

Sport and Ireland: a History

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Few authors are as well qualified as Paul Rouse to attempt this ambitious undertaking, the first scholarly overview of the history of sport in Ireland during the last millennium. Rouse has previously contributed numerous articles on various aspects of sport in Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly on the history of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), including as contributing editor of an important collection of essays on this most influential sporting organisation in modern Ireland.⁽¹⁾ In addition to his writings on the history of the GAA, Rouse's role as a founding member and stalwart of Sports History Ireland, a society dedicated to the scholarly study of Irish sports history, means that he has built up a formidable knowledge of this once-neglected field of study. The end result of his research is a treat for both specialists and non-specialists alike: the former will find in this book plenty to provoke and illuminate, whilst the latter will find that this is a well-written, accessible introduction to the subject. No reader who wishes to understand the broad trajectory of sport in Ireland in the period under study can afford to ignore this important book.

Two main ideas run throughout the book: first, that over the centuries, a number of distinctive features emerged in how the Irish participated in sport, although, as Rouse shows, not all sports played in Ireland were either uniquely or distinctively Irish; second, that in many ways the Irish love of sport was simply part of a much wider *human* phenomenon, as 'A primal passion for play underpins any understanding of the origins and development of the modern sporting world' (p. 1). In the book's first main chapter, 'Sport before 1800', Rouse examines the main types of sports activity in Ireland in the medieval and early modern periods. His assessment of hurling in the medieval period is the first of numerous examples of myth-busting that pepper his book. In this instance, he offers a nuanced critique of the idea of a continuity between the sport, ostensibly 'hurling', that was played in pre-medieval and medieval Ireland, and the version of hurling that the GAA promoted from the 1880s and that was used as part of the latter organisation's romantic nationalist agenda of proving the antiquity of its sports. Although, as Rouse points out, the patchy nature of the primary source material means that many features of Irish sport in the medieval and early modern period will remain conjectural, in this chapter he still succeeds in describing a wide range of sports that were played in Ireland in the centuries before 1800. He makes skilled use of the *Irish Historical Towns Atlas* series to illustrate the role of sport in various urban areas of Ireland between 1500 and 1800, mining historical maps to show the presence of such features of the urban landscape as bullrings for bull-baiting and cockpits for cock-fighting,

as well as numerous tennis courts, ball alleys and bowling greens. Horse racing also features in this section of the book, but not in as much detail as in James Kelly's recent study of sport in early modern Ireland (2); given the broader temporal sweep of Rouse's work, however, this is probably to be expected. Like Kelly, Rouse stresses the growing importance of the associational element in Irish sport in the 18th century, but stresses that this was a process that was only in its early stages by the century's end: as he shows, the sports club took centre stage in the decades after the Great Famine, transforming the nature of Irish sport in the process. Rouse's account of sport in the pre-1800 era is probably strongest when examining demotic sports such as hurling. He takes issue with scholars such as Kelly who argue that 'commons', played in the north of the country, should be seen as a totally different sport to the hurling that was played elsewhere. This is a debate that is likely to continue, and is possibly impossible to resolve, given the ambiguity of key descriptive terms used by contemporary observers: as Rouse notes, 'The words hurley, hurling, commons, camán, and shinty appear to have been used interchangeably in a variety of sources, further complicating the situation' (p. 77). Hurling's widespread popularity comes across clearly in Rouse's account, a popularity that was not confined to the rural lower orders, as shown by the gentry's frequent patronage of the sport. The excitement generated by hurling – which is later evoked with great skill in Rouse's account of the GAA's promotion of the sport in the late 19th century – is illustrated by evidence from 'Carrigmenan', a poem written in 1779 by a Wexford man, Robert Devereaux. Devereaux records 'a scene that remains undimmed' when a winning goal is scored:

'Hats, wigs, shoes, stockings, quickly fly in the air;

The victors to the beer barrel repair,

Where huntsmanlike the game's play'd o'er again

And bagpipes drone while they get drunk amain' (p. 77).

In chapter two, 'The modernization of Irish sport: 1800–1880', Rouse argues that sport in Ireland underwent a revolutionary transformation in the course of the 19th century. In the first half of the century 'change was steady rather than radical', but in the second half – and particularly after 1870 – it 'gathered remarkable pace'. The 'ubiquity of the sporting club' (p. 84) was central to this radical change, with most parishes having at least one sports club by the late 19th century. Rouse complements James Kelly's work on the decline of traditional sports in the pre-Famine decades, particularly in his account of the suppression of various blood sports involving animals – but not, of course, fox-hunting, which the landed elite continued to enjoy, while withdrawing their former patronage of such sports as bull-baiting, bear-baiting and cock-fighting. The fate of Kildare's cockpit is instructive here. Built at Market Square at 'some point shortly after 1798', Rouse argues that 'The construction of this fine circular building can only have been rooted in the belief of the centrality of the cockfight, its enduring appeal, and the absence of any sense that this might change' (p. 89). Within two decades Kildare's cockpit was no longer being used for its original purpose, but was instead being utilised as a court house: a telling indication of the marked change in attitudes amongst the Irish elite towards the blood sports that they had once enthusiastically promoted. Hurling fell into similar disfavour, at the same time as cricket began to take root in rural Ireland; there is evidence that some members of the Catholic clergy also adopted a hostile attitude to hurling in the 1820s and 1830s, regarding the unruly sport as one element in a wide range of inappropriate recreational and devotional practices that needed to be stamped out or reformed. Stronger clerical opposition to the sport emerged after the Great Famine. The failure of hurlers to form their own clubs to promote the sport, Rouse contends, left it particularly vulnerable to inroads from cricket, a process that gathered strong momentum after the famine. Nevertheless, hurling did not disappear after the 1840s. Rouse provides numerous examples from the 1850s and 1860s, from many parts of the country, of the authorities punishing hurlers for violent or disorderly behaviour, as well as newspapers calling for the sport to be suppressed on the grounds of its alleged inherently violent character. This evidence suggests that hurling in the immediate post-famine decades was in a stronger state of health than has sometimes been argued, as it is likely that the violent matches that

featured in newspaper reports, or the instances where hurlers were prosecuted for breaking the Sabbath, constitute just a fraction of the actual number of hurling matches that were played during these decades. Nevertheless, hurling was gradually replaced by cricket in most of the countryside and the latter sport became a genuinely popular sport, whose appeal spread to all classes of Irish society. Patrick Bracken and Tom Hunt have documented that cricket was ‘the people’s game’ in Tipperary and Westmeath, respectively, in the mid-Victorian decades (3); Rouse extends this further, showing that if any sport should be regarded as Ireland’s de facto *participatory* national sport (as opposed to the long-established popular spectator sport of horse racing) in the 1860s and 1870s, it is cricket. Cricket’s remarkable growth in Ireland was part of a wider phenomenon that affected all of the United Kingdom: ‘this phenomenon centred on the expansion of sports clubs, which now became a vital part of the lives of middle-class and working-class people’ (p. 123). Other transformational factors at work included the growing commercialisation of sport, as evidenced by the marked increase in the number of Irish horse-racing meetings and courses, a phenomenon that was aided significantly by the railway network, as well as a notable increase in the number of sporting facilities that were dedicated to sport, such as ball alleys in urban areas, billiard rooms, swimming baths and gymnasiums.

Rouse’s third chapter, ‘Contested sports: politics, war, and women, 1880–1920’, is his most iconoclastic one, and will probably draw most comment from Irish reviewers and historians in what has been billed in Ireland as the ‘decade of centenaries’ of the revolutionary 1912–22 period. Some of Rouse’s finest writing is directed towards dissecting central myths relating to the GAA, many of which were propagated by that organisation for its own political ends. The GAA’s officialdom liked to present its organisation as an avowedly nationalist one, that played an unambiguous and key role in what later came to be seen as a struggle for national freedom. Rouse has little time for such a sweeping claim, pointing out that while the GAA’s membership was, indeed, ‘largely nationalist’, the membership ‘reflected the assorted shades of green from radical republican separatists to the largely apathetic’ (p. 150). While he does not deny that there was a nationalist hue to the GAA, he argues that the organisation’s nationalist rhetoric does not explain why thousands of young men played the sports and hundreds of thousands watched the sports that fell under the GAA’s ambit. What one may euphemistically term hurling and Gaelic football’s ‘robust’ nature was enormously attractive to many: in a wonderfully insightful account of Gaelic games’ ‘devotion to physical combat’, Rouse remarks that ‘after all, the promise of a good row was never known to lessen a crowd’ (p. 209). The GAA ‘offered Irish people a day out with a difference – a unique cocktail of sport and drink and music and pageantry, which mixed the local with the national’ (p. 181). This is writing of the highest order, that skilfully evokes the multi-layered appeal of the GAA in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in rural areas. In the early 20th century the GAA’s leading officials became more militant in their nationalism, as evidenced in heightened efforts to ban GAA members from playing or attending ‘foreign games’ such as cricket, hockey, rugby and soccer, as well as excluding policemen and members of the Crown forces from GAA membership. The organisation also gave its official support to the frequently Anglophobic ‘Irish Ireland’ cultural renaissance of the period. There was some support for this approach at the grassroots level, as Rouse shows, but he also stresses that ‘Around these radicals and zealots, there was a whole range of members who displayed little interest in the Irish cultural revival and whose membership in the GAA was rooted in a [simple] desire to play hurling and Gaelic football’ (p. 211). Rouse’s case study of the GAA in Enniscorthy reveals that members of the association there often openly co-operated with leading lights of the Anglo-Irish elite, many of whom were involved in sports that came under the GAA’s ban or who were officers in the British Army. Rouse is surely correct in suggesting that the Enniscorthy example was not unique, and that ‘The infinite connections and complexities of life in small-town Ireland meant that neat divisions based on sport were not easily achieved’ (p. 213). Other excellent discussions in this chapter include Rouse’s examination of the spread of rugby and soccer from their supposed ‘garrison’ origins to their becoming sports with a wide appeal to many sections of Irish society, including nationalists who did not feel any less Irish for playing sports that were anathematised by the GAA. The complexities of Irish politics and identities in the early 20th century are shown by the fact that many members of the GAA fought and died in the British armed forces during the Great War, while many soccer and rugby players fought and died for the IRA during the War of Independence. In this chapter, Rouse also surveys women’s involvement in sport, with his main focus being on those women who played camogie; women who played golf, lawn

tennis and hockey, or who hunted, receive a less detailed discussion than their camogie-playing counterparts.

The final chapter, 'Sport on a partitioned island: 1920 to the new millennium', presents a richly textured survey of key trends in how sport developed on both sides of the new border after the partition of Ireland in the early 1920s. There were some notable differences in the sporting history of the two political jurisdictions, such as the early involvement of the Southern state in using sport as a means of promoting a sense of national identity, as in the Tailteann Games of 1924, 1928 and 1932. Rouse provides a deft discussion of how the Irish Rugby Football Union handled such tricky issues as the appropriate national anthem to play before international games when they were played in Belfast and Dublin, as well which flag should be flown on such occasions. The squabbles between the Irish Football Association and the newcomer Football Association of Ireland over which body's team was entitled to call itself 'Ireland' are also outlined skilfully. While this chapter devotes considerable space to exploring how sport was affected by Ireland's partition, it also looks closely at other important subjects, such as the 'triumph of associational culture' (p. 280) as the number of sports clubs mushroomed at the same time as Ireland's population declined; the rise of the sports star, a phenomenon that was partly media-fuelled; the increasing commercialisation of Irish sport towards the end of the 20th century; and also the efforts of both Northern and Southern governments to promote 'sport for all' from the 1970s onwards.

In such a wide-ranging work, there are inevitably some gaps. Given my personal research interests, I think that the role of cyclists and of cycling clubs in the Irish sports world of the late 19th century probably merits some discussion, as does another significant cycling topic, the interlinking of sport and politics in the Rás Tailteann, the all-Ireland cycling competition founded in the 1950s by the Republican activist, Joe Christle. More important omissions include the significant attitudinal and institutional changes in the GAA that were facilitated by the Northern Ireland Peace Process. Such changes included the dropping of its membership ban on members of the police in Northern Ireland and the British armed forces, as well as the scrapping of its rule forbidding the playing of 'foreign games' on its pitches. It would have been interesting to have read Rouse's exploration of such topics as Croke Park acting as the venue for Six Nations rugby internationals in February 2007, including one between Ireland and England, before the start of which 'God Save the Queen' was played, as well members of the GAA hierarchy playing host at Croke Park to Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip during their visit to Dublin in May 2011. However, such is the breadth of the subject matter covered by Rouse's book that he almost certainly could have written a work of twice the length and still have picky reviewers asking for more. This book is a wonderful read. Rouse points out in his preface that writing the book 'seemed like something that would be a hugely enjoyable thing to do, something that could be considered work, but not really work at the same time' (p. vii): the exact same comments apply to reading it.

Notes

1. Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse, eds, *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884-2009* (Dublin and Portland, OR., 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. James Kelly, *Sport in Ireland, 1600-1840* (Dublin and Portland, OR, 2014).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Patrick Bracken, 'Foreign and Fantastic Field Sports': *Cricket in County Tipperary* (Thurles, 2004); Tom Hunt, *Sport and Society in Victorian Ireland: The Case of Westmeath* (Cork, 2007).[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

Irish Times

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/sport-and-ireland-a-history-by-paul-rouse-forging-a-national-identity-1.2419888> [2]

Irish Examiner

<http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsfilmtv/books/sport-and-ireland-a-historydebunks-what-you-thought-you-knew-about-our-favourite-games-366316.html> [3]

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