CORMAC MOORE

THE GAA v DOUGLAS HYDE

The Removal of Ireland's First President as GAA Patron

The Collins Press

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In memory of my father, Paddy Moore.

Cormac Moore has a Master's degree in history from UCD where he completed his thesis on Douglas Hyde's removal as GAA patron. He is currently pursuing a PhD on a history of soccer in Ireland.

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Contents

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Cormac Moore
September 2012

Introduction

> Our games were in a most grievous condition until the brave and patriotic men who started the Gaelic Athletic Association took in hand their revival. I confess that the instantaneous and extraordinary success which attended their efforts when working upon national lines has filled me with more hope for the future of Ireland than everything else put together.
>
> I consider the work of the association in reviving our ancient national game of *comáin*, or hurling, and Gaelic football, has done more for Ireland than all the speeches of politicians for the last five years.
>
> And it is not alone that that splendid association revived for a time with vigour our national sports, but it revived also our national recollections, and the names of the various clubs throughout the country have perpetuated the memory of the great and good men and martyrs of Ireland …
>
> … Wherever the warm striped green jersey of the Gaelic Athletic Association was seen, there Irish manhood and Irish memories were rapidly reviving …[1]
>
> Dr Douglas Hyde
> November 1892

Dr Douglas Hyde, founding member and first president of the Gaelic League, became the first President of Ireland in 1938 under the new Constitution of 1937, Bunreacht na héireann. He was an early member and advocate of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and was friends with Michael Cusack, the man most associated with the founding of the GAA.

Hyde claimed that the GAA paved the way for the Gaelic League, an organisation he, more than anyone else, initiated and grew to levels unthinkable at its outset. It was for his work with the Gaelic League that he was made a patron of the GAA in 1902, an honour bestowed on only a few men even to this day. It was an honour greatly appreciated by Hyde.

This honour was taken from him in December 1938.

On 17 December of that year, the Central Council of the GAA met. Members in attendance included the then president, Ulsterman Pádraig McNamee who was chairing the meeting, Pádraig Ó Caoimh, general secretary, former president Bob O'Keeffe (1935–1938), and members representing the four provincial councils and different county boards. One item on the agenda involved a brief discussion relating to Hyde. It would lead to his removal as a patron of the GAA.

Hyde had attended an international soccer match between Ireland and Poland on 13 November 1938 in his capacity as Head of State. This was considered to be in direct violation of Rule 27 of the GAA, the ban on 'foreign games'. The 'foreign games' ban stipulated that members of the GAA could not play or attend any event organised by the sports of Association football (soccer), rugby, cricket or hockey.

At the meeting a resolution of the Galway County Board was discussed:

> That the Central Council at its next meeting be requested to consider the position of a patron whose official duties may bring him into conflict with the fundamental rules of the Association. The chairman said that his ruling was that such a person ceased to be a patron of the association. Some people thought that a patron should be above the rules, but that was not his view. It was no pleasure to rule as he was doing, but he

> saw no other course. Mr O'Farrell, Roscommon, dissenting from the ruling said Dr Hyde had done some good work for them in Roscommon. Chairman – He did good work in many places and in many ways. There was no further discussion.[2]

The meeting ended when a 'circular from the National Association of the old IRA was read, in which it was asked that the Central Council would send two representatives to a conference in connection with Partition. The Council decided not to appoint delegates as it may lead the Association into political connections'.[3] The GAA may have desired to remain uninvolved in politics but its decision to remove the President of Ireland as patron of the Association would ensure that the opposite would happen over the coming weeks and months.

The decision to remove Hyde was seen as an extraordinary one and garnered much interest both nationally and internationally. Not only was the decision made against the Head of the State but it was against a man seen by most as the embodiment of the Irish-Ireland movement, a movement that had the GAA at its forefront.

How did it come to pass that such a decision could be made? In pondering this question, this book will look at Hyde's career, one spanning over fifty years dedicated to the Irish-Ireland cause that culminated with him being elected unanimously as first President of Ireland. This book also explores the backgrounds of the two people in the GAA who were most associated with Hyde's removal, Pádraig McNamee, the president at the time, and, Pádraig Ó Caoimh, the general secretary. Both men contributed hugely to the Irish-Ireland movement in their own rights and it can be believed that the removal of a man they both respected greatly was a very difficult decision for them to make.

The GAA ban on 'foreign games' had experienced a colourful history before the Hyde incident was added to its

catalogue of episodes. Installed shortly after the founding of the GAA in 1884 to stave off the growth of the Irish Amateur Athletic Association (IAAA), the Ban went through periods of being removed, then being reinstated to reach the point, by the late 1930s, of being a steadfast rule accepted by the majority of the membership of the GAA.

Hyde's removal coincided with club, county and provincial conventions within the GAA and this ensured the topic remained in the news until the GAA Annual Congress of April 1939. The media, with a few exceptions, were vehemently opposed to the GAA's stance. There was also a big divide within the Association itself.

This decision led to a great straining of relations between the GAA and the government that would be exacerbated by a number of incidents in the following years that tested their rapport to its limits. A resolution was finally reached in 1945 when éamon de Valera, the Taoiseach at the time, met with members of the GAA and an agreement was made to ensure such an incident would never happen again.

The maintenance of the Ban was seriously questioned by many quarters after Hyde was removed as a patron in 1938. The Ban would remain in place as a fundamental principle for many years, only being removed over thirty years later in 1971. The credibility of the Ban was undermined significantly by the removal of Hyde as a patron; over the following decades his removal would be the main weapon used by opponents of the Ban to demonstrate its flawed nature as an antiquated rule that had no place in an Ireland looking to embrace the modern world.

‘I Dream in Irish’

Douglas Hyde was born on 17 January 1860 in Castlerea, County Roscommon. A member of a family steeped in the Protestant religion, he was the third son of Arthur Hyde, a Church of Ireland rector, and his wife, Elizabeth, whose father was John Orson Oldfield, Archdeacon of Elphin. His two brothers were Arthur and Oldfield and he had one younger sister, Annette.[1] Hyde’s ancestors had moved from Castle Hyde, Cork, where they had lived since they were planted there from England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century.[2] Although his family was not wealthy, they ‘moved in circles occupied by a relatively leisured, educated, privileged class’.[3] When Hyde was a young boy his father was made rector at Frenchpark, County Roscommon, and the family moved there to live. According to author, poet and translator, Seán Ó Lúing, ‘The environment of Douglas Hyde’s boyhood, embracing central and northern Connacht, played an important part in the development of his consciousness, superlatively rich as it was in bardic culture, legend and folklore’.[4]

Hyde was not formally educated except for a brief, unhappy stint in a school in Kingstown (modern day Dún Laoghaire) in 1873.[5] His move back to Roscommon turned out to be fortuitous for Hyde and for the Irish language movement in the long term. He was educated at home mainly by his father who, with an eye on Hyde following him into clerical life, taught him Greek and Latin, the primary languages he would need for that profession.[6] Hyde developed an extraordinary talent for languages and, in addition to Greek, Latin and English, he was able to communicate in German, French and Hebrew.[7] The language that he had most affection for was the one he learned from

his father's servants, from local farmers and peasants, the native tongue of the land, Irish.[8] While studying at Trinity College Dublin, Hyde claimed it was the language he knew best, saying, 'I dream in Irish.'[9]

Castle Hyde in County Cork. Douglas Hyde's ancestors were planted there from England in the sixteenth century during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. *(Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)*

According to Doiminic Ó Dálaigh, in his book, *The Young Douglas Hyde*, Hyde picked up the language within a remarkably short period of time, which was astonishing considering he had no 'formal' teacher.[10] His first Irish teacher was a local Fenian, Seamus Hart, who instilled in Hyde a love for the language as well as a love for the idioms and lore of Irish folk tales handed down orally to generations of locals in the area. Hart's death in 1875, when Hyde was just fifteen, was a huge blow to the young boy. He wrote in his diary, 'Seamus died yesterday. A man so kindly, so truthful, so neighbourly I never saw. He was ill about a week, and then he died. Poor Seamus, I learned my Irish from you. There will never be another with Irish so perfect. I

can see no one from now on with whom I can enjoy friendship such as I enjoyed with you.'[11] Other locals who took up the baton of teaching Hyde Irish included Mrs William Connolly and John Lavin.[12] Hyde was a meticulous and dedicated student, spending between five and six hours a day on average studying,[13] primarily concentrating on languages. His diaries document his first halting steps writing in Irish in 1874 and demonstrate his rapid progression with the language. Soon it would be the language he would use, primarily, for writing.[14]

Not a particularly robust youth, Hyde was, however, a keen enthusiast of the outdoors and there are many references to him participating in activities and sports such as fowling (hunting), tennis, cricket[15] and croquet as well as a ball game he played with his future brother-in-law Cam O'Kane.[16] Had he grown up a number of years later, he would not have been free to participate in some of those sports as a member of the GAA.

On many of these outdoor excursions he was to discover from locals a treasure chest of sources he would use as stories and folktales in later years. Hyde realised that there was no documentation of these wonderful tales, tales covering ghosts and fairies and many other mythical characters,[17] tales that had all been handed down orally to different generations. He was determined to record everything he heard, creating a new genre and power in literature along the way, according to his contemporary William Butler Yeats.[18]

Hyde did not learn just the language and stories from local people. He also developed a taste for their politics. Considering that he would be forever remembered as a non-political man, reading some of his youthful pro-nationalist and anti-British sentiments makes for surprising reading. His verses are covered with themes on the oppression of the local people as well as a need to remove the British Empire

by physical force. In one poem, one could be forgiven for thinking that the author was a Thomas Clarke or a Pádraig Pearse, not a man who became widely known as a pacifist:

> And it (is) their power to free their country
> By rising and drawing their blades like men,
> To show to the Saxon that each man is ready
> To break the yoke with which he is bound.
>
> To frighten that most hateful country;
> Believe, oh believe that she will not withstand force,
> But she will grant easily, meekly, to arms
> What she will never grant to truth or to right.
> I hate your law, I hate your rule,
> I hate your people and your weak queen,
> I hate your merchants who have riches and property,
> Great is their arrogance – little their worth.
>
> I hate your Parliament, half of them are boors
> Wrangling together without manners or grace –
> The men who govern the kingdom, false, insincere,
> Skilled only in trickery and deceit.
> Smoke rises over no city more accursed
> Than London, for all its greatness, its wonder, its fame;
> It deserves the greatest chastisement from God,
> Like ancient Rome or great Babylon.[19]

He was an admirer of Fenians like O'Donovan Rossa and John O'Mahony who he eulogised in the poetry he wrote.[20] His political beliefs would change significantly over the years but his passion and enthusiasm for the Irish language would remain with him forever.

He enrolled in Trinity College Dublin in 1880; he started to attend lectures in 1882 and moved to Dublin to live a year later.[21] Due to pressure from his father, he took a course in Divinity studies, graduating with great distinction.

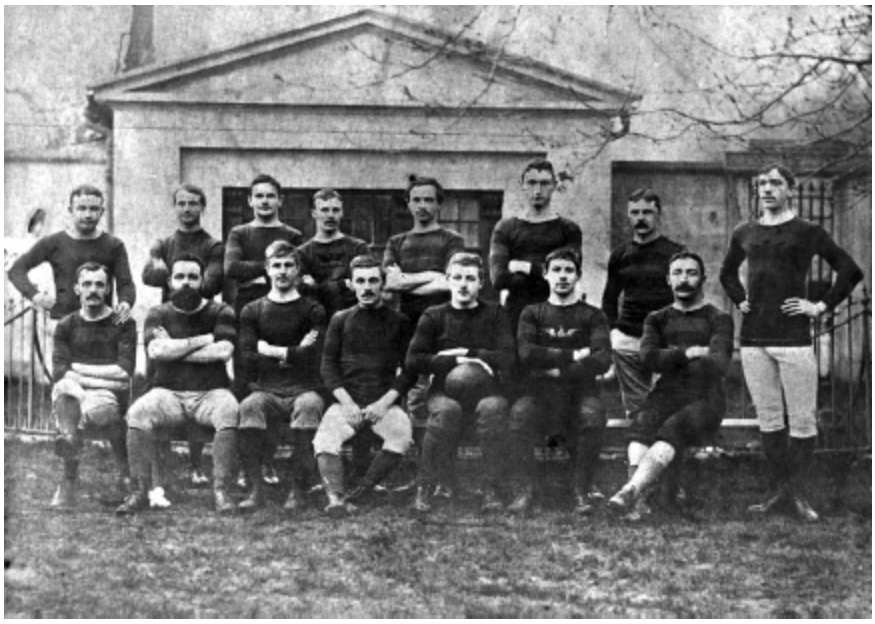
A deep rift would develop between Hyde and his father, as Hyde, like his older brothers, had no interest in pursuing a life in the Church. Instead of returning to Roscommon to live with his father, he decided to remain in Trinity to study Law in 1886 and qualified with an LL.D. degree in 1888.[22] Hyde had a glittering academic career, winning many prizes and medals. It was his extracurricular activities at university that would be of most interest to him. He immersed himself in movements such as the Contemporary Club where he discussed topics of the day with minds such as Yeats, Maud Gonne, John O'Leary and Michael Davitt,[23] as well as the newly formed literary group the Pan-Celtic Society.[24]

Hyde did not find too many fellow students in Trinity College who shared his passion for the Irish language. His main outlet to interact with like-minded language enthusiasts was the Gaelic Union, an offshoot of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. Hyde had been contributing to that society since he was a teenager, subscribing £1 to its cause in 1877.[25] Hyde immersed himself wholeheartedly in the nascent language movement and chaired many of the Gaelic Union meetings.[26] One of the people he befriended at this time was fellow language activist, Michael Cusack. Cusack, a Clare native, was, at that time, in the process of setting up another Irish-Ireland movement, one specifically catering for the native games, the Gaelic Athletic Association.

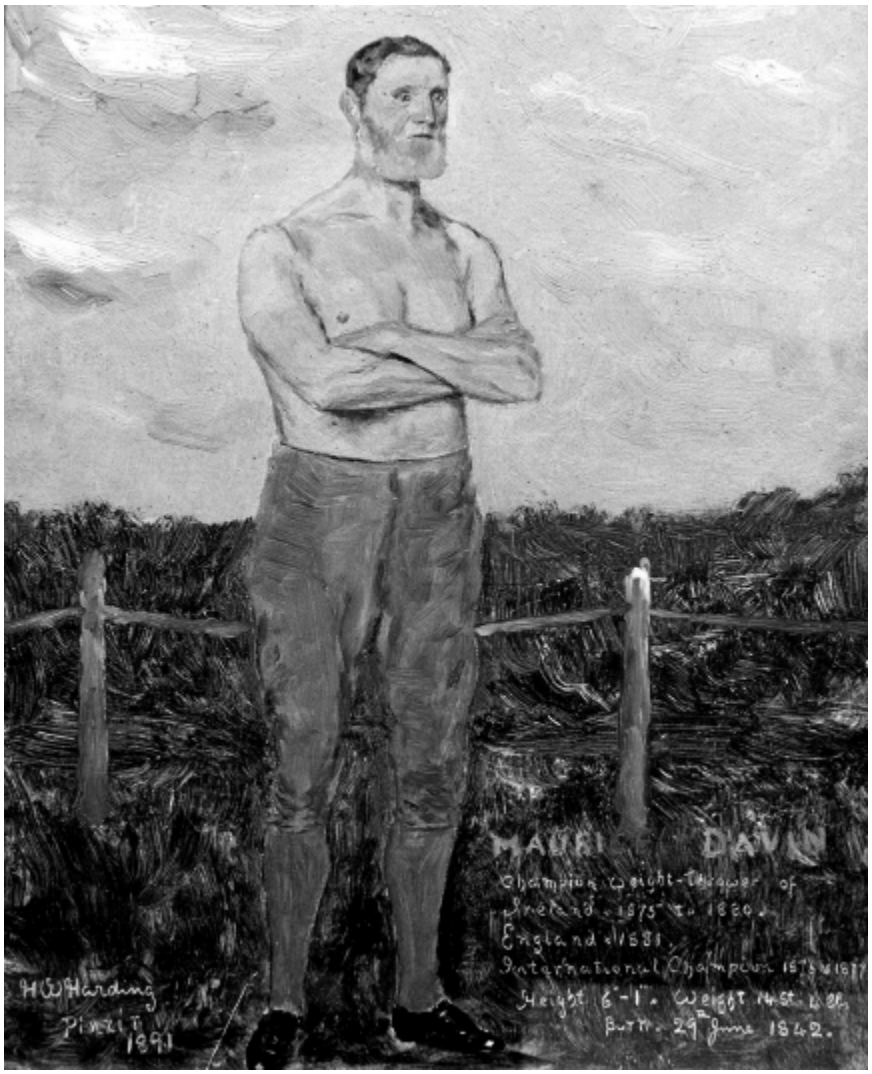
‘Sweeping the Country Like a Prairie Fire’

Michael Cusack was born in 1847 in Carron, which is located in a remote part of the Burren in County Clare. As a child he was keenly interested in hurling, a game that would stay with him throughout his life. Cusack trained as a teacher and had teaching positions in all four provinces at various times.[1] He settled in Dublin in 1874. He taught in Blackrock College as well as in Clongowes Wood in County Kildare before setting up his own academy to prepare students for the British Civil Services examinations, an academy which would become quite lucrative for Cusack for a number of years before his extracurricular activities would take up more and more of his time. Like Hyde, Cusack was a keen Irish language enthusiast and he was an active member of the Gaelic Union. He played a leading role in the establishment of a bilingual magazine sponsored by the Gaelic Union entitled *The Gaelic Journal*,[2] seen by many as the spark for the language revival movement.[3] Douglas Hyde referred to *The Gaelic Journal* ‘as the start of the resurrection of modern Irish’.[4] He would also become an early member and actively involve himself with the Gaelic League when it was established in 1893.[5] It was, however, for his interest in the national pastimes of Ireland that Cusack’s name has been remembered. An accomplished athlete, Cusack played hurling, football, handball, cricket, rugby and athletic field events, and was particularly accomplished at weight-throwing events. As well as competing at athletic events, Cusack became involved in the administration side of sports. He soon became disillusioned with how sports were being organised in

Ireland: he was against sports being run on a professional basis. There was a tendency to ignore sports such as weights and jumping events in which Irish people had a track record of excelling, and he believed the sports bodies in Ireland were too elitist and class-based as well as too subservient to Britain. Although there had been a revival in athletics throughout Ireland at this time, it 'remained the preserve of the well-to-do and of the small class of white-collar workers. Both groups were predominantly Unionist in outlook'.[6] Commenting years later on the elitism and exclusionist policies of sporting bodies towards many Irish people, Cusack declared, 'From out this latter crocodile condition of things came an idea no bigger than my head'.[7]



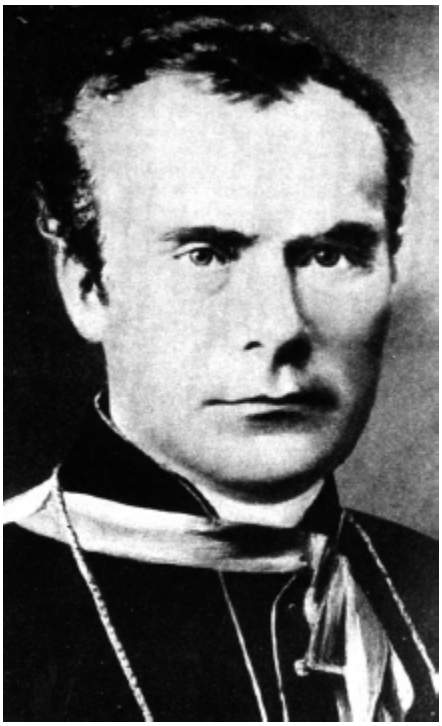
Michael Cusack (*front row, second from left*) in a team photograph for a rugby match. Cusack, an accomplished athlete in many codes of sport, was the key driver in the founding of the GAA in 1884. *(Courtesy of the James Hardiman Library, NUI Galway)*



Maurice Davin, the first president of the GAA, was an internationally renowned athlete, whose public support for the GAA helped the nascent body gain a strong foothold. *(Courtesy of the GAA Museum, Croke Park)*

Inspired by people like the renowned athlete P. W. 'the Champion of the West' Nally (an advanced nationalist from Mayo who would have a stand named after him in Croke Park in 1953), Cusack started a campaign for pure athletes, advocating amateurism, the inclusion of weights and jumping events, the lifting of class barriers, and unity in Irish athletics. Following Nally's lead of organising sports events for Irish people in Mayo,[8] Cusack followed suit in Dublin and started to organise sports meets there. In 1882 he established the Dublin Hurling Club, which would later

become the Metropolitan Hurling Club. The momentum he created gathered pace in the summer of 1884 when he wrote a series of articles in William O'Brien's *United Ireland* and Richard Pigott's *Irishman* (Pigott would achieve infamy a few short years later as the man responsible for forging letters purporting to be from Charles Stewart Parnell), calling for a national athletic body to be founded.[9] On 11 October 1884, an article, almost certainly from the pen of Cusack, appeared in *United Ireland*, asking 'the Irish people to take the management of their games into their own hands, to encourage and promote in every way every form of athletics which is peculiarly Irish and to remove with one sweep everything foreign and iniquitous in the present system'.[10] Internationally renowned athlete Maurice Davin from Tipperary publicly offered his support to such a body and the wheels were set in motion for the Gaelic Athletic Association to be formed. This happened in Mrs Hayes' Commercial Hotel on 1 November 1884 where at least seven men met, including Cusack and Davin. Davin was invited to become the first president and Cusack one of three secretaries. The main agreement reached at the first meeting was the names of the people they would invite to be patrons of this new association: Archbishop Thomas Croke of Cashel, Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt. The three men represented different strands of the nationalist cause in Ireland at the time.

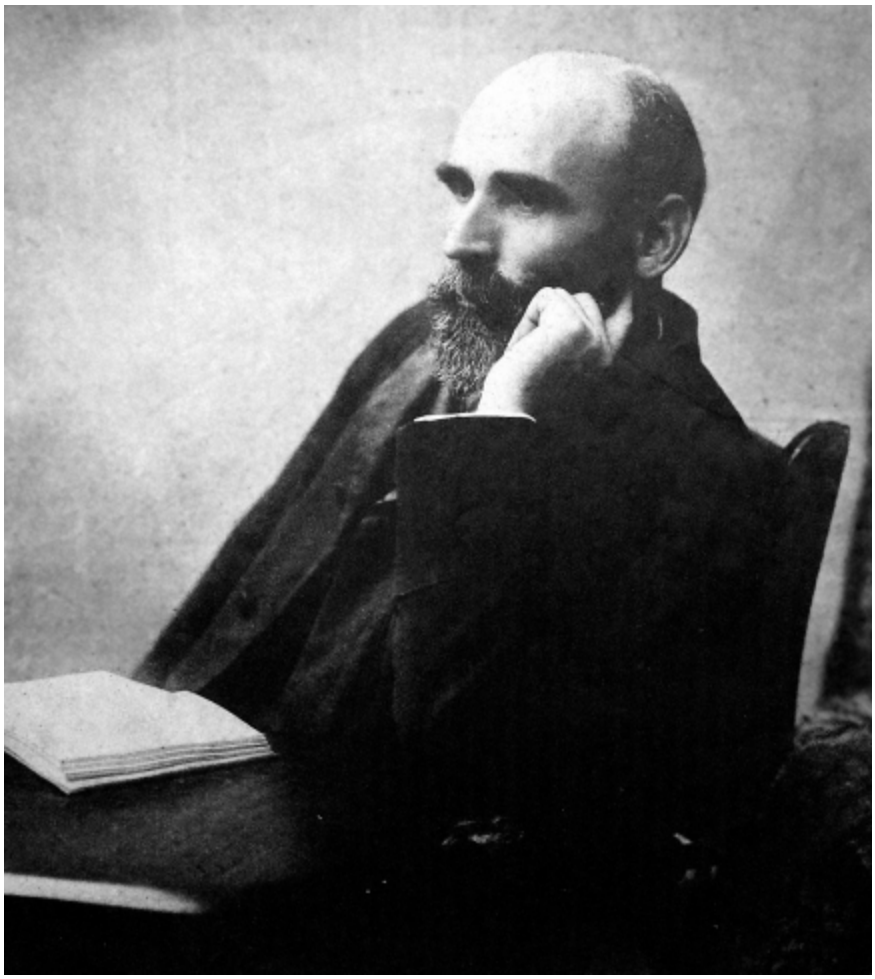


Archbishop Thomas Croke, founding patron of the GAA. His letter accepting the position as patron of the GAA, using pro-Irish and anti-British rhetoric became in many ways the *de-facto* manifesto of the GAA. *(Courtesy of the GAA Museum, Croke Park)*

Archbishop Croke was the clergyman most associated with the Irish-Ireland cause. He was an active supporter of the land agitation and the Home Rule movements of the time and was a patron of the language society, the Gaelic Union.[11] He led calls for the Gaelic Union and the parent group that it had split from, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, to amalgamate with each other again,[12] a precursor to what happened when the Gaelic League was formed in 1893. He was very vocal in calling for a revival of the national pastimes whilst being a virulent opponent of foreign sports. He called existing sports such as cricket and polo ‘effeminate follies’ played by ‘degenerate dandies’, saying that ‘if we continue condemning the sports that were practised by our fore-fathers, effacing our national features as though we were ashamed of them … we had better, and at once, abjure our nationality and place

England's bloody red exaltingly [sic] above the green'.[13] With his exemplary religious credentials and his support for all things nationalist, he was seen as the perfect choice to be the GAA's primary patron. His letter accepting the position, using pro-Irish and anti-British rhetoric became, in many ways, the *de-facto* manifesto of the GAA.[14]

Charles Stewart Parnell had shown no interest in or knowledge of native pastimes or sports prior to the founding of the GAA. As a youth he was more than likely to be found on a cricket field. There is still a cricket ground at his estate in Avondale, County Wicklow to this day.[15] He too, though, was a perfect choice as patron. The most pre-eminent politician of his era, Parnell was at the height of his powers in 1884, known by many as the 'Uncrowned King of Ireland'. It may have been somewhat of a coup for the GAA, founded on such inconspicuous terms, to receive the support of such a powerful figure who had previously not demonstrated an interest in Irish pastimes. However, Parnell saw the mood in Ireland moving towards a revival of all things Irish and was determined that his Irish Parliamentary Party would not let the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) take complete control of what could potentially become a very useful organisation. In accepting the invitation from Cusack he stated, 'It gives me great pleasure to learn that a "Gaelic Athletic Association" has been established for the preservation of national pastimes, with the objects of which I entirely concur. I feel very much honoured by the resolution adopted at the Thurles meeting; and I accept with appreciation the position of patron of the association which has been offered to me'.[16].



Michael Davitt, one of the founding patrons of the GAA. Douglas Hyde was not the only GAA patron to attend a soccer match, as Davitt was also a patron of Glasgow Celtic Football Club in Scotland. He placed the first sod at Celtic's new ground, Parkhead, in 1892. *(Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)*

Michael Davitt was another inspired choice as a founding patron. An advanced nationalist, Davitt had served time in prison for Fenian activities. He was the driving force behind the founding of the Land League in 1879 and was devoted to Irish-Ireland causes such as the Irish language[17] and native pastimes. Douglas Hyde was not the only GAA patron to attend a soccer match, as Davitt was also a patron of Glasgow Celtic Football Club in Scotland. In fact, he placed the first sod at Celtic's new ground, Parkhead in 1892;[18] the sod came from Donegal and was apparently stolen soon

after.[19] He would subsequently become a regular visitor to Parkhead, occasionally accompanied by his son.[20]

The choice of patrons demonstrated the GAA's nationalist credentials, thus helping, as Cusack was to claim a number of years later, the association to sweep 'the country like a prairie fire'[21] in its first few years. It is estimated that there were over 50,000 individual members of the GAA after eighteen months and over 400 affiliated clubs after two years. In comparison, the soccer body, the Irish Football Association (IFA), which had been founded in 1880, had just 124 affiliated clubs ten years later, and the initial Irish rugby union of thirteen clubs on its foundation in 1874 had grown to merely 100 clubs six years later.[22] It is hard to pinpoint the exact reasons for the huge success the GAA experienced in such a short space of time, but there were a number of factors that helped to make it the most popular sporting organisation in the country. Neal Garnham in his paper, 'Accounting for the Early Success of the Gaelic Athletic Association', claims the primary reasons were the GAA's affiliation with the nationalist cause and the support it received from the Catholic Church. Its nationalist credentials were demonstrated through its choice of patrons, its connections with the IRB and the naming of GAA clubs after nationalist heroes and martyrs.[23] Nationalists were now afforded the first opportunity to participate in sports in Ireland; previous sporting bodies had kept their doors firmly shut to people of a nationalist outlook. The GAA also opened its doors to all classes and members included those from the ranks of teachers, clerks, small tradesmen and artisans. For example, the first All-Ireland Gaelic football winners of 1887, the Limerick Commercials, were all shop workers.[24] GAA events were also held on Sundays, the main day of rest for most people in Ireland, making it easier for people to participate in the new organisation. The rugby, soccer and cricket bodies in Ireland discouraged Sunday play.[25] The

GAA had the full day of Sunday to itself, whereas the other major sports were competing against each other to attract members and attendances at their events. GAA affiliation fees and entrance fees to games were also cheaper. The GAA provided better additional forms of entertainment like dances and poetry recitations at its events.[26] The exclusion of fitter, more disciplined policemen and soldiers from participation at GAA events made it easier – and more attractive – for civilians to compete and win GAA competitions.[27] The bans the GAA introduced, although the reason for much controversy over the years, also helped to increase the GAA membership numbers and stifle the growth of its opponents. This was particularly the case when the GAA was looking to gain a foothold during its embryonic years.

The GAA today is primarily known for its field sports of hurling and Gaelic football and, to a lesser extent, handball. This was not the case when it was founded in 1884. It was mainly concerned with athletic events and its first ban, known as the Boycott Ban, was introduced to curb the growth of the IAAA, which was founded to combat the GAA in 1885. The word boycott had only recently made its way into the English language after Mayo based landlord Captain Charles Boycott had been ostracised by the local community in Mayo in 1880, following a battle to improve tenants' rights on his estate.[28]

At the third meeting of the GAA, held on 17 January 1885, the following resolution was passed: 'any athletes competing at meetings held under other laws than those of the GAA shall be ineligible for competing at any meetings held under the auspices of the Gaelic Athletic Association'.[29] This came into effect on St Patrick's Day 1885. The IAAA introduced its own ban disallowing its members to compete at GAA events and a battle for supremacy raged between the two bodies for most of 1885. The first big test between