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Sport and the 1916 Rising

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It is impossible to fully appreciate the forces that led to the Easter Rising of 1916, the Rising itself and moreover how we remember and commemorate the Rising, without a consideration of sport. Indeed, the Rising began against the backdrop of one of the highlights of the Irish sporting calendar. On Monday 24 April 1916, many Dublin citizens were attending the Irish Grand National when Irish republicans occupied major buildings across the city and Patrick Pearse read the Proclamation of the Republic on the steps of the GPO. The early advances of republicans in taking strategic points in Dublin city were helped considerably, furthermore, by the absence from the city of many British military officers present at the horse race, held at Fairyhouse racecourse in county Meath, some 25 kilometres from the capital. This year’s Irish Grand National at Fairyhouse marked this occasion (in an event unlikely to have being received well in 1916) when members of Fingal Old IRA Commemorative Society re-enacted the 1916 Grand National. As noted in the *Irish Times* the following day

The 1916 race was recreated here, in heavily edited form, and without any fences, less that tempt fate. In the event, a horse called “All Sorts” won again, safely with “Civil War” – the 1914 victor – once more trailing back in fourth...The other re-enactment of Grand National day saw members of the Fingal Old IRA Commemorative Society performing armed manoeuvres in period dress, as a tribute to those who fought and won the Battle of Ashbourne on the Friday of Easter Week.¹

This Battle of Ashbourne also had another very significant sporting connection; the commander of the Dublin Volunteers fifth battalion responsible for the attack on a local RIC station was Thomas Ashe, a former captain of the Lispole Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club in Kerry and founder of the Lusk GAA club in county Dublin. Ashe led a force of sixty men in one of the most successful rebel attacks of Easter week when his battalion attacked a large RIC force of fifty men on Friday, killing ten and capturing the rest with the loss of only two volunteers.²

As Ashe’s involvement suggests, of all sporting organisations in Ireland in the early twentieth century, GAA members were more likely to have participated in the Rising. While the level of engagement of GAA members with events leading up to and during the Rising differed considerably across the country, some local organisations and individual members undoubtedly played a significant part. The leadership of the Kerry GAA, for instance, were heavily involved in the lead up to the Rising. The county chairman was Austin Stack, a leading figure in both the

IRB and of the Irish volunteers in the county. Stack used the cover of GAA events to facilitate his revolutionary activities, including the movement of arms from Dublin to Kerry in November 1915 which occurred following the All-Ireland final that year between his county and Wexford.³ There is also evidence that on the night of this all-Ireland final, an informal meeting took place between leaders of the Irish Volunteers and the GAA central council suggesting the increasing links developing between the two organisations.⁴ Stack also employed his GAA connections and local GAA organisation to prepare and potentially facilitate the ill-fated landing of arms from the *Aud*, the German merchant steam ship which was to deliver much of the arms for the Rising but was eventually scuttled by its crew when surrounded by the British navy.⁵

With regard to the Rising itself, as William Murphy has uncovered, there were some 302 GAA players from 53 clubs who participated, almost one-fifth of the estimated 1,500 to 1,800 rebels of Easter Week.⁶ There is some evidence of significant participation by a limited number of Dublin GAA clubs in particular, with 69 “members of the St. Laurence O’Toole Club alone taking part in the fighting”.⁷ During the Rising, GAA men were to be found in all major positions across Dublin city held by the rebels. Present in the GPO were leading GAA activists J.J. Walsh (chairman of the Cork GAA and future Postmaster General in the Free State government), Domhnall Ó Buachalla (captain of the Kildare football team, leader of the Maynooth volunteers and future Governor general of the Irish Free State), and Éamon Bulfin (forth from left in the back row of Image 1) captain of UCD’s 1915 Sigerson Cup winning football team and the man responsible for raising the Tricolour over the GPO on Easter Monday 1916.⁸



Image 1: Sigerson Cup winning UCD team from 1915 with Éamon Bulfin – the man who raised the tricolour over the GPO on Easter Monday 1916 – fourth from left in the back row. (UCD Sports Centre)⁹

The Dublin volunteers third battalion, who took control of Boland's mills under the command of Éamon de Valera (who we will return to shortly), also included players from a number of GAA clubs including Sandymount, St Andrew's, and Fontenoy.¹⁰ In one of the more poignant moments in the Rising, this force would attack early in the week a unit of the Irish Rugby Union Football Corps, recruited from members of the Irish Rugby Football Union and under the command of the IRFU's president, Lieutenant-Col. Francis Henry Browning (also a prominent Irish cricketer who had represented his country in international matches). Browning had been instrumental in encouraging rugby players to join up with the British army during the war; he was the driving force behind the Corps issuing a circular to Dublin Rugby Clubs in 1914 encouraging members to join up. Almost 200 enlisted at Lansdowne Road, in D company of the 7th Battalion of the Dublin Fusiliers and were eventually sent to Gallipoli where many lost their lives; those older (such as Browning who was almost 50 in 1916) or "unfit" remained in Dublin to establish a "home guard". This home guard was ambushed by the Volunteers on Haddington Road on the first day of the Rising and Browning and four other IRFU members were killed.¹¹

As already noted with regard to the Battle of Ashbourne, outside of Dublin GAA members were heavily involved in the Rising; most of the approximately 500 men who carried

out attacks on police stations in Galway on Easter Monday were members of local GAA clubs.¹² Similarly in Wexford, prominent GAA men Seán Etchingham and Seamus Doyle “used the pretext of an Easter Sunday GAA match in Wexford Park to cover their turnout for the Rising. They managed to advance upon and hold Enniscorthy for several days before surrendering.”¹³

With regard to the leaders of the 1916 Rising, of the fifteen men eventually executed, five had significant GAA connections, including Eamon Ceannt, Con Colbert, Michael O Hanrahan, Sean McDermott and the spokesman for the Rising, Patrick Pearse.¹⁴ Pearse, through the St. Enda’s school he established, had stressed the importance of Gaelic games to his students and the connection of hurling in particular with an ancient and glorious Celtic and Gaelic past. Other celebrated figures captured after the Rising, including Harry Boland (who refereed the 1914 All-Ireland Football Final) and Michael Collins, were also prominent within the GAA. Collins, who would go on to have a pivotal role in the subsequent War of Independence, played hurling and football with the Geraldine GAA club in London (while working at the Post Office Savings Bank in West Kensington) and eventually became treasurer of the club, a role that no doubt provided him with early relevant experience for his position as Minister for Finance in the first provisional Irish government prior to independence from April 1919 – 22 August 1922.¹⁵

Despite the involvement of these GAA members and some local GAA organisations, it would be wrong, however, to interpret this as widespread support across the GAA for physical force nationalism prior to the Rising. Indeed, the sad reality is that more members of the GAA experienced the trauma of World War 1 as members of the British army than participated in the Rising; as current GAA president Aogán Ó Fearghail has noted “There were far more GAA members in the general sense involved in [WWI] than in the War of Independence or 1916. There’s no doubt about that.”¹⁶ Two prominent examples were county Wexford’s James Rossitor and county Clare’s John Fox both of whom fought with the British Army in World War One. Rossitor who featured in the 1913 all-Ireland football final and scored the winning goal in the 1914 Leinster football final, enlisted in the British army shortly after and died of his wounds in France ten days before the 1915 All-Ireland football final which Wexford won, defeating the Kerry team that beat them in 1913. John Fox played on the 1914 Clare hurling team which won the all-Ireland hurling final before joining the British army with the Munster Fusiliers. Though injured at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, he survived but lived for the remainder of his life with a piece of shrapnel lodged in his head. The involvement of both Rossitor and Fox in the British army suggests the complexities of sporting allegiances in early twentieth Ireland.

Furthermore, in the immediate aftermath of the Rising the GAA's response was not that of an organisation supportive of the revolutionary events during Easter Week. The association issued a statement distancing itself from the events and contending that allegations "that the Gaelic Athletic Association had been used in furtherance of the objectives of the Irish Volunteers are as untrue as they are unjust".¹⁷ Furthermore, the GAA engaged actively with the British authorities later in 1916 to protect the organisation's operations, including sending a deputation to General Sir John Maxwell (the man responsible for introducing martial law into Ireland and ordering the executions following the Rising) "in an attempt to secure GAA exclusion from taxation and to arrange for the provision of special trains to GAA matches", actions that do not suggest an organisation with revolutionary political priorities.¹⁸

The focus on the GAA in discussions of the Rising has also tended to obscure the relevance of other sports to the events of that week. While I have already noted the involvement of rugby players with the British army, there were also a considerable number of men who played other sports, including rugby and soccer, participating on the rebel side. This is most famously evident in the figure of Éamon de Valera, one of the few commanders of the 1916 Rising not executed for his actions. De Valera was a highly regarded rugby player during his student days at Blackrock College in Dublin. According to Seamus J. King, while working subsequently as a maths teacher in Rockwell College in County Tipperary from 1903, De Valera was part of the college's rugby team that reached the Munster Cup Final.¹⁹ Indeed, De Valera believed strongly that every Irishman should play rugby, claiming that the sport suited the Irish psyche. As he famously remarked, "There is no football game to match rugby. If all our young men played rugby not only would we beat England and Wales, but France and the whole lot of them together."²⁰ With regard to association football, the rebel group that held the Metropole Hotel during the Rising was led by Belfast Celtic goalkeeper Oscar Traynor who would later serve following independence in a range of cabinet positions, including as the country's longest-serving Minister for Defence.²¹ There is also evidence of a considerable number of other soccer players being involved in the events of Easter week and subsequent revolutionary activities.²²

Apart from Gaelic games, rugby and soccer, republican activism was also evident among followers of other sports. A less commented upon sport that arguably had a more practical importance during the Rising was cycling. Bicycles were a major means of transport for both sides during Easter Week. However, the 1916 rebels had the advantage of having two cycling Olympians on their side. Michael and John Walker had competed for Ireland with the Olympic cycling team in the 200-mile road race in Stockholm in 1912. The Walker brothers were based at Jacob's biscuit factory under the command of proclamation signatory Thomas MacDonagh but

spent much of their time as couriers conveying messages across the city; as familiar figures on Dublin's streets, they delivered many dispatches successfully by bike without challenge. In 1948, Michael Walker gave a witness statement of their actions remarking, "My brother John and myself, being well-known racing cyclists at this period, had been appointed by our Coy. as men who were each to mobilise at short notice so many members of the Coy. whenever they would be required."²³

Finally, Cricket – not a sport readily associated with the rebel side during the Rising – nonetheless has its place in the lives of leading figures and during the event itself, a place that speaks volumes regarding the complexity of sporting allegiances and interests in Ireland. Patrick Pearse, while placing great emphasis on Irish culture, sport and particularly hurling in his school St. Enda's, also admired cricket, allowing students to vote every summer on whether they wanted to play hurling or cricket.²⁴ The same Jacob's Factory where the Walker brothers were based during the Rising also apparently witnessed a cricket demonstration by one of two British soldiers held prisoner there for much of the week. The soldier concerned was adept as a cricketing spin bowler, a skill of some interest to commander Thomas McDonagh. The soldier was a skilled practitioner of the "googly", a specialist type of delivery bowled by a right-arm leg spin bowler. Using a tennis ball and improvised cricket bat from a piece of floorboard, McDonagh had the soldier demonstrate the skill to him and fellow combatants.²⁵



Image 2: 'The Cricket Bat that died for Ireland'

There is a further remarkable connection between 1916 and cricket, evident in what has come to be referred to as 'the cricket bat that died for Ireland'. The bat concerned, which is held in the Historical Collections of the National Museum of Ireland, was on display during the Rising in the front of Elvery's sports store on O'Connell Street, then Sackville Street. Located quite close to the GPO, Elvery's was caught in the cross-fire of Easter week, and the bat continues to hold evidence of this – a bullet most likely fired (as it is a .303 calibre) by a British soldier. The irony of this symbol of Britishness been struck by a British bullet during Easter

week has not been lost on subsequent commentators.²⁶ Furthermore, it reminds us of the prominent place cricket played in Irish society and culture in the decades previous to the Rising itself, as a sport that initially crossed class and religious divides. Indeed, cricket was a popular pastime in Ireland with both the gentry and tenant classes for over a century, and up until the launch of the GAA in 1884 was arguably the most popular team sport played in the country.²⁷ Moreover, the launch of the GAA was partly in response to the popularity of cricket and concerns that what was perceived as a foreign sport by the GAA's founders was displacing indigenous pastimes. The politicisation of sporting life subsequently would contribute greatly to the decline of the sport in Ireland.

As in Ireland today, sport had an important place in the lives of those who participated in the Easter Rising, though the reasons for people's engagement with it, and its many forms, varied considerably. Certainly politics and political persuasion was a factor for some, and the social occasions that sport facilitated provided the opportunity for like-minded individuals to discuss and inform themselves on the political issues of the day. However, as noted by historian Richard McElligott "Around the world and in Ireland from the end of the 19th century, far more people are involved in sporting activities than ever were in political parties or revolutionary bodies. A lot more people right from the 19th century until today have sport in their daily lives than they ever have any interaction with politics or governments or revolutionary organisations."²⁸ It would be wrong therefore to simplistically relate sporting preference with political affiliation – the story of sport and politics in Ireland is one more complex and in some ways more strange than popular representation or memory may allow.

Endnotes

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⁴ W. F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish nationalist politics, 1884-1924* (Dublin : Gill and Macmillan, 1987), p. 175.

⁵ Anthony J. Gaughan, *Austin Stack: Portrait of a Separatist* (Dublin : Kingdom Books, 1977), p. 45.

⁶ William Murphy, 'The G.A.A. During the Irish Revolution, 1913-23', in M. Cronin, W. Murphy and P. Rouse (eds.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884 – 2009* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. 67-68.

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⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ For further on Browning and the Irish Rugby Union Football Corps, see Michael Pegum, "Frank Browning – a casualty of the 1916 Easter Rising" <<https://www.tcd.ie/Library/1916/frank-browning-a-casualty-of-the-1916-easter-rising/>>; and "D Company, 7th Battalion RDF", <<http://www.dublin-fusiliers.com/battaliions/7-batt/d-coy/d-coy.html>>

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- ¹⁴ W. F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish nationalist politics, 1884-1924* (Dublin : Gill and Macmillan, 1987), p. 178.
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- ¹⁶ Seán Moran, "The GAA and the 1916 Rising: Playing a major part in our history", *The Irish Times*, Mar 5, 2016, < <http://www.irishtimes.com/sport/gaelic-games/the-gaa-and-the-1916-rising-playing-a-major-part-in-our-history-1.2560719>>
- ¹⁷ Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 232.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 233.
- ¹⁹ Seamus J. King, "Rockwell Senior Rugby Team", *Tipperary Association Yearbook*, 1981/82, pp. 37-39.
- ²⁰ Quoted in "Flashback 1973: Dev and Childers at the All-Ireland final", *Irish Independent*, 27 September 2015, <<http://www.independent.ie/life/flashback-1973-dev-and-childers-at-the-allireland-final-31551989.html>>
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- ²³ Graham Healy, "The Irish Olympic cyclist who fought in the Easter Rising", *The Bike Comes First*, Oct 19, 2015, <<http://www.thebikecomesfirst.com/the-irish-olympic-cyclist-who-fought-in-the-easter-rising/>>
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- ²⁶ See for example Brenda Malone, "The Cricket Bat that Died for Ireland", *Irish Independent*, 3 Mar. 2016, <<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/1916/rising-life/the-cricket-bat-that-died-for-ireland-34510610.html>>
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