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IRF OFF: CONNACHT'S FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL AND THE FOUNDATION MYTH OF A RUGBY IDENTITY

Ruadhán Cooke & Éamon Ó Cofaigh

The Connacht Rugby website describes its crest as ‘a modified version of the provincial flag consisting of a dimidiated eagle and an arm wielding a sword’. Little could Connacht have suspected that the arm wielding the sword over the province would one day be that of its own parent body. This article will retrace briefly the history of Connacht Rugby, focusing in particular on the near-death experience of the 2002/03 season. In reviewing the media coverage of a three-week window of protest which ultimately prompted the IRFU to reverse its plan to disband the professional team, this article will critically assess the legacy of the protest movement whose lasting achievements include not just the immediate survival of the franchise but its more recent successes on and off the field.¹

The story of Connacht Rugby will be situated in the context of its geographic location and history of economic and social marginalisation. Since January 2003, efforts to develop the sport in the province will be considered in terms of regional identity and collective identification. Hobsbawm’s and Barthes’ work on invented traditions and the creation of myths will be useful as the article seeks to examine the impact of the protest against Connacht’s proposed disbandment and the subsequent articulation of a more region-oriented representation of the franchise, while newspaper articles from the national, regional and local press will be important primary sources.

A Brief History of Connacht Rugby

Last of the four provincial branches to be formed in 1885, with the smallest population base and the fewest number of clubs and schools playing the game, Connacht has always been ‘fourth among equals’ in the hierarchy of Irish rugby. Prior to the establishment of the Interprovincial Championship in the 1946/47 season, fixtures were arranged on an ad hoc basis and there were no formal competitions for the provinces at representative level. The winners of the Senior Cup

for clubs from each province played for the Bateman Cup between the years of 1922 and 1939 from which the Western province was frequently excluded.

From 1946 on however, there was a structured championship guaranteeing that each province played the other three every season, playing home and away in alternate years. Then, and until very recently, Connacht was the weakest of the 4 teams but did manage a surprise win occasionally. In the first 50 years of the Interprovincial Championship, Connacht recorded just 17 wins, suffered 128 defeats and shared the spoils on 8 occasions. In the weeks leading up to the start of the Interprovincial Championship, the provinces arranged fixtures with other teams in preparation. Connacht has even played national touring sides, beginning with the visit of Spain to Galway in 1973 and including the All Blacks, Australia and South Africa. However, the only properly competitive fixtures were those against the home provinces.

Jean-Pierre Bodis in his seminal work on Irish rugby, published in 1992, prior to the advent of professionalism, suggested that from an external perspective, the game in Ireland was viewed as poorly developed.² This, he argued, was particularly evident in player numbers in a country where the sport was, at best, third choice behind both Gaelic games (football and hurling) and soccer. Numerically, this translated into four times fewer players in Ireland than in the United States and the same number of players as in Spain. Bodis also pointed out that Ireland had no ‘mythical’ national tournament such as New Zealand’s Ranfurly Shield, or France’s Bouclier de Brennus. He went on to observe that Connacht lagged well behind the other three provinces in the development of indigenous rugby players and could not lay claim to a rugby ‘heritage’. When the game turned professional in 1995, the Irish Rugby Football Union chose the existing provincial structures as the template for the four ‘clubs’ or franchises which would compete in the newly established European Cup competitions and it was envisaged that all 4 provinces would stand on an equal footing. Qualification for the premier European competition would be based on a ranking derived from the placing in the Interprovincial Championship and subsequently from the ‘domestic’ league, in Ireland’s case, the Celtic League. Ralph O’Gorman’s ‘Rugby in Connacht’ was published in late 1996 to mark the 110th anniversary of the Connacht Branch. Its publication also coincided with the end of the amateur era and the early days of ‘pay-for-play’, a new concept O’Gorman described as a “major break with tradition”.³ In

an environment evolving towards fully-fledged professionalism, the IRFU challenged the provinces to justify their existence against the backdrop of the financial investment being made in them not just by their potential to generate revenue but also their ability to show returns on that investment in other ways. From having been one of 4 equals, albeit for a very short time, Connacht was re-designated as a ‘development’ province in 2000 and allocated a budget half that of the other provinces. This was not, however, as a result of poor competitive performances but because of small attendances, limited commercial revenue and virtually no senior players feeding into the senior international team. As Brendan Fanning put it in his account of the 2003 events, Connacht “had fewer players and fewer clubs than the big three - just less of everything”.⁴ As we shall see in the following sections, Connacht’s rugby disadvantage and the incorporation of associated stereotypes into the identity of the professional franchise are reflected in cultural and popular imagery of the western region.

Place, Cromwell and Provincial Identity

The Irish provinces, or *cúigí*, meaning one fifth in Irish, are ancient territorial entities which predate by many centuries the Anglo-Norman conquest in the twelfth century.⁵ The drawing of county boundaries as subdivisions within the provinces was a later creation of the colonising power for administrative and political purposes. Today, the four provinces of Ulster (9 counties, 6 of which make up Northern Ireland, itself a constituent ‘country’ of the United Kingdom), Munster (6 counties), Leinster (12 counties) and Connacht (5 counties) correspond to the cardinal points of the compass, north, south east and west. Comprised of the counties of Galway, Mayo, Sligo, Roscommon and Leitrim, Connacht is the smallest, least populated and most disadvantaged, economically, socially and in terms of infrastructure, of the Irish provinces, and as such is eligible for priority structural funding as part of the Border, Midland and Western region under the European Union’s Cohesion policy. This marginality is reflected also in its peripheral rugby landscape. The concept of ‘peripherality’ is considered by Dilwyn Porter in an article on sport in Cornwall. His suggestions that as a county on the English periphery, rugby has played an important role in underpinning “the persistence of difference” and has also functioned as an important “sporting signifier of Cornish identity” will be useful foci through which to view Connacht’s experiences later in the article.⁶ Political and administrative structures do not exist at

the level of the provinces in Ireland. However, geographically, the provinces are entities with which Irish people identify quite strongly. The Shannon is the longest river in the British Isles and represents a physical boundary separating Leinster from Connacht and east from west but also psychologically, proximity to the capital from the Wild Atlantic Way, a recent and successful 'invented tradition'. Natives of the five counties of Connacht see themselves as being 'of the West'. Many national organisations, and in particular the NGBs of sporting bodies, have adopted the architecture of a national executive and 'branches' at provincial level for the purposes of both administration and competition. This is the case in respect of Gaelic games, rowing, hockey, swimming and rugby to name but a few.

Historians will confirm that the infamous ultimatum 'To Hell or to Connacht' was never actually issued by Oliver Cromwell, often described as the most hated man in Irish history. It is nonetheless a matter of historical fact that at the end of Cromwell's campaign (1649-1653) to subdue Ireland and establish unequivocally the authority of parliament in post-Civil War England, the Irish Catholic elite east and south of the river Shannon had been stripped of their land, partly in punishment for a revolt in 1641 but primarily in order to pay soldiers who had fought on the side of Parliament, and reward those who had funded Cromwell's various campaigns since the outbreak of the Civil War with grants of land. Subsequent to earlier plantations of English and Scots settlers in Munster, Leinster and Ulster, an English/Protestant ascendancy was thus firmly established in three of the four Irish provinces and Connacht became the last refuge of what was left of the old Gaelic order.⁷ In attempting to explain the 'spat' surrounding English-born and recently capped international second-row Mike McCarthy's decision to leave Connacht for Leinster at the end of the 2012-13 season, Keith Duggan quipped in then Leinster and current Ireland coach Joe Schmidt's direction, "Joe, this isn't about rugby football, it's about Oliver Cromwell". Duggan goes on to suggest that Schmidt as an outsider might not understand the historical subtleties and comments that 'he is wading into centuries of oppression and the prickliness that all west of Ireland people possess when it comes to their province'.⁸ This provides a good example of how Connacht Rugby has sought to identify its narrative with a variety of 'communities of experience' west of the Shannon.

The West's Asleep, written by Thomas Davis, editor of *The Nation* newspaper and leader of the *Young Ireland* revolutionary movement of the 1840s, is a rousing reminder in song of heroic deeds and the past glories of Connacht. With the province as a metaphor for the plight of subjugated Ireland, the country can never aspire to freedom and nationhood until Irishmen and women of all traditions unite to throw off the yoke of the English oppressor: 'Alas! and well may Erin weep that Connacht lies in slumber deep'. The words 'But hark some voice like thunder spake: The West's awake! The West's awake!' anticipate a rising-up which will make England 'quake' and the establishment of the Irish nation, in which Connacht and its identity will play a leading part. *The West's Asleep* was famously sung by the recently deceased Joe McDonagh, a member of the Galway senior hurling team which won the All-Ireland title after a 57-year wait in 1980, immediately after arguably the most memorable acceptance speech in the history of Gaelic games, delivered in Irish by captain Joe Connolly. This song has become an anthem for the West of Ireland and has more recently been appropriated by Connacht Rugby whose ever-optimistic fans identify with the sentiments regarding the underdog and complacent Goliaths. Connacht Rugby's strategic vision of 'Grass Roots to Green Shirts' echoes the inter-related networks of locality and county which underpin the culture of GAA clubs and communities, but extended to the boundaries of the province. Gaelic Games journalist, Sean Moran, in the week following Connacht's historic first ever Pro12 triumph in May 2016, acknowledged the 'connectedness and sense of local identity' – strengths normally associated with the GAA – in evidence as the victorious team made its 'bonfire-lit' journey back to Galway from Ireland West Airport near Knock Co. Mayo, having been welcomed on the tarmac by a crowd of several thousand supporters in the early hours of Sunday morning.⁹

Hardship, injustice and emigration are common themes in songs associated with Connacht. Pete St. John's *The Fields of Athenry*, has been adopted as an unofficial anthem of both the Irish soccer and rugby teams, slightly more curiously Munster Rugby and more curiously still Glasgow Celtic football club. It is also, and for much more obvious reasons, Connacht Rugby's 'other' official anthem – Athenry being a medieval market town some twenty kilometres east of Galway city. The song tells how a man, convicted of stealing corn from an English landlord to feed his starving family awaits deportation to Australia but also reaffirms his defiance against the British crown. These sentiments strike a chord with people from the West of Ireland and perhaps

by extension with the Irish more generally and the descendants of Irish emigrants all over the world. Writing in *The Irish Times* on the Monday following Connacht's victory over Leinster in the Pro12 final Gerry Thornley commented that the fans who had flocked to Murrayfield from all over the West, but also in large numbers from the ex-pat community right across Britain had fittingly and emphatically reclaimed the song as their own.¹⁰

Aired on TG4, the Irish-language public service television station with broadcasting rights to the Pro12 league, *The West's Awake: Rugbaí Chonnacht*, followed the fortunes of Connacht Rugby over the course of its first campaign in European rugby's premier competition, the iconic Heineken Cup in the 2011/12 season. This 'observational' documentary opens with voice overs from a number of rugby figures with footage from Connacht's first home game against French and European heavyweights, Stade Toulousain, and images of landscapes from the West of Ireland in the background.¹¹ Connacht is described as a hard place but at the same time a place of great beauty. The people of Connacht are credited with being resilient and for having had to fight for everything they got. Senior player and Irish-speaker, Ronan Loughney contends that playing for Connacht is not like playing for the other three Irish provinces and traditionally, it's been such a struggle to compete that they've always been 'up against it', further reinforcing stereotypes which have been mobilised to good effect as leitmotifs by Connacht Rugby.

In a recent newspaper article entitled 'Provincial contests at heart of GAA's enduring appeal', Dr Arlene Crampsie makes the case that the particular attraction of the provincial championships in Gaelic games is rooted in both history and geography.¹² Referencing sports geographer John Bale, she points out that he and others have examined "the role played by place-based sports teams in creating and evolving attachment to local places". Bale has also been referenced by Hunter Shobe in a study of FC Barcelona which considers how football clubs are frequently "involved in the construction of national identities by making explicit the connections between sport, identity and place".¹³ It can be argued that Connacht Rugby at a regional/provincial level has engaged in a similar process, whereby the 'club' has come to represent an embodiment of the West of Ireland and its collective identities. It is noteworthy that with the relegation of the GAA's interprovincial competitions, the Railway Cup, to the status of virtual non-event, Connacht Rugby has sought to invest the vacated sporting space with a rugby identity. Crampsie

also notes that when teams are successful, it increases followers' pride in their area and can lead to "the creation of place-based memories that form part of the social, collective memory". In this context, Connacht's Pro12 victory will doubtless become such a 'memory site'.

Connacht Rugby Rises Up: The March on Lansdowne Road

In the late 1990s, spiralling costs associated with the administration of a game that was no longer amateur prompted the IRFU to assess the viability of its constituent parts and to implement radical cost-cutting strategies. In November 2002, it was widely reported that the IRFU, faced with the prospect of announcing an operating deficit for the first time in its history, was actively considering winding up the least viable of its four professional entities at the end of the 2002/03 playing season, although no official arrangements had been presented. From a rugby perspective, Connacht up to that point had been performing extremely well. In a four-week period from the end of August to the end of September, Connacht recorded five wins in a row in the Celtic League, setting up a quarter final contest against Munster at the end of November and with a home win over Narbonne on 15 December, Connacht earned the right to play Pontypridd over two legs in the quarter finals of the European Challenge Cup in the New Year. In this context, the threat of disbandment was particularly ill-timed. After some media exchanges, Connacht's response was to call an EGM of the IRFU Council, scheduled to take place in February. There was however no follow up with a PR campaign or further attempts to mobilise support.

Tony Ward, the former Munster and Ireland out-half, is a rugby commentator and columnist with the national daily newspaper, *The Irish Independent*. A blunt announcement of 'End of the road for Connacht' made the front page of the Thursday, 9 January 2003 edition and referred to Ward's article at page 17, 'End of the line for Connacht as IRFU moves to cut costs'. The article was based on information leaked to the press by an IRFU source and was extremely stark:

The final curtain is set to fall on Connacht as a professional rugby entity. When Shane Moore leads the province out in European action against Pontypridd at Ericsson Park in Athlone on Saturday it will not only be the biggest game in the history of the sport in the West but most probably the last as well. [...] A new financial plan for the future running of the professional

game in Ireland will be revealed with the country's professional representation reduced from 4 to 3.¹⁴

Chapter 9 of Brendan Fanning's *From There to Here: Irish Rugby in the Professional Era* entitled 'Waking the West: The Assault on Connacht', retraces the events and agendas of late 2002-early 2003.¹⁵ The protest movement with which this article is concerned really only began in response to the 'bombshell' of Tony Ward's article on 9 January and lasted a mere three weeks until the formal announcement by the IRFU on 31 January that they would continue to fund Connacht into the foreseeable future. The most noteworthy features of the whirlwind 3-week period which shook the world of rugby in Ireland were the formation of an ad hoc group called The Friends of Connacht Rugby, a public meeting held in Galway on 15 January, the media coverage in the national broadsheets and on the airwaves, the threat of strike action by the fledgling *Irish Rugby Union Players' Association (IRUPA)*, the intervention of high-profile political figures and the now-famous march on the Lansdowne Road headquarters of the IRFU on 23 January.

The reaction in the local and national media to Ward's article confirming the demise of Connacht as a *fait accompli* merely awaiting the rubber-stamping of a committee decision was one of disbelief at the timing (2 days before their Challenge Cup Quarter final) and a common theme in the commentary was the injustice of it all. In support of Connacht's position, a Robert Tighe article in the *Galway City Tribune* described the move as "probably the most discriminatory piece of sporting policy ever proposed in this country"¹⁶ while an editorial in the same paper a week previously described the IRFU, supposedly a 32-county body, as "partitionist", accusing them of an act of "monstrous betrayal" and demonstrating "absolutely no understanding of fair play!"¹⁷ In an earlier *Galway City Tribune* article, Connacht CEO Gerry Kelly accepted that there were financial problems but that the western province was keen to be part of the solution. He made a point of stressing the irony of the fact that the team was drawing bigger crowds and getting better results than ever before.¹⁸ While the IRFU remained silent in the face of the media furore, its stance continued to be that on balance, given the relative deficiencies of the rugby infrastructure in Connacht and the dire financial position, retaining four professional teams was a 'luxury' Irish rugby simply could not afford.

A public meeting held in the Radisson Hotel in Galway on Wednesday, 15 January drew an impressive attendance from the rugby fraternity, from other sports and from the business community, struck by what they saw as the unfairness of the IRFU's plans. Billy Glynn, former Connacht player and then Connacht representative on the IRFU Committee, explained what had been set in train, how to engage with the Union through its own Constitution and stressed the importance of mobilising public and political support. Former Galway All-Ireland hurling winning captain Joe Connolly spoke passionately in support of what Connacht rugby stood for, calling for "temper, [...] heart and fight". In using the analogy of the GAA advocating the removal of weaker counties from the competitive landscape, such as Sligo and Leitrim – an unthinkable proposition – he contended emphatically that Irish rugby without the province of Connacht would no longer be whole. This conflation of regional rugby franchise with provincial space and territorial integrity is a construction which Connacht Rugby has subsequently promoted to good effect. The mood was reflective of the groundswell of indignation and support from across the provincial sporting spectrum. An image projected onto a large screen proclaimed 'The IRFU has problems, the problem is not Connacht'.¹⁹

As recommended by Billy Glynn, the Friends of Connacht Rugby met with and lobbied public representatives. Frank Fahey was a sitting deputy (TD) for the Galway West constituency, and a Junior Minister who drew attention to Connacht's plight from the floor of the national parliament. As a former Minister for Sport, he went on the record saying he would lobby the government to withhold financial support to the IRFU if they proceeded with their move against Connacht. The *Connacht Tribune* editorial quoted earlier expressed the hope that the TDs of Connacht would join with Frank Fahey in "kicking up a stink in the Dáil".²⁰ Enda Kenny, leader of the largest opposition party, *Fine Gael*, and hailing from Co. Mayo was vociferous in his outrage at the proposal, stating that he and his party stood for inclusion in Irish sport and society, while Mary O'Rourke, from Athlone on the river Shannon, a former minister and sitting TD for the government party, *Fianna Fáil*, demanded "justice and rights" for the province.²¹

Local radio station *Galway Bay FM* immediately took up the media fight in defence of Connacht and provocatively gave air-time to the recently penned *Three Proud Provinces of Ireland*, a

parody of the cross-border official anthem of the international team, *Ireland's Call*. That weekend, *The Irish Times* ran with a headline on the front page 'IRFU has booked 88 rooms in five-star hotel for Rome match'.²² This 'scoop' could hardly have come at a more embarrassing time for the Union or a more opportune time for Connacht's case. Commenting that traditionally the IRFU had managed to remain "bullet-proof from public criticism", Thornley suggested that they had grossly underestimated the depth of feeling in rugby and wider circles. The front page of the sports supplement headlined with 'Players may strike over Connacht' in which Liam Toland, chairman of the player's representative association, was quoted as saying that the IRFU probably didn't realise "how seriously we take these proposals".²³ In the main feature entitled 'Connacht won't go away you know', Thornley described the "institutionalised racism" which existed against Connacht within the structures of the IRFU and summarised the situation in the following terms:

In much of Irish life and sport, Connacht have been treated as second-class citizens and this may explain why the reaction west of the Shannon has transcended rugby or even sport.²⁴

A protest march in Dublin to deliver a letter making the case for the retention of Connacht's professional team to the offices of the IRFU was planned for Thursday, 23 January. The decision to disband Connacht was on the agenda for that evening's committee meeting although the meeting was actually postponed in light of the particular turn events had taken. That morning in *The Irish Times*, the doyen of Irish rugby writers Edmund Van Esbeck's Analysis & Opinion piece was titled 'Connacht Rugby stares into the abyss'.²⁵ Hundreds of supporters converged on the capital from throughout the province and were joined in St Stephen's Green by hundreds more Dublin-based Connacht people. When the procession formed to make its way to Lansdowne Road, it numbered somewhere in the region of 2,000 and included the full Connacht squad, administrators of the provincial game at all levels and former players from around the country including a number of well-known ex-internationals. Before the letter was formally handed over to IRFU CEO, Philip Browne, Enda Kenny addressed the crowd, saying that the issue was much bigger than Connacht and promised that he would not stand for the segregation of one quarter of the country in any sport.²⁶ The mood was good-humouredly defiant as reflected

in the messages and images on some of the banners. ‘Connacht Fans say IRF Off!’ had been brandished on the evening of the match in Athlone against Pontypridd and had become something of a leitmotif of the protest in the interim. ‘Shoulder to Shoulder my Arse’ was a broadside at the perceived hypocrisy of the IRFU decision in light of the inclusiveness and equality trumpeted by the anthem of Irish rugby when proclaiming that the four proud provinces ‘together standing tall’ and ‘shoulder to shoulder’ would ‘answer Ireland’s Call’. ‘Less Dinners and more Winners’ highlighted the anomalies of an largely opaque organisation citing a funding crisis but sparing no expense in wining and dining the ‘blazerati’ and the exorbitant amounts of money spent on hotel rooms for committee members and their wives for Ireland’s international away games.²⁷ Writing the next day, Vincent Hogan was struck by the “disparate, largely jocular throng’ who resembled ‘disgruntled loom workers marching on the mill” but in particular by how Connacht on the one hand and the Union on the other, stood for “two worlds, two cultures colliding”, further highlighting the extent of the province’s physical, cultural and sporting separation.²⁸

Exactly one week later, it was announced officially that the IRFU would not now proceed with its plans to disband Connacht. Gerry Thornley’s article, ‘Reprieve for Connacht rugby in IRFU rethink on provinces’ confirming the news, made the front page of *The Irish Times*. He put it thus:

Connacht have had some great victories in their time but probably none compared to the one last night when the IRFU completed a rare volte-face in the face of mounting public pressure by announcing that they would not be dissolving the western province.²⁹

Thornley described the decision as “the most significant climb-down in the 129 year history of the IRFU” citing an increasing wave of support behind the embattled province as the reason for relenting, including the threat of mutiny by IRUPA and a fear that clubs from around the country would mandate their delegates to vote against any such move at the EGM on that particular question.³⁰ The *Galway City Tribune*’s headline declared Connacht Rugby to be “safe” following the IRFU’s decision to back down.³¹ The sequence of events triggered by the public meeting in Galway and culminating in the march on Lansdowne Road has been described as “one of the

most exceptional acts of solidarity and support ever witnessed in Irish sport” and the “passion” displayed by the people of the province as being the factor which ultimately saved Connacht from extinction.³² Billy Glynn, quoted in Thornley’s article, commented on how rugby in Connacht had never had so much goodwill throughout the whole province, citing the excitement in Galway at the news and the fact everybody in the street knew about it. He declared the game of rugby to be the real winner and encouraged stakeholders to be positive and exploit the opportunities. As we shall see, the sense of purpose of the protest movement, which in a very short period of time succeeded in going from “from inertia to all out action”, proved to be pivotal and has subsequently been perceived as the beginning of a new and significant chapter for Connacht Rugby.³³

Memory site and myth

Subsequent to the campaign to save Connacht Rugby, which spanned a three-week window in January 2003, the status of what French historian Pierre Nora would term a ‘memory site’ – an important reference point in time and against which history is measured – has been conferred upon it by both the organisation and commentators, and has since been embraced as such by supporters.³⁴ Christopher Gaffney in *Geography of Sport* contends that the ‘reproduction of a given sporting landscape somewhere on the globe should be understood as a particular response to the specific forces of production that have given birth to it’.³⁵ Connacht Rugby’s sporting landscape has been grafted onto an existing, broader narrative based on a popular perception that it was the ‘forgotten’ province. In the aftermath of the threatened and subsequently aborted disbandment, a concerted effort was made to consolidate rugby in Connacht and create a financially viable and sustainable franchise. Eric Hobsbawm argues that invented traditions “use history as a legitimator of action and a cement of group cohesion”.³⁶ This has been argued to good effect by Liam O’Callaghan in relation to Munster Rugby, and can be adapted to the process by which Connacht Rugby re-invested its energies in rebranding the western franchise, encouraging its supporters to identify with the team as a concrete representation of a place and its people.³⁷ In his treatise *Mythologies*, cultural commentator, Roland Barthes considers a number of phenomena such as the Tour de France which he describes as a “modern epic” and a “unique fable” and examines the role they play in modern society.³⁸ The explanatory essay entitled ‘Myth

Today' explains how anything, be it a car or an event can potentially be a myth. If history 'frequently becomes the actual symbol of struggle', Connacht rugby in its fight for survival and parity of esteem created a myth of its own drawing from the narrative and dynamics of the 2003 protest.³⁹ Hobsbawm suggests that new traditions are frequently devised "by borrowing from the well-supplied warehouses of official ritual, symbolism and moral exhortation".⁴⁰ In the case of Connacht Rugby, motifs such as 'The West's Awake', 'Connacht Clan' and 'To Hell or to Connacht' have been deployed to good effect in the promotion of such legitimating and federating attachments. Gerry Thornley's recently published 'official story' of Connacht Rugby bears the title *Front Up, Rise, Up*, borrowing from the public address announcement which welcomes the home team onto the pitch at the Galway Sportsground.⁴¹

In the aftermath and notwithstanding the IRFU's commitment to Connacht for at least the following season "everyone that could jump ship, did", including highly regarded South African coach Steph Nel and most of Connacht's highest profile players such as Gavin Duffy, Johnny O'Connor, Eoin Reddan and Jerry Flannery.⁴² Out-half Eric Elwood was one of the key figures who chose not to leave. Up-and-coming coach and former international scrum-half Michael Bradley was appointed to fill the vacancy left by Nel's departure. He and Elwood had previously formed Ireland's half-back partnership at international level and would now play a key role for Connacht in the seasons to come. Subsequent to the haemorrhaging of players and the reputational damage which had been inflicted, the following seasons would prove to be extremely challenging and the perennial 'problem' of what to do with Connacht would persist.

The 2003/04 season saw the amalgamation of 9 Welsh clubs into 5 regional franchises. Only 4 are still in existence. Scottish Rugby created 3 super regional franchises, one of which, Borders – once the heartland of Scottish rugby – is long since defunct. A number of Italian entities have been created and either reconfigured or disbanded entirely. Keith Duggan in an article entitled 'Don't know how, but Connacht keep stayin' alive' described both the team and the organisation as "perennially down but never counted out".⁴³ Journalist John Fallon was team manager at the time and the theme of survival against the odds is reflected also in the title of his recent book on Connacht Rugby's journey from near extinction to the success of last May.⁴⁴ Connacht has played in every year of the Celtic League – currently known as the Guinness Pro12 and featuring

teams from Ireland, Wales, Scotland and Italy – since its inception in the 2000/01 season. In August 2016, the entity now known as Connacht Rugby embarked on a twenty-first consecutive season in European competition in its different guises and incarnations – the second tier Conference, Shield and Challenge Cups as they have been variously named, and the premier Heineken Cup, now known as the European Champions Cup.

Writing in advance of the home European Challenge Cup semi-final against Sale in April 2005, Keith Duggan suggested that Connacht teams, in the years following the threat of disbandment, had played consistently “as if in a kind of fury against the doubt that has hung over the future of the game in the province”.⁴⁵ Describing the Connacht set-up as a “half-way house” – neither a fully resourced stand-alone professional entity, nor a development province providing properly conceived pathways into elite-level rugby in the other three provinces – Tony Ward stated in October 2008 that he fully supported the retention of four professional playing entities but not in their existing form, whereby the criteria against which Connacht was to be judged were the same as for the other provinces but on a much smaller budget, and called on the Union to give Connacht a “fighting chance”.⁴⁶ A similar call for fair play on the back of some disappointing results came the following year from Keith Duggan in an article entitled ‘IRFU must back Connacht fully or pull the plug’.⁴⁷ Further causes for concern were an IRFU audit of Connacht and the imposition of a moratorium on contracts exceeding 12 months in March 2010, despite Connacht CEO Gerry Kelly quelling fears that Connacht’s future might be called into question again. Linley McKenzie’s article ‘IRFU review will be positive for Connacht Rugby’ quotes Kelly who, in alluding to the events of January 2003, stated that he would prefer to see Connacht supporters marching regularly in ever increasing numbers [up] College Road to the Sportsground in active support of their team, rather than occasionally in protest to IRFU headquarters at Lansdowne Road.⁴⁸ Reviewing the performances of all four Irish provinces following the last weekend of action in the pool stages of the 2013/14 Heineken Cup, the controversial commentator and former coach of the province, George Hook, dismissed Connacht’s remarkable away win in an earlier round of the competition against Toulouse as just another one-off performance and concluded:

With a debt of almost a million euro, an average coach and an even more average squad, the future is bleak. Economic reality may bite and as was always the sensible option, Ireland should have just three professional teams.⁴⁹

Notwithstanding Hook's interpretation, in the years since the 2002/03 season, when results against the other Irish provinces and also the Scottish and Welsh regions were inconsistent in the Celtic League, the European fixtures against French and English opposition and some very unexpected results, not only at home but at times quite spectacularly away, gave Connacht visibility and exposure that was not negative. In an interview with the authors, Billy Glynn, at the time president-elect of the IRFU, suggested that Connacht Rugby's performances in European competitions helped strengthen the case for its retention, while it can also be argued that the European stage afforded Connacht the opportunity to "project a place to people who would otherwise never hear its name mentioned" and facilitated a construction of identity underpinned by the further conflation of regional franchise with provincial space.⁵⁰ Outside of Ireland, 'Connacht' is now largely synonymous with its professional rugby team and the franchise has "generated opportunities to fly the [Connacht] flag at home and abroad" which would otherwise not exist.⁵¹

From 2011 to 2014, Connacht enjoyed three consecutive seasons of participation in European Rugby's top-flight Heineken Cup, as one of the three Irish provinces guaranteed inclusion, not on the basis of their finishing position in the league, but by virtue of Leinster having qualified as Heineken Cup and Challenge Cup champions. With the significant increases in average attendances and season ticket sales that ensued, a top-six finish in the Pro12 league, which would also guarantee qualification for the Champions Cup became the organisation's headline objective. The sense of anticipation and huge support – an official attendance of 9,120 – witnessed on the occasion of Toulouse's visit to Galway for Connacht's first ever Heineken Cup match in October 2011, demonstrated how far Connacht had come but also drew attention to the striking funding-differential vis-à-vis the biggest professional entities.⁵² High-profile games played in front of capacity crowds at the Galway Sportsground against quality opposition have shown the appeal of top-class rugby and underline the relationship between commercial viability and success on the field of play. Coinciding with Connacht's home Heineken Cup clash with

Biarritz in December 2012, the French rugby newspaper *Midi Olympique* ran a special feature entitled ‘The Green Gold of Connacht’ in which Heineken Cup participation among Europe’s elite is credited as being the platform that justifies Connacht’s existence and a reason to be optimistic for the future of top-flight rugby west of the Shannon.⁵³ Such tangible successes culminated in the IRFU’s strategic decision in advance of the 2014/15 season to significantly increase the resources it would allocate to the professional entity in Connacht, although not quite matching the level of funding enjoyed by the other three provinces.

What of the broader significance and lasting legacy of the successful campaign to save Connacht Rugby? At a national level, the events of 2002/03 demonstrated the extent to which the landscape of the sport of rugby had changed in the short period since the advent of professionalism and highlighted the imperative to move towards a more efficient and innovative National Governing Body. As such, it represents something of a watershed moment for rugby in Ireland. Journalist Vincent Hogan pointed out at the time that when it came to marketing and sponsorship, the IRFU was “not far off the dunce’s cap” and that the absence of a commercial manager smacked of “gross naivety” on its part.⁵⁴ The attention which came the Union’s way from politicians involved in the campaign to save Connacht started a debate on the relationship between sporting organisations, not traditionally renowned for their transparency, and agencies responsible for the allocation of public funds. Flowing directly from the events of those few months has been a gradual but inexorable redefinition of the relationship between the IRFU and its stakeholders – the provinces, the players and the public. The IRFU committed to a policy of centrally-funded player contracts and devolved control structures at provincial level, and continues to emphatically reject the model of privately-owned franchises which wield such influence in the English and French game.

Locally, one of the first positive initiatives in the wake of the IRFU’s climb-down was the announcement of the creation a Connacht Rugby Supporters Club to tap into the good will and enthusiasm which the ‘revolt’ against the threat of extinction had engendered.⁵⁵ Concerted efforts were made to grow the support base and develop attachments between Connacht Rugby and the wider community throughout the province. In this context, Connacht Rugby has forged partnerships with the business community, schools, third level institutions, the civic authorities

and the media. Connacht kit has become popular casual wear, in many cases usurping GAA and soccer apparel. Flags, bunting and banners on businesses and in public spaces are commonplace throughout the province. A media campaign in advance of the Pro12 Final encouraged supporters to ‘Go Green for Connacht’. In blurring the distinctions between the history of the province and that of the organisation, including in particular the near-death experience and the difficult times that followed the threat of disbandment in 2003, two distinct yet related narratives have emerged which have become core strands of Connacht Rugby’s identity.

In *Midi Olympique*’s special feature referenced earlier, the dual narratives of 2003 as foundation myth and Connacht Rugby’s rootedness in the wider provincial space are evoked. The article, which credits the march of 10,000 people (a hugely inflated figure) on Lansdowne Road in 2003 with changing the course of history, includes an interview with Eric Elwood, who explained that, in accepting the role of head coach, his aim was to unify a broad community around a jersey and get people from all over the province to come to the matches. Furthermore, he stressed that his biggest achievement would be to contribute to the creation of a distinctively Connacht rugby identity to sustain the game in the province and the organisation into the future. Key to this objective would be to draw on the many different strands of identity and culture that are ‘of’ the West of Ireland. From Elwood’s remarks about survival and the drive to represent the province through the rugby club, journalist Arnaud Beurdeley suggests that the history of rugby in Connacht and the history of the province itself share many common denominators.⁵⁶

Writing early in the new year of the 2014/15 season, Keith Duggan gives examples of how rugby in Connacht appears to be “blossoming” but contends that the real beauty of the story lies in a “spirit of separateness”.⁵⁷ Duggan writes of a real sense that “as a club and as an entity, Connacht are going somewhere” and suggests that in the fight for parity of esteem, it would be crucial to the culture and ethos of the organisation that a strong sense of being something “distinct and different” be maintained. Players and fans are complicit in the perpetuation of certain stereotypes associating a rural, isolated and inhospitable province with an emerging rugby heritage. When Elwood stepped aside as head coach, he was replaced before the start of the 2013/14 season by Pat Lam, ex-Samoan international and Heineken Cup winner, who from the outset had a clear vision of how he wanted the team to play but also articulated a personal

view of what the ‘club’ means, not just in Galway and the larger urban centres but right across the province. In interviews, he invariably qualifies an initial reference to ‘Connacht’ as meaning all five counties and always makes a point of saying a few words in Irish.⁵⁸ Ireland’s official language, spoken by a small minority of the population, primarily in communities on the Western seaboard, and the implicit marginalisation it evokes, have equally been appropriated as important components of Connacht Rugby’s identity. Reacting to the recent announcement of Pat Lam’s decision to leave the province at the end of the 2016/17 season, Keith Duggan credits him with having tapped into “a fierce local pride” and with having made a “huge virtue” of an “intense association with place and identity”.⁵⁹

In the week leading up to Connacht’s historic Pro12 final appearance, the organisation launched its Vision and Strategy for 2016-2020 symbolically at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin, the headquarters of Irish rugby. It is a confident statement of how Connacht Rugby sees itself and its ambitions for the future. Without losing sight of the fact that it is a business document, with a commercial agenda emanating from a professional organisation, the language insisting on the centrality of people and place is striking. ‘Since 1885’ is part of the branding and the stated purpose of the organisation is simply ‘To inspire our community through rugby success’. It is worth commenting that the IRFU, founded in 1874, predates the Gaelic Athletic Association by a full decade and that the Connacht branch is a mere 12 months ‘younger’ than the much mythologised institution of Irish life and society. ‘Grassroots to Green shirts’ is described as the next chapter in the story of Connacht Rugby and the road map for delivering on the belief of the six founding clubs that rugby would ‘add value’ to their communities. A key ambition is the creation of ‘a powerful and inclusive story of rugby success that everybody who feels a connection with Connacht can be part of and enjoy’. In practical terms, this means making a connection with people in the west of Ireland as the sporting entity that represents them. Contextualising the enormity of what the professional team has achieved, the much-quoted Keith Duggan speaks of “a growing sense that they are representing everything that Connacht people from all five counties have felt when it comes to sport: that they are fighting bigger forces, greater odds, that it’s different in the west”.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In 2003, Connacht Rugby's plight was seen as a metaphor for the sense of grievance felt by sections of society right across the West and mobilised a broad constituency of support inspired by the defiance of the attitude to 'stand up and fight'. Whereas the IRFU may have hoped to achieve its cost-cutting objective by a combination of stealth on its own part and indifferent self-interest on the part of the three stronger provinces, the backlash from the western rugby-playing constituency and a groundswell of support from wider civic society in the West of Ireland, including senior political figures, were significant. The experience federated the rugby community across the province, creating a sense of common purpose not just to survive but also prosper in spite of the odds. The events of January 2003 now constitute a 'memory site' which has been exploited to good effect in fostering a strong sense of collective identification with the franchise. With 2003 as the starting point, a number of popular constructions of identity, in particular the conflation of the professional rugby entity with the geographical space of the province, served to articulate a new expression of Connacht Rugby as a representation of a place, its history and its people. As Keith Duggan suggests, "no one can quite believe how the most put-upon rugby team of them all has become the beating heart of the west".⁶¹

In line with trends elsewhere in the rugby world at the time, the IRFU had an arguable case for disbanding Connacht in 2003, given its own financial situation, the fragility of Connacht Rugby's commercial model and the shallowness of its playing and physical infrastructure. Drawing, as we have seen, on various elements of the identity and culture of the West of Ireland, Connacht Rugby in the interim set about addressing these deficits in what has been described as an "incredible journey from the depths of despair to the top of the pile".⁶² By virtue of a combination of factors including astute marketing and the cultivation of a 'spirit of separateness' Connacht Rugby has largely succeeded in creating a rugby heritage which Bodis considered virtually non-existent a quarter of a century ago.

¹ Prior to the season just ended, Connacht's highest ever finish in the Pro12 league was seventh and they had never won a trophy or title. At the end of the regular 2015/16 season, Connacht finished second behind Leinster in the Pro12 league, thereby earning a home semi-final against Glasgow, which they won, before defeating Leinster in their first ever final.

² Jean-Pierre Bodis, *Le Rugby d'Irlande: Identité, Territorialité* (Talence: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 1993), 96.

³ Ralph O'Gorman, *Rugby in Connacht* (Galway: The Connacht Tribune, 1996), 96.

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- ⁴ Brendan Fanning, *From There to Here: Irish Rugby in the Professional Era* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2007), 168.
- ⁵ In ancient Ireland, the fifth province was Meath, the territory around the seat of the High Kings at Tara.
- ⁶ Dilwyn Porter, 'Sport and the Cornish: difference and identity on the English periphery in the twentieth century', *National Identities*, 16:4, 312.
- ⁷ Cf. Micheál Ó Siochrú, *God's executioner: Oliver Cromwell and the conquest of Ireland* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008).
- ⁸ Keith Duggan, 'Joe, this isn't about rugby football, it's about Oliver Cromwell', *Irish Times*, 15 December 2012, 12.
- ⁹ Sean Moran, 'Connacht's success raises awkward questions for GAA', *Irish Times*, 1 June 2016, 18. Lighting fires of turf or hay at the side of the road is a traditional west of Ireland gesture of well-wishing on the occasion of an important celebration.
- ¹⁰ Thornley, 'Spirits soar on the western front', *Irish Times*, 30 May 2016. Sports supplement, 1.
- ¹¹ *The West's Awake: Rugbaí Chonnacht*. Directed by Kieran Hartigan. Galway: Iris Productions, 2012. First screened, 2 October 2012.
- ¹² Arlene Crampsie, 'Provincial contests at heart of GAA's enduring appeal', *Irish Times*, 27 August 2015, 15.
- ¹³ Hunter Shobe, 'Place, identity and football: Catalonia, Catalanisme and Football Club Barcelona, 1899–1975', *National Identities*, 10:3, 329.
- ¹⁴ Tony Ward, 'End of the line for Connacht as IRFU moves to cut costs', *Irish Independent*, 9 January 2003, 17.
- ¹⁵ Fanning, *From There to Here*, 167-82.
- ¹⁶ Robert Tighe, 'Rugby protest draws widespread support', *Galway City Tribune*, 24 January 2003, 3.
- ¹⁷ 'IRFU shows absolutely no understanding of fair play!' *Galway City Tribune*, 17 January 2003, 12.
- ¹⁸ 'Connacht on the brink of European breakthrough', *Galway City Tribune*, 10 January 2003, 26.
- ¹⁹ Fanning, *From There to Here*, 177.
- ²⁰ *Galway City Tribune*, 17 January 2003, 12.
- ²¹ Thornley, 'Connacht swear to march on', *Irish Times*, 24 January 2003, 19.
- ²² Thornley, *Irish Times*, 18 January 2003, 1.
- ²³ Thornley, 'Players may strike over Connacht', *Irish Times*, 18 January 2003, Sports supplement, 1.
- ²⁴ Thornley, 'Connacht won't go away you know', *Irish Times*, 18 January 2003, Sports supplement, 3.
- ²⁵ Edmund Van Esbeck, *Irish Times*, 23 January 2003, 16.
- ²⁶ Thornley, 'Connacht swear to march on', *Irish Times*, 24 January 2003, 19.
- ²⁷ 'To Hell with Connacht IRFU' and 'It'll be Lonely Around the Fields of Athenry Again!' were other similar messages featured on placards.
- ²⁸ Vincent Hogan, 'Tea and sympathy for Western approaches', *Irish Independent*, 24 January 2003, 21.
- ²⁹ Thornley, 'Reprieve for Connacht rugby in IRFU rethink on provinces', *Irish Times*, 31 January 2003, 1.
- ³⁰ Thornley, 'Relief for Connacht as IRFU back down', *Irish Times*, 31 January 2003, 19.
- ³¹ Francis Farragher, 'Connacht Rugby safe as IRFU backs down', *Galway City Tribune*, 31 January 2003, 1.
- ³² Will Slattery, 'The march on Lansdowne Road: The amazing story of how the passion of a province saved Connacht from extinction', *Irish Independent*, 21 May 2016. <<http://www.independent.ie/sport/rugby/connacht-rugby/the-march-on-lansdowne-road-the-amazing-story-of-how-the-passion-of-a-province-saved-connacht-from-extinction-34733009.html>>
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- ³⁴ Pierre Nora, ed. *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).
- ³⁵ Christopher Gaffney, 'Geography of Sport' in *Social Sciences in Sport*, (Leeds: Human Kinetics, 2014), 120.
- ³⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12.
- ³⁷ Liam O'Callaghan, *Rugby in Munster: A Social and Cultural History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011).
- ³⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957) 103-13.
- ³⁹ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 12.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Gerry Thornley, *Front Up Rise Up* (Dublin: Transworld Ireland, 2016).
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- ⁴³ Duggan, *Irish Times*, 21 January 2012, Sports supplement, 12.

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- ⁴⁵ Keith Duggan, 'The bar must be raised even higher', *Irish Times*, 2 April 2005, Sports supplement, 2.
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- ⁴⁷ Duggan, 'IRFU must back Connacht fully or pull the plug', *Irish Times*, 3 October 2009, Sports supplement, 12.
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- ⁴⁹ George Hook, 'Connacht are struggling on and off the field – it's time to pull the plug', *Irish Independent*, 20 January 2014, Sports supplement, 5.
- ⁵⁰ John Bale, *Sport, Space and the City* (Caldwell, NJ: Blackburn Press, 2001), 56.
- ⁵¹ Porter, 'Sport and the Cornish', 314.
- ⁵² The attendance figures alone are in stark contrast to attendances of 500 (Racing Club de France), 1000 (Toulon), 500 (Béziers) and 1,000 (AS Montferrand) for Connacht's home games against French opposition in the pool stages of the European Challenge Cup competitions in the 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/01 seasons.
- ⁵³ Arnaud Beurdeley, 'L'or vert du Connacht', *Midi Olympique*, N° 151, 4 March 2013, 53.
- ⁵⁴ Hogan, 'Tea and sympathy for Western approaches', *Irish Independent*, 24 January 2003, 21.
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- ⁵⁷ Duggan, 'Connacht rugby is blossoming but real beauty lies in their spirit of separateness', *Irish Times*, 10 January 2015, Sports supplement, 10.
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- ⁶⁰ Duggan, 'Low rumble ends with outsiders of Irish rugby crashing through the front door', *Irish Times*, 30 May 2016, Sports supplement, 2.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
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