

Gaelic Games in New York City and Ireland and their role in Strengthening a Trans-Atlantic Irish  
Nationalism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

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The Irish Hurling and Football Club was founded in New York City in 1857.<sup>1</sup> This was more than twenty years before Ireland's Gaelic Athletic Association was founded. Both organizations had similar goals; to instill in their members a sense of Irish identity.<sup>2</sup> The connection between Gaelic games and Irish nationalism has been well researched by authors like Paul Rouse. However, there has been a tendency when writing about Gaelic games and Irish nationalism to focus on these phenomena within Ireland's borders. Paul Darby, in his, *Gaelic games, Nationalism, and the Irish Diaspora in the United States*, explores Gaelic games in the United States, an underdeveloped field of study. He delves into how Gaelic games developed in New York, Boston, and Chicago, offering insights into how the diaspora's relationship to both Gaelic games and nationalism changed throughout the twentieth century. While Darby offers a glimpse into the diaspora's relationship with their homeland, his history is particularly interested in the development of Gaelic games in America. This essay builds on Darby's work to offer an explicitly transatlantic picture of Gaelic games' relation to Irish nationalism by exploring New York City's gaelic sports community and its connections to nationalism in Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By analyzing how gaelic organizations, Irish newspapers, Irish-American newspapers, and Irish nationalists viewed Gaelic games in New York City and Ireland, a picture emerges that shows these sports in America not only helped the diaspora maintain a sense of Irish identity, but in fact influenced and reinforced nationalism in Ireland.

In Ireland, the main force behind the development of Gaelic games both past and present has been the Gaelic Athletic Association.<sup>3</sup> However, in New York City there were a

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Darby, *Gaelic games, nationalism and the Irish diaspora in the United States* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2009), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Rouse, "The Triumph of Play," in *The GAA & Revolution in Ireland 1913-1923*, ed. Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh (Cork: The Collins Press, 2015), 16

<sup>3</sup> Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 162-177

variety of organizations involved in Gaelic games. As mentioned above, the first such organization was the Irish Hurling and Football Club. Yet, the event most credited with sparking the growth of modern Gaelic games to America was an 1888 tour of the country by Irish sportsmen.<sup>4</sup> This tour, known as the American Invasion, was organized by a collective of Irish men who wished to preserve and promote gaelic culture in Ireland through the creation of a Gaelic Association. Michael Davitt, the founder of the Irish National Land League, believed that the American tour could raise £500 of the £1,000 needed to pay for a meeting of the Gaelic Association.<sup>5</sup> The tour was a failure. The ocean crossing was difficult, events saw poor attendance, a considerable number of players stayed in America, and in the end Davitt had to pay the necessary £500. Despite its shortcomings, the tour did inspire renewed interest in Gaelic games among Irish-Americans, and, in fact, the Irish players who stayed behind elevated the level of play in America.<sup>6</sup> From the very beginning organized Gaelic games were a transatlantic endeavor meant to instill a sense of pride and nationalism.

To reinforce the connection between gaelic games and nationalism, it should be noted that many early teams were named after famous Irish nationalists including but not limited to Charles Stewart Parnell, Wolfe Tone, and Daniel O'Connell.<sup>7</sup> In 1891, the Gaelic Athletic Association of America was founded. The GAA of America proved a largely ineffective governing body due largely to disputes among its leadership on issues of physical force nationalism versus constitutional nationalism brought about by the divorce of Charles Stewart Parnell in Ireland. The division in Irish-American leadership demonstrates the strength of nationalist beliefs in America and the close tie nationalism had to Gaelic games. In the 1890s, a

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<sup>4</sup> Darby, *Gaelic games, nationalism and the Irish diaspora in the United States*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> "Pastimes." *Cork Examiner*, November 3, 1884.

<sup>6</sup> Darby, *Gaelic games, nationalism and the Irish diaspora in the United States*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> John Ridge, "Irish County Societies in New York, 1880-1914," in *The New York Irish*, ed. Ronald H. Baylor and Timothy Meagher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 290.

large number of Irish County Societies began Irish football and hurling teams. These societies loosely organized events until 1904 when they formed the Irish Counties Athletic Union. The Athletic Union led to better organization of Gaelic games and stayed in place for ten years until the New York Gaelic Athletic Association, still active today, was formed in 1914.<sup>8</sup>

Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities*, is useful in addressing the development of Irish nationalism across the Atlantic. Anderson suggests that a nation is a socially constructed community brought into being by the people who believe themselves to be part of it.<sup>9</sup> This notion of a nation allows us to understand how Irish-Americans were able to play a significant role in the development of Irish nationalism. Despite distance and differences in their appreciation of Irish identity, they shared a sense of Irishness with those still in the homeland.

While Anderson is not without his critics, this paper supports his assertion that print capitalism plays a vital role in developing national identity. Print capitalism is the emergence of mass printing and distribution of texts. Newspapers were particularly important in the creation of imagined communities. The role of print capitalism in the creation of national identity is evidenced in the printing and reprinting of articles about Gaelic games in both Irish and Irish-American newspapers.<sup>10</sup> One such article was printed in the New York newspaper the *Irish-American Weekly* in 1913. Titled "Kerry and Gaelic Football," the article reveals the deep sense of community Gaelic games helped create between Ireland and America. The article begins with a brief history of gaelic football in Kerry, which expresses a lot of pride for the role of the county in helping the growth of the sport. However, the article quickly began addressing the

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<sup>8</sup> Darby, *Gaelic games, nationalism and the Irish diaspora in the United States*, 62-75.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

nationwide benefits of Kerry's prowess. The writer claimed that when Kerry faced Kildare in the 1903 All-Ireland Championship:

Gaelic football... received an impetus that would have taken years of agitation to produce; an enthusiasm, widespread as it was wholehearted, was aroused and the Irish nation again beheld the magnificent spectacle of the young men of the country aroused to a sense of duty and participating in a work that went far to inculcate in them Irish principles and sever them from the demoralizing effects of Anglicization.<sup>11</sup>

The use of the term Irish nation is notable. It's important to remember that this was written for Irish-Americans. It seems that, despite their physical distance from Ireland, the author of this paper considered Irish-Americans to be part of an Irish nation, as well as a source of finances to further the nationalist cause. It seems too that Gaelic games were vital to upholding this Irish nation. Gaelic football was not just a spectacle but the duty of young Irish men. The game was a tool of the Irish nation to reinforce uniquely Irish principles and, in fact, challenge British culture. The author believed that the Kerry team of New York should take pride in their connection to their namesakes. This was an admiration born out of nationalist sentiment. Irish-American gaelic football players were inspired by Irish gaelic football players, specifically the work they had done to further the national identity of Ireland. Gaelic games players felt that their Irish forefathers provided them with a connection to the Irish nation and a sense of Irish identity.

This Irish-America connection is not just created through newspapers but through individuals. The paper informs the reader that members of the 1903 Irish team moved to New York and at the time played on New York's Kerry team. The article goes on to list a number of former Kerry players "lost" because they moved to America. This serves as an important reminder that the two communities were porous, with movement between them not uncommon. Despite their lost players, the Irish team continued to perform admirably. More admirable, in the eyes of the author, was the role of Kerry men in, "the elevation of our national pastimes and our

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<sup>11</sup> "Kerry and Gaelic Football." *Irish American Weekly* (New York, NY), Mar. 1, 1913.

people from the deep slough of feud to the wide level of cooperation.”<sup>12</sup> Concluding on such a note reinforces the importance of Gaelic games in the creation of an Irish identity and the importance of this identity to many within the Irish-American community. Irish-American nationalism provided a broader, perhaps stronger, sense of Irish identity. Irish-American’s departure from Ireland turned their sense of home from a town or county into a country. While those living in Ireland often contended with local rivalries, the Irish-American no longer saw a rival county as an enemy, but rather as a fellow Irishman. They might still compete in America through the GAA but they were bound together by their common history and culture in the “melting pot” they had landed in.

A 1905 article from the *Fermanagh Herald* reveals that Gaelic games in the homeland inspired Irish-Americans, and Gaelic games in America supported nationalist sentiment in Ireland. The piece, titled “The Gael Abroad: Our Olden Pastimes Popular in the States,” celebrates the role of Celtic Park in promoting Gaelic games in New York. It is worth noting that the author claims that “the recently formed Irish Counties Athletic Union has brought all the Irish County Societies together in an athletic association that begets the keenest rivalry in sports among the natives of the various counties of Ireland.” This use of the word natives seems to suggest that a large number of players were immigrants. In fact, the article seems particularly concerned with emphasizing the role of the Irish in influencing Irish-Americans. A section of the article is titled “Americans Joining” and reads:

The game is gradually winning many American young men to the Gaelic shrine. They look on a few times and are then seized with the irresistible desire to join in the lively, fast running and free kicking game. In the various societies where patriotic sons of Ireland come into close contact with Americans of several generations, the enthusiasm of the Irishmen for the Gaelic game gradually proves infectious, and the American, who at first was skeptical of the merits or charms of the game, tries it out of pure curiosity, or from a desire to be obliging to the supposed ardour of his Irish fellow-member. After a

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<sup>12</sup> “Kerry and Gaelic Football.” *Irish American Weekly* (New York, NY), Mar. 1, 1913.

trial or two the American becomes a convert and a lusty advocate of the grand old Gaelic game.<sup>13</sup>

Once again, Gaelic games are linked not just to fun but national responsibility. Those young men who play Gaelic games are patriotic; serving the Irish nation by introducing the game to Americans. There also appears to be a suggestion that the game is inherently appealing to those with gaelic ancestry. Irish-Americans are seized with an “irresistible desire” to join in the sport. For Irish readers this instills a sense that Irish-Americans and the Irish are part of a larger transatlantic nation.<sup>14</sup>

The Irish were not only interested in the general development of Gaelic games in America, but also in the specificities of particular matches. There exists a surfeit of Irish-American newspaper articles covering New York’s Gaelic games community reprinted in Irish papers.<sup>15</sup> It can be extrapolated from these reprintings that readers of Irish papers followed particular teams and players in New York, strengthening the bonds between the two locales. Still, while the Irish held a widespread interest in American Gaelic games, they appear to have been particularly invested in their county’s team. A number of Irish-American articles reprinted in Irish papers concerned the New York team named after the county where the article was reprinted. For example, a 1909 article from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* was reprinted in the *Munster Express*. The article covers a game between New York Cork and Kilkenny. Cork is in the province of Munster suggesting that readers of the *Munster Express* were particularly interested in games where their counties were represented.<sup>16</sup> The *Kerry News* also supports this county connection. A section of the paper is labeled “G.A.A.” and encompasses two

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<sup>13</sup> “The Gael Abroad. Oir Olden Pastimes Popular In The States.” *Fermanagh Herald*, August 12, 1905.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “New York Kerry Footballers Make Merry.” *Kerryman*, April 4, 1907.; “Brooklyn Boys Victorious St. Patrick’s Parish Team Defeats St. Ann’s, Bronx, Crowd- O’Leary Best Hurler.” *Munster Express*, August 14, 1909.; “G.A.A. Contests In America.” *Kerry News*, Aug. 25, 1913.; “Kerry Footballer Dies In New York,” *Kerryman*, February 19, 1916.

<sup>16</sup> “Brooklyn Boys Victorious St. Patrick’s Parish Team Defeats St. Ann’s, Bronx, Crowd- O’Leary Best Hurler.” *Munster Express*, August 14, 1909.

subsections, “Contests in America,” and “Kerry Team in America.” “Contests in America” covers a wide range of gaelic sporting events involving teams from all over the United States. The “Kerry Team in America” provides specific coverage of the New York Kerry team reprinted from the New York *Advocate*.<sup>17</sup> A separate section for the Kerry team attests to a pride in the role of Kerry in upholding the play of Gaelic games in America. Again, local identities might be important back in Ireland, but in America a sense of Irishness would be more broad and inclusive of other counties and provinces.

Irish-Americans also closely followed Gaelic games in Ireland. A 1905 edition of the *Gaelic American* has an entire page devoted to “Gaelic Sports and Pastimes.” While much of the page is reserved for American news, there is a column reserved for “The Athletes in Ireland.” It reports on the performance of different teams and the outcomes of various matches. Below this section is a section labeled “Kerry Wins Championship,” which was a “Special Cable to The Gaelic American” directly from Ireland.<sup>18</sup> The news of the championship game was reprinted only five days after it first appeared in Ireland. Reprints and special reports of Gaelic games evidence a strong connection between newspapers on either side of the Atlantic.

Gaelic games, while an important unifier in themselves, also served as a means to organize other events meant to instill Irish pride. “New York Kerry Footballers Make Merry” was printed in the *The Kerryman* in 1907 and reports on the New York Kerry Football Club’s first annual ball. Balls, dances, and other events were often held by teams in New York City, and in the early twentieth century these events were increasingly used by nationalist organizations to raise funds. Clan na Gael used Gaelic games to garner publicity, recruit members, raise money, and promote Irish nationalism in the United States.<sup>19</sup> The article itself directly references the

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<sup>17</sup> “G.A.A. Contests In America.” *Kerry News*, August 25, 1913.

<sup>18</sup> “Gaelic Sports and Pastimes.” *Gaelic American* (New York, NY), October 21, 1905.

<sup>19</sup> Darby, *Gaelic games, nationalism and the Irish diaspora in the United States*, 65

strong connection between Kerry and New York, “all things considered, there was a very fair attendance of the friends and admirers of the Kerry boys who in America are gallantly, upholding the fame of the old Kingdom, as the home Kerry team is doing in Ireland.”<sup>20</sup> Teams on either side of the Atlantic had the same duty to represent Kerry and on a larger scale to uphold Gaelic games.

These balls were one of the few opportunities women had to interact with the Gaelic gaming community, as such it is difficult to discern what the role of women was in strengthening trans-Atlantic Irish nationalism. Their main role appears to have been that of guests, or in the case of the games, spectators. The only time a woman is referenced in “New York Kerry Footballers Make Merry” is when Miss M Murphy leads the grand march with a partner. Scores of couples participated in the march. However, all the organizing seems to have been done by men, or at least credited to them in the article.<sup>21</sup> Gaelic games seem to have been a decidedly masculine arena in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. From the very beginning the language of Gaelic games was masculine. Consider the 1888 “Gaelic Invasion,” which compared the spread of nationalist sentiment to a military engagement. In addition, articles were filled with constant references to young men, boys, and men. The clubs were gender exclusive. Yet, women were certainly present throughout the history of Gaelic games as spectators, wives, and, later in the century, players. Further exploration of women’s role in the history of Gaelic games and nationalism is certainly merited.

Gaelic games created Irish spaces in New York City where Irish nationalism could be strengthened. Celtic Park and Gaelic Park, in their respective times, provided the Irish in America with a place to convene. A great number of nationalist events in New York took place in these spaces, and even when events weren’t explicitly nationalist, they still worked to

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<sup>20</sup> “New York Kerry Footballers Make Merry.” *Kerryman*, Apr. 4, 1907.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

strengthen the bonds of the Irish community. One such nationalist event was the New York Gaelic Feis in Celtic Park as reported on by the *Irish Independent*. It was attended by 100,000 people and many speakers. One of the main speeches was regarding the necessity of promoting the Irish language in Ireland, a vital part of the nationalist agenda.<sup>22</sup> That events were held in America to protest Ireland's schooling system accentuates the deep connection that existed between the two countries. This connection is further illustrated by the fact that the article was written for the *Irish Independent* and is not a reprint of an Irish-American paper. The spaces constructed for Gaelic games acted as event spaces for other nationalist activities. These events link Gaelic games to Irish nationalism through its organization's ideology physical spaces.

As evidenced above, Gaelic games and their respective communities in New York City and Ireland profoundly impacted each other, helping the diaspora maintain, and even develop, a sense of Irish identity, which then reinforced the Irish nationalist movement in Ireland. Irish newspapers often covered Gaelic games in America, and Irish-American newspapers would often cover Gaelic games in Ireland, illustrating the strong sense of community Gaelic games was able to foster, even across an ocean. These newspapers also report on the movement of players back and forth between New York City and Ireland, revealing the porous nature of the two communities. Beyond that, Gaelic games created spaces for other nationalist events in New York City, accentuating their connection to Irish nationalism. Understanding the transnational nature of Gaelic games and its unique position to support Irish nationalism reveals that sports are more than just games. They are ways to strengthen communities, identities, and even nations. While this paper developed a trans-Atlantic picture of Irish nationalism, it is nowhere near exhaustive. The role of women in the development of Gaelic games is underdeveloped.

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<sup>22</sup> "The New York Gaelic Feis." *Irish Independent*, August 13, 1912

Exploring the creation of women's leagues, as well as their role in the men's leagues might prove fruitful. Another possible avenue for development is the specific role of Kerry in trans-Atlantic Irish nationalism, as the county appeared quite often in researching this paper. In short, Gaelic games and its connection to Irish nationalism will remain a revealing topic for a long time to come.

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