

How Leix Won the All-Ireland Hurling Championship of 1915

By Dr. Paul Rouse

On Saturday night, 24 October 1915, a group of about 25 men from Queen's County stayed in a hotel on Gardiner Street in Dublin. They were the hurlers of Leix – as Queen's County was officially known in GAA circles – and they were in Dublin to play the final of the All-Ireland hurling championship. They had travelled to the city by train on Saturday afternoon. That night, after the players had gone to bed, the officials of the county board arranged and paid for four men to patrol the corridors of the hotel. Their job was to restrain any man wishing to avail of a night in the city. This was done at the suggestion of Bob O'Keefe, team captain and schoolteacher, who noted that the 'caretakers' employed 'must be very strict on Saturday night. There is no use depending on any of the players.'¹ As it was, no player was thought to have successfully escaped to the pleasures of Dublin. On the morning of the match, the Leix players had their breakfast and took mass in Gardiner's Street Church. Sometime after noon, they toggled out in their hotel rooms and, wearing black-and-amber horizontally striped jerseys, crossed Gardiner's Square, walked down Fitzgibbon Street, then down Jones's Road, and into Croke Park.² They had a straightforward mission: beat Cork and win the All-Ireland hurling championship, thereby avenging the disastrous loss to Clare in the previous year's and bring an All-Ireland to Queen's County for the first time. If the mission was straightforward, the task itself was expected to prove extremely difficult. Cork were strong favourites – Leix were given a chance of victory, but Cork were expected to win. Nowhere was this expectation more secure than in Cork, where self-confidence in their hurling was already traditional. How was it that Leix were walking across Dublin to play a hurling match on a city field and how had they set about winning that match?

I

Hurling in Leix Before the GAA

Hurling was played in Queen's County before 1915, of course – indeed, hurling had been played in Queen's County long before the GAA was founded. Precisely how long is lost to history. We know from ancient Irish texts, from Brehon Law and from other sources that a stick-and-ball game denoted as hurling (though, of course, lacking the detailed, agreed rules of modern hurling) extends back at least to Middle Ages. Proof of this comes from the collection of hair hurling balls held by the National Museum of Ireland. These balls were recently carbon-dated and the oldest one dates from the 1200s. The game evolved through the centuries of course and by the 1700s hurling matches drew crowds of up to 10,000 people to see the game played. There are records of big hurling matches played in Queen's County in the second half of the eighteenth century, notably in the area of the county close to Tipperary, Kilkenny and what might be considered the modern hurling area of County Offaly.

Across Ireland, hurling declined somewhat in the 1800s, after the Act of Union. The spread of cricket and other sports, followed by the calamity of famine pressed the game into retreat, but it was still played and one of the places it was still played was in Queen's County. Here, it was the game of the ordinary man – but also of others. There is a file in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland which contains letters written by James Richardson (son of the linen manufacturer and philanthropist John Grubb Richardson) to his mother in Co. Down. Richardson wrote: 'I have learned a new game called 'hurling' – it is knocking a ball about with a stick, each side trying to send it the opposite way. Scarcely a day passes that we do not play at it. It gives us plenty of exercise and is a fine game in which all the boys can join...'³ Richardson was then attending the Quaker School at Mountmellick and was subsequently elected Liberal MP for Co. Armagh in 1880. He was avowedly unionist in his politics, but

opposed the arming of the Ulster Volunteers after 1913, refused to allow his car be used for gunrunning or his estate at Bessbrook be used for drilling.⁴

II

Hurling in Leix, 1884-1913

The founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association by Michael Cusack in 1884 provided the structure for the development of hurling as a modern game fitted into a modern sporting organisation. It is repeatedly claimed that the strength of the GAA lies in the local passions that it stirs, that it is the power of the parish that is the true power of the GAA. And this is true. But it is not the full truth. The GAA also thrived – and thrived immediately – because it provided a framework that offered a national competition for clubs to compete against each other. The GAA ran its first All-Ireland hurling championship in 1887. The decision to establish that first championship was influenced by several factors. Firstly, inter-club contests in 1885 and 1886 were wildly popular and began to draw huge crowds. Clubs started to travel across the country to play against each other and these matches generated intense interest as the newspapers began to speculate which teams might be considered the best in the country. Secondly, although the number of clubs was growing, many were slow to affiliate to the Association, leaving it short of money. Establishing a central championship held the prospect of enticing GAA clubs to process their affiliations, just as the establishment of the Football Association Cup had done so much in the 1870s to promote the development of the Football Association in England. The championships were open to all affiliated clubs who would first compete in county-based competitions, to be run by local county committees. The winners of each county championship would then proceed to represent that county in the All-Ireland championships. These two basic ideas – county championships between local clubs and national competition between competing counties – provided the framework for the GAA's long-term development.

It was precisely this which drove the early GAA in Queen's County. The first games of the inaugural Queen's county championships were played on a wintry, windswept field in Abbeylisk in February 1888; by the time they were finished Rathdowney had won the hurling championship. The championships inspired the creation of clubs all across Queen's County and by 1889 there said to be 41 clubs comprising 1,692 members affiliated. Like other counties, Queen's County was severely hampered through the 1890s by political divides and the GAA was moribund for a spell. It recovered in the 1900s, firstly establishing itself and then prospering.

Central to this prosperity was the work of a new generation of administrators who revitalised the game in Laois. One of these was Fr. J.J. Kearney who established the Leix and Ossory Schools Leagues and helped establish O'Moore Park as a headquarters for the GAA in the county. Through all of these years the Leix hurling championship was dominated by Rathdowney. They won 11 championships before 1914, while Kilcotton won 5 and Clonaslee won 2. All the while, hurling was gathering strength; by 1907 there were actually 21 clubs contesting the championships, with a junior grade being added to the senior one. The first signs of progress being made on the intercounty scene came in 1909, when Leix progressed to meet Kilkenny in the Leinster hurling final. They were well-defeated by the eventual All-Ireland winners - 5-16 to 2-7 – but getting there in the first place was an indication of what might in the future be possible.

New competitions were established in the county between the best hurlers, and under the stewardship of Fr. Kearney and Bob O'Keefe, Leix became more and more competitive at inter-county level. The benchmark was Kilkenny and by 1912 Leix were back in the Leinster Final; Leix lost again but the margin was closer. In 1913 the teams met again in the Croke Cup – a secondary competition which was nonetheless an important one – and Leix only lost by 1 point. Observers of Leinster hurling were clear what was happening: Leix were now genuine

contenders for provincial honours – and maybe for more. It was one thing to contend, it was another to actually win.

III

Hurling in Leix, 1914

As 1914 dawned, the men who were driving the development of the GAA in Leix were about to take the organisation of the county hurling team to a new level. This was a broad-based process to which many people contributed, not least John Drennan of Ballacolla, James Miller of Mountrath, JJ 'O'Higgins and Thomas O'Dunne. In a way it is unfair to single out some individuals above the other because every organisation is full of people who claim credit for work that is actually done behind the scenes by others. Allowing for that, all the records show that Fr. JJ Kearney and Bob O'Keeffe were extraordinarily determined in their efforts to promote hurling in Leix. Fr. Kearney was born in County Carlow but after graduating to the priesthood he served as curate in Leix where he was the key administrator in the Leix County Board for more than 15 years. He appears to have been single-minded in his desire to promote the GAA in Leix and he governed the county's operations with both wisdom and an unflinching nature. For his part, O'Keeffe was a schoolteacher who was originally from Mooncoin in Co. Kilkenny, where he had won a county hurling championship. In 1904 he moved to work near Borris-in-Ossory, Queen's Co. (Laois). He joined the Kilcotton hurling club, made the Leix team and went on to play for Leinster in the Railway Cup. An outstanding player, he worked as an administrator even while still playing and his drive to establish Leix as a top-ranking hurling county was everywhere apparent.

For 1914, these two men took the preparation of the Leix hurling team to new levels. The story of how they managed to do this can be found in a box of files held at the GAA Museum in Dublin. In those files lies the story of how Leix progressed through the Leinster campaign

beating Wexford on 24 May by 4-3 to 1-4 in the Leinster quarter-final. In the semi-final in Tullamore on 12 July Leix beat Dublin by 4-3 to 3-4 and then – against scenes of unbridled joy – claimed the county's first Leinster senior on 2 August by beating Kilkenny by a single point, 3-2 to 2-4. This was the damburst.

Leix were now riding the crest of a wave and were now through to the county's first ever All-Ireland hurling final where they would face Clare – also seeking their first title. When Clare won the 1914 Munster hurling championship, they were reputed to have prepared better than any team in history. This revolution in preparation was rooted in past failure. In 1914, the Clare County Board had issued an appeal for funds to help its team be 'properly trained and equipped', because 'we now find ourselves occupying a very insignificant position.'⁵ The ambition was to ape what successful counties 'like Kilkenny, Kerry and others had done.'⁶ By 1915 the various aspects of the modernisation of the game of hurling, and the parallel modernisation of the GAA, had brought dramatic change to how players prepared for games. Training regimes stressed the importance of physical fitness, skill-based drills and practice games. In Clare for the 1914 championship it meant taking a full week off work before championship matches and training full time for hurling.

All of this cost money, of course. As a means of fundraising, Clare Chairman J. Shearin suggested organising some concerts throughout the county: 'Then they could get the players to Ennis to train.'⁷ The Clare training fund – like that of training funds in many counties – was well-subscribed, with the GAA clubs, the general public and businesses all contributing.⁸ As Clare progressed to the 1914 All-Ireland hurling final, they headed for a week's training in Lahinch and in Lisdoonvarna before all their championship matches, with Clare County Council, a local National Insurance inspector and a local doctor, Dr. McDonagh, all giving use of their cars to convey the team.⁹ Throughout the week before the 1914 All-Ireland final they stayed in the Temperance Hotel in Lisdoonvarna,¹⁰ and among the exercises they undertook were running,

walking, hurling, and gymnastics, as well as receiving massages.¹¹ Each man was up at 7.00 a.m. for a five-mile walk and was usually in bed by 10.30 p.m. to rest and recuperate.¹² The training was overseen by the trainer for the team, Jim Ó Hehir¹³ (father of the renowned Gaelic games commentator Mícheál Ó Hehir); he instructed that no drinking or smoking should take place, for even 'smoking of any kind is almost as harmful as drinking.'¹⁴

There were strong rumours, however, that some members of the team had occasionally indulged in 'certain spa water brewed on the banks of the Laney.'¹⁵ There were other distractions, too, as a letter-writer to the *Clare Champion* wrote:

'Our boys being so good looking, and of course such heroes in the eyes of the fair sex, attract quite a number of fair ladies to the vicinity of their training quarters every evening and as a result we have some 'tripping in the light fantastic toe' which is all very well in its own way, taken in moderation ... but it should not come off every night and on no account be prolonged after ten'.¹⁶

Hearing of the training being undertaken in Clare an anonymous letter was sent to the secretary of the Leix County Committee which implored the players to 'leave off work and train. If ye do not, ye will be not only beaten, but disgraced.'¹⁷

As it was, the Leix team actually trained together for the 1914 final every day for three weeks at the county grounds in Maryborough, using money raised by the county committee. The annual convention of the Leix County Committee had agreed that 'a fund be established to defray the expenses of training the Senior inter-county teams' and that that fund would be administered by a specially elected committee.¹⁸ A circular was issued by the Training Fund Sub-Committee:

'The preparation of the team for the Leinster Championship was carried out at the personal expense of the members of the team. This has involved a serious drain on the means of the men, who, in many cases, had to provide substitutes to fill their places of employment during frequent special practices. It would be too much to expect them to bear the expenses of the extra special course of training which it will be necessary for them to undergo for the playing of the All-Ireland

Final. The team is mainly composed of working men to whom the loss of a day's wages is a serious matter, and they have, as stated, already sacrificed a considerable sum in this way.'¹⁹

Contributions were received from GAA clubs across Queen's Co., from the Tullamore club in neighbouring King's Co., from local businesses and from people from Queen's Co. who were living across Ireland, particularly in Dublin.²⁰ To raise money, the committee had printed collecting cards where people could write in their subscriptions; receipt cards were printed to those who subscribed.²¹ Some who were solicited for money wrote back in apology that they could not raise more. M. Collier wrote from 22 Árd Righ Road, Arbour Hill, Dublin that he had thought he would 'do better, but things are so upset with the war it's hard to get money.' Others were unable to raise any money. The GAA club in Monasterevin, Queen's Co. wrote that they could raise nothing because they 'had to pay one of our players 10s. a week last month that got hurt.'²² The generosity of other donors was obviously rooted in self-interest, including a donation from the management of Wynn's Hotel on Lower Abbey Street in Dublin. Wynn's was already established as a venue for GAA players and supporters. It was in Wynn's that the Leix players ate breakfast and dinner on the day of big matches in Dublin.²³ Others still saw this as an opportunity to make money. John J. Higgins, the secretary of the Leix County Committee, received a letter from James F. O'Crowley, Wellington Square, Cork, offering to supply decorations in the Leix colours. With his letter O'Crowley enclosed samples of his decorations and suggests decorations bearing the legend 'Up Queens County'.²⁴

The amount of money required was made clear in a letter from the captain of the team, Bob O'Keefe.²⁵ In a letter to John J. Higgins, the secretary to the Leix County Committee, O'Keefe stressed the need to pay for substitute workers for members of the hurling team who would miss work. O'Keefe wrote: 'We will have to pay a man to take Jim Hyland's place also. He is a coach-builder. He is working at home but they are a very large family and they could not very well afford to have Jim away so long.' O'Keefe mentioned the costs of covering the

expenses of the players, and understood that 'this will involve a big sum of money and it will go near the £80 that I had in my head all along. I would like, if at all possible to have every man free of any loss whatever.'²⁶ Replacing E. P. McEvoy, a farmers' son, cost 10s. per week for three weeks for a substitute worker and 1s. 3d. per day for sixteen days to cover the cost of his train fare from Abbeyleix to Maryborough.²⁷ The money raised by the training fund covered not just the cost of providing those employers with substitutes for the hurlers, but also the cost of train fares and meals for the players. Leix was fortunate to be a crossing point for trains and, indeed, several of the hurlers were employed on the railways. Others worked as bakers, brewers and caretakers, in addition to a strong farming contingent.²⁸

There were many other ancillary expenses. A dozen sliotars (hurling balls) were bought from Quigley's of Barrow Street in Dublin. They were 'made of the best Irish hide' and cost a total of 30s.²⁹ Another dozen sliotars were bought from James Lalor from Three Castles in Kilkenny, while his brother, Martin Lalor, was asked to make hurleys for the players, at a cost of 3s. 6d. apiece. Getting the sliotars from Lalor proved no straightforward task. He made six and sent them up to Maryborough. He then sent up two more, and then two more again, apologising for the delay. A rather bizarre letter was received from Lalor's wife in the midst of the transactions. She wrote to Higgins on 29 October 1914 and asked that her husband not be paid until she sent word for this to happen. A month later, on 30 November, Mrs. Lalor wrote again to say that it was now fine to pay her husband and asked that Higgins 'not mention when sending that I caused the delay as he didn't know anything about it.'³⁰

All through the late summer and autumn of 1914 the Leix hurlers trained and trained and trained and left for Dublin for the final in in high spirits. And they were hammered. The final score of the 1914 All-Ireland hurling final was Clare 5–1 (16 points), Leix 1–0 (three points).³¹

IV

Hurling in Leix, 1915

Defeat to Clare was met by dismay, but not despair. After all, 1914 had brought a first Leinster title and that was a marker of huge progress. And, of course, one of the great things about sport is that a new season offers new possibilities. Leix could look to 1915 with great optimism.

Tempering that optimism were challenges:

1. The first challenge was the unravelling political situation in Ireland. The founding of the Irish Volunteers had immediately impacted on the activities of the GAA at local level. In Leix, Bob O'Keefe wrote: 'Our lads are dying on the game lately. Between wet weather [and the] Volunteers, the hurling is going to the wall.'^{32 33}
2. The second challenge was the outbreak of the Great War. In addition, in April 1915, discussions took place in the House of Commons on the GAA's policy of exclusion and a question was put to the Under-Secretary of State for War, by P. J Meehan, an Irish Parliamentary Party MP who represented Queen's County, on whether he was aware that the 'majority of Reserve Men and recruits who have joined in Ireland have been members of the Association.'³⁴ In many respects, the attitudes across the GAA towards the enlistment of its members in the British army can be seen in a motion put by the Leix County Committee to the Annual Congress of the GAA in 1915. This motion sought to permit volunteering for the British army during the Great War. The Leix County Committee argued that, with the increasing growth in the National Volunteers, it was due time that some move should be made to have deleted from the rules that portion prohibiting ex-army men from competing in the Association.³⁵ The motion was eventually withdrawn under pressure from other members within the GAA. The *Gaelic Athlete* expressed its annoyance that such a motion should be put forward in the first place: 'There are many Gaels who will totally disagree with it.'³⁶ More than that, the

paper claimed the motion would have only entailed 'playing into the hands of parties who have never been distinguished by an inordinate display of affection for the GAA.'³⁷

There were other challenges for the Leix County Board as well that were specifically related to hurling. The year 1914 had seen the rise of a new power in the land. Ballygeeghan won their first ever Laois senior hurling championship. It was the start of an extraordinary run of success that saw Ballygeeghan win 5 championships. The Leix County Committee had wished to appoint Bob O'Keefe from the Ballycotton club as captain of the team for 1915, but Ballygeeghan had won the Leix championship and insisted – as was their entitlement – on appointing a captain from their club. This was an important moment. From the very first All-Ireland championships in 1887 a trend developed whereby the champion clubs of each county selected a number of players from other clubs to assist them in inter-county matches. Over time, more and more players were brought in to supplement the county champions. By the early 1900s the idea of a county being represented by the best players from any club within its boundaries, rather than merely the champion club, was firmly established. It was a development which added greatly to the popular appeal of hurling.³⁸ However, the captain of the county team had the deciding say on who should constitute the team. Within the GAA, picking a county team was a delicate balance between avoiding alienating the members of your own club and picking the best players from the other clubs in the county. Indeed, it was a consistent challenge across the GAA to get the best players from all the clubs to represent the county.

There were concerns now as well because – in Queen's County, just as in every other county in Ireland – there were tensions between clubs who competed against each other in their own local championship.³⁹ Already by the end of 1914 there was a new and intense rivalry between Ballygeeghan and Kilcotton.⁴⁰ There were also problems between other clubs. After one club match between Kilcotton and Clonaslee, Bob O'Keefe had written that by the time they 'have cleared up [doctors'] fees for the battle with Clonaslee we may go bankrupt.'⁴¹

As it turned out Ballygeeghan nominated their best player, John Finlay, to captain Leix in 1915. Finlay (possibly under advice or pressure from the county committee) determined on picking the best hurlers in the county and the eventual team that represented Leix contained just six Ballygeeghan players.⁴² The balance of the team came from Rathdowney, Abbeyleix, Ballacolla, Rapla and Kilcotton.

Finlay was also progressive in his approach to training. He believed that the team's preparations for the 1914 final had actually been hindered by the fact that they had trained too hard and that 'some of the players on the team were not able to stand the training they went through.'⁴³ Early in 1915 he wrote to his players advising that they do their utmost to win the the All-Ireland: 'This we can do by acquiring the staying powers and speed necessary for a player to do his best for the whole of an hour's hard play.' He advised that players initially go on long, slow runs, reaching a distance of three miles. They should then start to build sprints of up to 50 yards into these runs.⁴⁴

Leix duly beat Kilkenny 4-1 to 2-6 on 6 June at Tullamore in the Leinster semi-final.⁴⁵ The victory was a sweet one – and one which confirmed that 1914 was no fluke. It also brought a less than wholesome reaction from the losers. It was one thing to lose to Leix in 1914, but two years in a row was sickening. So Kilkenny lodged an appeal with the Leinster Council. It was argued that one Leix player was standing in the wrong position when a free was taken that led to a crucial goal. As a result, Kilkenny looked for a replay. The Leinster Council said no. In the Leinster Final Leix beat Dublin in Kilkenny by 3-2 to 0-5. For the second year running Leix were Leinster Champions by the middle of August.

It was then that preparations to win the All-Ireland final were properly put in train. Money was raised through renewed appeals to supporters and was now used to fund a refined training regime, with elaborate drills for the players to follow during practice. Copies survive of practice drills for catching, dribbling, striking, sideline pucks, free pucks and fighting for possession. In

the drill which worked on fighting for possession, it was proposed to send a ball a short distance ahead of two players who would then fight for it 'somewhat like two dogs for a hare.'⁴⁶ In the two weeks before the final, the Leix players came together to train three times a week, for two hours on each occasion. To do this, some had to secure permission from their employers to leave work at 2.00 p.m. in order to be in Maryborough to train before the light faded.⁴⁷

A significant input into training was made by Fr J. J. Kearney, chairman of the Leix County Committee and president of the Maryborough Hurling Club. In the weeks before the final he wrote to the players stressing the importance of speed and intensity: 'There will be no time for fancy play or raising the ball in an All-Ireland final. Men should practice striking ground balls when running at top speed.'⁴⁸ Kearney – in tandem with other members of the county committee – believed that the team needed outside expertise if it was to win an All-Ireland.⁴⁹ He wrote to Jim Doyle from Michael Street in Waterford and asked him to take charge of the team in the weeks before the 1915 final. Doyle was unavailable but offered the advice that Leix should be careful not to over-train before the final and suggested that they ask the great Kilkenny hurler Dick 'Drug' Walsh to take charge. Walsh knew all about winning championships. He had recently retired, having won seven All-Ireland medals, three of them as captain.

Walsh was approached and duly agreed. He did some work with the team, including bringing Kilkenny hurlers in sidecars to Maryborough to hurl practice matches on three successive Sundays.⁵⁰ Illness then prevented Walsh from attending training for several days, though he was in Croke Park for match day.⁵¹ By then, the players had been given a type-written document: 'Notes for players previous to match'. This re-iterated all the work that had been done in training, stressed the importance of moving the ball quickly, of playing unselfishly and concluded: 'The team possessing the greater SPEED AND DASH will win.'⁵²

Cork players, too, trained assiduously for the final. As well as training collectively, many players trained to their own regime. One of the stars of the Cork team in 1915 was Larry Flaherty who had won an All-Ireland as long before as 1903. Flaherty had learned his hurling ('as many') when playing the game as a boy using a sycamore branch and a can. As an adult, he developed a training regime which saw him train on a hill behind his house in Douglas, commencing at 5.30 a.m. He followed a regime of jumps, as well as tying a 6 lb. weight to his hurley, before working on his swing. (Flaherty lived into his 90s and later commented on watching hurling on television in the 1970s: 'To be honest, I don't like watching fellows doing things which I sometimes feel I could still do better myself.'⁵³) Cork had already won six All-Irelands and their passage to the 1915 final had seen them defeat Tipperary, Limerick and defending champions Clare to win the Munster championship.⁵⁴ Many members of the Leix team travelled to watch Cork beat Clare in the Munster championship, 'each man to observe the style of his opponent'; Bob O'Keefe said that the match 'was not classic hurling ...[because] Cork were superior everywhere and their forward line is the best ever I saw working.'⁵⁵

V

The Final

Cork entered the final as strong favourites with the press. In sections of the national press there was comprehensive coverage of the game. There were then several weekly newspapers in Ireland dedicated to the coverage of sport. One of those papers was *Sport*, whose GAA correspondent was Frank Dineen, the man who had bought Croke Park and then sold it to the GAA in 1913. Dineen's preview of the game included pen-pictures of the players. In compiling the preview, Dineen had travelled to Maryborough where he had interviewed the Leix captain, John Finlay. As Dineen later recalled, Finlay appeared to have already adopted the pose which was to become so associated with GAA teams: 'Speaking to Mr. John Finlay, I

was made to think that they had not the slightest expectation of defeating Cork ... John Finlay, across a table, was a quiet, unassuming, sociable country gentleman, who talked of everything but hurling.⁵⁶ Even if Dineen could wrinkle little from Finlay, the evidence which sat before him was enough to convince him of his team's worth. He wrote:

'The Leix team of this year are as fine a body of young men as could be found in any county in Ireland. The majority of them are over 6 feet in height, and all of them are handsome-looking athletes of power and strength and speed. They know how to hurl, they know how the Cork team will hurl, and they will play to the last minute.'⁵⁷

Dineen had no doubt that Cork expected to win. When they arrived in Dublin on the Saturday night before the match, he went and met the train at Kingsbridge Station and noted 'a smile of confidence in every Cork face I saw on Saturday night.'⁵⁸

It was on that same Saturday night that the Leix preparations – drawing from the previous year's experiences - were put in place. This included massages for the players and, of course, the posting of those four sentries on corridors to ensure that the night was passed sleeping and not carousing. The following morning – Sunday 24 October 1915 – huge crowds of people headed to Dublin for this unique All-Ireland pairing. Special trains were run from Cork and Queen's Co., and also from the hurling heartlands of Tipperary, Limerick, Galway, Offaly, Kilkenny and Waterford. In all, the Great Southern and Western Railway put on 17 special trains which were filled to capacity. Admission to the ground was 3s. for sideline seats, 2s. for the balcony, 1s. for the enclosure and 6d. to stand on the bank around the pitch.⁵⁹ In the end, around 12,000 people paid gate receipts totalling £362 on the day.⁶⁰ Amongst them was the former world heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnston who was visiting from America to perform in a revue. It is claimed in local lore in Laois that Johnston 'appeared to be a supporter of Leix too.'⁶¹ The crowd would most likely have been greater but for the wetness of the day. All morning it had threatened rain and that rain duly arrived before the game started – and it fell in

torrents. Leix were better prepared for the rain than Cork and appeared on the field wearing their overcoats. The *Irish Independent* was later to comment that the appearance of the Leix men was 'somewhat unconvincing because they all wore mackintoshes,' but it was a decision rooted in commonsense.⁶² On top of that, the Leix team had brought resin to put on their hurleys to improve the grip; Cork had not done this.⁶³ Journalists, though, were even more poorly prepared. They sat at a table on the sideline taking notes, but such was the rain that they were forced to resort to slinging 'sheets of water off our writing pads as frequently and as plentifully as if we were bailing water from a leaking boat.' When they tried to put up an umbrella, they were immediately brought to change their mind by the unsighted crowd standing behind them who made the journalists 'a target for their harmless missiles.'⁶⁴

The referee, William Walsh (who, the press would later write, 'controlled the game in a masterful way, giving satisfaction to all'), called in the two captains and spun the hurley.⁶⁵ The Cork captain, Sheehan, had correctly chosen on which side the hurley would fall and directed that his team would defend the city end of the pitch (later known as the Canal End and then as the Davin Stand). Walsh threw in the ball to start the match at 2.54 p.m. and Cork started as if they were sure to justify their position as favourites and scored three early goals. Leix settled midway through the half, however, and scored two goals of their own, as well as two points, and trailed by just one point at the interval. The match was won in the early minutes of the second half. As the rain worsened to a downpour, Leix scored three quick goals and, despite a late rally by Cork, when the final whistle was blown the score stood at Leix 6–2, (20 points), Cork 4–1 (13 points).⁶⁶ In a somewhat wistful summary, Frank Dineen noted that he was growing old with the GAA and had now seen many All-Ireland finals, but that he was 'lost in admiration at one of the most magnificent battles that had ever been played in the final ... Every stroke of the hurley was like an electric shock, while the ball shot here and there and everywhere with lightning-like speed.'⁶⁷ In Cork the reaction was a little bit more cutting. The

match was decided in favour of Leix because of the rain which stopped their boys hurling. In a bitter aside, the *Cork Examiner* complained that when the hurling ball had been thrown up, it was as if 'one side was armed with stout ash camáns and the other side with frail tennis rackets. And Laois certainly weren't the side equipped with tennis rackets.'⁶⁸ It should be noted that all other publications credited the Leix hurlers for their skill and their subtlety, even if it should also be acknowledged that the memory of that Leix team as being filled with huge men survives in folklore.

VI

After the Final

There were huge celebrations on the field after the match, with players and officials congratulated on their success. The team travelled home by train and are reported to have followed the passion for singing which GAA teams traditionally displayed on train journeys. The Leix men sang their local song 'Lovely Laois' and the Kilkenny standard 'The Rose of Mooncoin'.⁶⁹ Bonfires blazed across Queen's Co, there was a procession through Abbeyleix where John Finlay was carried shoulder-high behind a pipe band. Congratulatory letters arrived from many parts, not least from Sir Algernon Coote, Lord Lieutenant of Queen's Co., who wrote from the House of Commons: 'Will you convey my hearty congratulations to the Leix team, upon winning the hurling championship?'⁷⁰ A telegraph also arrived from Westminster from the nationalist MP for Queen's Co., Patrick A. Meehan.⁷¹ There was praise for Bob O'Keefe from Frank Dineen: 'His hair has turned grey at the game for he has been over twenty years behind the camán [hurley]... He has had a long and successful career as a hurler, and no one who ever knew him will grudge him his All-Ireland gold medal.'⁷² O'Keefe had missed much hurling earlier in the year, not least because one of his daughters had suffered successively from pneumonia, measles and scarlet fever, but could now exult in that medal.⁷³ There was

gratitude, too, for the work which administrators had done to achieve victory. O'Keefe was later involved in ensuring that a special commemorative watch worth £25 was struck and presented to Fr J. J. Kearney in recognition of his work in promoting the GAA in the county through the establishment of schools' leagues and proper structures for adult games.⁷⁴ To conclude, this was a success that was rooted in the vision of a small few men, who mobilised many around them, committed to the cause of Leix hurling, brought the county from the margins right to the mainstream and then on to the peak. It was arduous, intensive, laced with failure for many years, but ultimately successful – a reminder of what can be done if people of will row as one.

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¹ Robert O'Keefe to John J. Higgins, 19 Oct. 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/169.

² *Village*, 15 July 2005; Phelan, *In the Shadow of the Goalpost*, p.352.

³ Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, T2571/3/3, James N. Richardson letter, c. 1850s-1860s.

⁴ Linde Lunney, 'John Grubb Richardson', in *DIB*.

⁵ Clare GAA Circular re. Hurling Championship semi-final for the Championship of Munster, Ennis, July 1914, Clare County Museum; Circular letter asking people of Leix to contribute to the Training Fund, 29 Aug. 1914, GAA Museum and Archive, GAA/Laois/2.

⁶ *Limerick Leader*, 4 Feb. 1914.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See for example *Cork Weekly Examiner*, 6 Feb. 1915; *Limerick Leader*, 9 Oct. 1914; *Mayo News*, 12 May 1917.

⁹ *Limerick Leader*, 12 Oct. 1914.

¹⁰ *Clare Champion*, 24 Oct. 1914.

¹¹ *Clare Champion*, 17 and 24 Oct. 1914.

¹² *Clare Champion*, 24 Oct. 1914.

¹³ Tomás Mac Conmara, "'Tip and slashin'" – Clare's hurling victories of 1914', *Clare Association Yearbook*, 2006. Later, two men involved in the preparation of the Clare team for this success – Stephen Clune and Jim Ó Hehir – wrote to the GAA asking that they too should receive All-Ireland medals for their part in the success. Their request was denied.

¹⁴ *Clare Champion*, 10 Sept. 1914.

¹⁵ *Clare Champion*, 24 Oct. 1914.

¹⁶ *Clare Champion*, 10 Sept. 1914.

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- ¹⁷ Anonymous letter to the Leix County Secretary, c. Oct. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/74.
- ¹⁸ Letter from. M. J. Sheridan and John J. Higgins, Honorary Secretaries to the Training Fund Sub-Committee, to each of the officers of the county committee and to club secretaries, 6 Mar. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/1(2).
- ¹⁹ Circular letter asking for contributions to the training fund, 29 Aug. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/2.
- ²⁰ See, for example, misc. subscriptions, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/5–44.
- ²¹ Receipt card, Sept. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/5.
- ²² See, for example, misc. subscriptions, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/5–44.
- ²³ E. Fitzgerald to John J. Higgins, 25 Nov. 1914, on Wynn's headed notepaper, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/ 88.
- ²⁴ James F. O'Crowley to John J. Higgins, 6 Oct. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/89. On his notepaper, O'Crowley styled himself as 'J. F. O'Crowley, One of the original seven at founding of GAA 1884'. This was untrue. O'Crowley had not attended the first meeting of the GAA, though he had been involved in the GAA from at least 1886 and had been commissioned to make the medals for the first All-Ireland championships.
- ²⁵ Phelan, *In the Shadow of the Goalpost*, p. 18.
- ²⁶ Robert O'Keefe to John J. Higgins, 7 Sept. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/4.
- ²⁷ E. P. McEvoy to John J. Higgins, 22 Oct. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/4.
- ²⁸ Schedule on amounts needed to pay substitute workers, undated, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois /45.
- ²⁹ J. Quigley to John J. Higgins, 19 Sept. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois /59.
- ³⁰ Mrs. Lalor to John J. Higgins, 29 Oct. and 30 Nov. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois /68–69.
- ³¹ Mac Conmara, "'Tip and slashin'".
- ³² Robert O'Keefe, 18 Dec. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/180.
- ³³ *National Volunteer*, 8 May 1915.
- ³⁴ *Irish Times*, 29 Apr. 1915.
- ³⁵ *Irish Times*, 26 June 1914.
- ³⁶ *Gaelic Athlete*, 27 Mar. 1915.
- ³⁷ *Gaelic Athlete*, 3 Apr. 1915.
- ³⁸ See, for example, Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse, *The GAA: A People's History* (Cork, 2009).
- ³⁹ See Arnold Mahon, 'An analysis of the development of sport in Laois/Queen's County within the context of the period 1910–1920' (MA thesis, University College, Dublin, 2007).
- ⁴⁰ Ballygeeghan went on to win five championships in a row between 1914 and 1918. See Phelan, *In the Shadow of the Goalpost*.
- ⁴¹ Robert O'Keefe to John J. Higgins, 18 Nov. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/178.

⁴² Ballygeeghan and Kilcotton were the powerhouses of the Laois team. They had met in the 1915 Laois county final and the match had ended in a draw. Ballygeeghan had come up from junior level in 1914 to immediately win that year's Laois championship and their rivalry with the established force of Kilcotton was rather intense. To ensure that all players were available, Fr Kearney had decided that the replay would not be played until after the All-Ireland final against Cork. In all, there were eight changes from the team defeated the previous year by Clare. The Laois team comprised six players from the Ballygeeghan Club, with the remainder from Kilcotton, Rathdowney, Rapla and Abbeyleix, *Sport*, 23 Oct. 1915. All through the 1915 championship O'Keefe was engaged in a confidential exchange of letters with members of the county committee who were provided with his views on team selection and preparation. See misc. correspondence, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/165–75.

⁴³ *Sport*, 30 Oct. 1915.

⁴⁴ Letter from John Finlay, John Phelan (Hon. Sec., Ballygeeghan Hurling Club) and John Phelan (Hon. Treas., Ballygeeghan Hurling Club), 22 Mar. 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/96.

⁴⁵ *Sport*, 23 Oct. 1915.

⁴⁶ Notes on training methods, c. 1914, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/ 73.

⁴⁷ P. Daly to John J. Higgins, 11 Oct. 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois /91.

⁴⁸ Letter from Fr J. J. Kearney, 11 Oct. 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/97.

⁴⁹ *Sport*, 23 Oct. 1915.

⁵⁰ Teddy Fennelly, *One Hundred Years of GAA in Laois* (Laois, 1984), p.31.

⁵¹ Jim Doyle to Fr J. J. Kearney, 1 Oct. 1915 and Dick 'Drug' Walsh to John J. Higgins, 15 Oct. 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/94–95.

⁵² 'Notes for players previous to match', undated, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/71.

⁵³ *Irish Independent*, 1 Sept. 1976.

⁵⁴ It remained one of the quirks of the championship that the matches did not always run as smoothly as might be expected. Because of the delay in finishing the Munster championship, the Munster Council of the GAA had nominated Clare to play the Connacht champions, Galway, in the All-Ireland semi-final. Then, when Cork duly beat Clare in the Munster championship, it was they who progressed to play the All-Ireland final.

⁵⁵ Robert O'Keefe to John J. Higgins, 27 Sept. 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/156.

⁵⁶ *Sport*, 30 Oct. 1915.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *Sport*, 30 Oct. 1915.

⁵⁹ *Irish Independent*, 22 Oct. 1915.

⁶⁰ *Irish Independent*, 25 Oct. 1915.

⁶¹ Anon., *125 Years of Laois GAA* (Laois, 2009), p. 23.

⁶² *Irish Independent*, 25 Oct. 1915.

⁶³ *Irish Times*, 25 Nov. 2011.

⁶⁴ *Sport*, 30 Oct. 1915.

⁶⁵ *Sport*, 30 Oct. 1915.

⁶⁶ *Irish Independent*, 25 Oct. 1915.

⁶⁷ *Sport*, 30 Oct. 1915.

⁶⁸ See Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan, Paul Rouse, *The GAA: County by County* (2012)

⁶⁹ Interview with John Lawless, GAA Oral History Project. Various songs were written in honour of the team. See Phelan, *In the Shadow of the Goalpost*, passim.

⁷⁰ Algernon Coote to John Drennan, 26 Oct. 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/106. See also Patrick F. Meehan, *The Members of Parliament for Laois & Offaly (Queen's and King's Counties) 1801–1918* (Laois, 1972), p. 65.

⁷¹ Telegraph from Meehan to John Drennan, 28 Oct. 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/108.

⁷² *Sport*, 30 Oct. 1915.

⁷³ Robert O'Keefe to John J. Higgins, 23 May 1915, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/154.

⁷⁴ Misc. correspondence, 1915, 1916 and 1917, GAA Museum and Archives, GAA/Laois/135–37.