

The Story of Gaelic Games in Ulster

Scéal na gCluichí Gaelacha i gCúige Uladh



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*This publication and the education and outreach project of
Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library & Archive,
of which it forms part, have been generously supported by
Heritage Lottery Fund*

Introduction

‘Scéal na gCluichí Gaelacha i gCúige Uladh / The Story of Gaelic Games in Ulster’, was a project undertaken by the Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library and Archive, Armagh, with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, in 2009. The project, which was held to coincide with the 125th anniversary of the Gaelic Athletic Association, comprised a yearlong historical exhibition, a major national two-day conference on the history of Gaelic games, a series of quarterly events such as lectures in the Ó Fiaich Library and Archive, and a programme of outreach events on the same theme for adult and school groups around the province of Ulster and beyond. Between all of these aspects, the programme was delivered directly to more than two thousand people from all over Ireland and some from further afield, and many more learned about it through promotional literature in various publications.

This booklet aims to provide a concise, informative and accessible narrative history of Gaelic games and the GAA in Ulster, as a legacy of the project. It touches upon native traditions, major games, cultural dimensions, significant milestones, the political background, controversies and key personalities. Much of this content is based on fresh research and rare archival material from the holdings of the Ó Fiaich Library and Archive. The text is illustrated with a range of enlightening images from the library exhibition, many of which have rarely if ever been brought to public attention previously. The period between the establishment of the GAA in 1884 and 1959 is covered in most detail, for it is less familiar to most people and it is from then that most of the fascinating artefacts on display in the project exhibition originated. The last fifty years are outlined merely in a brief summary; perhaps they may be examined in greater detail on the occasion of a future anniversary.

Dónal McAnallen, 2010

The Cavan team (on right) on parade before the 1933 All-Ireland Football final, Ulster's first senior All-Ireland success.



The Origins of the GAA

Since the medieval period at least, hurling, in one form or other, has been consistently identified as the indigenous stick-and-ball game of the Irish, and a most popular one at that. The mythical figure of Séadanta (Setanta) / Cú Chulainn, who is generally acknowledged as an Ulsterman, was reputedly the supreme hurler of the prehistoric era. Indeed, according to legend he acquired his adult name by driving a *liathróit* (ball) into the mouth of a dog, before slaying it. The problem with this story is, of course, its very mythical nature. Ambiguous references to the game of *áin phoill* ('the game of the hole') in old texts have been greatly embellished over the centuries. We have no way of proving that Cú Chulainn ever lived, let alone that he played a game closely resembling hurling. Equally ambiguous are references in the ancient Brehon Laws to penalties for causing injury in ball games. For more definite evidence of a game with the identity of modern hurling, the earliest available sources in the English language are the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366) and the Statutes of Galway (1527), both of which specifically proscribed 'horlinge'; while references to *iománaíocht* and *báire* appear in Irish-language documents from the same broad period.

Within Ulster, there is considerable evidence of stick-and-ball games of a similar nature. Probably the most graphic depiction of this can be found in a fifteenth-century grave-slab in Clonca, in Inishowen, north Co. Donegal. This grave-slab is nearly two metres long, with a carving of a two-handed sword, and a ball and a stick very like the modern Scottish shinty stick. It also bears an inscription in Irish which states that it was made by Fergus Makallan

in memory of Magnus Mecorrison of Iona. One plausible theory suggests that Irish *gallóglaigh* or gallowglass soldiers may have introduced the game of *camán* to Scotland. Alternatively, it is possible that the influx of Scottish planters after the Ulster Plantation of the early seventeenth century, reinforced the game in Ulster, or even introduced different styles of play. The common names of the game(s) in Ulster and Scotland suggest a shared heritage. *Camanachd* was the Scotch Gaelic term for the stick-and-ball game known as, and later codified



Cú Chulainn ready to play.



15th century grave slab, Clonca, Dún na nGall.

as, Scottish shinty. From the eighteenth century onwards, the main stick-and-ball game(s) in Ulster were identified as *camán* / *common(s)* and *shinny* - remarkably like *camanachd* and *shinty*. It also appears that the game(s) in both Ulster and Scotland were played in the winter and primarily on the ground. There are numerous references to the playing of *camán* / *common(s)* in Ulster in surveys, song, poetry, fictional literature and oral accounts right up to the end of the nineteenth century and beyond. It was played with a ball known variously as a *cnag*, *crag* or *nag*, *nig*, *nog* or even a *bool* - but never *sliotar*, the word of Munster origin which was later adopted more widely. Up to the late nineteenth century, the size and manufacture of hurling balls was quite irregular; they were of different sizes, and some were made of wood or other materials such as animal hair. The game(s) of *camán* / *common(s)* and hurling went into steep decline during the nineteenth century, owing to a number of factors: a pursuit of 'social improvement' in society; an increase of sabbatarian influence in Ulster; the inception of the (Royal) Irish Constabulary; the Great Famine and the consequent depopulation of the Irish countryside. There are scarcely any surviving reports of these games being played in Ulster in the 1850-80 period, and the situation around the rest of Ireland was hardly any better. This decline made a deep impression on men such as Michael Cusack, a schoolteacher from An Clár who taught in St Colman's College, Newry, in the 1870s, and married Margaret Woods of Dromore (An Dún) in 1876. When based in Dublin in the 1880s, he began to plan to revive hurling and indigenous Irish games, and to open up track-and-field athletics to the masses. Among his fellow

players and administrators were a number of Ulstermen, several of them Protestants, including four Potterton brothers from Newry, H.A. Auchinleck from Victoria Bridge in Tír Eoghain, and John Huston Stewart from near Castlederg. Finally, Cusack and the champion athlete Maurice Davin (Tiobraid Árann) convened a meeting in Hayes's Hotel, Thurles, on 1 November 1884. One of the other five men who are definitely known to have attended this meeting was John McKay, a native of Downpatrick who was then a reporter for the *Cork Examiner*. At that meeting they formed the Gaelic Athletic Association for the Preservation and Cultivation of National Pastimes.



Michael Cusack



John McKay

2 The Growth of Early Clubs

The GAA spread quickly around the southern half of Ireland, but it was slower to develop in the north. After earlier attempts to organise Gaelic sports in various parts of Ulster through 1885, Ballyconnell (J. G. Biggar's) became the first club in the province to affiliate with the association, in the early part of 1886. Over the next couple of years over one hundred clubs were formed in the southern half of Ulster, and county boards were established in An Cabhán, Muineachán, Ard Mhacha, Fear Manach and Doire. The birth of the GAA had stimulated tremendous excitement and enthusiasm among young nationalists, bringing thousands of them into contact with organised sport for the first time while providing them also with an outlet for their national sentiments. Several county championship competitions were run off, and the first Ulster football championship produced a victory for Maghera (An Cabhán) over Inniskeen (Muineachán) in 1888. In the second Ulster football final, played at Blaris, near Lisburn, in 1890, Armagh Harps beat Owen Roe O'Neill's of Cookstown (Tír Eoghain). On the downside, however, hurling was only being taken up enthusiastically in Belfast and Derry City and their environs, and indeed apart from these areas, neither was there much organised Gaelic football in the northern half of Ulster.

By 1891, the GAA in Ulster (and in other parts of the country) was on a downward spiral. It had grown perhaps too rapidly in these early years, and it was unfit to withstand the many problems that confronted it at once. The parochial rivalries that had helped it to spread also led to bad feeling, and frequently disputes on the playing fields were carried on through letters in the newspapers.

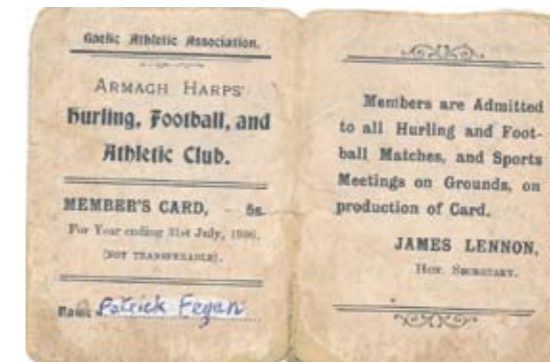
Several prominent Catholic clerics condemned the association from the pulpit, on account of the fights and drunkenness at many early Gaelic games on Sundays (which apparently scandalised sabbatarian Protestant neighbours), and the efforts of the Irish Republican Brotherhood to infiltrate it. Many of the Gaelic sports combinations or teams that were referred to as 'clubs' scarcely qualified for this description, lacking as they did a proper administrative structure, finance or indeed any facilities to call their own. There was also great confusion about the playing and other rules, due in no small part to the distance of Ulster from the Munster headquarters of the association, to which most northern officials were unable to travel for meetings. The general disapproval of



Owen McMahon,
Cullyhanna GAA player, 1888

Sunday games in Protestant areas of Ulster, together with the strength of association football in the province, meant that the GAA had more external opposition to deal with in Ulster than in the other Irish provinces. Consequently, after the disastrous Parnell split within Irish nationalism in 1890-91, the association was effectively moribund all over Ulster from 1892 until the late 1890s, with no county boards operating and only a handful of clubs being affiliated in the middle part of the decade.

By 1901 a revival was under way, with several clubs active in Belfast and other centres around Ulster. Over the next few years more and more clubs appeared. Now, influenced by the spread of Conradh na Gaeilge, the GAA clubs of Ulster were infused with a stronger cultural nationalist spirit than their counterparts of the 1886-91 period. Many of the 1900s clubs ran Irish language, history and dancing classes and similar cultural events. There was a greater emphasis on sobriety at games. And many clubs



Armagh Harps membership card, 1906.

were inspired to field hurling teams and hold athletics sports-days. Although the GAA has an image of being rural-based, some of the strongest and most durable clubs in Ulster developed in urban centres. The re-formed Armagh Harps club secured a rare level of patronage from local councillors and businessmen, and achieved an enviable level of organisation. The club issued its own membership cards and secured a lease on Abbey Park. In 1904, when Harps agreed to let an inter-provincial hockey match (Ulster v. Leinster) be played there - there was no ban on non-GAA games on Gaelic grounds then, largely because the GAA had hardly any to call its own - the decision caused divisions in the GAA locally (according to police files), and a letter to a Gaelic games newspaper condemned this 'Judas-like' action of giving the park to 'seoinín "hockey snobs"'. A few years earlier the Irish Football Association had initiated the first ban on the use of sports-fields in Ireland, by prohibiting the lease of its clubs' grounds for Sunday games - in direct response to the hosting of GAA events on the Belfast Celtic F.C. grounds. From 1903 onwards the GAA reintroduced rules banning its own members from playing rival or 'foreign' codes, and from joining the British Crown forces.

While the GAA in Ulster was now on a reasonably sound footing overall, for most clubs it was still a struggle to keep going. The departure of club officials, the constant need to raise funds, and the popularity (and subsidisation) of soccer in many localities posed constant threats.

3

1901-11: The Reorganisation of the Province

It became quite routine for clubs to come and go, and return some time later (perhaps in a different guise). From the turn of the twentieth century there emerged a stronger, more structurally sound GAA in Ulster. The establishment of a Belfast-based Antrim County Board in late 1901 provided a solid foundation for this process. In March 1903 Comhairle Uladh (the Ulster Council) was established by a meeting in Armagh City. George Martin, a solicitor from Belfast, was elected as the first *Uachtarán*; Michael Victor O Nolan, a customs and excise official living in Strabane and father of the famous writer Brian O Nolan ('Flann O'Brien'), was appointed *Leas-Uachtarán*; and Louis O Kane, a 20-year old draper's assistant from Derry City, was given the role of secretary. In a re-shuffle before the end of the year, O Nolan took up presidential duties, Charles O'Neill (Ard Mhacha) became vice-president and Martin switched to the position of secretary. In the same year county boards were set up in Doire, An Cabhán and Ard Mhacha. Tír Eoghain, An Dún, Muineachán and Fear Manach followed suit in 1904, and in 1905 Dún na nGall did likewise to complete a full set of nine county boards. Each board ran county championships, while Ulster championships in hurling and football were run annually from 1902 onwards, and the provincial champions played in the All-Ireland semi-finals.

In these early years the Ulster Council and county boards generally could not afford to purchase fitting trophies for their competitions. Apart from a Derry Hurling Championship cup, made in 1891, the association in Ulster relied on generous benefactors to provide its trophies.

An early and outstanding example is the McKillop Cup. William McKillop was born in Scotland and elected as Irish Parliamentary Party MP for South Armagh in 1906. Upon becoming a candidate, he offered this trophy to the Armagh County Board. The cup is made of solid silver, weighs over 82 ounces, features depictions of a Gaelic footballer on a pitch clad in shamrocks, an old Irish round tower, an Irish wolfhound, an ancient Celtic cross and a ruined monastery. It was very valuable then and is worth thousands of pounds today. Up to 1995 it was the most prestigious prize for the Gaelic football clubs of Ard Mhacha. Meanwhile, in 1904 the Donnelly Cup was presented for the Antrim Hurling Championship; in 1906 the O'Hare Cup was presented for the Down Senior Football Championship; and a few years later, Jeremiah MacVeagh, another IPP MP, donated a trophy for the Down Senior Hurling Championship. In Tír Eoghain, the McAnespie Cup was first awarded in 1907, and in 1913



M.V. O Nolan, first president of the Ulster Council (1903) and father of 'Flann O'Brien'

the Owen Roe O'Neill Challenge Cup was presented by Anthony Lucy, M.A. – a London resident who had lived at Carrowcolman, in Eglish parish, as a boy – to the Presentation Brothers, Dungannon, for competition among local schools.

Ulster remained the weakest province of the GAA throughout this period. The heavy defeats of its champions in all of the All-Ireland hurling semi-finals and most of the football semi-finals indicated as much. Aontroim upset this trend by reaching the All-Ireland football finals of 1911 and 1912, but lost on both occasions, and no other Ulster champion team got as far for many years afterwards. Year on year too the Ulster Council accounts showed a loss, and its county boards were little or no better off. Officials in the north expected that the Central Council and the other provincial bodies would appreciate the peculiar difficulties confronting the association in Ulster and render financial and other assistance accordingly, but to their chagrin they got only a £20 grant in the course of this decade. Even back then there was a feeling of isolation and persecution among northern officials, but in return they were accused from the other provinces (and sometimes from their own) of having bad business methods. In truth, the challenges before them were huge. Up to 1910 the Great Northern Railway Company refused to run special trains to sports on Sundays – a policy which greatly limited the GAA's ability to make a profit from championship games and to reinvest in infrastructure. And it must be remembered that the players and officials were all

volunteers and amateurs. This point was brought home most forcibly when the Ulster secretary of 1911, William Gilmore (Aontroim), failed to organise the provincial championships; his sister had just died and he had to look after his mother, and in his absence no-one else was in a position to carry out his duties.



The McKillop Cup

4

The Development of Gaelic Games in Ulster Colleges

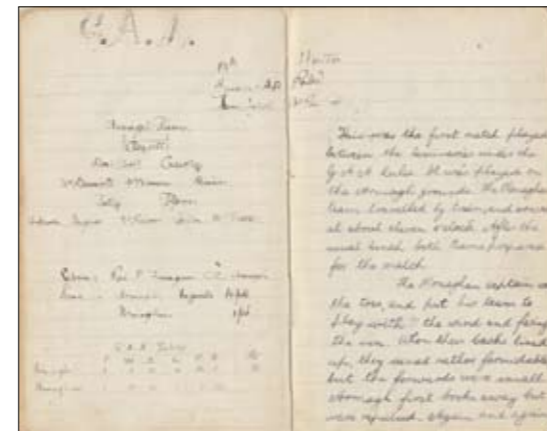
During the first quarter-century of the GAA, Gaelic games were played in very few educational institutions, and in Ulster least of all. Many of the Catholic clerics who ran leading schools were wary of Gaelic games, owing to their robust nature and the perceived links of the GAA with republicanism. Some GAA officials also believed that there was an element of snobbery and class distinction implicit in the decision of such schools to play association football and other sports instead.

In 1903 a challenge soccer match between two of the eminent Catholic seminaries, St Patrick's College of Armagh and St Macartan's College of Monaghan, was instituted by their respective presidents (Fr Carrigy and Dr Mulhern), with the sanction of Bishop Dr Owens of Clogher and Cardinal Logue. This became an annual event, being contested in most years up to 1916, and it was one of the highlights of the school calendar for the pupils of the two colleges. Records of all the games in this period, including the Armagh line-outs, details of travel arrangements, the weather, ground conditions and injuries, were compiled in a notebook of the Armagh school. The game of 11 April 1916, for example, was described in vivid terms. 'The state of the field was such that for the entire hour both teams were like pigs wallowing in a mire.' To this mudbath and 'the fact that only one of the Armagh team had played on the grounds of St Macarten's [sic] before' stretched an annalist of St Patrick's to account for their thumping 6-0 defeat.

Armagh still had slightly the better record overall, and looked forward to the 1916/17 game for months in

advance. 'From the beginning every man laid his mind down to football, and vowed to defeat Monaghan,' it is recorded. For various reasons, however, the game did not take place. Meanwhile, the stirring of nationalist feeling since the Easter Rising of 1916 was having a decided impact on school sport.

The notebook outlines the offer of His Lordship Most Rev. Dr MacRory of Down and Connor, to provide a trophy for Gaelic games for Ulster secondary schools. This offer, and the establishment of the Ulster Colleges' Council in January 1918, led to the rapid inception of the MacRory Cup football competition. Although this valuable trophy was apparently not presented until 1923, it became the most coveted sporting prize among Ulster Catholic schools thenceforth.



St. Patrick's College Football Diary

Armagh and Monaghan were joined by colleges such as St. Malachy's (Belfast), St. Columb's (Derry), St. Colman's (Newry) and St. Patrick's (Cavan) in the competition's early decades. A raft of Christian Brothers' schools and other schools followed in later years. The Mageean Cup for Colleges was presented in the 1950s. After an initial burst of activity in the early 1920s, the GAA club at Queen's University also flourished from 1931 onwards, and contested the Sigerson Cup which was named after Dr George Sigerson, the UCD professor and native of Holyhill, Strabane, who presented it in 1911.



St. Patrick's College, Armagh - the first winners of the MacRory Cup competition in 1918.



The Sigerson Cup.



Cardinal MacRory presenting the MacRory Cup in the late 1920s.

5

1912-23: The Revolutionary Years

In the early 1910s many policy decisions were made which helped to finesse Gaelic games into the modern games that we know today. In 1911 the H-shaped goalposts were adopted for both hurling and football, replacing the former soccer-style goalposts flanked by point-posts on either side. In 1913 teams were reduced from seventeen-a-side to fifteen-a-side, and it was decided that each county should have standard county colours. The purchase of Croke Park in 1913 gave the association a genuine home and headquarters.

In subsequent years however, revolutionary matters of a political nature came to have a tremendous impact on the GAA, and particularly so in Ulster. After the Easter Rising of 1916, the heavy-handed reaction of the authorities did much more to radicalise the Irish national mood. The internment of numerous GAA members, and restrictions on the playing of and transport to Gaelic games, along with attempts to impose entertainment tax on sports, brought the GAA into a position of ever-greater defiance of the law. No man took a greater part in this process than Eoin O Duffy. O Duffy became Ulster GAA secretary in 1912, on the proposal of the Ulster president, Patrick Whelan JP, a fellow Monaghan man. A brilliant organiser, O Duffy helped to put the Ulster Council on a much sounder footing from an early stage of his tenure. The printing of the *clár*, or agenda, for meetings, was indicative of the improving standard of organisation in the province, while the item also reveals some of the enduring administrative problems. Both Ulster football semi-finals of that year, as can be seen, were the subject of objections. Dissatisfaction with the handling of the latter objection -

and a feeling that O Duffy and Muineachán had too much sway in the administration - led An Cabhán to resolve to leave the Ulster Council and form a new GAA province of 'Tara'. This proposal was not endorsed, however, and Ulster remained a nine-county province.

Also during 1917, like many nationalist men, O Duffy (who did not adopt the Irish version of his first name until later) joined the Irish Volunteers. As the organiser for Monaghan he tried to recruit all GAA members into Volunteer activities and he rose through the ranks rapidly to become the leading figure in the IRA in Ulster during the War of Independence, 1919-21. All the while he remained the provincial secretary of the GAA. His dual role got Gaelic games in Ulster increasingly embroiled in the unfolding



The *clár* for an Ulster Council meeting in 1917.

political turmoil. In 1920 he was arrested during an Ulster Council meeting in Armagh. His entanglement culminated in the arrest of half of the Monaghan football team by B Specials at Dromore, Co. Tyrone, on their way to play the Ulster final in Derry in January 1922. The incident became an issue of major political controversy for the newly formed Northern Irish state, as it was alleged that the footballers, who were in the IRA and carrying weapons, sought to rescue some condemned prisoners from Derry Gaol. With such events occurring amid a period of intense sectarian conflict in the north-east, ordinary Gaelic games fell into abeyance in most counties at some stage between 1920 and 1922.

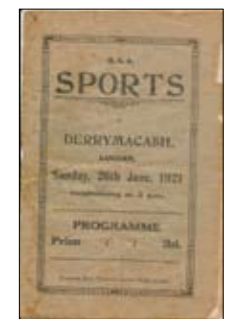
Alongside O Duffy, Séamus Dobbey (Antrim), the Ulster GAA president from 1919, was a leading IRB man and he was incarcerated in various prisons between 1916 and 1920. Dobbey and O Duffy stepped down as president and secretary in 1923, but the latter - who was appointed as Garda Commissioner in Dublin in 1922, and had a controversial role in the Irish Civil War of 1922-23 - remained popular among GAA officials in Ulster. Under his command the Garda played Gaelic games primarily, and many of its officers built local ball-alleys around the Free State - handball having come under the GAA's aegis in 1922. Although living in Dublin he retained an officer position on the provincial council until 1934, when he resigned due to his political role in Fine Gael and the Blueshirts. Due to the special insight that they provide into this dramatic period, the Ó Fiaich Library's collection of the minute books of Comhairle Uladh from 1917 to 1972 hold a significance far beyond normal sporting and

cultural matters. Yet valiant efforts ensured that the GAA continued to provide sporting activity, as seen, for example in the holding of a GAA sports day at Derrymacash (Ard Mhacha) in 1921.

After the partition of Ireland in 1920, the GAA acquired a heightened importance in Ulster, especially north of the border, in a state that was hostile to Gaelic games and culture. Some GAA members were interned in the early 1920s for no reason other than their cultural identity. From an early stage efforts were also made to ban Sunday games. For members in the six counties, the GAA was their strongest remaining link with the rest of Ireland, where the association was in the van of efforts to turn the Free State to create a Gaelic republic. Northern nationalists wanted to keep in step with this Gaelicisation movement, in order to be culturally prepared for the expected imminent unification of the island, and so they were often urged to take part in Gaelic games, learn the Irish language and practise *céili* dancing.



Armagh handball players, 1923.



Derrymacash Sports Day programme, 1921.

Monaghan players are carried shoulder-high from the pitch following the county's victory in the 1956 All-Ireland Junior Football Championship 'home' final at Carrickmacross.



6 1924-39: Sporting and Cultural Revival

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, concerted efforts were made to galvanise and reorganise the GAA in Ulster. Two symbols of its regeneration were the opening of Bréifne Park (An Cabhán) in 1923 and Corrigan Park (Belfast) in 1927. At last the GAA in Ulster owned proper stadia. Similarly significant was the presentation of the Anglo-Celt Cup and Dr McKenna Cup to the Ulster Council in 1925; having not had a trophy to call its own since its foundation many years earlier the provincial body suddenly had two. The inception of the inter-provincial Railway Cup competitions in 1927 further cemented the identity of nine-county Ulster in the GAA, in spite of partition. Around this time northern counties entered the newly initiated National Football League, which brought them more regular games and more frequent contact with those in the south. The Ulster Council even began to print programmes for its championship finals in the 1920s.

Against the backdrop of partition, even quite modest triumphs for Ulster were cherished all the more. When Ard Mhacha won the All-Ireland Junior Football Championship of 1926, it was the first national title won by an Ulster county - over four decades since the starting point of 1884. This was to prove the only notable success of the Orchard County in the 1920s and 1930s; it was followed by eight deflating defeats in Ulster football finals in thirteen years. The fact that An Cabhán and Muineachán monopolised the Ulster football championship honours between 1914 and 1945 disguises the significant progress that was being made in the other seven counties.

Yet An Cabhán was unquestionably the trailblazing Ulster county, and in 1933 the Bréifne footballers achieved a

major milestone, by beating Ciarraí and Gaillimh in the All-Ireland semi-final and final respectively, to take the Same Maguire Cup north for the first time. The players were lauded as heroes throughout Ulster, and in 1934 they got to travel to the USA, as had become the norm for All-Ireland champion teams. Jim Smith of Killinkere, the team captain, along with 'Big' Tom O'Reilly of Cornafean, would achieve the as yet unequalled distinction of winning thirteen Ulster senior championship medals. Later in 1934, partly due to the exertions of a long foreign tour and a highly controversial semi-final against Gaillimh in Tuam, the national title was relinquished. In 1935 the Bréifne men came back and beat Cill Dara in the final to claim their second All-Ireland title. In administrative circles too, Ulster eventually reached the pinnacle. Pádraig Mac Con Mí of Aontroim was elected as national *Uachtarán* of the association in 1938, so becoming the first Ulsterman to



Ard Mhacha, 1926 All-Ireland Junior Football champions.

hold this office, and his popularity was such that his term was extended beyond the usual triennium, until 1943 - an honour that has not been accorded to anyone else since 1920.

Parallel with this came a tremendous growth in club numbers and activities in Ulster. Whereas in 1923 there were 128 affiliated clubs in the province, by 1929 there were 257. Clubs were becoming more solid and stable in structure, and competing in more regular games in local leagues and the annual county championships. The Ulster Council finally got its house in order too; Gerry Arthurs (Ard Mhacha), having been appointed secretary (and *de facto* treasurer) from 1934, quickly sorted out the council's tangled finances and produced balance-sheets that at last showed a profit resulting from the ever-greater crowds at Ulster championship games. The rituals around games in this period were unapologetically nationalist, with the introduction of a rule in 1933 directing that the tricolour be flown at all games and the increasing rendition of *Amhrán na bhFiann* at big games. The sense of national occasion on big days in Croke Park was also enhanced by the construction of the Hogan Stand in the 1920s and the Cusack Stand in the 1930s; and by live radio broadcasts on Raidió Éireann, with commentary from the renowned voice of Michael O'Hehir from 1938 onwards. The links between the Catholic Church and the GAA became particularly obvious as well: priests began to occupy prominent positions on county boards and in clubs; clubs in turn became more closely aligned with parishes; the crest of the association incorporated the Celtic cross; and

following the playing of *Faith of our Fathers*, bishops threw in the ball to start big games. Not all of the conduct was of the holiest order, however. Violence and melees on the field of play continued to dog Gaelic games, and would remain an issue for decades to come.



Pictorial representation of some of the skills of Gaelic football produced for the American public before Cavan's match with New York in 1934.

7

The 1940s: Advancing through Adversity

Despite the obvious hardship brought about by World War Two, the GAA proved remarkably resilient, and nowhere more so than in Ulster. Whereas some competitions in other sports in the north of Ireland were suspended during the war, most GAA activity continued, and indeed in several respects the association thrived. Restrictions on travel did limit the number of games in many instances, but a localised focus was always one that suited the GAA, being as deeply rooted as it was in parish and community. Towards the latter end of the war the numbers of affiliated clubs in Ulster reached new peaks: 320 in 1944, and 349 in 1945. Outdoor sporting and cultural festivals under the aegis of the GAA, such as *aeridheachtaí*, seemed to increase further in popularity. At administrative level, the association remained very much pledged to the cause of a Gaelic and united Ireland. Comhairle Uladh went further than any other branch of the GAA in its efforts to promote the Irish language, by awarding scholarships to schoolchildren to *Gaeltachta* and deciding to hold all of its meetings from 1943 onwards *trí mheán na Gaeilge*.

On the field of play, northern teams broke new ground once again. In 1940 Aontroim reached the All-Ireland minor hurling final, and in 1943 the same county shocked the GAA world by beating Gaillimh and Cill Chainnigh in Corrigan Park, Belfast, to reach the All-Ireland senior hurling final for the first time. Although heavily defeated by Corcaigh in the decider, it was a spectacular achievement by Aontroim to progress so far. Ulster achieved a further coup by reaching its first Railway Cup hurling final in 1945.

Gaelic football remained the more popular and successful GAA game in Ulster, however. The province won the Railway Cup football title for the first time in 1942, and retained it in 1943, with a team that was noted for its distinctive hand-passing style. From 1943 the winners of the northern section of the NFL received the Dr Lagan Cup (until the 1960s). Interest in the Ulster Senior Football Championship continued to grow. The development of a new stadium at Clones (Muineachán) in 1944, with its amphitheatric steep hill for spectators, provided an ideal arena to house the swelling crowds. St Tiernach's Park, Clones, duly became synonymous with the Ulster football final. Aontroim broke the



A 1940-41 poster for Cavan indicates the types of businesses that supported the GAA.

lengthy monopoly of the south Ulster counties on the Ulster Senior Football Championship in 1946, and Doire confounded expectations to win the National Football League in 1947. With its supremacy coming under increasing pressure, An Cabhán came back to achieve probably its most famous victory yet, in the All-Ireland football final played on the Polo Grounds, New York. A year later, back on home soil, An Cabhán withstood the challenge of Maigh Eo in the final to retain the title for the first time. There was further evidence of other parts of Ulster coming to the fore among the younger generation of players. The victories of St Patrick's College, Armagh, in the Hogan Cup in 1946, and those by the minors of Tír Eoghain (1947-48) and Ard Mhacha (1949) in their All-Ireland championship augured well.

By the late 1940s the GAA in Ulster was making rapid advances in the provision of grounds elsewhere too. 1947 alone saw the opening of county grounds such as Davitt Park, Lurgan; St Molaise's Park, Irvinestown; and O'Neill Park, Dungannon. A string of other GAA grounds were opened around the province before the decade was out. The magnificent booklets that were published to mark the opening of these facilities formed only one part of an expanding range of promotional literature for the GAA in the north. In addition to the more regular provision of match programmes, the 1940s also saw pioneering efforts to produce club magazines, county yearbooks and an Ulster Gaelic games newspaper. The additional facilities, literature and general documentation reflected

the increasing voluntary commitment of members to their clubs, counties and the association. Paddy O'Rourke, a young player on the Muineachán senior inter-county football team, was appointed secretary of the Inniskeen club in 1946; he served in this capacity for the next fifty-six years, until 2002; and also served as county treasurer from 1970 until his death in 2003.



Left
1943 All-Ireland Hurling final programme



Below
The Ulster hurling team parade before a Railway Cup match at Corrigan Park, Belfast, in 1945.

8

The 1950s: Expansion and Enhancement

The material progress of GAA in Ulster the late 1940s was sustained into the 1950s. The most famous new GAA arena was Casement Park, Belfast, which was opened in 1953, amid much pomp and ceremony. A raft of additional grounds were also being developed, and the idea took hold that each parish club should own not only a Gaelic pitch, but also dressing-rooms and even a hall for extra club activities. The hall and complex of Clann Éireann, Lurgan, which was opened in 1954, became the prototype for the development of GAA social clubs and community centres nationwide in future decades. In any case GAA clubs had to go it alone, because most local councils were very reluctant to provide facilities for Gaelic games.

In 1952 An Cabhán, captained by Mick Higgins, returned once more to claim the Sam Maguire Cup, beating An Mhí in the replayed final. Bréifne supporters did not know that it would be their last such success for the rest of the century, due in part to the tragic deaths of key players P.J. Duke and John Joe O'Reilly, the ravages of emigration and the rising standards of play throughout the province. Ard Mhacha came out of the doldrums to reach the All-Ireland football final of 1953, before a crowd of almost 90,000 people, but narrowly missed out on ultimate victory. Team preparations for the early rounds of the inter-county championship were still not very elaborate. It was by a letter in the post that players learned of their selection for a first-round game, were instructed which items of playing gear to bring with them and where they would be collected, and exhorted to be in peak fitness for the upcoming game. By the latter end of the championship,

however, arrangements were more thoroughgoing, and most teams would go away on training camps for weeks on end before big games. Players on these camps were given money to cover the time that they spent away from their ordinary work, a Central Council investigation into the issue reported that this system of 'broken-time' payments was escalating out of control and endangering the amateur ethos of Gaelic games; accordingly, the GAA congress of 1954 banned full-time training. An unintended consequence of this decision was that it disadvantaged and prevented some sprawling, rural counties - such as An Cabhán, Maigh Eo and Ros Comáin - from repeating their recent All-Ireland triumphs.

In the the Ulster Senior Football Championship, the field was now more level than ever before. After Ard Mhacha's breakthrough in the early part of the decade, Tír Eoghain emerged in 1956-57 with its maiden brace of Ulster senior titles, and the O'Neill County team got to embark



The souvenir programme from the opening of Casement Park Belfast in 1953.

on their own memorable tour of the USA. Doire came good in 1958 to record its first provincial football victory, and An Dún followed suit in 1959. Cause for further joy and hope came with the eventual success of Queen's University in inter-varsity competition. In football, the Sigerson Cup - was won at last by Queen's in 1959. Six years earlier, in 1953, Queen's had (with the help of a few 'external' players) performed one of the greatest upsets in GAA history, by winning the Fitzgibbon Cup final in Belfast, and thus recording a pioneering national triumph for Ulster in hurling - while also appearing on the first Gaelic game to be shown on (BBC) television in Ireland. This was a one-off result, however, and the apparent progress made by Aontroim in hurling in the 1940s had little or no positive impact on other northern counties. Aontroim did achieve another significant honour, though, when Séamus McFerran of Belfast was elected *Uachtarán* of the association from 1955 to 1958.

During the course of the 1950s a great deal of change also took place in relation to how players and spectators travelled. Up to the early part of the decade, the majority of fans going to Ulster championship games would travel by train, and indeed Clones' position as a railway hub for the province was a vital component in the building of the Ulster final tradition in that town. The popularity of the railways declined, however, due to improvements in facilities of road transport, and towards the end of the decade governments north and south began to close down rail-lines. By the eve of the 1960s most followers of a big game in Ulster journeyed by bus or car. The gradual

increase in personal ownership of cars also revolutionised the way inter-county teams prepared for competition. It was now becoming possible for teams in some counties to convene at a central location for mid-week evening training sessions, perhaps twice a week.



A Comhairle Uladh poster advertising the 1952 Ulster Senior Football Championship final and all of the train stops for spectators.

9 Camogie: A Game for Independent Women

While the GAA catered primarily for the menfolk of Ireland, women were conspicuous at many Gaelic games and related events throughout the twentieth century. Women had, moreover, their own version of hurling and a separate organisation to cater for it. *Camóguidheacht* or *camógaíocht*, abbreviated to *camogie*, was devised by members of Conradh na Gaeilge in Dublin in 1903 as a suitable Gaelic game for women, with shorter field-dimensions and less physical contact than hurling. The sport reached Ulster sooner than it spread to Munster, Connacht or most of Leinster, as Fág-an-Bealach camogie team of Newry took to the field in 1904. Camogie made its debut in Belfast and Derry City in 1905, and it was first played in Omagh and parts of Dún na nGall and Muineachán in 1906. By 1908 there were reports of games in An Cabhán and Ard Mhacha. Hence the game appeared in most regions of Ulster within these first five years. For the first few decades, however, it was very difficult to spread and sustain camogie beyond Dublin. The vigorous nature of the sport caused many people to think it unsuitable for ladies, while obtaining transport was problematic, and the nature of female employment and the sacrifices of marriage and motherhood truncated the playing careers of many skilful exponents. Hence the game struggled to take root in any part of the province. In terms of regular national competition camogie was confined to the inter-varsity Ashbourne Cup (which started in 1915), a tournament which owed much to the patronage of Prof. Agnes O Farrelly, a native of An Cabhán and a lecturer at University College Dublin.

It was not until the late 1920s that camogie was reorganised and put on a more permanent basis in Belfast. The growth of the GAA and interest in all aspects of Gaelic culture in the north created a more auspicious environment for the development of the Irishwomen's game. From the late 1920s convent schools gradually began to take up camogie. St Mary's Training College had a team by 1928, and Queen's University by 1932. With more practice among young players, the standard of play improved. Attendant with this progress came an upsurge in interest nationwide and a reorganisation of the game along the same lines as those of the GAA. Parish clubs and county boards were set up all over Ulster. In 1934 the Ulster Council and other provincial councils for camogie were inaugurated, and in the same year the first All-Ireland championship proper took place at last. Some of the issues that were quite controversial for the GAA proved to be much more divisive for An Cumann Camógaíochta, however. In 1934 the camogie body voted to ban its



Ardoyne camogie team on an outing to Hazelwood, north Belfast in 1909.

members from playing in rival or 'foreign' codes - primarily hockey - but in 1939 the efforts to delete this rule resulted in a national split. For the next two years Baile Átha Cliath, Cill Dara and some Corcaigh clubs remained with the original body, while all of the Ulster counties and most of those in the other provinces joined the new organisation. When the schism was healed in 1941, a Belfast woman, Jean McHugh, was elected as national secretary / treasurer. The unity was ruptured once more, however, by a continuing debate over the role of men as officials in the association and an issue about the alleged misappropriation of funds in Munster, factors which combined to cause Corcaigh and several Leinster counties, to withdraw and form another organisation.

Southern woes provided Ulster's opportunity. Aontroim took it. From its final debut in 1945 to 1947, the northern county recorded a remarkable three-in-a-row of All-Ireland senior titles. In the first, Aontroim travelled away to Cappoquin, where they beat Port Láirge, but did not receive the Seán O Duffy Cup (the All-Ireland trophy), because Baile Átha Cliath refused to hand it over. In 1946 and 1947 Aontroim played both national finals at Corrigan Park, Belfast - a home advantage that had a big part in the county's victories over Gaillimh and Baile Átha Cliath respectively. Ulster's successful run ended in 1948, when An Dún suffered a heavy defeat to BÁC in the All-Ireland final. The northern province continued to make its mark at administrative level: A. Hennessy of An Cabhán was the association's president in 1945; and Sighle Nic An Ultaigh of An Dún brought about a reunification of the sport

during her tenure in that office, 1949-53. The Aontroim team of 1947 also contained two future national camogie presidents: Lily Spence and Nancy Mulligan (Murray). In playing terms, Ulster did not enjoy quite as much success in later decades. Aontroim won further All-Ireland senior titles in 1956, 1967 and 1979, but BÁC (with eighteen titles in nineteen years, 1948-67), Corcaigh, Cill Chainnigh and latterly Tiobraid Árann have come to dominate the sport. In the last thirty years camogie has been eclipsed somewhat by the newer and more easily accessible game of women's Gaelic football, and the women's *camán* game has tended to recede to the extent that it has few strongholds outside of the hurling heartlands. Nonetheless, occasional events such as the triumph of O Donovan Rossa's (Belfast) in the All-Ireland senior club championship of 2008 - a first for the north - provide cause for renewed hope for the game of camogie in the province of Ulster.



A schools' camogie game at Portstewart, c.1940s

10

1960-2009: From Triumphs to Troubles and back again

For GAA members in Ulster, the 1960s will always be associated with the breakthrough victories of An Dún in the All-Ireland Senior Football Championship in 1960, 1961 and 1968. While the GAA was proud not to recognise the north-south border in any of its internal matters, it was viewed as a special feat to take the Sam Maguire Cup north of the border for the first time. For many northern nationalists, these feats proved that they were not doomed to subjection in their lives. Players such as Kevin Mussen, the McCartan brothers, Paddy Doherty and Seán O'Neill were held in the highest esteem throughout the province and beyond, not merely as supreme footballers, but also as great ambassadors for Gaelic games. Their successes were watched by record crowds - 90,556 people attended their All-Ireland final against Uibh Fhailí in 1961 - commanded huge publicity in an expanding media environment. The first live broadcasts of Gaelic games on television began in 1962. Colour was introduced into Gaelic sports magazines - and the bold red and black of An Dún made a distinct impact on the nation. The players of An Dún even published three editions of a magazine of their own. Suitably impressed, unionist daily newspapers in Belfast now began to carry reports, albeit limited in size, of Gaelic games as genuine sports. Another leading player, Joe Lennon, published a pioneering book, *Coaching for Gaelic Football*, in 1964, and followed up by organising the first national coaching course for the sport. These developments were not entirely welcomed at central level. Ailf Ó Muirí of Ard Mhacha, Ulster's third president of the GAA (1964-1967), saw the potential for the coaching phenomenon to

encroach on the amateur status of Gaelic games. Ó Muirí himself launched a radical hurling scheme, to spread the game into counties where it was faltering. The scheme helped hurling to make some headway in Ulster, notably in Doire, but not to the extent hoped overall.

The creation of the Youth and Sports Council for Northern Ireland in 1962, under the Stormont Ministry of Education, opened up a new tranche of funding for



Ulster teams began to feature prominently in Gaelic games publications from the 1960s.

sports bodies for capital development projects, and GAA clubs availed of this funding to assist with the development of their pitches, dressing-rooms and halls. Further manifestation of the thawing of relations between the Northern Irish state and the GAA could be seen in the hosting of a civic reception for the victorious An Dún team of 1968 in Unionist-controlled Belfast City Hall. The rescindment of the GAA's bans on its members engaging in rival games and 'foreign' dancing in 1971 further raised expectations that more people would take up Gaelic games and embrace them. The outbreak of the 'troubles' in the late 1960s, however, and the continuing deterioration in civil relations right through the 1970s led to renewed identification of the GAA as a political symbol. The association's ban on members of the RUC, which had long been ignored, now came to be applied as a method of protest against policies of the security forces - not least the military occupation of certain Gaelic grounds. Unionist politicians frequently objected to aspects of the GAA and indeed some engaged in crude characterisations or exaggerations of its nature. Numerous GAA members were killed in the conflict - mostly civilians (of whom many were deliberately targeted by loyalist paramilitaries because of their GAA membership), others republican paramilitaries, and a handful from the Crown forces. Tensions climaxed during the hunger strikes of 1980-81, when branches of the association came under pressure from within their own communities to support the hunger strikers' demands on humanitarian grounds, and some republicans actively sought ways of using GAA clubs and facilities as platforms to make protests. In turn,

some southern GAA officials railed against such gestures, and the consequent north-south friction presented an unwelcome problem for Uachtarán Paddy McFlynn of An Dún (1979-82).

The civil unrest undoubtedly had a negative impact on the standard of Gaelic games in Ulster in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite countless national titles being won at youth and other levels, no All-Ireland senior championship honours came north, with only Ard Mhacha in 1977 and Tír Eoghain in 1986 reaching the football final showpiece, and Aontroim doing likewise in hurling in 1989. On a social level, the importance of the GAA was enhanced all the more. Since the arrival of Scór competitions in 1969 the association has had indoor cultural competitions to complement the outdoor games. As the GAA entered its second century, after 1984, the aspiration of every



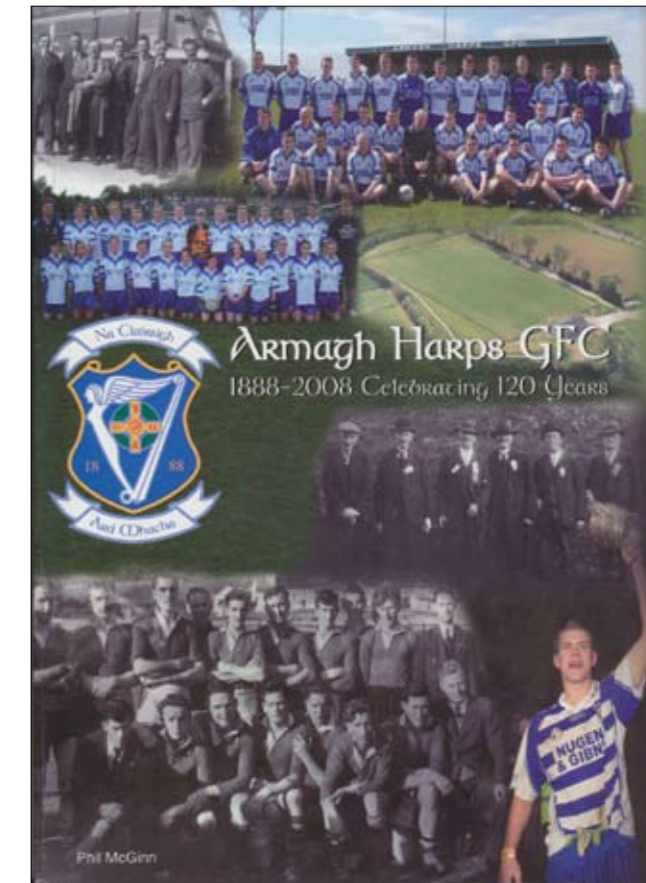
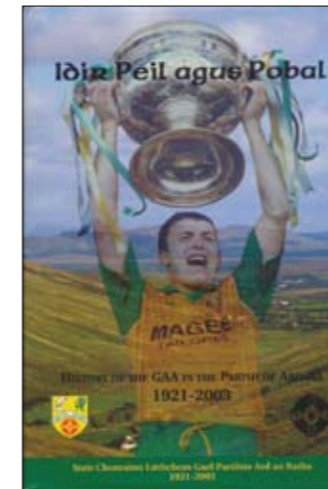
Goalmouth action from the 1970 Tyrone Senior Football final.

club having its own facilities was virtually achieved, and many clubs sought to procure a second playing-field and expand their club premises. Ever more GAA clubs have developed into community clubs and centres. In the last quarter-century myriad history books have been published about the association at all levels, not least the clubs. In a more peaceful climate since the early 1990s - within which the ban on Crown forces was removed in 2001 - Gaelic games have flourished as never before in Ulster. Between 1991 and 2008 the province won eight All-Ireland senior football titles - as many as in the previous 106 years. These were complemented by many other football and hurling honours at other levels, while

handballers from Ulster at last started to claim Irish and world senior titles. In the 2000s Comhairle Uladh found its own permanent home in Ard Mhacha, and proceeded to launch a range of ambitious community initiatives to open up Gaelic games anew to different communities. The unprecedented popularity of Gaelic games may be seen in the huge crowds, many now wearing replica *geansaithe* or county colours in fashion, who pack the revamped Clones, Casement Park, Croke Park and many other grounds; in the playing of these games in dozens of countries in several continents, including among non-Irish peoples today; and in the thousands of youth teams out at practice on their local fields every week.



Action from the Ulster Minor Football final of 1993.



Some of the extensive collection of club histories held in the Gaelic games collection at the Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library and Archive



THE STORY OF GAELIC GAMES IN ULSTER

The Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library and Archive would like to thank the following individuals and bodies for images used in this booklet.

Cavan County Museum.

Comhairle Uladh, CLG.

Eamonn McMahon (Belfast).

Gearóid MacGabhann (Baile Átha Claith).

Gilly McIlhatton (Belfast).

Joe Lavery (Belfast)

Michael Anderson (Poyntzpass).

Micheál Greenan (An Cabhán).

Phil McGinn (Armagh).

Rose O'Rourke (Muineachán).

St. Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh.

The Irish News.

CÓFLA is also grateful to all of those who made items available for use in the wider project and to the Heritage Lottery Fund for its generous support.



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