A Century Before the GAA
Hurling in 18th Century New York

by Brian McGinn

Historical accounts of hurling in the United States generally begin with the "American Invasion" of 1888, when 50 athletes and officials of the four-year-old Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in Ireland arrived for a tour of northeastern U.S. cities.

The grand plan to spark American interest in the ancient Gaelic game fell flat, a victim of unpublicized and poorly-attended exhibition matches. But the germ of future success was hidden in the apparent failure. Some seventeen of the athletes stayed on at the end of the tour. The presence of these early "illegals"— many of them hurlers— eventually captured the attention and admiration of the Irish in America, and helped create the momentum that led to the formal organization of the New York GAA in December 1914.

But the history of Irish hurling in America goes back more than a century before the GAA or the American Invasion. Indeed, there is documentary proof that hurling was played in New York during the American Revolution of 1775-1783, and circumstantial evidence of the game as far back as the French and Indian War of 1756-1763.

The men responsible for these 18th century exhibitions were also touring from Ireland, though not in a capacity that would have inspired feelings of affinity among their GAA successors. The evidence strongly suggests that the earlier hurlers were Irishmen serving in the British Army, and that the games were promoted by New York Irish tavern keepers who catered to British officers.

Anyone for Hurling?

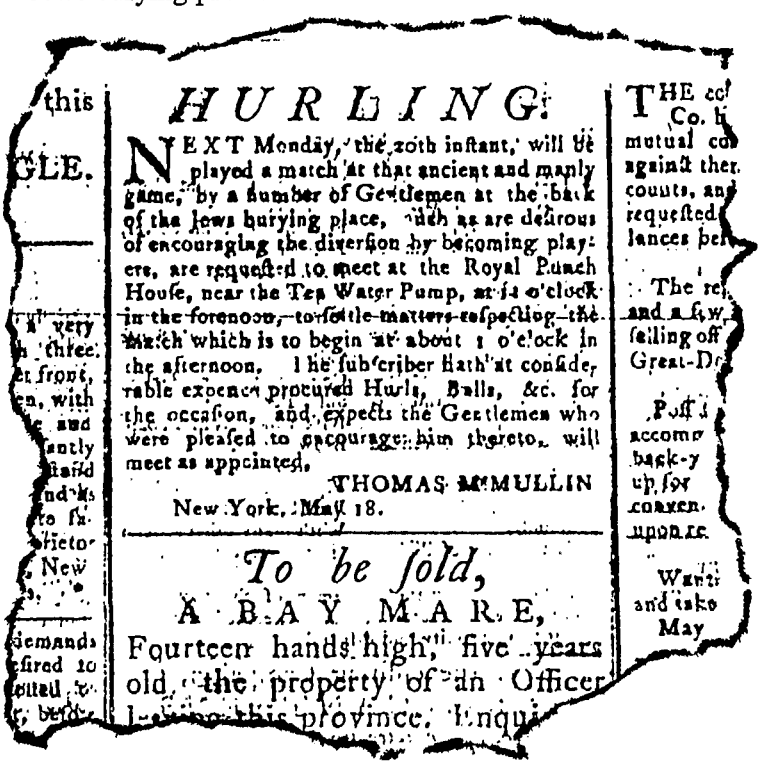
By May 1782, New York was in its sixth year as the headquarters of British military power in rebellious and war-torn America. The overcrowded garrison town served as temporary home to a transient population of soldiers, sailors and Loyalist refugees.

The confidence and gaiety of the earlier war years had now given way to nervousness and fatalism. Just seven months earlier, the British Army and Lord Cornwallis had been humiliated by American and French forces at Yorktown, Virginia. And on May 16, the British government advised London merchants not to ship any more goods to New York, in case the city might soon be evacuated.

Tangible signs of panic appeared in the press. In the *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, Belfast-born publisher and merchant Hugh Gaine was replacing promotions for cosmetics and musical instruments with advertisements for relocation kits: large and small pistols, and a newly-published atlas of the West Indies.

Whiffs of fear could also be sensed in the *Royal Gazette* dated Saturday, May 18. A merchant on Dock Street was liquidating his inventory "at the very lowest prices." An officer "leaving this province" offered his bay mare for sale. Robert Bogle's single-line announcement spoke volumes in its simplicity: "I intend to leave this Place soon."

And there, smack in the midst of this litany of gloom, the capital letters of one ad hit you with the force of a speeding *sliotar*: HURLING. "Next Monday," explains the smaller print, "will be played a match of that ancient and manly game, by a number of Gentlemen at the back of the Jews burying place."



HURLING.

NEXT Monday, the 20th inſtant, will be played a match at that ancient and manly game, by a number of Gentlemen at the back of the Jews burying place, ſuch as are deſirous of encouraging the diverſion by becoming players, are requeſted to meet at the Royal Punch Houſe, near the Tea Water Pump, at 11 o'clock in the forenoon, to ſettle matters reſpecting the Match which is to begin at about 1 o'clock in the afternoon. The ſubſcriber Hath at conſiderable expence procured Hurls, Balls, &c. for the occaſion, and expects the Gentlemen who were pleaſed to encourage him thereto, will meet as appointed.

THOMAS M'MULLIN

New York, May 18.

To be ſold,

A BAY MARE,

Fourteen hands high, five years old, the property of an Officer leaving this province. Inqui

From the *Royal Gazette*, May 18,1782

The advertiser, Thomas McMullin, requested those interested to meet at his tavern, the Royal Punch House, "at

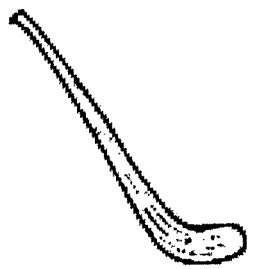
Born in New York and raised in Ireland, Brian McGinn is an independent writer currently based in Alexandria, Virginia. His interest in hurling dates from the 1950s when his father, the late Mike McGinn from County Monaghan, offered a home away from home to several young Irish hurlers playing in New York.

11 o'clock in the forenoon, to settle matters respecting the match, which is to begin at about 1 o' clock in the afternoon." And he reminded those gentlemen who had encouraged him that he had "at considerable expense procured Hurls, Balls, &c. for the occasion."

The Irish Flag at Ascot Heath

Unfortunately, further details or results from the match of May 20, 1782 are unavailable: no further notices appeared under McMullin's name. But earlier advertisements placed by fellow tavernkeepers—and by McMullin himself—reveal that this was by no means an isolated attempt to promote hurling in New York.

Charles Loosely had abandoned his earlier trade of papermaker to cater to thirsty soldiers and sailors near New York's wartime docks. His King's Head Tavern, originally on Brownjohn's Wharf and later at the Brooklyn ferry terminal, was the 18th century equivalent of a sports pub. But in place of televised spectacles, Loosely created his own, sponsoring blood sports and other events guaranteed to appeal to free-spending military officers: cricket, fox-hunting, bull-baiting and horse-racing, the latter at Ascot Heath, five miles from the ferry landing on Long Island.



Advertising the Grand Races of Ascot Heath in Gaine's *New York Gazette* of June 4, 1781, Loosely added that "there will a Hurling Match on the ground on Tuesday the 5th instant; when those Gentlemen who have a curiosity to play (or see) that ancient diversion, will get hurls and bats (sic) at the Irish flag, at twelve o'clock." After the hurling, the ad continued, "an elegant saddle will be run for" at four in the afternoon.

An advertisement in the *New York Gazette* of April 4, 1763 raises the possibility that Loosely and McMullin had a much earlier, hurling promoting counterpart. A "commodious dwelling house," kept as a tavern by its owner Martin Pendergrast, was now offered for sale. It included a "very fine Tennis Court, or Five Alley," and was located between the New-Goal and Fresh-Water Hill.

Pendergrast is an alternative spelling of the more familiar Prendergast, a Norman-Irish name intimately associated with the Tipperary heartland of hurling. Even more suggestive is the name of Pendergrast's tavern: The Sign of the Hurlers. If this was the 1760s equivalent of the King's Head or Royal Punch House, we might speculate that Pendergrast was seeking new opportunities at the end of the conflict known in Europe as the Seven Years' War.

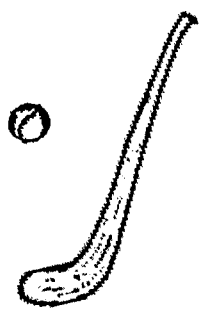
Winter Hurling from Ulster

The hurling matches promoted by McMullin and Loosely in New York were the game known to sport historians as *iománoíocht* or summer hurling. Historically associated with Leinster, this was the game adopted by the GAA in 1884. Summer hurling is distinguished by its wide hurl and the permitted handling of the hide-covered ball, or *sliotar*, for which the broad-bossed hurl is suited.

Ireland had given birth to a second style of hurling, referred to by historians as *camánacht* or winter hurling. Historically played throughout the entire island, winter hurling was by the late 18th century largely confined to Ulster, where it was called Common or Commons, names deriving from the Gaelic word for hurl, *camán*.

Common was distinguished from its summer cousin by the fact that no ball-handling was permitted. In place of the ash traditionally used for the broad *camán*, the hurl used in common was usually made from a furze, or whin, bush, or cut from a whitethorn or blackthorn hedge. Resembling an inverted walking stick, this narrow *camán* was nevertheless ideal for driving the hard wooden ball, or *cnag*, used in this style of ground hurling. In Antrim, Derry and north Down, common was a Christmas and New Year tradition often played on the seashore's hard-packed strands.

Thomas McMullin. who was almost certainly an Ulsterman, also brought this northern style of hurling to wartime New York. The bitter northeastern winters, with snow and ice on the ground, probably precluded Christmastime Common. But the spring thaw of 1782 apparently provided the tavern keeper's opportunity. The games of Common were played in March and April—whereas both hurling matches were played in May and June, placing them within the 18th century season for summer hurling, which opened May 1st.



The first announcement, in the *Royal Gazette* of March 16, 1782, invited those "Sons of St. Patrick" who wished to join their countrymen in the "ancient and favourite Irish game of COMMON" on Monday the 18th to leave their names at the bar of the Royal Punch House before Monday morning. It is interesting to note how, as in Ulster, the sabbatarianism of Protestant New York prevented play on St. Patrick's Day, which fell on a Sunday.

The success of this March 18th match is confirmed in the *New York Gazette* of April 1st, 1782, which reported that "The presence of a great personage at the last game of Common, has induced a number of Gentlemen to propose a second game to be played this day at 3 o'clock, for a genteel supper." The game's popularity was not confined to spectators: "As thirty Gentlemen are already engaged, such as mean to share in this diversion are desired to leave their names at the Royal Punch House, sign of King George IIId, near the Tea water Pump, where Commons are provided."

A Hurling Primer

Hurling (*iomáin,* or *iománaíocht)* is one of the fastest and most skillful games in the world. Its popularity as a Gaelic sport dates back at least as far as the mythological figure Cúchulain whose exploits on the hurling field enhanced his heroic personna.

For long the sport was a communal pastime played between neighboring clans or rival parishes with unlimited players on either side. By the 18th century matches were well organized. Teams were lined out in set positions and the behavior of each player was controlled by a strict code of honor. Modern-day rules fix the number on the field at fifteen.

The ball (*sliotar)* was traditionally cow hair wrapped in pigskin. Today's ball is cork wound with thread and covered with leather. The hurling stick (*camán)* is made from the wood of the ash tree. The width of the blade enables the ball to be struck or stopped in mid flight as well as hit along the ground.

Either end of the field has an H-frame goalpost. A goal is scored if the ball passes between the posts and under the crossbar (*cúl*). A goal is worth three points. A point is scored if the ball passes over the crossbar (*cuilín).*

The *sliotar* may be caught in the hand before hitting but not thrown or lifted. It may be held in the hand for up to four steps, or indefinitely juggled or carried on the blade of the stick. It can be passed by kicking, hitting it with a stick, or by striking it with an open hand.

A game consists of two 35-minute halves.

The women's version of hurling is known as *camogie.*

A Gentry-Sponsored Sport

To identify the hurlers and Common players of 1780s New York, the best place to search is contemporary Ireland. Emigration from Ireland had been heavy during the 57 years prior to the American revolution, with the largest number coming from the nine northern counties. By the time of the American Revolution, most Irish residents of New York were Ulster Anglicans and Presbyterians.

While some Ulstermen, such as Hercules Mulligan from Coleraine, played notable roles in aiding the Patriot forces of George Washington, most Irish who remained in the City during the British occupation were loyal to the Crown. During the war years, those resident Loyalists were augmented by a continuous influx of military units and reinforcements, many of them previously stationed in Ireland. In 1776, more than one third of the 44 British battalions in America had originated in Ireland.

In Ireland, the third quarter of the 18th century is considered a golden age of hurling. And with good reason. The landed gentry—both Protestant settler families and Catholics who had managed to hold on to their estates—took an intense interest in the sport. Patrons such as Baron Purcell of Tipperary and Lord John Cuffe of Kilkenny fielded their own teams, providing practice fields and distinctive uniforms—usually colored caps and sashes—for their players. These upper-class patrons advertised inter-county and inter-baronial matches, kept order on the field and among spectators, and wagered heavily on the outcome of matches.

The gentry also participated directly: in fact, some hurling matches were restricted to "Gentlemen" players, But most teams combined landlords and tenants in a sporting mix that sounds incongruous if not implausible to modern ears, but is verified by contemporary accounts. Reporting on 18th century hurling in Connaught, Lady Morgan (Sidney Owenson) wrote that upper-class women often acted as umpires and young men of the first families played side by side with the best hurlers of the "mere Irishry."

The status of Common in Ulster is less clear; most historians believe that winter hurling was more populist and participatory-oriented than gentry-sponsored, spectator-rich summer hurling. Apart from the question of patronage, there is no doubt that settler families played the winter version of the game. Parish surveys carried out in Down, Derry and Antrim during the early years of the 19th century confirm that Common had been as popular with Ulster Presbyterians and Anglicans as it was with Catholics.

In time of war, the families of Anglican hurlers and Common playing Presbyterians from Ireland provided British forces with a disproportionate share of their officers. As early as 1763, Irishmen and Scots comprised more than half the officer corps of the British Army. And the Scots soldiers, who were primarily Highlanders, had their own counterpart of Common in *camánachd* or Shinty, a game thought to have reached Scotland from Ireland, along with the Gaelic language, about the 5th century A.D.

Who was Thomas McMullin?

The tavern keeper first appears in New York records on July 1st, 1780, when Thomas McMullin announced in the *Royal Gazette* that he had "opened a large and convenient house close to the Fresh Water Pump for a Tavern, distinguished by a sign representing his present Majesty, King George the Third, where gentlemen may depend on being

served different Wines, London Porter, &c."

McMullin's chief clientele was clearly military. In October 1780 advertisements, McMullin invited gentlemen of the navy and army to patronize his oyster house, now open for business "at the sign of his present Majesty, or Royal Punch House, near Fresh-Water." The following year, McMullin announced the added attraction of a bull-bait at his house, near the Fresh Water Pump, on August 30. "The Bull is active," patrons were promised, "and very vicious."

The Royal Irish marching down Broadway.

The omission of McMullin's name from an April 24, 1776 "List of Retailers of Spirituous Liquors in the City of New York" suggests that the tavern keeper arrived in the city either with or after the British occupation in late 1776. And the absence of other signs of his presence before 1780 suggests that he may have been a Loyalist refugee from a city already evacuated by the British.

Although 18th century spellings are notoriously subjective and phonetic, the form of his name may also hold clues. According to Robert Bell's *Book of Ulster Surnames* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1988), McMullan and McMullen are two forms of the Scots name MacMillan that are common in Ulster, but not found in Scotland. And in Ulster, those forms are found mainly in Antrim and Down. It may be significant that the bull-bait advertisement in the Royal Gazette of August 29, 1781 is signed "Thomas McMullan."

Additional possibilities are raised by the fact that some Ulster O'Mullans, Irish septs based in northeast Derry and north Antrim, adopted the surname McMullan. While there were tavernkeepers of Irish Catholic origin in 1779 New York—among them Patrick Doyle and Elizabeth Powers—the evidence suggests that Thomas McMullin was likely the son of an Ulster settler family in Antrim or Down.

McMullin's fate is only slightly less obscure than his origins. His advertisements abruptly cease with the hurling match announced on May 18, 1782, and no further traces of McMullin have been found in the wartime press. His name is also absent from the lists of New York loyalists who fled to Canada before or during the final British evacuation of November 1783. Nor is there any trace of Thomas McMullin in New York's postwar census of 1790.

But the records of burials in New York's Trinity Church contain the following entry for April 23, 1783: "Mr. McMullen; 32 years old; buried at Trinity churchyard; died of fever." Allowing for the variant spelling, the date, age, and cause of death all point toward a match with the tavern keeper Thomas McMullin. The 1783 interment, for which no known tombstone survives, is the only McMullen burial recorded in Trinity churchyard between 1777 and 1813.

Hurling on Ice

McMullin's boasts of his proximity to the Tea or Fresh Water Pump make his tavern easier to locate. This well-known landmark, which supplied drinking water to much of the 18th century city, was on the north side of Chatham Street (modern Park Row) just east of its intersection with Orange (later Baxter) street.

From here, it was only a short walk—or a good puck—to another familiar landmark, the Jews' burying ground. A remnant of this ancient cemetery, in use from 1682 until 1828, can still be found in modern New York, across from Chatham Square at 55 St. James Place. Behind the wrought iron railing, you can glimpse the Hebrew-inscribed tombstones and above-ground burial vaults that would have been passed by McMullin's hurlers and common players.

Contemporary maps show a large expanse of open ground directly behind the Jewish cemetery. This was a favored location for wartime cricket matches, and as occasion demanded, the ground was also used for military drills or a shooting range. And it was here, in the incongruous setting of New York's modern Chinatown, that ash hurls clashed in 1782.

Surrounded by the oriental atmosphere of a modern diaspora, and contemplating the fading reminders of a very ancient one, you cannot help wondering whether this unlikely American exposition of Gaelic games died with Thomas McMullin, or left with the departing Irishmen in British uniforms, awaiting the birth of the GAA and a new invasion of America in 1888.

Irish history, be it sports or politics, abhors simple endings. After the Revolution, cautions Belfast-based hurling historian Brendan Harvey, hurling did not completely disappear. Many of the Loyalists who crowded New York during the war moved to Canada, settling in Nova Scotia and in the modern provinces of New Brunswick and Ontario. There, the game was adapted to long, cold winters and

transformed into ice hurling or ice shinty games which gradually merged into Canada's national game of ice hockey.

Indeed, among the Loyalists who fled to Canada was the tavern keeper Charles Loosely, whose military clients had apparently driven him into bankruptcy by failing to settle their bills. On May 24, 1783, just a month after McMullin's likely death in New York, Loosely announced his intention of speedily proceeding, with Brother Loyalists, "to the promised Land of Nova Scotia."

Whether Loosely played any role in promoting ice hurling is unknown. What is certain is that, even as the game's earliest American exponents were fleeing or dying, the link between hurling and ice hockey could already be glimpsed in New York.

In an address delivered before the St. Nicholas Society of New York on December 1st, 1848, William Alexander Duer recalled the city's Collect Pond, a body of fresh water no longer existing that was located a few blocks north of McMullin's tavern. Frozen over in winter, the Pond served as a popular skating rink. In the winter of 1783, Duer told his audience, the ice was alive with skaters, darting in every direction or "bearing down in a body in pursuit of the ball driven before them with their *hurlies*."

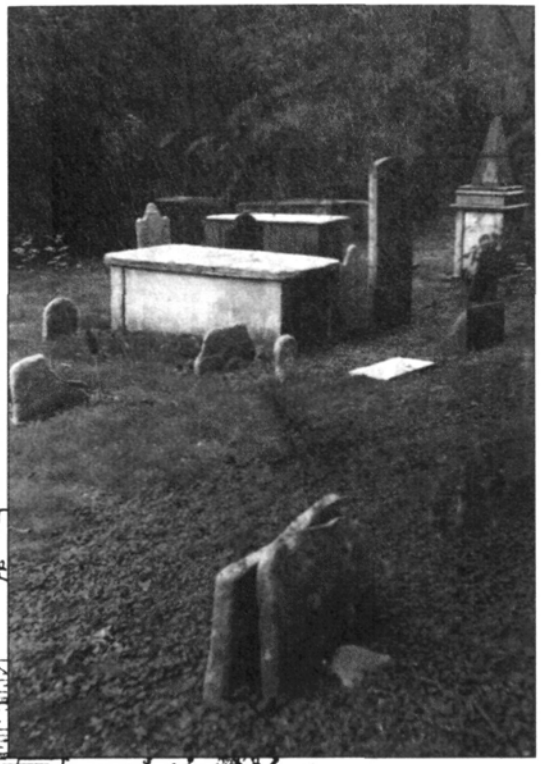
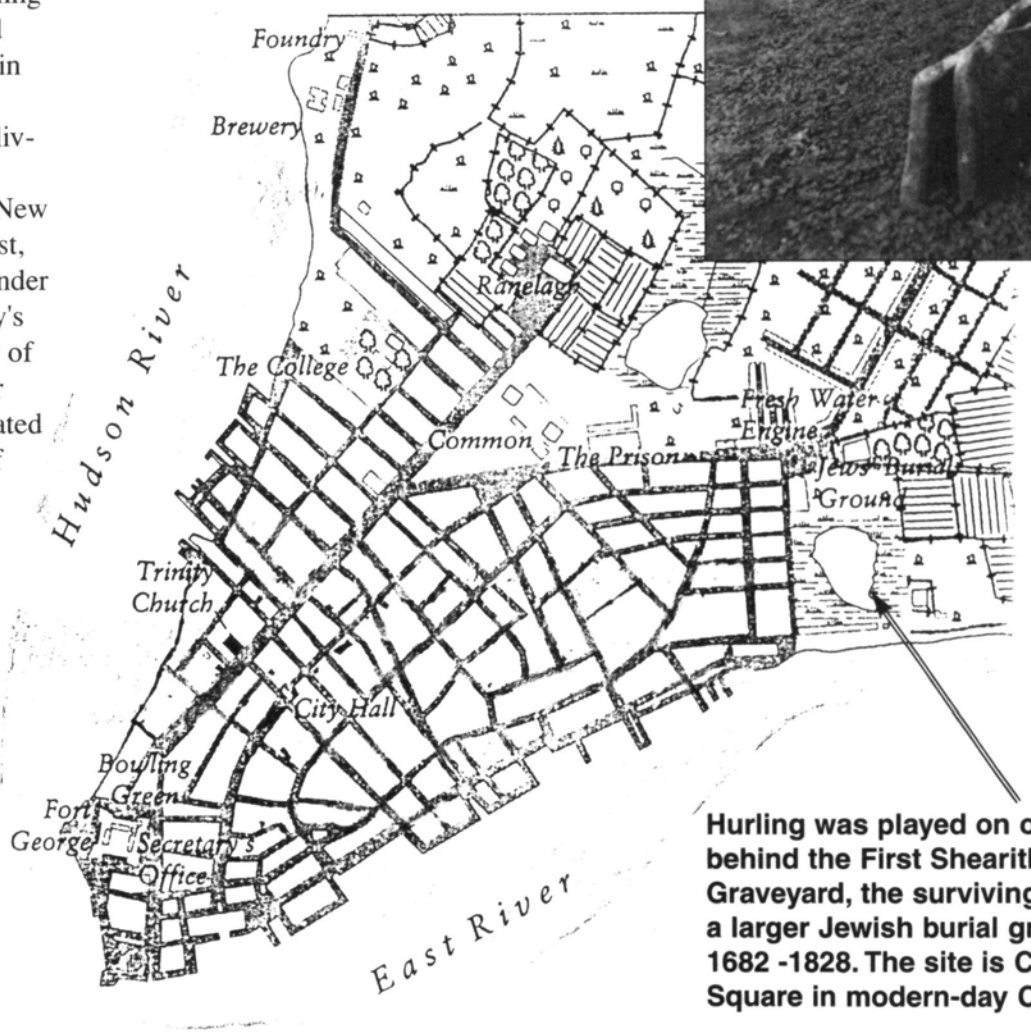


photo: Deborah Green

Map adapted from *The Historical Atlas of New York City* (NY: Henry Holt & Co., 1994)



Hurling was played on open ground behind the First Shearith Israel Graveyard, the surviving remnant of a larger Jewish burial ground in use 1682 -1828. The site is Chatham Square in modern-day Chinatown.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted, in more ways that I can here enumerate, to the following enthusiasts, experts and scholars: William B. Gibson, author of *Early Irish Golf: The First Courses, Clubs and Pioneers* (Naas, Co. Kildare: Oakleaf Publications, 1988), who independently uncovered evidence of New York's early hurling and generously shared his interpretations and insights. Brendan Harvey of Belfast, for his expertise on Ulster hurling and Shinty, and the links between both games and ice hockey. Seamus J. King of Cashel, Co. Tipperary, author of *A History of Hurling* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996) and of a forthcoming work on hurling in the Irish Diaspora, for sharing both his unpublished manuscript and unparalleled knowledge of the game. John Panter, Parish Historian of Trinity Church, New York, who diligently searched for evidence of Thomas McMullin's burial. Kenneth H. Powers, historian of New York's "Fighting Sixty-Ninth" Regiment, for his introduction to Bill Gibson and infectious enthusiasm for all things Irish and military. Mariam Touba, Reference Librarian at the New-York Historical Society, for her patient help with 18th century geography.