

Hurling in Mid Tipperary pre-1884

By Liam Ó Donnchú

The origins of hurling are lost in antiquity. It is a distinctly Irish game, a unique brand of a ballgame played with sticks. The earliest references to hurling come from the very dawn of civilisation in Ireland. The ancient sagas of kings and heroes, Cuchulainn and the Red Branch Knights, Fionn and the Fianna, the Battle of Moytura, the Brehon Laws – all contain references to the game. Through the centuries, it has attracted the admiration of native and foreigner as a unique sporting spectacle and has survived invasions, wars, strife, famine and attempts at suppression. Since earliest times mid-Tipperary has had a continuous involvement with hurling.

The finding of a hurling ball during turf-cutting in Littleton Bog near Thurles in May, 1960 adds to the evidence of hurling in this area. Archaeologist Etienne Rynne dated this find at about 200 years.¹ The ball, made of horse-hair with a two-ply woven horse-hair covering, was found at a depth of two meters in the townland of Bawnreagh by Mr. Tod Fanning, Ballydavid, Littleton. Another archaeologist, A. T. Lucas, concludes that its depth was much greater before the bog was drained.² This would age the ball to at least 600 years.³

In the fourteenth century, Thurles was in the heart of the Butler Norman territory. This was a time when the game of hurling was growing in popularity even among the Anglo-Normans. For the authorities, the game appears to have become a threat, as archery and other military preparations were neglected. Consequently the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366) were passed, to wean the Anglo-Norman from the game:⁴

Whereas a land which is at war requires that every person do render himself able to defend himself, it is ordained and established that the commons of the said land of Ireland . . . use not henceforth the game which men call hurlings with great clubs of a ball on the ground, from which great evils and maims have arisen, to the weakening of the defence of the said land . . .

Further statutes in the sixteenth century outlawed the game and ordered loyal subjects "at no time to use the hurling of the little ball with hockey sticks and staves, on pain of a fine of eight pence".⁵ But the game was played in spite of prohibitions, fines and imprisonment. Seathrún Céitinn, ever a champion of the Gael, surprises us in 1620 with his condemnation of the youth of his time.

The foolish, conceited young men of today, however, do not consider the quirks of fate when they are enjoying themselves and leading a wild life, playing ball, shooting darts and arrows and contending and hurling, drinking and playing, swearing and babbling.⁶

Hurling was viewed with suspicion by the authorities in the seventeenth century. Writing on July 9, 1667 the Earl of Orrery reported:

I hear out of Tipperary, that there is a view taken of Irish Papists and several are enlisted

... and are buying arms and fixing old ones Another great meeting . . . under pretext of a match of hurling.⁷

Sporting occasions such as hurling matches gave the ordinary people a reason or an excuse to assemble. State authorities were of the opinion that occasions such as hurling matches and meetings were used to organise secret societies to plan revolution or rebellion.

A golden age

During the Penal Times, many a student for the priesthood left Ireland for the Irish colleges of Europe. One such was a Tipperary lad Liam O'Conaire, who left the country in the 1750s. Writing in a poem of farewell to his native county he includes the line *mar a bhíodh báire agus greann le fáil ann go Samhain*⁸ ("where hurling and fun were available till November").

Another Tipperary student on the continent wrote wistfully of boyhood pastimes:

"Each day we were free to jump and to hunt,
To play hurling and run races after swimming awhile,
Driving the ball on the smooth soft moorland,
Farewell with a pang to that playtime".⁹

Arthur Young, who travelled through Tipperary in the late 1770s, described a very ancient custom,

... for a number of county neighbours among the poor people to fix upon some young woman that ought, as they think, to be married; they also agree upon a young fellow as a proper husband for her; this determined, they send to the fair one's cabin to inform her that on the Sunday following she is *to be horsed*, that is, carried on men's backs. She must then provide whisky and cider for a treat, as all will pay her a visit after mass for a hurling match. As soon as she is *horsed*, the hurling begins, in which the young fellow appointed for her husband has the eyes of all the company fixed on him; if he comes off conqueror, he is certainly married to the girl, but if another is victorious, he as certainly loses her; for she is the prize of the visitor.

These trials are not always finished in one Sunday, they take sometimes two or three; and the common expression when they are over is, such a girl was *goaled*. Sometimes one barony hurls against another, but a marriageable girl is always the prize. Hurling is a sort of cricket, but instead of throwing the ball in order to knock down a wicket, the aim is to pass it through a bent stick, the ends stuck in the ground. In these matches they perform such feats of activity, as ought to evidence the food they live on to be far from deficient in nourishment.¹⁰

The eighteenth century has been called the Golden Age of hurling. This was a time when the landed gentry were frequently associated with hurling teams and hurling men and were openly and actively involved as players, captains of teams, trainers, managers and powerful patrons. Moreover, they gambled after their fashion at every match and their presence was a guarantee of strictly enforced rules.¹

Baron Purcell of Loughmore was among the landed gentry of the mid-Tipperary area who

kept a private team of hurlers. At the Templemore end of his castle, near the high road and bounded on one side by the modern railway, was their hurling ground. Among his hurlers, one Londergan was undoubtedly the best. A favourite feat of his was to stand at one end of the castle, throw up the ball and strike it with his hurley over the roof. Then he would rush to the far end of the building and strike back the ball before it touched the ground, and so would cause it to pass and repass nine times in all over the castle, without ever allowing it to fall to earth.¹²

In Thurles about the same time Lord Mathew, Earl of Llandaff, whose residence was in the town, had his own celebrated team of hurlers, of which he was justly proud. In a match with a neighbouring team, controlled by Baron Purcell of Loughmore, one of the most renowned of the Thurles team struck the ball with such force that it went clean through the thatch of a cottage and broke some household utensils inside. Even afterwards "Thro' The Thatch" became the rallying cry of the Thurles men.¹³

The newspapers of the eighteenth century leave us in no doubt as to the influence of the landlords and the popularity of hurling in the Mid-Tipperary area. Here are a few examples:

*A grand hurling team match will be played between the counties of Kilkenny and Tipperary on Monday, next, the 8th of August, at The Fair Green of Urlingford for 20 guineas, some of the principal Gentlemen of both counties are concerned.*¹⁴

A bet of 300 guineas, a cold dinner and a Ball at night for the Ladies, to be hurled for on Friday 9th inst., by 21 married men and 21 bachelors, on the Green of Ardfinnan in the County of Tipperary.

N.B. None admitted to play but the Gentlemen of the Baronies of Iffa and Offa in the said County. (Cork Evening Post 4-9-1760).

*There is a hurling match to be played at Galbertstown near Thurles on Tuesday the 25th inst. [25th July] being St. James's Day. Three baronies against all Ireland for 100 guineas a side. The ball to be thrown up precisely at 4 o'clock.*¹⁵



A previously unpublished photograph (from the R.U.C. Museum, Belfast) of Thomas St. George McCarthy of Bansha, a founder of the GAA, wearing full-dress uniform of a District Inspector (3rd class) of the R.I.C. – With the permission of Ms. Brenda Kenny, Baltinglass.

*The grand Hurling Match so long intended betwixt Upper and Lower Ormond Boys, and those of Thurles and Kilnamanhenry, will be played at Brittas near Thurles, on Saturday, the 1st of September, 27 men on each side; when great sport is expected, as the most superior and elegant Players in Europe will appear on a delightful Green properly corded and cleared and in every respect conducted with the greatest regularity. And night will be an elegant Assembly in Thurles, for which the best Music is engaged and every material to render the Entertainment pleasing to the Ladies.*¹⁶

It is likely that the match was organised by Mr. Langley who was proprietor of Brittas at this time.

In 1742 an advertisement for Ballyspellan Spa, just over the border in Kilkenny, noted that "horseracing, dancing and hurling will be provided for the pleasure of the spa".

Other landed gentry families to patronise hurling in Tipperary were the Butlers of Clanwilliam, the Callaghans of Shanbally and the Mathews of Thomastown.¹⁷

Edward Mandeville, the Tipperary poet (from Ballydine) sets the scene.

*The lusty youths advance in equal rows,
Each parent's breast with blushing transport glows,
Silk kerchieves bind their close compacted hairs,
Each strong-nerved hand a polished hurley bears.*¹⁸

Teams would consist of 20 or more players and the result depended on who scored the first goal. Return challenge games were common, as was the concept of "best of three".¹⁹ The prize was generally a barrel or two of ale, which was brought into the field and drunk by the victors on the spot, though the vanquished were not without a share of it too.²⁰ On many occasions teams wore distinguished clothing – sashes, belts, caps or ribbons.²¹ "When the priest and the gentlemen used to lead us, and we were all dressed out like jockeys, in jackets and caps, and the green was all roped, . . .".²²

From the Tipperary poet "Myles" Finnan comes the following:

*We sported no tights, that pure modesty hurts,
But wore our knee-breeches and bandlecloth shirts,
With handkerchiefs over our nappies well drawn
To show our true colours at Glennacoslan.*

"Myles" (J. J. Finnan) *Patriotic Songs and Poems* (Limerick, 1913), p. 77.

These games of hurling (*iomán* or *báire*) were generally played in the summer. The ball could be handled or carried on the stick, which was flat and roundheaded; the ball was soft and made of animal hair or leather.²³

Edward Wakefield toured Ireland in 1812, and he reported as follows:

In Tipperary, Limerick and Queen's County, the Irish Language is very common. The men are strong limbed and seem to be more active than those of Cork. Hurling is a prevailing amusement. Children, as soon as they are able to follow each other, run about in bands of a dozen or more with balls and huris eagerly contending for victory . . .

*Hurling is a game which cannot be played in mountainous districts and I think that the vigour and activity of the peasantry in the south are in a great measure to be ascribed to this play, which by the exercise it affords strengthens the whole frame and contributes to health.*²⁴

The interest of the landlords, which was vital to the development of the game, ceased after the Rising of 1798. The powerful backing of the landed class was withdrawn from hurling, as it was from everything else Gaelic. This abandonment of popular culture by the nobility was not merely an Irish phenomenon but one of European dimension. Peter Burke's account of this development is worth noting.

"The nobles were adopting more 'polished' manners, a new and more self-conscious style of behaviour, modelled on the courtesy books Noblemen stopped eating in great halls with their retainers and withdrew into separate dining-rooms They stopped wrestling with their peasants, as they used to do in Lombardy, and they stopped killing bulls in public as they used to do in Spain. The noblemen learned to speak and write 'correctly' according to formal rules and to avoid technical terms and the dialect words used by craftsmen and peasants".²⁵

Kevin Whelan also notes:

The gentry's disengagement from immersion in the shared intimacies of daily life can be seen not just in hurling, but in other areas of language, music, sport and behaviour, as the gradual reception of metropolitan ideas eroded other loyalties.²⁶

The game of hurling suffered as its structures collapsed. Newspaper advertisements of hurling matches almost ceased and such gatherings were frowned on and suspected of seditious undertones. The ruling classes were fearful of allowing sport to develop, for sporting events need organisational skills, which were not to be encouraged. If one is successful in organising sport, one's attention could also turn to organising other activities to the detriment of the "crown". The 1798 rising had resulted in the deaths of thousands of men of hurling age, and the Act of Union (1801) caused many landlords to become absentees, and with them went their patronage.²⁷

However, during the eighteenth century all the hurling was not solely inside the demesne walls of the landed gentry. From many references in the Folklore Commissions, it is evident that there was a good deal of hurling that never came in contact with the patronage of the Anglo-Irish. From the Gaelic perspective, the eighteenth century was far from being a golden age, with its Penal Laws and native cultural suppression, from which the term "The Hidden Ireland" emerged.

The Famine's impact

The Great Famine was a disaster for native pastimes. It also brought a steep decline in national morale. David Power Conyngham of Crohane, Killenaule, reported in 1860 that "Now national games are fast dying out, we seem to get ashamed of anything national. The famine years, no doubt, did away with a great deal of the elasticity and cheerfulness of character of the Irish peasant".²⁸

Conyngham also recalled hurling in his youth.

"Many's the Sunday and holiday evening I stole away with my hurley under my arm to join the invigorating game All preliminaries being arranged by the elders, twenty-one

young men at a side were selected. The spectators then retired to the ditches and the ball was thrown up among the rival parties. The ball was struck here and there, often pucked up in the air, then hit again before it reached the ground".²⁹

Kickham's *Knocknagow*, which portrays rural life in the Tipperary of the 1840s and '50s, also describes how the local landlord organised a hurling team among his tenants and issued a challenge.³⁰ They played with teams of twenty-one players on each side in the kiln field. "There was a hush, and an eager, anxious look in every face, as Mat Donovan moved from the crowd towards the middle of the field followed by his twenty picked men".³¹

Cross-county hurling or *scuaibín*, as it was called in the central Munster area, was common in mid-Tipperary in the nineteenth century. Usually an old man would throw up the ball on the border of two townlands and as they clashed to get possession they all would shout *abhaile*. The aim of the game was to bring the ball into one's own territory as far as possible – thus the saying "Hurling Home" or "Abhaile" matches.³² The game, which was usually associated with festive occasions, developed at a time of expanding rural population. It was not well organised or a game where skilful hurling stickwork was a priority.³³ Large wagers and gambling were features of many of these games, much of the winnings being spent on alcohol, which led to denunciation by authorities and clergy.

Edward Wakefield (see footnote 24) describes the game as he saw it in Tipperary in 1812 . . . "[played] by parties of a hundred men on each side. The ball is tossed up in the middle and each player has a knotted stick with which he endeavours to drive it to the goal on that side to which his party belongs".

In the Turtulla district near Thurles the Nicholson family, who resided at the site of the present Thurles Golf Club, had a cross-country hurling team composed of workmen, tenants and neighbours, who would turn out and play against teams of the ascendancy class and others.³⁴ Moycarkey and Holycross often met in Paddy Maher's three-cornered field on the Yellow Lough Road. The fence in that field formed the boundary between the parishes. "Crooks" were used if hurleys were not available and games were rough-and-tumble affairs.³⁵

There were dangers too in playing. The *Hibernian Journal* reported:

Last Sunday see'en night two brothers being at a hurling match near Dundrum, Co. Tipperary, in wrestling for a ball, one of them received an accidental stroke of a hurl from the other, which unfortunately killed him on the spot.³⁶

The Whiteboy ballad "The Convict of Clonmel" (*Priosún Chluain Meala*) recalls the *scuaibín*:

"Next Sunday the 'pattern' at home will be keeping,
All the young active hurlers the field will be sweeping".³⁷

In 1825 a selection from Two-Mile-Borris and Moycarkey played a Kilkenny panel from Johnstown and Urlingford. The venue was Kilcooley, and Mathias Purcell of Ballydavid, Littleton captained the local boys. The game was played cross-country from ditch to ditch and dyke to dyke with most of the rival supporters joining in.³⁸ The day culminated in a Tipperary victory and a fight on Fennor Hill.³⁹

The late Mícheál Mac Cárthaigh of Knockavilla recorded a story in 1939 from Denis McCarthy, Kilmore, of a hurling contest between Knockavilla and Donaskeigh played in immediate pre-famine times. The two teams met at Castlefield, Ballinaclough. There were no

goalposts and no goals were scored. Victory went to the team that brought home the ball. Something like an ordinary hurling game was first played until a breakaway was made. This was made by Knockavilla. The two Multeen rivers had to be crossed and they were both in spate. The players were obliged to wade or swim across the rivers. Once the dash to home was made the main task of the greater portion of the team was to hamper the opponents in the pursuit. The ball was brought across the two rivers, through Mogh and Kilmore, to the hill of Knockavilla. If the breakaway had been in the other direction the hill of Donaskeigh would have been the destination.⁴⁰

Killenaule seemed to specialise in cross-country hurling. The games were rough and police reports of the period show that at least one death occurred during these games. Running with the ball in hand was allowed and every means was used to take the ball from an opponent. Killenaule played all neighbouring teams, e.g. Moycarkey and New Birmingham (Glengoose). Cross-country football was also played here. It resembled Australian Rules football. According to evidence at Fenian state trials, football matches were often played in South Tipperary.⁴¹

Nearer to Thurles at Templetuohy, Ned Davey (born 1864) recalled memories of the game for the Folklore Commission in 1940.

They used to have crooks long ago. They were like ash butts with a knob at the end for hittin' the ball. They were not allowed during my time as the crook would smash the hurley. Teams were of even number and they played from ditch to ditch. It was very rough.⁴²

Leugh and Rahealty, two townlands in Thurles parish, were rivals in a challenge at cross-country hurling. The ball was thrown up in Cassestown and the field of action had Leugh Hill on one side and the castle of Rahealty on the other. The Rahealty men pushed their opponents as far as the Suir, on the bank of which the battle raged fiercely. Ultimately it was decided to leave the finish between Flynn and Callanan, the giants of their race – the former from Rahealty and the latter from Leugh. In tense excitement Flynn and Callanan tussled for supremacy, in the water and out of it, until darkness fell.⁴³

In England a football game similar in form to *scuaibín* was played annually on Shrove Tuesday at Chester, and historians of the game of football also refer to Shrovetide matches in Derbyshire, Dorset and Perthshire. A survey of Cornwall published in 1602 records that goals were set three or four miles apart and two or three parishes united to play two or three others in a football game called "hurling over country".⁴⁴ It is suggested that the origin of *scuaibín* may be that it is an Irish or stick version of this English football game which British forces brought to Ireland. Alternatively, it may have its source in the older Norman or French influence where Shrovetide ball and stick games were common among French peasants.⁴⁵

However, a major casualty of the Famine was the game of hurling and the other traditional pastimes of rural Ireland. A local newspaper confirmed that "The English game of cricket is very much in vogue in Ireland. It has completely displaced the old athletic exercise of hurling, so prevalent some years ago. Hurling is almost unknown to the rising generation".⁴⁶

Cricket had indeed grown in organisation and popularity. All towns in county Tipperary had at least one cricket team. Thurles had four teams and rural areas such as Littleton, Horse and Jockey, Tartulla, Tubberadora, Dundrum, Ardmayle, Longfield, Nodstown, had their own cricket team.

Gaelic games were not high on the agenda of rural dwellers in the second half of the nineteenth century. Fear of famine, starvation and eviction were the priorities. The Irish

language was on the wane, being associated with poverty and ignorance. The system of education did little to enhance the spirit of the Gael. Failure to Repeal the Act of Union, the failure of the Young Irelanders in 1848 and the Fenians of '67, all added to leave the spirit and self-esteem of the Irish at a low ebb.

The famine was not the only obstacle native games had to contend with in the nineteenth century. All over the country hurling and football were either discreetly discouraged or openly prohibited by government officials such as policemen and magistrates, as well as by some of the Catholic clergy and many landlords. The reasons given for such action varied from fear of violence and insobriety to suspicion of games being used as cover for meetings of various nationalist bodies. The overall effect was naturally a reduction in the extent of organised games.⁴⁷

Yet somehow the urge was there, to get back on the hurling field and cross hurleys with men from other parishes. Native games did not die, however, but they lacked any proper organisation to control and foster their development. Into this void came Michael Cusack.

FOOTNOTES

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3. Liam Ó Caithnia: *Scéal na Iomána* (Dublin, 1980), p. 229.
4. S. J. King: *A History of Hurling* (Dublin, 1996), p. 7.
5. Statute of Galway, 1537.
6. Seathrún Céitinn: *Trí Bior Ghaoithe an Bháis*, eag. Osborn Gergin (Dublin, 1931), lines 522-6.
7. Rev. Matthew Kelly ed.: *Cambrensis Eversus* (Dublin, 1848), p. 22, footnote r.
8. Mainchín Seoighe: *Cuid Dár nDúchas – Our Games Annual* (Dublin, 1958), p. 55.
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13. Raymond Smith: *Decades of Glory* (Dublin, 1966), p. 71.
14. *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 30 July, 1768.
15. *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 8-12 July, 1769.
16. *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 29 August, 1770.
17. Kevin Whelan: *The Geography of Hurling*, in *History Ireland*, Vol. I No. 1 (1993), p. 29.
18. Edward Mandeville: *The Hurling, Miscellaneous Poems* (Waterford, 1798), lines 52-5.
19. Seamus King, op. cit., p. 11.
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21. L. P. Ó Caithnia: "Landlords and Hurling", *The Book of Gaelic Games* (Dublin, 1985), p. 55-9.
22. D. P. Conyngham: *The O'Donnells of Glen Cottage* (1860), p. 87.
23. Kevin Whelan, op. cit., p. 27.
24. Edward Wakefield: *An Account of Ireland Statistical and Political* (London, 1812), p. 768.
25. Peter Burke: *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, 1978), p. 271.
26. *History Ireland*, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 98.
27. S. J. King, op. cit., p. 24.
28. D. P. Conyngham: *The O'Donnells of Glen Cottage*, 1860, p. 84.
29. D. P. Conyngham, op. cit., pp. 83-86.
30. C. J. Kickham, *Knocknagow* (Dublin, 1887), p. 455.
31. C. J. Kickham, op. cit., p. 446.

32. Mainchín Seoighe, "Centenary Thoughts on the G.A.A.", in *One Hundred Years of Glory* (Limerick, 1987), p. 14.
33. Art Ó Maolfabhail: *Scéal na h-Iomána – deich mbliana ar aghaidh*, in *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1991, p. 199.
34. *Moycarkey Borris G.A.A. Story* (Thurles, 1984), p. 8.
35. Bob Stakelum: *Gaelic Games in Holycross Ballycahill, 1884-1990* (Holycross, 1990), p. xipxii.
36. *Hibernian Journal*, 22 May, 1786.
37. Pádraig Breathnach: *Songs of the Gael* (Dublin, 1915), No. 6, pp. 182-3.
38. Philip Fogarty: *Tipperary's G.A.A. Story* (Thurles, 1960), p. 16.
39. *Moycarkey-Borris G.A.A. Story* (Thurles, 1984), p. 16.
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40. Interview with Willie Coyne, Thames, Christmas 1988.
41. L.C. 581, 582-4.
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45. *Weekly Courier*, 20 June 1875.
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