



No Shoneen: Gaelic Games and the Athletic Hero in the Irish Periodical Press

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In this presentation, I would like to talk about the germinal idea that originated my dissertation *No Shoneen: Gaelic Games and the Athletic Hero in the Irish Periodical Press*, its outline and the results I think I have achieved.

The thesis, through the filter of the periodical literature intended for juveniles, especially boys, examines some facets of the Irish sporting culture as it emerged during the “Long Gestation” of Ireland’s independence, i.e. the period prior to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. However, this project started as mainly an analysis of British periodicals and the representation of sport—and, by extension, of the British sporting system—they disseminated. Then, working on the imperial dimension of British sport, I identified a lacuna in contemporary Irish Studies, located at the intersection between Youth Studies and Sport Studies, which I deemed worthy of scholarly attention. Certainly, I could rely on the scholarship on the British periodical press, insofar as, if the study of Irish periodical literature is still in its infancy, much ink has been spilt on the profusion of periodical literature in Britain since the 1850s. I here refer to the studies by Kelly Boyd, Joseph Bristow and John Springhall, who



demonstrated the productivity of an analysis conducted through the prism of the periodical press. They pointed out that the juvenile periodical as a filter may help reveal the ethos obtaining in a certain period, because it enables the researcher to grasp the deeper structures of concurrent events and phenomena, in my case the emergence of a modern sport system. For instance, in the introductory chapter of my thesis, the examination of the articles and fictional pieces in the British juvenile press sheds light on the reasons underlying the cult of sports in the Victorian public school environment, where the practice of games and sports was regarded as a training ground in the education of military and administrative leaders for Britain's expanding empire; it was also instrumental to moral development along sanctioned lines.

Moreover, the filter of juvenile magazines can be used to understand better the reasons and the modality underpinning the rise of a distinct type of combative masculinity, a *homo sportivus* that became prevalent and normative during the heyday of the British Empire (Tosh 67; Boyd 76). The *homo sportivus* was put forward as an outstanding exemplar of ideal Britishness, a model which was propagated all around the world through the spread of organized games and through the wide circulation of juvenile papers. A model, nevertheless, fundamentally unattainable for the colonial subjects or for the Irish, who were attributed with characteristics that were antonymic to the virtues the British were said to possess.

What British juvenile papers cannot reveal, however, is the fact that colonial subjects, including the Irish, could develop an athletic culture and related athletic masculinities as a response and negotiation to British models. The values and the stereotypes propagated by the British could be negotiated, contested and reproduced. Indeed, the Irish nationalists brought their own agendas and meanings to the playing fields of their country, realising that sport could function as a means for counteracting British ideology and upholding their own. Bearing this in mind, *No Shoooneen* investigates the competing narratives and the whole network of words and images surrounding the revival of the Gaelic games in Ireland by examining the *Irish* periodicals.

As previously stated, my inquiry situates itself at the intersection between Sport Studies and Irish Youth Studies, a vantage point that enabled me to establish new links between the increasing public concern with the 'problem' of youth and the revival and development of the Gaelic games between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What Irish Youth Studies, now a broadening field of study, have pointed out is that the role of boys and girls in the long struggle for national self-determination was to the fore in the debates of the decades around 1900. Then, "the meaning and value of youth underwent a radical transformation in nationalist political discourse" (qtd. in Countryman and Matthews 52) as nationalists started identifying in Irish youths the main agents of both the struggle for independence and the nation-building.

From this new perspective, both the formal and informal education of the boys and girls of Ireland became a matter of concern for the nationalists. They were deeply interested in the reading habits of Ireland's youth and shared a common preoccupation with the deluge of 'trashy' literature from Britain. Irish nationalists took an active interest in promoting home-grown substitutes for the examples of British popular culture such as *The Boy's Own Paper*. Eventually, Irish story papers started to be



produced when the nationalist struggle was at its most intense and the most popular were the ones forming the core of my corpus: *Our Boys*, *Fianna*, *Young Ireland* and *St. Enda's*, whose peculiarities are detailed in the second chapter ("The Corpus"). Admittedly, a number of manuscript papers appeared and disappeared during the revolutionary years besides the four periodicals I analysed, but those are irretrievably lost due to their inherent precariousness.

With regard to the methodology employed in the thesis, I took into account the "multifarious nature" of the periodical and its being "both open-ended and end-stopped" (Pykett 102; Beetham 99). For these reasons, the publishing genre of periodicals can be best analysed if the institutionalised boundaries between disciplines are blurred. In turn, the recognition of the need for an interdisciplinary approach led to the absence of a single theoretical position in the dissertation. To examine my peculiar subject matter I drew on the eclectic methodology of Cultural Studies, here intended as an interdisciplinary field in which perspectives from different disciplines can be selectively tapped into.

I tried to see the periodicals not in splendid isolation, but as products of their age. Story papers need to be read and understood as part of the culture and society they came from, and "within the actual means and conditions of their production" (Williams 210). My approach thus combined textual analysis—close reading—with a detailed investigation of the historical and cultural context in which these texts were produced; they were seen as inseparable from the conditions of their production in history, their reception, and the historical, political and cultural specificities of the period around 1900 in Ireland.

No Shoneen also includes a wide range of archival reading material—ephemera, newspapers' articles, annual reports, police reports and even private correspondence and manuscripts—in order to put the juvenile periodical sources into context and shed light on the implications of their writings. I tried to position each juvenile paper within contemporary discourse and to identify some patterns in them that might reveal both their internal mechanisms and their external relationships. The context concocted by the archival sources is crucially important so as to demonstrate that the content of the periodicals was also the product of wider societal anxieties and fears.

Juvenile periodicals were a barometer of public concerns and interests. But not only that. The four periodicals were among the engines of the Irish struggle for self-determination, because through opinion articles, tales, ballads, they concurred to spread anti-British sentiment and gave impetus to the separatists' campaigns. At the same time, their fluid boundaries, that is their open-ended nature, allowed for the readers' direct intervention in the production of the periodicals, making them an arena where discussing crucial national matters.

More importantly, my inquiry casts light on the steps that led up to the emergence of an Irish sport system and how Gaelic games came to be cultural signifiers pointing to Ireland's specificity at home and abroad. As shown in the chapter "Sport as a Cultural Signifier", nationalists gave their unconditioned support to the Gaelic Athletic Association, which was devoted to restoring the traditional pastimes, emphasising the fact that the GAA promoted cultural distinctiveness and resisted Anglicisation.



Nevertheless, the promotion of Gaelic games came to be justified on other grounds as well. Traditional sports such as hurling and Gaelic football were believed to restore “race vigour, manhood and moral strength” to the Irish people, what was necessary to achieve national independence (*Irish Freedom* 7). It was thought that morally and physically well-moulded future citizens would ensure Ireland’s self-determination, as sporting practice contributed to both the moral and the physical regeneration of the Irish who were entrusted with building the future free nation. The regenerated body of the Irish athlete began to be perceived as the vehicle through which attaining independence.

In the second part of the thesis, I thus discussed why the early twentieth century saw the emergence of what can be termed “Athletic Hero”. The fourth and fifth chapters, titled “The Athletic Soldier” and “The Athletic Hero”, bring to the surface the connection between the rise of the Irish sport system and the political and cultural investment on the youths of Ireland to demonstrate how Gaelic games assisted the Irish in the formation of a new ideal of boyhood: strong, manly and committed to the cause. Whereas the fourth chapter focuses on the conception of sporting practice as military preparedness, with the young athlete regarded as the maker of Ireland’s independence and the cornerstone of a new community, the other one traces the contours of the idealised masculinity embodied by the young Gaelic athlete. The objective is to show how the athlete’s vigorous body was represented and extolled so as to counteract the stereotypical characterizations of the Irish as either “simian, drunken ruffians, or effeminate and feckless, childlike inferiors in need of Anglo-Saxon domination” (McDevitt 18).

Against the accusation of barbarism, effeminacy and immaturity, the story papers advanced an ideal of boyhood that revolved around the figure of the Gaelic athlete—a sportsman who, besides boasting physical prowess, was also committed to Ireland’s cause. The Gaelic athlete embodied the desirable and desired qualities of self-discipline, bravery, physical prowess and patriotism, which formed the base understanding of the Irish male ideal. Not only did the athlete provide a symbol of full-grown masculinity for the boys and young men of Ireland, who had been written off as feminine or childish in British fictional representations, but, by mastering his nature yet remaining boldly masculine, the athlete displayed precisely that emotional equilibrium of which his compatriots were said to lack.

To conclude, this thesis provided me with a significant opportunity to illustrate the pervasiveness of periodical literature intended for juveniles as well as the cultural and political relevance of sport in Irish society at the turn of the XX century.

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