

## **REVIEW: SPORT IN THE MAKING OF CELTIC CULTURES**

*James Hunter*

Grant Jarvie (ed.), **Sport in the Making of Celtic Cultures**. London, Leicester University Press, 1999, hb £45, ISBN 0-7185-0129-2, pp.ix+198.

As I know to my cost, sport - especially spectator sport - has now so permeated our contemporary culture that to profess no great interest in any aspect of it is to encounter, particularly from males, much the same shocked reaction that might have been provoked if, in 1560s Edinburgh, you were to have casually announced your total indifference as to whether Scotland was Catholic or Protestant. To a rapidly diminishing minority of sports-agnostics like myself, this may seem a crazy state of affairs. But it's a fact nevertheless. Inevitably and rightly, therefore, it has led to the academic world - in the shape, for instance, of the 14 contributors to this collection of essays and papers - getting to grips with sport's social, political, literary and other dimensions. The result, in the present case at any rate, is both fascinating and illuminating - not least with regard to the way in which, over the last 100 or 150 years, sport came to have a key role in the way that nationality and identity is defined in a number of those European nations or regions whose inhabitants are commonly considered Celtic.

Like anyone who's taken any interest in the modern history of what Norman Davies has recently taken to calling 'The Isles' - meaning, broadly speaking, Britain and Ireland - I was aware, in general terms, of the part played by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in the emergence, in the 1890s and subsequently, of the variant of Irish nationalism which was to loom so large in the events surrounding Ireland's regaining of its independence. And because of my own explorations of Highlands and Islands history, I was equally well aware of the way in which GAA activity in Ireland had its

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counterpart in Scotland in the form of overlaps between Gaelic revivalism, land reform activity and a passion for regenerating and reorganising traditional Highland games like shinty - overlaps which were most evident, as Grant Jarvie comments in his introductory contribution to this book, 'during the high period of Irish nationalism and Gaelic radicalism between 1880 and about 1920'. So far, so commonplace. But if there's nothing very original in this, or in Jarvie's immediately ensuing observation that - in the Scotland of 1900 or thereby - 'the politics of land reform, Gaelic affairs, Celtic radicalism and shinty were often inextricably linked', there's a great deal that's new, from my standpoint at least, about much of the rest of what Jarvie and his collaborators have to say.

Shinty is dealt with here by Hugh Dan MacLennan - unrivalled authority on the game's evolution - who, having first touched on the extent to which the sport's rules might ultimately be traced to Gaelic law tracts of a thousand or more years ago, offers a whole series of intriguing insights into shinty's contribution to community life in the nineteenth-century Highlands. After that, it comes as something of a shock to discover, in the course of Lorna Jackson's painstakingly detailed survey of the sporting scene in Victorian Argyll, that Oban, Campbeltown and several neighbouring settlements sustained, from the 1860s through to the 1890s, flourishing cricket clubs. Cricket in Argyll, Jackson notes, was 'associated with the gentry'. But the latter, as both Jackson and MacLennan observe, were just as likely - maybe more likely - to promote traditional sports such shinty, stone-throwing or caber-tossing as they were to introduce their tenants to the mysteries of spin-bowling and wicket-keeping. Quite how the shinty-promoting radicals of the Highland Land League related to shinty-patronising lairds, of whom there were a lot, is not made clear either by Jackson or MacLennan - and possibly offers, therefore, scope for further work.

Hurling, which MacLennan calls 'shinty's sporting and cultural cousin', was, of course, one of the Irish games so passionately embraced by the Gaelic Athletic Association from its formation in 1884. By its original patrons, such as Archbishop Thomas Croke, the GAA was conceived, from the outset, as part of a wider effort to dissuade Irish people 'from putting on, with England's stuff and broadcloths, her mashier habits and other effeminate follies' - among which Croke counted cricket, soccer and other imports of that sort. As is suggested here by Alan Bairner, whose survey of the GAA takes the association's story right down to the present, its nationalism - as Croke's words underline - has long been strongly ethnic in nature. And modern Ulster's troubles, Bairner points out, have helped to reinforce this aspect of the GAA's collective character:

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Whilst part of the island is still politically tied to Britain, it remains incumbent on the GAA as a nationalist body to continue to make some contribution to the idea of the ethnic unity of the Irish people. In addition, the resolve of members to fulfil this role has been strengthened at various times both by attacks [in Northern Ireland] on them and their facilities by loyalist paramilitaries and by what has been perceived to be a systematic policy of harassment by the security forces.

But for all that Bairner concludes of the GAA that 'it is difficult to see how it could become more inclusive without losing its very reason for being', he discerns some hope - in the new, more pluralist society which has lately been developing in the Irish Republic and which may be extending into Northern Ireland as the peace process takes effect - of the appeal of traditional Irish sports beginning to spread across sectarian and other boundaries.

We have such boundaries in Scotland, too. But it's of more than passing interest (and exactly this issue is explored here by Joseph M. Bradley) that people of Irish Catholic extraction in West Central Scotland quickly chose to express their distinctiveness by identifying with a soccer team, Celtic, rather than by founding, as the never-very-successful Scottish branches of the GAA thought they should, their own hurling and Gaelic football clubs.

Which makes the point that linkages between sport and communal identity don't need to be in any way dependent on games which are themselves rooted historically in the community in question. Brittany, for example, has no lack of traditional sports. But though Breton nationalist and cultural revivalists have made strenuous attempts to sustain and revive these, those attempts have mostly failed - with the result, as is made clear by first-class contributions to this book from Michel Lagrée, Philip Dine and Michel Raspaud, that the sporting carriers of Breton identity today tend to be footballers and cyclists, not the tiny minority who continue to engage in Breton wrestling and other age-old pastimes of that sort.

Much the same - as is emphasised here by Gareth Williams' wholly fascinating analysis of 'Sport, Literature and Welsh Identity' - is true of Wales. Once Welsh-language poets celebrated the skills, just as their Breton counterparts did, of wrestlers and stone-throwers. Now they celebrate prowess on the rugby field and see in that prowess (or, more accurately, saw in it when Welsh rugby was in a better state than presently) something of much more than sporting significance. This is neatly illustrated by G. R. Jones's 1975 tribute to Barry John:

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Y glew o Gefeithin  
Dilea graith cenedl grin ...

'The warrior from Gefneithin,' Jones insists, 'will eradicate the scar of a shrivelled people.' Commenting on these lines, Gareth Williams observes:

It [the poem] continues in this vein; throughout the land, timid men are straightening their backs. An impotent people is rousing itself, inspired by the unassuming Barry John. Anyone who has known his genius can never grovel to foreign crowns.

In a passage which will strike a chord in Scotland, Williams goes on:

Such voices fall mute after 1979, the year of the first devolution debacle and the end of a decade of Welsh rugby dominance. It is the English-language poets of Wales who most bitterly articulate the frustration of dashed nationalist hopes, and turn vengefully on the eighty-minute patriots of the Arms Park.

Hence these lines, written in 1987, by Alun Rees:

To see this, all the same, is to regret  
That sixty thousand with this splendid fire  
Urge fifteen on to drive the English back  
If only they would urge themselves like that.

All in all, then, an excellent and timely book on which Grant Jarvie and everyone else involved - except the publishers whose pricing-policy is such as to confine this volume to a few specialist libraries - are to be congratulated.

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