



Unit 2:

**The Gaelic Athletic Association
1884-1901**

A Short History

UNIT 2:

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE GAA 1884-1901

The Irish cultural and literary revival of the late nineteenth-century developed in response to concerns about the 'Anglicisation' of Ireland. In the decades after the Great Famine, Irish language, culture and traditions were being steadily eroded by emigration, intense poverty and outside influences. Central to the philosophies of cultural nationalist organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the Gaelic League was the notion that Ireland was a distinctive nation and that Irish people should foster their own particular culture.

The Gaelic Athletic Association was founded in Thurles Co. Tipperary, on 1 November 1884 by Clare schoolteacher and ardent nationalist, Michael Cusack supported by internationally-renowned athlete Maurice Davin. Cusack was passionate about all aspects of Irish culture and critical of the growing popularity and exclusivity of English sports. Rugby or soccer was not an option for working men whose only leisure time fell on Sundays.

Cricket, or athletics under the sponsorship of the Irish Amateur Athletic Association, could not be enjoyed by those whose incomes were low or whose

social standing made them unwelcome companions for those in control of these institutions.

The GAA aimed to make athletics more accessible to the masses and to revive and nurture traditional, indigenous sports and pastimes: Irish sports for Irish people, with Irish rules. Within a year, the Association had re-invented and codified hurling and football as modern sports. It was an extraordinary social phenomenon, which acted a major revivalist force and engendered a new local and national spirit across Ireland

Maurice Davin was elected President, Cusack Secretary and Archbishop Croke of Cashel – as well as Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell – were patrons of the Association. While Cusack insisted that politics was secondary to the objective of forging a sense of local and national identity, the early participation of these men, and the Association's expressed patriotism placed the GAA firmly within the nationalist camp. Early clubs were named after Biggar, Davitt and Parnell, Emmet and the Young Irelanders, and the green flag with the gold harp floated over GAA sports meetings.

MICHAEL CUSACK
(LEFT) AND
MAURICE DAVIN



The GAA enforced rules - collectively referred to as 'the ban' - that excluded those who played foreign sports and games, or who were closely associated with the British administration in Ireland. As a Dublin Castle report put it, early in 1888, 'the question was not whether the association was a political one, but only to what particular section of Irish national politics it could be annexed'.

Formed against a backdrop of the Land War and Home Rule agitation, the GAA flourished during the decade of Parnell's ascendancy. His leadership of the Home Rule Party had yielded unprecedented electoral success and all things seemed possible in nationalist Ireland. The Catholic Church had also consolidated its power and influence, which extended to all aspects of Irish society, including sports and politics. The dormant Irish Republican Brotherhood, (IRB) with its alternative vision for securing Ireland's independence, experienced a revival in the 1880s and at least four of the eleven men present at the inaugural meeting of the GAA in Thurles were IRB members.

The GAA fostered the image of the 'ideal Gael' - a sober, manly, self-reliant, athlete, pure in mind and deed and devoted to his county and religion. There is little doubt that the Association's nationalist rhetoric was an important factor in its rapid growth between 1886 and 1887, but its most valuable tool was the development of games that the public loved to pay and to watch, generating an enthusiasm and a fervour not seen for decades.

[THE GAME OF HURLING] IS "LIKE A CITY ON FIRE, WHERE THE CRACKLING OF BURNING TIMBER AND THE HISSING OF THE FLAMES SWELL INTO THE ROAR OF CONFLAGRATION. WE NEVER HEARD SWEETER MUSIC THAN THAT OF THE HURLING FIELD'.

- Michael Cusack, writing in the Celtic Times, 2 April 1887 -

Basing its club organisation on parish and county units, the GAA captured parochial passions drawing vast crowds to competitive hurling matches between parish clubs and counties. With the blessing of the Church, matches were held on a Sunday and were often preceded by Irish dancing competitions, poetry recitations, parades, speech making, and even pony races.

The bicycle revolutionised travel to local and distant matches and railway companies offered special deals for match-day outings. Journeys were shortened by singsongs, poetry recitations and card games. Also important to the early success of the association was the establishment of an All-Ireland championship for hurling and football in 1887. At Birr, Co. Offaly, on Sunday, 1 April 1888, Tipperary won the first All-Ireland hurling final against Galway.



Between 1887 and 1899, the Association was affected by disputes and diverging political loyalties. The increasingly powerful Fenian members clashed with the Clerical and Home Rule wings of the Association. The power struggle reached its climax in 1887 at the annual convention in Thurles when IRB candidates were elected to key positions within the central executive of the GAA. Archbishop Croke disassociated himself from the GAA and moderate nationalists and members of the clergy condemned the new leadership. By the autumn of 1887 disunity was evident across the association's clubs.

At the 1888 convention, however, Davin was re-elected president and the radical secret society lost its grip on the GAA leadership. This battle for power was the most serious threat to the Association in its

early years and, for a time, threatened the continued existence of the GAA as clerical support was vital to the survival of any nationwide organisation in the late nineteenth century.

The battle for control of the GAA reached its peak during the controversy surrounding Parnell as a result of the O'Shea divorce scandal in 1890. In December a majority of the Irish Parliamentary Party rejected Parnell's leadership and the party split was replicated in the GAA. Under IRB influence, the GAA at national level stood firmly with Parnell, but their position was contrary to mainstream nationalist and clerical opinion. Many local branches were not supportive of the unconstitutional, anti-clerical position and membership almost collapsed in some areas.

Elsewhere, rival clerical and Fenian clubs competed for membership. Parnell's death in 1891 further exposed the divisions within the association. Two-thousand GAA members participated in Parnell's funeral cortège 'each carrying a hurley draped in black and held in reverse to resemble a rifle'.

Key structural decisions were made during the difficult years of the 1890s. Four provincial councils were established between 1900 and 1903 and the Association established a central office in Dublin becoming an island-wide national movement in 1904. In 1905, the GAA the 'ban', which had not been enforced during the difficult 1890s was reintroduced. The foreign games rule was re-imposed and membership was prohibited to policemen, soldiers and sailors and even men receiving pensions from the British forces.

The achievements of the GAA included reviving and standardising Gaelic football and hurling, which was nearing extinction in post-famine Ireland. The Association also played a significant role in awakening the spirit of local and national pride and it helped to forge a national identity in the early years of the twentieth century.

Despite these achievements, the GAA's policy of banning foreign games and members of the British administration alienated its early protestant supporters and widened the divide between the two traditions in Ireland.

DUNGARVAN BOYS
HURLING TEAM, 'THE
YOUNG REBELS', PROBABLY
AT THE FRAHER FIELD,
DUNGARVAN, C. 1910.



[Source: Waterford County Museum]