

THE NEW YORK GAA: ORIGINS TO GOLDEN JUBILEE

By Joseph Milkovits

Joseph Milkovits graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1986 from the University of Michigan with a degree in mechanical engineering, and received his Masters in English in 1988, also from the University of Michigan. He is currently employed by Hewlett-Packard in San Diego. Mr. Milkovits wrote the following history of the New York Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) while a student.



The Gaelic Athletic Association was formed in Thurles, Co. Tipperary in 1884¹. It was a body meant to regulate and promote Irish games, such as handball, football, and hurling, among Irishmen of all backgrounds and status. The two men who presided over this infant group were Michael Cusack and Maurice Davin.

Cusack was an athlete, and entirely resented the Anglicization of sport and the corruption present in his day. He was also a Fenian (taking the oath in 1867)², and while he was an athlete his nationalist dreams and goals manifested itself in his writings and recorded associations³. Davin was the greatest athlete of his time, equally proficient at Irish games as well as competition with the English. At the first meeting in Thurles, Cusack, Davin and five other men were the only delegates. Two of the others, Wyse-Power and Bracken were Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) men, initiating a continuing trend of nationalist political involvement in the GAA⁴. But this was not the only support for the movement; Parnell, Davitt and many of the leading Irish newspapers came out in favor of the resolutions adopted at Thurles.

The first American-exile connection to the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ireland was the so called "Invasion of America". Cusack, Davin, and especially Michael Davitt supported the idea of sending Irish athletes to America to display their prowess at Irish games, and also spread the games among a greater audience⁵. Davitt was also familiar with the greater financial means of Irish-Americans, as the Land League itself had been greatly supported by American donations. Since the association was in debt £450, and £1000 was the estimated expense, the "Invasion" must have had a profit motive as well.

On September 18, 1888, 27 hurlers, 18 athletes and 5 officials, including Maurice Davin, left from Cobh for New York on the liner Wisconsin⁶. The initial response to their arrival was great, including glowing newspaper reports about the athletes, "They were literally the flower of Erin's Manhood"⁷. Once the ballyhoo had died down, it was obvious that little had gone on as far as concrete planning for the tour. Also, the Manhattan Athletic club and the New York Athletic club, two large clubs on whose cooperation a tour depended, had split into separate groups, each trying to take

control. The Manhattan AC won out, but this type of factionalism was a recurring theme in Irish-American politics and social life.

On September 29, 1888, without much advertising, there were hurling, track, and field events played at the Manhattan AC's home grounds. The tour continued to Brooklyn, Boston, Trenton, and Lowell, with poor attendance except in Boston, where the crowd numbered over 5000⁸. There was a second "leg" of the tour, which visited Yonkers, Newark, Patterson, and Philadelphia. Once more, except in Philadelphia, this leg was a failure, attendance-wise⁹. The "Invasion" left the GAA in Ireland with a sizable deficit, and all they could hope for was that the tour planted a seed out of which an organization could grow.

The first sprout was the formation in New York City of the "GAA of America" by 22 Gaelic clubs in September of 1891¹⁰. Unfortunately for the New York Gaels, the organization was caught up in the factional struggles among Irish-Americans after Parnell's fall, and recorded information on this group is scant. But the clubs survived, and they kept the games alive. These clubs arose out of the social and benevolent organizations that had been formed along county lines. The Cavanmen's club was the first to form, (they claim as far back as 1848,) and considered themselves to be "an oasis in the urban desert"¹¹. It is from this background that the failed "GAA of America" came, and next arose the "Irish Counties Athletic Union". On Sunday, September 11, 1904, in Grace and Coffey's Hall on 1st Ave. and 25th St., the Kilkenny Social and Benevolent Association called a meeting of twenty-four of these county clubs, and resolutions were made and accepted on this day to form the I.C.A.U. "to promote the Irish games of football and hurling"¹². Before the end of 1904, a parallel organization was formed along the same lines by the county boards for the promotion of social and benevolent activity, the United Irish Counties Association (U.I.C.A.).

These organizations loosely controlled the Gaelic games in New York, but records and word-of-mouth information on these early days are minimal. They are known, however, for a failed attempt to create an official sportsfield for the games. In 1908, a lot in South-East Yonkers was acquired, and bonds were sold to finance the project. No one really knows if the amount was raised, but it is felt by later observers that the poor location of the park and distance from mass transit, coupled with the refusal of the Yonkers City Council to allow play on Sunday, caused the venture to fail in 1910¹³. Championships were held at this venue and others, including Celtic Park, but with no ruling body, the claims are not relevant. However, this is not to say that the interest was low. The Gaelic American would advertise and report on at least one hurling and football "outing" per week. These were sponsored by the county boards, and always included a social hour after, with music "of course". Also, the ad would mention the rules to be followed at this meet.¹⁴

The need for a strong central authority began to be realized by leading members of the clubs, and newspaper writers such as Martin Hurley of the *Irish Advocate* paper. In December of 1914, Billy Snow, manager of the Cavan F.C. (football club) called for a meeting among the county teams at his hall on 8th Ave. and 119th St. The *Advocate* published comprehensive minutes of the two formative meetings on December 12 and 26, 1914¹⁵. These meetings have been called "(as important) to New York as Thurles was to Ireland"¹⁶. That conclusion is well taken, because these were the first concrete steps taken to form a central authority to control Gaelic games in New York. The spirit of unity present here,

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KERRY JR. HURLING CHAMPIONS OF NEW YORK STATE—1955

(documented in the published minutes) was lacking in the previously formed "GAA of America", which disbanded precisely because of internal conflict.

As with any infant body, challenges from other groups are inevitable. In the late 1910's, football was dominated by the county clubs of Cork, Kerry, Kildare, and Kilkenny. These teams would play at Celtic Park, and split the handsome gate receipts. The GAA was set up as an amateur body, and on this they stood. They were then boycotted by the "Big Four". On June 5, 1915, the *Gaelic American* reported the result of a Cork-Kerry football game at Celtic Park under the auspices of the "Gaelic League of N.Y.", not the GAA¹⁷. After two years, in the middle of 1917, the teams acquiesced and were readmitted to the GAA.

Another procedural matter that caused problems was the use of "ringers". In the "troubled times", many Irish, forced to leave their home because of the Civil War in Ireland, fled to New York. The GAA and the county clubs absorbed these exiles, and provided a haven for them if they were pursued, especially anti-treaty men¹⁸. The New York GAA has at all times been quite nationalistic, if not by recruitment, by the fact that sympathy with the games of the Gael almost implies a nationalistic fervor. A flyer from the Claremen had the following proclamation:

A greeting all each
The Claremen gives
But loves the man who works for the Sireland,
Though Clare beloves
Whatever he does
His motto is "United Ireland"¹⁹.

The native Irish immigrant would be quickly placed on a team, and usually improve its fortunes. Initially, these "ringers" were illegal players, but this rule was relaxed for the good of all. Many Irishmen of skill in the Gaelic games were "imported", and set up with jobs

so they could compete on the New York level. This is one of the positive socializations of the Irish brought about by the games.

Also, athletic fundraisers to aid in the construction of Irish projects were given by the county boards. For example, the *Gaelic American* reports on "The Monster Athletic Carnival" in aid of the James Stephens memorial given by the Kilkenny S & B²⁰. One of the unfortunate by-products of this 'havening' was the amount of scores settled in and around GAA hangouts²¹.

Other bodies such as the Irish Amateur Council and the Shamrock Club sponsored athletic "outings" at Celtic Park in the early 20's. The I.A.A.C. actually held the first "Feis" in 1919, predating later claims of the U.I.C.A. that their 1931 "Feis" was the first in America²². As the 20's went on, however, the GAA became the dominant force in the promotion of Gaelic games. This is because the other groups lacked cohesion. After 1923, the only sponsoring body of the Gaelic games mentioned in the *Gaelic American* is the GAA.

However, the arena where most of the games were held, Celtic Park, had no exclusive relationship with, or loyalty to, the NY GAA. Because of this, Billy Snow of Cavan and Paddy Grimes of Offaly invested in the lease of a park from the City of New York. The Park was located on 240th Street and Broadway, in the Bronx, and after two years of preparation, was opened in the spring of 1928²³. It was named Innisfail Park, and really made Celtic Park unnecessary for the GAA. (Today, Celtic Park has been replaced with apartment buildings.) While this was certainly an improvement, some members wanted to push further, and buy a park of their own. In 1930, the beginning of the depression, a \$22,000 downpayment was placed on a park in Flushing Meadows, Queens, the site of the 1964 World's Fair. If the income of the GAA had continued at the levels of the late 20's, the testimony

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of observers is that this park would have succeeded²⁴. However, the timing was not good: more people were out of work, and what money they had couldn't support the expansion begun by Grimes and Snow. But still the games continued.

By 1937, the depression had deepened. Innisfail Park's attendance was very low, about 200 people per Sunday, even though admission was now free. Part of the problem was the fact that immigration to the U.S. from Ireland had stopped during the economic downturn. The New York GAA was bankrupt, and even the dedication of Billy Snow and Paddy Grimes made it impossible for the GAA to hold the lease on Innisfail Park. It was returned to the City of New York in 1940, and one of the local soccer groups took it over²⁵. However, the GAA continued to rent the park on Sundays until 1944. In these trying times, the games went on, and New York titles were still decided.

At the end of 1944, the situation at Innisfail Park came down to brass tacks. The soccer clubs wanted the park permanently, and desperate measures were needed. Up stepped John Kerry O'Donnell, a former President of the Association, with the cold hard cash to lease the park permanently for the GAA²⁶. It reopened in March 1945 under the new name of Croke Park. Another rebirth for the GAA was, on the parish level, the formation of Minor teams of U.S. born Gaels, who competed for N.Y. championships in hurling and football. This was the beginning of a new era for the N.Y. GAA.

The catharsis of this rebirth was the holding of the All-Ireland football final of 1947 in the Polo Grounds, N.Y. Sunday, September 14, 1947 "was without question the greatest day in the history of the N.Y. GAA"²⁷. The circumstances preceeding the day are the stuff legends are made of. The New York representative to the Irish GAA Central Council, the Right Reverend Canon M.J. Hamilton (Clare) made a speech to the Council:

"It would be great if the descendants of those unfortunate Irish, who were both kith and kin, could see an All-Ireland Football Final in America during 1947 which would be the 100th Anniversary of their forefathers in America"²⁸.

This passionate plea won over a majority of the Council, and it was decided that the 1947 All-Ireland would be held in New York. The mythical quality of this tale must be analyzed within the context of Judge James J. Comerford's remarks:

A Kilkenny friend of mine gave me all the particulars in 1951. "As I stood on the ship going to Ireland, I saw Paddy O'Keefe with two briefcases. The cases were full of dollar bills, and following Paddy were 3 more briefcases. . ."

It was an invisible export of services from Ireland²⁹.

In the final analysis, rhetoric and riches both had a lot to do with the historic game taking place. The acquiescence of the Irish to the wishes of the exiles, basically for financial reasons is well known dating back to Clan na Gael and other nationalistic groups whose money supported Parnell and the Land League³⁰. Kerry, the holders, and Cavan, the Ulster champions were to meet in the 1947 All-Ireland. By all accounts, it was a great final, Cavan victorious in front of over 35,000 people³¹.

After World War II, emigration from Ireland to the United States was on the increase. The influx and integration of the new Irish into Irish-America was helped greatly by the athletic games, and the social support groups of the GAA, and its newly re-named facility (in 1951) Gaelic Park³². Led by "the Grand Man Himself", John Kerry O'Donnell and also Paddy Grimes, the competition was never better, and accompanying social events formed the basis for a strong Irish community in and around the northern Bronx. It's been said that "There were more marriages made at Gaelic Park than on any other square footage in the State of New York"³³. Testimony from Monica Milkovits, "They'd have the games, and when the lads were cleaned up, the dancing began, and didn't stop, and a fellow that had a good outing on the pitch was surely ahead of the rest"³⁴.

In this period the GAA and Gaelic Park, continuing the

benevolent tradition of the U.I.C.A. it arose from, also conducted many fundraisers and testimonials to aid injured players, and spouses of men deceased³⁵. This aided families in need, and can be compared to the now outdated social welfare system of the Tammany Hall Irish.

The 50's were the greatest decade of the New York GAA to date, the increased immigration of new blood and the stability of a set playing field led to greater revenues for the body. Gains were also made with the introduction of insurance to protect the players, which allowed many more men to freely play, without fear of reprisals from employers who didn't recognize the Irish games.

The crowning event and the date of maturity for the New York GAA was 1964, the Golden Jubilee Year. The preceeding year, men such as John Kerry O'Donnell, John Byrne, and Patrick McMahon, shuttled back and forth between Dublin and New York, and returned with the co-operation of the Central Council regarding International Gaelic Games on American soil. Irish teams had toured America previously, but now New York was allowed to participate in Ireland's National Football and Hurling championships.

The first spectacle of the Jubilee was the arrival of the teams from Tipperary, 1964 National Hurling League champions, and Kilkenny, the 1963 All-Ireland champions in Hurling. In the opening game, Tipperary played New York, and after what has been called a thrilling hour, Tipp prevailed 4-16 to 6-6. The next week the Irish teams met to decide the '64 N.H.L. final. This game has been called "the greatest Hurling game ever played on U.S. soil", Kilkenny on top, 4-16 to 3-13³⁶.

The second "leg" of the Golden Jubilee was the New York GAA's "Round-the-World" football tour. It was sponsored by the Ballantine Brewery, and after an opening loss in San Francisco, the New York team defeated four Australian teams and culminated the tour by beating Offaly at Birr 2-6 to 1-2. The cooperation of the New York GAA and the Central Council was in evidence at the lavish banquet given by the Offaly County Board. Paddy Grimes and John Kerry O'Donnell were presented with a special silver tray and a scroll memorializing the Golden Jubilee and the achievements of the Gaels of New York³⁷.

The final segment of the Jubilee was the visit of the Dublin footballers to New York to contest the National Football Final. The day was October 18, 1964, and the atmosphere was charged. The play was fast and furious, and with two minutes left in the game, New York led by one point. The referee, Geraghty, awarded Dublin a free from in close, and it looked like a tie. The New York players lined up close and charged at the Dub. He complained to the referee to enforce the distance rule on the free. When the kick was taken, New York blocked the ball, Paddy Cummings grabbed the ball, took it down and fisted over the bar for the eventual two point winning margin and New York's second National League football title³⁸. This was the climax of the Golden Jubilee and New York's crowning hour in International competition. The co-operation of the New York GAA and the Central Council would have given great joy to the men of the 1888 "Invasion".

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Piecing together the history of the New York GAA was a task that demanded persistence, and a reliance on oral information in order to get a coherent picture. There have been a number of books written about the GAA in Ireland, and its great significance politically as well as socially. On the other hand, the New York GAA, judging from the responses I've gotten, isn't receiving the same attention. The conclusion is this: The New York GAA has had a great effect on the lives of Irish exiles in New York. This effect has not been a political one, rather a social one. Irishmen from the old country quickly found a support group to accommodate them, much like the old-style Tammany-Irish bosses had done for previous generations. This socialization is a direct descendant of the county club system that the GAA arose from. The reason that politics has not been such a strong backdrop to the drama is similar to the Irish GAA's situation as time progressed. There is no way the organization could have survived the turmoils, if it hadn't become a place where men left their politics at the door, and one and all worked for the games. They were the lifeblood in the words of John Byrne, "the glue that held it all together"³⁹.

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Oral Interview with Monica Milkovits.
Oral Interview with Paddy Cummings.
Oral Interview with John Byrne (sports reporter for the *Irish Echo* 1959-present)

Footnotes

- ¹W.F. Mandle, *The GAA & Irish Nationalist Politics 1884-1924*, p. 3
²P. Puirseal, *The GAA in its Time*, p. 34
³Ibid, p. 37
⁴Mandle, p. 17
⁵*The New York Irish*, p. 7
⁶Puirseal, p. 86
⁷Puirseal, from the New York Herald, p. 86
⁸*The New York Irish*, p. 7
⁹Ibid, p. 7
¹⁰Puirseal, p. 96
¹¹*The New York Irish*, p. 50
¹²Ibid. p. 49
¹³Ibid, p. 9
¹⁴*The Gaelic American*, Nov. 1, 1913, p. 5
¹⁵*The New York Irish*, from *The Advocate*, p. 9
¹⁶Testimony of John Byrne
¹⁷*The Gaelic American*, June 5, 1915, p. 6
¹⁸Testimony of John Byrne
¹⁹*The Gaelic American*, June 13, 1913, p. 4
²⁰*The Gaelic American*, June 13, 1913, p. 4
²¹Testimony of Monica Milkovits
²²*The Gaelic American*, August 23, 1919, p. 5
²³*The New York Irish*, p. 10
²⁴Testimony of John Byrne
²⁵*The New York Irish*, p. 11
²⁶Ibid.
²⁷Testimony of Mitchell Cogley, related in *The New York Irish*, p. 122
²⁸Puirseal, p. 242
²⁹Testimony of James J. Comerford, in *The New York Irish*, p. 135
³⁰Mandle, p. 11
³¹Puirseal, p. 252
³²*The New York Irish*, p. 13
³³Testimony of John Byrne
³⁴Testimony of Monica Milkovits
³⁵Testimony of John Byrne
³⁶*The New York Irish*, p. 15
³⁷Ibid.
³⁸Testimony of Paddy Cummings
³⁹Testimony of John Byrne

ROUNDTABLE PROJECTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY PROJECT. The goal of this project is to publish, in pamphlet or other form, an annotated bibliography of Master's essays and doctoral dissertations which relate to various aspects of the experience of the Irish in New York. Volunteers are needed to search New York public and university libraries for references, locate the work, and then to describe it according to a standardized format. The range of the bibliography will be as wide as is necessary, incorporating as many subject headings as possible. Nothing like this exists at the moment for the New York Irish! Nancy Shea is coordinating this project with the assistance of John O'Connor. You can call Nancy at (212) 996-5773.

IRISH ECHO INDEX PROJECT. This project aims to provide researchers with access to the wealth of information contained about Irish New York in this sixty-year-old newspaper through a comprehensive index. By this summer, we hope to have completed one year's issues and distribute it in printed form, as an example of what is to come, at the *Echo's* 60th anniversary celebrations. Volunteers are needed to read back issues of the *Echo* either at the New York Public Library or at the newspaper's office, index articles according to a prescribed format, enter the data on a computer, proof-read entries, or coordinate publication. If you are interested, other related tasks can be discussed. This is hands-on historical research! Bill McGimpsey and Eileen Sullivan are coordinating the indexing project, and plan to hold meetings one evening per month to review indexers' progress. You can call Bill at (914) 628-9103 and Eileen at (212) 673-6941.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT. To record the voice of the past through the lives and work experiences of Irish New Yorkers is the goal of this unique project. Using tape or video recorders, volunteers can become the means by which an otherwise elusive history is preserved for future generations. The Roundtable will train interested members in the necessary techniques and will monitor the project closely. This can be a fun and easy way to come in contact with living history! Anyone interested should leave their name and telephone number with Angela Carter at Irish Books and Graphics (212) 962-4237.

NEW YORK IRISH HISTORY. The Roundtable's Annual Journal is calling for papers for its 1989 issue. The deadline for submission of articles for Volume 4 will be 31 July 1989. If you or someone you know is currently at work on New York Irish research, if you come across articles or announcements that might be of interest to our members, or if you have other ideas, drop us a note to tell us about it. Write to our Editor, Trish Little Taylor at 16 Arlene Drive, West Long Branch, New Jersey 07764.