outside county Meath; ninety percent of both the footballers and hurlers were natives of the county. The only other counties of origin with appreciable numbers participating in the GAA were the neighbouring ones of Louth, Dublin, Westmeath and Cavan. The homogeneity in age, marital status, county of origin and religion was repeated also in the literacy levels of the players, with ninety-eight percent claiming the ability to read and write.

The decade between the 1901 and 1911 census was one when the Gaelic League played an influential role in Irish life. In Meath in 1911 about four percent of the male population between fifteen and forty years of age claimed an ability to use Irish and English, a figure broadly reflected among the football players in the survey with a return of 3.6 percent.[3] This was in strong contrast to the hurlers. In all, twenty-nine of them, or 18.4 percent, recorded an ability to use Irish and English, over four times

[3] *Census of Ireland, 1911, area, houses and population: also the ages, civil or conjugal condition, occupations, birthplaces, religion and education of the people, province of Leinster, county of Meath,* 107 [Cd 6049-VIII], H.C. 1912–13, cxiv, 915.

the figure for the county as a whole. Among the twenty-nine were seventeen who had not recorded an ability to do so in 1901 but claimed to have acquired Irish by the 1911 census. Based on their ages only three of them were of school-going age in the inter-censal period so they must have acquired Irish through Gaelic League classes. This statistic is further evidence of the influential role the Gaelic League played in Meath, particularly in the formation of hurling clubs (see chapter three). The players who claimed they were bilingual came in the main from clubs where the Gaelic League was strong, especially Athboy and Dunboyne, many of whom were active in the Irish Volunteers later and participated in efforts to join the 1916 Rising.

The censuses of 1901 and 1911 classified occupations into six broad categories: professional, domestic, commercial, agricultural, industrial and an indefinite or non-productive class made up mainly of children under fifteen years of age and women who worked at home. The categories are very broad and imprecise in many ways. For example, general labourers are included in the industrial category, but as the census compilers admit, the majority of them in rural areas 'may be assumed to be Agricultural Labourers, although not having returned themselves as such.'[4] The industrial category also includes skilled craftsmen such as carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, tailors etc. Accordingly, for the purposes of the current study, categories used in similar research in other counties, with some minor amendments, are used, as shown in Figure 4.1. Hunt and McElligott use the categories of farmer/son and farm labourer to encompass the agricultural sector but rather than include occupations like herd and shepherd, in the unskilled/semi-skilled category, I have created an additional group called 'other agricultural' for those, while I have also included the general labourer in a separate category.

The dominant occupational group among the GAA players in the Meath database was the agricultural class. Combining farmers, their sons, farm labourers and other agricultural occupations gives a total close to forty-five percent. According to the 1911 census there were 15,312 males in the 15–45 year old age group in Meath, the age range into which practically all GAA players fell.[5] Of those, 54.5 percent were engaged in agriculture, a figure higher than that recorded among the Meath GAA

[4] *Census of Ireland, 1911, general report with tables and appendix,* xxviii, [Cd. 6663], H.C. 1913, 28.
[5] *Census of Ireland, 1911, county of Meath,* 57, 865.

players.[6] The reason why agricultural based occupations are under-represented among GAA players is mainly due to the fact that the sample is not reflective of the overall population of the county. There were only two substantial towns in Meath in 1901, Kells and Navan, which between them had a population of 6,329, representing a mere ten percent of the total population.[7] However, the player data used in the current research is based on an almost equal number of town and rural teams, which does not reflect the fact that the population was almost ninety percent rural. Taking rural teams only, the proportion involved in agriculture is sixty percent.

Table 4.1: Occupations of GAA players, 1900–1916

	Ireland 1886–1905	**Tipperary 1898–1902**	**Kerry 1888–1916**	**Meath 1900–1915**
Sample Size	500	96	910	382
Farmer/son	53.4	64.6	27.9	20.2
Farm labourer	4.8	18.8	10.3	18.1
General labourer				14.9
Other Agricultural				6.5
Un/semi skilled	7.6	4.2	11.5	7.9
Skilled	13.4	9.3	21.9	18.8
Shop asst/clerk	16.2	2.1	10.3	9.4
Professional	2.4	0.0	5.3	1.8
Merchant	2.2	1.0	7.2	2.4
Others			5.6	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Statistics for Ireland 1886–1905 from Hunt, 'The GAA: Social structure and associated clubs', pp 183–202; statistics for Tipperary from Hunt, 'Tipperary hurlers, 1898–1900, a socio-economic profile' pp 115–128; Kerry details from McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 139 and Meath 1900–1915 from this research.

Previous research into GAA teams by Hunt, one involving a sample from a number of counties, and a second from Tipperary, and work by McElligott on Kerry, arrived at figures of 58.2 percent, 83.4 percent and 38.2 percent respectively for the proportions of players involved in agriculture. There is no consistent pattern to those

[6] Ibid., pp 58–9, 866–7.
[7] Ibid., pp 53, 861.

figures. Hunt's research in Tipperary was confined to hurlers from a rural farming area in the county, where practically the entire population was engaged in agriculture – hence the unusually high figure in the study. McElligott suggests that emigration and increasing urbanisation resulted in the low figures for Kerry.[8] The figures for Meath are higher than the Kerry figures and lower than Hunt's national sample.

Within the agricultural sector there were three component parts, farmers and their sons, farm labourers and other agricultural occupations such as herd and shepherd. The proportion of farmers and their sons in the Meath figures is much lower than that revealed in the other studies while the proportion of farm labourers in Meath is higher. In Hunt's study of rural Tipperary GAA clubs, farmers and their sons outnumber farm labourers by over three to one, in Kerry by 2.7 to one whereas in Meath there is near equality in the numbers. The farmers and their sons comprise 20.2 percent of the Meath sample and the farm labourers make up 18.1 percent. The latter increases to almost twenty-five percent when other agricultural occupations like herd, shepherd etc. are included. When looking at the relative proportions of farmers and their sons on the one hand and farm labourers on the other in the GAA surveys, it should be borne in mind that their proportions in the overall population varied from county to county also. In the 15 to 45 year age group farmers outnumbered farm labourers by 3 to 1 in Tipperary and 3.8 to 1 in Kerry, while in Meath the numbers in the two categories are practically equal.[9] Consequently, if participation rates in the GAA reflected the overall population in the county one would expect a greater equivalence in numbers of farmers and farm labourers in Meath than in Tipperary. As noted earlier, the relative proportions in Tipperary and in Meath are reflective of the overall population in those counties.

The farmer/farmers' sons category itself is very broad as it does not indicate how many were farmers and how many were the sons of farmers, nor does it give any indication of the size or value of the farms. A closer analysis in the present study of the farmers and their sons who played Gaelic games reveals that the majority of them

[8] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 140.
[9] *Census of Ireland, 1911, area, houses and population: province of Munster, county of Tipperary,* p. 108 [Cd 6050-IV], H.C. 1912–13, cxv, 1034; *Census of Ireland, 1911, … county of Kerry*, p. 86 [Cd 6050-II], H.C. 1912–13 cxv, 654; *Census of Ireland, 1911, county of Meath*, pp 58, 866.

were farmers' sons rather than farmers. This is to be expected, given that most GAA players were aged between twenty and thirty and had not yet inherited the family farm. Indeed, younger sons were unlikely to ever inherit the farm. In fact, the vast majority, over seven in ten, described themselves as farmers' sons, with only thirty percent being described as farmers. In addition, an examination of farm size and valuation was conducted using the cancelled land books in the Valuation Office. Despite Meath's reputation for large grazing farms, the majority of farms in the county in 1911 were under fifteen acres, with 57.7 percent of all farms in this category.[10] The land holdings of fifty-three farmers or farmers' sons were identified and the result are summarised in Table 4.2. Very few were from farms under fifteen acres. Half the sample of GAA players, 50.9 percent, came from farms in the 20–100 acre band, close to Hunt's national findings of 58.3 percent in this category. However, in Meath most of the farms within this category were over fifty acres, whereas in Hunt's sample only 15.9 percent were.

Table 4.2: Meath farm sizes and farm sizes held by Meath GAA players, 1911

Farm Size	Meath 1911		GAA Sample	
	No.	**Percent**	**No.**	**Percent**
Under 15 acres	8,185	57.7	12	22.7
16–20	1,953	13.8	4	7.5
21–30			4	7.5
31–50	1,273	9.0	7	13.2
51–100	1,235	8.7	16	30.2
101–200	915	6.4	9	17.0
200+	628	4.4	1	1.9
Total	**14,189**	**100.0**	**53**	**100.0**

Source: Agricultural statistics of Ireland with detailed report for the year 1911, pp 12–13, H.C. 1912 [Cd. 6377], cvi, 778–79; Meath figures based on Valuation Lists, county Meath in Valuation Office, Dublin.

[10] Calculation based on *Agricultural statistics of Ireland with detailed report for the year 1911*, pp 12–13 [Cd. 6377] H.C. 1912, cvi, 778–79.

The smaller farmers were hugely underrepresented in the GAA playing population, with only 22.7 percent of players coming from farms smaller than fifteen acres, whereas almost sixty percent of the farms in the county were of this type. At the other end of the scale, 17.7 percent of Meath farms ranged between thirty and one hundred acres; 43.4 percent of the GAA farmers had holdings of this size. Those figures confirm Hunt's findings that 'smallholders had difficulty participating in the GAA'[11] and were very poorly represented in proportion to their presence in Meath, whereas farmers from larger holdings were over-represented.

This is probably due to the fact that participation in the GAA incurred a cost that may have been beyond the means of the smallholders and especially their sons. Club minutes from the early 1900s do not exist but membership fees were required, travel costs had to be paid and players needed some playing gear, such as boots or camáns. A few minute books from the 1880s give some indication of the cost of joining a GAA club at that time. Kilcock O'Connells in Kildare passed a resolution in 1887 that 'the subscription be raised to sixpence per month.'[12] The Naas GAA club minutes for June 1888 refer to a charge of one shilling from each member for June.[13] Clubs found membership fees difficult to collect. In 1888–89 Pierce O'Mahonys of Navan decided that any member owing three weeks' subscription would be suspended until he cleared up his account and the Kilcock O'Connells club adopted a motion in 1887 'That any member allowing himself to fall four weeks in arrears is liable to suspension and if he allows eight weeks to pass without paying he is liable to be expelled altogether.' Naas GAA took a similar step in 1888 when it decided that any member who was two months in arrears should forfeit membership.[14] It is likely that membership fees remained unpaid, or at best partially paid, in many cases but players owing fees continued to play. It is also possible that membership fees decreased in subsequent years as clubs were less reliant on such fees, as gate receipts, raffles and fund raising dances made clubs more viable. For example, in March 1911, Mullagh St Killians, a club on the Cavan-Meath border, set a

[11] Hunt, 'The GAA: social structure and associated clubs' p. 189.
[12] Kilcock O'Connell's minute book, 8 Aug. 1887 (in private possession).
[13] Minutes of meeting, 17 June 1888, Naas GAA club (CPA, Naas GAA club minute book, 1887-1889).
[14] Noel Coogan, 'A blast from the past' in *Meath GAA summer special* (Navan, 1981), pp 36–7; Kilcock O'Connell's minute book, 1 May 1887; Minutes of meeting, 30 Aug. 1888 (CPA, Naas GAA club minute book).

membership fee of one shilling for the year to 1 April 1912 but, in the absence of minute books from the era, it is not possible to say if this reflected fees generally, nor does it indicate if members had to make other contributions, for example towards travel expenses.[15]

One of the most significant findings in the current study of Meath players is the extent to which agricultural labourers participated. This participation rate was close to twenty percent, but as noted earlier, if one includes other agricultural occupations the figure rises to almost twenty-five percent, a figure above the representation of farmers. It has been generally assumed that farmers predominated in the GAA and that farm labourers played a subsidiary role. In Hunt's national study farmers and their sons account for 53.4 percent of the sample and farm labourers amount to just 4.8, whereas McElligott's sample reveals 27.9 percent in the farmer category, with 10.3 percent consisting of farm labourers. Hunt describes his finding on the virtual absence of labourers as 'extraordinary'.[16] His study of rural Tipperary hurlers in the 1898–1902 period resulted in a very different outcome of 18.8 percent for farm labourers.[17] R.V. Comerford encapsulates the perception that labourers were excluded in the comment ascribed to a Tipperary labourer in the 1940s as he watched his team fielding what he considered to be an unfair proportion of farmers' sons: 'We practising and ye playing the matches'.[18] How then might the findings in this current research of a substantial farm labourer involvement be explained?

It is often asserted that the widest gap in rural Ireland was that between the farmer and the landless agricultural labourer,[19] and if the small farmer was excluded from participation in the GAA on grounds of cost then the agricultural labourer was even more likely to be excluded. It is certainly true that there was a great social divide between farmers and labourers, which precluded inter-marriage and many forms of social interaction between the groups. However, given that the majority of the

[15] *MC*, 11 Mar. 1911.
[16] Hunt, 'The GAA: social structure and associated clubs' p. 187.
[17] Hunt, 'Tipperary hurlers, 1898–1900, a socio-economic profile', pp 115–128.
[18] Comerford, *Ireland*, p. 219.
[19] Finola Kennedy, *Cottage to crèche: family change in Ireland* (Dublin 2001), pp 208-09; John W. Boyle, 'A marginal figure: the Irish rural labourer' in Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, *Irish peasants: violence and political unrest, 1780-1914* (Manchester, 1983), pp 311-38; p. 328.

farming group playing Gaelic games consisted of farmers' sons rather than farmers, the social disparity may not have been so wide. At the time they were playing, while still in their twenties, many of these young farmers' sons were probably not much better off than the farm labouring class, as they probably worked long hours, were unlikely to be guaranteed a regular income from their father and would have to supplement it with work similar to the farm labourer. The farm labourer, if he had regular employment, was at least guaranteed a steady, if small wage. In any event, on the playing field sporting ability and skill probably trumped social class and while fathers might not have favoured their sons playing football with farm labourers, their opposition would not be on the scale of disapproval which a suggestion of intermarriage between the classes would cause.

It is difficult to make accurate calculations of farm labourers' earnings, because, as David Fitzpatrick has stated, 'no data is so treacherous as that relating to agricultural wages.' He nevertheless suggests that by 1911 a labourer 'might expect to earn about 10*s*. 9*d*. weekly.'[20] The reports of the Royal Commission on Labour in 1893 quotes 8*s*. to 9*s*. weekly, with a few on 10*s*., for example, men in regular summer employment in Delvin, a union on the Meath border.[21] The 1901 agricultural returns for the Dunshaughlin constabulary district reported daily rates from 2*s*. 6*d*. to 3*s*. in summer and 1*s*. 6*d*. to 1*s*. 8*d* in winter for agricultural labourers, and a general wage for men of 10*s*. per week.[22] The farm labourers identified in the current study probably could afford to spend a certain amount of money on social and recreational activities. The vast majority of them were single men, mainly living with their parents. Only four of the footballers were married and the rest were all single, so at the time they played they did not have the responsibilities and financial commitments that came with marriage and a family and may have been willing to devote some of their wages to participation in the games and social activities of the local GAA club. Based on a membership of 6*d*. to a shilling a month, it would have amounted to less than five percent of their wages.

[20] David Fitzpatrick, 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer, 1841–1912' in *Irish Economic and Social History*, vii (1980), pp 66–92; pp 80-81.
[21] *Royal commission on labour, reports by assistant commissioners on the agricultural labourer, pt. iv, reports by Mr. Arthur Wilson Fox*, p. 26 [C 6894–xxi], H.C. 1893–94, xxxvii, 346.
[22] *Agricultural statistics of Ireland, with detailed report for the year 1901*, pp 148–9 [Cd 1170], H.C. 1902, cxvi, 496–7.

The importance of individuals in organising teams and running clubs should not be underestimated as a factor in the selection of teams and the inclusion or exclusion of certain classes. Captains were hugely influential figures in the early teams and often retained the position for many years, with some of them being referred to as 'captain' in daily life. Such men could be critical in deciding who played and who did not. Joe Curran, the captain of the highly successful Castletown team in the first decade of the twentieth century, was a postman, which placed him in an ideal position to communicate with members of the club on an almost daily basis as part of his work. He was a farmer's son, the eldest in the family, who would eventually inherit the family farm, but two of his brothers were described as general labourers in the 1901 census. Consequently other farm labourers were unlikely to be discouraged from playing football on the team he captained. In fact, farm labourers predominated on the team, making up seven members of the fourteen that could be identified. Another, described as a general labourer in 1901, was probably an agricultural labourer as he gave his occupation in 1911 as a herd. They were bolstered by two farmers and three skilled craftsmen, consisting of a carpenter, shoemaker and blacksmith, with the latter's forge the regular gathering place for club meetings.[23] It is likely that some of the farm labourers were employed on the lands of the farming members of the club but it is not possible to verify this.

John Newman captained the Bohermeen team that took over from Castletown as the dominant force in Meath football between 1909 and 1916. Newman was a farm labourer who worked on his parents' farm, a holding he would eventually inherit. Fifteen of the club players from that era were identified and agricultural occupations dominated. Four were farmers or farmers' sons, while six were farm labourers. Thus, two-thirds of the players identified were occupied in agriculture. The figure may have been even higher, as four who returned their occupation as labourer may have worked in the agricultural sector, but it is also possible they worked in the Ardbraccan quarries which provided employment for a number of men in the area. The club's goalkeeper, Sam Rennicks, worked as a stonecutter in the quarry. Newman was critical to the success of the team, and, as a labourer himself, he was probably in a position to influence others of similar status to join.

[23] Barbara and Colm Smyth, *100 Years of Castletown GFC,* p. 34.

Remarks from club and county committee officers suggest that labourers formed a significant proportion of some clubs. James J. Connolly, the secretary of Dunshaughlin in 1887 bemoaned the club's inability to run a sports meeting 'with a club composed chiefly of poor labourers' and had to ask for assistance from 'the chairman and other men of means and influence in the locality.'[24] The demographic had not changed much twenty years later. Of the twenty-two different players who featured on the Dunshaughlin team that won the 1909 and 1910 hurling championships, the occupations of twenty can be identified. Five of them were farmers or farmers' sons, another five were farm labourers, four were described as labourers while there was also a blacksmith. A similar situation prevailed at county level. The Meath chairman stated in 1904, when complaining of the low level of expenses covered by the Leinster Council, that the county football team consisted largely of labouring men.[25] In order to verify the accuracy of his assertion all Meath senior football teams that played inter-county games from 1903 to 1905 were examined and, of the thirty-one men known to have played, twenty-three were identified. Just over a third, 34.8 percent, were agricultural labourers, with farmers or farmers' sons and skilled tradesmen next highest with 21.7 percent each.[26]

Thus, in this survey agricultural occupations predominated, as expected, but the research for Meath does not substantiate the view that farmers dominated GAA teams and that labourers were largely excluded. In fact farm labourers comprised a significant proportion of GAA players in the county.

Profile of Meath GAA officers

A similar process was used to identify a sample of club or county committee officials in Meath during this period. Seventy-nine men were identified and included presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries, treasurers and captains of clubs. The findings are presented in Table 4.3. The biggest difference between the officials and the players is that far more shop assistants or clerks and professionals were involved as officials than as players. Between them these occupations provided just under a third

[24] *DI*, 18 June 1887.
[25] *DI*, 13 Feb. 1904.
[26] Teams taken from local press and O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 181.

of the officials, whereas they accounted for just one-eighth of the players. This finding is unsurprising, as officials, particularly club and county committee secretaries and treasurers, required the administrative and financial skills that were necessary in those occupations. McElligott's figures for Kerry are higher, with shop assistants, professionals and merchants accounting for just over fifty percent of the officials. This discrepancy is probably due to the larger town population in Kerry, where Killarney, Listowel and Tralee had a combined population of 19,505 in 1911, whereas Meath's three main towns, Navan, Kells and Trim, had 7,817 persons. Farm labourers had a lower representation among GAA officials in Meath than they had in the playing population, but the difference was not substantial. Almost fourteen percent of the officials were labourers, compared to eighteen percent of the players. In contrast, McElligott's sample of Kerry officials contained a mere 2.4 percent of farm labourers. This can hardly be attributed to the much larger urban population in Kerry and it is difficult to account for it. The finding, however, bolsters the view that far more agricultural labourers were involved in the GAA, at least in Meath, than is sometimes believed.

Table 4.3: Occupations of GAA officers in Kerry and Meath, 1900–15

	Kerry	Meath
Farmer/son	18.9	24.0
Farm labourer	2.4	13.9
General labourer		3.8
Un/semi skilled	2.8	5.1
Skilled	19.3	17.7
Shop asst/clerk	16.5	20.3
Professional	15.1	10.1
Merchant	22.6	5.1
Others	2.4	
Total	100.0	100.0

Statistics for Kerry from McElligott, *Forging a Kingdom*, p. 142. Meath statistics based on team lists from *Meath Chronicle*, *Drogheda Independent*, *Drogheda Argus* and club histories. Occupations identified using the online census returns of 1901 and 1911.

Unsurprisingly, all officials in the sample returned themselves as literate, with each person claiming the ability to both read and write. Predictably, the age profile of

officials was older than that of players and while almost seventy percent of players were twenty-five years of age or younger only forty-three percent of officials fell into this age category. At the other end of the scale, seven percent of players were aged over thirty, while among the officials thirty percent were in this category. Nevertheless, the age discrepancy was not as wide as might be expected and the average age among officials at 28.5 years was relatively young. This is probably due to the fact that the revival of the GAA in Meath after 1900 was driven by a new, younger group of enthusiasts. Very few of those who had been active in the organisation during its earlier heyday were involved in the revived GAA in the early twentieth century and consequently there was a strong overlap between officials and players, with many men filling both roles. Approximately one-third of the officials recorded themselves as being able to speak Irish and English. This is substantially greater than the figures for players but must be treated with caution as it was self-reported and it is unclear what criteria respondents used to decide their level of competence in the Irish language. The figure is lower than those found by McElligott in Kerry, where 54.2 percent of his sample of officials claimed proficiency in Irish. The much higher figure in Kerry is accounted for by the existence of Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas in the county, whereas none existed in Meath. Nevertheless, as was noted above with regard to the sample of hurlers, the findings underline the influence of the Gaelic League during the first decade of the nineteenth century. However, the failure of the GAA to promote the use of Irish in the organisation, as will be outlined in chapter nine, suggests that many of those who declared a competency in the language exaggerated their own ability.

Conclusion

The focus of this chapter has been on the GAA players in county Meath in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century. Men from the agricultural sector predominated on GAA teams, as was to be expected in a rural county such as Meath. However, farmers and their sons did not dominate the teams as happened in other counties and farm labourers were equally represented. This is explained by the fact that there were equal proportions of farmers and labourers among the 15–45 year old age cohort in the county's general population, and their representation on teams reflected this. Men from the small farms of fifteen acres or less that constituted over fifty-five percent of the land holdings in the county were under-represented while

their counterparts from the larger farms above thirty acres were over-represented. This suggests that participation in Gaelic games may have been too costly for the former group, especially the sons who had not yet inherited the family farm and had no steady income. While it could be argued that farm labourers would be equally excluded on financial grounds, most of them did have a wage, however small and uncertain, and as Sunday was their only day of rest they may have been willing to spend it on the entertainment and social interaction provided by Gaelic games. It is also likely that some of them were employed on the farms of the larger farmers who persuaded and recruited them to join the local GAA club. In this context, it has been shown that the captain of the club was a pivotal figure in the organisation and constitution of teams.

Club and county officials were, in the main, older than players, but there was not a significant age gap as many of the players acted as club officers also. The most notable difference between officials and players is the greater representation of shop assistants, clerks and professionals among the former than the latter. Nevertheless, Meath's status as an agricultural economy with a small town population is reflected in the fact that shop assistants were not as highly represented as they were in Kerry and that members of the agricultural sector, including labourers, were well represented among club and county officials.

Chapter 5

Years of upheaval I: the GAA in Meath, 1912–16

Introduction

Politics and war took centre stage in Ireland from 1912, and events over the following four years presented many challenges for the GAA. It was a time of great political upheaval, encompassing the third Home Rule Bill crisis, the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1913, the formation and split in the Irish National Volunteers (INV) and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and the Easter Rising in 1916. Thus, the organisation and playing of Gaelic games had to proceed alongside momentous events in an ever-changing political landscape. The impact of political developments on the GAA varied from county to county and this chapter will analyse their effect on the organisation in Meath during these years.

Dónal McAnallen concludes with regard to the GAA in Ulster that 'the most moderate province of the association in 1912, mirroring contemporary moods within nationalism, became radicalised through the course of political events until it acted as a central player in the War of Independence'.[1] Richard McElligott, in his analysis of Kerry, comments that 'The local GAA became increasingly aligned with the broader nationalist political movement that emerged in these years.' [2] William Murphy is less definitive, claiming that the effect which a small, motivated cohort in the GAA, committed to revolutionary nationalism, 'had upon the Irish revolution is tangible, but, despite the certainties of some, it is not an easy matter to delineate with precision.'[3]

This chapter will examine the relationship between the Irish National Volunteers and the GAA. The attitude of the GAA and its members to World War I has received little attention until recently in the historiography. The reasons for that will be considered in this chapter, which examines the attitude of the GAA in Meath to the war and enlistment in the British army. It will be argued that whereas many of those

[1] Dónal McAnallen, 'The radicalisation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ulster, 1912–1923: the role of Owen O'Duffy', in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, xxxi, no. 7 (2014), pp 704–23; p. 719.
[2] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 216.
[3] William Murphy, 'The Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish revolution' in Crowley *et al*, *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, p. 897.

in leadership roles in the GAA were vehemently opposed to participation in the war, not all members supported that view. A number of GAA members, including prominent players, enlisted and fought in the conflict. On the home front, Meath's role in the 1916 Rising was minimal, but the chapter will show that Seán Boylan, the Dunboyne hurling club captain, and other GAA members were in regular contact with P.H. Pearse and leaders of the Rising and that a number of GAA members from Meath were mobilised to participate in it.

The GAA, the Volunteers and the outbreak of World War, 1913–15

Two general elections in 1910 left Herbert Asquith's Liberal government dependent on the support of John Redmond's IPP for survival. The price of Irish support was the introduction of legislation that would grant Ireland a measure of Home Rule. Previously, the House of Lords had had the power to veto such proposals, but its ability to do so was curtailed when the Parliament Act of 1911 limited the Lords' power to delay bills passed by the House of Commons to just two years. Thus, when the Commons carried the third reading of the Home Rule bill in May 1914 it was evident that Ireland would finally have its own parliament, albeit with limited powers. However, vehement opposition among the unionist population, particularly in Ulster, had earlier led to the formation and arming of the UVF in 1913 to oppose Home Rule, by force if necessary. In response, Eoin MacNeill, professor of early and medieval Irish history in University College Dublin and a co-founder of the Gaelic League, wrote an article 'The North Began' that advocated the formation of a similar force among nationalists. The result was a meeting in the Rotunda in Dublin on 25 November 1913, which established the INV.[4] Its aim was 'to train, discipline, arm and equip' the Volunteers 'to secure and maintain the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland.'[5]

In early December the *Meath Chronicle* reported that a branch of the Volunteers was to be established in Navan but nothing happened until February 1914, and then it was Kells that took the initiative.[6] The following week Eoin MacNeill addressed a thronged meeting in Navan at which over 110 men enrolled, while Meath GAA

[4] For a detailed account see Ronan Fanning, *Fatal pat:, British government and Irish revolution, 1910–1922* (London, 2013), pp 30–135.
[5] Conor McNamara, *The Easter Rebellion 1916: an illustrated history* (Cork, 2015), p. 37.
[6] *MC*, 13 Dec. 1913, 21 Feb. 1914.

secretary, Lorcán Ó Cléirigh, acted as secretary of the meeting.[7] The branch later established a provisional committee of twelve, four of whom had strong GAA credentials. County chairman and Gaelic League activist Seaghan MacNamidhe, his brother James, secretary of the county committee in 1906–08, Thomas Walshe, the Navan Harps representative and future vice-chairman of Meath GAA, all joined Ó Cléirigh, who remained as secretary of the branch.[8] The involvement of GAA members was replicated in the formation of additional branches throughout the county. On St Patrick's Day in Athboy, GAA activist Patrick O'Growney presided over a meeting that ended with 200 men expressing an interest in joining the new branch.[9] Matt O'Toole, Meath GAA vice-chairman, was secretary of the Skryne Volunteers while John Newman, captain of the Bohermeen Geraldines, was a member of the local Volunteer branch committee.[10] In 1914 Volunteers marched to, and drilled at, football games and sports in Trim, Ratoath, Kells and Athboy, while the Carnaross club organised a football tournament in aid of the local corps.[11] By late May there were fifteen Volunteer branches. In early July numbers had doubled to thirty and by 9 August 1914 had almost doubled again, to fifty-eight.[12] The latter increase reflected nationalist outrage at the deaths of four civilians shot by British troops of the King's Own Scottish Borderers on Bachelor's Walk, Dublin, following the landing of arms at Howth for the INV.[13] Alexander Gray's monthly report for July as County Inspector of the RIC in Meath noted that 'a great stimulus was given to this movement by the successful gun running of Howth on 26th July and many respectable young men who hitherto held aloof have now joined.'[14]

In joining the Volunteers the GAA men were taking their lead from the organisation's officers at national level. Luke O'Toole, the secretary of the GAA, was a member of the platform party at the Rotunda meeting to establish the Volunteers, and, in a short contribution, 'appealed to all Irishmen to join the

[7] *MC*, 28 Feb. 1914.
[8] *DI*, 25 Apr. 1914; Oliver Coogan, *Politics and war in Meath, 1913–23* (Navan, 2013 [1983]), p. 3.
[9] *MC*, 21 Mar. 1914.
[10] *MC*, 18 July 1914.
[11] See *MC,* 18 July 1914, 25 July 1914, 1 Aug. 1914, 15 Aug. 1914; *DI,* 18 July 1914.
[12] Coogan, *Politics and war*, pp 7–8.
[13] Fanning, *Fatal path*, pp 128–9.
[14] CI Meath, 1 Aug. 1914 (TNA, CO 904/94).

organisation'.[15] De Búrca has made the point that his attendance was unsurprising, given the broad representative nature of the meeting and the GAA's embrace of members and supporters of all nationalist bodies over the previous dozen years.[16] At the time the IRB's shadowy role in the calling of the meeting was not known.[17] The president, James Nowlan, was stated to have added his support at the Wexford annual GAA convention by advising 'every member as an individual to join in the Volunteers and . . . learn to shoot straight' while noting that the GAA as an organisation could not take part.[18] As de Búrca and others have pointed out, the GAA at national level was careful to steer clear of involvement in party politics following its bitter experience of the Parnellite era,[19] and the 1911 annual congress supported a motion 'that the Association be conducted on non-political lines'.[20] However, the GAA was adept at flexibly interpreting such rules. As an organisation whose avowed aim was the promotion of national pastimes and culture it gave implicit, and often direct, support to what it deemed national organisations. The presence of O'Toole at the launch and Nowlan's later comment gave implied, if not overt, support to the newly-formed Volunteers. The association permitted Robert Page, a member of the INV's national executive committee, to speak at the annual congress in 1914. His call for delegates to promote the objectives of the National Volunteer movement on their return to their clubs was met with applause. He was careful to note, however, that they did not ask the congress to take any official action.[21] In fact, the GAA refused to grant Croke Park for drilling purposes while noting that members 'were quite free to follow their own inclinations in the matter [of joining the Volunteers], and it was not for the [Central] Council to advise them for or against'. There is no record of the refusal in the GAA minutes, but details were carried in the *Gaelic Athlete*, published the week after the meeting.[22] However, the reason given for the refusal was that drilling would damage the playing surface and not any principled opposition to the Volunteers. Thus, many individual GAA members helped to

[15] Cormac Moore, 'Luke O'Toole, servant of the GAA' in Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923*, pp 53–70; p. 58.
[16] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, pp 119–20.
[17] McNamara, *The Easter Rebellion 1916*, p. 36.
[18] *Gaelic Athlete*, 17 Jan. 1914.
[19] De Búrca, *The GAA*: *a history*, p. 120.
[20] Central Council mins, 15 Apr. 1911.
[21] Central Council mins, 12 Apr. 1914; *II*, 13 Apr. 1914.
[22] *Gaelic Athlete*, 27 Dec. 1913.

establish branches of the Volunteers and some clubs held tournaments in aid of the local corps.[23]

Volunteer activity became so prevalent in some counties that it interfered with the working of the GAA, and, with drills regularly held on Sundays, some GAA fixtures had to be deferred. David Hassan, quoting the *Gaelic Athlete,* states that in Kildare 'nearly all the members of the GAA were identified with the "Volunteer movement" and that volunteer activities were interfering with the playing of Gaelic games'.[24] GAA officials were also prominent in the Volunteers in Kerry, while in Derry the recently revived GAA was once again rendered practically defunct because of the Volunteer movement.[25] The *Gaelic Athlete*, a newspaper supportive of the GAA, declared in June 1914 that the association had given the Volunteer movement 'every possible assistance, both officially and unofficially'.[26] The level of support, however, varied from area to area. Cornelius Murphy, a Volunteer from Cork, recalled that only around ten percent of GAA men there had any involvement with the local Volunteers, the rest being involved in the GAA for purely sporting and social reasons,[27] while in Clare the All-Ireland hurling final took precedence over the first county inspection of the Volunteers.[28] In Meath, the county committee chairman, MacNamidhe, explained that a decline of revenue in 1914 occurred because 'the Volunteer movement somewhat interfered with them last year. They did not make their fixtures in deference to the Volunteer bodies, and they were put back'.[29] Nevertheless, both the senior football and hurling championships were completed by December 1914 and sixty-four games were played in the junior football league, indicating that disruption was not widespread in the county.[30] The overall relationship between the Volunteers and the GAA might best be described, in

[23] *MC*, 15 Aug. 1914.
[24] David Hassan and Andrew McGuire, 'The GAA and revolutionary Irish politics in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland' in *Sport in Society*, xxi, no. 1 (2016), pp 51–61; p. 54.
[25] For Kerry see McElligott, *Forging a kingdom,* pp 227–8; for Derry, see de Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 124.
[26] *Gaelic Athlete*, 20 June 1914.
[27] Cornelius Murphy (BMH, WS 24), p. 1.
[28] David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life 1913–1921: provincial experience of war and revolution* (Cork, 1998, 2nd ed.), p. 102.
[29] *DI,* 27 Feb. 1915.
[30] Dunboyne won their fourth consecutive hurling championship in late December, defeating Trim by 2-7 to 3-0, while Bohermeen and Navan Harps played a scoreless draw in football in early December. No replay took place as the Harps refused to play when the county committee rejected their demand for one-third of the gate. As a result Bohermeen earned a sixth consecutive title. Curraha won the junior final in March 1915 but it was not unusual for championships to run into the following year.

the words of de Búrca, as 'an informal but effective alliance'.[31]

World War I and Meath GAA

The outbreak of World War I in August 1914 altered the political situation and resulted in dissension that split the Volunteers. Two months earlier John Redmond had successfully insisted on the co-option of twenty-five of his nominees to the executive of the volunteer movement against the wishes of many of the original leaders.[32] Then, on 18 September, the Home Rule bill became law, but an amending act suspended its operation for the duration of the war. A decision on the inclusion or exclusion of the Ulster counties under Home Rule was also deferred. Redmond, believing that his ultimate ambition had been achieved, made a fateful speech at Woodenbridge, county Wicklow, on 20 September, exhorting the Volunteers to fight in Europe, urging them to serve, 'not only in Ireland itself, but wherever the firing line extends in defence of right, of freedom, and religion in this war'.[33] The original provisional committee of the Volunteers, on which the IRB was strongly represented, viewed this as completely contrary to their aims and issued a statement repudiating Redmond's stance that they 'take foreign service under a government which is not Irish.'[34] In the resultant split the vast majority followed Redmond under the title Irish National Volunteers while the minority, who supported Eoin MacNeill and the original committee, operated as the Irish Volunteers.[35]

The reaction in Meath reflected the position nationally, with the vast majority of Volunteer corps and members following Redmond, and it was almost six months before any sign of disagreement with his stance materialised.[36] One of the areas where dissent surfaced was in the county's premier hurling club. The Dunboyne club captured its fourth successive senior hurling title a week after Redmond's Woodenbridge speech and three days after the original committee led by Eoin

[31] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 128.
[32] Chris Dooley, *Redmond: a life undone* (Dublin, 2015), p. 186.
[33] Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: an Irish history, 1800–2000* (London, 2004), p. 145.
[34] Statement to the Irish Volunteers, 24 Sept. 1914 (UCDA, MacNeill papers, LA1/H/1) available at http://historyhub.ie/statement-to-the-irish-volunteers http://historyhub.ie/statement-to-the-irish-volunteers (accessed 31 July 2017).
[35] Figures as to the respective strengths of the organisations vary, with 150,000 National Volunteers compared to 10,000 Irish Volunteers giving a broad indication of their respective strengths. See Fanning, *Fatal path,* p. 136.
[36] Coogan, *Politics and war*, p. 28.

MacNeill issued its declaration that split the Volunteers. John Bruton, the Dunboyne club chairman, and Seán Boylan, the club captain and secretary, held opposing views, with Bruton continuing to support the National Volunteers while Boylan was firmly on the side of MacNeill. There was dissension in the hurling club as a result and Bruton and some of his supporters walked out of a meeting of the club when it voted to support Boylan by fifty votes to nine. The issue surfaced at the county convention in February 1915 when Bruton and Boylan both claimed to represent the club and engaged in a public argument. Bruton then declared that he wished to affiliate a new club while Boylan retorted on three occasions that Bruton wanted to start a new club 'simply and solely because we left the National Volunteers'. This was a reference to Boylan's role in forming a corps of Irish Volunteers in the village, which will be outlined in detail later. The majority of the hurlers seem to have followed Boylan. The convention declined to sanction a new club and a number of dissenting Dunboyne players lined out with other clubs in 1915, mainly Dunshaughlin and Pelletstown. The county committee chairman, Seaghan MacNamidhe, while allowing a discussion of the issue, wanted to avoid entanglement in the political aspect of the dispute, stating: 'I will have to rule you out of order if you mention anything of a political nature at all.'[37] Boylan was in a small minority in the county in forming a branch of the Irish Volunteers in opposition to the National Volunteers – there were only four branches in the whole county by 1916 – and MacNamidhe's approach was based on a desire to avoid the dissension that had split the Volunteers from seeping into the GAA.

However, the dispute continued into early 1916 and an affiliation was accepted from a second club, so that for the championships of 1916 to 1919 Dunboyne was represented by a No. 1 and a No. 2 club.[38] Although the teams played each other occasionally, their encounters never resulted in violence but animosities lingered on for some time, with Hugh Mullally of the breakaway group claiming in 1917 that he had been denied a 1914 championship medal because he had taken an anti-Boylan stance. The Meath county committee continued to avoid entanglement in the Dunboyne dispute, deeming the medal issue an internal club matter. While similar

[37] *DI*, 27 Feb. 1915.
[38] *DI*, 27 Feb. 1915, 17 Apr. 1915, 22 May 1915, 19 June 1915; *MC*, 29 May 1915, 19 Feb. 1916, 15 Apr. 1916; O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 247.

divisions occurred in Kerry, they seem to have been rare in the GAA as a whole.[39]

The split in the Volunteers and Redmond's support for the war effort resulted in many Irishmen joining British army regiments, especially in the early stages of the war.[40] The issue of the GAA's attitude to, or involvement in, World War I is one that was ignored in the historiography of the GAA until recently. Pádraig Puirséal's account of the association refers to the cancellation of a number of important games due to troop movements and the takeover of GAA grounds in Cork and Limerick by the military and implies that all in the GAA were vehemently opposed to joining the British army.[41] J.J. Walsh, chairman of Cork GAA from 1909, suggested in his autobiography that no GAA member from the county fought in the World War, stating that

> history should record that, without exception, every man from the *Rebel County* who participated in this epic struggle for liberation was a Gael. Followers of alien games were to be found in the *Pals' Battalions* playing, as always, the enemy's game.[42]

De Búrca notes that members from rank-and-file level up to the Central Council were in both rival Volunteer forces but he offers no view on the extent to which GAA members may have fought in the war.[43] Yet, in 1915 the *National Volunteer* reported that a large contingent of GAA men had joined the colours.[44] Ross O'Carroll, writing in 2015, declared that the lack of discussion of the topic

> may be due to a desire to edit the Association's official history down to solely a part of the Irish nationalist movement, and to ignore quietly the role thousands of GAA men played in a foreign war, or it may simply be the daunting challenge facing historians in gathering evidence on the topic.[45]

By then Cronin, Duncan and Rouse had asserted that 'thousands of GAA members' followed the call of John Redmond to enlist in the British army and they pointed to

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[39] Richard McElligott suggests that the Laune Rangers club in Kerry almost divided in two over the issue. See McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 235.
[40] Philip Orr, '200,000 volunteer soldiers' in John Horne (ed.), *Our war, Ireland and the Great War* (Dublin, 2008), pp 63–77; p. 66.
[41] Puirséal, *The GAA in its time*, pp 161–3.
[42] J.J. Walsh, *Recollections of a rebel* (Tralee, 1944), p. 19.
[43] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 126.
[44] *National Volunteer*, 8 May 1915.
[45] Ross O'Carroll, 'The GAA and the First World War, 1914–18' in Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923*, pp 85–104; p. 86.

the collapse of clubs such as Killaloe in county Clare as proof of this.[46] Peter Hart also states that 'many prominent Cork GAA players joined the British army in 1914 and 1915' but gives no evidence to substantiate his claim.[47]

In 2014, on the anniversary of the outbreak of the war, the GAA initiated a project to discover the level of involvement by GAA members in the conflict and Dónal McAnallen's research has identified at least ten men who played in All-Ireland finals who took part in the war. As the numbers playing in All-Ireland finals represents but a fraction of the playing membership, McAnallen estimates that hundreds of GAA members may have joined the war effort.[48] However, as suggested by O'Carroll, it has proven a difficult task to quantify that involvement. Local and national newspapers and the recent publication of county histories of those who died in the war, such as Noel French's *The Meath war dead* and Donal Hall's *The unreturned army: county Louth dead in the Great War 1914–1918*, give some indication of local involvement in the war and the presence of GAA members in the ranks of combatants.[49] However, newspapers and memorial volumes both have drawbacks for the historian of the GAA. Firstly, they focus almost entirely on the minority who died in the war and ignore the majority who served and returned, while references to GAA membership are often made only in the case of those who were prominent as players or officials. Thus, the fact that a particular individual was an ordinary member of a club is unlikely to be noted. Many of those who returned from the war and resumed civilian life and membership of the GAA probably chose not to speak about their war-time role and with the passage of time it faded from public knowledge. Thus, obituaries of well-known GAA players published by the local press in the decades after the war do not always refer to a player's role in the war. A notable example of this is outlined later in the chapter. In addition, the fact that over a third of British army records were destroyed during the Second World War adds to the difficulty of documenting the extent of GAA men's participation in the conflict.

[46] Cronin *et al*, *The GAA: a people's history*, p. 148.
[47] Peter Hart, *The IRA and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 2009), p. 212.
[48] See https://www.the42.ie/gaa-heroes-world-war-one-donal-mcanallen-4412540-Dec2018/ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2019).
[49] Noel French, *The Meath war dead* (Dublin, 2011); Donal Hall, *The unreturned army: county Louth dead in the Great War 1914–1918* (Dundalk, 2005).

The best sources tend to be local histories written by authors with a detailed knowledge of people and place, but many of those also ignore the war.

The constraints referred to above have ensured that little or no work has been carried out on the extent of GAA members' involvement in the war, and this is particularly true of Meath. In the early years of the war, recruitment meetings were a regular feature of life in most Meath towns, particularly Navan. Ethna Cantwell's extensive research into recruitment in the area concludes that it is 'very difficult to estimate exactly how many young men were recruited from the town of Navan and its immediate environs'.[50] In 1916, A.J. Horneck, a journalist from Navan with the *Leinster Leader*, compiled a list of men from the county who had joined the forces from the outbreak of war until March 1916. He named a total of 1,315 men, which included reservists as well as recruits.[51] Official figures record that in the twelve months from December 1914 to December 1915 a total of 497 recruits joined from Meath. Even allowing for the inclusion of reservists and bearing in mind that the official figure does not take account of recruitment between August and December 1914 or January to March 1916, a total of seven months, this figure of 497 is a long way from corresponding with Horneck's totals. His totals, however, have the merit of listing the 1,315 men he claimed joined. The official figure of 497 for Meath was below the numbers for the neighbouring Leinster counties of Louth, which contributed 550, Westmeath 539 and Kildare 689 in the same period, but higher than its Ulster neighbours Cavan with 453, and Monaghan with 319.[52] Unfortunately, County Inspector Alexander Gray's monthly reports from Meath are perfunctory and formulaic and do not give any figures for recruitment from the outbreak of war until December 1914, but he does note as early as October 1914 that

> drilling has almost ceased and there is now no enthusiasm whatever to fight for England. Indeed, but for the fact that Belgium and France are our Allies I

[50] Ethna Cantwell, 'Navan and its people during the Great War, 1914–18' in Navan and District Historical Society, *Navan its people and its past,* ii (Navan, 2013), pp 105–57; p. 111.
[51] A.J. Horneck, *County Meath roll of honour* (Naas, 1916, reprinted by Meath County Council, 2016). It is unclear how Horneck defined men from Meath. He may have included natives of Meath who enlisted outside the county whereas the official figures relate to men who enlisted at locations within the county.
[52] Return of recruits who have joined the army between 15th December 1914 and 15th December 1915 in Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, *Intelligence notes, 1913–16* (Dublin, 1966), p. 55.

> am quite sure the majority would rejoice, temporarily at all events, if Gt. Britain were defeated by the Germans.[53]

In November he remarked that there was no disposition to join the army and that recruiting had practically ceased. Recruitment meetings did result in additional men enlisting and in January 1915 a large recruiting meeting in Navan resulted in 'several recruits', but opposition to such meetings was growing and anti-recruiting notices were posted in the town in advance of the gathering.[54] Given the uncertainty regarding the numbers of recruits generally, it is unsurprising that efforts to analyse GAA members' participation have met with little success.

The circumstances that propelled men generally to enlist, such as economic circumstance, a youthful desire for adventure and excitement, or agreement with Redmond's view that it would hasten Home Rule probably applied to GAA members also. Among the most prominent Meath GAA men who enlisted were Jack Shaw and Sam Rennicks. Jack Shaw had a lengthy career in the Meath colours ranging from the controversial 1895 All-Ireland final against Tipperary to victory in the Croke Cup final of 1911. He had an outstanding career at club level with a number of clubs, and captained South Meath (Kilmessan) to the Meath senior championship title in 1903. Following the demise of Kilmessan he changed allegiance to Trim, playing in and losing the 1905 final to Castletown, which was winning three-in-a-row. He played with Bohermeen in 1909 when the club won the first of six-in-a-row of titles and also played in the winning sides of 1910, 1911, and 1912. In all, he played in seven finals (although the 1911 and 1912 competitions were run on a league basis) and won five championship medals with three different clubs. He joined the Royal Garrison Artillery in 1915 and served in France. His reasons for enlisting are not certain, but they may have been financial; while on active duty he was taken to court on foot of a mortgage he owed on the public house he ran in Bective. The notice of his death in the *Meath Chronicle* in 1948 does not mention his army service.[55] This omission may be due to the reporter's lack of knowledge – the war had ended thirty years previously – or his family's reluctance to publicise it, but it is likely that if Shaw had participated in the War of Independence his service would have been recorded. This

[53] CI Meath, 1 Oct. 1914 (TNA, CO 904/95).
[54] CI Meath, Oct./Nov. 1914 (TNA, CO 904/95); CI Meath, Jan. 1915 (TNA, CO 904/96). District inspector Harry Smyth compiled the January report in the absence of County inspector Gray.
[55] *MC*, 27 Mar. 1948, 4 Apr. 1948.

suggests that war service was removed from the narrative as it did not fit with prevailing views of the war, either in the GAA or Irish society generally, at the time of his death. That, however, may be to read too much into its omission, as the war service of a contemporary GAA man, Sam Rennicks, was noted in his obituary.

Rennicks worked in the Ardbraccan Quarries, as did his father and many family members. He played in goals for Navan Gaels and Bohermeen Geraldines, featuring in most of the latter's six consecutive championship victories, and he also won a Croke Cup medal with Meath alongside Jack Shaw in 1911. Although he was married and had a job, he joined the army in late 1916, so it seems unlikely he enlisted for financial reasons. He survived the conflict, resumed his playing career with Martry and Meath and continued to play into the 1920s. He was later a member of the Martry company of the IRA during the War of Independence, lived until 1975 and attended the senior county final in 1974 when his former club made its first final appearance since 1916.[56] His obituary in the local press detailed his career during World War I, noting his part in the Battle of the Somme and an injury he received.[57] Another Rennicks, Richard, also from Bohermeen, was not as fortunate. He was a private in the Leinster Regiment and died from wounds suffered at the battle of Locre in 1917. He too was a stonecutter in the Ardbraccan Quarries but was much younger than Sam and joined the army at the same time as five other young men from the area, so that a sense of adventure and search for excitement among the group may have influenced them to enlist.[58] The local press records that Rennicks was a member of the Bohermeen club, but it has not been possible to discover his name on team lists. He was only twenty-one when he enlisted, so he may have been too young to gain his place on the powerful championship-winning Bohermeen teams.

Pat Fox enlisted as a private in the Irish Guards. He was a member of the Navan Pierce O'Mahonys team that dominated Meath football in the 1890s and played in the All-Ireland final of 1895. Speaking at a recruitment meeting in Navan in July 1915, J.P. Timmon, a former president of both O'Mahonys and the GAA county

[56] Martry Company, 4th Battalion, 2nd Meath Brigade (Military Archives, MA/MSPC/RO 488); *MC*, 19 Oct. 1974.
[57] *MC*, 26 July 1975.
[58] French, *The Meath war dead*, pp 124–5; *MC*, 31 Mar. 1917.

committee, who was strongly in favour of enlistment, stated that Fox, who had once been a 'back' in the Pierce O'Mahonys was now a 'forward' at the front scoring points for the English.[59] Fox was killed in action in September 1916. He was probably a labourer and was forty years old when he died.[60] Some families in Navan had a tradition of service in the British armed forces. The Kerrigans had five members in the army during the World War. One of them, Joseph, was described as 'a well-known and popular member of the Navan Harps, and was one of their best players'. He played for the club in the football league final versus Dunshaughlin in 1909 and later served with the army in India before dying in Flanders in January 1915.[61]

Andrew Russell from Kells had been prominent in the Gaelic League and the Kells hurling and handball clubs before enlisting. In addition to playing hurling, he represented his club at county committee meetings and was secretary of the Gaelic League branch in Kells when it sought to have the town's streets named in Irish as well as English. He was opposed to the ban excluding players of rival games from joining the GAA and enrolled in the INV on its formation in Kells. At the time he enlisted he was studying at the London School of Economics, where he had gone on a scholarship, and is probably another example of a young man who joined alongside his friends.[62] His experience exemplifies the complexity of attitudes to the war, for while he was committed to the GAA and the Gaelic League he saw no conflict between those ideals and fighting in the war.

A history of the Longwood GAA club claims that a number of men from the area joined the British army, many of them members of the association. They included Bill and Jim Vaughan, the latter of whom played for Longwood in the 1910 senior hurling final, Pat McEvoy from Longwood and Jim 'Poocher' McManus, a Boardsmill player.[63] John Sherlock, of the Navan Harps club, whose son Victor won a National Football League with Meath in 1945–46 and an All-Ireland with Cavan in

[59] *MC*, 31 July 1915.
[60] French, *The Meath war dead*, p. 30; *MC*, 28 Oct. 1916, 4 Nov. 1916.
[61] French, *The Meath war dead*, p. 72; *MC,* 11 Dec. 1909*,* 23 Jan. 1915.
[62] French, *The Meath war dead*, pp 127–9. For details of Russell's involvement in the GAA and Gaelic League prior to enlistment see *MC*, 24 Aug. 1904*,* 27 Oct. 1906, 10 Nov. 1906, 23 Mar. 1907*,* 22 June 1907, 28 Dec. 1907*,* 21 Mar. 1908, 29 Aug. 1908, 26 May 1910.
[63] Farrell, *Strong backs,* pp 101–2.

1947, survived the war.[64] Some, such as Michael 'The Gael' McArdle, a Trim hurler, fought in the war but returned home to fight with the IRA in the War of Independence.[65] He was not alone in this, as many ex-army men used their military expertise against the British in the 1920s and it is estimated that the officer corps in the National Army between 1922 and 1924 included more than 600 veterans of World War I.[66]

Francis Ledwidge, the poet from Slane, though not prominent in the GAA, was a strong supporter of the Slane team, writing to the local press to defend them after they refused to play the second half of a championship match against Navan Harps in 1913. He also acted as the club's delegate to the county committee on occasion.[67] His brother, Joe, was one of Meath's outstanding defenders and won a number of senior championship medals with Rathkenny. Francis and Joe were founder members of the INV branch in Slane and despite his admiration for the future 1916 leaders, James Connolly and Pádraig Pearse, and his friendship with Thomas MacDonagh, Francis joined the Inniskilling Fusiliers in October 1914. He explained his enlistment on the basis that the army 'stood between Ireland and an enemy common to civilisation', and saw that as more effective than passing resolutions at home as a member of the Navan Board of Guardians. The 1916 Rising inspired his poem *Lament for Thomas MacDonagh* and he obviously empathised with the rebels' actions at Easter 1916. He was killed during the battle of Ypres, in July 1917.[68]

A contemporary in the Inniskillings, Private Richard Cassidy, a former player with Drumconrath Brian Borus, also wrote home in 1915 expressing his sadness at the inability of his former club to defeat 'a team of schoolboys like the Navan Harps'. He outlined his views on the attidude GAA members should take to the war:

> Where is the spirit of Drumconrath fled to? Are they too much engrossed passing resolutions of hatred against their fellow countrymen in some Volunteer Hall, or are they afraid of Zeppelins? If the latter, here is the place

[64] *MC*, 18 May 1916, 13 Nov. 1954.
[65] Owen McFadden, *The old I.R.A. in Meath* (Drogheda, 2015), p. 258.
[66] Jane Leonard, 'Survivors' in Horne (ed.), *Our war, Ireland and the Great War*, pp 209–23; p. 219.
[67] *DI*, 18 Oct. 1913.
[68] Alice Curtayne, *Francis Ledwidge: a life of the poet, 1887–1917* (London, 1972), p. 83; Dónal Lowry, *Ledwidge, Francis Edward* in McGuire and Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish biography*, v, pp 394–97. For GAA references see *MC*, 1 Mar. 1913; *DI*, 18 Oct. 1913.

> to prevent invasion of their shores, if the former here is the place they will respect Irishmen from Cork to Derry.[69]

Ledwidge and Cassidy personify the complexity of the attitudes and reasons that propelled men to take part in the war. For some it was the expectation of adventure, for others a regular income, but many young men who went to the Front viewed themselves as fighting for Ireland. Cassidy's letter expresses the belief that Irishmen should join him at the Front. He was concerned for his former club and undoubtedly considered himself a good Gael, as did many others who took part in the war. Many more members of the GAA probably fought in the World War than participated in the 1916 Rising, and that is certainly true of Meath, but later perceptions of the war and the GAA's effort to ignore its members' involvement tainted those who took part.

While individual players enlisted in the army for various reasons, the higher echelons of the GAA were strongly opposed to recruitment. Seán Etchingham, president of the Wexford county committee, declared that no honourable man would support recruitment and withdrew money due to a player for injuries sustained in a game following the player's enlistment in the British army.[70] In Meath the county chairman, Seaghan MacNamidhe, was so opposed to anyone joining the war effort that he walked out of church in Navan when the celebrant announced that Mass would be celebrated for the spiritual welfare of soldiers from Navan at the Front.[71] At the Meath convention in 1916, Paddy Duffy, the Dunshaughlin delegate, proposed a motion allowing the military to play Gaelic games, stating that he thought it only proper they should be allowed to, as there were so many Gaels serving in the army. MacNamidhe retorted that when a player became a soldier he ceased to be a Gael, but Duffy countered that many of them were forced through circumstances to join the army and that as many of them had been members prior to joining, it would be a great blow to them to be denied membership. The chairman suggested that Duffy put down a formal motion, but both he and the vice-chairman Matt O'Toole stated that

[69] *DI*, 13 Nov. 1915.
[70] Précis of information received in the Crime Special Branch during February 1915 (TNA, CO 904/96); *IT*, 9 Feb. 1915.
[71] CI Meath, Sept. 1914 (TNA, CO 904/94).

they did not want it in their names.[72] A similar proposal from the Laois county committee in 1915 was withdrawn prior to annual congress.[73]

These incidents illuminate attitudes within the organisation on the issue of enlistment. Whereas the upper stratum of the GAA was resolutely opposed to any relaxation in the rule excluding British soldiers from membership of the GAA, some of the rank and file favoured a change. Many members of the GAA were Redmondites, and supported Redmond's call for recruitment and saw no reason why men who enlisted should be shunned by the GAA. However, most in authority in the GAA supported the ban and ensured that discussion of it was stifled so that the GAA would remain united. It is only in recent times that the issue has begun to be addressed and that the simplistic narrative of the GAA's outright opposition to the war, portrayed in earlier histories of the association, has been challenged.

The GAA, the Rising and its aftermath

In Meath prior to 1916 there was only minimal support for MacNeill's Irish Volunteers. In March 1915, the Athboy corps defeated by three to one a proposal that they affiliate to the National Volunteers. The secretary, Seán McGurl, proposed and George Butterfield seconded, an amendment 'that this Corps remain attached to the Original Committee with which we started, namely that of Mr. O'Neill' (sic). Both men were members of the Gaelic League and Athboy hurling club, while the chairman of the corps, Patrick O'Growney, had a similar involvement. Four months later a committee was set up in Kells to establish a branch, while there was similar activity in Drumbaragh, the two corps combining in October. The following month fifty men joined a new branch in Carnaross declaring that 'The rights of Ireland could be defended, not by paper resolutions, or by mob oratory, but by cold steel.'[74] Liam Mellows, who took part in the Easter Rising in Galway and was later elected as a Sinn Féin MP for North Meath in the 1918 general election, visited Carnaross to drill the Volunteers there.[75]

[72] *MC*, 25 Mar. 1916.
[73] *Gaelic Athlete*, 20 Feb. 1915; *Gaelic Athlete*, 13 Mar. 1915; *Gaelic Athlete*, 10 Apr. 1915.
[74] Coogan, *Politics and war*, p. 51. For Drumbaragh see also Seán Hayes (BMH, WS 172); for Carnaross Seán Farrelly (BMH, WS 1648); *MC*, 27 Nov. 1915.
[75] Seán Farrelly (BMH, WS 1648), p. 11; Peter O Connell (BMH, WS 1659), p. 3.

There was also a branch in Dunboyne, referred to earlier, making a total of four units of Irish Volunteers in the county prior to the Easter Rising of 1916. All of them, and especially the Dunboyne corps, had strong GAA links. Seán Boylan maintained in his witness statement that when the Volunteers were formed originally in Dunboyne in 1914 he did not join because he knew that 'most of the men, and particularly the influential ones amongst them, would never fight for Irish freedom'. He claimed to have started his own separate Volunteer unit, 'An extreme section, you might call us', and when the split occurred some members of the official Dunboyne Volunteers joined Boylan's group, though most of them sided with Redmond. Boylan's group then affiliated to MacNeill's Irish Volunteers and P.H. Pearse appointed him to look after the Meath area. Boylan used his contacts with Dublin hurling clubs to source a drill instructor named Larry Murtagh for the corps, and many of those who joined the corps had played on the successful Dunboyne hurling teams of 1911–14. Boylan claimed that he and some of the members were also sworn into the IRB.[76]

Soon after World War 1 began the military council of the IRB decided to stage an armed rebellion against British rule and detailed preparations began in early 1916.[77] P.H. Pearse was central to its planning and twice met Boylan as well as Dónal O'Hannigan, who was in overall charge of the Louth-Meath area, at St Enda's school in the weeks before the Rising for a briefing on their roles. On Good Friday, Boylan received written instructions from Pearse indicating the Rising would begin on Sunday evening but Eoin MacNeill's countermanding order meant it did not commence until Easter Monday. The Meath Volunteers were to meet at Tara on Easter Sunday and join O'Hannigan's group from Louth. The Carnaross men travelled as if going to a football match, bringing boots, togs and a football with them as well as some ammunition. Half a dozen of the Drumbaragh group joined them, taking the overall numbers to twenty-five to thirty men. However, around midnight, Seán Boylan arrived with news that the rebellion was off and the men went home. Boylan then stayed in Navan overnight at the home of Lorcán Ó Cléirigh, the secretary of Meath GAA.[78]

[76] Seán Boylan (BMH, WS 212), pp 1–2.
[77] McNamara, *The Easter Rebellion 1916*, p. 73.
[78] Ibid., p. 5.

On Monday after hearing the Rising was in progress, Boylan eventually linked up with O'Hannigan and the combined group moved into Tyrrelstown House, Mulhuddart, on the Dublin-Meath border. Among the group were the following members of the successful Dunboyne hurling teams: Seán Boylan, Peter Byrne, Christy Lynam, James Maguire, Aidan Crean and James and Patrick Mullally. A group from Athboy also tried to join the fighting, leaving the town on Wednesday of Easter Week, but they could not get into Dublin and returned home. One of them, Seán McGurl, joined Boylan's group in Tyrrelstown House and among those forced to return to Athboy were Patrick O'Growney, Patrick Butterfield, Michael Hoey, and Bernard McConnell, all prominent in the GAA in Athboy. After the surrender in Dublin, Boylan, his three brothers and Christy Lynam of Dunboyne were arrested and imprisoned in Frongoch in Wales. Another prominent Meath GAA member, Pádraig de Búrca, who was an officer of the Kells Stars GAA club and secretary of the Gaelic League in Kells, was due to participate in the mobilisation at Easter but he had returned to his native Tipperary for the duration of the holidays.[79] He later became secretary of North Meath Sinn Féin, commandant of the 4th battalion of the Meath brigade Irish Volunteers and chairman of Meath GAA in 1919.[80]

Four natives of Meath died in the Rising in Dublin, two of whom had strong GAA links. Philip Clarke, from Slane, was a member of the Irish Citizen Army under the command of Michael Mallin and died in St Stephen's Green on Easter Tuesday morning. He was an active member of the Gaelic League and played with the John Boyle O'Reilly GAA club in Dublin, winning an intermediate league medal and the Martyn Cup with the club in 1903–04. James Fox from Drumree, near Dunshaughlin, who was sixteen years of age, died on the same morning as Clarke and was also part of the Stephen's Green garrison. His father, P.J. Fox, had moved to Dublin in 1912 and in his youth had been captain of the Drumree GAA team.[81] Among those who fought in the GPO was Brian O'Higgins, from Kilskrye, a Gaelic League activist and

[79] Gerald (Garry) Byrne (BMH, WS 143), pp 8–9; Joseph Martin (BMH, WS 1723), p. 1; Seán Boylan (BMH, WS 212), pp 5–10; French, *1916, Meath and more*, pp 87–90.
[80] De Búrca moved to Dublin to work in the *Irish Independent* in late 1919 and was also legal adviser to the GAA in later years. He was the father of Marcus de Búrca, author of *The GAA, a history*.
[81] Jim Gilligan and Michael O'Brien, *Laochra na Mí: supplement to Meath senior football final*, 30 October 2016 (Navan, 2016), pp 5–9. The other two who died were Thomas Allen and James McCormack, natives of Hill of Down and Julianstown respectively.

joint founder of the Kilskyre hurling club.[82]

Although many members took part in the Rising, it is clear that the GAA as an organisation did not actively participate in, or have knowledge of, the plans for rebellion. As David Fitzpatrick has noted, 'the organisers, though often brethren and Volunteers, were not privy to the machinations of the shadowy "military committee" which had plotted Rebellion without reference to its ostensible superiors in either [the GAA or the Volunteers]'.[83] Nevertheless, many early historians of the GAA claimed a central role for the organisation in the events. In 1931, Phil O'Neill, writing on the GAA and 1916, commented that 'Our National Athletic Association nobly contributed its quota of heroic men, who left aside their camáns for more deadly weapons,'[84] while Pádraig Puirséal stated that

> there were few aspects of Easter week with which the GAA was not in some way associated. The Gaels were to the fore, not alone in Dublin and the other areas where the Irish Volunteers went into action but also in places where the countermanding of orders caused frustration among men no less willing to face danger and death than their brothers in arms.[85]

In reality, some members of the GAA supported the Irish Volunteers and took part in the Rising, but the majority of the GAA membership and officers were more concerned with the organisation of its games rather than separatist politics. The day before the Rising the GAA went about its normal business, holding its annual congress in Dublin's City Hall. Harry Boland, a Dublin delegate, was certainly aware of what was afoot, but James Nowlan, allegedly an IRB man, was not, and though he remained in Dublin for the duration of the rebellion he took no part in it, before returning to Kilkenny where he was subsequently arrested. [86] The Meath representatives, Seaghan MacNamidhe, Lorcán Ó Cléirigh and vice-chairman Matt O'Toole, had no advance knowledge of the Rising but O'Toole was among those subsequently arrested and quickly released.[87]

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[82] Ibid., p 11.
[83] David Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish revolution* (Cork, 2003), p. 38.
[84] Phil O'Neill (Sliabh Ruadh), *Twenty years of the GAA*, *1910–1930: a history and book of reference for Gaels* (Kilkenny, 1931), p. 117.
[85] Puirséal, *The GAA in its time*, p. 168.
[86] Walsh, *James Nowlan: the alderman*, p. 88.
[87] *MC*, 10 June 1916.

A number of other incidents suggest that the GAA's focus was on its games, and not politics. As Mandle has pointed out, it was six weeks before the Central Council met after the Rising and the first item on the agenda was the issue of a proposed entertainment tax, as discussed below, rather than the impact of the Rising, including the fact that the organisation's president, James Nowlan, was still in jail.[88] The meeting also issued a statement in response to allegations by Sir Matthew Nathan, under-secretary at Dublin Castle, that the Volunteers were made up of four anti-British organisations, among them the GAA.[89] The Director of Military Intelligence, Major Ivon H. Price, claimed that the Irish Volunteers had 'obtained practically full control of the Gaelic League (Language Movement) and of the Gaelic Athletic Association'.[90] The Central Council issued a statement vehemently denying the accusations and in so doing they were following the pattern of most organisations in the immediate post-Rising period. As McElligott has noted, the association 'wished to disassociate itself as much as possible from the Rising to avoid any further government crackdown on it or its members'.[91] Later in the year, Luke O'Toole, the secretary of the GAA, even met with General Maxwell, the man responsible for the execution of the 1916 leaders, in an effort to persuade the British authorities to reverse their ban on special trains for the All-Ireland finals.[92]

It is doubtful that members of the GAA who took part in, or attempted to participate in, the 1916 rebellion did so due to their GAA membership. It could be argued that membership of the Gaelic League was a better predictor of involvement in the Irish Volunteers and the Rising than membership of the GAA. Many of those from Meath referred to above, particularly the Athboy contingent and Brian O'Higgins, were Gaelic League activists. Very few of those who took part in the 1916 Rising assert that their membership of the GAA was an influential factor in that participation. Boylan claimed that family memories of the 1798 Rebellion influenced his views,

[88] Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, p. 178.
[89] *The Royal Commission on the rebellion in Ireland, minutes of evidence and appendix of documents* 3 [Cd. 8311], H.C. 1916, xi, 187.
[90] Ibid., pp 58, 242. Ivon H Price (1866–1931) was an RIC district inspector in Meath until 1912 and lived in Athboy at the time of the 1901 census.
[91] Richard McElligott, 'The GAA, the 1916 Rising and its aftermath to 1918', p. 140; de Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, pp 130–2.
[92] Central Council mins, 26 Nov. 1916. O'Toole later denied the meeting took place when Harry Boland was critical of the event and a motion of censure was narrowly carried by 27 votes to 25 at the 1918 annual convention. See Central Council mins, 31 Mar. 1918.

stating that his ancestors fought in 1798 and some were transported to Van Dieman's land and 'my parents told me this and infused a patriotic spirit into me from my earliest day'. His brother Peter expressed similar sentiments.[93]

What the GAA provided was a network of contacts of people with similar views, with strong bonds of friendship, and it was a convenient vehicle for recruitment, but the members who did not join the Irish Volunteers greatly outnumbered those who did. William Murphy has noted that some Dublin clubs tended to be centres of involvement in the 1916 rebellion while many others were not, and that 'rebellion remained a minority sport'.[94] Particular Volunteer leaders probably made extensive use of their GAA contacts for recruitment. For example, Boylan persuaded many of his Dunboyne hurling clubmates to join the Irish Volunteers while he found a drill instructor in one of the Dublin hurling clubs. Thus, a local charismatic leader who was also a club captain could have an influential role in convincing his teammates to join.

In the aftermath of the Rising a number of clubs throughout the country were named after men who were executed or died in 1916. Tyrone had five such clubs, all based in areas that had Irish Volunteer companies and in 1916–17 there were two in Kerry.[95] Only one club in Meath named itself in memory of a 1916 participant. Significantly that was the Athboy club, a number of whose members had established a branch of the Irish Volunteers in the town in 1915 and had attemped to join the Rising as outlined earlier. For a period the club was known as Pearse Brothers.[96] Other clubs that re-formed at this time did not take inspiration from the 1916 leaders. These included Ashbourne, the scene of the Battle of Ashbourne in Easter Week, Carnaross, some of whose members had assembled at Tara, as well as Kildalkey, Lobinstown and Navan Emmets. No name change was made in Kells either, even though Pádraig de Búrca, president of North Meath Sinn Féin, was prominent and influential in the Kells Stars club as well as in the Meath GAA county committee and Gaelic League. Neither did the divided Dunboyne club adopt a new name in memory

[93] For references to the influence of 1798 see Seán Boylan (BMH, WS 212), p. 1; Peter Boylan (BMH, WS 269), p. 1; Joseph Lawless (BMH, WS 1043), p. 7.
[94] William Murphy, 'The GAA during the Irish revolution, 1913–23', p. 67.
[95] Fergal McCluskey, *The Irish Revolution, 1912–23: Tyrone* (Dublin, 2014), p. 68; McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, pp 266, 459, 463.
[96] *MC*, 9 Feb. 1918.

of 1916, choosing to register instead as the mundane Dunboyne No. 1. It appears therefore that even in areas in Meath where there were branches of the Irish Volunteers or that had some link to the Rising, the rebellion did not influence their naming policy. It is reasonable therefore to assume that there was not sufficient support within those clubs to name or rename them in memory of the 1916 leaders.

Even before the Rising there was ongoing conflict between the GAA and the British authorities regarding a proposed tax on entertainments, and in the aftermath of the Rising the imposition of martial law led to further clashes between them. The association strongly opposed the entertainment legislation, which would require organisers of games to include the tax in the admission price. The GAA president, James Nowlan, led a deputation to London on 15 April 1916 where, with John Redmond and other nationalist MPs, they met the Chancellor of the Exchequer to lobby for exemption from the proposed tax.[97] In the background, determined efforts were made by Walter Long MP, an influential opponent of Home Rule, to oppose an exemption by submitting information to McKenna highlighting the GAA's opposition to the war and its rules against foreign games.[98] Despite the passing of an amendment that exempted non-profit-making organisations promoting national pastimes, the government still refused to confirm that the GAA would not be liable for the tax. A special meeting of the Central Council directed the secretary Luke O'Toole to write to John O'Connor MP to ascertain if the GAA was exempt, but when his reply arrived it indicated that exemption would only apply if the rules barring the military and the police from GAA membership were removed. The Central Council meeting which followed decided unanimously that the rules would not be altered and that a special congress would be held if necessary. A few months later the annual congress in April 1917 advised county committees to refuse payment of the tax.[99] The GAA in Meath reflected the view of Central Council. In August and September 1916 Lorcán Ó Cléirigh, Meath GAA secretary, received written demands for payment of the tax. The chairman, Seaghan MacNamidhe, declared contemptuously that it looked to him like an anonymous letter and the county

[97] James McConnell, 'The GAA and the Irish Parliamentary Party, 1913–18' in Ó Tuathaigh (ed.), *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923*, pp 71–83; p. 80.
[98] Memoranda and notes on the Gaelic Athletic Association (Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Walter Long papers, 947/402/12).
[99] Central Council mins, 26 Nov. 1916, 3 Dec. 1916, 8 Apr. 1917.

committee ignored the demands.[100] GAA opposition to the tax continued and the government eventually admitted defeat and abandoned attempts to collect it.

An immediate consequence of the Rising was the proclamation of martial law and a ban on the playing of games. In early May the county inspector for Meath, Harry B. Maloney, wrote to MacNamidhe warning that any attempt to play the Louth v Dublin Leinster championship game or assemble crowds in Navan or elsewhere 'will be dealt with by force if necessary'.[101] No games were played until mid-June, when General Maxwell, the commander-in-chief of the British Army in Ireland, relaxed the restrictions, permitting club games but not inter-county fixtures. Prior to that, the Meath county committee agreed, on the motion of James Harte of Martry, to apply to the military authorities for a permit to play games and to seek the support of Patrick White, MP for South Meath, if it was not granted.[102]

These episodes illuminate the GAA's attitudes to the IPP and the British government at this time. It is unsurprising that the organisation would lobby the IPP for support, as the party still monopolised Irish representation at Westminster. Thus, Central Council and the Dublin and Meath county committees followed this course. However, the association's national officers were also prepared to meet General Maxwell, despite his role in overseeing a series of courts martial leading to the passing of death sentences on the leaders of the Rising. In Meath, it seems neither MacNamidhe nor Ó Cléirigh opposed the proposal to apply for permits despite their strong antipathy to the British. This was an example of the GAA putting its games above all other considerations. Pragmatism rather than principle informed the association's approach and its priority, whether on the issue of taxation or the banning of games, was to ensure that its games were played.

Conclusion

The formation of the Volunteers, the outbreak of World War I, and the events of Easter Week 1916 posed many challenges for the GAA. Its leaders had to ensure that its response to these events did not risk a rift in the association and while it could not afford to fall behind public opinion neither could it run too far ahead of it.

[100] *MC*, 23 Sept. 1916.
[101] CI Meath to John McNamee, 11 May 1916 (MCL Archive, Hilliard papers).
[102] *MC*, 10 June 1916.

Throughout the period the GAA also faced the practical problem of ensuring that its games were played and competitions completed.

The upper echelons of the GAA gave qualified support to the Irish National Volunteers on their formation and the new organisation attracted a number of GAA men to its ranks, with the county committee secretary and vice-chairman involved in Meath. In some counties volunteering impacted on the GAA's fixture programme but it had minimal effect on Gaelic games in Meath. Following the split in the Volunteers there was scant support at official level in the GAA for Redmond's advocacy of joining the British army, and isolated efforts at county committee level in Laois and Meath to relax the ban on soldiers joining the GAA were quickly stifled. Seaghan MacNamidhe exemplified the opposition to recruitment among the GAA's leadership by walking out of church in Navan when it was announced that Mass would be celebrated for the spiritual welfare of local soldiers at the Front. Despite this, in Meath, as in most counties, a number of prominent GAA players did enlist, but there is no evidence of the widespread degree of recruitment that some clubs in northern counties experienced. However, quantifying the extent of that participation is problematical.

Only four Irish Volunteer branches were formed in Meath prior to the 1916 Rising, in Athboy, Carnaross, Dunboyne and Kells/Drumbaragh, and despite the efforts of a number of men from these areas to participate in the Easter Rising they were peripheral to the main action. Although many of those who attempted to join the action had GAA links it cannot be asserted that their decision to do so was due to their GAA involvement. As many, if not more, were members of the Gaelic League, and it could be argued that this membership was a better predictor of involvement in the Irish Volunteers and the Rising than GAA membership.

The GAA initially disassociated itself from the Rising, in line with the majority of nationalist opinion, and in its immediate aftermath national officials and those in charge in Meath continued to lobby members of the IPP on issues such as permits for games. National officers even met the military authorities who had been responsible for the executions of the leaders of the Rising. In doing so they were taking

pragmatic decisions to ensure the games could proceed and their actions emphasised the centrality of the games, rather than politics, in the association.

Chapter 6
Years of Upheaval II: the GAA in Meath, 1917–23

Introduction

In the months after the Rising there was a gradual hardening of attitudes in nationalist Ireland and public opinion began to turn against the British government. This change of mood was evident in the GAA also, as the association mirrored the changing views and attitudes of the population at large. This chapter will argue that the GAA in Meath was greatly influenced by the political events of the period and that after 1916 gradually became more radical in its attitude to the British government and in its support for the republican movement. It will show that the GAA responded most strongly when its games came under threat.

However, the role and influence that the GAA had on the movement for independence is a more complex matter. The GAA itself and many of its early historians portrayed the association as a major protagonist and player during this transformative period and prominent GAA officials later regularly referred to the organisation's significant role in securing independence. The evidence presented here, however, will suggest that while a number of GAA members played central roles in the struggle to achieve independence and utilised their influence and standing in the GAA to advance and promote it, the majority of club members had no such involvement.

The GAA, politics and war, 1917-23

In June 1916, after requiem mass for the executed leaders in Dublin's Pro–Cathedral, there were cheers for the dead, a republican flag was waved and crowds sang 'Who fears to speak of Easter Week', 'The felons of our land' and 'A nation once again'. Similar incidents were reported from other churches.[1] When restrictions on sports events were lifted, GAA games provided opportunities for displays of support for those involved in the Rising. The RIC Inspector General noted in September 1916 that 'A discontented and rebellious spirit is widespread, and though to a great extent suppressed, it frequently comes to the surface at Gaelic Athletic Association

[1] *II*, 13 June 1916; *MC*, 17 June 1916.

Tournaments when large numbers of young men of military age are assembled together.'[2] In July 1916 the Tipperary hurlers lined out against Cork wearing rosettes in memory of the executed leaders and were loudly applauded.[3]

Signs of the shift in opinion were also evident in Meath GAA circles. Oliver Coogan has argued that while Meath remained quiet for the remainder of 1916, nevertheless there were occasional signs of support for the rebels. In July the Carnaross club organised a tournament to benefit families that suffered in the insurrection while the Kilskyre Hurling Club made a collection in support of the National Aid Association.[4] Such actions increased in 1917. The Meath county inspector reported that around the first anniversary of the Easter Rising the police removed home-made republican flags that were flown in a number of places in Meath, while nationally there were 356 incidents of republican flags being flown.[5] Numerous flags were carried in procession in Athboy in August to celebrate Joseph McGuinness' victory for Sinn Féin in the South Longford bye-election. A crowd of 200 people marched on the RIC barracks, shouting 'Up McGuinness', 'Up the Rebels' and 'To hell with the King', and the event culminated with stones being thrown at the building. Among the eight men arrested as a result were prominent GAA officials and players from the town – Patrick O'Growney, Bernard McConnell, Nicholas Byrne and Seán McGurl – all of whom except Byrne had tried to participate in the Easter Rising a year earlier.[6]

Throughout 1917, and especially in 1918, reorganisation of the Volunteers began in Meath. Seán Boylan was central to this. In September 1917 he organised an *aeridheacht* that included a hurling game between Dunboyne and Laurence O'Tooles of Dublin on his family's land 'for the purpose of recruiting new members into the

[2] IG Monthly report, Sept. 1916 (TNA, CO 904/10); Joost Augusteijn, *From public defiance to guerilla warfare: the experience of ordinary volunteers in the Irish War of Independence* (Dublin, 1996), pp 55–56.
[3] Puirséal, *The GAA in its time*, p. 170, quoted in Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, p. 180.
[4] *MC*, 24 June 1916, 15 July 1916. There were two organisations supporting prisoners, the Irish Volunteer Dependants Fund (IVDF) and the Irish National Aid Association (INAA). The former, founded by Kathleen Clarke, the widow of the 1916 leader Tom Clarke, was strongly supportive of those who were involved in the 1916 Rising, whereas the latter, formed in May 1916, supported the prisoners without endorsing the politics of the prisoners. See Mark Reynolds, 'The GAA and Irish political prisoners, 1916–23' in Ó Tuathaigh (ed.) *The GAA and revolution in Ireland, 1913–1923*, pp 169–192; pp 185, 290.
[5] CI Meath, Apr. 1917 (TNA, CO 904/102).
[6] *MC*, 26 May 1917. O'Growney was sentenced to a month's hard labour, McConnell to fourteen days and McGurl and Byrne were discharged.

Dunboyne company'.[7] Prominent republican figures such as Michael Collins, Laurence Ginnell, William T. Cosgrave and Barney Mellows were in attendance. Boylan spent the next few months travelling throughout Meath helping to establish companies in Trim, Navan, Kells, Oldcastle, Summerhill and Stonefield. He was assisted by nineteen-year-old Seamus Finn, the son of a draper from Athboy, who was active as early as July 1916 in attempting to revive the Volunteers locally. Finn was a member of the local hurling club and Gaelic League branch and he contacted groups in nearby areas to persuade them to establish companies, noting that 'where there were good Irish classes and hurling clubs it was easy to get men to join the Volunteers'. On instructions from Bob Price, the Director of Organisation of the Volunteers, Finn told members of the Volunteers to join Sinn Féin, the GAA and the Gaelic League and where they did not exist to form branches.[8] Thus, from the beginning, GAA members were influential in establishing Volunteer companies in the county and there was a significant overlap in membership, especially in the upper levels of the organisations. Boylan became Officer Commanding of the Meath Brigade while Finn was the adjutant and Seamus O'Higgins, a prominent member of Trim hurling club, was quartermaster.[9]

The proceedings of the GAA's annual congress of 1918 give an indication of the change of attitude that had occurred within the organisation after 1916. Harry Boland sought information about the deputations sent to meet the Commander-in-Chief of British forces in 1916, describing the meeting as scandalous, and the delegates passed a motion of censure on Central Council for its action by 27 votes to 25.[10] The following month the threat of conscription in Ireland resulted in a special meeting of the council pledging the GAA 'to resist by any and every means in our power the attempted conscription of Irish manhood'.[11] Later in the year, the GAA took decisive steps to defend its games and assert its independence. In July, the government proscribed the Volunteers, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and Cumann na mBan, and declared that no public meetings could be held without an official permit.[12] Although the GAA was not included in the ban, the police insisted on one in many parts of the

[7] Seán Boylan (BMH, WS 1715), pp 1–2; *MC*, 22 Sept. 1917.
[8] Seamus Finn (BMH, WS 857), p. 6.
[9] Coogan, *Politics and war*, p. 110.
[10] Central Council mins, 31 Mar. 1918; *MC*, 13 Apr. 1918.
[11] Central Council mins, 14 Apr. 1918; Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, p. 183.
[12] *FJ*, 6 July 1918.

country. The Ulster semi-final between Armagh and Cavan was proclaimed an illegal assembly while police removed the goalposts to prevent a game in Kildare. In county Galway police took the names of players who refused to stop playing a football match in Brownsgrove and baton-charged a crowd at a camogie game in Kilbecanty.[13]

The only recorded incident of police interference in Meath took place during a game in Kells between schools from Navan and Kells when local police warned the players of the illegality of the event, but the game went ahead.[14] Following the failure to play the Ulster semi-final, Eoin O'Duffy, the secretary of the Ulster Council, was instrumental in Central Council's decision to adopt a motion, stating 'That no permits be asked for under any conditions . . . and no member of [the] GAA to take part in any competition where such a permit has been procured', while anyone offending against the order was to be automatically and indefinitely suspended. It was further agreed that counties would arrange a series of games on Sunday 4 August in defiance of the requirement to procure a permit.[15] Some games took place in Meath in early July, and, it seems, in the case of a benefit game for Navan Gaels, a permit was applied for and granted. In late July, after the Central Council's decision, the secretary of Meath GAA cancelled all games and instructed clubs not to apply for permits.[16] Realising the level of opposition it faced, the government clarified the position by claiming that the police had 'misunderstood instructions' and that it was not intended that Gaelic games would be restricted under the edict.[17] Nevertheless, Gaelic Sunday, as 4 August became known, went ahead as planned and estimates of the number of participants nationally exceeded 50,000. Seventeen games, involving twenty-six clubs, were scheduled in Meath.[18] Police estimates at the time claimed there were thirty clubs in the county so based on these figures eighty-seven percent

[13] *FJ,* 9 July 1918; Michael Leydon, *Dunmore MacHale: a history of football in Dunmore parish* (Tuam, 1983), pp 80–81. Mandle in *The Gaelic Athletic Association* confuses the two Galway events, pp 183–4.
[14] *MC*, 3 Aug. 1918.
[15] Central Council mins, 20 July 1918.
[16] *MC*, 20 July 1918.
[17] *Irish Independent*, 30 July 1918; *Hansard* 5th series (Commons), 29 July 1918, cviv, col. 116. https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1918/jul/29/mr-dillons-motion (accessed 31 July 2017).
[18] Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association,* p. 185; *DI*, 3 Aug. 1918.

of the clubs participated.[19] The police, however, probably underestimated the number of clubs in the county because research in the local press indicates that there were forty-six clubs, which suggests that about sixty percent of them were involved in Gaelic Sunday. The actual figure may have been higher as it is likely that other clubs arranged games that were not reported in the local press. Neighbouring counties Monaghan, Cavan and Dublin organised twenty-seven, nineteen and twenty-four games respectively.[20]

Gaelic Sunday represented the GAA's most overt and explicit anti-government action during this period. It occurred because of a real threat to its *raison d'être*, its games. While many in the organisation joined the Volunteers and participated in the 1916 Rising and War of Independence, all of those actions involved decisions by individual members of the association and the association as an organisation did not formally support them, nor could it be said that the rank-and-file membership wholeheartedly approved of them. Even when many of its members were imprisoned in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising, the GAA's reaction was timid in comparison with its response to the threat to its games. This underscores the fact that while certain elements in the GAA could from time to time bend the association to support political issues, the overriding priority of the organisation was the promotion and protection of its games. Both the response to the decision to declare 4 August 'Gaelic Sunday' and the turn-out at games, despite the short notice and the restrictions on travel, suggest that the vast majority of the clubs and their members supported Central Council's action. Gaelic Sunday emphasised the centrality of the games and the growing opposition of the GAA to British authority.[21]

Events such as these led to a perceptible change of tone and a gradual radicalisation in attitude of the GAA. This change reflected a similar shift in the nationalist

[19] CI Meath, August 1918 (TNA, 904/106).
[20] Aogán Ó Fearghail, 'Gaelic Sunday, 1918', paper delivered at the Croke Park Spring Lecture Series, 8 Feb. 2016; Terence Dooley, *The Irish revolution, 1912–23: Monaghan* (Dublin, 2017), p. 64; *FJ*, 5 Aug. 1918; *AC*, 3 Aug. 1918, 10 Aug. 1918. Four of the Cavan games failed to take place, two of them due to the counter attraction of religious ceremonies and games at the St Kieran's Pattern in Carnaross, Co. Meath. In Clones, county Monaghan when police patrolled the regular grounds the scheduled game was played a mile away between two teams from the St Tiernach's club named the Kaffirs and Hottentots.
[21] Andrew McGuire and David Hassan, 'Cultural nationalism, Gaelic Sunday and the Gaelic Athletic Association in early twentieth-century Ireland' in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, xxviv, no. 6 (2012), pp 912–23; Murphy, 'The GAA during the Irish revolution, 1913–23', p. 72.

population at large as revealed in the success of Sinn Féin in defeating the IPP's candidates in the North Roscommon and South Longford bye-elections in 1917. The general election of late 1918 exposed the full extent of the change in nationalist political opinion as Sinn Féin routed the IPP, taking seventy-three seats to the IPP's six.[22] Among those elected were prominent national GAA figures such as Harry Boland, J.J. Walsh, Austin Stack and Séan Etchingham.[23] In Meath, two of the most prominent and influential GAA voices – Pádraig de Búrca and Seaghan MacNamidhe – supported Sinn Féin.[24] MacNamidhe remained as chairman of the GAA until 1919 when he stood down after twelve years in the position. There had been some opposition to his re-election as chairman of the county committee in 1918, mainly on the basis that he had held the position for too long.[25] He spoke in favour of Sinn Féin at numerous public meetings and in January 1920 was elected to the Navan Urban District Council.[26] De Búrca replaced him as chairman of the Meath GAA county committee in 1919. He was a native of Tipperary and was teaching in Kells, where he was a leading member of the GAA and the Gaelic League. He joined the Carnaross Irish Volunteers prior to the 1916 Rising, was president of North Meath Sinn Féin and commanded the fourth battalion of the Irish Volunteers, operating in the Kells area.

In late 1918 and early 1919 the GAA's growing militant stance created internal difficulties for the organisation. When the government decided that from November 1918 all civil servants must take an oath of allegiance, Central Council reacted by unanimously declaring that taking the oath was 'incompatible with the principles of the association' and that all who had taken it would be suspended from the GAA until the following congress when a final decision on the matter would be taken.[27] The proposal led to rancorous debate in a number of counties, with many opposing it,

[22] Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland*, p. 183.
[23] Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801–1922*, pp 185–191. Harry Boland (1887–1922), chairman of Dublin GAA 1911–18, was elected for Roscommon South; J.J. Walsh (1880–1948), chairman of Cork GAA 1909–14, was elected for Cork City; Austin Stack (1879–1929), secretary 1904–08 and chairman 1914–17 of Kerry GAA, was elected in Kerry West; Seán Etchingham (1870–1923), chairman of Wexford GAA (1915–22) was elected in Wicklow East.
[24] *MC*, 7 Dec. 1918, 14 Dec. 1918.
[25] *MC*, 16 Feb. 1918, 5 Apr. 1919.
[26] Coogan, *Politics and war*, p. 223.
[27] Central Council mins, 7 Dec. 1918.

and only one, Meath, decisively supporting the proposal.[28] The proposal was debated at the Meath convention in March 1919. De Búrca, the new chairman, supported it, stating that those who took the oath 'paid a great tribute of fidelity to the government, which last year proclaimed the GAA and stopped all their matches'. Some favoured giving the Meath delegates freedom to decide how they would vote at congress but the Pelletstown delegate J.J. Wildridge proposed

> That we, the representatives of the affiliated clubs in the county of Meath, at our annual convention, hereby endorse the decision of the Central Council in expelling all civil servants who have taken the oath of allegiance from GAA matches and games, and that we instruct our delegates to the annual congress to vote accordingly.

His resolution was overwhelmingly carried, with a mere eleven votes opposing and sixty in favour.[29]

The overwhelming support for the proposal, was, it appears, due in the main to the efforts of Seán Boylan. He later claimed that the supreme council of the IRB instructed its members to support the Central Council's proposal and stated that he 'had spent three weeks travelling around the county on my bicycle contacting all our members (IRB). By the date of the annual convention (GAA) we had members of the IRB in the vast majority on the County Board of the GAA.'[30] As the IRB was a secret oath-bound society it is impossible to verify Boylan's assertions, but an analysis of the delegates suggests that the majority were members of the Volunteers and/or Sinn Féin, and that many of them fought in the subsequent War of Independence. All of the officers, except one – James Reynolds, the vice-chairman– and the more influential delegates were members of the Volunteers.

Although at least ten county conventions had opposed the Central Council's proposal, the expected level of opposition failed to materialise at congress in April

[28] O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, pp 108–9; de Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 145.
[29] Boylan claimed that seventy-two voted in favour, see Seán Boylan, (BMH, WS 1715), p. 11. De Búrca records sixty but gives no source, see de Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 145, a figure repeated in Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, p. 187 and based on a report in the *Freeman's Journal*, *FJ*, 1 Apr. 1919. The contemporaneous account is likely to be more accurate than Boylan's later figure. It is equally unclear how many attended the meeting as the local press published incomplete lists.
[30] Seán Boylan (BMH, WS 1715), p. 11.

1919.[31] The GAA's top officials, Luke O'Toole and James Nowlan, strongly supported the proposal and Harry Boland swayed delegates with his argument that the GAA had always 'drawn a line between the garrison and the Gael.'[32] An amendment proposing that the oath should not apply to those who took it prior to November 1918 was defeated 50 votes to 31 and the meeting then voted unanimously in favour of the Central Council proposal. Mandle explains the outcome by saying that while there was opposition to the proposal at county level, 'delegate opinion, or at least voices prepared to speak on the issue, was in favour.'[33] William Murphy concurs, noting that 'the upper echelon of the association was more radically minded than its sporting constituency.'[34] Meath sent five delegates to the annual congress, all of whom were IRB men according to Boylan. However, his memory was faulty, as two of those he listed, his brother Peter and Christopher Lynam, did not attend, according to the minutes of congress.[35] Nevertheless, the Meath delegation reflected the republican nature of the county convention as it consisted of three men believed to be members of the IRB and two others who were members of the Irish Volunteers.[36]

Civil servants lobbied county committees to oppose the proposal at county level, and opposition to it, especially in Dublin, was usually based on the fact that civil servants had no alternative but to take the oath if they wished to retain their positions. In Kerry it was argued that civil servants had been the backbone of the GAA and Gaelic League and that even Michael Cusack had taught prospective civil servants.[37] In many counties opposition was based on the original decision of a Central Council meeting to impose the ban without consulting the membership and was not necessarily a matter of principle. The new rule seems to have had little effect on the

[31] Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, p. 187 gives the ten as Tipperary, Wexford, Laois, Galway, Roscommon, Sligo, Cavan, Wicklow, Leitrim and Carlow.
[32] Central Council mins, 20 Apr. 1919. The minutes give no particulars of the actual debate but detailed accounts were carried in *CE*, 21 Apr. 1919 and *FJ*, 21 Apr. 1919.
[33] Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association*, p. 188.
[34] Murphy, 'The GAA during the Irish Revolution', p. 65.
[35] Central Council mins, 20 Apr. 1919; Seán Boylan (BMH, WS 1715), pp 11–12.
[36] The minutes of the congress, the local press and Boylan agree on de Búrca, Paddy Blake of Dunshaughlin and Boylan himself, all of whom were alleged to be members of the I.R.B., but the minutes and the local press record the other two as John Newman of Bohermeen and Michael Keegan of Longwood, whereas Boylan claims his brother Peter and Christopher Lynam of Dunboyne attended. The contemporaneous record, and especially the minutes, is more likely to be correct. See Central Council mins, 20 Apr. 1919; *DI*, 5 Apr. 1919; Boylan (BMH, WS 1715), p. 11.
[37] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, pp 277–8.

association, especially at club level, and examples of its implementation are rare.[38] A couple of high profile administrators, such as Patrick Whelan and J.J. Hogan, the chairmen of the Ulster and Leinster Councils respectively, were forced to step down from their positions, but the rule seems to have been ignored once passed.[39]

The Meath convention further displayed its radical stance by voting to support the Irish Republican Prisoners' Fund, with de Búrca stating that such support arose not because of politics, which was against GAA rules, but because 'the men in dungeons were supporters, and in most cases, members of the GAA'.[40] The motion received unanimous support. De Búrca's next proposal was to refuse admission to Gaelic games to members of the RIC whether they offered payment or not, as, he argued, their principal reason for attending was to act as spies. This attracted some opposition and the issue was adjourned to the following meeting where it was defeated by two votes. The proposal would have been difficult to implement consistently across the county without sanctions on recalcitrant clubs and the decision not to support the motion probably averted a split. Another indication of the radical make-up of the convention was the decision to nominate J.J. Walsh of Cork and Harry Boland of Dublin to the Central Council. Both were members of the IRB and had been vociferous critics of the decision of the GAA to negotiate with the British authorities in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising.[41]

In January 1919, the Sinn Féin MPs who had been elected the previous month and were not in prison convened the first Dáil and proclaimed an independent Irish Republic. On the same day, Irish Volunteers, soon to be named the Irish Republican Army, fired the first shots in the War of Independence at Soloheadbeg in county Tipperary.[42] The war in Meath, lasting from January 1919 to the truce in July 1921, resulted in extensive damage to property and some loss of life, but on a much smaller scale than that experienced in southern counties. Peter Hart states that during the

[38] See *AC*, 16 Aug. 1919 for the refusal of the Belturbet club in Cavan to play a team including a civil servant.
[39] Patrick Whelan stepped down as Ulster Council chairman at the 1919 convention. See Ulster Council minutes, 16 Apr. 1919 (Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library and Archive, Armagh, CLG/M/CU/AA/01-11). J.J. Breen, a postal official, stepped down as Leinster chairman in January 1919. See de Búrca, *Forbairt agus fás*, p. 19.
[40] *MC*, 5 Apr. 1919.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Fanning, *Fatal path*, p. 193.

1917–23 period 'Meath remained passive throughout' and only three Leinster counties, Wicklow, Dublin and Kildare experienced a lower level of revolutionary violence.[43] Volunteers attacked and burned RIC barracks in Meath, particularly rural ones once the RIC evacuated them, and set fire to some country houses, including Summerhill House. British forces burned and looted parts of Trim after the Volunteers raided and destroyed the RIC barracks there. During the period three policemen were killed, as were three Volunteers, and at least six men were executed for spying activities, but there were no military casualties.[44]

The conflict created difficulties for the GAA in the county at committee level and in the running of the championships. When de Búrca was elected as chairman in April 1919, the only sustained opposition to him and to the prevailing mood of the convention came from James Reynolds of Trim, who was elected vice-chairman of the board, and Navan Gaels' delegate Tommy Eggleston. Following the convention, Reynolds claimed that the 'Trim club was an insurmountable obstacle to those "Republican Gaels" in their efforts to make a cat's paw of the GAA for their political purposes.' He asserted that people attended who were not representatives of their clubs, bearing out Boylan's later contention that he had packed the meeting with IRB men. In a none too subtly veiled attack on de Búrca, Reynolds described some of those in attendance as 'new additions to the GAA; whether they are acquisitions is more than doubtful.'[45] De Búrca, however, stepped down as chairman in July 1919 on his appointment to a journalistic position in Dublin and the moderates on the committee, such as Reynolds and Eggleston, wanted MacNamidhe to replace him. However, MacNamidhe withdrew when Boylan was also proposed, leaving the Dunboyne man elected without a contest. Boylan, aware of the latent opposition to him, stated on election that the suggestion that the organisation would be used otherwise than in the interests of the GAA would prove to be unfounded. Reynolds did not concur, writing to the county secretary on the evening of Boylan's election to withdraw from the position of vice-chairman, as the county committee had been captured 'by men of an extreme political party, who have endeavoured and are now

[43] Peter Hart, 'The geography of revolution in Ireland, 1917–1923' in *Past and Present*, no. 155 (1977), pp 142–76; pp 147, 154.
[44] Coogan, *Politics and war*, p. 188.
[45] *MC*, 24 May 1919.

in a position to use it for their own political purpose'.[46]

In the event, Boylan was unable to devote much attention to the GAA in subsequent months due to his role as Officer Commanding the Meath brigade of the IRA. Meetings of the county committee became infrequent and the press queried the delay in holding the 1920 convention. James Reynolds accused what he termed an 'inner cabinet' of attempting to hold a secret county convention in March 1920.[47] When the convention was finally held in April 1920, Boylan was not present and Seamus Finn responded to criticism of him, stating that 'under the flag of the British government Mr Boylan was not able to come there to defend himself. He was a Gael before some of the men that criticised him.'[48] Boylan was returned unopposed and he chaired meetings in June, July and August, but was subsequently absent from meetings until late November and also missed the 1921 convention.

Thus, by 1919, Boylan and the other leading officials of the county committee were all strongly republican. Michael McGinn, the vice-chairman, was imprisoned in Ballykinlar camp in county Derry from December 1920 to December 1921 while the treasurer, John Newman, was a member of the Bohermeen company of the IRA and his house was the venue for secret meetings. He too was arrested in February 1921.[49] Lorcán Ó Cléirigh, who had been county committee secretary since 1908, seemed to have neglected his GAA duties in 1917 and 1918, probably because of his political activities, and he stood down in 1919. His house in Navan was a regular meeting place for Volunteers and was often raided, and it was there that Seán Boylan stayed after the 1916 debacle at Tara. His replacement, Seán Giles, like Ó Cléirigh, was a volunteer with the Navan IRA company.[50]

Due to the absence of Boylan and the inactivity of Ó Cléirigh the 1919 championships were not completed during the year and clubs reverted to challenge

[46] *MC*, 16 Aug. 1919.
[47] For comment on the delays and lack of activity see *MC*, 19 Nov. 1919, 6 Mar. 1920, 20 Mar. 1920, 27 Mar. 1920, 10 Apr. 1920.
[48] *MC*, 17 Apr. 1920.
[49] *MC*, 11 Dec. 1920, 25 Dec. 1920, 12 Feb. 1921, 17 Dec. 1921.
[50] McFadden, *The old IRA in Meath*, pp 214, 217; Navan Company, 4th Battalion, 2nd Meath Brigade (Military Archives, MA/MSPC/RO 488).

games to remain active.[51] In April 1920, with the election of Seán Giles as secretary, there was an immediate improvement in administration. Within a year he had overseen the completion of the 1919 senior and junior championships in both football and hurling, with three finals played on one Sunday in August 1920. The 1920 senior football final was played in November of that year with the rest deferred until late 1921. This was due to the political climate at the time, as the authorities prohibited fairs, markets, and public assemblies, including GAA games, when warfare between the British and republican forces intensified.[52] Few club games and no championship games were played between January and July and regular activity resumed when the truce came into effect in the latter month.

While the county committee was influenced and controlled by republican activists, the situation in the clubs was less clear-cut. At the time, the strongest hurling club in the county was Trim, which had achieved the unprecedented feat of winning the 1919 senior and junior hurling championships and had also reached the 1920 junior football final. Efforts to play the junior final in the early months of 1921 failed. When the game was fixed for mid-January, Trim declined to take part 'for certain reasons' and when their opponents Martry sought to have it played two months later, the county secretary noted that the board did not want Trim to 'run into the fire to burn themselves'.[53] These were references to the possibility of some of the team being arrested because of their republican activities. Michael Giles, a member of the team and brother of the county secretary, had already been arrested while Seamus O'Higgins, a winner of senior hurling championships in 1915 and 1916, was arrested in 1919 and released conditionally following a hunger strike.[54] He was quartermaster of the Meath Brigade IRA from 1919 and took part in the attack on Trim RIC barracks in 1920, so was a prime candidate for arrest. At least two other members of the team were active IRA men, Joe Kelly and Michael 'The Gael' McArdle, a former British soldier. In addition to these, a number of men such as Mick Hynes, Pat Mooney and Pat O'Hagan, who won championship medals in 1915 and 1916, were active in the War of Independence. [55]

[51] *MC*, 27 Mar. 1920.
[52] For details of the conflict in Meath at this period see Coogan, *Politics and war*, pp 163-93.
[53] *MC*, 12 Mar. 1921.
[54] *MC*, 20 Sept. 1919, 15 Nov. 1919.
[55] McFadden, *The old IRA in Meath*, p. 261.

However, it would be inaccurate to characterise the GAA in Trim as having a consistent radical republican ethos. As noted earlier, the most vociferous opponent of Pádraig de Búrca and Seán Boylan at county committee level was James Reynolds from Trim. He was also part of the successful Trim GAA squad of 1915-16 but spoke out strongly against political influence in the organisation. Indeed, there seems to have been a split in the GAA in the town. At the 1919 convention a war of words broke out between Seamus O'Higgins, who stated that he represented Trim junior football club, and Reynolds, the hurling club representative, who claimed that there was no football club in the town.[56]

Rathkenny, the most successful football team of the era and senior champions in 1917–19 and 1922–23, also provided a significant cohort of volunteers during the War of Independence. Among them were team captain Jimmy Curtis, the Reilly brothers, James and Tim, and Joe Ledwidge, a native of Slane and brother of the poet Francis. A number of members of the Dunboyne club were also actively involved in the War of Independence, and prior to that in attempts to participate in the 1916 Rising, as outlined in the previous chapter. In addition to Boylan at least three other hurlers were members of the IRB: Peter Byrne, Michael Kelly and Michael Newell. Newell, from Galway, won a senior hurling championship with Dunboyne in 1913 and was part of the Irish Volunteers corps established by Boylan in Dunboyne in 1914 before returning to Galway where he participated in the 1916 Rising.[57] Other Dunboyne hurlers who took part in the War of Independence were Christopher Lynam, Nicholas Moran, James Maguire and Peter Lee. Clearly, Boylan used the hurling club as a fertile ground from which to gather a substantial cohort of recruits but this is not representative of all GAA clubs in the county. Indeed, even in places like Trim, Rathkenny and Dunboyne, where a significant proportion of club members displayed a commitment to the Volunteers or the IRA, it must be noted that the majority of club members had no such involvement. Peter Hart argues that there is little evidence to suggest an inevitable link between GAA membership and IRA membership, concluding that 'The Irish War of Independence was not won on the playing fields of Croke Park'.[58] Neither is there evidence to suggest that IRA activity

[56] McCann and Brennan, *Wielding the ash*, p. 78.
[57] Michael Newell (BMH, WS 342), p. 3.
[58] Hart, 'The geography of revolution', p. 169.

in Meath was greatly influenced by GAA clubs. Most people who played Gaelic games did so for the enjoyment of the games and the associational experience they offered and had no involvement in politics. William Murphy is surely correct when, in a balanced and nuanced contribution to the debate, he notes that 'The effect that a small, but very motivated cohort had upon the GAA and the effect that it, in turn, had upon the Irish revolution is tangible, but, despite the certainties of some, it is not an easy matter to delineate with precision'.[59]

Six months after the truce the British government and representatives of the Irish Republic signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty that established an Irish Free State, made provision for the new state of Northern Ireland, and required members of the Irish parliament to take an oath of allegiance to the British monarch. In January 1922, Dáil Éireann, the parliament of the Irish Republic, ratified the treaty by sixty-four votes to fifty-seven, but supporters and opponents of the Treaty were strongly entrenched in their views and the settlement led to a split on pro- and anti-Treaty lines that finally resulted in a civil war from the end of June.[60]

Southern counties bore the brunt of the civil war violence, while Meath, and much of Leinster, escaped the worst excesses of the conflict. The majority of the county's population favoured acceptance of the treaty. Both local newspapers, the *Meath Chronicle* and the *Drogheda Independent*, welcomed the treaty, as did the local councils that discussed the issue. North and South Meath Sinn Féin Comhairle Ceanntair both voted in favour also, while only one of the five Meath-Louth constituency TDs, J.J. O'Kelly, the then Minister for Education, took the anti-Treaty side. The IRA in the county was also strongly in favour, with the main leaders such as Seán Boylan, Seamus Finn and Seamus O'Higgins supporting it. Oliver Coogan concludes that 'on the anti-Treaty, republican side there was a great depletion in numbers and a breakdown in IRA organisation'.[61]

[59] Murphy, 'The Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish revolution' in Crowley *et al*, *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, p. 897.
[60] For a summary of the period see Michael Hopkinson, 'From Treaty to Civil War' in J.R. Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, vii: Ireland, 1921–84* (Oxford, 2003), pp 1–29.
[61] Coogan, *Politics and war*, p. 313.

While the Civil War caused some disruption in Meath with regular interruptions to railway services and attacks on police barracks, the county was calm compared to Kerry, Cork and Tipperary. As a result, the GAA was able to organise its programme of games with little disruption to the schedule. When the truce was signed in July 1921, the county committee quickly resumed competitions and the unfinished 1920 championships in junior football and senior hurling were completed in August. The 1921 championships began in September, with the senior football and hurling finals being played in April 1922. The junior football final was held in May, but no report of a junior hurling final survives. Draws for the 1922 championships took place in April of that year and despite the Civil War, hurling and football finals were completed before the end of the year. Thus, between July 1921 and December 1922 the 1920, 1921 and 1922 championships were all played. This was a signal achievement for the county committee, as even in peacetime competitions were rarely finished within the year in which they were scheduled to be played. It was in sharp contrast to the situation in Kerry and Cork. The Kerry county committee failed to meet from June 1922 to mid 1923 and no games were played, while by autumn 1922 a similar situation prevailed in Cork, due to the intensity of the conflict in both counties.[62] Apart from two Sundays in the early part of the Civil War, games seem to have taken place in Meath every Sunday throughout 1922. In August, the Oldcastle club wrote to the county secretary, Seán Giles, stating that they were reluctant to travel to a game against Duleek due to the disturbed state of the country but he responded that 'we can continue with our matches as Meath is not in the same position as other counties'.[63] A bigger problem for a number of clubs was that they were losing men, especially IRA members who supported the treaty, to the national army. Oldcastle and Duleek both suffered depletion in this way, while Seán Boylan, who was still Meath GAA chairman, Seamus Finn and Seamus O'Higgins, all became officers in the national army. Boylan relinquished the chairmanship at the 1923 convention, and was replaced by James Reynolds from Trim, the man who had fought doggedly, but unsuccessfully, to prevent political influence and control of the GAA in the county for a number of years.

[62] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 298.
[63] *MC*, 19 Aug. 1922.

Conclusion

The period from 1916 to 1923 presented many challenges for the GAA, nationally and locally. Political allegiances were changing as the IPP lost ground to Sinn Féin and the key demand of Irish nationalism progressed from the parliamentary campaign for devolution to the ideal of outright separation. Nevertheless, the GAA's main focus was its programme of games. Whenever the games were threatened the GAA acted decisively. It had strenuously opposed the imposition of an entertainment tax on its games in 1916, refused to apply for permits to stage games in July 1918 and then organised a series of matches on what became known as Gaelic Sunday. This represented the GAA's most explicit anti-government action during this period. It occurred because of a real threat to the association's prime concern, its games.

The GAA marched broadly in tune with the evolution in public opinion. From 1917 onwards the republican element in the GAA became more prominent at national level and in Meath. Meath was the only county to support unambiguously Central Council's proposal to suspend members who had taken the oath of allegiance as part of their employment, and Seán Boylan and Pádraig de Búrca from Kells were the main proponents of this stance. Between them they held the position of GAA county chairman from 1919 to 1922 and the upper echelons of the county committee were in the hands of republican activists during this period. The vice-chairman resigned in protest, declaring that the leadership would use the GAA 'for their own political purpose'. There is little evidence to suggest this happened but the absence of Boylan due to his military activities and the secretary's neglect of his duties resulted in the county championships running behind schedule. It was only when a new secretary, Seán Giles, was appointed and the truce between the warring parties took effect in July 1921 that competitions were brought to a successful conclusion.

Most GAA members were motivated by participation in the games, whether by playing or spectating, winning or losing. They might support the broader nationalist agenda, and certain elements in the GAA, such as Harry Boland and J.J. Walsh at national level, and Pádraig de Búrca and Seán Boylan in Meath, could from time to time bend the association to support political stances and adopt a strong republican position, but that did not mean that most players and supporters would follow such a radical agenda. Even in clubs containing a wide network of people committed to

radical political action, it must be remembered that the majority of members did not subscribe to that view and the decision to participate in events such as Easter Week or the War of Independence was a personal one, and not one determined by membership of the GAA. The majority of GAA members joined the association for the social participation and recreational amusement it provided and steered clear of politics and war. Even at leadership levels the overriding priority of the organisation was the promotion and protection of its games; in short, the main focus was on games, not politics.

Chapter 7
The GAA ban on foreign games

Introduction

Chapter three outlined the introduction by the GAA of a series of rules that banned its members from playing the games of soccer, rugby, cricket and hockey. GAA members proven to have done so were subject to suspension from the GAA for two years.[1] In addition, persons attending such games, or even dances organised by soccer, rugby, cricket and hockey clubs, also incurred a suspension. The ban also denied GAA membership to members of the police and army. As the GAA faced into the first decade of national independence, one of the issues it had to consider was the status of its ban on foreign games.

There was little prospect of a change in the rules during the War of Independence, particularly as Croke Park had been the scene of an attack on the GAA. On Bloody Sunday, 21 November 1920, British armed forces opened fire on spectators attending a game between Dublin and Tipperary, resulting in the death of fourteen civilians, including Tipperary captain Michael Hogan.[2] However, with the arrival of independence the GAA now had to decide whether to retain its ban on foreign games or to amend or even abolish it. Some within and outside the GAA believed that the ban had outlived its usefulness now that Ireland had achieved a degree of independence from Britain but, to many in the organisation, the attainment of independence in 1923 left Ireland as far away as ever from the ideal of a Gaelic Ireland. Bob O'Keeffe, the Leinster Council chairman, summed up this mood when he urged delegates in 1927 to intensify their efforts 'to combat the wave of shoneenism, imperialism and snobbery that was permeating the country.'[3] His view was a common one among GAA officials. This chapter will analyse the series of debates and the decisions taken regarding the ban in the early years of independence, at a national level and in Meath, and it will examine the extent to which GAA

[1] County committees could recommend that the provincial council reinstate a player as a member of the GAA before the two years had elapsed provided he had ceased to play foreign games for six months prior to the application.
[2] The intention was to surround the ground and search those attending following the killing earlier that morning by the IRA of twelve British intelligence officers and two auxiliary policemen. For a detailed account see Michael Foley, *The bloodied field* (Dublin, 2015).
[3] Leinster Council minutes, 4 Mar. 1928 (CPA, GAA/LEIN/01/01).

members in Meath ignored the organisation's ban by playing cricket, the main sporting rival of the GAA in the county.

Ban on foreign games

In April 1923, a regular *Meath Chronicle* columnist reflected the views of many regarding the ban when he declared that there had been 'a certain amount of commonsense in excluding British soldiers and police from participation' but as they 'are not with us now . . . all our citizens should have freedom of choice in the matter of games.' He believed that Gaelic games were 'well able to stand on their own feet' and favoured removal of the ban.[4] GAA members in a number of counties held similar views and the ban was a regular item on the agenda at county conventions and annual congresses in the years from 1922 to 1926. Some of the men who had been strongly in favour of the ban prior to independence were now seeking to repeal it. Delegates from fourteen counties attended the 1922 adjourned congress where Michael F. Crowe, a Dublin delegate, proposed the deletion of what were described as 'the Rugby and Soccer rules'. In 1905 Crowe had proposed the ban that he was now seeking to repeal, but, 'after some discussion the exclusion rule was carried by 21 votes to 12'.[5] The following year support for change came from Cork, where there was a large majority in favour of removing the ban, and Meath, where delegates favoured removal by twenty-eight votes to fifteen.[6] At the annual congress Dan McCarthy from Dublin, president of the GAA from 1921 to 1924, seconded the Cork motion to remove the ban, as 'the time which had justified the rule was past' and 'the men who played "foreign" games could not be held to be shoneens.' Despite McCarthy's position as president, the delegates voted even more strongly for the ban's retention than was the case in 1922. The vote for repeal remained at twelve but opposition to such a move had risen to fifty.[7] Further votes at the 1924 and 1925 congresses revealed continuing support for its retention and in 1926 a motion was passed limiting discussion on the issue to every third subsequent congress.[8]

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[4] *MC*, 7 Apr. 1923.
[5] Central Council mins, 21 May 1922. For Crowe's role in 1905 see Pádraig de Búrca, 'Do they dread the moment of truth?' in *Gaelic Sport*, vi, no. 1, Mar.–Apr. (1963), pp 16–18; p. 16.
[6] *MC*, 31 Mar. 1923.
[7] Central Council mins, 1 Apr. 1923; *CE*, 2 Apr. 1923.
[8] In 1924, the vote against change was 54–32, see Central Council mins, 20 Apr. 1924, and in 1925 delegates voted 70–15 against change, see Central Council mins, 12 Apr. 1925 (CPA, GAA/CC/01/03). For 1926, see Cormac Moore, *The GAA v Douglas Hyde* (Cork, 2012), p. 52.

Before discussing the details of the ban debates in Meath it is necessary to assess if attitudes to the ban reflected political views on the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Brendan Mac Lua in *The steadfast rule*, and Marcus de Búrca, in his history of the GAA, both claim that this was the case. De Búrca stated that 'Most GAA members who opposed the Treaty supported the . . . Ban, while those who favoured its abolition were mostly pro-Treaty members.'[9] McElligott in his history of the GAA in Kerry advances a similar theory.[10] However, an analysis of the debates suggests that this is an oversimplification of the reality. Dan McCarthy, the GAA president who supported change in 1923, was a member of the Provisional Government which favoured the treaty, but Eoin O'Duffy, who, as chief of staff of the army and later Garda Commissioner, was a strong government supporter, was fiercely opposed to the removal of the ban. He stated that McCarthy's motion was 'an outrage on the living and the dead'. He also claimed that the army, all of whom were pro-Treaty, expressed the view at a meeting the previous day that the existing rule should not be changed.[11] De Búrca records O'Duffy's strong support for the ban despite his pro-Treaty stance but McElligott wrongly asserts that O'Duffy supported its abolition.[12]

The debates on the issue in Meath show that a simple paradigm of pro-Treaty supporters favouring removal of the ban and anti-Treaty adherents supporting its retention does not do justice to the complexity of the issue. Meath also reflected the national trend of increasing support for the ban with the passage of time. In advance of the 1922 annual congress there was no discussion of the issue at the Meath convention and the only delegate who attended congress – Farrel Tully of Kells – was free to vote as he saw fit.[13] As noted earlier, the motion to delete the ban failed. In contrast, there was a lengthy debate in Meath the following year on Cork's proposal that the ban be removed. Thomas Walshe, vice-chairman of the Meath county committee, proposed that Meath's delegates should vote against the motion and John Newman supported him, saying: 'We did without them up to this and we'll do without them further', referring to those who played foreign games. The chairman, James Reynolds of Trim, who had objected to the GAA being used for

[9] Brendan Mac Lua, *The steadfast rule: a history of the GAA ban* (Dublin, 1967), p. 56; de Búrca, *The GAA: a history,* p. 169.
[10] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 315.
[11] Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland', p. 43; *CE*, 2 Apr. 1923; *EH*, 2 Apr. 1923.
[12] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 315.
[13] Central Council minutes, 21 May 1922.

political purposes during the War of Independence, favoured the amendment, saying 'the time for protection has passed. We are now in no danger of alien influence, . . . the national games can withstand the rest on level terms'. George Cudden from Rathkenny, who took the anti-Treaty side and was arrested and imprisoned following the battle of Curraghtown, near Navan, in July 1922, proposed an amendment that men should have the freedom to play any game they chose.[14] Thus, his active involvement on the anti-Treaty side did not prevent him from supporting the removal of the ban. Cudden's amendment was carried on a show of hands by 25-15. However, as noted above, the Cork motion failed to find sufficient support at annual congress, losing on a vote of fifty in favour to twelve against.[15]

When the issue returned to the agenda the following year Meath changed its stance and voted firmly against removal. Reynolds, the sitting chairman, did not attend the convention and was replaced by John Newman, the former captain of Bohermeen. Although on the pro-Treaty side, he stated to applause that he was unalterably opposed to removing the ban, as anglicisation had not been ended and it was the duty of all Gaels to combat it in every way in their power. Seamus Finn from Athboy had been second in command to Seán Boylan in the War of Independence, and later joined the Free State army. He was vice-chairman of Meath GAA from 1924 to 1926 and participated in nearly all the debates during this period, opposing change, despite his pro-Treaty views. He declared that members of the Meath GAA would be renegades to the ideals of Dr Croke if they removed the ban; it would be madness to surrender to the forces of anglicisation, for so long their bitter enemies. Fr Michael Kilmartin, representing Ardcath, declared that if the GAA's Central Council deleted the ban rules he would propose that they break away from the council. He claimed that forty or fifty cricket clubs had started in Meath and saw the retention of the ban as a means of protecting the GAA from rival sports. The meeting unanimously directed that the Meath delegates vote against the lifting of the ban.[16]

This represented a complete reversal of the position adopted at the previous convention and may have been due to two factors. The strongest proponents of the

[14] Owen McFadden, *The old IRA in Meath*, pp 58, 126; *MC*, 31 Mar. 1923. An IRA volunteer and a Free State army officer were shot dead at Curraghtown, near Dunderry, on 5 July 1922.
[15] Central Council mins, 1 Apr. 1923.
[16] *MC*, 29 Mar. 1924.

ban's retention, Finn and Kilmartin, had been absent the previous year, and their contributions seem to have swayed the attendance, as many of their statements were greeted with applause and calls of 'hear, hear' while some of those who had been supportive of removing the ban in 1923, especially the former chairman, James Reynolds, were not present in 1924. George Cudden did attend but his only recorded contribution was to propose Newman, even though he knew from Newman's stance in 1923 that he was opposed to any relaxation of the rule. Secondly, while some people in the GAA favoured a change in the ban rule in the immediate aftermath of independence, many of them revised their opinions later. They discovered that while they had secured independence it was no simple task to banish the continuing influence of English culture and customs. This opposition to, and fear of, anglicisation can be seen in the speeches of Finn and Wall. Finn claimed that many national customs were dying out and that people were aping the foreigner, while Kilmartin feared the revival of cricket, the game many viewed as quintessentially English. As noted earlier, congress voted against the proposal to remove the ban by fifty-four votes to thirty-two.[17]

The evidence from Meath suggests that while there may have been support for the removal of the ban among the supporters of the treaty and opposition to its removal among republicans, many on the pro-Treaty side favoured its retention. It is likely that those who supported the ban based their decision, not on politics, but because of their commitment to the Irish-Ireland cause and their view that anglicisation in the form of English literature, customs and games was a threat to the GAA. They also opposed it on a practical level, believing that cricket, soccer and rugby had the potential to entice players away from the GAA.

In subsequent years there was increasing support for the retention of the ban in other counties also. In Cavan, the chairman, B.C. Fay, said that the GAA should not support the contamination that the removal of the ban would bring: 'never was Ireland more flooded with Anglicisation than at present, and the ban on foreign games was the last barrier to it.'[18] Attitudes had hardened in the Meath press also. The writer of 'Casual Comments', who favoured removing the ban in 1923, had

[17] Central Council mins, 20 Apr. 1924.
[18] *MC*, 21 Mar. 1925.

changed his stance completely two years later, writing that the Free State was 'rampant with "shoneenism" and "West Britonism" and practically the only non-political organisations making any kind of a stand against the new wave of anglicisation sweeping over the country are the GAA and the Gaelic League.'[19]

By the mid 1920s opposition to any change was entrenched in Meath. A proposal to delete the ban rules attracted no support in 1925[20] and the following year the issue dictated the county's choice for the national presidency of the GAA. The convention voted against nominating the incumbent, P.D. Breen of Wexford, despite the fact that he was a Leinster man, and opted to support Seán McCarthy of Cork, as the latter was prominent in supporting the ban at the 1925 congress, whereas Breen favoured its removal. It was unusual for counties to support a person from outside their province, particularly when he was the incumbent, and the meeting underlined its views by instructing its delegates to vote to retain the ban, the chairman having declared that there was no need to discuss it.[21] As indicated earlier, support for the retention of the ban grew at each congress and there was no further proposal for change at Meath conventions until after the Second World War.

Following the decision to retain the ban in 1924 a special GAA convention took place in August 1924 at which a motion was adopted providing for the establishment of vigilance committees 'whose duties will be to visit centres where foreign games are held and to report . . . on the attendance of members of the GAA as players or spectators at such functions.' The chairman of each county committee was authorised to nominate members to such committees,[22] and Meath chairman John Newman stated in September that they had already formed one. [23] The membership of the vigilance committees was never publicised and the level of activity of such committees varied from county to county. There is little evidence in the local press between 1924 and 1934 that the committee submitted the names of alleged culprits to the county committee for sanction. Most transgressions usually came to light when defeated clubs objected to the result of games on the grounds that their opponents

[19] *MC*, 4 Apr. 1925.
[20] *MC*, 21 Mar. 1925.
[21] *MC*, 13 Feb. 1926.
[22] Central Council mins, 16 Aug. 1924.
[23] *MC*, 13 Sept. 1924.

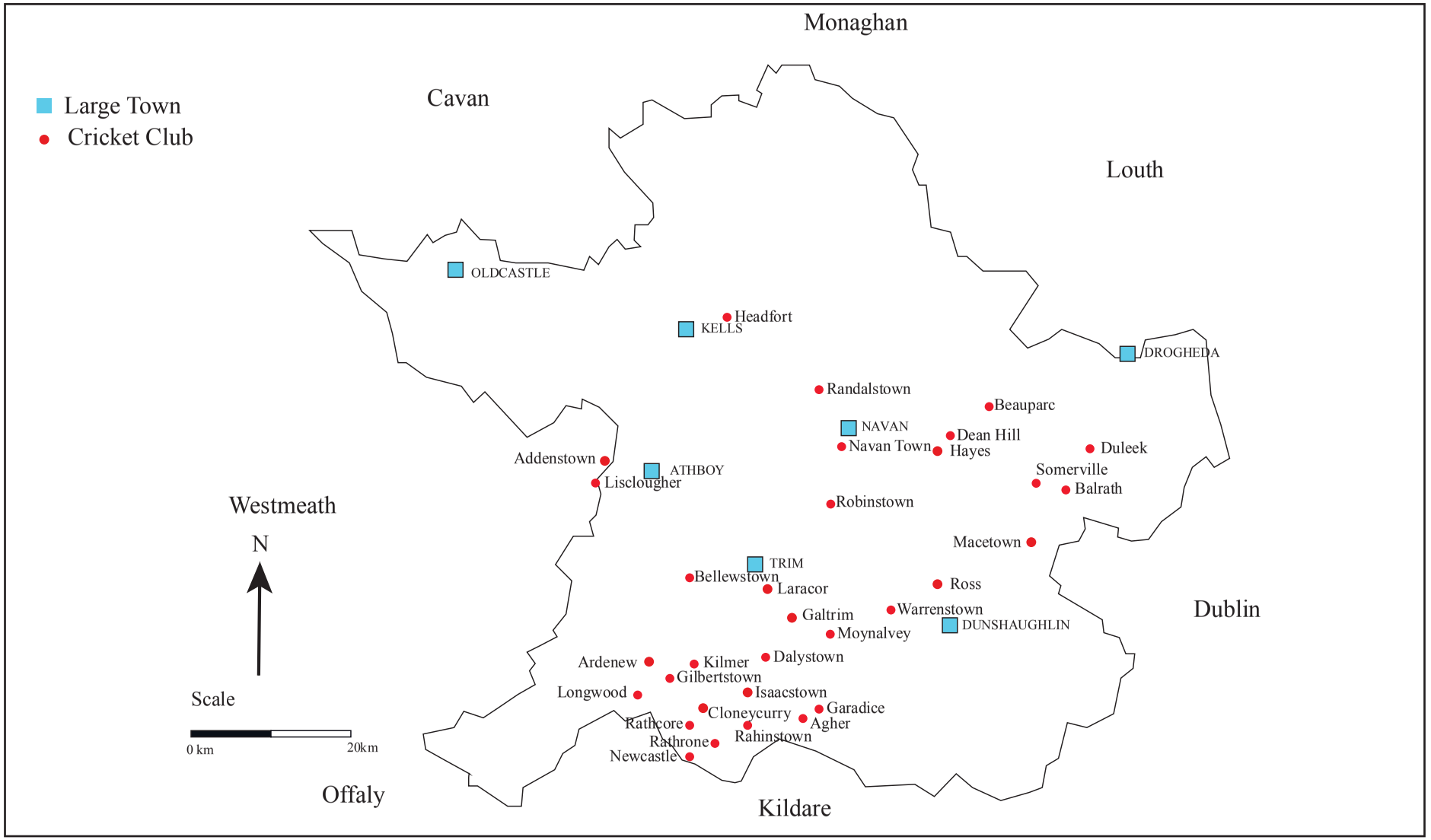
had fielded players who played foreign games, or attended dances organised by the promoters of these games. Such objections were frequent and often successful, but probably represent a small fraction of the actual infractions that went undetected.[24]

Chapter three has shown that cricket was the strongest sporting rival of the GAA in Meath and consequently the most likely of the foreign games to attract GAA members. It was the dominant game in Meath from 1895 to 1905 but declined thereafter. However, the game experienced a strong revival in the county in the 1920s following the formation of a Meath Sunday Cricket League (MSCL) in January 1924.[25] This league was much more successful than the short-lived one that had been established in 1905, and part of the reason for this was the creation of an effective administrative structure. The reestablished league combined a degree of central control with devolved authority to organise games locally in separate divisions. The overall controlling body held annual meetings, kept accounts and elected officers, while a Committee of Administration that met from time to time oversaw the practical organisation of the league. It established senior and junior divisions to cater for the varying levels of skill among teams, made draws for the leagues, adjudicated on disputes and arranged venues for the knock-out stages. In each division a secretary was appointed, with responsibility for setting dates for games within the division, recording their outcome and informing the Committee of Administration which teams had qualified to advance to the knock-out stages of the league. The divisions were usually arranged geographically, and as most of the teams within a division were close to each other, and teams played on a home and away basis, this system made for the smooth running of the league. The cricket season was a relatively short one, usually running from May to October, but competitions were almost always concluded within the calendar year. The local GAA, with a longer season, albeit with more competitions and teams, often struggled to conclude its schedule within the calendar year.

From its revival in 1924, when sixteen cricket teams can be identified, the number of clubs increased to a high of forty-one in 1926, before settling at an average of twenty participants in the league annually into the early 1930s. It should be noted that not all

[24] For examples of objections see MC, 13 Oct. 1923, 20 Oct. 1923, 9 Aug. 1924, 13 Sept. 1924, 15 Aug. 1925.
[25] *DI*, 22 Dec. 1923.

Figure 7.1: Clubs in Meath Sunday Cricket League, 1924



teams took part in the league (for a list of teams in the period 1923-34 see appendix eight). An analysis of the teams participating in the MSCL in 1924 reveals that almost half of them were reincarnations of teams that had flourished in the early 1900s (see Figure 7.1). Clubs such as Beauparc, Bellewstown, Deanhill, Drumree, Duleek, Garadice, Headfort, Isaacstown, Kilmer, Navan, Rathdrina, Rathrone, Ratoath, Robinstown and Warrenstown had existed twenty years previously, so while teams had disappeared the cricketing tradition had not died out, but was merely dormant for close to two decades. The rest of the teams in the competition could not be described as new either; all of them were located in areas where cricket clubs had previously flourished, with the vast majority centred around the Kentstown area and south-west Meath.

It is not possible to give definitive reasons why cricket clubs reformed or failed to do so, but a couple of observations may be advanced. The area with the longest tradition of cricket was Kentstown and its hinterland, to the east of Navan, along the river Boyne. Cricket clubs flourished here both in the 1900s and the 1920s and Deanhill CC won the MSCL senior title for five consecutive seasons from 1931 to 1935. It was an area of substantial estates such as those of Lord Athlumney of Somerville and the Lamberts of Beauparc, and these families supported cricket by providing suitable grounds, patronage and in some cases lining out for the teams.[26] Many of the MSCL finals were played at the Somerville grounds. It was also an area where Gaelic games had little or no presence from the 1900s to the mid 1920s. Conor Brennan, who was at school in the area in the 1920s, recalled that 'Cricket was played in Yellow Furze and Kentstown schools. There was always bats, wickets, etc. and each day at lunch time the Furze boys played in the chapel field.'[27] Short-lived GAA clubs were established in the area in Ashfield and Knockerk but cricket reigned supreme and the GAA provided little opposition until the Seneschalstown club, which continues to represent the area to this day, was set up in 1932. When a Gaelic Carnival, including a football match, was played in Kentstown in 1928, the *Meath Chronicle* report noted that 'Kentstown is a district where people eat and sleep in terms of cricket. A

[26] Conor Brennan, *Yellow Furze memories* (n.p., n.d.) p. 38; *MC*, 12 Jan. 1929; *DI*, 20 Sept. 1930. The Athlumney estate was sub-divided in the 1950s while part of the Lambert estate was distributed in the 1960s, with Lord Henry Mountcharles of Slane inheriting the remainder.
[27] Seneschalstown GAA, *Seneschalstown Golden Jubilee, 1932–1982,* (n.p., n.d.), not paginated.

good [Gaelic football] match will keep the newly formed football club there, and put the national game at least on a level with the foreign article.'[28]

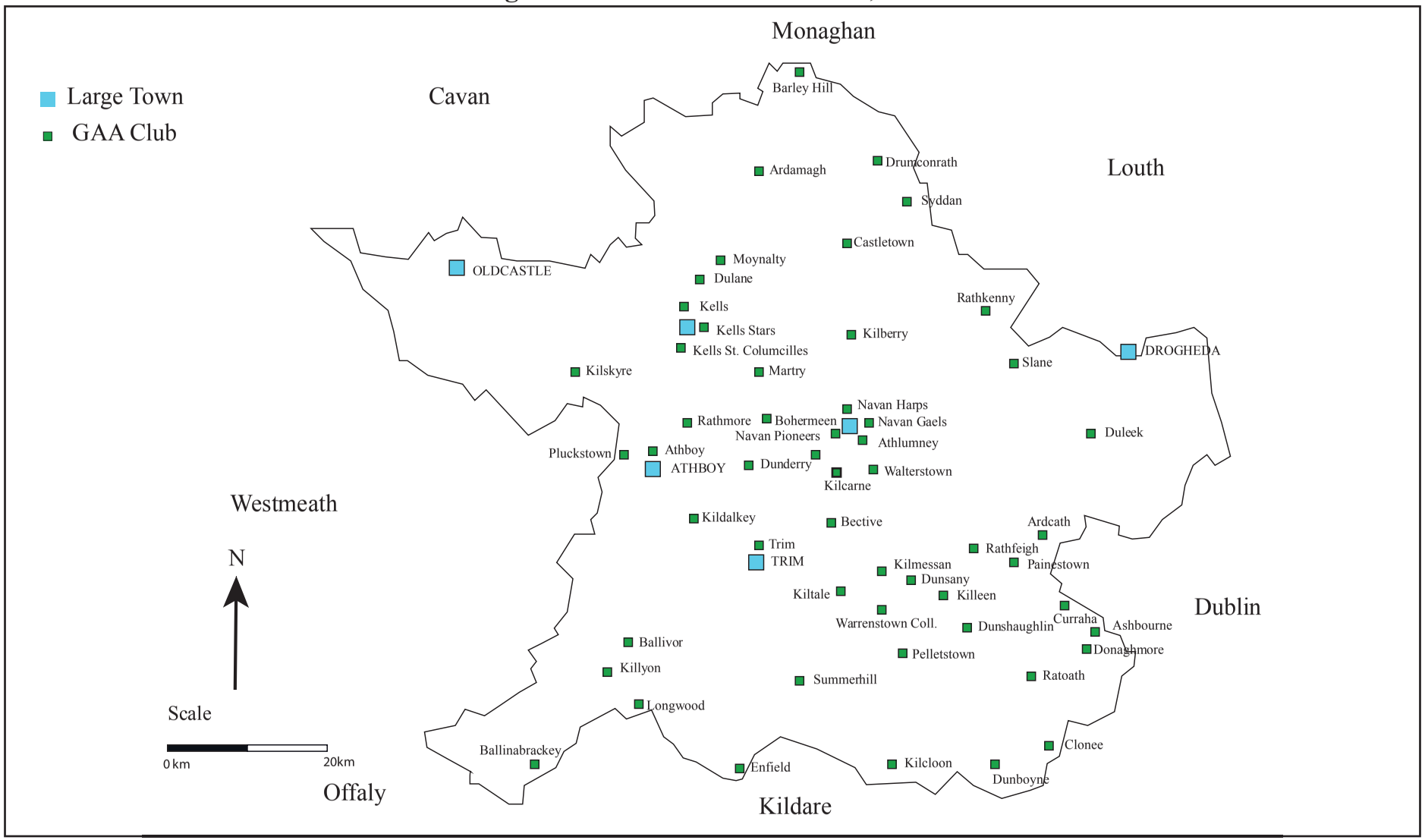
There were similarities in the south-west area of Meath, where there were also a number of large estates such as that of the Fowlers in Rahinstown. Cricket was strong in the area and one-third of the teams in the MSCL in 1924 were located there. It was also a part of the county where the GAA found it difficult to establish an ongoing presence. Summerhill GAA club survived for a short spell in the 1920s before disappearing and then reforming in 1931. The club won the junior championship in its maiden year but soon went out of existence, and its best player, Willie Shaw, also played cricket. A cricket club existed in Garadice, close to Summerhill, from 1924 to 1939 whereas a GAA club there survived for two years only, 1932 and 1933. Rathmolyon, one of the larger villages in the vicinity, fielded a football team from 1926 to 1934 but there was no cricket club in the village.

However, not all areas where cricket teams prospered in the early 1900s produced teams in the 1920s. There were at least a dozen cricket clubs in south-east Meath in the vicinity of Ashbourne, Ratoath and Dunboyne in the 1898–1908 period but only one team from the area, Ratoath, joined the MSCL in 1924, and it competed for one year only. A club from Dunboyne participated between 1926 and 1928 before it lapsed once again. Thus, although there was a tradition of cricket in the area and numerous large farms where cricket grounds could be located, clubs failed to re-emerge in the 1920s. A militating factor may have been the presence of strong GAA clubs. Dunboyne fielded senior and junior hurling teams throughout the decade, Donaghmore emerged as a powerful force in football in the 1920s, winning two senior titles, and there was also at this time a strong club in Curraha, an area where cricket clubs had existed in the 1900s. Thus, support from local landlords or large farmers, the absence of GAA clubs and the existence of a tradition of cricket seemed to be factors in the distribution of cricket clubs in the county in the 1920s.

The GAA was firmly established in the county by the 1920s (see Figure 7.2) but the number of cricket clubs in existence provided a strong counter-attraction to it. The minutes of the Leinster Council give some indication of the extent to which members

[28] *MC*, 7 July 1928.

Figure 7:2: GAA clubs in Meath, 1924



of the GAA flouted the ban, as they contain regular references to players from all counties in the province who applied to be reinstated as GAA members after serving a suspension for breaking the rules. The minutes of two meetings in early 1927 give an indication of the attractiveness of foreign games for GAA members in Meath. For example, at its meeting on 5 February the council reinstated Robert Mulligan, Frank Murray, John Murray, Pat Goff and Christy Caddell – probably members of the Ardcath club – who had played 'foreign games'. John and Pat Farnan, Martin Moore, Tom Byrne and Pat Cromwell were reinstated having been suspended for attending a cricket dance.[29] On 27 March 1927, the council reinstated another group of players previously suspended for playing cricket: Joe Kelly and Michael McArdle of Trim; J. Grey from Donaghmore; Robert Pentony, William Pentony and James Lynch of Donore FC; and James Hanly, Pat Hanly and Pat Williams of Enfield. Others reinstated included Pat Dillon of Ardcath, who attended a cricket dance, and Tom Tully, Mick Tully, Mick Carolan, Frank Ryan and James Murphy of Ceannanas Mór (Kells) FC who had played rugby. The same meeting reinstated a long list of Dublin and Westmeath players for playing or attending soccer and rugby games.[30] The minutes of course do not account for the many GAA members who played the banned sports but were not identified.

Cricket was not the only banned sport that members of the GAA in Meath indulged in. There is also evidence of players being suspended and later reinstated for playing soccer, mainly in Navan, and rugby in Navan and Kells. Navan United was formed in late 1925 and Navan Celtic came into being about the same time.[31] Their formation may be linked to the decline and eventual disappearance of one of the local GAA clubs, Navan Harps. The Harps were senior county champions in 1921 and 1922, but their local rivals Navan Gaels won three consecutive senior titles in 1924–26. The Harps did not affiliate in 1926 due to difficulty in paying the rent on their grounds and a number of them preferred to play soccer rather than Gaelic. When the club applied for reinstatement at the end of the soccer season in 1926, the GAA county chairman commented that if all teams behaved like Harps and defected

[29] Leinster Council mins, 5 Feb. 1927.
[30] Leinster Council mins, 27 Mar. 1927.
[31] *MC*, 10 Oct. 1925, 7 Nov. 1925, 14 Nov. 1925, 12 Dec. 1925, 16 Jan. 1926. For an account of soccer in Ireland during this period see Mark Tynan, 'Association football and Irish society during the inter-war period, 1918–1939' (PhD thesis, Maynooth University, 2013).

to soccer the GAA would be in a bad way.[32] Nevertheless, at its meeting on 11 September 1926 the Leinster Council reinstated seventeen Navan Harps players who had previously played soccer.[33]

There were two rugby clubs in the county from the 1920s. Kells, known as the County Meath RFC, was formed in 1922, and Navan RFC was founded in 1924 or 1925. The officers from these clubs were from the upper echelons of the towns' society, but despite its strong middle and upper class composition some GAA players occasionally featured on these rugby teams.[34] Patrick Colclough, who played for Meath in the Leinster football final and replay of 1930, was reinstated the previous year after playing rugby and soccer while Willie Shaw, Meath's captain for the county's first National Football League title in 1933, who was also a referee and deputy vice-chairman of the county committee for a year, played rugby in 1929 and cricket in 1939.[35]

Despite the evidence that many players ignored the ban rules, the GAA refused to relax them as the organisation viewed itself as being in a position of strength in the 1920s and 1930s. During the 1920s the GAA experienced significant increases in club affiliations, attendances and gate receipts. The number of clubs nationally grew from 1,051 in 1924 to 1,549 in 1929,[36] and the attendance at both the All-Ireland football and hurling finals in 1933 exceeded 45,000.[37] As its popularity increased, the arguments for removing the ban lost their validity. Bob O'Keeffe, the Leinster Council chairman, declared at the 1931 convention that the association had never been so strong and that 'The country is behind the GAA; feeling is hardening behind the games and the ideals they stand for'. He was strongly in favour of the vigilance committees, stating that they had 'men on Saturdays patronising foreign games and doffing their hats to "God save the Queen" and on Sundays they bowed their heads

[32] *MC*, 3 July 1926.
[33] Leinster Council mins, 11 Sept. 1926.
[34] See *MC*, 26 Nov. 1922 for details; Navan Rugby Football Club, *Programme to commemorate the formal opening of the extension to the pavilion, 21 Dec. 1969* (Navan, 1969).
[35] For Colclough see *MC*, 17 Aug. 1929, 24 Aug. 1929. For Shaw see *MC*, 23 Mar. 1929, Leinster Council mins, 20 Feb. 1932, *Summerhill GFC, souvenir record* (Mullingar, 1977), not paginated.
[36] Central Council mins, secretary's report, 1929.
[37] Gaelic Athletic Association, *The complete handbook of Gaelic games* (Dublin, 2014), pp 133, 264.

on Gaelic fields for the national anthem. These were not wanted in the GAA and should clear out at once.'[38]

The ban led to much duplicity, cynicism and deceit among GAA players and officials. Players often assumed false names and clubs objected to opponents for fielding men who had flouted the ban rule, while turning a blind eye to similar transgressions by their own members. Even the secretary to the Central Council, Pádraig Ó Caoimh, admitted in 1931:

> It would be the veriest self-delusion to think that all fundamental rules of the association are being observed. Openly in many cases, and covertly in hundreds, restrictions embodying principles of the GAA are being constantly violated.[39]

The operation of the vigilance committees and their membership was shrouded in secrecy and this bred suspicion and mistrust, as GAA members playing or attending banned games ran the risk of a lengthy suspension. Nevertheless substantial numbers were prepared to take that risk. The ban rules were clearly unpopular with many ordinary GAA members and some may have wished to change them, but club, and especially, county committee officials in most counties were vehemently against change and the matter was not even on the agenda in Meath after 1926.

The ban debates of the 1920s set the template for the following half-century. Paul Rouse in his analysis of the ban argued that it was initially

> introduced for organizational and administrative purposes; it later acquired a political dimension; but it was only in the decades after independence that it attained extreme ideological importance. Even then, there was a persistent number of nonconformists who refused to accept the ideology which the rule embodied.[40]

From then on, its defenders claimed that the ban reflected the ideals and views of the GAA's founders and Brendan Mac Lua in his 1967 book *The steadfast rule* epitomized this view.[41] The retention of the ban on foreign games reflected the trend

[38] Leinster Council mins, 22 Feb. 1931.
[39] *CE*, 6 Apr. 1931.
[40] Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland', p. 334.
[41] Mac Lua, *The steadfast rule*.

in the new state to oppose outside ideas and influences. Censorship of films and of literature deemed indecent and obscene was introduced in the 1920s,[42] and the opposition of the Catholic Church and the GAA to foreign dances and their support for Irish céilís will be discussed in the next chapter. The GAA's ban rules reflected the conservative, protective ethos of the new state and were intended to bolster political independence with increased cultural separation.

Conclusion

Arguments for and against the removal of the ban dominated annual congress in the early 1920s but by the end of the decade the ban rule was enshrined as a central principle of the GAA and was no longer an issue for debate. The status of the ban was not subsequently discussed at Meath conventions until the 1960s and it did not make its way onto the agenda for annual congress until 1959. It was eventually removed at the 1971 congress.[43] This chapter has shown that there was some support for the removal of the ban in the early 1920s, even among high-ranking GAA officials, but this view did not prevail in the face of the majority, who believed that anglicisation remained rampant in Irish society, and that the country was as far away as ever from the ideal of a Gaelic Ireland.

The argument that support for the removal of the ban came from supporters of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and that those who favoured its retention were opponents of the treaty is unduly simplistic. In Meath, many prominent supporters of the treaty were vehemently opposed to removing the ban because of their commitment to the Irish-Ireland cause, their opposition to anglicisation and fear that GAA players would be attracted to foreign games. While GAA officialdom became increasingly dogmatic on the issue of the ban, many players ignored its strictures. It is impossible to quantify the extent to which the rule was flouted as many of the culprits probably went undetected, but the regular references in the records of the Leinster Council to the reinstatement of players who had broken the rule suggests that the numbers were substantial. Even more significant were the hypocrisy and cynicism the rule

[42] Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland*, pp 340–42.
[43] Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland', pp 58-60; de Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 254.

engendered as clubs often indulged in objection and counter-objection on the basis that their opponents included a player guilty of playing foreign games.

Chapter 8
The GAA in Meath after independence, 1923–1934

Introduction

During the first decade of national independence the GAA was operating in a very different environment to that experienced in the first four decades of its existence. The government and the forces of the state, such as the police and army, were no longer hostile to it. Now a number of the GAA's former officials, such as J.J. Walsh and Eoin O'Duffy, held high positions in the new state and Gaelic games were promoted in the army and the Gardaí.

There is a significant deficit in the historiography of the GAA after independence. Practically all the academic research on the organisation has concentrated on the period prior to 1923, with a primary focus on the political aspects of the GAA. A few writers have continued their research up to the golden jubilee of the GAA in 1934, including Richard McElligott's *Forging a kingdom* and Conor Curran with a broader sporting remit in *The development of sport in Donegal*. Cathal Billings has analysed the relationship between the GAA and the Irish language for the same period but, as most of the work is unpublished and in the Irish language, it is accessible to very few. Billings has, however, published two articles in English, while Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin has examined the GAA's view of the cultural importance of its games in the 1930s. The only published work on the GAA in Meath for the period 1923–34, Michael O'Brien's *Royal and loyal*, is not an academic study but concentrates on the games at club and county level and does not offer a broader analysis of the GAA in Meath.[1] Consequently, this chapter breaks new ground in examining a number of aspects of the organisation in the years after independence.

This chapter plays particular attention to the relationship and interaction between the GAA and three important organisations in post-independence Ireland: the new police force, An Garda Síochána, the Catholic Church and the Gaelic League. Eoin O'Duffy, a former secretary of the GAA's Ulster Council and a member of the

[1] Richard McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*; Curran, *The development of sport in Donegal*; Cathal Billings, 'Speaking Irish with hurley sticks: Gaelic sports, the Irish language and national identity in revival Ireland' in *Sport in History*, xxxvii, no. 1 (2017), pp 25–50; Billings, 'Athbheochan na Gaeilge agus an spórt in Éirinn, 1884–1934'; Billings, 'The first minutes: an analysis of the Irish language'; Ó hAnnracháin, 'The heroic importance of sport'; O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*.

Central Council until 1934, became commissioner of An Garda Síochána in 1922.[2] O'Duffy made no secret of his view that members of the GAA were ideal candidates for the force. As the gardaí were dispersed to towns and villages they became potential GAA recruits, both as players or administrators. This chapter will outline and evaluate the contribution of the gardaí to the GAA in Meath and examine whether there was any opposition to their involvement.

The focus of the chapter will then shift to one of the most powerful institutions in post-Independence Ireland, the Roman Catholic Church. Episcopal opposition to the GAA in Meath, which dated to Bishop Nulty's strong anti-Parnellite stance, continued long after it had waned in other dioceses, and priests were rarely to the fore in the GAA in Meath before the 1920s. In the aftermath of independence members of the Catholic clergy became increasingly prominent at all levels, and priests took leadership roles on many county committees. This chapter will consider the extent to which this trend occurred in Meath also.

The GAA and the Gaelic League viewed themselves as sister organisations, each promoting different aspects of Irish culture and tradition, the former in the area of sport and pastimes, the latter in the realm of language, music and dance. As shown in chapter three, the Gaelic League was largely responsible for the formation of many of the first hurling clubs in Meath but the relationship between the two organisations was often an uneasy one. This chapter will consider the evolution of that relationship in Meath, their respective strengths and the level of co-operation between them up to 1934.

One of the most important factors in the viability of a GAA club was access to a suitable playing field. From the mid 1920s the GAA realised the importance of county committees and clubs owning their playing fields. The Leinster Council of the GAA was the first to pursue a policy of establishing a ground in each county suited to inter-county games and then of assisting individual clubs within counties in

[2] Originally known as the Civic Guard, the force became An Garda Síochána in 1923 following an amendment to a bill before Dáil Éireann from Cathal O'Shannon, Labour TD for the Louth-Meath constituency. See *Dáil Debates*, 31 July 1923, vol. 4, 1709; Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy, a self-made hero* (Oxford, 2005), pp 117, 150.

their efforts to acquire playing fields. The chapter will outline the impact of this policy in Meath and the level of interest among clubs in supporting it.

The GAA and An Garda Síochána

If the GAA viewed the RIC as an inveterate enemy, its replacement from 1922, An Garda Síochána, was a reliable ally. This was particularly true following the appointment of General Eoin O'Duffy as Garda Commissioner. O'Duffy had been secretary of Monaghan GAA county committee in 1912, secretary of the Ulster Council 1912–22 and was an influential member of the GAA's Central Council throughout the 1920s.[3] As Garda Commissioner he made sport, and especially Gaelic games, a mainstay of police life, recalling later that 'A candidate's best recommendation, in my eyes, for a police post, was athletic fitness and keenness such as a GAA record shows.'[4] In February 1923 he issued a circular to all Garda stations urging the Gardaí to join local hurling, football and handball clubs.[5] Part of his motivation came from his own interest in sport, but also from his belief that involvement in the local community would establish trust and friendship between the new police force and the population, in contrast to the animosity that had previously existed between the majority of nationalists and the RIC. The new recruits were young men between the ages of nineteen and twenty-seven years, ideally placed to become active members of sports clubs in the towns and villages to which they were assigned.[6]

The role of the Gardaí is referenced only occasionally in the historiography of the GAA. The new force is fleetingly mentioned in de Búrca's history when he notes that the appearance of army and garda teams in Dublin provided a welcome new element in metropolitan competitions and that 'Garda support provided a badly-needed stimulus in areas where native games had previously not gained wide local acceptance.' [7] General histories of the new force make little reference to its

[3] Dónal McAnallen, 'The radicalisation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ulster, 1912–1923: the role of Owen O'Duffy' in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, xxxi, no. 7 (2014), pp 704–723.
[4] Eoin O'Duffy, 'Reminiscences', chapter v, p. 3 (NLI, O'Duffy papers, MS 48,300/2).
[5] Brian Willoughby and Noel Hynes, *Guardians of the GAA* (Naas, 2018), p. 22; Liam McNiffe, *A history of the Garda Síochána* (Dublin, 1997), pp 113–4.
[6] *Dáil Debates*, 25 Sept. 1922, vol. 1, 644.
[7] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 166.

involvement in sport, and while a recent publication, *Guardians of the GAA*, contains a section on the Garda and the GAA, it focuses mainly on internal Garda competitions and biographical details of notable GAA players who were gardaí.[8] One of the few publications to discuss the issue in any detail is Conor Curran's *Sport in Donegal* which outlines the significant role that gardaí played in the revival of the GAA in Donegal during the 1920s.[9]

Gardaí were appointed to various towns throughout the country from September 1922, and by October they had occupied stations in Navan, Trim, Athboy, Slane, Dunshaughlin and Kells.[10] This was a welcome influx, as in the early 1920s the local press in Meath contained numerous references to members of GAA clubs departing for the USA, as emigration resumed after an enforced hiatus during the war.[11] Accordingly, new members were welcome, and in the early years of independence gardaí featured on a number of successful teams in the county. James Keogh played on the senior championship winning Athboy hurling team in 1923 and also represented Meath in junior hurling, while Alex Ryan from Limerick helped Dunshaughlin to a senior hurling title in 1925.[12] Sergeant Matthew Fitzpatrick was instrumental in the revival of the Summerhill club that won the junior football title in 1931, and he and Sergeant Daly of Enfield frequently represented their clubs at county committee meetings. Another member of the force, John McGeough, a native of Monaghan, played in Summerhill's 1931 title-winning team and later helped to form a club in Dangan, near Summerhill.[13] One or two gardaí could have a big influence on a GAA club's fortunes, especially in a small town or rural area. Even in a large town, where there was already a bigger selection of players available, the arrival of a couple of gardaí could transform a team's performances. This is well exemplified by the experience of the GAA in Kells. Although Kells was the second largest town in Meath, no club from there had won a senior hurling championship in

[8] Willoughby and Hynes, *Guardians of the GAA*. See also Gregory Allen, *The Garda Síochána: policing independent Ireland, 1922–82* (Dublin, 1999), pp 98–100; Conor Brady, *Guardians of the peace* (Dublin, 1974), pp 117–19; McNiffe, *A history of the Garda Síochána:* pp 113-16.
[9] Curran, *The development of sport in Donegal,* pp 148–9.
[10] McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy*, p. 123; *MC*, 14 Oct. 1922.
[11] See for example, *MC*, 23 May 1925, 26 Nov. 1927, 22 Feb. 1930, 5 Sept. 1931, 28 Jan. 1933.
[12] *Aonach an Gharda, souvenir programme*, 1926, p. 111; O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, p. 255; Gilligan and McLoughlin, *Black and amber*, p. 506.
[13] *Civic Guard (Garda Síochána) temporary register*, 1922–1925, (Garda Museum and Archive) hereinafter referred to as *Civic Guard temporary register*; for Fitzpatrick, see pp 189–90; for McGeough pp 233–4; *MC*, 3 Mar. 1934; *Summerhill GFC, souvenir record*.

the two decades of finals up to 1922, and clubs were formed and disbanded with monotonous regularity. The arrival of Superintendent J.J. Bergin, a native of Laois, resulted in the formation of a new club named Erin's Own and the winning of three consecutive senior hurling titles between 1930 and 1932. Bergin was assisted by a number of other gardaí, Tom Irwin and William Bennett, both from Limerick, and Tom Meaney from Clare. Irwin was also part of the first ever Meath team to win an All-Ireland title when the county won the junior hurling championship in 1927.[14] At various stages Bergin was captain, secretary and trainer of the Erin's Own club and in 1930 stood unsuccessfully for the position of vice-chairman of the county committee.[15] In addition, he was responsible for establishing an athletics club in the town and reorganising the annual sports there, while also promoting boxing.[16]

The influx of gardaí into Kells did not meet with general approval, however. Following Erin's Own's first championship success in 1930, Seamus Finn, the Athboy delegate, sought an investigation into the constitution of the Kells team, saying that 'Erin's Own was building up a team from every source they could and importing men into the county to win the championship.' He claimed that William Bennett was illegal, as he had taken part in the Cork championship in 1930 and that James Smith, another garda, had played with Crossakiel. In response, Bergin asserted that all the Erin's Own players were legal and that he imported players 'to try to further hurling in north Meath and in county Cavan.' Finn eventually withdrew his request for an investigation, saying he hoped the men described as imports would not think he was casting a reflection on them as Gaels or as men, while the chairman stated to applause that the men were welcome in Meath.[17] Athboy themselves had fielded Garda Keogh in a previous championship victory but the opposition to Erin's Own probably arose due to the significant number of gardaí on the team. In addition to those previously mentioned, Garda Con Delaney played with Erin's Own for a while, Gardaí McDunphy trained them and Charles McGovern was club treasurer.[18]

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[14] *Civic guard temporary register*, Bennett, pp 383–4; Bergin, pp 135–6; Irwin, pp 23–4; Meaney, pp 67–8. For the 1927 All-Ireland junior hurling title and Erin's Own see O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, pp 258–264, 269–72.
[15] *MC*, 1 Feb. 1930.
[16] For athletics see *MC*, 4 Sept. 1926; for boxing see *MC*, 14 Apr. 1928. The Erin's Own GAA club later set up its own boxing club. See *MC*, 25 Nov. 1933.
[17] *MC*, 20 Dec. 1930.
[18] *MC*, 25 May 1929, 19 Oct. 1929, 4 Feb. 1933.

Despite the reservations of some, the inclusion of local gardaí on teams in Meath had a beneficial effect as seen in the revival of football in Summerhill and hurling in Kells. J.J. Bergin served for a decade in Kells and his popularity is attested to by the fact that two efforts to transfer him out of the county were resisted and thwarted before he was eventually assigned to Blarney, county Cork in 1933. It is possible that influence was brought to bear to thwart the earlier proposed moves and O'Duffy recorded that, as Garda Commissioner, 'Wherever I could reasonably do so I facilitated the Garda in regard to sports — and I believe therefore served the welfare of the areas concerned — by leave, transfer and retention at stations of prominent footballers or hurlers'.[19] Prior to Bergin's departure members of the Erin's Own club treated him to a farewell supper and presentation, after which, club members, many with hurleys, formed a procession headed by the St. Columcille's Band. In addition, the *Meath Chronicle* regretted his departure in an editorial.[20]

Nevertheless, it is clear that there was an undercurrent of opposition to gardaí GAA players in some areas of the county, for in 1930 Bergin complained that Athboy followers were calling his men 'Shannon Schemers' during a game, while in a 1932 championship game between Erin's Own and Dunboyne there were constant shouts for the referee to put off Tom Irwin. Bergin claimed not to know what was meant by 'Shannon Schemers' but it is likely that it was a reference to the fact that a couple of the Kells players were from the Limerick-Clare region and therefore were outsiders.[21] An Ardcath motion at the Meath convention in 1926 is also indicative of some resistance to them. The motion proposed that 'no soldier or Guard be allowed to play with any team in the county because, being frequently changed, their inclusion in any team gives rise to objections.' The motion led to a lengthy debate, with most speakers supportive of garda involvement on teams. However, one delegate expressed the view that gardaí and soldiers had their own teams with whom they should play. Eventually the motion was watered down to one seeking a ruling from annual congress defining their status, but there is no record of this in the

[19] Eoin O'Duffy, 'Reminiscences', chapter v, p. 4; *MC*, 19 Apr. 1930; *MC*, 16 Apr. 1932.
[20] *MC*, 15 Apr. 1933.
[21] *MC*, 13 July 1929, 7 May 1932, *DI*, 20 Dec. 1930. The Shannon Scheme was a government funded development to provide a hydroelectric power station on the river Shannon at Ardnacrusha, county Limerick. The contract was awarded to the German company Siemens and this may have provided the basis for the jibe that the Erin's Own team consisted of outsiders.

congress minutes. Interestingly, the proposer of the motion, "Mr. Wall" (who was actually Fr Michael Kilmartin) opened his contribution by making the point that there was nothing political in the motion.[22] The fact that he felt it necessary to state this suggests that it may have been politically motivated, particularly as he was of strong republican views. Nevertheless, the opposition to the gardaí in Meath seems to have been based on sporting grounds, the fear that gardaí would strengthen some clubs and reduce the chances of others winning titles and there is limited evidence of opposition to them on political grounds.

This was not the case in other counties. McElligott, in his history of the GAA in Kerry, notes that the Tralee GAA Board was so strongly republican that it rejected the proposed affiliation of a garda team in the local league, claiming that no team would play against them.[23] The most recent biography of Eoin O'Duffy, Fearghal McGarry's *Self-made hero*, makes only passing reference to the deployment of gardaí and their involvement in GAA clubs,[24] but Dónal McAnallen, in a discussion of O'Duffy's role in the GAA between 1912 and 1923, gives some consideration to his role after independence. McAnallen refers to 'festering resentment' in many northern counties over the posting of star garda players to Monaghan. The All-Ireland final of 1930 was regarded by some as 'the last battle of the Civil War' due to the number of gardaí and army members on the Monaghan side that lost out to a Kerry team with a number of prominent republicans.[25] A proposal in 1932 from the Antrim convention calling for the exclusion of gardaí from the GAA on the basis that they were similar to the Royal Ulster Constabulary was withdrawn and the Ulster Council issued a statement praising the work of gardaí in promoting the GAA in Ulster.[26] In Donegal, there was some comment in the press on the difficulties faced by small rural clubs when playing opponents fielding gardaí and a view that the regular transfer of gardaí from one location to another created uncertainty for clubs.[27] The variation in attitudes in different counties shows the importance of local studies of the GAA on a county level, as circumstances varied and general histories fail to capture the nuances at local level.

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[22] *MC*, 13 Feb. 1926.
[23] McElligott, *Forging a kingdom*, p. 323.
[24] McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy*, p. 126.
[25] McAnallen, 'The radicalisation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ulster', p. 719.
[26] Ibid., p. 719; *II*, 1 Feb. 1932, 23 Feb. 1932.
[27] Conor Curran, *Sport in Donegal*, p. 149.

The GAA and the Catholic Church

If the GAA's disposition towards An Garda Síochána following the establishment of the Free State represented a radical departure from its traditional attitude towards law-enforcement officers, its attitude to the Catholic clergy was also undergoing change, though much less radical in nature. The relationship between the Church and the GAA was always a complex and evolving one, and the outlook of individual bishops and priests varied. Although Archbishop Croke of Cashel was the first patron of the GAA, not all his episcopal colleagues shared his approval of the organisation. Chapter two highlighted the outright opposition of the Catholic clergy in Meath, especially Bishop Nulty, to the GAA, even before the bitter rift at the time of the Parnell split. This was not a temporary estrangement but one that had a lasting legacy, continuing well into the early decades of the twentieth century. Nulty's successors to the bishopric, both of whom had been priests in the diocese during Nulty's period as bishop, Dr Matthew Gaffney (1899–1906) and Dr Laurence Gaughran (1906–28), evinced no enthusiasm for, or interest in, the GAA. Gaughran had claimed, while parish priest of Clara in Offaly as late as 1896, that the GAA was got up by publicans and led to Sunday desecration.[28] Two decades later he still held similar views, condemning drinking associated with sport on Sundays in his 1915 Lenten pastoral when he wrote: 'On Sundays and Holydays when the trains are full of excursionists of both sexes, on pleasure bent, when thousands of both sexes assemble at football matches, with unlimited supplies of drink near at hand, then he [the devil] does a roaring trade.'[29] In the period from 1890 to 1922 priests at parish level in Meath were very rarely involved as elected or honorary officers of their local GAA club, while the only member of the Catholic clergy to hold any elected position with the Meath GAA county committee was Fr Francis Hickey, vice-chairman from 1916 until 1918.[30]

In contrast, in other counties clergy had a more prominent role in the GAA. De Búrca, in his history of the GAA, claims that 'after 1929 the tendency of the clergy

[28] CBS Précis, May 1896, 22 May 1896 (NAI, 257S/15978).
[29] *MC*, 11 Mar. 1916.
[30] *MC*, 12 May 1917, 16 Nov. 1918.

to participate in GAA activities showed a marked increase.'[31] This trend can be seen even prior to 1929 in a number of counties. In Offaly between 1905 and 1918 a number of priests held the position of county chairman. They included Fr Culligan, Fr Manning, Fr Murray, Fr McCormack, Fr Crowe and Fr Kennedy and almost all were Gaelic League enthusiasts.[32] In Wicklow Fr E. Farrell was chairman of the county committee from 1921 to 1927 while Fr Hanton took the position in 1929. Longford had a run of three consecutive clerical chairmen spanning the years 1927 to 1950,[33] while in 1934 nine counties had clerical chairmen. These were Armagh, Carlow, Clare, Derry, Fermanagh, Galway, Longford, Leitrim and Tipperary.[34] In 1923, Dr John MacRory, then bishop of Down and Connor, presented a perpetual cup in his name to the Ulster Colleges' Council for the senior colleges' competition, and, in 1930, on his elevation to cardinal, he accepted the GAA's invitation to become a patron of the organisation.[35] In 1917 the archbishop of Cashel and Emly, Dr John Harty, presented a trophy for the Munster colleges' senior hurling championships.[36]

Signs of greater participation by the Catholic clergy in GAA affairs in Meath can be seen even before the death of Bishop Gaughran in 1928. The diocesan college, St Finian's in Mullingar, which substantial numbers of Meath students attended, participated in the Leinster colleges' senior football competitions during the 1920s, capturing the title in three successive years, 1925–27.[37] The clergy had much greater control over a school such as St Finian's and its footballers than it did over clubs, and could ensure that the devil had limited opportunities to cast his spell there. There was some clerical involvement in Meath GAA circles in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but there was an unwritten constraint on priests' participation at a playing level. While the bishops in general had no issues with priestly involvement in an administrative or coaching capacity, the hierarchy in all dioceses frowned on priests playing Gaelic games. Cronin, Duncan and Rouse ascribe this to Cardinal Paul

[31] De Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 185.
[32] McEvoy, 'The GAA and nationalism in Offaly, 1884–1918', p. 195.
[33] C.M. Byrne, *50 years of the GAA in Co. Wicklow* (Wicklow, 1935), pp 74, 81; Seán Ó Corcora, *C.L.C.G. Chontae Longfoirt 1887–1987* (Longford, 1987), p. 453.
[34] *Irish Independent, Gaelic Athletic Association golden jubilee souvenir*, Easter 1934, pp 56–95.
[35] Humphrey Kelleher, *GAA family silver* (Dublin, 2013), p. 63; de Búrca, *The GAA: a history*, p. 185.
[36] Kelleher, *GAA family silver*, p. 138.
[37] Gaelic Athletic Association, *The complete handbook*, p. 274.

Cullen's reform of the church in the second half of the nineteenth century, whereby 'the hierarchy of the church sought to redefine the engagement between the clergy and their flock. The new definition did not include playing hurling and football.'[38] There seems to have been no specific written embargo on priests playing Gaelic games but those who did play were aware of an implied prohibition and generally participated under an assumed name.

In Meath, two priests played important roles in the GAA during the 1920s and 1930s. Both were ordained two decades after Bishop Nulty's demise. References to 'Tom Wall', who played with Ardcath and the Meath juniors and was a prominent advocate of the ban at the county convention in 1924 appear frequently in the local press at the time, with inverted commas. He was, in fact, Fr Michael Kilmartin, a curate in Ardcath who became honorary president of Meath GAA in 1925. When Drumconrath won the junior championship in 1928 the team featured two priests, Fr John Irwin and Fr Michael McManus. McManus lined out using the name of a local family, J. Fahy, and he was particularly prominent in press reports. Both he and Kilmartin played for Meath in the Leinster junior championship against Westmeath and McManus went on to feature on the senior team for two years before he had to retire from the game. He was unhappy with playing under an assumed name and asked the new bishop, Dr Mulvany, for permission to play. The bishop was aware that McManus was playing and had turned a blind eye to it, but when permission was requested he had to refuse.[39] McManus never played for the county thereafter but he trained county and club teams, was appointed honorary president of the county committee in 1931 and its chairman for the period 1938–47, the first clergyman to hold the position since Fr Michael Woods in 1888–89.

Many of the younger clergy, such as McManus and Kilmartin, who were ordained long after Dr Nulty's demise, had no recollection of his vehement opposition to the GAA and were willing to assume roles in the organisation. The new bishop, Dr Thomas Mulvany, was also more favourably disposed towards the GAA than his

[38] Cronin et al, *The GAA: a people's history*, p. 248.
[39] For biographical details of the priests see Olive C. Curran, *History of the diocese of Meath* (3 vols, Mullingar, 1995). For Kilmartin see i, pp 97–8; Irwin, i, p. 335; McManus, ii, p. 709. For further detail see Larry Ward, *Drumconrath in the 1800s, a cradle of Irish culture* (Drogheda, 2016), p. 230; O'Brien, *Royal and loyal*, pp. 131–6.

predecessors and threw in the ball for the Feis Cup final in 1932.[40] He also blessed the grounds at the official opening of Cusack Park in Mullingar the following year.[41] The fact that priests were the chairmen of nine county committees in 1932 is proof positive that the clergy were comfortable with the GAA's values and actions. The growing influence of the Catholic Church in Meath GAA and the welcome given to its involvement is evident from the willingness of the county committee to defer games in Navan on the feast of Corpus Christi until after the conclusion of the religious procession.[42] The GAA also played a prominent role in the Eucharistic Congress in 1932, providing 3,000 stewards for the event, with Meath requested to provide 100, while the event director publicly thanked the GAA for its assistance.[43] The practice of bishops throwing in the ball at the start of All-Ireland finals commenced in the 1920s.[44]

The views of the GAA and the church chimed on other issues also, and the GAA was a strong ally of the church in their joint opposition to foreign dances. The leadership of the governments of the new state in the 1920s were, in the words of Joseph Lee, 'instinctively conservative'.[45] It was also an era when the Catholic Church reasserted its moral authority in many areas. The Church was concerned by a number of issues, summarised in a pastoral from the bishops in 1927 as 'the dance hall, the bad book, the motion picture, the indecent fashion in female dress — all of which tend to destroy the virtues characteristic of our race.'[46] In 1925 the Catholic hierarchy issued a statement condemning the dance hall as 'this great evil.' Their opposition to dancing applied to foreign dances, all of which were often subsumed under the broad term of jazz. Irish dances were exempted from condemnation as 'They should be the fashion in Ireland. Irish dances do not make degenerates.'[47] In 1924, the bishop of Meath, Dr Gaughran, issued a Lenten pastoral that received front page coverage in

[40] *MC*, 18 June 1932.
[41] Tom Hunt, 'Cusack Park, Mullingar: the conception, difficult gestation and spectacular delivery of a GAA venue' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, xvii (2006), pp 271–91.
[42] See *MC*, 9 June 1928, 1 June 1929, 21 June 1930.
[43] *MC*, 18 June 1932; Central Council mins, 23 July 1932, 3 Sept. 1932 (CPA, GAA/CC/01/04).
[44] *II,* 23 Sept. 1929; Central Council mins, 20 Aug. 1932; See also Seán Crosson and Dónal McAnallen, '"Croke Park goes plumb crazy": Gaelic games in Pathé newsreels, 1920–1939' in *Media History*, vol. xvii, no. 2 (2011), pp 159–74.
[45] J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–85, politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 174.
[46] Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland*, pp 331, 336.
[47] 'Statement of the archbishops and bishops of Ireland issued at their meeting held in Maynooth, on 6th October 1925' in *Irish Catholic Directory*, 1926 (Dublin, 1926), pp 596–8; p. 597.

the *Meath Chronicle* under the heading: 'Danger of Modern Dancing'. In it he stated that the practice of 'nightly gatherings of young people, of both sexes, at halls and dances, are very dangerous occasions of sin.' He had no censure for 'Our National dances, where the parties stand apart, . . . they are no more than social intercourse. The same cannot be said of the dances known as round and fast dances — and judging by what I hear and read, the latest additions to these are simply revolting.'[48]

Dancing was a hugely popular pastime in the 1920s and sports clubs regularly used dances as fundraisers. They were also social occasions at which players' wives and girlfriends could participate. Whist drives, often followed by a dance, and annual end-of-year presentation dances were an important part of the social aspect of clubs. A total of fourteen dances organised by GAA and other clubs were advertised in the *Meath Chronicle* in the fortnight after Easter 1923. This undoubtedly understates the actual number, as it is probable that smaller, rural clubs refrained from advertising on cost grounds and because their clientele was local. Only one of the advertised dances was described as a céilí. An examination of the advertisements for the dances organised by GAA clubs during the 1920s indicates that the music played at such functions was modern popular music, often condemned as 'jazz'.[49] The Navan Harps GAA club, county champions in 1920–21, engaged the Navan String Orchestra for their dance, which included the belated presentation of the championship medals, as did Athboy hurling club for a similar event in 1924.[50] The Nobber handball club had a 'string band with the latest effects' and throughout the 1920s GAA clubs engaged a variety of local string and melody bands, the most popular being the Navan String Band, the Mullagh String Band, the Oldcastle Melody Band and the Trim Melody Band. Opposition to such music was not confined to the bishops. An advertisement announcing the opening of a new hall in Athboy with music by 'a first class band' drew a rebuke from Patrick O'Growney. He withdrew his consent to his brother Fr Eugene O'Growney's name being associated with the hall on the basis that the main band was a jazz band. 'Jazz and the ideals of the dead do not comport' he declared.[51] There is very little evidence of

[48] *MC*, 8 Mar. 1924.
[49] Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, 'Dancing on the hobs of hell: rural communities in Clare and the Dance Hall Act of 1935' in *New Hibernia Review*, ix, no. 4 (2005), pp 9–18.
[50] For Harps see *MC*, 7 Apr. 1923; for Athboy see *MC*, 16 Feb. 1924.
[51] *MC*, 10 Oct. 1925.

céilís in the early to mid 1920s in Meath, and it was not until a revival of the Gaelic League and the GAA's introduction of rules against foreign dances late in the decade that céilís became more common.

The leadership of the GAA was in agreement with the bishops' views on the unsuitability of foreign dances and in the late 1920s introduced rules to prevent its members attending or supporting them. In 1928 the Clare convention passed a motion that a member of the GAA attending foreign dances should be suspended for six months and permanently excluded for a second offence, but withdrew it at congress.[52] Two years later, Antrim gained approval at congress for a proposal that no unit of the GAA be permitted to organise any entertainment that included foreign dances, with those breaking the rule liable to suspension of at least a month.[53] The 1932 congress went a step further by demanding that clubs permit only dances approved by the Irish Dancing Commission and requiring the organising club to submit the programme of dances to the county committee for approval. The sanction for failing to adhere to the rule was the severest possible: expulsion. The latter regulation was similar to the ban rule and others supported by the GAA during this period, in that it was restrictive, difficult to monitor, and unevenly applied. Like the ban on foreign games it reflected the opposition to outside ideas and influences in the GAA and Irish society after independence.

The GAA and the Gaelic League

The GAA and the Catholic Church also had the support of the Gaelic League in their efforts to promote Irish dances and clamp down on foreign ones. However, the Gaelic League's membership and influence had declined in the immediate aftermath of independence with branch numbers falling from 819 in 1922 to 139 in 1924, but there was a gradual revival from the late 1920s.[54] Efforts were made in the 1920s and 1930s to promote greater co-operation between the GAA and the Gaelic League and the most public manifestation of this was the publication of a joint monthly newspaper, *An Camán*. It was published from 1931 to 1934 and replaced the Gaelic League's *An Claidheamh Soluis* and *Fáinne an Lae*. The genesis of the newspaper

[52] *Irish Examiner*, 9 Apr. 1928.
[53] *Irish Press*, 28 Mar. 1932.
[54] Breandán S. MacAodha, 'Was this a social revolution?' in Seán Ó Tuama (ed.), *The Gaelic League idea* (Dublin, 1993), pp 20-30; p. 29.

was the GAA's dissatisfaction with the level of coverage its games received in the national press, a regular complaint at its annual congress.[55]

However, although both organisations aimed to promote Irish-Ireland ideals they often had an uneasy relationship and Douglas Hyde, president of the League, contrasted the GAA's failure to support Irish songs, dances, music and language with the League's support for Gaelic games (see chapter three). The GAA made a number of token efforts in the 1920s to promote the use of the Irish language but none of them encouraged the use of the spoken word. The address of the recipient and signature of the sender of any official correspondence had to be in Irish, and county committee cheque books were to be printed and signed in Irish.[56] As part of the effort to support native industry all paper used was required to be of Irish manufacture with an Irish watermark.[57] However, those were mere administrative technicalities, which, rather than promoting the use of the Irish language, provided clubs and officials with further grounds for objections and counter-objections. These rules did not help promote the Irish language in any practical manner and were similar to the lip service numerous officials paid to the language by making a few introductory remarks in Irish before continuing in English.

The attitude of the majority of GAA officials to the language can be seen in the occasional efforts to make Irish the medium of communication at annual congress. In 1912 congress passed a motion declaring that from 1917 onwards its deliberations would be conducted in Irish.[58] However, when 1917 arrived the delegates decided this was not feasible and the meeting proceeded in English.[59] In 1930 there was a lengthy debate at the Meath convention on a motion proposing 'That all official correspondence in future be in the Irish language. After the year 1930 all business in connection with the GAA be transacted in Irish.' It appears that the motion was intended to apply to Meath only and initially there was no mention of submitting it to congress. The motion evoked a lengthy and at times acrimonious debate, which, as usual, was conducted almost entirely in English and revealed the impracticality of

[55] See for example Central Council mins, 4 Apr. 1926, 8 Apr. 1928.
[56] Central Council mins, 16 Apr. 1922.
[57] Central Council mins, 4 Apr. 1926.
[58] Central Council mins, 7 Apr. 1912.
[59] Central Council mins, 8 Apr. 1917.

the proposal. The chairman and secretary of the board stated they would have to step down from their positions if the motion was passed at congress, due to their lack of proficiency in Irish. This was despite the fact that the secretary, Seán Giles, was joint treasurer of the Navan branch of the Gaelic League. An amendment proposing that it be implemented from 1932 received only four votes while the original motion attracted only two. Although the Meath convention was unwilling to support the proposal, the motion was nevertheless forwarded to annual congress and included on the agenda.[60] There the proposal received an equally low level of support. Fr Michael Hamilton, the Clare chairman and an Irish enthusiast, speaking in Irish, opposed the motion, as he did not think it would be possible to carry out such a resolution. 'They were all', he stated, 'in favour of Irish but they could not favour the motion.' The president of the association also opposed it, as he believed that it would be unfair to old Gaels who never had the opportunity of learning the language. His proposal that it be withdrawn in favour of a recommendation that as much of the business as possible should be transacted in Irish was approved.[61]

The episode showed clearly that while the GAA at county and national level was in favour of the language in principle, the reality was that members were unwilling to take the practical steps necessary to make it the working language of the GAA. Members evinced a vague commitment to the language so long as it did not require that they learn and use it themselves. In this they were merely reflecting the attitude to the language in society generally. It would be a simplistic analysis to claim that GAA members were hypocritical in their attitude to the language, expressing support while avoiding or deferring action, but Cathal Billings sums up the situation accurately when he remarks 'B'éasca amach is amach an spórt Gaelach a chur chun cinn agus a ghlacadh mar shuaitheantas náisiúntachta ná mar a bhí sé amhlaidh a dhéanamh leis an teanga.'[62] [It was much easier to promote Gaelic sport and to adopt it as a symbol of nationality than it was to do the same regarding the language.] This was particularly true for older members of the GAA and it must also be borne in mind that the GAA's primary focus was always on its games. It had consistently put these to the forefront throughout its existence and the remark, quoted in chapter

[60] *MC*, 1 Feb. 1930.
[61] Central Council mins, 20 Apr. 1930.
[62] Billings, 'Athbheochan na Gaeilge agus an spórt', p. 86.

three, that the GAA consisted of 'Feet Gaels' rather than 'Fíor Gaels' was as valid in the 1930s as it had been in the 1900s.[63]

An incident in 1934 exposed the fault lines between the GAA and the Gaelic League in Meath. In January 1934, the Gaelic League sought, and was granted, permanent representation on the Meath GAA county committee. Its representative, the Gaelic League secretary, Dónal Ó Cuinn, explained that the request was made in order to expose any 'abuses of the Gaelic code'. There was very little debate on the issue and the few GAA representatives who spoke in favour of the proposal saw his role as the promotion of the Irish language and dances among GAA members, whereas the Gaelic League stated explicitly that 'The main object is to expose any irregularities.' Ó Cuinn expanded on his views at the Gaelic League's county convention the following month when stating that 'If a GAA club runs an English dance my business would be to expose it. The same would apply to individual players attending a foreign dance.'[64]

It soon became clear that some members of the GAA saw this as unwarranted interference in their affairs. At the following two county committee meetings Fr Michael McManus, the honorary president of the board, supported by others, criticised the decision to grant representation to the Gaelic League and proposed that it be rescinded. McManus argued that the GAA was competent to run its own affairs without Gaelic League interference. Revealingly, he stated that League involvement 'might make every team illegal here.' This was a tacit admission that clubs were organising foreign dances, and that if the letter of the law was followed many of them would be suspended. A lengthy debate took place during which the chairman requested McManus on three occasions to withdraw his proposal, as he 'did not want anyone to think that the Gaelic League and the GAA could not pull together in Meath.' When McManus refused to relent and threatened to withdraw from the GAA the chairman agreed to allow a vote on the motion, whereupon Ó Cuinn withdrew the

[63] O'Leary, *Gaelic prose in the Irish Free State*, p. 48
[64] *DI*, 10 Feb. 1934.

original application ‘as the decision on the motion will not be unanimous and won’t be any great asset to the Gaelic League or the GAA.’[65]

This episode shows clearly the different priorities of the two bodies. The GAA and the Gaelic League always regarded themselves as kindred bodies in the promotion of Irish culture through the Irish language and Irish dances and games at national and local level. At national level their joint journal *An Camán* propagated their views while in Meath the League presented the GAA with the Feis Cup for football and the O’Growney Cup for hurling. The GAA in turn played the finals of these competitions in conjunction with the League’s annual Feis, and the games drew larger crowds than the Feis alone would, thereby aiding the League’s finances. There was always a crossover in membership between the organisations. In earlier years Seaghan MacNamidhe had been Gaelic League secretary and later GAA chairman, while in 1934 the GAA secretary Seán Giles was joint treasurer of the League and the then chairman and vice-chairman were both members. The controversy reveals that both the GAA and the League tried at all costs to avoid the impression of dissension between the organisations, and the GAA chairman made every effort to preserve the pretence of unity and amity. However, the reality was that the two organisations had different spheres of influence and interest. The GAA always jealously guarded its authority over its games. It might promote the Irish language and dances but these were never its prime focus. The reference by Fr McManus to the risk of teams being deemed illegal due to their holding foreign dances exposed the lip service the GAA often paid to issues such as the ban on foreign games and dances. When the rhetoric of GAA legislators at congress met the reality of the ordinary membership at club level, the ideas and regulations of the former were often diluted.

The GAA and the acquisition of playing fields

Although the GAA had existed for four decades by the 1920s, clubs remained reliant on local sympathetic farmers for access to a playing field in the 1923–34 period. Failure to locate one could be fatal for a club, as without access to a playing field there was no prospect of survival. Farmers were usually unwilling to sell land, so

[65] A detailed account of the controversy can be found in *DI*, 20 Jan. 1934, 10 Feb. 1934, 17 Feb. 1934, 17 Mar. 1934.

fields had to be rented or leased, and because of the short-term nature of these arrangements it was not possible to develop the grounds. The enclosure of grounds in order to collect entrance fees from the viewing public was one of the features of the Victorian sports revolution and it was common in Britain at sports grounds in the late nineteenth century.[66] Without a long-term lease or outright ownership, GAA clubs could not install palings, control crowds or charge spectators an entry fee. Nevertheless, clubs were slow to see that ownership of their grounds was the only long-term solution to the issue and even at national level it was not until 1914, three decades after the formation of the GAA, that the association took ownership of Croke Park. [67]

The various county committees faced a similar problem in sourcing a county ground for their games and the process of acquiring such permanent grounds only began in earnest in the 1920s and 1930s. Some counties did procure grounds earlier, such as the Cork Athletic Grounds (1904) and O'Moore Park in Portlaoise (1917). These were followed by Breffni Park, Cavan (1923), Corrigan Park in Belfast (1926), James Nowlan Park in Kilkenny and Páirc na nGael in Limerick (both 1928), MacHale Park, Castlebar (1931) and Wexford Park (1933).[68] Approximately half of all county grounds were established in the two decades after independence.[69] Meath played most of its inter-county games in Navan but club finals took place at a number of different venues. The county committee had a prolonged dispute with the Royal Meath Agricultural Society (RMAS) over the use of its Showgrounds in Navan for Gaelic games. The crux of the issue was that the County Meath CC held a lease of the grounds, which enabled it to dictate when the GAA was allowed to use them, thus access was always limited during the cricket season, between May and

[66] Mike Cronin and Róisín Higgins, *Places we play: Ireland's sporting heritage* (Cork, 2011), p. 20.
[67] Tim Carey, *Croke Park, a history* (Cork, 2007), pp 34–36.
[68] For Cork Athletic Grounds see *Irish Examiner*, 12 Sept. 1904; for O'Moore Park see Teddy Fennelly, 'A history of Páirc Uí Mhórdha' in http://www.laoisgaa.ie/contentPage/43223/pairc_ui_mhordha (accessed 4 Apr. 2019); for Breffni Park see McGarry*, Eoin O Duffy,* p. 151; for Corrigan Park see http://naomheoinclg.com/club-information/corrigan-park-home-of-st-johns (accessed 4 Apr. 2019); for Nowlan Park see *Kilkenny People*, 1 Sept. 1928; for Páirc na nGael see Dara Challoner, *Gaelic Athletic Association county grounds* (Unpublished Masters thesis, School of Architecture, U.C.D., 2013), p. 10; *Limerick Leader*, 16 Oct. 1926; for MacHale Park see *Western People*, 30 May 1931; for Wexford Park see *An Camán*, 8 Apr. 1933.
[69] Challoner, *Gaelic Athletic Association county grounds*, p. 10.

December.[70] However, by the 1920s the relative strengths of the organisations were changing. The Meath County CC was in a weaker position after the war as many of the elite cricket clubs went into decline and their lease contributed only €30 annually to the RMAS. The GAA's rental to the RMAS was significantly larger and in 1919 it amounted to £135, making it the second biggest contributor, exceeded only by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction.[71] The self-confidence and assertiveness of the GAA is displayed in a forceful, if somewhat inelegantly phrased, letter sent by its secretary, Seán Giles, to the RMAS in July 1922, demanding equivalent terms as was granted to the cricket club:

> In the new Ireland, we are now coming into our own, and want a more satisfactory arrangement about these grounds and equal facilities as the old ascendancy party enjoy now and always from you. Heretofore the GAA has suffered much from your sustained and unchangeable hostility and as compared with the mock Irishmen, who play English games only, you have succeeded so far, in keeping us in a humiliating inferior position, and all the while you have enacted a rack rent of from three to six times more than you get from the Cricket Club, and yet this same Cricket Club actually could excuse (sic) a veto as to when we could have the Grounds, or whether we could at all use them . . . We don't mind telling you we mean to end, once and for all, that bigotry and intolerance forthwith. We seek not for ourselves the ascendancy which was used with such tyranny against us, while you could do it, but we must have equality.[72]

This was a trenchant and threatening letter, emblematic of the GAA's perception of changing times and its own strength in comparison with the Meath County CC and the RMAS. Its use of terms like 'the old ascendancy party', 'rack rent', 'tyranny', 'bigotry' etc. sought to portray the struggle between the two organisations as equivalent to the struggle of the tenant farmer for the land during the land war. This battle was also about land, a plot that the RMAS owned, and to which the GAA demanded access on terms equal to those given to the cricket club. Implied in the assertion that the GAA did not seek the same ascendancy that had been used against it was the unstated threat that the GAA would use it if necessary. The dispute was finally settled the following year when the new GAA chairman, James Reynolds,

[70] For a detailed account of the issue see O'Brien, *The struggle for Páirc Tailteann*.
[71] O'Brien, *The struggle for Páirc Tailteann*, p. 57.
[72] *MC*, 8 July 1922.

negotiated a deal with Colonel Nugent T. Everard, the chairman of the RMAS, that allowed the GAA access to the Showgrounds on practically all Sundays for an annual rent of £60.[73]

Although the arrangement guaranteed the GAA a field for its games it was still a tenant and not the owner. The idea of purchasing its own county grounds, which would make Meath GAA independent of any landlord, had been considered at various times but was ruled out as impractical. It was agreed at the convention in 1909 that £15 should be set aside annually to purchase or rent grounds for the championship finals and semi-finals, but this was not acted on.[74] In 1922, the county secretary, Seán Giles, proposed that the county committee take two-thirds of gate receipts in championship games to fund the purchase of a county ground. He bolstered his argument by asserting that foreign games were gaining adherents in the midlands and that with its own grounds the GAA would be better placed to counteract such games. The clubs opposed his proposal, arguing that it would impact too severely on them.[75]

It was another decade before an opportunity arose to purchase the grounds outright after the RMAS suffered successive years of financial losses. The GAA announced at its 1932 convention that it had purchased ground suitable for a playing field from the Irish Land Commission at the Commons, Navan, for £400 with the help of a grant from the Leinster Council. The prospect of losing its rent from the GAA seems to have convinced the RMAS that there was no point in retaining all the land it owned, and after a series of negotiations a substantial part of it became the property of Meath GAA.[76] It was a complete reversal of fortunes, with the GAA now in charge of grounds where they had been unwelcome tenants for many years. Michael O'Brien in *The Struggle for Páirc Tailteann* claims that the GAA had no intention of developing the Land Commission's field at the Commons and that the announcement of its purchase was a ploy to get a deal from the RMAS, who, in addition to their recent losses, would also lose the GAA rental if the GAA developed its own

[73] O'Brien, *The struggle for Páirc Tailteann*, p. 62.
[74] *MC*, 16 Jan. 1909.
[75] O'Brien, *The struggle for Páirc Tailteann,* p. 57; *MC*, 25 Feb. 1922.
[76] O'Brien, *The struggle for Páirc Tailteann,* pp 65–66 for full details of the protracted process.

facilities.[77] It seems unlikely that the GAA would risk such a large sum of money on the proposed purchase of grounds at the Commons and convince Leinster Council to support them, on the basis that such a move would force the RMAS to offer them a better deal. It is more plausible that the GAA did originally intend to develop the Commons grounds and end its dependence on the RMAS but when the RMAS offered to sell the Showgrounds the GAA availed of the opportunity. The grounds, now officially renamed Páirc Tailteann, were officially opened on 8 September 1935.[78]

While it took Meath county committee almost half a century to get ownership of a ground, it took even longer for clubs to do so. Town teams had more difficulty than rural ones in sourcing playing fields as land was scarce in urban areas. The lack of continuity of clubs in Kells was often due to the scarcity of suitable grounds. In 1908 a campaign was launched there for a public recreation ground but it was another five years before Kells' public park was opened and the Gaelic teams from the town continued to use it until the 1930s. It also hosted a number of county finals.[79] The GAA in Trim utilised a variety of venues before renting the Fair Green, close to the centre of the town from c.1914, from Trim Urban Council, an arrangement that continued for over two decades.[80]

Ciarán Reilly has argued that the use of demesne land was often central to the development of the GAA at a local level, providing instances in counties such as Galway, Limerick, Cork and Kildare.[81] The situation in Meath parallels these findings with a number of instances of the landed class providing grounds. In 1904, Andrew Russell, the secretary of the St Columkille's junior hurlers, thanked the marquess of Headfort for use of his cricket ground at Lisland, Kells, during the winter months. The hurlers again sought permission to use it on Sunday evenings during the winter months in 1905, while in 1908 the Wanderers GAA club obtained

[77] Ibid., p. 66.
[78] *MC*, 14 Sept. 1935.
[79] The 1929, 1930 and 1931 football finals were played there.
[80] Brennan and McCann, *Wielding the ash*, p. 346.
[81] Ciarán Reilly, '"Ill-gotten acres": the GAA and the Irish country house' in Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgeway (eds), *Sport and Leisure in the Irish and British country house* (Dublin, 2019), pp 217-27; p. 220. I am grateful to Dr Reilly for permission to quote his research, originally delivered as a paper at the Sixteenth Annual Historic Houses Conference, Maynooth University, 8 June 2018.

permission to use it. There were conditions attached in the latter case, as the club secretary assured Headfort that 'No match will be played and your intentions with regard to going and coming from the field will be strictly enforced by the Committee'.[82]

Oldcastle regularly used a field for football games and annual sports on William Harman's land at Millbrook outside the town. Harman held all 330 acres in Crossdrum Upper townland from the Naper estate. He was a justice of the peace, a member of the Church of Ireland and a substantial grazier. He permitted the club to place a paling round the field, while it was usually neatly lined, and the club made a point of thanking Harman regularly in the local press.[83]

Nugent T. Everard, owner of 1,200 acres at Randlestown, north of Navan, who was high sheriff and lord lieutenant for the county, supported the local GAA club, Randalstown Éire Óg while it flourished between 1902 and 1905. It is likely that many of the team worked on the estate. Part of Everard's land at Randalstown, known as the Polo Field, hosted a county semi-final between Castletown and Meath Hill in 1903. The venue, a short distance from Gibbstown railway station, was enclosed by a substantial wire paling inside which 'small flags a yard apart, marked the side and end limits'.[84] Everard was also a member of the County Meath Cricket Club and the RMAS but helped broker a deal with the GAA on the use of the Showgrounds in 1923.[85]

Captain R.H. Fowler of Rahinstown House, Enfield provided grounds for a football match in 1899 and Rathmolyon Sports in 1904 and 1905 but it is not clear if these were under GAA auspices. In 1905 and 1906 in Moynalty the GAA secretary, Laurence McMahon, thanked local Catholic landlord, John E. Farrell, for his kindness in 'placing at their disposal an excellent field for football practice' and 'a field that cannot be excelled for GAA football'. The Farrell estate was but a fraction of its original size in 1900 but the family still held land in the village, which was

[82] 'Correspondence from various organisations (or clubs) seeking Lord Headfort's permission to use fields for practice or sporting events', various dates (NLI, Headfort papers, MS 48954/2).
[83] *MC*, 25 Mar. 1905, 23 Sept. 1905.
[84] *MC*, 29 Aug. 1903.
[85] O'Brien, *The struggle for Páirc Tailteann*, pp 62–3.

probably used for Gaelic games. Farrell also made what was described as a generous subscription towards the club in 1905.[86] The countess of Fingall and the Mowbray-Stourtons also provided pitches for the Killeen and Corbalton camogie teams between 1913 and 1915.[87]

Leinster Council was the first of the provincial councils to invest surplus funds in grounds. Bob O'Keeffe, a native of Kilkenny, who spent his early teaching career in Meath and established the Dunboyne hurling club before settling in county Laois, initiated the idea as chairman of the council from 1924. Martin O'Neill joined him as Leinster Council secretary from 1927 and under their leadership the council gave loans to county committees for purchasing grounds.[88] By the end of 1932 the council had advanced £4,500 to its member counties for this purpose, including £400 for Meath's proposed purchase at the Commons.[89] During his term in office as Secretary General of the GAA, from 1929 to 1964, Pádraig Ó Caoimh also encouraged clubs to acquire their own grounds, stating at the opening of Cusack Park in Mullingar that central government and county councils should be compelled by law to equip playing pitches.[90]

For clubs seeking to purchase their own grounds one of the main conduits for acquisition was the Irish Land Commission. The 1881 Land Act established the Commission and it began life as a rent-fixing body. It also became a land-purchase agency with a remit to transfer land from landlords to tenants, which it carried out under the terms of various land acts. Following independence, the Commission continued to oversee land purchase and transfer under the 1923 and 1933 acts.[91] The latter act provided in section 32 (2) for the provision of land for sports fields, parks, pleasure-grounds or play-grounds for the inhabitants of villages, towns or cities.[92]

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[86] Valuation Office, Cancelled Valuation Books, No. 17, Co. Meath, Barony of Lower Kells, Parish of Moynalty, ED Moynalty, 1855–1966; *MC*, 13 May 1905; *DI,* 10 Mar. 1906.
[87] Mary Moran, *A game of our own: camogie's story* (Dublin, 2011), p. 18; *MC*, 22 Mar. 1913.
[88] De Búrca, *Gaelic games in Leinster,* pp 26–8. See also Minutes of Leinster Council convention, 22 Feb. 1931.
[89] Leinster Council Mins., Financial General Report, 4 Mar. 1933.
[90] Hunt 'Cusack Park, Mullingar' p. 286.
[91] For a summary of the role of the Irish Land Commission see Terence Dooley, '*The land for the people': the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), pp 8–10.
[92] *An act to amend generally the Law, Finance and Practice relating to Land Purchase, and in particular to make further and better provision for the execution of the functions of the Judicial and Lay Commissioners of The Land Commission and to provide for the revision of purchase annuities*

However, even before it was enshrined in law, the Land Commission was prepared to 'give favourable consideration to applications from branches of the Gaelic Athletic Association to purchase a field for use as a sports field,' according to Martin Roddy, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Lands and Fisheries in 1931.[93] In 1934 the *Irish Independent* issued a supplement to mark the golden jubilee of the foundation of the GAA and an article claimed that 'members of the GAA have been mainly responsible for securing the insertion of a clause in the Land Acts which enables the Land Commission to set aside in any parish a site for an athletic park or sportsground to be held by local trustees'.[94]

During the 1930s only a handful of clubs in Meath availed of the opportunity to acquire land in this manner. The small number of applications may have been due to a number of factors. Clubs with an accommodating landowner who gave them regular access to grounds for free, or for a nominal sum, had no incentive to purchase a field that involved a substantial financial outlay in developing the ground, in addition to the annual repayments to the Land Commission. Castletown, for example, paid only £1 in rental for a playing field in 1932, whereas purchasing a field would require a much larger investment.[95] The period from 1932 to the outbreak of World War II was marked by worldwide depression, and in Ireland an economic war with Britain. It was a time when farmers' incomes declined and it was an era when clubs were unlikely to embark on new ventures that could have serious financial implications.

Only four Meath clubs availed of Land Commission assistance to purchase grounds in the 1930s: Killyon, Skryne, Kilskyre and Trim. In 1932 the Land Commission divided the Toppin estate and granted over five acres to the Killyon club, which became the first club in Meath to gain a permanent home from the Land Commission.[96] The official opening took place on 15 August 1934 with the vice-chairman of the county committee, Thomas Flood, performing the opening ceremony. There seems to have been an element of informality in many of the

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and certain other annual payments and for the funding of arrears thereof, and to provide for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid. [13 Oct. 1933], no. 38/1933.

[93] *Dáil Debates*, 26 Mar. 1931, vol. 37, 2170.

[94] *Irish Independent, Gaelic Athletic Association golden jubilee souvenir*, p. 50.

[95] Barbara and Colm Smyth, *100 Years of Castletown GFC,* p. 74.

[96] Marjarie Gilsenan and Úna Ward (eds), *Killyon: a window on the past* (Mullingar, n.d.), p. 96.

applications for land. Terence Dooley notes that 'many acquisition cases were initiated . . . by writing to the Land Commission or simply calling to the nearest Commission office'.[97] A process similar to this led to Killyon acquiring its ground. The club secretary, Michael Farrell, wrote a formal application for a plot of land suitable for a hurling pitch, posted it in Trim, and received an immediate visit from the commissioner in charge, a Mr Browne, who declared himself delighted to accede to the request.[98] Skryne officially opened their playing fields in September 1937 following the receipt of almost seven acres during the division of the Henry B. Wilson-Slater estate.[99] When Trim lost their access to the Fair Green in 1936, a number of club officers sought land from the Land Commission and were rewarded with ten acres from Nevill's estate in Manorlands, while before the end of the decade Kilskyre acquired close to six acres from the McClelland and Farrell estates.[100] When GAA clubs acquired grounds new deeds were drawn up and three trustees were appointed to safeguard the GAA's interest in the properties.[101] For club grounds the trustees were prominent GAA officials chosen by the relevant county committee. In the 1930s those were usually John Newman, county chairman, Thomas Flood, the vice-chairman and Joe Curran, Meath's long-serving representative on the Leinster Council.

It was not until the 1950s that other clubs took the longer view that grounds of their own were preferable to rented or leased property and began to acquire land from the Land Commission. As a result between April 1937 and December 1978 a total of 1,936 acres was allocated to 308 clubs, averaging out at six acres per club. According to P.J. Sammon, a long-serving official in the Land Commission, the policy was that grounds granted by the commission should be utilised for all games and be open to all organisations promoting sport and athletics. However, in areas where the only sporting organisation was the GAA, the allotment was made for those games only, and Sammon declared that the majority of sports fields were allotted for

[97] Dooley, *'The land for the people'*, p. 67.
[98] Killyon GAA grounds file (GAA, National Financial Management Committee, Croke Park); 'Killyon's past' in *Royal County, Meath GAA yearbook*, 1986, pp. 35–7.
[99] Skryne GFC grounds file (GAA, National Financial Management Committee, Croke Park); Skryne GFC, *Souvenir Programme*, 1 July 1973.
[100] Kilskyre GAA grounds file (GAA, National Financial Management Committee, Croke Park); Trim GAA grounds file (GAA, National Financial Management Committee, Croke Park); Brennan and McCann, *Wielding the ash*, p. 348
[101] Leinster Council mins., 22 Feb. 1931.

Gaelic games.[102] Development of the grounds was the responsibility of the clubs acquiring them, which often involved drainage, levelling, erection of paling, the provision of goalposts and changing facilities.

The opening and naming of GAA grounds provided an opportunity for the organisation to display and reaffirm its values. The official opening of the Mullingar and Navan grounds had a number of common features. The names were chosen to emphasise the link with the GAA's or Ireland's past or to honour the contribution of individuals to the organisation. Thus, Mullingar was named Cusack Park in honour of the GAA's founder, Michael Cusack, while in Meath, Páirc Tailteann referred to the Aonach Tailteann, a sporting and religious gathering at Tailteann in ancient times in honour of Queen Tailte. Joe Curran, the former captain of Castletown, and Meath's representative on Leinster Council, was credited with proposing the name.[103] His inspiration may have been the Tailteann games held in 1924, 1928 and 1932, based mainly in Croke Park, which had been presented as a revival of this ancient custom, so the name was common currency when the purchase of the Showgrounds was arranged. Curran also lived within a few miles of where many believed the original games were held, Teltown, Oristown near Kells.

The increasing participation of Catholic clergy in the GAA in the 1920s and 1930s was on display at ground openings. Dr Thomas Mulvany, the bishop of Meath, performed the official opening and blessing of Cusack Park in Mullingar and declared that the GAA 'was not afraid or ashamed to profess or proclaim their belief that God rules in the playground as well as in the busy market and in the Church.'[104] The bishop was not present at the opening of Páirc Tailteann, but he sent a financial contribution and a congratulatory note that was read to the attendance. There was a strong representation of clergy on the main platform, including Fr J.H. Gilmartin of Navan, who performed the blessing, Fr Michael McManus who became chairman of the county committee in 1938 and Dr Kyne, vice-rector of the Irish College in Rome and a future bishop of the diocese. Their presence symbolised the close relationship

[102] Patrick J. Sammon, *In the Land Commission* (Dublin, 1997), pp 138, 261.
[103] *MC*, 7 Sept. 1935.
[104] Hunt, 'Cusack Park, Mullingar', p. 285.

that had developed between the GAA and the Catholic Church after the establishment of the Free State.

Mike Cronin, in an analysis of the naming of a sample of eighty-eight grounds from all thirty-two counties, concluded that the GAA 'has embraced the individual when naming its grounds, the majority of whom are figures from the Irish revolutionary period.'[105] This is a sweeping generalisation based on the fact that from his sample, thirty-three percent of grounds were named after political figures and of those just over half commemorated figures active during the 1916–22 period. Thus, only about sixteen percent of his total sample celebrates 'a violent republican past.' A much larger proportion of the grounds sampled, forty-six percent, are named after local or national GAA figures or have a religious connotation. In addition, Cronin is also inaccurate in his description of some of the personalities after whom grounds are named. Leo Casey Park in Ballymahon (Longford) is named after the poet John Keegan Casey, better known as Leo, and not a local GAA official, while Dr Cullen Park in Carlow is named after Dr Matthew Cullen, the bishop of Kildare and Leighlin (1927–1936), and not Cardinal Paul Cullen, the archbishop of Dublin (1852–78), as Cronin asserts.

In Meath, none of the four local grounds or the county ground established during the 1930s represent the republican tradition. Skryne named its field in honour of Fr Michael McManus, the local Catholic curate from 1931 to 1935 who trained the club team and was responsible for acquiring the grounds. The Trim club named its field St Loman's Park in remembrance of a bishop from the area associated with St Patrick. The Killyon and Kilskyre grounds were unnamed, while as outlined above, Páirc Tailteann's name came from a period in ancient Irish history. This pattern of honouring local GAA or religious figures continued as more Meath clubs acquired grounds in subsequent decades. An analysis of all current grounds (2019) in the county reinforces the view that the majority of them are named after saints or local GAA personalities, rather than republican figures from the revolutionary era (see appendices nine and ten). Of the sixty-four existing grounds twenty-one are not formally named, eleven are named after saints, and ten carry the name of former club

[105] Mike Cronin, 'Enshrined in blood, the naming of Gaelic Athletic Association grounds and clubs' in *The Sports Historian*, xviii, no. 1 (1998), pp 90–104; p. 96.

officials or players. Between them, these three categories account for two-thirds of the grounds. The remainder are named after the club itself or a townland name, or persons who donated the grounds. Three priests are honoured: Fr McManus, in Skryne, referred to previously; Fr Tully, in Seneschalstown, a native of the parish and GAA county chairman from 1949 to 1968; and Fr Plunkett in Kildalkey. The grounds in Bohermeen are named after Seán Newman, Bohermeen captain and county chairman from 1922 to 1939; Donnelly-Loughran Memorial Park in Kilmessan honours two of its most renowned players, Tony Donnelly and Joey Loughran; the Ratoath grounds recall Seán Eiffe, a club player and garda shot during an armed raid in 2001. Only two grounds have links to the republican tradition as defined by Cronin. The grounds of the Wolfe Tones club in Kilberry were known as Páirc an Phiarsaigh (Pearse Park) until 1990 when they were renamed Páirc Mhic Eoin in memory of former club official, Joe McKeown, and the Kilskyre club named its grounds after Brian O'Higgins, who was present in the GPO during the 1916 Rising.[106] The latter choice, however, may also be due to the fact that he was a co-founder of the hurling club, as well as a Gaelic League activist and teacher in the area. The only other ground with a link to an earlier episode in Irish history is Páirc Emmet in Drumbaragh, named after the leader of the 1803 rebellion in Dublin. The evidence from Meath suggests that very few grounds are 'enshrined in blood' and that local considerations dictated the naming process. It is likely that an analysis of other counties would give a similar result, and that Cronin overstates the importance given to figures from the revolutionary era in the naming of GAA grounds.

Conclusion

One of the most potent symbols of the new state was the placement of unarmed gardaí in towns and villages throughout the country from 1923. The Garda Commissioner, Eoin O'Duffy, encouraged the gardaí to integrate into their new communities and their involvement in GAA clubs was of mutual benefit to the gardaí and the clubs. It allowed gardaí to mix with the community on an informal basis and clubs who were often losing personnel to emigration welcomed players and administrators from the new force. The welcome was not universal, however, with opposition arising in the main from clubs or counties who resented the strengthening

[106] Cumann Bhulf Tón CLG, *Ath-oscailt agus ath-ainmniú Páirc Mhic Eoin, Cill Bearra,* 27 May 1990 (in possession of Brendan Cummins, Meath GAA); *DI*, 10 May 1974.

of their opponents by the inclusion of gardaí. This can seen in the antipathy towards the success of the Erin's Own hurling club in Kells, while Dónal McAnallen refers to 'festering resentment' in many northern counties over the posting of star garda players to Monaghan. There was an undercurrent of opposition on political grounds also, as O'Duffy's enemies believed he was using his position to strengthen his own county, Monaghan, while some opponents of the treaty regarded the gardaí as being too closely affiliated with the government of the day. Further research at county level would help to shed more light on this issue.

The opposition of the Catholic clergy to the GAA following the bitter rift at the time of the Parnell split left a long legacy and resulted in the subsequent absence of clerical involvement in the GAA in Meath into the early decades of the twentieth century. This only began to change in the 1920s, and was in strong contrast to the position in many other counties, as priests were chairmen in nine counties in 1934. Thomas Mulvany, appointed bishop of the diocese of Meath in 1929, was more favourably disposed towards the GAA than his predecessors, but even before his appointment there were signs of a closer relationship between the GAA and the church. The GAA's increasingly restrictive policy against foreign games, dancing and culture complemented the bishops' pastorals opposing dancing, alcohol and imported foreign literature. There were similarities in the agendas of both organisations in wishing to limit access to external influences and, in the words of Paul Rouse, the ban on foreign games and dances came to 'epitomize the introspective homogeneity of culture and society in independent Ireland.'[107]

The Gaelic League and the GAA, both formed in the late nineteenth century, also co-operated in promoting Irish games, language and dance and often had members in common. The GAA made some efforts to promote the Irish language, but an emphasis on its technical administrative aspects, such as listing teams, did little to advance the language as a living, spoken one. However, the organisations had different priorities, and while the GAA at official level was supportive of the Gaelic League's aims, its primary focus was on its games and it would brook no

[107] Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland', p. 359.

interference on the matter, as evidenced by the failure of the Gaelic League to gain representation on the Meath GAA county committee.

From the 1920s onwards it was the policy of most county committees, with the support of the provincial councils, to gain ownership of their own grounds. Meath achieved this in 1933, after thirty years of conflict with the RMAS and the County Meath CC, when it gained ownership of Páirc Tailteann. The long process of each club owning its own grounds began in Meath in the 1930s and the Irish Land Commission was often the source of the land; four Meath clubs acquired grounds from the Commission in the 1930s. This was to prove a successful template for many other clubs in subsequent decades. Clubs named their grounds to assert their identity but the claim that the GAA used the process to identify with personalities from the revolutionary period of Irish history, such as Pearse, Casement and Mac Diarmada, overstates the situation. In Meath only a tiny minority of grounds reflect this aspect of Irish history and it is likely that wider research in other counties would replicate this.

Conclusion

By 1934 the GAA was the strongest sporting organisation nationally and in county Meath. It had survived during a period of major political and social upheaval that brought Ireland to independence as the Free State. In addition to negotiating the challenges that these events posed, the GAA had to develop and operate as a sporting body. From the beginning, the GAA made a number of decisions that helped it endure. It played its games on Sundays, the day of rest and recreation for the farmer and rural labourer, the urban shop assistant and clerk. It based its clubs on the Catholic parish and established a provincial and All-Ireland championship based on the county structure. It also gained the support of the three pillars of nationalist Ireland, through the appointment of Michael Davitt of the Land League, Charles Stewart Parnell of the IPP and Archbishop Croke of Cashel as its patrons.

The public support given to the GAA in its formative years by Croke and the central role of clergy in the organisation from the 1930s masks a more complex relationship in the intervening period. Not all bishops shared Croke's enthusiasm for the GAA and this was particularly true in Meath. Bishop Nulty and his clergy opposed the GAA in Meath from the late 1880s on the basis that games played outside a club's parish led to intemperance, to players missing Mass and to the danger of involvement in secret societies. This opposition decimated the GAA in the county by 1890, even before the Parnell split. The rift between the GAA and the Church was exacerbated by Nulty's prominent public role on the anti-Parnellite side and the ensuing division put a brake on the GAA's progress. However, in contrast to other counties, the rupture between the Catholic Church and the GAA in Meath left a long legacy and resulted in the subsequent absence of Catholic priests from the association until the 1920s. Whereas many other counties had Catholic priests as chairmen of their county committees, only one priest was involved in the GAA in Meath at county committee level before independence. During 1934, the fiftieth anniversary of the GAA's foundation, priests chaired nine county committees and others had clerical chairmen in the years prior to 1934, but Meath had to wait until 1938 before Fr Michael McManus became the first to hold the position since Fr Michael Woods in 1888-89.

In the aftermath of independence the views of the GAA and the Catholic Church

converged on a number of issues and Catholic clergy became more involved in the GAA. The GAA's ban on foreign games chimed with the philosophy of a church and a state that was protective of Irish culture and industry from what were seen as malign outside, mainly English, influences. The GAA's increasingly restrictive policy against what it categorised as foreign games, dancing and culture complemented the bishops' pastorals opposing dancing, alcohol and imported foreign literature and by the time the GAA celebrated its golden jubilee in 1934 it fitted comfortably into the status quo of the new state.

In addition to the lack of church support, a further reason for the decline of the GAA in the late 1880s was the level of ambiguity in the few playing rules that existed and the different interpretation of these rules by referees. This led to regular arguments over scores and constant recourse to objections by defeated teams. In the mid 1890s Richard Blake, on his appointment as Meath chairman and later as Central Council secretary, adopted a two-pronged approach in his efforts to revive the GAA. He combined reform of the playing rules with directing the GAA onto a non-political path, achieving major success in the former and some progress in the latter. The changes in the playing rules were aimed at clarifying the vague and imprecise existing rules, for example empowering referees to dismiss players who engaged in dangerous play. Prior to his appointment as Central Council secretary Blake implemented many of the proposed rule changes in Meath. While the changes brought greater certainty and clarity to the rules it can be argued that this had potential dangers, because if each county adopted its own set of rules the whole project of standardising the rules nationally would have been placed in jeopardy. Cusack and Davin had endeavoured to standardise the rules of football and hurling and the Victorian sporting revolution, of which the GAA was a part, prized uniformity of rules and centralised control.

Blake and others in the organisation realised the damage that IRB influence and the Parnell split did to the GAA and he was successful in introducing rules to make it a non-sectarian and non-political, games-oriented organisation. However, in the decade after Blake's removal the growth of the Gaelic League brought an influx of new administrators into the GAA and it moved away from Blake's vision of a purely sporting and strictly non-political organisation, to an association committed once

again to a nationalist agenda and opposed to foreign games. Blake declined to continue as Meath chairman after 1902, probably due to disagreement with these changes. As an avid cricketer and supporter of other sports he would have opposed the ban on these games introduced in 1904. Although he had no further involvement in the GAA, Blake set the template for the modern GAA, both in terms of its playing rules and its political approach. He would have been more at home in the present organisation than he was in the early 1900s.

When the GAA declined in the late 1890s and early 1900s, other sports attracted the attention of the playing population. Cricket prospered in Meath as the game gradually overtook the GAA, reaching its zenith in 1901 when there were over fifty rural clubs, dominated by farmers and agricultural labourers who played on Sundays. The findings of this thesis substantiate those of Hunt in Westmeath, showing that cricket was much more popular than is generally accepted. However, cricket failed to maintain its prominent position in the sporting life of Meath. With the revival of the GAA and the growing influence of the Gaelic League, the game was regularly assailed in the press as a foreign one, played by 'West Britons' who were aping the manners and customs of England. The growth in cricket clubs when the GAA was weak, and their decline when the GAA revived, particularly after 1905 when the ban rule was operative, suggests that the chief causes of the game's decline in Meath was the ban rule and the prevalence of negative publicity regarding cricket. However, cricket also had its own deficiencies; with no central organising body, clubs were left to their own devices in organising games. This was rectified when cricket experienced a revival in the county in the 1920s and it helped sustain the game for a couple of decades despite the fact that the GAA was much stronger than it had been from 1895 to 1905. Cricket prospered only in areas where there was an earlier tradition of the game and a weak GAA structure. The Kentstown region is the best exemplar of this; cricket had strong roots in the area, it was played among the school pupils, and GAA clubs were often revived but rarely survived until the formation of the Seneschalstown club in 1932.

New hurling clubs were crucial in the revival of the GAA in Meath; in 1900, there were no hurling clubs but five years later there were ten. The local branch of the Gaelic League inspired the formation of at least six of these, mirroring developments

in other counties, such as Antrim and Dublin. There was always a crossover in membership between the two organisations but their relative strength varied in Meath. In the early 1900s, the League was the stronger of the two as a weakened GAA attempted to re-establish itself, but in subsequent years interest in, and membership of the League declined, whereas the number of GAA clubs expanded. The organisations co-operated in Meath with the League presenting trophies for football and hurling competitions, while at national level the organisations jointly published the journal *An Camán* in the early 1930s. However, although they viewed themselves as sister organisations, their relationship was at times a fractious one. Douglas Hyde criticised the GAA for failing to support the League's aims to the same extent that the League supported the GAA's, but the reality was that the two organisations had a different focus. Efforts to conduct business in Irish at annual congress were unsuccessful and when the Gaelic League sought representation on the Meath GAA county committee to monitor and expose GAA clubs promoting foreign dances there was strong opposition to the proposal. The GAA always jealously guarded its authority over its games. It might promote the Irish language and dances but these were never its prime focus.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the GAA was able to use its influence in the new state to its advantage. One of the GAA's most successful campaigns was to persuade the Irish Land Commission to provide grounds for its clubs throughout the country. Many of the new GAA grounds were carved out of former estates as the Commission redistributed them in the post-independence period. In the 1920s, there were some in the GAA, such as the secretary of the Ulster Council, B.C. Fay, who believed that the GAA's lack of playing facilities was exacerbated by the fact that 'those who own their demesnes have never been too anxious to place their ill-gotten acres at the service of the "mere Irish".'[1] However, as Ciarán Reilly has shown, the use of demesne land was important to the development of the GAA in many areas and this thesis has also shown that landlords facilitated the GAA in Meath with access to land for games. The marquess of Headfort, the Nugent-Everards of Randalstown, the Harmans in Oldcastle and the Fowlers of Rahinstown House all permitted Gaelic games on their land at various times, while the countess of Fingall and the Mowbray-

[1] Reilly, '"Ill-gotten acres": the GAA and the Irish country house', p. 218.

Stourtons also provided pitches for the Killeen and Corbalton camogie teams. Four Meath clubs acquired grounds from the Irish Land Commission in the 1930s, but many others followed in subsequent years. Currently, sixty-four Meath clubs own their grounds, many of them acquired from the Commission. Although Mike Cronin has asserted that the naming of GAA grounds reflects the organisation's partiality for honouring figures from the Irish revolutionary period, an analysis of current Meath GAA grounds shows that in the main, local considerations dictated the naming process. Thus, local saints' names, and the names of GAA officials and players dominate. Further research in other counties would probably replicate this finding.

In the decades after independence, the GAA emphasised the role it had played in the struggle for freedom and highlighted its members' involvement in the 1916 Rising and its role in events such as Gaelic Sunday and Bloody Sunday. However, this view was a simplification of the period. Not all in the GAA supported the radical stances taken by some of the organisation's leadership and the GAA reflected the evolution in public opinion in Ireland during this period. Despite the GAA's ban on members of the British army playing Gaelic games and its opposition to recruitment during World War I, some of its members enlisted and fought in the conflict. This thesis has identified a significant number of prominent Meath GAA players who enlisted and fought, even though the national leadership and Meath's chairman, Seaghan MacNamidhe, were vehemently opposed to recruitment. The GAA's leadership also originally disassociated itself from the Rising, in line with the majority of nationalist opinion, but as the views of the population changed so did those of the GAA. From 1917 onwards the republican element in the GAA became more prominent at national level and in Meath. In 1919 Meath was the only county to support unambiguously Central Council's proposal to suspend any member who had taken the oath of allegiance as part of their employment, and Seán Boylan and Pádraig de Búrca were the main proponents of this stance. Between them they held the chairmanship of the county committee from 1919 to 1922 and republican activists dominated the upper echelons of Meath GAA at this period.

However, the GAA took its strongest stands on issues that threatened its games. It strenuously opposed the imposition of an entertainment tax in 1916, refused to apply for permits to stage matches in July 1918, and then organised a series of games

without government permission on Gaelic Sunday in August 1918. Gaelic Sunday represented the GAA's most explicit anti-government action during this period, but it occurred because of a real threat to the association's prime concern, the games. As Diarmaid Ferriter has noted, 'it could be contended that this act of rebellion was just as much about sport as politics.'[2]

The revolutionary events of the period 1912–23 had a significant impact on the GAA. Many individuals and certain clubs were involved in the Irish Volunteers, the Easter Rising and in the War of Independence but there were many more in the GAA who did not participate in these events. Men like Pádraig de Búrca and Seán Boylan in Meath could from time to time persuade the association to adopt a strong republican position, but the ordinary membership did not necessarily follow their lead. The decision to actively participate in the struggle for independence was probably motivated by a variety of factors, but it is unlikely that GAA membership was a determining one. Commenting on GAA involvement in the push for independence after 1916, Vincent Comerford concludes that its record was 'as mixed and patchy as that of the nationalist collectivity in general.'[3]

Breandán Ó hEithir encapsulates the meaning of the GAA to its ordinary member in two anecdotes in his personal account of the GAA in *Over the bar*. One is of a Meath delegate who arrives at a county committee meeting in Navan drenched to the skin, having cycled thirteen miles in the rain. When the meeting commenced water began dripping from the delegate onto the table, impeding the business that was being conducted. The meeting was temporarily suspended so that the saturated delegate could be brought to the nearby Spicer's bakery where he stood in front of one of the ovens until dry, before the meeting continued. At the conclusion of business, he mounted his bicycle and again cycled the thirteen miles home in the rain.[4] The second recalls Bill Doonan, who played for Cavan in the 1947 All-Ireland final in the Polo Grounds in New York. In 1943, Doonan was a radio-operator with the Allies in Southern Italy. One Sunday in September he went missing before being found up a tree on the side of a steep hill with his radio to his ear. After much effort he had

[2] Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, p. 255.
[3] Comerford, *Ireland*, p. 224.
[4] Breandán Ó hEithir, *Over the bar* (Dublin, 1991 [1984]), p. 7.

managed to tune in to the commentary of the All-Ireland football final between Cavan and Roscommon from Croke Park.[5] These two men and many ordinary members or supporters who flocked to games from the foundation of the GAA and who attended All-Ireland finals in increasing numbers from the 1900s did not travel long distances by bicycle, train and car for political purposes but for the enjoyment of the game, the chance to escape the humdrum demands of daily life, and the opportunity to meet and socialise with others of similar interests. For them the GAA was primarily about the games, not politics.

[5] Ibid., pp 215–6.

Appendix 1

Details of Meath GAA clubs compiled by RIC Crime Branch Special, 1890

No	Name of Club	Names of Officers	Position	Nos.	
1	Athboy Davitts	Thomas Kiernan	Capt	60	
		Jas. Casserley	Pres.		
		Edwd. Matthews	Secry		
2	Ballivor Sir Chas Russells	Pat Gavigan	Capt.	40	
		Pat. Ryan	V.C.		
		Thos. Ryan	Treas		
3	Dunshaughlin St. Seachnalls	Chr. Tallon	Capt.	40	
		Pat. Brien	Prest.		
		Pat King	Secry		
		L.J. Canning	Treas		
4	St Patricks of Kilmessan	Henry Coady	Capt.	50	
		L.S.J. Tombe	Secry.		
		Henry Doran	Treas		
5	Warrenstowns of Warrenstown	Pat. Fox	Capt.	45	
		Ml. Kenny	Secry.		
		Jas. Cluskey	Treas.		
6	Kilbeg Volunteers	M. Tevlin	Capt.	40	IRB
		Revd. S. Kelly CC	Prest.		
		Wm O Brien	Secry.		
		John Gaffney	Treas.		
7	Moynalty Owen Roes	J Reilly	Capt.	40	
		M Plunkett	Pres		
		P Carolan	Secretary		
		M McCabe	Treasurer.		
8	Wm O'Briens Navan	Jas Byrne	Capt.	87	
		John Morgan	Secretary		IRB
		Chas Pentony	Treasurer		IRB
9	Pierce Mahony's of Navan	John Elliot	Capt.	93	
		J or D Lowe	Secretary		

		F Fox	Treasurer		
10	Round Towers Donaghmore	T Fahy	Capt.	60	
		Chris Murray	Secretary		
		M Meleady	Treasurer		
11	Ardbracken St Ultans	T Wall	Capt.	200	
		Pat Keane	Treasurer		
		Chr Commons	Secretary		
12	Bohermeen Geraldines	Jas Mallon	Capt.	53	
		Thos Mallin	Secr		
		Jas Donnelly	Treas.		
13	The Donecarneys of Donecarney	W McCrory [?]	Capt.	45	
		Michael Drew	Presd.		IRB
		John Woods	Secr		IRB
		Andrew Murphy	Treas.		IRB
	Total			930*	

* Note: The total given on the file is 930 but the actual total when all clubs are added is 853.

Source: CBS, 26 Jan. 1891 (NAI, 2452/S).

Appendix 2
Meath GAA Bye Laws 1894 drawn up by Richard T. Blake

1. Side lines, goal lines, and 40 yards lines shall be marked with whitewash and also by flags at corners, half way and 40 yards.
2. Side lines and goal lines shall be at least five yards from ropes or spectators enclosure and no pegs or other means liable to injure players shall be used in defining these lines.
3. The size of a match ball shall be a No. 6.
4. In championship matches and tournaments umpires shall be neutral and shall act as linesmen only. Their sole duty subject to the referee's decision shall be to decide when the ball is out of play and which side is entitled to the throw in. They shall be provided with flags to indicate the spot where the ball crosses the line.
5. There shall be only one goal umpire at each end, who shall be neutral, not two as heretofore, for this only leads to disputes.
6. The goal posts shall not exceed 8 feet in height, and crossbars only must be used, not tapes. The point posts shall not be less than 16 feet high, and ought to be as high as possible.
7. A goal or point cannot be scored until the whole ball has crossed over the goal line; and the ball is in play until the whole ball has crossed over the goal or side line.
8. The vicious practice of "going for the man" shall be deemed foul, and no player shall be in any way interfered with except in the act of kicking or playing the ball.
9. No player once ordered off the ground by the referee shall under any circumstances be again allowed to join in the game. The ridiculous custom of giving offenders a couple of minutes rest shall be discontinued. The referee shall award a free kick, and not merely hop the ball, for all breaches of the rules. In the event of rough or dangerous play, including pushing from behind, butting with the head and tripping, catching, holding, jumping on or threatening a player, the referee shall caution the offender; or in the case of violent conduct or improper language, without any previous caution the referee shall at once order the offender off the ground and report him to the County Board.
10. Missing
11. The goalkeeper shall kick out the ball from any part of a 7 yards square in front of goal, having the goal posts at adjacent corners.
12. "Carrying" shall be taking more than three steps while holding the ball.
13. Should a player holding the ball be prevented from kicking it by a scrimmage, the referee shall blow the whistle and hop the ball; but should the player holding the ball be collared or held, the referee shall award his side a free kick.

14. Players shall particularly note that the ball is in play till the whistle is blown; therefore, in the case of an appeal for any breach of the rules, players ceasing play do so at their own risk, as any scores made before the whistle sounds shall be perfectly valid in the event of appeal being disallowed.
15. All clubs shall furnish a list of their players to the County Secretary; and no player shall be allowed to compete in the championship who has not played at least one match with his club previously.
16. Throwing the ball against the ground with both hands while running is illegal; but the player catching the ball may start his run by throwing the ball against the ground once with both hands.
17. In championship matches all players shall wear their club colours.
18. Appeals to County Committee shall be accompanied by 5s, to be forfeited in case the appeal is considered frivolous.
19. Players are requested to note the wording of the new 40 yards rule:– 'If a ball that otherwise would not have crossed the line be driven over the crossbar, or over any part of the goal line outside the goal posts by a player whose goal line it is, the opposite side shall have a free kick 40 yards out from the point where the ball crossed' – viz. directly opposite where the ball was driven out.

Source: *Drogheda Argus*, 26 May 1894.

Appendix 3
Gaelic Football Clubs in Meath, 1885–1900

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Ardagh Garryowens				•	•											
Ardbraccan St Ultans			•	•	•	•				•						
Ardcath O'Mahonys				•	•											
Ardcath Sarsfields				•												
Ardcath Slashers											•	•	•	•		
Ashbourne Faughs				•	•											
Athboy Dalgais				•	•						•			•		
Athboy Wolfe Tones														•		
Athboy Sarsfields					•											
Ballina, Tara			•	•	•											
Ballinlough Wolfe Tones											•		•			
Ballivor Charles Russells						•	•	•								
Ballivor Emmets										•	•	•				
Barley Hill						•							•			
Batterstown														•		
Batterstown Bards				•	•			•								
Batterstown Sunbursts				•												

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Bective					•			•								
Bective Harps													•	•		
Bective Home Rulers				•												
Bective Volunteers				•	•											
Bellewstown Crockafothas			•	•	•											
Bellewstown Hilltown Stars												•				
Bellewstown Stars												•				
Black Bull			•													
Bohermeen Geraldines				•	•	•		•		•	•		•			•
Boyne Hill				•	•											
Breemount Inisfáils					•								•	•	•	
Butterstream Wolfe Tones					•					•						
Carlanstown Erin's Own									•							
Carlanstown St Patricks																•
Carnaross Sons of Erin													•			
Carnaross St Kierans			•		•	•				•		•	•	•		•
Castletown Emmets																•
Castletown O'Connells				•	•											

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Clonee William O'Briens				•	•											
Clonee Tolka Rovers																•
Coalpits Henry Grattans, Slane			•	•												
Corballis		•	•	•												
Corbertstown Home Rulers							•									
Cortown Sarsfields												•				
Crossakiel Milesians			•	•	•											
Crossakiel Wolfe Tones										•						
Curraha Davitts				•	•	•										
Curraghtown Harringtons										•	•	•				
Cushenstown St Malachys					•											
Danestown										•						
Derrylangan														•		
Dogstown										•						
Donaghmore Round Towers				•	•	•						•	•			
Donaghpatrick Clan na Gael				•	•											
Donacarney Parnells		•	•	•	•	•	•									
Donore			•	•	•			•	•							
Dowdstown		•	•	•												

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Dowth JB O'Reillys			•													
Drogheda Owen Roes											•	•	•	•	•	
Drumconrath Brian Borus			•	•	•	•						•	•	•		•
Drumree							•	•								
Duleek Shamrocks	•		•	•	•			•				•				
Dunboyne Volunteers			•	•	•						•					
Dunderry John Martins				•	•			•	•	•	•				•	
Dunshaughlin St Seachnalls		•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Enfield													•			
Fairyhouse Gaels				•												
Fairyhouse Home Rulers				•												
Fraine										•						
Girley Shamrocks				•	•					•	•					
Gormanlough Érin go Brach											•	•	•			
Gormanston United Stars											•	•	•			
Grange Campaigners				•										•		
Grange, Dunsany							•									
Grange Geraldines			•	•	•							•		•		

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Grange Stars of Érin				•	•											
Grangegeeth		•	•	•							•					•
Grangegeeth Independents			•													
Grangegeeth Sons Erin			•													
Hatchet Independents												•	•			
Hatchet, St Patricks							•	•			•					
Johnstown Faugh a Ballagh				•	•						•		•			
Julianstown Stars & Stripes			•	•	•						•		•			
Kells Campaigners		•	•	•	•	•	•			•						
Kells Columcilles										•	•					
Kells Commercials												•				
Kells Emmets										•	•					
Kells FC															•	•
Kells Harps & Shamrock										•	•		•			
Kells Home Rulers			•	•	•											
Kells Round Towers															•	•
Kells Young Ireland												•				
Kentstown Emmets				•	•											

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Kilberry St Johns				•												
Kilbeg Volunteers			•	•	•				•							
Kilbride											•					
Kilcarne									•							
Kildalkey											•					
Kildalkey O'Neills															•	
Killallon Smith O'Briens			•	•						•	•					
Killana Shamrocks			•	•	•				•			•		•		
Killeen 98															•	•
Killeen Fingal Rangers																•
Killeen Geraldines																•
Killyon															•	
Kilmainham			•									•				
Kilmmainhamwood Benburbs			•	•												
Kilmessan St Patricks		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
Kilmurry Volunteers															•	
Kilskyre Sarsfields			•	•	•											
Ladyrath Rovers										•	•					
Ladyrath Parnells			•	•	•	•										

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Laytown Old Guards											•					
Lismullen			•													
Lobinstown																•
Longwood					•									•		
Macetown Owen Roes					•								•			
Martry Clan na nGael				•	•	•				•	•					
Meadstown Volunteers															•	
Merrywell St Martins			•	•	•											
Monknewtown			•	•												
Mooretown Independents			•	•												
Mornington											•					
Moylagh											•	•				
Moynalty Owen Roes			•	•	•						•					
Mullafin				•							•					
Mullagh			•													
Navan Athlumney Sarsfields			•	•	•					•						
Navan Commercials										•						•
Navan Commons W. O'Briens			•	•	•	•		•								

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Navan Independent/Commons										•	•					•
Navan Emmets				•						•	•	•	•	•		
Navan Harp & Shamrock			•	•	•											
Navan Independents										•	•					•
Navan Pierce O'Mahonys			•	•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•			•
Navan Sandymount											•					
Navan Wolfe Tones				•						•						
Newcastle Gallowglasses				•												
Newtown Round Towers											•		•	•		
Nobber Hibernians			•	•	•											•
North Meath Petitioners										•						
Oldcastle			•													
Oldcastle Harps											•		•			
Oldcastle Sons of Freedom				•												
Oristown St Johns										•						•
Porterstown Home Rulers				•	•											
Randalstown Young Irelands											•	•				
Rathbeggan Sunbursts				•												

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Rathdrinagh			•													
Rathfeigh Emeralds			•	•	•				•			•				
Rathkenny		•	•													•
Rathkenny Sarsfields			•	•												
Rathmolyon [John Howards]													•	•		
Rathmolyon United Irish															•	
Rathmolyon Volunteers															•	•
Rathmore Clan na Gaels											•					
Rathmore Davitts			•	•	•						•					
Ratoath Shillelaghs			•	•	•	•										
Ratoath FC													•	•		
Ratoath Home Rulers				•												
Realtoge U16			•													
Ringlestown		•	•													
Robinstown													•			
Rodanstown St Patricks				•	•											
Rosnaree			•	•												
Ross, Tara			•	•	•											
Skryne Rangers										•	•	•				

	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900
Slane										•	•	•				
Slane St Patricks			•	•	•											
Stackallen Erin go Bragh		•	•	•												
Stamullen			•													
Stamullen [Delvin] Rovers				•	•											
Summerhill											•					
Syddan												•	•			•
Syddan Emmets			•	•	•											
Tara 98															•	
Trim FC																
Trim John Mitchells				•	•				•	•					•	
Wilkinstown St Johns															•	•
Warrenstown			•			•	•									
White Gate			•													
Yellow Furze	•	•	•	•	•				•	•	•					
Total clubs per year	2	11	60	81	64	18	10	11	11	34	45	29	29	19	16	24

Appendix 4
GAA Clubs in Meath, 1901–1917
F: Football; H: Hurling

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Aghamore, K'wood		F															
Ardamagh														F	F		
Ardbraccan			F														
Ardcath Slashers		F	F	F	F	F		F									
Ashbourne Faughs																F	F
Athboy	F	H	H	F H	H	F H	H	H	H	H		F	F	F H			F H
Ballinacree														F	F	F	
Ballinlough Wolfe Tones					F	F								F	F	F	F
Ballivor				F	F	F	F	F				F					F
Barley Hill			F	F													
Bective	F	F															
Bellewstown de Wets	F																
Bellewstown Stars														F	F		
Bettystown						F	F	F	F	F							
Boardsmill												H	H	H			
Bogganstown														F			

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Bohermeen Geraldines	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Bolies																	F
Boyne Rangers		F															
Breakey Emmets										F	F						
Breemount Inisfáils				F	F												
Carlanstown St Patricks			F														
Carnaross St Kierans			F	F		F					F	F	F	F		F	F
Carnisle Boyne Rovers					F												
Castletown	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F								
Castletown, Athboy															F		
Caucestown St Patricks														F			
Clonard				F	F	F											
Clonee Tolka Rovers	F	F			F												
Coolronan						F											
Corbalton	F	F			H												
Cortown Sarsfields					F												
Crossakiel				F													
Crossmacole		F															
Cruicetown				F													

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Culmullen	F	F		F	F	F								F			
Curraha Shamrocks		F		F								F	F	F	F	F	F
Cushenstown Cuckoos		F															
Dean Hill		H	F	F													
Dervor Free Traders	F																
Donore	F				F	F	F	F					F	F	F		F
Dowdstown de Wets		F															
Dromone				F													
Drumbaragh Emmets			F					F	F								
Drumconrath Brian Borus	F			F	F			F		F			F	F	F		
Drumree Volunteers															F		
Duleek	F	F												F	F	F	
Dunboyne				H	H	F H	H	H	H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	H	H	H
Dunboyne No. 2 Hurling Club																H	
Dunderry		F			F		F	F									
Dunshaughlin	F	F H	F H	F H	F H		F	F H	F H	H	F H		F H	F H	H	H	H
Durhamstown	F				F												
Enfield						F	F	F	F		F	F	F	F	F		

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Fairyhouse Ward Unions		F															
Fordstown/Girley Vols.			F	F	F		F	F	F								
Fraine	F																
Galtrim				F	F	F											
Garadice	F																
Garlow Cross		F		F										F	F	F	F
Gormanlough Erin go Brach		F		F	F		F	F	F	F							
Gormanston Stars						F											
Grangegeeth	F													F		F	F
Grange Geraldines	F																
Greenpark							F	F H									
Hatchet						F	F	F	F								
Julianstown Emmets		F				F											
Julianstown Stars						F	F										
Kells F & Hurling Club													F H	H	H	H	F H
Kells Columkilles		H	H	H	H	H				H							
Kells Emmets					F	F	F	F									
Kells Campaigners			F														
Kells Harps & Shamrocks			F	F													

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Kells Round Towers						F H	H	H									
Kells Stars											F	F	F	F			
Kells Wanderers								F	F	F							
Kellystown			F														
Kentstown Shamrocks		F		F											F		
Kilbeg				F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	
Kilberry St Johns									F	F							
Kilcloon						F								F	F		
Kildalkey O'Neills					F	F					H	H	H				F
Killallon				F	F H	H			F					H			
Killeen Fingal Rovers	F	F		F		F		F	F	F							
K'wood Benburbs				F	F	F	F		F	F							
Killyon			H		H	H	H		H		H	H	H	F H			H
Kilmainham				F													
Kilmessan	F	H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H		H	F H		H	H	H	H
Kilmoon		F		F													
Kilmore	F													F			H
Kilskyre			F H	F H	F H	H	F H	F H	F H	F H				H	H	H	H

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Kiltale																	H
Knocklough													F				
Lobinstown Emmets				F		F	F		F								F
Longwood			H	H	F H	H	H	H	H	F H	H		H	H	H	H	H
Loughan											F	F	F				
Lougher													F	F	F	F	F
Martinstown	F																
Martry							F	F	F	F	F		F	F	F	F	F
Meadstown	F			F													
Meath Hill Shamrocks		F	F	F	F	F	F	F		F							
Monknewtown			F								F	F					
Moorpark											F	F	F		F		
Moorpark Valley Rangers		F															
Moylagh														F			
Moynalty					F	F	F	F			F	F	F	F	F		
Mullafin			F										F				
Mullaghea Allies															F		
Navan Emmets		F	F	F								F	F	F	F		F

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Navan Fianna Éireann					F H												
Navan Gaels					F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F			F
Navan Harps					F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Navan Hibernians	H	H	H	H													
Navan Independent/Commons	F	F			F	F	F	F			F	F	F	F			
Navan O'Growneys								F	F	F	F						
Navan Pierce O'Mahonys			F	F													
Navan Young Irelands		H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H		H		H	H	H	H	
Newcastle Gallowglasses				F													
Newtown Round Towers				F	F												
Nobber					F								F	F			
Oakley Park					F												
Oldcastle Harps			F H	F	F	F H	F H	F	F	F	F			F	F	F	F
Ongenstown Rovers			F														
Oristown								F H	F	H							
Piercetown																	F
Portlester						F											
Possextown											F	F	F				

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Randalstown Eire Óg		F	F	F	F	F									F	F	
Rathbran				H													
Rathcore				H									H				F
Rathcormack												F	F	F			
Rathdrinagh										F							
Rathendrick Volunteers	F																
Rathfeigh													F				
Rathkenny	F	F	F			F	F							F	F	F	F
Rathmolyon	F				F	F	F H				H	H	F H	F H	F	F	F
Rathmore		F	F						F								
Ratoath		F			F		H	H	H	F H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
Rathrone				F		F											
Ringlestown						F											
Robinstown										F	F	F	F				
Rodanstown						F									F	F	F
Ross														F			
Skryne				F					F	F	F	F	F				
Slane			F	F		F	F	F	F				F	F	F	F	F
Stagreenan							F										

	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
Stamullen	F	F															
Summerhill				F	F	F				F	F	F	F	F			
Syddan Emmets				F	F	F	F										
Tierworker Volunteers				F	F					F							
Trim Abbey Harps										F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	H	F H
Trim Clan na Gael						F H	F H	F H									
Trim John Mitchels				F	F												
Walterstown		F	F						F								
Warrenstown	F				H	H	F										
Wilkinstown			F	F	F	F	F H	H	H								
Wolfe Tones		H															
Yellow Furze				F	F	F		F	F		F						
Total clubs per year	30	40	35	56	53	54	41	40	36	30	31	29	40	49	38	29	36

Appendix 5
GAA Clubs in Meath, 1918–1934
F: Football; H: Hurling

	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Agher				F													
Ardamagh							F										
Ardcath	F					F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Ashbourne	F	F				F	F									F	
Athboy Pearse Brothers	F H																
Athboy O'Growney	F H	F H	FH	H	F H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	F H	H
Athlumney O'Growney							F	F	F			F	F				
Ardenew																H	
Ballinabrackey			F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Ballinacree	F									F	F	F					
Ballinlough	F H	F H	F H	F	F			F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F H		
Ballivor	F	F	F	F	F	F	F						F	F	F H	F	F
Ballyboggan									F	F	F		F	F	F	F	
Barley Hill							F										
Batterstown															F		
Bective							F	F	F	F			F	F	F H		

	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Bellewstown	F					F										F	F
Bettystown										F			F	F	F	F	F
Boardsmill	H	H						H	H								H
Bohermeen Geraldines	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F					F	F			F
Boyerstown									F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	
Carnaross St Kierans	F	F	F	F	F				F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Castletown, Athboy											H						
Castletown						F	F	F	F	F	F H	F	F	F	F	F	F
Clavinstown											H						
Clifton Hurling Club											H						
Clonalvey															F		
Clonard																	F
Clonee									F	F	F						F
Clongill									F								
College Park			F	F											F	F	F
Colvinstown																	H
Cookstown, Kells								H									
Corballis								F	F	F H	F	F	F	F			
Creewood				F													

	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Crossakiel													F	F			
Culmullen																	F
Curraha	F	F	F		F	F H	F H	H	H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F	F	F	H
Dangan																	F
Derrylangan														F			
Dervor								F	F	F							
Donacarney			F		F												
Donaghmore, Ashbourne							F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Donore	F	F								F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Dowdstown					F H	F H	H										
Dowth Boyle O'Reillys											F	F					
Drumconrath Brian Borus		F	F				F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Drumree											F		F	F			
Dulane						F	F	F									
Duleek	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F			F	F
Dunboyne			H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	F H	H	H	F H
Dunboyne No. 1 Hurling Club	H	H															
Dunboyne No. 2 Hurling Club	H	H															
Dunderry		F	F		H		F H	H				H	H	H	H	H	H

	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Dunsany				F	F H	F	F	F									
Dunshaughlin	H	H		F	F	F H	H	H	H	F	H					F H	F H
Enfield	F	F	F		F	F	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F	F H
Flathouse				F	F	F	F										F H
Fletcherstown																	F
Girley St Reids													F	F	F	F	
Fourknocks										F	F		F				
Garadice				F											F	F	F
Garlow Cross	F	F		F	F										F	F	F
Gormanston			F	F	F												F
Grennanstown								F									
Hill of Down													F				
Horath												F					
Johnstown				H	H			H			H	H	H	F H	F	F	
Julianstown Stars												H	F		F	F	F
Kells	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F	F	F				
Kells Columkilles	F	F	F H			F	F						F	F	F	F H	F H
Kells Erin’s Own										H	H	H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H
Kells Stars	F H	F	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H								

	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Kells Young Ireland		F	F														
Kellystown				F													
Kentstown Shamrocks									F								
Kilcarne Young Irelands						F H	H		H								
Kilbeg	F	F	F	F	F	F			F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Kilbeg Harps		F	F														
Kilbeg Volunteers		F	F	F	F	F			F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Kilberry St Johns	F	F	F				F	F	F		F	F	F	F H	F H	F	F
Kilbride									F	F	F	F					
Kilcloon	F	F			F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F H
Kildalkey	F H	F H	F	F			H	F H	F H	F H	H	H	H	H	H	H	F H
Killallon Smith O'Briens						F											
Killeen							H	H		F	F	F					F
K’wood Benburbs															F	F	
Killyon	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	F H	H	H	H
Kilmessan			H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
Kilmore	F	F															
Kilskyre	F H			F H	H	H	F H	F	F H						H	H	F H

	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Kiltale	H						H	H								F	F H
Knockerk		F	F	F							F	F	F				
Lobinstown Emmets	F	F	F	F	F	F			F								
Longwood	H	H		F	F	H	F H	H	H	H	H	H	F	F H	F H	F H	F H
Longwood Boyne Rangers															H		
Loughan			F	F													
Lougher	F	F	F	F	F	F								F			
Martry Clan na nGael	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Meath Hill Shamrocks			F							F	F		F	F	F	F	F
Millbrook Oliver Plunketts																H	H
Monknewtown			F						F		F	F					
Moylagh			F			F											
Moynalty		F	F				F	F		F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Navan Commons					F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F				F
Navan de la Salle							F	F	F	F		F H	F H	F H	F H	F	F
Navan Fianna Fáil										F	F H	F					
Navan Gaels	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Navan Harps	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F			F	F	F	F
Navan Hurling Club		H	H		H			H					H	H	H	H	H

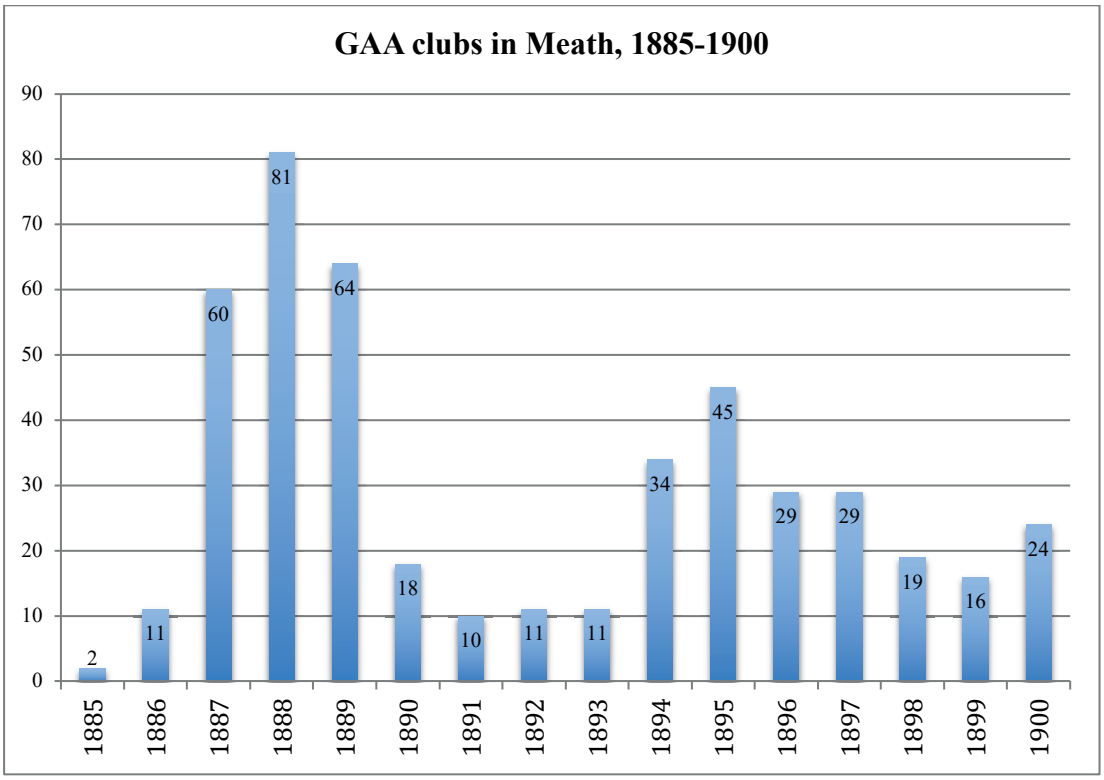
	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Navan Pioneers							F	F	F	F	F						
Navan Young Ireland					F	F											
Newcastle Shamrocks				F					F								
Newtown Round Towers	F																
Newtown, North Meath											F						
Nobber	F							F	F	F	F		F	F	F		F
Oberstown				F	F	F											
Oldcastle Harps	H	F	F	F	F	F			F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Oristown				F	F	F											
Painstown							F	F								F	
Pelletstown	F H	H	H	F H	F H	F	F H					F					
Piercetown	F																
Pluckstown							F	F	F	F	F	F		F		F	F
Rahood												F					
Randalstown Eire Óg					F	F											
Rathbeggan								F	F								
Rathbran			F														F
Rathcore	F														F	F	F
Rathfeigh							F	F					F	F			

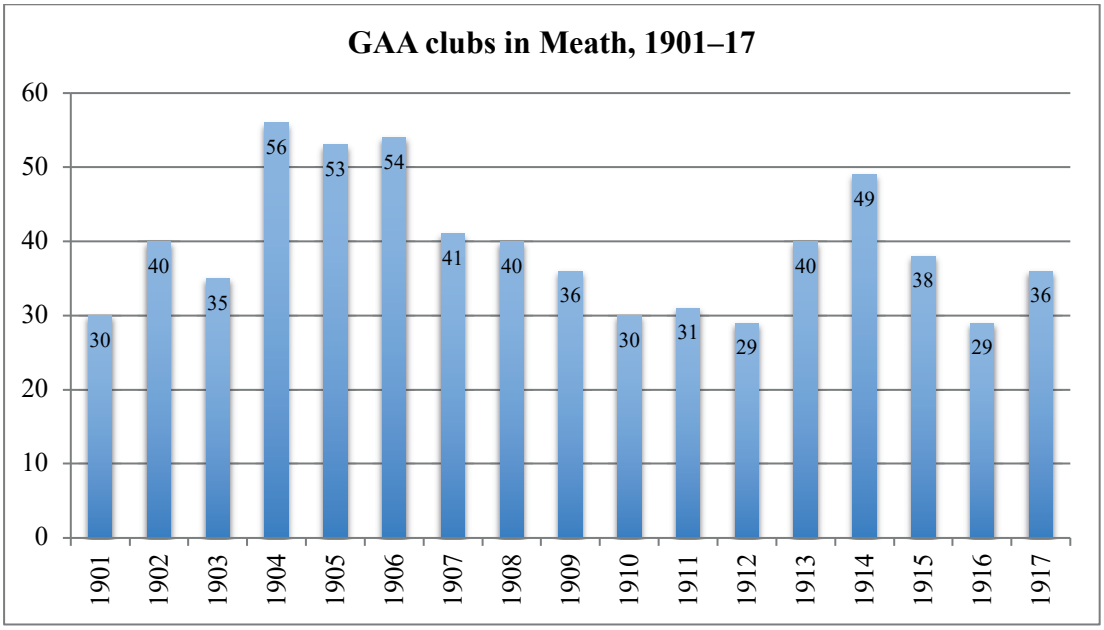
	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Rathkenny	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Rathmolyon			F	F	F				F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F H
Rathmore	F	F				H	F H	H									
Ratoath Hurling Club	H		H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	
Rathvale				F													
Robinstown						H											
Rodanstown	F	F															
Rossin													F				
Rosnaree		F															
Ross		F															
Seneschalstown																	F
Skryne	F								F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Slane	F	F	F				F		F	F	F	F	F	F	F		
Stackallen				F													
Stamullen									F	F	F	F					
Summerhill	F	F	F	F			F	F						F	F	F	
Syddan Emmets						F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	
Syddenrath															F		
Tierworker								F	F								

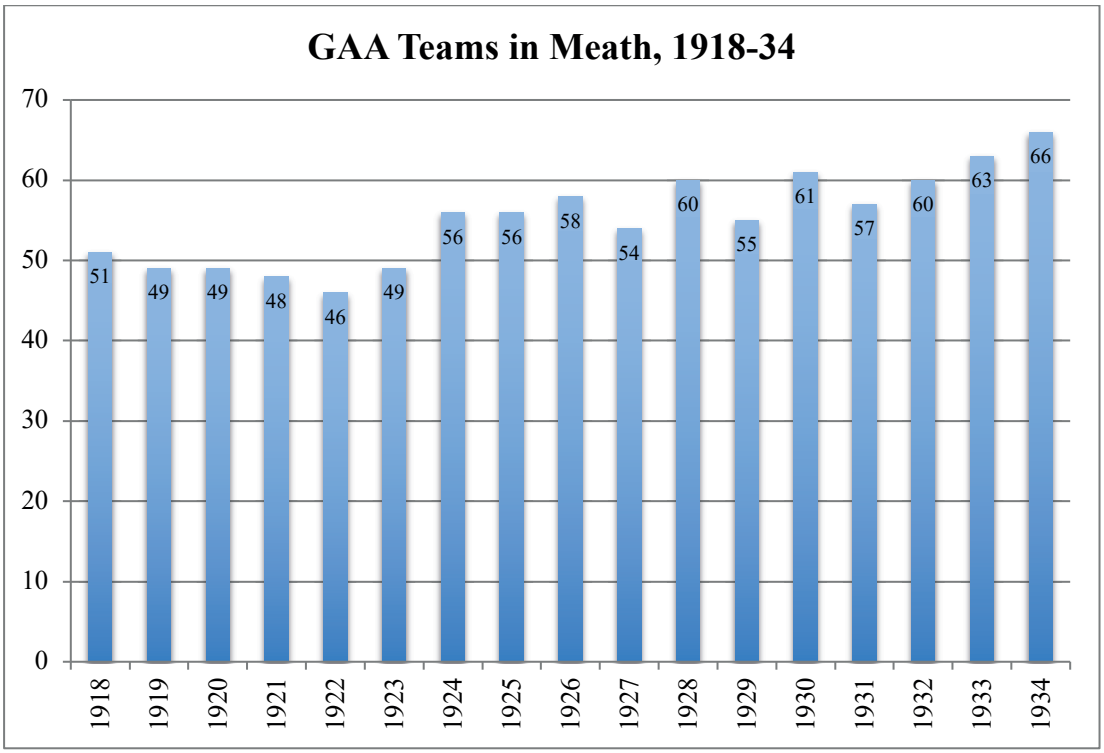
	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Trim	H	F H	F H	F H	H	H	H	H	F H	F H	H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H	F H
Tullaghanstown																F	F
Walterstown			F	F	F	F	F	F									
Warrenstown College							F						F	F	F	F H	F
Wilkinstown	F	F	F									F	F	F	F	F	F
Yellow Furze																F	
Total clubs per year	51	49	49	48	46	49	56	56	58	54	60	55	61	57	60	63	66

Appendix 6

Summary totals of Meath GAA clubs, 1885–1934






GAA Teams in Meath, 1918-34
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
51
49
49
48
46
49
56
56
58
54
60
55
61
57
60
63
66
1918
1919
1920
1921
1922
1923
1924
1925
1926
1927
1928
1929
1930
1931
1932
1933
1934

Appendix 7

Meath Cricket Clubs, 1896–1910

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Addenstown											•				
Agher														•	
Ardmulchan			•	•	•	•	•								
Ashbourne				•	•	•	•	•			•				
Athboy CC		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•
Booleykeagh						•									
Ballinabrackey								•							
Batterstown			•	•	•	•	•	•				•			
Beauparc								•	•	•	•	•	•		•
Bective												•			
Belinter			•												
Bellewstown, Trim							•	•	•	•	•				

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Bettystown														•	
Boyne				•											
Boyne Mills											•				
Bradystown						•									
Breemount			•	•	•		•	•	•						
Brewshill													•		
Carberstown									•				•	•	
Carrollstown		•	•	•	•										
Caulstown													•		
Charlesfort							•								
Clonee						•					•				
Cloneycavan						•									
Colvinstown								•							
Co Council				•											
Meath County		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Commons								•							
Corbalton				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
Cortown											•	•		•	
Craddenstown						•									
Crossakiel									•	•					
Cruicetown					•	•	•	•							
Culmullen							•								
Curraha								•	•	•		•			
Curtisstream			•												
Dalystown							•	•							
Dean Hill				•	•	•	•	•	•	•					
Dogstown		•		•											
Dowdstown											•				
Drumree		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			•			
Duleek					•	•	•	•	•						

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Dunboyne							•								
Dunsany Selection															•
Durhamstown	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•						
Fairyhouse								•	•	•	•				
Follistown					•	•									
Galtrim		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•					
Garadice			•	•	•	•									
Geehanstown								•							
Garlow Cross			•							•	•				
Gibbstown	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
Gilbertstown			•		•									•	
Glascarn											•				
Gormanlough		•													
Gormanston		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		
Grange, Dunsany			•	•	•	•									

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Greenpark											•				
Harristown						•	•								
Hatchet				•	•	•			•						
Headfort			•	•						•	•				
Isaacstown		•	•							•	•				
Jamestown			•												
Johnstown					•										
Kells				•				•	•					•	
Kentstown			•	•	•	•	•			•	•				
Kilbride		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	
Kilcloon					•										
Killallon								•							
Kilmainham				•	•	•	•	•					•		
Kilmer						•	•								
Kilmessan							•								

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Kilmore			•		•			•							
Kilskyre									•						
Knockbrack												•			
Ladyrath			•								•	•			
Laytown							•							•	
Longwood							•								
Loughcrew															•
Lougher					•				•	•					
Macetown				•	•	•	•	•							
Martry	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•		•	•			
Meadstown						•									
Meath Regiment			•												
Mitchelstown			•	•											
Moattown								•							
Moorpark							•	•	•	•	•				

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Moymet							•								
Muckerstown												•	•	•	
Mullafin				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Navan CC					•			•							
Navan Emmets				•											
Navan Hockey Club							•								
Navan Junior					•										
Navan Town		•	•	•	•				•			•			
Nevinstown									•			•	•		
Newhaggard					•										
Newtown Park									•						
Newtown Trim					•	•									
Oldcastle							•		•	•					
Ongenstown							•								
Oristown			•	•		•	•	•							

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Portlester					•	•	•			•					
Priestown							•	•							
Randalstown	•					•									
Rathcore								•							
Rathdrina					•	•	•	•		•		•	•		
Ratoath						•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	
Rathmolyon		•				•	•								
Rathrone		•			•				•			•	•		
Realtoge						•	•								
Robinstown	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•	•				
Ross			•	•	•	•	•	•					•		
Rossnaree					•										
Rushwee					•										
St Finians P&P			•	•	•	•									
Scurlogstown				•	•										

	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910
Skerrymount									•						
Slane		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•						
Summerhill											•				
Stackallen		•	•	•			•								
Stedalt	•														
Stokestown					•							•			
Tara							•				•	•			
Telltown									•						
Trim		•	•	•		•	•	•	•						
Tullaghanstown	•	•				•									
Walterstown						•		•							
Warrenstown				•	•	•	•								
Williamstown								•							
Woodpark							•	•							
Yellow Furze					•	•	•	•	•	•					
Total clubs per year	7	21	35	39	45	49	51	47	37	25	28	21	17	12	6

Appendix 8

Meath Cricket Clubs, 1923–34

	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Addenstown				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Agher		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
Ardenew				•								
Athboy								•	•			
Ballinderry					•		•	•				
Balrath	•	•	•	•	•							
Balrath B		•		•								
Balrath Burry		•										
Beauparc	•	•	•	•	•	•	•					
Bective											•	
Bellew						•	•	•	•			
Bellewstown, Trim	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
Bettystown		•										

	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Besborough									•			
Bogganstown							•	•	•			
Cadamstown		•	•									
Carrollstown	•											
Clifton Lodge	•											
Clonecurry				•	•		•	•	•	•		
Coragh							•	•			•	
Craddenstown			•	•	•					•		
Cullintra				•								
Dalystown		•	•	•	•	•	•	•				
Dean Hill	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Derryconnor					•							
Drumree		•		•								
Duleek	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Dunboyne				•	•	•						

	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Dunsany	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•			
Galtrim				•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
Garadice		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Gibbstown							•					
Gilbertstown		•		•								
Ginnetts							•	•	•	•	•	
Grange						•	•	•		•		
Hayes			•	•	•							
Headfort	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Isaacstown		•	•	•								
Johnstown		•										
Kilmer		•	•	•	•	•			•	•		
Kilmore					•		•	•				
Laracor			•	•	•	•	•	•		•		
Laytown				•	•	•						

	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Lisclogher	•	•	•	•	•							
Longwood		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
Loughcrew		•							•			
Lougher			•									
Macetown				•	•		•	•				
Martinstown								•				
Meadstown		•										
Meath County	•	•	•		•		•	•	•	•	•	•
Milltown									•	•	•	•
Moynalvey		•		•	•		•	•	•		•	
Navan	•		•	•	•				•	•	•	•
Newcastle	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	
Oakstown			•		•							
Oldcastle												•
Rahinstown		•	•	•	•	•	•	•				

	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Randalstown		•	•	•	•							
Rathcore		•	•	•	•	•	•	•				
Rathdrina		•	•	•		•		•	•	•		
Rathrone	•	•	•	•	•	•						
Ratoath		•										
Robinstown		•	•	•	•	•	•	•				•
Ross			•	•								
Shanco			•									
Somerville	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Summerhill					•		•	•	•		•	
Trammon		•	•	•								
Tuiterath										•		
Warrenstown		•	•	•	•							
Wilkinstown	•	•	•	•								
Total clubs per year	16	37	33	41	38	25	31	32	26	19	15	11

Appendix 9
Naming of Meath GAA Grounds

Club	Name of Ground	Origin of name
Ballinabrackey	Boyne Park	River Boyne
Ballinlough	Ballinlough GAA Pitch	Club and townland name
Ballivor	St Columban's Park	Patron saint of Ballivor RC parish
Bective	No name	NA
Blackhall Gaels	No name	NA
Boardsmill	Páirc Chill Mhuire	Townland name, Kilmurray
Carnaross	Páirc Naomh Chiaráin	Patron saint of Carnaross RC parish
Castletown	No name	NA
Clann na nGael	O'Growney Park	Gaelic League co-founder
Clonard	St Finian's Park	Patron saint of the diocese of Meath
Cortown	Páirc Naomh Baoithín	A local saint
Curraha	Joe McDermott Park	Club official
Donaghmore/Ashbourne	No name	NA
Drumbaragh	Páirc Emmet	Robert Emmet, leader of 1803 rebellion in Dublin
Drumconrath	Páirc Naomh Pheadair	Patron saint of the parish
Drumree	No name	NA
Duleek/Bellewstown	No name	NA
Duleek/Bellewstown	Howard Park	Richie Howard gave access to playing ground at Milltown
Dunderry	Páirc Dún Doire	Club and townland name
Dunsany	Páirc na nGael	Translates as Gaelic Park
Dunshaughlin	No name	NA
Gaeil Colmcille	Páirc Cholmcille	St Colmcille, Patron saint of Kells RC parish
Gaeil Colmcille	No name	Newly acquired grounds at Clonmagadden
Kilbride	No name	NA
Kildalkey	Fr Plunkett Park	Fr Patrick Plunkett, Roman Catholic curate in the parish, 1946-58
Killyon	St Finian's Park	Patron saint of the diocese of Meath

Kilmainham	No name	NA
Kilmainhamwood	Centenary Park	Opened in 1984, centenary of GAA's foundation
Kilmessan	Donnelly-Loughran Memorial Park	Club and county players Tony Donnelly and Joey Loughran
Kilskyre	Brian O'Higgins Park	Local Gaelic League activist, club co-founder and active in GPO during 1916 Rising
Kiltale	Páirc Cluiche Gaeil	Translates as Gaelic Games Park
Longwood	No name	NA
Meath Hill	Páirc Naomh Bríd	Patron saint of Meath Hill RC parish
Moylagh	St Oliver's Park	Patron saint of Moylagh RC parish
Moynalty	No name	NA
Moynalvey	Kilmore Park	Local townland name
Na Fianna	No name	NA
Na Fianna	Dónal Flynn Park	Local footballer and hurler who died in 2005
Nobber	Nobber GAA Park	Club name
Oldcastle	Gilson Park	Local educational philanthropist, Edmund Gilson
Oldcastle	Millbrook Football Grounds	Local townland name
O'Mahonys	Paddy O'Brien Park	Club official
Rathkenny	Dr Townsend Park	Donated ground to the club
Rathmolyon	No name	NA
Ratoath	Seán Eiffe Park	Club player and garda shot during an armed raid in Athy, Co. Kildare, 2001.
Seneschalstown	Fr Tully Park	Fr Patrick Tully, native of the parish and chairman Meath county committee, 1949-68
Simonstown Gaels	No name	NA
Skryne	Fr McManus Park	Fr Michael McManus, curate in Skryne, team trainer & helped acquire grounds
Slane	Toddy Harding Park	Club player and official
St Brigids	No name	NA
St Colmcilles	Páirc Uí Rís	Edmund Rice founder of the Christian Brothers

St Marys	St Mary's Park, Donore	Patron saint of Donore RC parish
St Michaels	No name	NA
St Patricks	No name	NA
St Pauls	No name	NA
St Peters Dunboyne	No name	NA
St Ultans	Séan Newman Park	Club and county player and chairman Meath county committee, 1921-37
St Ultans	Thomas Coogan Park	Club and county player who died following an injury playing with Martry, 1937
St Vincents	Masterson Park	Patrick Masterson donated the land
Summerhill	No name	NA
Syddan	Ludlow Park	Tom Ludlow, Syddan native, resident in London, donated the land
Trim	St Loman's Park	St Loman, patron of Trim
Walterstown	John Fitzpatrick Park	Local club official, 1911-81
Wolfe Tones	Páirc an Phiarsaigh Renamed Páirc Mhic Eoin	P.H. Pearse leader of 1916 Rising Renamed to honour club official Joe McKeown, in 1990

Appendix 10
Naming of Meath GAA Grounds by category

Category of ground name	Number	Percent
No name	21	32.8
Saint	11	17.2
Club official/player	10	15.6
Townland or club name	7	10.9
Donor	5	7.8
Priest	3	4.7
Irish nationalist figure	3	4.7
Generic GAA name, e.g. Páirc na nGael	3	4.7
Other	1	1.6
	64	100.0

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