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AMONG THE GAELS AT CROKE PARK. IRISH-IRELAND AT PLAY

The Tongue of the Gael.

To live in the true atmosphere of the new Ireland of to-day, to see and to meet the men who made that Ireland a possibility, you must go to Croke Park on the day of a final. And for preference let it be the day of a hurling final. You will no longer find the air of the Park – Jones's Rd. we generally called it then, appropriately enough – polluted with the harsh, discordant Cockney accents of the Fly-Boys shouting the odds. Any of these gentlemen who still honour us with their presence have a wholesome respect for those quiet, but stern-looking, lads with the white armlets. Men no longer go to Croke Park to make or to lose a week's salary.

The tongue of the Gael has supplanted that of the Cockney. People have ceased to ask, as they used to ask a few years ago, what was the meaning of that gold ring worn by that young priest on the sideline seats. Everywhere around you now you see the golden Fainne, and you are not surprised to find that more of your neighbours are discussing the game in Irish than are speaking English.

The spectators, too, have changed for the better. Time was when even the "local Member" would not deign to honour his county by cheering it to victory. Now our T.D.'s are to be seen by the score. For they know they are amongst their own – they know they are at the headquarters of the one Association which first and before all others drew the line between the Gael and the garrison. The G.A.A. has made mistakes and has lost opportunities; but one thing at least it has never done – it has not forgotten that its one great object is to stem the tide of anglicisation. Some day, perhaps, the historian will judge rightly what a debt Ireland owes to the G.A.A. Not a few of the men to whom today the nation has entrusted its future got their earliest training in its ranks.

Michael Collins, Hurler.

It was nothing new to see Harry Boland in Croke Park, with his camán. Many a time has his unerring stroke brought victory to the Faughs. But when Michael Collins had a few preliminary shots before he started the match yesterday we realised that he, too, had handled a hurley before.

That left-handed flying double of his drew a cheer as hearty as the ovation he received when he set the teams going. For five minutes the fifteen thousand spectators saw him no longer a hunted fugitive or a Minister of Finance, but a schoolboy at play. And at half-time we saw him once more "on the run" – to his seat on the sideline, when the ball came flying in his direction after he had restarted the game.

Croke Park crowds have now become connoisseurs in the matter of music. Long ago on the rare occasions when we had a band any old selections would do. Now we must have the music that breathes of the new spirit. And we got it yesterday, and we showed our appreciation. The ladies, too, have kept pace with the times. A few years ago the few of them who patronised Croke Park blushed at their own audacity. Probably they came only because their husbands or their fiancées came. Now they come in hundreds, and not to see the crowd and to shriek at the clash of the rival camáns, but to enjoy the game, and they know Rob Mockler, and Dick Grace, and Daly, and the rest of the favourites about as well as the men know them.

Thrilling Struggle.

And what about the match? It was a grand, a thrilling struggle. I have seen better and more exciting battles, but not often. For half-an-hour the result was in doubt, but after the interval it was plainly Dublin's game. Above all it was a clean match – few fouls, nothing unsportsmanlike. And Kilkenny took their defeat just as a few years ago they would have taken another All-Ireland victory. No wonder we are proud of our national game and of our players. It is not the game of weaklings; it is the game of soldiers. Ireland need not fear for the future of her manhood as long as hurling survives. Mr. Frank P. Walsh, probably for this first time, saw a classic struggle yesterday. Now he will no longer wonder why Cork, Tipperary, Limerick, Clare and the other hurling counties are also the fighting counties.