

Gaelic Sunday – The GAA V the British Empire

By Mark Duncan

Across the entire span of the decade of centenaries we are in the midst of marking, it is the one event to which Ireland's largest sporting organisation can lay a legitimate and singular claim. Unlike, say, the 1916 Rising or the subsequent war of independence in which they had members who participated, this alone is the event for which they took organisational responsibility. It was entirely of their making. From the top down, they organised it and owned it. It was theirs. 'Gaelic Sunday', which took place on 4 August 1918, was, the GAA's website proudly declares, the day on which Association's clubs 'stood against the British Empire and triumphed in a peaceful protest' – a protest against the requirement that their games only be allowed with an official permit.¹

Of course, in the spring and summer of that year, peaceful public protests were commonplace and all-embracing. Catholic priests and bishops were at it. So too were home rule nationalists and separatist republicans, employers and trade unionists, as well as a plethora of women's political and welfare organisations.

What mobilised and united these often competing groups was the issue of conscription and the British government's announcement, against all informed advice, of plans to extend a compulsory military service bill to Ireland.

The conscription crisis erupted at the start of April 1918 and a month later, in early May, the British government inflamed the popular mood further when more than 70 leaders of the Sinn Féin movement were arrested and deported (but not charged) on spurious allegations that they were engaged in a war-time plot with Germany. As if to underline the fact that repression had become become the British policy of choice in Ireland, on 3 July the Lord Lieutenant proclaimed as 'dangerous' various political and cultural organisations, including the Gaelic League.

The GAA, significantly, was left untouched by this broad ban but not by the proclamation that immediately followed it. On 4 July an order was issued by the Commander in Chief of the British forces in Ireland, Lt. Gen. Frederick Shaw, announcing that 'meetings, assemblies, or processions in public places' in Ireland would be prohibited without written authorisation from the police,²

¹ <http://www.gaa.ie/news/countdown-to-gaelic-sunday-commemorations-north-tipperary/>

² UK National Archives CO 904 106 July 1918

a measure the GAA's full-time secretary Luke O'Toole, later construed, mistakenly, to have been specifically targeted at the GAA.³

If the permit order was too widely applied for the GAA to have taken exclusive offence, there can be no doubting the implications it carried for the regular conduct of GAA activity, particularly as games continued to be organised without recourse to the now necessary permits.⁴

Disruption was widespread. It occurred at many levels and occasionally gave rise to clashes between police and spectators. Perhaps the most high profile fixture impacted upon was the Ulster semi-final meeting of Armagh and Cavan, scheduled for Cootehill just four days after the permit order was introduced. Twice, the GAA's Provincial Secretary in Ulster, Eoin O'Duffy, rebuffed the police when told that a permit would be required to allow the match go ahead unimpeded, the second occasion when 3,000 supporters had already paid their entrance to the ground. The teams, too, were present but, in spite of urgings from O'Duffy that they do so, they didn't take the field, leaving it to be filled by armed RIC men and British soldiers who took up positions with their bayonets fixed.

The result was that the match was abandoned before it ever began. The following morning, the *Freeman's Journal* published a letter from O'Duffy protesting the actions of the army and police and proclaiming the non-political aims of the GAA. Those that had gathered in Cootehill, he wrote, had been intent neither on participating in a political demonstration nor on 'an engagement with the forces of England' - the "Defenders of Small Nationalities", as he contemptuously labelled them; rather, he stated, they had come together to 'witness a harmless football match'.⁵

While the public O'Duffy emphasised the non-political character of GAA events, the private O'Duffy, a republican who combined his role as a sporting administrator with that of local commander of the Irish Volunteers in Clones, was clearly irked at the political passivity of his fellow Gaels. In a subsequent report to the Ulster Council's annual convention, he suggested that had the Cavan and Armagh teams shown 'sufficient pluck' and taken the field when he had asked them to do so, the British soldiers 'would have thought it better than to interfere'. As it was they - the police and soldiers - had been given 'easy passage'.⁶

³ Mike Cronin, 'The GAA in a time of Guerilla War and Civil Strife, 1918-1923', in Gearoid O Tuathaigh ed., *The GAA & Revolution in Ireland 1913-1923* (2015) p. 162

⁴ The requirement for permits also extended to elected MPs going about their business in Ireland. On 30 July 1918, Irish Party leader told the House of Commons that "Irish Members of Parliament are no longer allowed to discharge their duties in the House except they go to a police officer and obtain a police permit.... I submit that that is an outrageous and unparalleled interference with the liberty of Members of this House." Hansard, House of Commons debates, 30 July 1918 Vol. 109 cc276-83276
<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1918/jul/30/police-permits>

⁵ *Freeman's Journal* 9 July 1918

⁶ CLG Ulster Council, Minutes of Annual Convention, St. Patrick's Hall, Waterside, Derry, Sunday 16 March 1919

At a national level, the GAA's initial response to events in Cootehill and similar acts of interference was to engage with the authorities. Luke O'Toole visited Dublin Castle, but was left in no doubt that future hurling or football matches, local or otherwise, would not be allowed unless a 'permit was attained'.⁷ It was only on foot of this encounter that the GAA adopted as official strategy a combination of non-compliance and open, co-ordinated defiance. On Saturday, 20 July 1918, the Association's Central Council held a meeting at which two key decisions were taken. Firstly, it was decided to instruct that no GAA member was to partake in a game for which a permit had been obtained and anyone in breach of this directive was to be subject to automatic and indefinite suspension. Secondly, it was determined that on 4 August 1918, an extensive programme of matches would be held without permits across Ireland.⁸ 'Gaelic Sunday' was born of a proposal from Ulster officials and it was intended to showcase both the organisational strength of the GAA and the depth of its community roots countrywide, the directive from the Central Council to the County Boards and onwards to the clubs being that matches were to be 'localised as much possible'.

Approximately 1,500 hurling, football and Camogie matches were scheduled to start simultaneously - with throw-in times of 3 pm - throughout the country with over 50,000 players expected to participate and many more again turning out as spectators. It seems unlikely that anything like the number of games fixed was actually played.⁹ In Cork, for instance, the county board organised 40 games though many were abandoned owing to heavy rain.¹⁰ In Limerick, where difficulties had been experienced beforehand in procuring suitable fields, the County Board ran off 14 games in adverse weather. In Dublin, about 30 matches were organised at 22 venues that extended from Baldoyle to Bray and from Crumlin to Clonsilla to Croke Park.¹¹ The protest was even observed within the walls of Ireland's prisons. From Belfast Jail, one prisoner told of a how inmates, using an improvised ball, staged an inter-provincial game that was refereed by Tim Ryan, a former Chairman of the Tipperary GAA's County Board. The game ended, diplomatically, in a draw and with the on-looking prisoners chanting 'Up Ireland'.¹²

⁷ GAA Archives, Central Council Minutes, 20 July 1918

⁸ GAA Statement, 22 July 1918. GAA Archive Online <http://www.gaa.ie/centenary/administrative-docs/1918-gae/>

⁹ Not all arranged games were actually played. 40 games were arranged for Cork but heavy rain forced the abandonment of 'many'; likewise, in Athlone, 2 to 3 games arranged did not take place owing to a 'misunderstanding', *Irish Independent*, 5 August 1918. There were 17 games fixed for Kildare, 6 for Armagh,

¹⁰ *Irish Independent*, 5 August 1918

¹¹ *Irish Independent*, 5 August 1918; *Freeman's Journal*, 3 August 1918

¹² *Irish Independent*, 14 August 1918; *Cork Examiner* 12 August 1918, Tim Ryan, ex-Chairman of the Tipperary GAA, acted as referee and a crowd of about 130 'Gael' was reported to have watched in the prison.

Whatever the actual turnout on the day, 'Gaelic Sunday' impressed in both its ambition and realisation. It delivered on what it intended to do. When the Ulster Council met shortly, they congratulated themselves on having conceived of an idea which, they claimed, had demonstrated 'in no unmistakeable manner, that so far as the GAA was concerned we entirely ignore the proclamation of the British government'.¹³ From Enniscorthy, County Wexford, a similar message was conveyed, the local GAA Board passing a resolution lauding the Central Council for the 'effective means it had devised for defeating the attempt that had been made to crush the GAA out of existence'.¹⁴ No less impressed was the reporter from the *Limerick Leader*, who gushed that 'Gaelic Sunday' was one of 'greatest days' in the GAA's then 34-year history¹⁵, a giddy judgement of instant journalism that found an echo in many of the written histories that followed: published more six decades later, an official history of the Association described it as 'the greatest single act of defiance outside the purely political sphere between 1916 and 1922'.¹⁶

A defiant act it certainly was, yet 'Gaelic Sunday' involved no great showdown between the GAA membership and the forces of the British crown.

What had been billed beforehand to be 'the first direct trial of strength between the government and the nation' under the coercion regime introduced at beginning of July 1918, ended up as nothing of the sort.¹⁷ That's because, confronted by the prospect of a widespread mobilisation of the GAA community and the impossibility of adequately policing it, the authorities effectively gave way in advance.

The capitulation came late in the day and not before further disruption to the games was caused. Indeed, in the fortnight between the announcement of plans for 'Gaelic Sunday' and the day itself, the interruption of GAA fixtures continued unabated, as did the pressure on the British authorities to explain the reasoning for it. In late July, for instance, the staging of a series of Dublin club football league matches at Croke Park was prevented when police parked themselves along Jones's Road blocking access to the ground. When a number camogie teams, hurley sticks in hand, subsequently approached Croke Park demanding entry to the ground, they too were turned away, the police holding their positions until nightfall when the opportunity for playing matches had passed.

¹³ CLG Ulster Council Minutes, Clones, 24 August 1918

¹⁴ Andrew McGuire & David Hassan (2012): Cultural Nationalism, Gaelic Sunday and the Gaelic Athletic Association in Early Twentieth Century Ireland, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29:6., p. 919

¹⁵ *Limerick Leader*, 9 August 1918

¹⁶ Marcus de Burca, *The GAA: A History* (1980) p. 142

¹⁷ From Daily News, Quoted in the *Irish Independent*, 24 July 1918

Nearby, at the playing fields at the Phoenix Park, nine schoolboys were arrested and removed in military wagons to the Bridewell where they were held for five hours before being released. Their misdemeanour, the *Manchester Guardian* informed its English readers, was that 'they did not go to a policeman and ask leave to kick a football.'¹⁸ And in Cork, a programme of hurling and football matches organised for the Athletic Grounds in aid of the widows and orphans of local sailors killed at sea by German submarine attacks, was aborted when armed police blocked admission to the ground.¹⁹ The Cork County Board, which subsequently donated £10 to the seaman's widows and children fund, claimed that the fundraiser had been scuppered by the actions of a 'local police zealot'.²⁰

The press and political spotlight that was shone on such incidents did little smooth public disquiet at either police behaviour or the drift of the government's Irish policy.

On the floor of the House of Commons, the incident at the Cork Athletic Ground was referenced as evidence of the heavy-handedness with which the permit order was being applied, the Irish Party's MP for North Kerry, Michael Flavin, mischievously inquiring of Chief Secretary for Ireland, Edward Shortt, if the police had 'received any orders from Dublin Castle yet to prosecute or arrest people who play marbles, or slash tops, or play 21 or 31 at cards; and, if not, why have these instructions not been issued so as to ensure peace and good order in Ireland?'²¹ Of course, no such orders had been issued or received. Quite the opposite, in fact: rather than the compound the error of an ill-thought policy, the authorities began to beat a hasty retreat. In the days leading up to 'Gaelic Sunday', a circular was issued to the police to the effect that Gaelic games were no longer to be considered to fall under the terms of the restrictive order, the extent of the British back-tracking underlined by Edward Shortt's disingenuous claim that such 'police suppression of Irish sports' as had already been experienced had been 'based on a blunder', on a police misunderstanding of instructions that had been imparted to them. While the circular gave practical effect to the policy volte-face, newspaper reports conveyed to the wider public that there would be no attempt at a wholesale stoppage of games on 4 August.²² The government, as one such report stressed, had 'no intention of taking up the challenge' laid down by the GAA.²³

¹⁸ Quoted in *Irish Independent*, 1 August 1918

¹⁹ *Kerry People*, 3 August 1918

²⁰ *Irish Independent*, 2 August 1918

²¹ Hansard, House of Commons debates, 01 August 1918 Vol. 109 cc599-600599, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1918/aug/01/games-and-athletic-sports>

²² See, for example, the *Evening Herald*, 3 August 1918

²³ *The Kerryman*, 3 August 1918. See also Andrew McGuire & David Hassan (2012): Cultural Nationalism, Gaelic Sunday and the Gaelic Athletic Association in Early Twentieth Century Ireland, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29:6, 912-923

Those that turned out to play and watch on 'Gaelic Sunday' did so therefore in the full knowledge that police interference would not occur and that the potential for confrontation had been averted.²⁴

This was critical not only to how the event was experienced but how it was subsequently perceived and presented. Once the decision to relax the application of the permit order had been taken, for instance, 'Gaelic Sunday' lost its political charge for the authorities. Not alone did the games pass off almost entirely free of police interference, the events of 'Gaelic Sunday' merited not a mention in the confidential monthly report of the Inspector General to Dublin Castle, which otherwise saw fit to highlight demonstrations by the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Ulster and the various activities of the Sinn Féin movement throughout the country. The Inspector General's commentary on the general state of Irish affairs was itself grounded in a series of county inspector reports which, where they referred to the GAA at all, were strikingly silent about the Association's 'great act of defiance'. From Wexford – one of the few locations outside of Dublin to see action during the Rising and where just months prior to 'Gaelic Sunday' attendances at Gaelic games were characterised as being 'mostly Sinn Féin' – the local inspector had only two short lines to offer on the conduct of the Association in his monthly review for August 1918: 'The GAA has hurling and football matches on Sundays, which, however, have not been attended with any seditious display. No visible effort is being made to promote sedition or disloyalty.'²⁵

The relationship between the GAA and Irish nationalism was long-established and far from straightforward. Complexity abounded.

The GAA was, after all, an organisation which precluded from its membership members of the police and British military forces, yet contributed significant numbers into the British war effort after John Redmond had urged Irishmen to do their bit in September 1914. The GAA, likewise, was an organisation that contributed some 300 of its members to the rebel forces at Easter 1916 (it would have been more had the rebellion gone off as planned), yet officially distanced itself from the event when subsequently accused of being complicit in bringing it about.

²⁴ Welcoming the change in government approach, the *Manchester Guardian* suggested that widespread trouble had been averted as 'the consequences of the police and military interference with that enormous number of fixtures might have been many people here would prefer not to think about', *Manchester Guardian*, 31 July 1918, See McGuire and Hassan, p. 918

²⁵ UK National Archives, CO 904 105 Wexford County Inspector Report, March 1918 and CO 904 106 Wexford County Inspector Report, August 1918

As war and rebellion changed the dynamics of Irish political life in 1914 and 1916, so were those dynamics changed again by the events of 1918.

Indeed, if the intention of the British authorities throughout the spring and summer of that year had been to foment nationalist anger, undermine the authority of their administration in Ireland and drive the cause of separatism, then they could hardly have done a better job.

‘Gaelic Sunday’ sits within a pattern of large-scale Irish public protest in 1918. What’s more, coming as it did in the wake of such popular anti-conscription initiatives as the General Strike and the mass collection of public pledges, the event was, in subsequent years, neatly accommodated within what historian Bill Mandle called the ‘mythology of Irish nationalist defiance’.²⁶

And yet, ‘Gaelic Sunday’ speaks far more eloquently of the GAA’s sporting mission than it does of its nationalist bona fides. For as much as it had been borne out of a particular set of political circumstances and conceived by a GAA administration where separatist views were gaining a greater foothold, the most striking feature of ‘Gaelic Sunday’ was that it had as its principle focus and mobilising appeal the playing of games. It was only when the policy of British repression threatened to hinder the conduct of its own games that the GAA moved to flex its organisational muscle. However, in doing so in the manner it did and with such success, the GAA demonstrated the strength and reach of that organisation and popular appeal of the games it sought to serve. ‘Gaelic Sunday’, therefore, was not simply a defence of Gaelic games; it was a celebration of them.

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²⁶ Quoted taken from Cormac Moore, ‘Luke O’Toole: Servant of the GAA’, in Gearoid O Tuathaigh ed., *The GAA & Revolution in Ireland 1913-1923* (2015) p. 64