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“Ar son an Náisiúin”:
The National Film
Institute of Ireland’s
All-Ireland Films¹

ON 4 SEPTEMBER 1948 the *Irish Independent* carried a small announcement on page ten indicating that the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) had authorized the filming of the All-Ireland hurling and football finals of that year. These finals were to be filmed by the National Film Institute (NFI) of Ireland, set up three years earlier, and this announcement marked the beginning of the first sustained period of indigenous filming of Gaelic games in Ireland. Although important research has been done on the crucial link between the codification and popularization of Gaelic games in Ireland and the development of Irish nationalism in the late nineteenth century, the role that filmic representations of sport may have played in this developing process in the twentieth century has as yet been the subject of limited investigation.² This article builds on previous research about the representation of Gaelic games in early newsreels between 1920 and 1939 in order to consider the filmic depictions of All-Ireland finals produced by the NFI and their role, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, in representing and affirming the Irish nation through

1. I want to acknowledge the generous support of the staff of the Irish Film Institute’s (IFI) Irish Film Archive, especially that of Kasandra O’Connell, Sunniva O’Flynn, and Rebecca Grant, in the completion of this article, including the archive’s permission to use screencaps from its films and records featured in this article. I also want to thank Bill Morrison, former senior publicity officer with Bord Fáilte, and Professor Mike Cronin, academic director, Boston College-Ireland, for information provided regarding Bord Fáilte and Aer Lingus.

2. See, for example, W. F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics, 1884–1924* (London: Christopher Helm, 1987); and Mike Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic Games, Soccer, and Irish Identity since 1884* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999).

sport.³ These films also offer fascinating insights into Irish society in the postwar period, while sharing intriguing links with one of the most accomplished (and controversial) sports films ever made, Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938).

FILMING GAELIC GAMES AFTER IRISH INDEPENDENCE

The first two decades of independence saw little indigenous film work produced in Ireland, with coverage of Gaelic games left primarily to foreign newsreel companies. These representations, found in Pathé, Movietone, and British Gaumont Newsreels and less often in some American major studio shorts, though important as among the only moving-image representations of players of the period we have, nonetheless sometimes presented these games condescendingly. Even where depictions were more positively disposed, the narration, offered in contrived, clipped, upper-class “Oxford” accents, often indicated less about the sport and more about the lack of understanding of Gaelic games among British commentators.⁴ The GAA itself expressed alarm at some of the more questionable representations; the release in Britain and Ireland in 1937 of one particularly offensive depiction of Irish sport, the short film *Hurling* (figure 1) produced by MGM in 1936, motivated a delegation from the GAA to visit the Irish film censor and demand that offensive scenes be removed.⁵

THE NFI OF IRELAND

The year 1936 would also be crucial for the facilitation of indigenous filming in Ireland, including that of Gaelic games. In 1936 Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical “*Vigilanti Cura*,” which recognized the potentially “great advantage to learning and to educa-

3. See Seán Crosson and Dónal McAnallen, “‘Croke Park Goes Plumb Crazy’: Pathé Newsreels and Gaelic Games,” *Media History* 17, no. 2 (2011): 161–76.

4. *Ibid.*, 165–67.

5. For further information on this film, see Seán Crosson, “‘Shillalah Swing Time. . . You’ll Thrill Each Time a Wild Irishman’s Skull Shatters’: Representing Hurling in American Cinema, 1930–1960,” in *Screening Irish-America: Representing Irish-America in Film and Television*, ed. Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 148–64.

FIGURE I. Press sheet for the 1936 MGM film *Hurling*, which described the game as “Ireland’s athletic assault and battery.” Press sheet kindly supplied by Paul Balbirnie. Copy available at http://www.irishfilmposter.com/hurling_presssheet.html.



tion” of the cinema.⁶ Pope Pius’s words inspired clergy members to get more involved in film production and eventually to organize the NFI of Ireland in 1945 under the patronage of Dr. John Charles McQuaid, archbishop of Dublin. The Institute was initially set up to import and distribute educational films around Irish schools and parish halls but soon began making films of its own. From the beginning these films would place a strong emphasis on affirming and celebrating the still relatively new independent state of Ireland. This is apparent in one of its first documentary films, *A Nation Once Again* (Brendan Stafford, 1946), made to mark the centenary of the death of Thomas Davis, the leader of the nationalist Young Ireland movement of the 1840s. Described by Ruth Barton as “a classic instance of the use of history as a legitimizing discourse,”⁷ the film provided, as the title suggests, a nationalist and uncontested account of Irish history and identity. While exploring Davis’s legacy and celebrating his political ideals, it prominently featured Eamon de Valera, the then taoiseach, as well as aspects of Irish society and culture, including Gaelic games. In one sequence, narrating over images of Gaelic football and Irish dancing, Dan O’Herlihy reminds us that Davis’s teaching is “the sure basis on which to plan a united nation, free from shore to shore, and the hope of all true Irishmen is that in

6. Pope Pius XI, “Vigilanti Cura: Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XI on the Motion Picture,” *The Holy See*, accessed May 2012, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_29061936_vigilanti-cura_en.html.

7. Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 67.

this as in most things else this man was prophet as well as leader.” Thus O’Herlihy connects Gaelic games, a set of sports that operated then as now on an All-Ireland basis, with Irish nationalism and its ambition for a united Ireland, a theme that would be continued in the Institute’s highlights films of All-Ireland finals.

Among the original directors of the Institute was Pádraig Ó Caoimh, the then ard-rúnaí (general secretary) of the GAA. Following the 1947 All-Ireland football final between Cavan and Kerry in New York, Ó Caoimh realized the importance of and demand in Ireland for quality moving-image representations of Gaelic games.

The highlights footage of this match, shot by New York-based Winik films under Ó Caoimh’s supervision, was a major attraction in Irish cinemas and parish halls, particularly in the counties featured. This is evident, for example, in the film’s prominence in advertisements from the period where it was frequently given billing above popular Hollywood fare (figures 2 and 3). Inspired by this success, Ó Caoimh set about facilitating through the Institute the filming of highlights of all subsequent All-Ireland finals.



FIGURE 2. Advertisement for screening of the 1947 All-Ireland football final, *The Anglo-Celt*, 20 September 1947.



FIGURE 3. A further advertisement from *The Anglo-Celt*, 11 October 1947.

THE NFI'S ALL-IRELAND FILMS

The Institute's films of All-Ireland finals are each about ten minutes in length, following the pattern of the popular short of the 1947 final. This was also the approximate length of the one-reel films that preceded features in Irish cinemas during this period, including sport-themed shorts such as *Hurling* (1936). Although this brevity was criticized in the press at the time,⁸ these highlights packages were nonetheless a considerable improvement on previous newsreel depictions of Gaelic games, which were rarely longer than 2½ minutes, and offered more detailed accounts of the buildup and the role of these games in national life. In some instances, as in the highlights of both the 1949 All-Ireland football and hurling finals, additions include footage of teams in training before the final itself. Some of the highlights packages, such as the film of the 1948 hurling All-Ireland, also feature the arrival of supporters from all over the country to Dublin on final day, while scenes outside Croke Park prior to the throw-in are found on many of the packages. Some films featured the parade of supporters to the stadium, as in the shots of Dublin followers processing from Fairview and Marino behind a horse-drawn carriage prior to the 1958 football final. These shots offer fascinating renderings of the urban space prior to games—with crowds arriving at Kingsbridge Station (renamed Heuston in 1966) and gathering on O'Connell Street—as well as visual depictions of the various means of transport to games during that period, from bicycle to horse and cart, to car and bus. One shot from the 1948 football-final highlights shows the back of an open-top cattle lorry packed with standing supporters. Most of the film packages also include highlights of the minor final that preceded the senior game.

Film production of the games themselves now involved two cameras rather than the one used previously in newsreel footage; the films also provided considerably fuller coverage (though by no means comprehensive), including identification of prominent players by name, a rare occurrence in previous newsreel footage of All-Ireland finals. Given the stature of the players and teams featured in these highlights packages, including nine players from the GAA hurling and eleven from the GAA football teams of the millennium,

8. "All-Ireland Final Film," *Tuam Herald*, 3 Nov. 1956.

it is not surprising that they became popular cinema attractions in the pre-television era.⁹ These films also provided vital instructional tools for Gaelic clubs training young players in both Gaelic football and hurling across the country throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. However, correspondence between the NFI and the GAA indicates that the Institute had some difficulties extracting payment for films hired, and not all films loaned were returned. As the Institute's secretary G. J. McCanny remarked in one letter to the association's development director, "The attached invoice has been treated as if it were a hurling ball, having been pucked to and fro between here and Croke Park, and I'm anxious it should come to rest."¹⁰ It would appear that the NFI had particular problems in reacquiring films loaned to clubs across the border, as is evident in another letter from McCanny to the GAA: "We cannot agree to supply Six-County residents with films. We have experienced too much difficulty in the past even in cases where the film has been collected here, and too many films which we know were definitely posted to us failed to reach us."¹¹

PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND RECEPTION OF THE NFI'S ALL-IRELAND FILMS

The All-Ireland films were initially shot with two cameras, each positioned on the Hogan stand side of the field, and the rushes were sent on Sunday evening to London for development. The next morning, Seán O'Sullivan, the first secretary of the NFI, accompanied by Mícheál O'Hehir (who provided the commentary until the late 1950s), traveled by plane to the Carlton Hill Studios in London, where the sound and commentary were added.¹² These films, dis-

9. See, for example, "Competitions for Sixty Juvenile Hurling Teams," *Kerryman*, 27 Mar. 1965, for a report of the use of the NFI All-Ireland films for instructional purposes in County Kerry.

10. G. J. McCanny to Mr. Prenderville, Gaelic Athletic Association, 5 Oct. 1977. See Irish Film Institute (IFI), Item Number 16245, Box 317.

11. G. J. McCanny to M. de Prionnbhiol (draft), Gaelic Athletic Association, 25 July 1975. See IFI, Item Number 16256, Box 317.

12. These details were given by Seán O'Sullivan in the documentary series *Memories in Focus* (Peter Canning, *Memories in Focus* [Dublin: RTÉ, 1995]).



FIGURE 4. Cameramen preparing to film the 1957 All-Ireland football final. Courtesy of the IFI Irish Film Archive.

tributed initially by Abbey Films, were screened as short attractions before feature films in cinemas around the country by Friday of the following week. They proved popular above all in the counties featured in the All-Irelands themselves, particularly before the advent of live television coverage of All-Irelands after the establishment of Telefís Éireann in 1962.

Beginning in 1948 George Fleischmann (figure 6) filmed the matches with assistance from the English-born sound technician Peter Hunt. From 1953 onward, Brendan Stafford, assisted by Robert Monks, took on the filming responsibilities, supported by various other cameramen including Vincent Corcoran, Tommy Hayde, and Pádraig Thornton, and continuing in the role into the mid-1960s. In a significant piece of self-reflexive footage, the buildup to the 1957 football final includes images of the cameramen climbing to their elevated position before the game and beginning to film (figure 4).

Particularly in the early years, the footage is clearly the work of cameramen learning the art of filming Gaelic games and challenged above all by the speed of play and the size of the ball used in hurling, as well as by the limitations of the technology that required reloading of film stock at short, regular intervals. During the period of Monk's involvement cameramen shot the games on Newman Sinclair 35 mm cameras hired from London. These were clockwork cameras that could hold a maximum of two hundred feet of film—equivalent to approximately two minutes of footage—before the magazines had to be reloaded.¹³

13. Robert Monks, Personal Interview, 17 Apr. 2008.

As a result, filmmakers missed many of the scores, and it is sometimes difficult to follow individual passages of the play, although the commentary of Mícheál O’Hehir in particular nonetheless manages to communicate some of the excitement and significance of the occasion. Another commentator who featured regularly in the packages by the late 1950s was Frank Ryan, who spent a period as secretary of the NFI.

As with the 1947 final film, announcements for these films featured prominently, sometimes above titles of popular Hollywood releases, especially in local newspapers (figure 5), while newspaper reports indicate that local audiences took considerable interest in the sports screenings. The *Meath Chronicle* of 9 October 1954 describes the film of the 1954 Meath-Kerry All-Ireland football final, for instance, as one that viewers “should not miss,” after being screened to “enthusiastic audiences” in the Lyric and Palace cinemas at Navan and in the Savoy at Kells.¹⁴ The *Tuam Herald* of 3 November 1956 also described the “great interest taken in the NFI’s film of the All-Ireland football final shown at the Mall and Odeon cinemas this week. Sean Purcell and Frank Stockwell [two of Galway’s star players at the time] were guests at the Mall on Monday night, and the two Tuam men heard the Croke Park plaudits re-echo in the cinema when they flashed on the screen.”¹⁵

In addition to the 35 mm prints sent to cinemas until the late 1950s, 16 mm prints produced from the mid-1950s were exhibited in clubs and parish halls around the country by using mobile projectors from the NFI. By 1958 the Institute was filming the games on 16 mm rather than 35 mm and would continue with this format in subsequent years. Prints of the finals were also occasionally screened abroad, including to Irish soldiers in the Congo in 1960¹⁶ and to viewers in London, New York, and Cyprus.¹⁷ The 1960 Rome Olympics also included a special screening of the Institute’s films of the football and hurling finals from the previous year.¹⁸ Footage from

14. “Gaelic Fields and Forum,” *Meath Chronicle*, 9 Oct. 1954.

15. “All-Ireland Final Film,” *Tuam Herald*, 3 Nov. 1956.

16. “Final Crowd May be a Record,” *Irish Independent*, 23 Sept. 1960.

17. “London Calling,” *Irish Independent*, 27 Oct. 1961; G. J. McCanny to Seán Ó Siocháin (draft), Gaelic Athletic Association, 8 Aug. 1969 (IFI, Item Number 16267, Box 317); and Tom Hyde, National Film Institute, to unknown recipient, 24 Oct. 1967 (IFI, Item Number 16292, Box 317).

18. “Irish Films for Olympic Games,” *Irish Independent*, 21 July 1961.

FIGURE 5.
Announcement for the
showing of the All-Ireland
hurling final in 1953,
Munster Express,
2 October 1953.

Showing at THE COLISEUM, WATERFORD, on FRIDAY
and SATURDAY, 2nd & 3rd OCTOBER. First - Run
Presentation Film.

EXTRA—The All-Ireland Hurling Final, 1953—CORK
v. GALWAY—Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Watch Out for FOOTBALL FINAL—Kerry v. ARMAGH.

Matinees: Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

Sunday and Monday Nights at 8.15. Other Nights, 8 o'clock.

Friday, 2nd October (TWO days)—John IRELAND, Lloyd
BRIDGES, Marie WINDSOR in THE FIGHTING SEVENTH.
Also Sid MELTON, Iris ADRIAN in STOP THAT CAB.

the Institute's film of the 1962 hurling final was incorporated into an episode of the popular series *Irish Diary*, broadcast on twenty U.S. channels in the mid-1960s.¹⁹ The British Broadcasting Corporation aired highlights of the football film taken from the Institute's footage in 1957 before filming highlights from some finals themselves from 1959 onward.²⁰ The films also enjoyed some critical success at film festival screenings, winning awards in 1956 and 1958 at the Festival of Sports Pictures at Cortina d'Ampezzo in Italy.²¹ Indeed, by the end of the 1950s the films had become a crucial source of revenue for the Institute; minutes from the Institute's Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting of 3 January 1958 noted that "the estimated profit on the GAA films in 1957 would be between £180 and £200," a not inconsiderable sum at the time.²²

Initially working in black-and-white, the Institute began filming in color beginning with the All-Ireland football final of 1958, partly in response to competing newsreels of All-Irelands emerging first from Universal Irish News in that year and subsequently from Gael

19. Mick Dunne, "U.S. Viewers to See Hurling," *Irish Press*, 14 July 1964.

20. "Croke Park Can Hold 76,000 for Final," *Irish Independent*, 20 Sept. 1957; Kenneth Wolstenholme, "Why Keep This Great Game Such a Big Secret?" *Sunday Press*, 13 Sept. 1959.

21. "Italian Award for Film of G.A.A. Matches," *Irish Independent*, 7 Mar. 1956; "People and Places," *Irish Press*, 9 Jan. 1961.

22. Minutes of Finance and General Purposes Committee Meeting, National Film Institute of Ireland, 3 Jan. 1958 (IFI).

Linn's *Amharc Éireann* series.²³ The color footage also provided a distinguishing aspect for the Institute's films from the black-and-white televised images broadcast by Telefís Éireann from the All-Ireland football semifinal between Kerry and Dublin in 1962.

PARALLELS WITH *OLYMPIA* (1938): "AR SON AN NÁISIÚIN"

Of all of the cameramen who filmed All-Irelands for the NFI, George Fleischmann (figure 6) had both the most colorful history and arguably the greatest influence on the initial style and focus of the films themselves, a focus that continued to be evident after Fleischmann's departure in 1953. He was a *Sonderführer Lt.* (or specialist leader) with the *Luftwaffe* during World War II, and his plane was shot down over Ireland in 1941. Fleischmann was subsequently interned in the Curragh until the end of the war, then remained in the country.²⁴



FIGURE 6. George Fleischmann. *Memories in Focus* [Documentary Series]. Dir. Peter Canning. Dublin: RTÉ, 1995.

Fleischmann's arrival in Ireland, while unexpected and uninvited, was fortunate for the development of sports filming in the country. His specialty was operating a camera: he trained at the Berlin Film Academy and worked for *Universum-Film A.G.* (UFA), the major film studio in Germany, during the 1930s and 1940s.²⁵ At the end of the war Fleischmann received

a statement from the German authorities indicating that the camera was his to keep; it was returned to his possession, along with

23. Louis Marcus to Luke Dodd, Head of Irish Film Archive, 14 Oct. 1998 (IFI, ARC 52); Monks, Personal Interview, 17 Apr. 2008.

24. Canning, *Memories in Focus*; Patrick J. Cummins, "Emergency" *Air Accidents—South-East Ireland, 1940–1945* (Waterford: Aviation History Ireland, 2003), 45.

25. Harvey O'Brien, *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 79.

the rest of his filming equipment.²⁶ In a sign of the scarcity of such equipment in Ireland in the postwar period, Fleischmann quickly became a much-sought-after cameraman.²⁷

During Fleischmann's time with UFA he had worked as a camera operator on Leni Riefenstahl's sports documentary *Olympia* (1938), the seminal depiction of the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics. Whereas it would be wrong to overstate the similarities, particularly given the Fascist context of 1930s Germany and the vastly superior resources available to Riefenstahl, there are nonetheless intriguing parallels between *Olympia* and the early Institute films of All-Irelands. First, there are similarities in the filming of the games themselves. This is most evident when one compares the filming of association football in the second of the two related films that Riefenstahl made of the 1936 Olympics, *Olympia 2. Teil—Fest der Schönheit* (1938), with the NFI's All-Ireland films in the late 1940s. Both adopt similar principal camera positions—one elevated camera from the stand at midfield and one roving camera to the right of this position behind the goal (figures 7 and 8, figures 9 and 10). As the Institute continued to film All-Ireland finals, their camera positions evolved to more elevated positions closer to both goals in an attempt to capture more scores.

A second parallel between *Olympia* and the NFI films is the prominence of radio commentators in both productions. In the original version of *Olympia*, Germany's leading radio commenta-



FIGURES 7 and 8. Screen grabs from the NFI footage of the 1949 (above) and 1948 All-Ireland hurling finals. Courtesy of the IFI Irish Film Archive.

26. Canning, *Memories in Focus*.

27. O'Brien, *Real Ireland*, 79.



FIGURES 9 and 10. Screen grabs from the 1936 Olympic Games Association Football final. *Olympia*. Dir. Leni Riefenstahl. Berlin: Olympia-Film, 1938.

tor Dr. Paul Laven²⁸ introduces events, describes athletes, and provides running commentary on the various competitions featured in the film. Indeed, radio commentators figure prominently in the film itself, apparently (as their language and appearance would suggest) from Italy, France, Japan, Spain, the U.S., and Germany, all of whom are filmed seemingly broadcasting the games live from Berlin, although the images were actually recorded after the event (figures 11 and 12).

In a similar fashion Pádraig Ó Caoimh arranged for the leading Irish radio sports commentator of the time, Mícheál O’Hehir, to provide the commentary for the NFI All-Ireland films until

the late 1950s. From the establishment of 2RN in 1926, radio played a central role in the popularization of Gaelic games via live coverage of matches, most famously through the distinctive and thrilling voice of O’Hehir, who began broadcasting in 1938.²⁹ Indeed, O’Hehir is often prominently featured in the work itself (figure 13); producers clearly wanted to build on his huge radio following by depicting him relaying the action to “wireless” sets across the nation during the game. Some of the highlights packages also include images of families gathered around the radio, listening to the games themselves (figure 14).

28. Larry Hartenian, “The Role of Media in Democratizing Germany: United States Occupation Policy, 1945–1949,” *Central European History* 20, no. 2 (1987): 184.

29. Raymond Boyle, “From Our Gaelic Fields: Radio, Sport, and Nation in Post-Partition Ireland,” *Media, Culture, and Society* 14, no. 4 (1992): 623–36.



FIGURES 11 and 12. Some of the radio commentators featured in *Olympia* (1938)



FIGURES 13 and 14. Screen grabs from NFI films of Mícheál O'Hehir at work (on the left during footage of the 1948 All-Ireland hurling final) and of a family listening to their radio, presumably to his commentary, in the footage of the 1948 All-Ireland Gaelic football final. Courtesy of the IFI Irish Film Archive.

However, the German and Irish productions are most comparable in their affirmation and celebration of the nation through sports events. Riefenstahl's filming of the Berlin Olympics in 1936—often referred to as the “Nazi Olympics”—was centrally concerned with celebrating the achievements of Nazi Germany and affirming the German nation.³⁰ As Taylor Downing notes in her study of Riefenstahl's film,

It's clear that it was decided at the highest level in the Reich, probably by Hitler himself, that the Games should be used as an opportunity to promote the achievements of Nazi Germany before the war. Hitler decided that money would be no problem in creating a national spec-

30. Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

tacle to show off Germany to the world. . . . The Nazis intended the games to promote the “new order” in Germany.³¹

Although aspirations for an international audience are less evident (apart from occasional references to Irish-America) in the Institute’s All-Ireland films at least until the 1960s, the post–World War II milieu after “The Emergency” nonetheless provided the perfect arena for the popularization of national spectacle through film. Southern Ireland’s neutrality during the war reinforced the country’s independence against heavy criticism by Winston Churchill and other world leaders, and as the Institute’s films of Gaelic games indicate, celebrating the nation was a recurring concern of the coverage, particularly in those films produced until the end of the 1950s.

The focus in NFI All-Ireland films of this period on the ceremony that preceded each game provides evidence of this recurring theme. Such filmic openings included the foregrounding of the national anthem and national flag as well as the focus on the attendance of dignitaries such as the president of Ireland, An Taoiseach, and the various bishops in attendance, including, at the 1952 football final, the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Gerald O’Hara (figure 15). The recurring shots of religious figures in attendance is striking, as in the buildup to the 1951 football final where O’Hehir commented on the “many personalities of the political, ecclesiastical, and diplomatic world [who] view the colorful scene below.” Particularly in the case of the football finals, it would appear that these bishops were often invited, depending on which county qualified for the final, as in 1955 when Bishop Denis Moynihan of Kerry and Rev. Dr. Fitzpatrick, a representative of the Dublin diocese, participated in the prematch ceremony where both these counties featured. Indicating the church’s dominant role in the 1940s and 1950s, these bishops initiated proceedings by throwing either the ball (Gaelic football) or the sliotar (hurling) in among the players, following the singing of the hymn “Faith of Our Fathers” and the ceremonial kissing of the bishop’s ring by the team captains (figure 15). Significantly, by the 1959 football final the GAA president Dr. J. J. Stuart, and not a bishop, threw the ball in; the practice of having bishops begin games was discontinued by the mid-1960s.

31. Taylor Downing, *Olympia* (London: BFI, 1992), 30.



FIGURE 15. The Cavan captain Mick Higgins is captured kissing the ring of the Papal Nuncio (Archbishop Gerald O'Hara) prior to the 1952 football final. Courtesy of the IFI Irish Film Archive.

These prominent images also provide a further parallel with *Olympia*, which similarly foregrounds the presence of political leaders, especially Hitler, and dignitaries present at the games from early on in the film. These dignitaries and religious figures in the NFI films do not, however, dominate proceedings quite in the manner of Hitler, who appears to preside over events, particularly in the Olympic Stadium; from his opening address to the end of the match, the camera returns repeatedly to him. Yet as Mike Huggins has pointed out in respect of newsreel coverage of association football in Britain between 1918 and 1939, the NFI films were also concerned with supporting the status quo in Irish politics and society.³² Indeed, the foregrounding of political and religious figures in the NFI All-Ireland films resembled the prominent depiction of members of the British royal family in English soccer newsreels: it reinforced the significance of both the sport and the dignitaries featured in national life. Surviving foreign newsreels of Gaelic games held before the Institute was established focus on the prominent role of the clergy, but Irish

32. Mike Huggins, "Projecting the Visual: British Newsreels, Soccer, and Popular Culture, 1918–1939," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 24, no. 1 (2007): 96–97.

political figures rarely appeared in such footage. The NFI productions, through more detailed portrayals of prematch ceremony, also confirm the growing importance of such ritual.³³

This focus on maintaining the status quo in the Institute's films is also evident in how they portray dissent or downplay controversy. Spectators, whether wading through the canal next to the stadium to gain access to games (1958 football final footage) or seated precariously on the walls surrounding the stadium or on the roof of the Hogan stand (recurring images found throughout the 1950s footage), appear to have taken increasing risks to watch All-Ireland finals as the 1950s progressed and attendances soared. However, the commentary gives little sense of the obvious dangers for such spectators. Attendance at All-Ireland finals in the 1950s and 1960s reached record-breaking levels, exceeding 90,000 by 1961.³⁴ Such masses far exceeded the capacity of Croke Park and led to serious overcrowding at times, including the 1953 All-Ireland football final, which attracted a then-record attendance of 86,155 (exaggerated somewhat by O'Hehir as 90,000 in his commentary). But the dangers of such overcrowding are downplayed in O'Hehir's commentary ("even the spacious and ever-improving Croke Park seems to burst at the seams"), despite the fact that we see in the footage that a large portion of the crowd had to be allowed onto the pitch just prior to the game to relieve the dangerous situation on the terraces. All-Ireland finals during these years were also occasionally marred by moments of foul play or violence; yet such moments are rarely evident in the Institute's footage.

Central to these films is an emphasis on All-Ireland final day as a national occasion for the whole island, "north, south, east, and west," as O'Hehir remarks in his commentary prior to the 1948 football final. The 1954 football final included a pageant for Irish unity at halftime—"one Ireland, Ireland one, Éire gan roinnt (Ireland without division)," O'Hehir comments. Irish nationalist history and culture are also foregrounded repeatedly, reinforced by the decision to set opening credits to music on most of the packages released in the 1950s: the air from the politically charged eighteenth-century

33. Crosson and McAnallen, "Croke Park Goes Plumb Crazy," 165.

34. Eoghan Corry, *The GAA Book of Lists* (Dublin: Hodder Headline Ireland, 2005), 371–412.



FIGURE 16. Parade prior to the 1957 hurling final with the banner “Ar son an Náisiúin” visible. Courtesy of the IFI Irish Film Archive.

aisling poem, *Fáinne Geal an Lae* (“The Dawning of the Day”).³⁵ The 1948 coverage of the Gaelic football final between Cavan and Mayo has a strongly nationalist tone, especially in the buildup sequence that recalls Bloody Sunday on 21 November 1920 and the shooting of Tipperary footballer Michael Hogan by British soldiers after their invasion of Croke Park. The commentary pays homage to the 1916 Rising, with accompanying shots of the General Post Office on O’Connell Street; O’Hehir refers to the alleged contribution of post-Rising rubble to the building of Hill 16, still one of the best-known spectator areas in the stadium. Furthermore, a long take during the parade preceding the 1957 hurling final prominently captures the banner “Ar son an Náisiúin (For the Nation)” (figure 16). The footage from the 1954 hurling final includes the prematch parade by thirty-two Irish-speaking and flag-bearing boys representing, as O’Hehir remarks, “the counties of our country and each carrying a hurley depicting the aim of the GAA to put a hurley in the hand of every boy in the country.” The Irish language also features prominently not only in the credit sequences but also in O’Hehir’s commentary, which is peppered with passages in Irish, while exhibitions of Irish dancing precede the 1955 and 1956 senior games. In all of this footage the films repeatedly affirm the Irish nation and its

35. As George Petrie noted, “The aisling poems used the ‘guise of a love-song put on to conceal treason’” (George Petrie, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* [Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1855], 37).

culture as well as its leading political and social figures, while downplaying controversy and dissent.

CONCLUSION

The arrival of live television coverage reduced demand that the Institute continue filming All-Ireland games. The Institute responded by improving its own coverage of the games, partly responding to requests from the GAA to focus more on continuous play rather than scores.³⁶ The coverage during this period focuses more on the games and less on the buildup; a third cameraman was employed by the mid-1960s to get better close-up work. Although the NFI intermittently continued filming until the mid-1970s, interest in viewing the highlights nevertheless decreased; by 1968 General Film Distributors Ltd. (the company that had distributed the films in Ireland from the late 1950s) informed the Institute that it “would prefer not to participate in their distribution, as indeed very little interest had been evidenced by any of our exhibitors in the finals over the past few years, due no doubt to the very extensive coverage by Telefis Eireann.”³⁷

The GAA, which had given the Institute £500 each year from 1948 for the production of the final films, discontinued this funding in 1968.³⁸ As the 1960s progressed, the Institute became increasingly dependent on orders from Bord Fáilte and Aer Lingus for its films—as the Institute’s Tom Hyde remarked in his response to General Film Distributors’ letter quoted above, “Thank God for Bord Fáilte and Aer Lingus.”³⁹ The beginning of the highlights packages of both the 1961 hurling final and the 1962 football final feature an Aer Lingus plane landing at Dublin Airport. The packages in the 1960s seem increasingly to be engaged with an international audience; the nationalist overtones evident in the earlier films, particularly in the buildup to games, feature much less. Although reflecting a chang-

36. Seán Ó Siocháin to Desmond Hand, National Film Institute, 12 Aug. 1965. See IFI, Item Number 16280, Box 317.

37. J. J. O’Brien to Tom Hyde, National Film Institute, 30 Aug. 1968. See IFI, Item Number 16283, Box 317.

38. G. J. McCanny to Seán Ó Siocháin (draft), 8 Aug. 1969.

39. Tom Hyde to J. J. O’Brien, General Film Distributors Ltd., 5 Sept. 1968. See IFI, Item Number 16283, Box 317.

ing Ireland during this period, this development also revealed the Institute's increasing dependence on Aer Lingus and Bord Fáilte for funding through the decade; both organizations used the Institute's films for screenings for employees and customers and for promotional purposes.⁴⁰ The Institute's accounts from the GAA Film Productions in 1967 and 1968 (figure 17) exhibit this dependence on Aer Lingus and Bord Fáilte, with most of the funding coming from these sources by 1967.

The NFI's All-Ireland highlights films represented a crucial step in the evolution of indigenous-sports filming in Ireland and also constituted an important part of an emerging and distinctive film culture in the country during the postwar period. If, as Susan Hayward suggests, film can function as "a cultural articulation of a nation," textualizing "the nation and subsequently [constructing] a series of relations around the concepts, first, of state and citizen, then of state, citizen, and other,"⁴¹ these films represent some of the most pertinent and popular examples of such an articulation. These productions, particularly until the end of the 1950s, repeatedly spotlight the Irish nation, its language, culture, and political and religious leaders. Featuring some of the most acclaimed sporting heroes of their time, the Institute's productions enjoyed considerable popularity when exhibited in cinemas across Ireland, especially until the arrival of television. Although live-television coverage of All-Ireland finals would eventually lead to the discontinuation of the Institute's filming of them, the films continued to offer a significant instructional tool for GAA clubs across the island in the 1960s and 1970s and provided Aer Lingus and Bord Fáilte with important promotional material. Still, the most important period of their production unquestionably lay in the late 1940s and 1950s, a time from which little other footage of Gaelic games survives. These films provide rare positive portrayals of Irish society and its sports culture in a challenging decade character-

40. Bill Morrison, "Re. Bord Fáilte's Use of the National Film Institute's All-Ireland Films," e-mail to Seán Crosson, 12 Apr. 2012; Mike Cronin, "Re. Aer Lingus Screening of National Film Institute's All-Ireland Films," e-mail to Seán Crosson, 11 Apr. 2012.

41. Hayward, *French National Cinema*, x.

