
BOSTON COLLEGE

Media Contacts (not for publication):

Mike Cronin, Academic Director

BC-Ireland

croninmr@bc.edu

Tel: +353 (0)1.614.7450

Thomas E. Hachey, Executive Director

Center for Irish Programs at Boston College

thomas.hachey@bc.edu

617-552-6396

GROUNDBREAKING PROJECT, LED BY THE BOSTON COLLEGE CENTER FOR IRISH PROGRAMS DUBLIN BRANCH, WITH THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION: INSIGHTS ON IRISH SOCIETY AND CULTURE

CHESTNUT HILL, MA (1-30-09) – Ireland's largest community organization—and one of its most grassroots cultural and social entities—is the focus of a major historical project being undertaken by the Dublin branch of the Boston College Center for Irish Programs, known as BC-Ireland.

BC-Ireland's four-year study of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) will be the largest public history venture in Ireland since the Folklore Commission in the 1920s and '30s, and is expected to offer unique insights on Irish society and culture.

The project will produce a major academic conference in Dublin this April, as well as a series of books and television and radio documentaries.



Croke Park in Dublin, 1929 (GAA archive)

The study also will entail the collection and digitization of photographs, films and other materials for an archive that will be publicly available through the GAA museum beginning in 2012.

But sports enthusiasts aren't the only ones who will find the project of interest, say its organizers. The GAA—which celebrates its 125th anniversary this year—also has been an important supporter and promoter of Irish language and music, they note, and has thus played a significant cultural role in Ireland.

BC-Ireland Academic Director Mike Cronin says the sheer scope of GAA's presence in the Irish community—there are some 2,500 clubs and about 800,000 members—offers the potential for insights into the lives of Irish people across generations.

"Because there is a GAA club in just about every parish throughout the country, you can honestly say the organization is the root and soul of Ireland," says Cronin. "Its social component, and the opportunities it presents for service—one national report says the GAA encompasses 49 percent of all volunteering in Ireland—put the GAA at the center of Irish community life."

Cronin adds that the GAA has long been considered a mentoring resource. "The GAA players are far more accessible than in most other comparable professional sports organizations," he explains. "A player who stars in an international match one week will be coaching a kids' game the next. You can't underestimate the importance of the positive adult presence in the kids' lives; when GAA is in the community, there tends to be less crime or youth problems."

The project's logistics and methodology also mark it as a uniquely public endeavor. While the project team will be based at BC-Ireland, and the study will involve hiring four researchers and collaborations with Irish universities, GAA officials and members—as well as schools and groups for the elderly, among others—also will take part. Questionnaires will be available to download from the project Web site www.gaahistory.com and used in collecting historical and anecdotal information.

"Oral history is a key aspect of this project," Cronin says. "I met one guy in his 90s, whose great uncle played in the first All-Ireland Final back in 1887, and he had all kinds of stories to tell. We want to capture those long memories—have kids go out and interview their grandparents about what the GAA was like back in their day."

"We have the professional researchers, but underpinning the project is that grassroots component, where a guy in Galway can download the questions and go out and do five interviews, just like that."

While BC-Ireland will host a conference on the GAA in April, the organization's 125th anniversary celebration will take place in November, which will coincide with the publication of a book drawing on GAA oral history. A television program based on the project will air at Christmas, Cronin said.

The final three years of the project will focus on producing books about GAA history at the county level, as well as among Irish communities in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. A children's book also is planned, said Cronin.

The Center for Irish Programs at Boston College

The Center—led by Executive Director Thomas E. Hachey, University Professor of History—brings together all University Irish initiatives and has oversight responsibility for the Irish Studies Program, Irish Institute, Burns Library Irish Collections and BC-Ireland. The latter serves as a focal point for the University's work in Ireland, the UK and throughout Europe.