

Sport and Society in Victorian Ireland: The Case of Westmeath

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Author:

Tom Hunt

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Paul Rouse

Until the last decade, scholarly work on the history of sport and leisure in Ireland was most noted by its absence. Historians of modern Ireland almost entirely ignored the importance of sport as a historical phenomenon, preferring to concentrate on matters of church and state. The result of this was the publication of highly-regarded volumes which focused on the development of modern Irish society, but almost entirely ignored sport. For example, J. J. Lee's brilliant *Ireland: Politics and Society 1912-85* essentially ignores sport. (1) And this despite the fact that Lee once wrote in a newspaper column:

For many people, sport isn't just the icing on the cake of life. It is life. Next to sex, it is what makes the world go round for a large proportion of the western world, now with plenty of time on its hands and not a notion of what to do with it. That is why sport has become far too important to be left entirely to the sports pages. (2)

And yet, sport did not make it to the history pages. Within this vacuum, a series of caricatures prospered. Most of these focused on the relationship between sport and politics in Ireland, notably on the role of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) following its foundation in November 1884. In *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History*, for example, Roy Foster laments the chauvinists of the GAA and their propensity for 'deliberately embracing illogic'. (3) Foster's essays were beautifully written, but examine only one aspect of one section of the GAA and transpose that onto the organisation as a whole, all the while forgetting that it was primarily a sporting body.

During the 1990s Alan Bairner and Mike Cronin applied methodologies of English sports historiography and produced works of considerable quality which examined the relationship between sport and political and

religious allegiance in Ireland. Neal Garnham further developed the study of sport in Ireland with a series of articles and a book on the early years of soccer. (4) Sport slowly, sporadically entered mainstream historiography, most notably in Diarmaid Ferriter's best-selling 2004 survey, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*. (5) Ferriter outlined the development of modern sporting organisations in Ireland and recognised their importance in the lives of successive generations in every corner of the country. For example, he documented the importance of GAA clubs as the focal point for communities and underlined the significance to the national psyche of the success of the Irish soccer team in the 1980s and 1990s in reaching major tournament finals for the first time.

Despite the advances made in the historiography of sport in Ireland, it remained the case that research-driven, in-depth scholarly studies of sport in Ireland remain at a premium. (6) It is in this context that Tom Hunt researched and wrote his *Sport and Society in Victorian Ireland*. It is a context which renders the achievements of this book all the more laudable. Put simply: this is the best work yet to be produced on sport in Ireland. It is comprehensive, clear, confident and original. The book demolishes various established ideas of the Victorian sporting world in rural Ireland and reshapes our understanding of what games people were playing, and why they played them. It is a measure of its achievement that almost every chapter offers a unique insight into life in the Irish midlands - not just sporting life, but the way of life in general of almost every section of society.

The research which underpins the work is formidable; the range and breadth of the sources used is without comparison in writing on Irish sport. From local newspapers to personal memoirs, from account books to the minutes of national associations, the sources have been mined in a way which is only possible from a meticulous approach across thousands of hours. Importantly, however, the author has not been overwhelmed by the material and has not sought to wedge every last point of interest into the text. The book is written in an accessible way, without frills and artifice, and is much the better for that. It is a style which lends itself to the topic, but one which should not induce the reader to ignore the sophistication of the work.

At various points, however, the book would have benefited from a little more general history woven into its pages. It is sometimes presumed that the reader has a general understanding of social, cultural and economic development of Ireland in the second half of the 19th century. It is doubtful if the optimism of the author in this respect is fully justified. That is not to say that this is a work without context. Far from it. The story of sport in Victorian Westmeath is placed in a comparative context which links sport in Westmeath to the Irish sporting world and, most importantly, places the county within the sporting revolution of the wider Victorian world. This is a key point. It is impossible to understand the evolution of Irish sport without recourse to what was happening in Britain - or, more precisely, in England. The formal organisation of sport into clubs and societies was, of course, a profoundly English phenomenon. Sport may have been played in many forms in every known society through millennia, but it was the English who shaped the modern sporting world - and did so most emphatically during the reign of Queen Victoria. In essence, most of the major sporting organisations which dominant sport in Britain today - including the Football Association and the Rugby Football Union - were formed in the later half of the 19th century. More than that, the Victorian era saw sport become a far more commercial and regularised commodity than it had ever been. The Victorians made the sporting world - and then charged people who wished to come and look at it.

The Irish sporting world was not a mirror image of what happened across the Irish Sea, but it carried many identical characteristics. Geography matters to history so, inevitably, sport in Ireland carried its own unique characteristics. Nonetheless, it is impossible to get away from the basic fact that all aspects of the Irish sporting landscape were influenced in no small measure by the development of sport in England. There can be no surprise in this. Through the decades covered by Hunt's book, Ireland and Britain were two islands united in one kingdom. Further, deep ties of kin and of commerce left it impossible to imagine that Ireland would remain unmoved by a sporting revolution which spread throughout the British Empire and beyond. Britain's oldest colony was also the one which most immediately adopted the revolution in sporting behaviour.

This is the story which unfolded in Westmeath and is remarkably recounted in Tom Hunt's book. The sport

of hunting is a case in point. The chapter on hunting is brilliantly researched and holds a wealth of socio-economic detail. The class composition of the hunt is expertly deconstructed, the reconstruction of the social life around the hunt is particularly good and the section on polo is fascinating. Historians of the hunt in Britain will find many similarities between what transpired in Westmeath and in what transpired across England's hunting shires. But they will also find much that is unique to hunting in Ireland and the comparisons make for a more rounded understanding of that milieu. A love of horses is a characteristic of many Irish counties but the extent of organised horse racing in the county suggests that the sporting world of the horse was at a far more advanced stage than in many other midlands counties.

Probably the best chapter in the book is the one which deals with cricket and which outlines how it emerged as the most important sport in Westmeath in the later Victorian period. The analysis of who played the game not merely challenges perceptions on supposed elitist (and anti-national) sports but destroys those perceptions. Critically, the story which emerges here of cricket as a game played across the classes and in virtually every village, is precisely the story which is told of cricket in counties such as Tipperary and in Kilkenny. On this occasion, however, it is backed by extensive research through the relevant census records. This chapter alone makes the book worth reading.

There are many reasons for the subsequent collapse of cricket. The one most favoured by historians (and by cricket-lovers) is a straightforward narrative which sees the game undercut by the cultural nationalists of the GAA. By enforcing a ban on those who played and watched cricket from joining the GAA and by painting cricket-lovers as West-Britons who were not truly Irish, sections of the GAA certainly undermined the place of cricket in Irish sport. Those who attribute the decline of cricket to the GAA have a point, but push this point to a stage where it becomes inaccurate. There were numerous other factors at play, not least the failures of Irish cricket to develop a meaningful structure for the game in Ireland at almost any level. After all, the GAA imposed the same ban on rugby and soccer that it imposed on cricket, and it attacked rugby and soccer in even more virulent terms than it did cricket, and yet neither of these sports imploded.

All told, every chapter in the book carries a wealth of interesting material. The origins and development of soccer and rugby, and the story of the rise and fall and rise again of the GAA are treated convincingly. In terms of the GAA, the book undermines the notion that the games of the GAA - principally, hurling, gaelic football and athletics - were essentially classless. Gaelic games in Westmeath were more the preserve of farmers than of farm labourers and it would be extremely interesting to examine whether this was a trend which was repeated in other counties around Ireland.

What is clear from Hunt is that money mattered - and mattered a lot - in the playing of sport in Westmeath and, as if to emphasise its importance, the chapter on the commercialisation of sport in Westmeath demonstrates that the business of sport was an essential element in virtually every sport in the county. It has been a pungent lament of numerous commentators on sport in recent decades that sport has become ruined by excessive commercialisation. That lament focuses on the wages paid to sportsmen and women on the back of extraordinary earnings from subscription television organisations and sports goods manufacturers. What Hunt makes clear is that, more than a century ago in a county in the Irish midlands, money earned through sport was a key aspect of the local economy - and a key driver of the sports revolution.

In part, this money was the product of a moneyed set spending abundantly on their leisure, but it was also about the willingness of people everywhere to pay admittance fees to see sporting events. The enclosure of sports grounds is central to understanding why modern sports organisations have developed in the manner in which they have. There is nothing Victorian about the love of sport - this is a characteristic which transcends time and place - but the willingness of people of all classes to pay for this love was milked by Victorian entrepreneurs in ways which their forebears never managed to conceive. Hunt's chapter on spectator sports in Westmeath traces the development of this phenomenon at a local level. It is a genuinely innovative piece of scholarship.

To conclude, this is not just a brilliant *sports history* book - it is a brilliant *history* book, plain and simple. It is a book which offers a roadmap of research to historians who wish to study the development of sport in any

county in Ireland, and possibly beyond. Like all good history books it suggests a whole raft of questions. The most basic of these questions is also the most important: is the case of Westmeath an exceptional one, or is it repeated across county after county? After all, Westmeath was a small, relatively prosperous county where relations between landlords and tenants were generally better than in adjacent counties. A significant presence of the gentry, a geography which straddled the Pale and a general sense of stability were all hallmarks of Westmeath. The challenge for historians in Ireland is to build on Hunt's work and to apply similar research to other counties. Just as geography matters in determining that sport in Ireland developed characteristics which distinguish it from sport in Britain, so it is certain that the story of Westmeath is not the story of other Irish counties.

Notes

1. J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912-85: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1990) [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Quoted in P. Rouse, 'Why Irish historians have ignored sport: A note', *The History Review*, 14 (2003), p. 7, pp 6-12. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London, 1993), p. 25. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See, for example, A. Bairner and J. Sugden, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (Leicester, 1993); M. Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity since 1884* (Portland, Oreg., 1999); and N. Garnham, *Association Football and Society in Pre-Partition Ireland* (Belfast, 2004). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2004). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. An exception to this is W. Nolan, *The Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin 1884-2000* (Dublin, 2005). [Back to \(6\)](#)

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