



Paul Rouse at Russell Street Bridge, from where the first shots were fired.

PHOTO: GERRY MOONEY



The GAA's complex relationship with the nationalist struggle

Bloody Sunday became a GAA touchstone, but the association was not initially in the vanguard of the revolution, writes **Paul Rouse**

What happened in Croke Park on Bloody Sunday passed into the story of the Irish revolution.

It became a key reference point, presented as evidence of the violence of the British regime, of callousness and cruelty, of disregard for the lives of the 'mere' Irish. It was the ultimate indictment of empire. That the brutality was compounded by the crass denials and cover-ups was taken as further proof of what lay at the heart of British rule in Ireland.

Naturally, Bloody Sunday also became a touchstone in the history of the GAA. The legacy of that day included a real and genuine desire to remember those people who had been murdered at a Gaelic football match. The naming of Croke Park's Hogan Stand — after Michael Hogan, the Tipperary player who died in a pool of blood on the field where he was supposed to be playing a game — and the subsequent unveiling of plaques were rooted in a sincere sense of loss.

But Bloody Sunday also got absorbed into the GAA's history in a very particular way. In independent Ireland, it was pushed forward time and again as compelling, incontrovertible evidence of the GAA's identification with nationalism and, in particular, with the nationalist struggle.

More than that, it became something that could be thrown at the GAA's rivals. In Waterford in 1931, in the midst of a dispute between the GAA and soccer authorities, Willie Walsh, the chairman of the Waterford GAA County Board, asked where the rugby union, the soccer association or the hockey association were on Bloody Sunday. He noted that the Black and Tans had not gone to Dalymount Park or Lansdowne Road to look for rebels.

Instead, it was at Croke Park that they "performed deeds which shocked the civilised world". "They knew friend from foe, and it was an unflinching experience," he added. "The Tans did not run into men like the directors and players of Waterford soccer club."

The backdrop to this was the GAA's enduring desire to imagine that it was in

the vanguard of the revolution. The reality is much more complex.

By 1920, the association reflected the growing radicalisation of Irish society. There were some GAA members who were radical before and during 1916 — but almost none were involved in the Rising. Indeed, the number of GAA men fighting for the British army in the Great War

emphasises the extent to which the association was made up of moderate nationalists.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of how this changed during 1917 and 1918 is to look at the relationship between the British government and the GAA's leading officials. In the immediate aftermath of the Rising, the GAA sought to engage with the British authorities to safeguard its sporting operations.

The first episode con-

cerned government attempts to enforce an entertainments tax on sporting and other recreational bodies throughout the United Kingdom. After asking to be exempted from this, the GAA's central council sent a deputation to General Sir John Maxwell to repeat the request and to arrange the provision of special trains to matches.

It speaks volumes for the GAA's priorities that its officials attended a meeting with Maxwell. After all, it was he who had been appointed commander-in-chief of the British army in Ireland during the Rising.

Using extensive martial law powers, he crushed the rebellion. In its immediate aftermath, he was the chief architect of government policy and oversaw a series of courts martial that led to 171 prisoners being tried and 90 sentenced to death.

Fifteen of those death sentences were carried out over 10 days in May 1916. It was also Maxwell who had presided over the internment of more than 2,000 of the 3,500 men and women arrested after the Rising. Most of this number had no connection with the rebellion and included hundreds of GAA mem-





The Tipperary team (above, including Michael Hogan) and the Dublin team (left) who lined out at Croke Park on Bloody Sunday

Below: the official order from Dublin Castle to carry out a raid at Croke Park on November 21, 1920

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE GAA MUSEUM, CROKE PARK

'Volley after volley rang out in quick succession'

Irish Independent

This extract from an article headlined 'Croke Park shootings' in the Irish Independent, Monday, November 22, 1920, captures the atmosphere of terror among the crowd.

Aeroplane overhead. Then volleys follow

The game was in progress about 15 minutes when the attention of the thousands of spectators was momentarily diverted by the appearance of an aeroplane which twice encircled the playing pitch at a fairly low altitude.

This incident did not strike the crowd as having any particular significance but a minute had not elapsed when the gathering was startled by the sound of rifle-fire coming apparently from the entrance to the enclosure close by the canal bridge.

The great mass of people at the end of the ground swept like an avalanche on to the playing pitch. It was a terrifying scene. The firing increased; volley after volley rang out in quick succession.

Confronted with machine-gun

Women and children were trampled on; apple sellers were pushed off their feet and their baskets of fruit walked on. The cries of the weak and shrieks of the women-folk, mingling with the sound of rifle-fire, struck terror into the hearts of people.

The exits were choked, and men and women failed in their efforts to get away. Outside, at the exit opposite Fitzroy Avenue, the surging crowds were confronted with a machine-gun and a line of men with rifles at the present. Most of the people who rushed in this direction were compelled to make for the laneway running between the railway line and the houses of Clonliffe Road.

The firing continued, and the people prayed aloud as they ran. The men in uniform chased down

the lanes and along the roads, firing as they went.

Houses were invaded by some of the fleeing Mass. The inhabitants were frightened beyond conception, not knowing what was happening or what might happen. Those emerging from houses in Clonliffe Road when the shooting had ceased and comparative quiet had been restored were confronted with big pickets of military, who had apparently taken over charge.

Everyone was subjected to a minute search, being first ordered to put up hands. People were compelled to keep their hands above their heads until they had reached the end of the road. Most of the men bore marks of the terrible experience.

Some were bleeding profusely from the face and hands; others were hatless, while more had their clothes torn and blood-spattered.

When the armed forces and armoured cars entered the field the scenes became indescribable, said another spectator. When the park was encircled the women and children were told they might go. The men were then all searched, and when any motion took place in the crowd a volley of shots were fired over their heads...

Seventeen lorries

A gentleman who was convenient to the grounds related how about 17 lorries filled with Crown forces came dashing along, stopping about 20 yards from the canal bridge.

Dismounting, they opened fire. This gentlemen saw a young lad with a wound on the left temple. Two men took the boy away. He next saw another man taken up the street apparently dead. He was brought away on a car. Some time later, St Joseph's Road was swept with bullets, and a man was shot. His body, said our informant, was put over the railings into an open space in front of the houses, and was still there at 6pm.

bers. Yet the central council of the GAA was prepared to meet him — and prepared to do business with him.

But as the Great War lingered on and as public sentiment about the rebels of 1916 changed, the GAA began to shift position. In the week after the Rising, the GAA had issued a statement denying any involvement. Now, though, as 1917 progressed, it began identifying with the emergence of Sinn Féin as a potent political force, one that was in the process of destroying the old Irish Parliamentary Party.

When Clare paraded before matches in the 1917 All-Ireland Football Championship, they did so in front of a banner that read 'Up De Valera'; it was a marked change from 1914 when they had paraded behind the name of Willie Redmond, the Irish Parliamentary Party MP.

- G.C.
1. There is a football match between a TIPPERARY team and a DUBLIN team taking place at CROKE PARK at 1445 hours this afternoon.
 2. You will surround the ground and picket all exits.
 3. Pickets will be required on the Railway W of the ground at Points "A" and "E" At Points "C" on the Eastern side. Points "D" & "F" on the railway on the Southern and Canal side and at the three known exits.
No picket should be less than 1 Officer and 15 men.
A reserve of not less than 1 platoon should be at exit "G"
2 Armoured Cars under an Officer will meet your party on the lower DRUMCONDRA ROAD at junction of FITZROY AVENUE at 1515 hours.
About a quarter of an hour before the match is over a Special Intelligence Officer will warn by megaphone all people present at the match that they will only leave the ground by the exits. Anybody attempting to get away elsewhere will be shot.
 4. All male persons will be stopped and searched.
Special party "G" will meet you at the same point as the Armoured Cars to assist in search.
 5. A C K N O W L E D G E .

(Sd.)

DUBLIN
R.F.

Major
Brigade Major,
Infantry Brigade

By 1918, any possibility that the GAA might seriously consider negotiating with the British authorities in Ireland had vanished.

The upturn in nationalist sentiment permeated the GAA. When the secretary's position of the Leinster Council of the GAA came up for election in 1917, it boiled down to a contest between the devoutly republican Jack Shouldice and the apolitical AC Harty. Shouldice had been interned, so his fellow radical Harry Boland spoke for him at the meeting. The result was victory for Shouldice by 16 votes to one (with Harty presumably being the one who voted for himself).

This increased militancy came to the fore in April 1918, when the GAA joined a broad alliance of nationalist bodies and the Catholic Church in opposing British government plans to

introduce conscription to Ireland as the Great War dragged on.

The GAA pledged "to resist by any means in our power the attempt conscription of Irish manhood, and we call on all our members to give effect to the foregoing resolution", and its leaders shared campaign platforms with trade unionists, church leaders and politicians.

This militancy was further evidenced by the playing of numerous matches in support of the Republican Prisoners' Dependents' Fund, with republican leaders such as Eamon de Valera and Michael Collins frequently in attendance.

It was also clear also in the retrospective admonishment of the Central Council of the GAA for having entered into negotiations with General Maxwell in 1916. The Central Council of 1918 was not likely to make such a move; indeed, it worked to push the GAA towards greater militancy.

Ultimately, Bloody Sunday was cast as an appalling reaction against this trend.

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