
The Contribution of Gaelic and "Foreign" Sports to the Division and Reconciliation of the Irish People

Laurent Daniel*¹

¹Héritages et Constructions dans le Texte et l'Image (HCTI) – Université de Bretagne Sud (UBS) :
EA4249 – 4, rue Jean Zay 56320 LORIENT, France

Résumé

After a number of military and political setbacks, Ireland's fight for independence moved into the cultural arena at the end of the 19th century. It was at this time that hurling and Gaelic football were born (or reborn/re-invented), under the aegis of a Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) founded in 1884. From then on, all true Irish sportsmen (women excluded then) were expected to take part in these sports, to the strict exclusion of so-called "English" or "foreign" sports. Anyone who took part in football or rugby, either as a player or a spectator, faced exclusion. Following on the 1916 Easter Rising and 1919-21 war of independence, the island of Ireland was divided into the mainly catholic Irish Free State (Republic of Ireland as from 1948) and Northern Ireland whose mainly protestant population was afraid of losing the privileges conferred by colonization. If anything, the split and 1968-98 civil war in the North exacerbated the divide. The great majority of team sports enthusiasts south of the border played hurling (camogie for women) and Gaelic football rather than football or rugby whereas in the North, ethnic and social exclusions ensured that very few Catholics played or supported soccer and rugby. In the years leading up to and following the 1998 peace agreements in Northern Ireland which terminated the thirty years of violence between the two communities, a number of initiatives aimed at preparing and consolidating the necessary reconciliation process were launched by the public authorities and taken by the various federations to combat sectarianism and promote inclusion. This article presents these initiatives and assesses their results by examining the surprisingly rare scientific literature on the subject and national press.

Mots-Clés: GAA, soccer, rugby, Ireland, Northern Ireland

*Intervenant