

The 19th

with Joe Ó Muirheartaigh



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IN the review of *The GAA, A People's History* in *The Irish Times* a few weeks back, Keith Duggan plucked a quote from the bowels of a book that was commissioned by the GAA that said: "much of the fun in being involved in the GAA is its capacity for controversy".

Those involved in the current controversy might not say that the whole sorry, sad and protracted stand-off over the management of the Clare senior hurling team for 2010 is their idea of fun, but nonetheless they should still read this book.

The considerable tome, which runs to over 400 pages is, in the words of one of the authors, Mark Duncan, something that "moves beyond the traditional histories we have at the moment, which tend to be overly focused on the games and chronicles who won what and when and how.

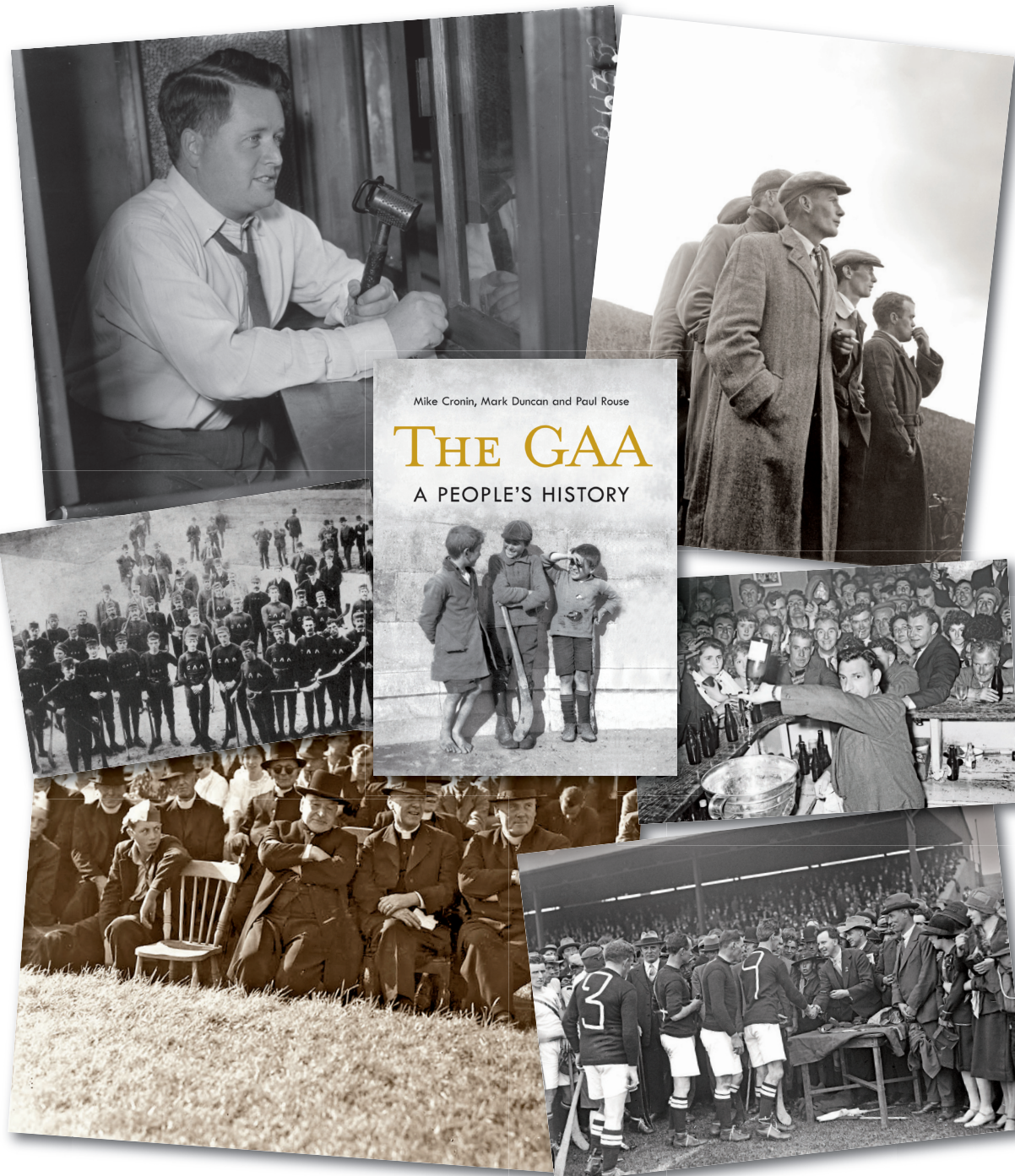
"Instead it's about how people have experienced the GAA and how it has impacted upon their own lives. The emphasis was always about the experience of the mass GAA membership as opposed to just talking about games," Duncan adds.

The GAA, A People's History fulfils that mission statement and mandate in resounding fashion, while its interest to those warring factions in Clare GAA who have had their hurleys drawn these past few weeks, is that the darkest hours always come before the dawn – the moral of that hoary old cliché from Clare's point of view is that things always get better and that the current stand-off could yet be a harbinger for success and happier times down the road.

And it mightn't be too long a road either.

A letter published on page 217 proves this so true:

Dear Sir,
Clare hurlers in the past occupied a proud and prominent position in the Gaelic arena. Unfortunately in recent years, owing to a want of proper training and combination, our representatives have greatly deteriorated, until at the present day we find ourselves occupying a very insignificant position, indeed, in the annals of the GAA generally, regret, and universal disappointment, is expressed throughout the County at this condition of things, and a hope was expressed on all sides that some steps should be taken to rehabilitate Clare to the conspicuous position she once enjoyed when her hurlers were second to none in the land. Yielding to the wish thus expressed, a meeting was recently convened and held in Ennis, of some of the prominent men of the County. As a result of the meeting, an influential Committee was appointed, and they were ordered to take the team, that is going to represent Clare in the Munster Championship, on hands, and



to see that they are properly trained and equipped for their fixture at Limerick on the 9th August. In order to properly train the team, the Committee propose to bring them, the week prior to the match, to Lahinch, so that they may be free from all disturbing attractions, and train in such a manner as will enable them to bring back once more to Clare the high prestige we once enjoyed.

Needless to remark the training of the team will entail considerable expenditure, and in order to defray this expenditure we earnestly appeal to you for a subscription to assist us in the work we have undertaken.

Subscriptions will be thankfully received and duly acknowledged by the undersigned.

Trusting that your response will be spontaneous and generous, and thanking you in anticipation.

We remain,
Yours truly,

James O'Regan, J.P., Sixmilebridge; P. E. Kenneally, J.P., Ennis; Dr. Fitzgerald, Newmarket-on-Fergus; Rev. W. Scanlan, P.P., Tubber; Rev. M. McKenna, Killimer; Rev. Fr. McCreedy C.C., Quin; Rev. Fr. O'Kennedy, The College Ennis; B. Culligan, J.P., Kilrush; Messrs. P.J. Floyd, P. McNamara, P. Power, J. Callaghan, Dublin; M. Duggan, Scariff; W. Moloney, Tulla; P. O'Loughlin, Ballyvaughan; D. Healy, Bodyke. Messrs. Stephen Clune, Quin, P. Kenny, Ennis Joint Hon. Secs.

The dateline is from July 1914 before a ball had been pucked in championship (with no National League back then it also meant before a ball

was pucked in 1914). Going by the tone of the letter, things must have rotten in Clare back then – the county had clearly fallen from grace in a big way, but the important thing was that the belief was there that things could and would get better.

And they did, because four games later Clare were All-Ireland champions for the first time ever. From drifting along aimlessly to being the best in Ireland, from chumps to champs and all that – and in a very short space of time.

The question is, could history repeat itself nearly 100 years on? Could lightning strike again?

The lessons don't end there. The book, which covers the GAA's 125 years also bridges the 81-year gap between 1914 and '95 when Clare's second All-Ireland was won. Come to think of it, things probably felt just

as bad in early '95 as they were in '14, given the humiliating defeats in the Munster finals of '93 and '94.

But, again out of nowhere the All-Ireland, that was a paradise lost for 81 years, came back to Clare, with *The GAA, A People's History* giving Clare's achievements in '95 and again in '97 their rightful and special place in the annals of hurling – a place way beyond the mere winning of All-Irelands.

"All-Ireland wins for Clare in 1995 and Wexford the following year helped revitalise the game to a point where, for a number of years, it surfed a wave of unprecedented popularity. Underpinning both these unexpected breakthroughs were charismatic management and an intensity of purpose born in years of underachievement.

"Under Ger Loughnane's management, Clare essentially did for hurling what Dublin and Kerry did for football in the 1970s. Training became almost year-long and ferocious. At a field in Crusheen, a small village north of Ennis, players were subjected to a gruelling regime of hard winter training. As one player recalled: 'At training you'd feel like getting sick, but you didn't quite because there was nothing there. You'd have nothing'. Crusheen became a byword for shared physical punishment and character formation. And because it worked for Clare, other teams went in search of a 'Crusheen' of their own."

In between those All-Ireland triumphs of '14 and '19 this book penned by Paul Rouse, Mark Duncan and Mike Cronin doffs its hat to Clare in many other ways – of course it starts with founding father Michael Cusack.

And, if Cusack was the man who sailed the Mayflower, it was Micheál O'Hehir who did most to steer the ship towards the mass appeal that enjoys to this day. You don't really need to read about O'Hehir's curriculum vitae here – 99 All-Irelands and all that from '38 to '84 – but how his Ballynacally lineage impacted on his commentaries shows just how local the GAA is.

"For some years before I started broadcasting he had been bedridden," said O'Hehir about Patrick Garry from Ballycorick in Ballynacally, "so I'd imagine myself talking directly to him. In those formative years (as a broadcaster) it was not to the people of Ireland or anywhere I was speaking to, but to Patrick Garry, doing my best to tell him what was happening".

Above:
Images from *The GAA: A People's History*