



SPO

R AND EVOLUTION:

THE KERRY GAA AND THE 1916 RISING



BY DR. RICHARD MCELLIGOTT

FOUNDATIONS

1884-1900



Michael Cusack

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

The 1916 Rising is the most significant event in modern Irish history.

It represented a watershed in the political and social development of this country.

The Easter rebellion, though militarily an utter failure, set in motion events which would ultimately lead to a successful mass independence movement emerging in Ireland, culminating in the Irish Free State being established and the island being partitioned in 1921.

The Rising's impact on Irish life is hard to overstate.

Though the GAA itself had no official part in helping organise the rebellion, hundreds of its members did participate. In the months and years which followed, the Association and its membership, much like Irish society at large, became increasingly politically radicalised. In Kerry, the links between the rebels of 1916 and the local GAA were considerable and in its aftermath, the Rising's effect on the Association in the county would be profound.

Since its foundation in 1884, the GAA had always displayed a strong affiliation with Irish nationalism.

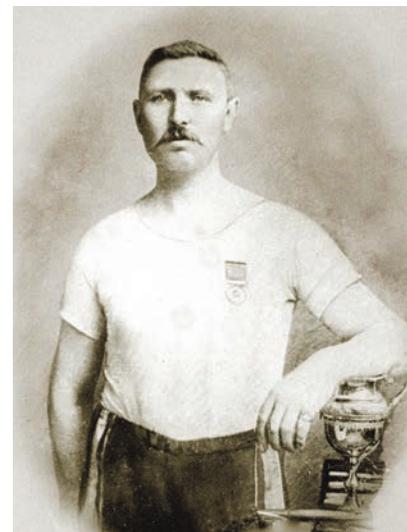
After all, Michael Cusack had established the Association with the aim of preserving and promoting Gaelic games and culture in an attempt to reverse the growing popularity of British culture and British sports in Ireland.

From the beginning, the GAA had links with prominent members of both the popular and politically moderate Home Rule movement of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the radical, revolutionary Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). More than this, the GAA represented a sporting revolution. Its formation gave ordinary Irishmen the chance to participate in organised modern sport en masse.

Before the coming of the Association, the organised modern sports which were being introduced from Britain were mostly controlled and run by an elite in Irish society.

Rugby, cricket and even soccer in this period, were the playthings of Ireland's upper classes.

Working class men and women seemed condemned to remain mere spectators of the games of their social betters. Cusack changed all that. The GAA was specifically designed to open up a national competitive



J.P. O'Sullivan

sports body to the ordinary people. By creating an organisation which tapped into Irish people's sense of local pride and national identity, the GAA, almost instantly, became a powerful force in Irish life.

In Cusack's own words, the Association spread across Ireland 'like a prairie fire'. By 1889, there were already 777 affiliated GAA clubs recorded in Ireland in contrast to the mere 124 soccer clubs then in existence in the country.

MAURICE MOYNIHAN

and the establishment of the Kerry GAA

Links between Kerry and the Association were quickly forged. Cusack chose Tralee to be the venue for the first great demonstration of the GAA's power. He was as much interested in governing Irish athletics as he was in promoting hurling and Gaelic football.

For several years, Tralee had hosted one of Ireland's largest annual athletics meetings. Cusack planned to fix a GAA athletics event on the same day it was being staged (17th June 1885). At the time, the Tralee sports ground (now Austin Stack Park) was widely regarded as the finest stadium in Ireland having recently received a £1,200 refurbishment to erect new stands and lay a running and cycling track.

Cusack believed that staging a GAA event which could mobilise popular support at the expense of this rival and successful athletics meeting would secure the future success of his organisation.

On 31st May 1885, the first ever branch of the Association in Kerry was formed in Tralee. Shortly after, Cusack travelled to the town to personally oversee preparations.

The GAA sports, held in Rathnane (now the Greyhound track), proved an extraordinary success and upwards of 10,000 people attended. In contrast, the rival event was a financial disaster. Following this propaganda triumph, the GAA swiftly gained control of athletics in Ireland.

And yet despite this, GAA activity in Kerry quickly collapsed.

However in 1887, the IRB managed to gain control over the GAA's Central Council and following this Maurice Moynihan, the secretary of the Kerry IRB, took the initiative in rekindling Gaelic games activity there. In November 1887, the Tralee Mitchels GAA club was formed. The following February, the first ever football match under GAA rules in Kerry was played at Rathass between Mitchels and the Ashill Alderman Hoppers club from Ballymacelligott in front of several thousand spectators.

As more clubs were established, Moynihan, through the pages of the *Kerry Sentinel*, issued a rallying cry to the people of Kerry: 'Our county is one of the most, if not the most, backward in Ireland in the ranks of the Gaelic Athletic Association ... Shall it be said that when there is a revival of Gaelic games all over Ireland, Kerry is the only county which gives a faint and half-hearted answer to the call! ... I would say to the young men of Kerry, join the ranks of the Gaelic Athletic Association ... Do it because it is your duty; do it out of pride; do it for any motive, because it is an association which deserves well of the people, and because it is at present a great force, and is bound to become a much greater



one in the life of this country.'

On 7th November 1888, Moynihan convened the inaugural County Convention of the Kerry GAA. At the meeting, Kerry's first County Board was selected and Moynihan was elected secretary. Within

Maurice Moynihan
(Courtesy of Liam Brosnan, Killarney)

a year, thirty-three clubs had affiliated. 1889 saw the first county hurling and football championships take place with fifteen football teams and five hurling teams participating.

DECLINE AND DECAY

THE GAA WAS now the largest sporting organisation on the island. Yet within five years it verged on extinction.

In 1890 a massive economic depression, caused by the collapse of the agricultural industry, descended on Ireland. The dire economic situation triggered the return of mass emigration. 716,000 people (15% of Ireland's population) left in the last years of the nineteenth century. Most were the young men who had backboned the Association's membership. The impact was devastating as the lifeblood of many clubs was swept away.

By 1894 only 118 clubs survived in Ireland, ten in Kerry.

No active GAA branch now existed in the twenty-six counties and the Association neared bankruptcy.

Furthermore, the incompetence of both local and national administrators was constantly highlighted as another major reason for the Association's woes. The *Kerry Sentinel* complained: 'County Boards are largely responsible for the disappearance of many clubs which, smarting under the bungling and unjust treatment of the governing body, become disorganised and simply disband.'

In 1896, the Kerry County Board refused to affiliate to the GAA when a decision that Tralee would host the Munster Final was reneged on. Within a year, the County Board folded and GAA activity in Kerry collapsed.

POPULARISING THE GAME

1905-1915

Who the hell said we couldn't play in the wet!

AFTER BEATING, WATERFORD, Clare, Cork and Mayo, Kerry qualified for the 1903 All-Ireland Final, which due to delays, was played in 1905.

In the lead up, a supporter wrote to the editor of the *Kerryman* suggesting: 'There are men who should be put off the Kerry football team and No. 1 is called Arthur Guinness ... We want to become champions of Ireland ... the chance offered to us now may not occur again in a generation.'

A staggering combined attendance of nearly 60,000, a figure which smashed any previous record for a sports event in Ireland, would witness the draw and two replays it took to separate Kerry and Kildare between July and October 1905.

EXCITEMENT

Ireland's entire railway network was pressed into service to cope with the demand of people travelling from every corner of the country to see the games.

The matches were played in primitive grounds in Thurles and Cork which offered no embankments or stands and only a rope around the pitch to keep out the throngs.

Yet the speed, skill, intensity and excitement of the games astounded journalists and spectators. The pace was so frantic that at full time in the first replay, the referee collapsed from exhaustion. Across Ireland, media and public interest surpassed anything ever seen for an Irish sporting event.

As the rain poured down, the Kerry team entered the pitch for the third and final game.

The *Kerry Sentinel* reported: 'it seemed the earth itself shook with the ring of "Up Kerry"'. A close first half ended with Ker-

ry leading 0-3 to 0-2. However, in the second half the Kerry forwards became dominant. Kerry claimed its first football All-Ireland title on a scoreline of 0-8 to 0-2.

The victory led to scenes of jubilation.

Before the game, the *Kerryman's* reporter 'JJ MC' recorded the anxiety and worry of the travelling Kerry supporters looking out the train windows at the streaming rain and wondering how their team would cope with the conditions.

As JJ strolled onto the pitch and basked in the glory of victory, he 'noticed a man coming across the field after the whistle who I knew and at home was much respected ... I thought he was under the influence of drink but found he was only temporarily mad. He struck me on the shoulder and slung the question: **'WHO THE HELL SAID WE COULDN'T PLAY IN THE WET?'**

The local press declared: 'The greatest battle in the history of the Gaelic Athletic Association has been fought and won ... For generations to come the matches ... will be spoken of at our Kerry firesides as one of the most interesting events in the whole history of the county.'

The epic of Kerry's maiden All-Ireland catapulted the GAA into the mainstream of Irish sport and led to Gaelic football claiming its place at the centre of Irish sporting culture. The stage was set for the Association to become the largest sporting body in Ireland in the decade before 1916.



REBIRTH 1900

In 1900, secretary of the Listowel GAA, Thomas F. O'Sullivan, began a campaign in the local press to revive the Association in Kerry.

O'Sullivan, an active IRB member, was horrified at the growing popularity of 'British' sports like rugby in areas like North Kerry following the collapse of the County Board.

That May, he successfully organised a GAA Convention in Tralee at which a new County Board was formed with O'Sullivan being elected secretary.

Meanwhile Austin Stack, a young office clerk from Tralee, helped reorganise the Mitchels club becoming its secretary and captain.

Mitchels went on to dominate the Kerry County Championship between 1902 and 1910. On the back of this success, O'Sullivan and Stack would lay the foundations for Kerry's rise to inter-county glory.

Under their effective leadership, the GAA in Kerry quickly became better organised, administered and more profitable.

Steadily the disputes which had previously crippled local GAA affairs were eradicated. Affiliated club numbers in Kerry jumped to 35 by 1901. Yet on the inter-county scene things remained bleak. Between 1893 and 1902, Kerry only reached two Munster finals losing both.

Stack recognised that if Kerry was to compete for All-Ireland honours, the principle of the

County Championship winners representing Kerry had to change. He persuaded his club to look beyond their own members and select the best players from across Kerry.

The Kerry side which won its inaugural All-Ireland contained only eight Mitchels players.

In the weeks leading up to Championship games, Stack organised dedicated training camps and challenge games against clubs as trials for those players in contention for the county team.

After Kerry's maiden All-Ireland victory, the county chairman, Eugene O'Sullivan, declared that no one had done more to ensure victory than Stack due to his extraordinary 'organisational skills, untiring energy and personality'.



THE KERRY TEAM, ALL-IRELAND CHAMPIONS, 1903 (taken in 1905). Back row from left: T.F. O'Sullivan, Hon. Sec. County Board; E. O'Sullivan, President, County Board; R. Kirwan; A. Stack, C. Healy, M. McCarthy; T. Looney; J.P. O'Sullivan. Centre row from left: D. Curran, C. Duggan, D. McCarthy, T. O'Gorman, J. Buckley, W. Lynch, P. Dillon. Front row from left: J. O'Gorman; R. (Dick) Fitzgerald; J.T. Fitzgerald; D. Breen.

(Courtesy of The National Library of Ireland)

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

SINCE THE ASSOCIATION'S foundation in Kerry, famous club names such as Tralee Mitchels, Dr Crokes and Laune Rangers have been synonymous with the county's GAA tradition. But hundreds of other clubs, most now lost to history, have all played their role in the development of the Kerry GAA. Between 1884 and 1934, no less than 436 separate GAA clubs were recorded in Kerry.

The fantastical names of many of these teams tell their own rich history. Wonderful names such as the Ballyda-vid Isles of the Sea, the Cordal Wild Rovers, the Tullig Gamecocks, the Renard Holy Terrors and the Tralee Gods, pepper the contemporary Gaelic games coverage.

The powerful Dingle Gascons, exotically named 'from the Gascony region in France whose inhabitants are supreme soldiers, strong and quick witted' emerged in 1906

and became one of the most formidable clubs in Kerry before they disbanded and disappeared in 1911.

Given the overwhelming Catholic and Nationalist ethos of the GAA and its membership at this time, it is no surprise that clubs named after Saints and Irish patriots were most common.

Ironically, given the Listowel Catholic Temperance Society club's origins, the County Board passed a unanimous resolution throwing them out of the GAA after their first ever county championship game in 1895 'in consequence of the disgraceful conduct of their players and supporters who have brought discredit on the Association here'.

In the years before 1916, club names were often chosen to reflect members' opposition to British rule in Ireland such as the Killorglin Irish Brigade Transvaal GAA, named in honour of a military unit of Irishmen that fought with the Boers against the British in South Africa two years previously.

Meanwhile in a display of sympathy, the Rathmore GAA rechristened their club the Rathmore Pearses in the weeks after the Rising.



PLAYERS AND PATRIOTS

THE GAA IN WAR AND REBELLION



Austin Stack (Photo courtesy of Seamus O'Reilly)

THE KERRY GAA, THE IRB AND THE IRISH VOLUNTEERS

THE REORGANISATION OF the Kerry GAA mirrored the national resurgence of the Association at this time.

In the decade before the Rising, the GAA became a close ally of the wider nationalist movement.

While the vast majority of its members were political moderates who fully supported the Irish Parliamentary Party's campaign for Home Rule, by 1916 the Association also contained a growing number of political radicals who were willing to support a rebellion against British rule in Ireland.

These members did not represent the official view of the GAA. Yet they did reflect the now growing influence of militant nationalism within Irish society. In Kerry the IRB, in the guise of officials like Austin Stack, were a constant influence on the leadership of the local GAA in the years after 1900. Nationally, the IRB's growing control could be seen in the Association's decision in 1903 to ban police and military personnel becoming members.

In 1913, the Irish Parliamentary Party's seemingly imminent success in introducing Home Rule caused the Ulster Unionist community to establish the Ulster Volunteers to oppose its implementation, by force if necessary.

In response Irish nationalists began to argue for a similar armed militia.

Maurice P. Ryle, editor of the *Kerry Advocate* newspaper, delivered a speech in Tralee and declared, 'If Ulster can give ... 90,000 drilled men, what could not the rest of Ireland be able to give'.

Ryle stated that members of the GAA 'whose prowess have been proved on many a hard fought field' could easily form volunteer clubs and drill in the use of arms.' The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) was equally worried about the potential of such a force, commenting that if it was established, 'the GAA could supply an abundance of first class recruits'.

On 22nd November 1913 the Irish Volunteers were established at a large public meeting in Dublin.

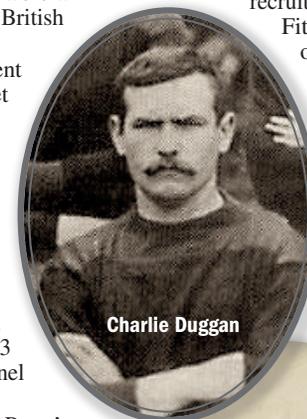
James Nowlan, the GAA's president, recommended that every member should 'join the volunteers and learn to shoot straight'.

In Kerry, local GAA officials were immediately prominent in establishing the movement.

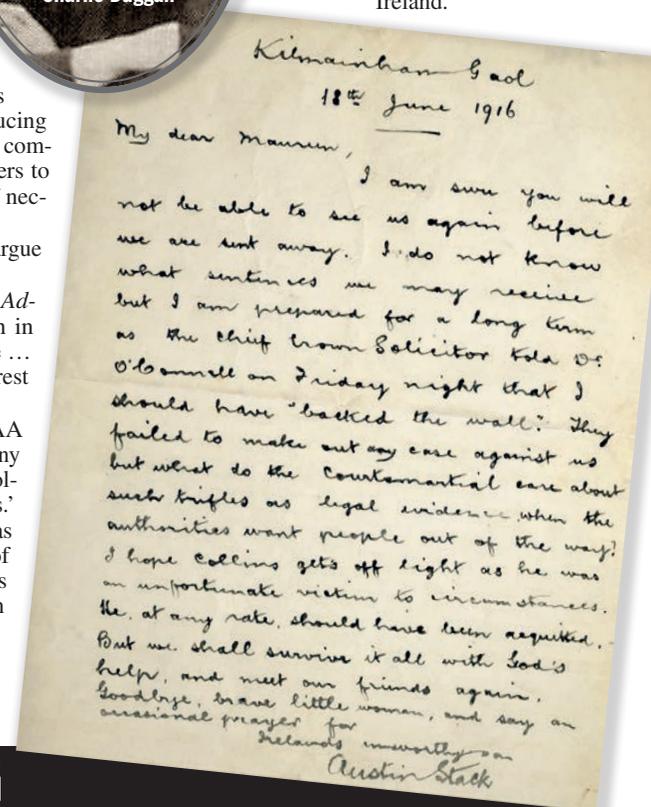
Stack, now Chairman of the Kerry GAA, organised the meeting to form the Tralee Volunteers on 10th December.

Kerry's star midfielder Pat O'Shea was instrumental in establishing a Volunteer company in Castlegregory and used the local GAA club as a recruiting ground for members, while Dick Fitzgerald, the Kerry captain, was an officer in the Killarney corps.

The Kerry Board also argued for a greater degree of co-operation between the two organisations. In September 1914, it requested the GAA to amend its constitution to allow for the affiliation of rifle clubs. By June 1914, the Volunteers numbered over 180,000 men many of whom had been drawn from GAA clubs across Ireland.



Charlie Duggan



THE GAA AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

WHILE THE 1916 Rising would profoundly affect the GAA, the Great War also had a significant impact on the Association.

Two examples of the contrasting experiences of GAA players during the war are provided by Charlie Duggan and James Rossiter.

Duggan, a member of Tralee Mitchels, won an All-Ireland with Kerry in 1903.

A soldier with the Royal Munster Fusiliers regiment, in August 1914 Duggan was sent with his unit to France.

He was wounded at the Battle of Mons but survived the war and returned to Tralee.

Meanwhile Rossiter was one of the GAA's rising stars, a brilliant forward on the Wexford team which lost to Kerry in the All-Ireland Finals of 1913 and 1914. He enlisted and was killed in action in November 1915. Poignantly, the press reprinted his last letter home in which he wrote he felt more nervous when facing Kerry than about the upcoming battle.

THE GAA and THE 1916 RISING

THE IRISH PARLIAMENTARY PARTY's call for the Irish Volunteers to assist the British war effort shattered the powerful unity of the force.

13,500 of its more radical members split and would come under the control and sway of the IRB. In Kerry, the GAA clearly aligned with this radical faction. Indeed so focused had they become on their Volunteer duties that the *Kerryman* complained that meetings of the County Board were now falling through.

In the spring of 1915, the IRB formed a Military Council under Patrick Pearse to prepare an insurrection against British rule in Ireland using the Volunteers.

Pearse sought to use the influence the IRB enjoyed among the GAA to further their designs.

By now Austin Stack was the acknowledged head of both the IRB and the Irish Volunteers in the county.

In October, Pearse visited Tralee and informed Stack of the IRB's plans to land German weapons in Kerry.

In preparation for this, Stack used the All-Ireland Final between Kerry and Wexford in November 1915 as a cover for an operation to smuggle a consignment of rifles from Dublin to Kerry, in order to adequately arm the local Volunteers.

Tadhg Kennedy, a member of the County Board, was put in charge of a group of Volunteers ostensibly travelling as supporters to the match. The morning after the game, Kennedy's men secured the weapons which were smuggled aboard the returning supporters' train to Tralee that evening.

In February 1916, the Military Council asked Stack to organise

the landing of the German arms that coming Easter and ensure their distribution among Volunteer units in Munster, while simultaneously their colleagues in Dublin launched their rebellion. To assist him, Stack effectively used his local GAA connections.

The former Kerry footballer, Patrick Cahill, was appointed his second in command. Meanwhile, Pat O'Shea arranged for a trusted harbour pilot to guide the German vessel, the Aud, into Fenit when it appeared.

However as Easter approached, the Military Council's plans began to fall apart.

On Good Friday, the Aud was intercepted by the Royal Navy off the Kerry coast. That same morning, Roger Casement was captured by the RIC after landing on Banna Strand off a German U-boat. Stack had orders that no trouble should

occur in Tralee before action was taken in Dublin.

That evening, Stack was arrested on a visit to Tralee RIC Barracks. Leaderless, and with military forces in the town now on high alert, the Tralee Volunteers took the decision on Easter Sunday morning to return to their homes, ending Kerry's involvement in the planned insurrection.

Despite these setbacks, the Military Council launched its uprising in Dublin at noon on Easter Monday.

302 players from fifty-two separate Dublin GAA clubs numbered among the 1,300 rebels who fought in the capital. In all, five of the fifteen men executed for their part in the Rising, Patrick Pearse, Sean McDermott, Eamonn Ceannt, Con Colbert and Michael O'Hanrahan had GAA connections.

THE RADICALISATION OF THE GAA

1916-1919



Frongoch Internment Camp, Wales

FRONGOCH

A UNIVERSITY OF REVOLUTION

IN THE IMMEDIATE aftermath of the Rising, public opinion across Ireland condemned the insurrection.

The Bishop of Kerry denounced the actions of the rebels and called on young men not to allow themselves 'to be drawn in by evil minded men affected by Socialistic and Revolutionary doctrines'. Yet, the months after the Rising witnessed the GAA and its members becoming increasingly politically radicalised. This was directly due to the British authorities' treatment of the Association in the months following the revolt.

On April 25th, martial law was proclaimed across Ireland and the holding of sports events was outlawed.

One victim was the Munster championship clash between Tipperary and Kerry scheduled for April 30th.

Over 3,400 people were arrested in the days following the Rising for their supposed participation with the rebellion.

The vast majority were known or suspected Volunteers or IRB members but many of those taken had little or no involvement with the rebellion. Because of the close connection between the GAA and both organisations, those targeted for arrest included

hundreds of ordinary members of the Association.

On May 9th, large scale arrests were conducted in Kerry. Among those rounded up were GAA officials and county players such as Paddy Cahill, Dick Fitzgerald, D.J. Griffin of Castlemaine, Harry Spring of Firies, Patrick Landers and Michael Griffin of Listowel and J.F. O'Shea, the Portmagee captain.

INTERNMENT

The majority found themselves deported to internment camps such as Frongoch in north Wales, which had originally been constructed to house German POWs.

However far from hindering the Volunteers or the IRB, this policy of mass internment only succeeded in increasing their strength and appeal. The detention of so many young men, many with little previous involvement in these bodies, brought them into contact with the emerging revolutionary republican doctrine. Due to their shared incarceration, many GAA members became politically radicalised.

As Willie Mullins, an internee and footballer with the Tralee Mitchels, stated: 'The comradeship that developed in Frongoch and the knowledge we got of each other from different parts of the country, the military aspect of things and being brought into

close contact with men, whom we used only hear about previously, was a binding force in the future. John Bull made an awful blunder when he put us all together there.'

Owing to the number of GAA players interned in Frongoch, Gaelic football was played to keep up discipline, fitness and morale amongst prisoners.

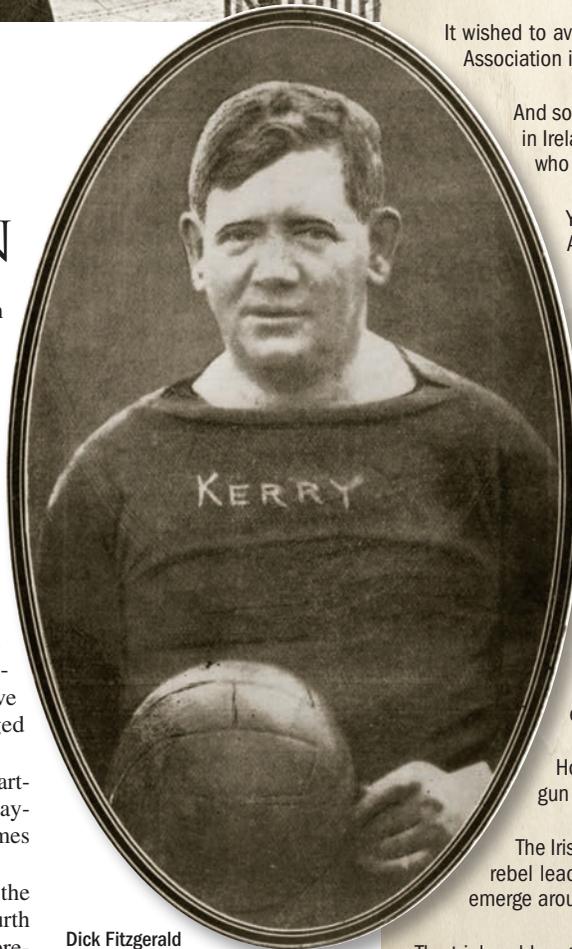
Dick Fitzgerald, Kerry's legendary captain, and Michael Collins, who was active in the London GAA, arranged the games.

A league competition was started among four teams, each playing six matches with two games being held daily.

The teams were called after the leaders of the Rising. The fourth team, nicknamed 'The Leprechauns' due to the small stature of their players, was coached by Dick Fitzgerald and won the competition. A Welsh prison guard watching on remarked: 'if this is what they're like at play, they must be hellish in a scrap!'

Inter-county contests were also organised and the pitch the prisoners used was renamed Croke Park.

In January 1916, the GAA had organised a secondary competition, the Wolfe Tone tournament, which saw Kerry and Louth qualify for the final. With so many



Dick Fitzgerald
(Photo courtesy of T.J. Flynn)

players from both counties now in Frongoch, it was decided that Louth and Kerry, led by Dick Fitzgerald, should play the final there. Kerry emerged victorious by one point.

Frongoch became a school of revolution for Irish republicans and the concentration on Gaelic games by its prisoners was a deliberate statement symbolising their rejection of British rule and culture and their commitment to the struggle for independence.

'A Discontented and Rebellious Spirit is Widespread'

IN THE DAYS following the Rising, the British Government established a Royal Commission to uncover the causes of the insurrection.

It concluded that the whole affair was perpetrated by the Irish Volunteers and claimed that their entire leadership consisted of radicals drawn from four anti-British bodies, including the GAA. The Commission's evidence stated that by 1916 the Volunteers had gained 'practically full control' over the Association.

In response to this accusation that the GAA was directly involved in helping orchestrate the Rising, the Central Council issued the following response in the national media: 'The claims that the GAA has been used in furtherance of the objects of the Irish Volunteers are as untrue as they are unjust, we strongly protest against the Commission's misrepresentations of the aims and objects of the GAA.'

Given the uneasy political climate in the country and the initial hostility of the Irish public towards the rebellion, the GAA's leadership wanted to dissociate itself as much as possible.

It wished to avoid any further Government crackdowns on the Association itself or its members.

And so the GAA, like every other major nationalist body in Ireland, showed no immediate sympathy with those who took part in the rebellion, or their cause.

Yet some within the GAA were proud that the Association had been implicated, an act which seemed to reaffirm its support for the nationalist cause. Maurice Moynihan, the founding father of the GAA in Kerry, wrote to the *Kerry Sentinel* that it would have been 'most uncomplimentary to the Association if it were omitted' by the Commission's investigation.

Due to the Commission's findings, the authorities conducted a campaign of harassment towards the GAA on both a local and national level for several months.

On June 4th, a scheduled meeting of the Munster Provincial Council in Limerick was raided and broken up by the city's police.

By September 1916, the RIC was still forcing entry into county championship games in Kerry.

However by now, public opinion in Ireland had begun to turn against the British Government.

The Irish people were appalled by the executions of the rebel leaders and a growing cult of martyrdom began to emerge around them.

The trial and hanging of Roger Casement in London also struck a powerful chord, particularly in Kerry.

GAA events provided some of the earliest examples of this growing surge of sympathy for the rebels. That July, the Tipperary hurlers began their Munster championship campaign by wearing rosettes on their jerseys symbolising their solidarity with the executed leaders.

Across Ireland, clubs from Tyrone to Limerick rechristened themselves in memory of the martyrs of 1916.

Soon the RIC were noting that 'a discontented and rebellious spirit is widespread which frequently comes to the surface at GAA tournaments'. The arrest and detention of many within the Association hardened members' views of the British authorities. The rise of the Sinn Féin party between 1917 and 1918 would provide the catalyst for the political radicalisation of Irish society and with it the GAA.

THE GAA AND THE EMERGING REPUBLICAN MOVEMENT

THE RISE OF SINN FÉIN

THE RISING HAD been greeted with disbelief and anger by the Irish people. Members of the Association overwhelmingly shared these sentiments. But the brutal British reaction swiftly changed public opinion and generated a renewed hatred of British rule in Ireland.

With popular opinion moving against the Irish Parliamentary Party and its links with the British Government, Sinn Féin was able to capitalise on the new national mood. In 1905, Arthur Griffith had formed the party to campaign for full Irish independence as opposed to the limited freedom that Home Rule offered.

Though Sinn Féin had no involvement with the Rising, for years the British authorities had used the term 'Sinn Féiners' to describe all radical nationalists like the IRB and the Volunteers.

When the uprising broke out, it was quickly dubbed the 'Sinn Féin Rebellion'.

Griffith now set about exploiting this new found, if misplaced fame, for his small organisation.

By the autumn of 1916, the Inspector General of the RIC was reporting the widespread belief among the Irish population 'that one week of physical force did more for the cause of Ireland than a quarter of a century of constitutional agitation'. The growing reality for many was that political freedom from Britain could be achieved quicker by adopting

the Sinn Féin programme of defiance rather than the old Home Rule policy of cooperation.

Swiftly Sinn Féin became a mass nationalist movement which the veterans of 1916 rallied to.

By 1917, the Irish political landscape was being transformed and GAA events frequently showed the earliest examples of this changing political mood.

In Kerry, GAA supporters were being arrested and imprisoned for shouting Sinn Féin slogans and displaying republican flags during matches.

In Clare, the County Board began the process which saw Eamon de Valera nominated to contest and win the county's by-election for Sinn Féin that July.

The Clare footballers, who, coached by Dick Fitzgerald reached that year's All-Ireland Final, entered their matches under a banner proclaiming 'Up de Valera'. The RIC reported that Sinn Féin's popularity was becoming so great it now 'virtually dominates' the GAA.



Thomas Ashe
(Photo courtesy of The National Library of Ireland)

THE DEATH OF THOMAS ASHE

THE DEATH OF Thomas Ashe would further inflame nationalist opinion and, particularly in Kerry, lead to a huge upsurge in support for the republican movement.

Born in Lispolo in 1885, Ashe was heavily involved with the Association locally as both captain and chairman of the Lispolo GAA.

In 1908, he took a teaching position in Lusk, Co. Dublin where he also became president of the Lusk GAA, playing in goal for the club's hurlers.

An active member of the IRB, with the formation of the Irish Volunteers Ashe established a corps in nearby Fingal.

He was later appointed commander of the Fifth Battalion, Dublin Brigade.

On Easter Monday, Pearse instructed Ashe to destroy enemy communications in the north Dublin area and disrupt the movements of British reinforcements coming into the city.

Leading sixty men, Ashe attacked a large RIC convoy of 50 officers in Ashbourne, Co. Meath on Friday April 28th, killing ten officers, wounding a further eighteen and capturing the rest with the loss of only

two Volunteers. It represented the most successful military action during the Rebellion.

With Pearse's surrender, Ashe's forces also capitulated.

At his court-martial, Ashe was sentenced to death but this was commuted to life imprisonment after the British government bowed to public and international pressure to stop the executions.

HERO

Like the other surviving Dublin Volunteer commander, Eamon de Valera, Ashe was sent to Lewes Jail in Sussex. While there he became a popular leader and spokesman of the rebel prisoners. As one of the senior surviving members of the IRB, Ashe was now appointed president of its Supreme Council.

In June 1917, the British government commuted the sentences of those still imprisoned after the Rising. Ashe was given a hero's welcome on his return

home to Kerry.

In the weeks that followed, Ashe toured Ireland, eulogising the Sinn Féin message and imploring young men to reform the Volunteers and make it a powerful force again. In August, he was arrested for making seditious speeches in public. While incarcerated in Mountjoy, republican prisoners began a hunger strike on September 20th. On the fifth day, Ashe died due to internal injuries sustained while being force-fed by prison officers.

Nationalist public opinion was outraged.

Those within the GAA were similarly appalled by the death of their former member. As a mark of respect, the Kerry County Board conducted no business at its next meeting and passed a resolution deploring his killing. His public funeral in Dublin was the largest ever seen in the city with over 30,000 taking part. Ashe's death was a major factor in the huge expansion of the Sinn Féin movement. By November, it had forty-four branches and over 3,200 members in Kerry.

Writers and Revolutionaries

THE CONTRIBUTION OF the Kerry GAA during this period was not limited to the playing or battlefields.

T.F. O'Sullivan and Dick Fitzgerald would write two of the most important works on the Association.

In 1907, O'Sullivan left his position as secretary of the Kerry GAA to join the *Freeman's Journal* in Dublin, serving as its parliamentary correspondent in London until the paper's demise in 1924.

Outside of journalism, O'Sullivan retained a deep interest in Irish history and his major contribution was the publication of *The Story of the GAA* in October 1916. This was the first ever written history of the Association. In its introduction, O'Sullivan declared that the GAA was 'the greatest athletic organisation the world has ever seen and it has helped foster a spirit of earnest nationality in the hearts of the rising generation.'

He continued to write for various newspapers and published many works of history before his death in 1950.

Meanwhile in 1914, Dick Fitzgerald published *How to Play Gaelic Football*.

As a training manual of the games skills and an exposition of Fitzgerald's own philosophy on the sport, the publication became essential reading for players, trainers and supporters alike.

The book was ground breaking in its extensive use of photographs demonstrating the skills Fitzgerald wrote about.

Fitzgerald spent much of the work musing on the strength and characteristics needed by players in specific positions.

Therefore a goalkeeper 'like a poet is born and not made'; half backs 'should be as hard as nails and able to take a good deal of rough abuse' and the centre forward should be 'the star of the side, a master tactician and the general to the whole team'.

The book constantly emphasised the great Kerry players who lived up to these characteristics while celebrating Kerry's footballing tradition.



How to play Gaelic Football
(Photo courtesy of T.J. Flynn)



Sinn Féin Ard Fheis, October 1917
(Photo courtesy of The National Library of Ireland)

THE 1918

CONSCRIPTION CRISIS

THE RISE OF the Sinn Féin movement was paralleled by the re-organisation of the Irish Volunteers. The mass release of their members from British jails in 1917 provided the impetus for the re-establishment of the force across Ireland. While Sinn Féin developed as the political wing of the republican movement, the Volunteers evolved as its military component.

Following the death of Thomas Ashe and his own electoral victory in Clare, Eamon de Valera was now seen as the rightful heir to the republican movement.

At Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis in October 1917, de Valera replaced Arthur Griffith as president of the party while Austin Stack was elected onto its ruling executive. Shortly after at the Volunteers' national convention, de Valera was formally elected president of the organisation, ensuring that from then on both bodies would run in tandem under the same leadership.

The GAA also hoped to capitalise on the new patriotic spirit that was inflaming Irish public opinion.

That same month the Association's Central Council issued letters to all County Boards 'to take advantage of the present feeling throughout the country with the object of wiping out soccer and other foreign games'. Many GAA members also became prominent in the reformation of the Volunteers.

Inevitably the commanding officers in local companies were young men of local stature, often the captains of the parish GAA club. One example in Kerry was Michael Leen, captain of the Castleisland hurling team who reorganised the town's Volunteer corps.

In April 1918, an enormous German army offensive on the Western Front forced the British Government to attempt to introduce conscription to Ireland. Once news of their intentions broke, political opinion in Ireland was outraged. A special meeting of the Central Council unanimously declared: 'That we pledge ourselves to resist by any and every means in our power the attempted conscription of Irish manhood and we call on all members of the GAA to give effect to the terms of this resolution.'

In an editorial, the *Kerry Sentinel* warned the authorities that if they tried to enforce the measure it could only end in 'bloodshed and disaster hitherto unknown in the history of Ireland'.

On Saturday 13th April, seven members of the Ballymacelligott Volunteers attacked the nearby Gortatlea RIC barracks hoping to secure rifles and ammunition to fight any attempt to conscript local men. Two of the Volunteers were killed with their public funerals in Tralee attracting a massive crowd of mourners.

Following Gortatlea, a spate of similar arms raids were carried out by Volunteers across Ireland. The attempt to enforce conscription

caused a huge uptake in enlistments to the force and membership swelled to over 100,000. The RIC reported that there were now twenty-two companies of Volunteers active in Kerry. In the north of the county, hurling matches were being used to mask the assembly and drilling of local Volunteer units.

Meanwhile on 18 April, the leadership of Sinn Féin called a national conference to co-ordinate public resistance to conscription, while the Catholic Church now gave the party its formal backing. Five days later, Trade Union leaders organised a massive general strike across Ireland and the country effectively ground to a halt. In the face of such overwhelming public resistance, the British government was forced to postpone the implementation of conscription indefinitely.



Back Row: J Prendergast, J Toumey, T Vale, D Mullins, W Fitzgerald, J O'Connor, T Fitzgerald, M Hannafin.
Middle Row: J Mullins, J. Sugrue, J Vale, M Dowling, M McCarthy, P O'Sullivan, D O'Callaghan, T Quinlan, D Power.
Front Row: W O'Connor, P. Carmody, J Ware, D Fitzgerald, J Dunne (capt), J Ware, P O' Donoghue, J. J. Sheehy, J O'Connor.

(Photo courtesy of Dermot Cotter)

GAEELIC SUNDAY

BY 1918, THE Kerry GAA was in dire financial straits.

Restrictions on rail travel due to the War meant only one county championship had been successfully completed since 1914.

In order to raise funds for the County Board, the Central Council decided to organise a national tournament.

That May, the Kerry team qualified for the final of the competition. Yet on 14th June in Tralee an attempt was made on the lives of the RIC officers responsible for the deaths of the two Volunteers at Gortatlea. In response, the town was declared a 'Special Military Area' and was effectively sealed off by the military. With its Tralee contingent being unable to leave, a weakened Kerry side was well beaten in the final.

Faced with growing political unrest and renewed Volunteer activity, London introduced Emergency Rule to Ireland in July 1918.

All public gatherings and political rallies were banned along with Sinn Féin and the Volunteers.

The GAA escaped being proscribed, a decision the British press called a grave error as the Association was undoubtedly 'an eager and lively organisation of revolutionaries'.

However, the Government's restrictions were framed to include GAA matches. Within a week, games in counties like Down and Offaly were being broken up as the police baton-charged the assembled crowds. To circumvent the law, the county championship match between Caher-

siveen and Portmagee was falsely advertised to take place in Ballinskelligs. While the local RIC were busy dealing with a decoy game there, the real teams contested their match at a pitch in Portmagee.

Outraged over the interference with its games and emboldened by the widespread demonstrations which had defeated the attempt to introduce conscription, the GAA began to orchestrate its own mass, peaceful protest.

On 20th July, the Association was informed that no GAA event would be allowed unless permits were granted from the police.

In response, the Central Council ruled that 'no member of the Association shall take part in any competition where such a permit has been obtained.

Anyone that disobeys this rule will be automatically and indefinitely suspended'.

PARTICIPATION

Next they ordered all County Boards to arrange an extensive programme of matches to be held across every parish in Ireland on Sunday, 4th August, a day quickly dubbed 'Gaelic Sunday'.

The Association's decision initiated a trial of strength between it and the Government.

Preparations were exhaustive. At 3pm on the day in question between 1,500 and 1,800 games involving anywhere between 45,000 and 100,000 players threw in concurrently. Practically every affiliated GAA club on the island participated and matches were even organised among Sinn Féin prisoners incarcerated in Belfast Jail. In Kerry, a large programme of events was mapped out but torrential rain forced the cancellation of most games.

Faced with such mass disobedience, the authorities were powerless to resist. By the following weekend, GAA events had resumed as usual. To emphasise the point, the Castleisland branch of Sinn Féin held a football tournament in the town. As play opened a large force of military arrived at the ground but made no attempt to interfere.

Gaelic Sunday represented the largest, most widespread and successful act of public defiance against British authority in Ireland during the entire independence struggle. It clearly demonstrated the growing resistance to British rule by those within the Association.

THE EMBERS OF EASTER

1919-1924

FREEDOM *and the* FREE STATE 1919-1922

BETWEEN 1916 AND 1918, Ireland witnessed an upheaval in its political landscape.

Following the Rising, popular support for Home Rule was washed away, replaced by mass backing for Sinn Féin's demand for an independent Irish republic.

The general election of December 1918 saw Sinn Féin capture 65% of the popular vote. In Kerry, the party was returned unopposed with Austin Stack being elected for West Kerry. In January 1919, Sinn Féin established Dáil Éireann and re-proclaimed the Irish republic. That same day, the first shots of the Irish War of Independence were fired when an RIC patrol was ambushed at Soloheadbeg, Tipperary.

As the Volunteers, now renaming themselves the Irish Republican Army (IRA), began their guerrilla campaign, 1919 ironically proved to be the most successful year for the Kerry GAA in this entire period. Kerry claimed its first provincial football title in four years before losing to Galway in an All-Ireland Semi-Final Replay in Croke Park. Yet given the overlap between GAA, Sinn Féin and IRA members in Kerry, the authorities continued to harass GAA events. In June, players and supporters of the Dr Crokes and Tralee Mitchels teams entering a match in Killarney were

baton charged by the RIC. Four Mitchels players were severely injured.

By the spring of 1920, the IRA's successes forced the British Government to supplement the overstretched RIC with units of ex-British Army officers and servicemen dubbed 'the Black and Tans' and Auxiliaries.

Their campaign of indiscriminate violence and destruction effectively put a halt to GAA activity across most of Ireland.

REPRISAL

This terror campaign reached a crescendo with the attack on Croke Park in November 1920. In reprisal for a series of assassinations carried out by the IRA in Dublin that morning, a force of Auxiliaries entered the stadium during a match between Dublin and Tipperary and began firing into the crowd. Twelve people were killed and another seventy wounded. Among the dead was the Tipperary right corner back Michael Hogan, shot as he ran for cover.

Given the close links between the GAA and the republican movement in Kerry, members of the Association there were prominent in the struggle for independence. In early 1919 Patrick Cahill, the former Kerry player, was appointed

commander of the Kerry IRA No. 1 Brigade in Tralee. Tadhg Kennedy of the County Board became the Kerry IRA's senior intelligence officer and reported directly to Michael Collins. Under Kennedy's direction a counter-intelligence network was built up, often supplied by sympathetic or disillusioned RIC officers.

In January 1921, Con Brosnan, the future Kerry captain, commanded a unit of the Moyvane IRA which killed RIC District Inspector Tobias O'Sullivan in Listowel.

The IRA force which attacked the Headford railway junction in March (the largest action undertaken by the Kerry IRA during the War) included Humphrey Murphy and John Joe Rice both senior IRA officers and former Kerry players.

The only IRA fatality was Jim Bailey of the Ballymacelligott GAA. That same month William McCarthy, a high-ranking IRA officer in North Kerry and popular hurler with Lixnaw, was infamously shot dead while in police custody in Tralee Town Park. On 15th April, John Joe Sheehy, commander of the Boherbee Company of the Tralee battalion and Kerry's star forward, oversaw the assassination of Major John Mackinnon, the notorious local commander of the Auxiliaries.



The Kerry football team which suffered defeat at the hands of Dublin in the All-Ireland Final in Croke Park in 1923. The match drew enormous crowds. (Photo courtesy of The National Library of Ireland)

THE CIVIL WAR AND ITS LEGACY

THE ANGLO-IRISH TREATY signed in December 1921 bitterly split the republican movement in two. In Kerry, public opinion largely supported Austin Stack's assertion that the Treaty was 'an unmitigated disaster'. Tadhg Kennedy also asserted that '99%' of the Kerry IRA rejected its terms.

In April 1922, the Kerry GAA held its first annual convention since 1920.

However the eruption of the Civil War in June put an end to any planned GAA activity. The Civil War could have easily fractured the Association's national membership into pro and anti-Treaty factions. The consequences

for the GAA would have been disastrous. Therefore they took the only viable course open to them and remained strictly neutral. Legislation was introduced to ban the selling of political literature and gate collections for political purposes at its games.

Though the Civil War was most brutality fought

in Kerry, following the IRA's ceasefire in May 1923, GAA activity there quickly resumed.

In October, Kerry defeated Tipperary to claim the 1923 Munster championship.

Nevertheless the *Kerryman* noted that many of Kerry's stars were absent from the team, most having been interned by the Free State for IRA activity.

OPPOSED

With their release from jail in December, a group of Kerry players who were former internees issued a challenge to the Kerry team. The County Board decided to use the game as a trial to select the team which would play Cavan in the All-Ireland Semi-Final. Those on the internees' fifteen were deeply opposed politically to many on the Kerry side such as the Kerry captain Con Brosnan, a serving Free State officer during the recent Civil War. In the circumstances, it came as little surprise that the *Kerryman* found the match to be 'robust and at times too much so, marred by a large number of fouls, ensuring the referee was kept busy.' The Kerry team won 0-5 to 1-0.

Their pride dented, the internees sought a replay which they won convincingly. As a result, a much changed Kerry side contested the All-Ireland Semi-Final - Kerry's first appearance in Croke Park

in five years. The *Kerryman* reported: 'On entering the field the Kerry team proceeded to the spot where Hogan was shot on. They knelt in silent prayer on the fatal sod while the spectators maintained a respectful silence. This action was warmly appreciated by the crowd. As the Kerry team walked to the centre, the cheering was long and loud.'

Many saw huge significance in this simple gesture.

The sight of a new Kerry team, composed of players from across the bitter political divide, kneeling united in prayer symbolised the unifying power of sport.

While Kerry would end up losing the 1923 All-Ireland to Dublin, less than nine months later, in April 1924, they defeated the same opponents in the 1924 final. It marked the beginning of perhaps the most successful period in Kerry's GAA history. Over the next decade, Kerry won six All-Irelands, ten Munster championships, two Railway Cups and four titles of the newly created National League. For a society still reeling from the horrors of Civil War, the successes of this Kerry team became a metaphor for the power of Gaelic games to transcend political divisions.

Out of the embers of Easter 1916, perhaps the greatest team in the history of the GAA would emerge in Kerry.



Kerry's great four-in-row side from 1929 to '32.

The core of that same team which of course went on to win Kerry's first four in a row between 1929-1932, and would become the most dominate side in the history of the GAA up until the point. They are often lost in the shadow of Micko's team from 75-86, but I for one would argue they could easily be considered the greatest Kerry team of all time. The photograph is courtesy of Seamus O'Reilly and TJ Flynn.