

# A Thurles CBS Hurler of 1848 and his Sporting Milieu

By J.M. Tobin

Sport was not a feature of the Christian Brothers' education system in the Victorian era.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, pastimes such as boating, 'hare and hounds', handball, cricket and football were available to privileged young men at English public schools.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, headmasters of those elite institutions, along with colonial officials, ascribed to the games ethic a central role in the vitality of the British Empire.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, a version of that ethic would be adopted by Christian Brothers' schools in the following century, when the promotion of 'Gaelic' games became embedded in their ethos.

Although sport was not an extracurricular activity in Thurles CBS, boys attending there undoubtedly enjoyed a variety of physical exercises during their leisure hours. Indeed, when Edward Wakefield visited Tipperary at the beginning of the nineteenth century he was greatly impressed by the athleticism of its inhabitants, observing that they ran, jumped and played the stick-and-ball game of hurling without shoes or stockings.<sup>4</sup> Hurling, of course, was especially popular in the Thurles district.

## Hurling

Prior to the founding of the GAA, hurling was of two distinct types:<sup>5</sup> one a field game similar to the modern version and the other a largely unstructured, cross-country contest, known in Tipperary as 'hurling home' and in parts of Munster as 'scoobeen'.<sup>6</sup>

The former game was played within a clearly defined area, such as a field or green, between opposite goals. The goal could be an arch of willow, a gap in a wall or hedgerow, a corner of a field or, in fact, an entire wall or hedgerow.<sup>7</sup> Teams were of equal size and could comprise sixteen, twenty-one, twenty-five, twenty-seven or thirty players.<sup>8</sup> Goalkeepers were not used, and participants were divided into three groups: backs, midfielders and forwards.<sup>9</sup> A goal was the only score permitted, which, depending on customary practice or the period in question, was obtained in one of four main ways. The ball could be driven (i) under a bow of willow, (ii) through a narrow gap, (iii) into a corner of a field or (iv) against a hedge or wall. In general, the outcome of a game was decided by the first score.<sup>10</sup> Return challenges were not uncommon, however, and in those instances victory was awarded to the team with the best winning record from a series of three meetings.<sup>11</sup>

Hurling home usually began at the boundary between two counties, parishes or townlands. It occasionally featured as many as 500 players on each side, and the aim was to bring the ball back to a landmark in one's own territory. Hurling home tended to be rough and sometimes led to serious injury.<sup>12</sup>

### **Hurling in Thurles and District**

Thurles CBS pupils would have been exposed to a rich corpus of hurling lore in their homes.

Those from Moycarkey-Borris were familiar with the game held c.1800<sup>13</sup> at Urlingford, where a Tipperary selection, comprising players from their parish along with others from Gortnahoe and Glengoole, defeated Kilkenny. The victors on that occasion, aided by their womenfolk, won the ensuing fight and were known thenceforth as 'the Tipperary stone throwers'.<sup>14</sup> They would have listened also to old people speak of the hurling home when the ball was brought from Kilkenny to the castle at Moycarkey.<sup>15</sup> Turtulla lads were



*Hurling in the pre-GAA era. Readers will observe the slender profile of the hurleys, the relatively large ball and the narrow, unmanned goal in the corner of the playing area.*

familiar with the Nicholson family of Turtulla House and their team of hurlers, composed of tenants, workers and neighbours that played against sides sponsored by other members of the ascendancy.<sup>16</sup> There were memories, too, of the match played at Galbertstown on 25 July 1769 involving 'three baronies against all Ireland for 100 guineas a side, play or pay.'<sup>17</sup> And at Brittas, just a short walk from the brothers' school in Pudding Lane, there had been a hurling match on 1 September 1770 'betwixt Upper and Lower Ormond boys, and those of Thurles and Kilnamanherly'. The game was played 'on a delightful green properly corded and cleared', and was followed by 'an elegant assembly' in Thurles that evening, 'for which the best music [was] engaged ... to render [it] pleasing to the ladies'.<sup>18</sup> Others were bearers of an older, but nonetheless enduring, tradition linking the aristocratic Mathew and Purcell families of Thurles and Loughmore to the patronage of hurling in their respective localities.<sup>19</sup>

### Patrick Fanning

All of the foregoing accounts refer to adult hurling. On the other hand, very little is known of the juvenile game, except for the occasional reference. The Young Ireland leader Michael Doheny (1806–1863), who received part of his education in Thurles,<sup>20</sup> recalled in his memoirs the hurling matches he played as a boy in his native Fethard.<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately, a reference also exists linking a pupil of Thurles CBS to the game. A journalist recording the reminiscences of Patrick Fanning (1831–1916),<sup>23</sup> Main Street, reported:

Mr Fanning says he was a boy of 13 years of age attending the Christian Brothers' schools when Smith O'Brien was arrested at Thurles railway station ... [on Saturday, 5 August] 1848. Mr Fanning and some other boys were hurling in a field by the side of the station when the ball was driven in on the platform. The station premises he says were very different then from what they are now and there were only two or three buildings there altogether. He and another boy went after the ball, and just as they reached the near platform from the town side the train from Dublin arrived. ... Mr Fanning explains ... 'There was one gentleman behind my back, and I didn't know who he was ... until I heard the guard say: 'You're Smith O'Brien, and I arrest you in the queen's name.' ... Mr Fanning goes on to describe the sensational arrest of the great revolutionary leader, and how the streets were soon lined with military, and [how] Smith O'Brien was escorted to the soldiers' quarters, where Mr Kirwan's stores now stand in New Street [Parnell Street].<sup>24</sup>

### Aftermath

Hurling survived the dislocation of the famine years and continued to be played locally until the 1860s, at least. For example, John Ryan and Edmund Hackett were bound to the peace at the assizes for the manslaughter of John Ryan at a game in Two-Mile-Borris on Sunday, 14 September 1862.<sup>25</sup> While at the Horse and Jockey, young John Manning of Ballymurreen, who was born in 1857,<sup>26</sup> saw men play hurling from 'ditch to ditch'.<sup>27</sup> The ditch to ditch style was also popular about that time in both Templetuohy and Tubberadora, as recalled by Ned Davy and Mike Ryan respectively.<sup>28</sup> The hurling homes also remained in vogue. Fr Philip Fogarty, the GAA historian, recorded in his notebook that one of the Quinlans of Forgestown, Horse and Jockey, had been a participant in one such encounter.<sup>29</sup> Fogarty was also aware of a hurling home between Leugh, and

Rahealty, two townlands in Thurles parish. The captains on that occasion were Callanan and Flynn respectively. The ball was thrown up in Cassestown, and 'the field of action' was from the hill of Leugh, on one side, to the castle of Rahealty, on the other.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Jack Maher of Glenreigh, Holycross, heard of pre-1884 cross-country contests between Holycross and Moycarkey. The meeting place was Paddy Maher's three-cornered field on the road from the village to the Yellow Lough. The fence in that field then formed part of the boundary between the two parishes. Jim Hayes of Holycross village also heard of those clashes. His uncle Willie played in one game but had to make do with a 'crook' as there was not a hurley available.<sup>31</sup>

## References

- 1 Barry M. Coldrey, *Faith and Fatherland: The Christian Brothers and the Development of Irish Nationalism 1838–1921* (Dublin, 1988), pp 189–90.
- 2 Tony Money, *Manly and Muscular Diversions: Public Schools and the Nineteenth-Century Sporting Revival* (London, 2001), pp 59–60, 77, 81–91, 97–109, 128–61; Written communication from Angharad Meredith, Harrow School (10, 13 Sept. 2012). 'Hare and hounds' was a precursor of cross-country running.
- 3 J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge, 1981), pp 16, 18; Idem, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal* (London, 1986), pp 21, 33–5, 47–8; Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford, 1992), p. 206; See also J.A. Mangan (ed), *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society* (London, 1992).
- 4 Edward Wakefield, *An Account of Ireland, Statistical and Political* (2 vols, London, 1812), ii, 772.
- 5 Writing in 1973, Art Ó Maolfabhail made the rather dubious claim that the styles of play in former times could be described as 'Leinster summer hurling' and 'camánacht' – a winter game; see Art Ó Maolfabhail, *Camán: Two Thousand Years of Hurling in Ireland* (Dundalk, 1973).
- 6 P.W. Joyce, *English as we Speak it in Ireland* (London, 1910), pp 275–6; Idem, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland* (2 vols, London, 1903), ii, 474–5; Philip Fogarty, *Tipperary's GAA Story* (Thurles, 1960), p. 32.
- 7 Ó Maolfabhail, *Camán*, pp 100–1; Liam P. Ó Caithnia, *Scéal na hIomána: Ó Thosach Ama go 1884* (Dublin, 1980), pp 623–4; *Tipperary Star*, 16 Mar 1940, p. 2 (henceforth TS); St Patrick's College Thurles, Notebook No. 1 of Philip Fogarty (MS). Fogarty refers to a match between Tipperary and Kilkenny at Urlingford when a gap in the corner of the field was the goal (He appears to have recorded the date initially as 1800 but then amended it to 1720). He went on to mention that John Manning of Ballymurreen, born 1857, had as a child seen men hurling at the Horse and Jockey when the 'ditch' (hedgerow on an earthen bank) was the goal. Fogarty also noted that the goal could be 'a gap in the ditch' or sallies stuck in the ground to form an arch or bow.
- 8 Ó Caithnia, *Scéal*, pp 69–73.
- 9 *Ibid*, pp 79–80.
- 10 *Ibid*, p. 161
- 11 *Ibid*, p. 163.
- 12 Joyce, *English*, p. 276; Bob Stakelum, *Gaelic Games in Holycross and Ballycahill 1885–1990* (Holycross, 1990), pp xi–xii; Fogarty, Notebook. Fogarty refers to hurling homes as 'terrible encounters'.
- 13 TS, 17 July 1926, p. 3.
- 14 Fogarty, Notebook; TS, 17 July 1926, p. 3.
- 15 Fogarty, Notebook.

- 16 Interview with Henry Langley of Archerstown, Thurles (21 Apr. 1976). For Langley's relationship to the Nicholson family, see William Hayes and Art Kavanagh, *The Tipperary Gentry* (Dublin, 2003), pp 121–2. The editors of the Moycarkey-Borris GAA history assumed in error that Langley had been referring to the cross-country version of the game; cf. T.K. Dwyer and James Fogarty (eds), *Moycarkey-Borris GAA Story* (Moycarkey-Borris, 1984), p. 8.
- 17 *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 8–12 July 1769, p. 2.
- 18 Ó Caithnia, *Scéal*, pp 48–9.
- 19 Raymond Smith, *Decades of Glory: A Comprehensive History of our National Game* (Dublin, 1966), p. 71; St. John D. Seymour, 'Loughmoe Castle and its Legends' in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, xxxix (1909), p. 74.
- 20 *The Nationalist*, 11 Mar. 1967, p. 17 (henceforth TN).
- 21 *Irish American*, 19 Feb. 1859, p. 1.
- 22 Thurles RC parish, baptismal register 1831; TN, 4 Mar. 1916; the writer is indebted to Margaret Cormack, Ballyknockane, Templetuohy, for providing this information.
- 23 William Smith O'Brien (1803–64) was, like Doheny, a prominent member of the Young Ireland movement.
- 24 *TN* 16 Oct. 1912, p. 8; The writer's mother, Mary Tobin of Turtulla, Thurles (1925–2013), referred to Parnell St. as the 'New Road' up to the time of her death.
- 25 *Nenagh Guardian*, Wed. 18 Mar. 1863, pp 2–3.
- 26 Moycarkey RC parish, baptismal register 1858. Manning was baptised on 1 January 1858.
- 27 Fogarty, Notebook.
- 28 Ó Caithnia, *Scéal*, pp 623–4; *TS*, 16 Mar. 1940, p. 2.
- 29 Fogarty, Notebook.
- 30 *Idem*, *GAA*, pp 32–3.
- 31 Stakelum, *Holycross*, pp xi–xii.