



Diarmuid O'Donovan

GAA history book gives an impeccable insight

"Since the establishment in November 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has made a profound impact on Irish social, cultural, political and economic life."

THIS is the opening sentence of the introduction to a new book commissioned by the GAA to celebrate its 125 anniversary.

The book is called *The GAA, A People's History*.

The authors of the book are Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan, and Paul Rouse. They are no strangers to the GAA or its history. All three are directors of the GAA Oral History Project based at Boston College-Ireland in Dublin.

Mike Cronin and Paul Rouse were two of the editors of another book *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884-2009* which was published last March. Mark Duncan was central in establishing the GAA Museum in the mid-1990s.

The book is fabulously presented. It contains an amazing collection of photographs and images of letters and posters (many seen for the first time) which portray the story of the first 125 years of the GAA as effectively as the text.

This is not to belittle the text. It shows that no effort has been spared in the presentation of the book.

Twenty five years ago when the GAA celebrated its centenary, the reading public were subjected to a plethora of publication that recorded the great games and characters of the first 100 years.

Legends such as Ring, Mackey, Stockwell and Purcell, along with the triumphs of Kerry, Tipperary and Kilkenny were held up as the fruits of the GAA's impact on "Irish social, cultural, political and economic life."

These publications and television programmes reflected the GAA of the time. It was still an association that felt it necessary to state and re-state its right to exist. This insecurity was not peculiar to the GAA. It was a symptom of Irish society as it was structured in 1984. In contrast to then, the current crop of books (of which this book is the most important) take a more analytical, and even critical, look at Ireland's most important voluntary organisation.

The GAA, A People's History does not record the winners and losers or

the heroes and villains, or at least not those of the playing fields. Instead, it looks at the role the GAA has played and, "how generations of Irish people have spent their time in the hours between work and sleep" and how this fascination with Gaelic games has more often than not featured at the cutting edge of a developing society.

The images on the dust jacket underline this point. In 1984 the front of this book would probably have been adorned by images of All-Ireland success or Cú Chulainn, and stamped with a Celtic cross, the then symbol of GAA approval. There are no logos of the GAA on the front of this book.

The front cover photograph features three young anonymous Kilkenny hurlers. One is barefoot, one is wearing boots that appear far too big and the third has shoes that seem much too small. The picture was taken in 1925 by Fr Browne. The back cover shows a group of men watching a local game in Clare in 1954. These are certainly not the images of an organisation that is uncomfortable with its past. They are images of what the GAA feel they have represented for the past 125 years; the common man.

The book is divided into 13 chapters that are meant to signify the essentials of the GAA. Chapter one examines the background to the founding of the association; the emergence of sport in Victorian Ireland and reasons behind the unusual alliance that was formed between Michael Cusack and Maurice Davin that led to the founding of the GAA. One of the highlights of this chapter is the reproduction (on four pages) of a letter that Michael Cusack wrote to Davin in the summer of 1884. It contains the following paragraph.

"Don't bother your head about Dublin. The place couldn't well be worse than it is. We'll have to look to the provinces for men. Dublin will have to fall in..." Those who organise clubs throughout the country, and who find their competitions constantly interfered with by the inter-county fixture list and financial monster that is Croke Park, must surely wonder if much has

changed in 125 years.

Other chapters deal with the development of the football and hurling as games from the 21 a-side all-in affairs of the 1884 through the development of coaching and playing styles before arriving at the games we have today. We are told that (The games) may be unrecognisable from those game rapturously described in the early press reports of Michael Cusack, but they have never been so popular...Winning and maintaining possession are now standard priorities. Whether the modern games are better or worse than those that went before is the stuff of bar-room debate and subjective analysis."

I was particularly taken by the chapter on Women and the GAA. It explains how women's participation in sport was practically ignored in the Victorian era. How camogie emerged from the Gaelic League; the role of Sean O'Duffy as an organiser and promoter of the game; and how in the 1970s ladies football emerged and rapidly grew into a major social force. The chapter concludes that "Within the GAA women continue to be grossly under-represented at high official levels. No woman has ever trained or been a selector with a county team, and no woman has refereed GAA matches at a top level."

Ultimately, however, the blame for the failure of women to advance within the sphere of Gaelic Games is left with the fans "the bald truth of attendance at the All-Ireland is stunning: when men play football or hurling, Croke Park is full: when women play there, 40,000 seats stay empty. The mould shaped by the Victorian world has never properly been broken — overt discrimination may have disappeared, but its rem-

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THE GAA A PEOPLE'S HISTORY



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nants live on."

It must be understood that any effort to capture the entire footprint of 125 years of GAA activity between the covers of 430 pages would be as futile as it would be an injustice. That said *The GAA, A People's History* covers the basics of at least 13 aspects of the GAA that will help the reader understand the extremes of emotion that flow through the veins of every grassroots member.

The GAA, like our country, is constantly evolving. The 125th anniversary it is currently celebrating, is a good time to take stock of where

it has evolved from, what it currently represents and where its future lies. This book should be read by all those, within the association, who wish to make an informed choice about the future.

It will also make a good companion for those outside the association who wish to gain an understanding of how the GAA has evolved from the scheming of two men, who merely wished to ensure that Irish men would be free to compete fairly at athletics events, into one of the greatest amateur organisations the world has ever known.

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