

## The story of 1916's band of brothers

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the IRB moved to change its character from a non-political organisation to an avowedly separatist grouping. Clarke was the mastermind of an organisational *coup d'état*, which precipitated the resignation of the League's founder, Douglas Hyde, who wanted to keep the language movement free from politics. In essence, the IRB take-over of the Gaelic League was about further shaping the wider public's consciousness in support of Independence.

A large number of those who would ultimately taken up arms in 1916 had first travelled down the road of militant republicanism via their membership of the Gaelic League. Its strong Irish-Ireland ethos convinced many young men and women that there was a strong intellectual and political basis for a separatist state.

Pearse, who had originally been a strong supporter of Home Rule, wrote about the politically radicalising effect of the Gaelic League. In 1914, he noted "the Gaelic League will be recognised in history as the most revolutionary influence that has ever come into Ireland. The Irish Revolution really began when the seven proto-Gaelic Leaguers met in O'Connell St... The germ of all future Irish history was in that back room."

**T**HOMAS MACDONAGH, a close associate of Pearse, was co-opted onto the IRB Military Council in April 1916, just before the Rising. His political journey had begun in the early years of the 20th century when he attended a Gaelic League meeting with the intention of sneering at proceedings, but instead he experienced a Pauline conversion. Eamonn Ceannt, another signatory of the Proclamation, had joined the Gaelic League as far back as 1899. He was a talented Irish language teacher and an accomplished uilleann piper, who had once performed in private audience for Pope Pius X.

James Connolly was ambivalent about the Irish language. He once wrote: "You cannot teach starving men Gaelic." Connolly's immersion in Irish politics commenced as a trade union activist and he evolved into a radical socialist hardened by his experiences during the Lockout. Connolly had little sympathy with Pearse's notion of a blood sacrifice, but his decision to throw his revolutionary lot in with the IRB amounted to a recognition that the national question had to be resolved before socialism could take root.

At Connolly's insistence, the fusion of his own Irish Citizen Army with the IRB-controlled Irish Volunteers in Easter Week created a new entity known as the Irish Republic Army. This is the origin of the title that a number of organisations have claimed — or still claim — direct historical continuity with.

Despite his warm handshake with Pearse on the steps of the GPO, Connolly instinctively recognised that they were strange bedfellows. A week before the Rising, Connolly instructed his most trusted colleagues in the Citizen Army that "in the event of victory, hold on to your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached. We are out for economic as well as political liberty."

Connolly's brand of Hiberno-Marxism sat uncomfortably with the more socially conservative separatists and gaelic revivalists of the IRB and this was just one of the many complexities of Easter 1916.

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Michael Collins throws the ball in at a hurling match at Croke Park in 1921.

# The GAA and the Rising

The organisation claimed it played a major role, but the truth is more complex, writes **Paul Rouse**



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Dr Paul Rouse photographed on UCD's Belfield campus. EL KEEGAN

Right: Dick Fitzgerald



\* Dick Fitzgerald was captain of the Kerry footballers who won the All-Ireland in 1913 and 1914 and played for the county from 1903 to 1923. He joined the Irish Volunteers in 1915 and after the Rising was arrested and detained in the Frongoch prison camp in Wales.

**I**N the decades after 1916, the history of the Easter Rising was rewritten by men and women who wished to claim for themselves — or for the organisations they loved — a central part in the Rising.

In sporting terms, the great example of this is provided by the GAA. The Association — and its historians — claimed that, unique among Irish sporting organisations, the GAA had provided the great bulk of the men who fought in 1916.

Like all the best myths, this is rooted in a certain truth: in the aftermath of the Rising, the Official Commission of Inquiry was told by the Chief Secretary, Sir Matthew Nathan, and by the Chief Constable of the Royal Irish Constabulary that the GAA had been an instigating factor in the Rising.

This, in turn, led to the internment of numerous GAA members, including the Association's president, in the ill-conceived, ill-directed round-up undertaken by the British authorities in the months that followed the Rising.

But are claims of intimate GAA involvement in 1916 accurate?

The truth is, unsurprisingly, much more complex.

As William Murphy has written, GAA players were indeed more likely to have participated in the Easter Rising in Dublin than most other sectors of society. It appears that there were some 302 players from 53 clubs.

This total of 302 represents a little less than one-fifth of the estimated 1,500 to 1,800 rebels of Easter Week. There can be no denying that it represented a significant contribution.

Allowing for this, it is also the truth that in the immediate aftermath of the Rising the GAA behaved in a way that was entirely at odds with an organisation apparently in sympathy with rebellion.

For example, the response of the GAA was to flat-out deny any involvement in 1916. It issued a statement saying that all allegations 'that the Gaelic Athletic Association had been used in furtherance of the objectives of the Irish Volunteers are as untrue as they are unjust'.

Then, in the second half of 1916, the GAA sought to engage with the British authorities to safeguard the organisation's sporting operations.

The first episode concerned the attempts of the government to enforce an Entertainments tax on sporting and other recreational bodies throughout the United Kingdom. As the relevant bill was being moved through the House of Commons, an amendment was introduced exempting any organisation founded 'with the object of reviving national pastimes'.

This amendment was introduced specifically in response to GAA efforts, through John O'Connor MP, to avoid

payment of the tax.

While awaiting decision on whether it should be exempt or otherwise, the Central Council of the GAA took the initiative and sent a deputation to General Sir John Maxwell in an attempt to secure GAA exclusion from taxation and to arrange for the provision of special trains to GAA matches.

It speaks volumes for the priorities of the GAA that it should attend a meeting with Maxwell.

After all, it was Maxwell who had been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in Ireland during the Rising. Using extensive martial law powers, he had crushed the rebellion. In its immediate aftermath, he was the chief architect of

government policy and oversaw a series of courts martial leading to the imposition of death sentences on the leaders of the Rising.

Ultimately, the idea that it was the GAA alone that provided the foot-soldiers of the revolution was rejected by some of the leading figures of that revolution.

Ernie O'Malley later recalled there were those 'who belonged to the Gaelic League or who played Gaelic football and hurling ... [who were] very contemptuous of rugby and golf, and soccer. They spoke of the English with inherited contempt, attended public meetings in the streets, approved of physical force in talk, but made no attempt to join the Volunteers.'

More than that, there were also many more GAA men fighting in British army uniforms in France, than there were in the GPO.

Any rounded account of the GAA's involvement in 1916 must acknowledge this basic truth — and accommodate it in any meaningful history of the Easter Rising.

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## The rebel sportsmen

Several of the Volunteers were active in other sports too...

### EAMON DE VALERA

An excellent rugby player, he won a trial with Munster as a centre.

**CATHAL BRUGHA**  
Opened the bowling for Pembroke cricket club, one

of the strongest in Leinster.

### MICHAEL AND JOHN WALKER

1912 Olympic Games cyclists, they acted as couriers in the Rising.

### OSCAR TRAYNOR

Star goalkeeper with Belfast Celtic, was president of the FAI in 1948.



Eamon de Valera won a rugby trial with Munster