
Celtic Revival in Ireland: Political Backgrounds and Aspects

FROM THE LECTURE SERIES: THE CELTIC WORLD

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The British conquest of Celtic lands and Anglicization efforts managed to keep the Irish from pursuing their ancient Celtic traditions. But in the 19th century, organized efforts were started to revive those forgotten traditions. But this revival had different manifestations for different people because it was a political matter.



Cú Chulainn was an Irish mythological demigod. (Image: Ernest Wallcousins/Public domain)

Celtic revival in Ireland was intertwined with politics since the Celtic identity of the Irish depended on their relationship with the British. Up until 1800, the Irish had their own parliament, but as a result of the 1798 rebellion by the United Irishmen, the Act of Union dissolved the Irish parliament. Therefore, Ireland was directly ruled by the British Parliament.

Political Approaches Affecting Celtic Revival

During the 19th century, there were three different opinions about how Ireland should maintain its relationship with Britain. There was Unionism that supported the Act of Union. Most of the Unionists were Protestants who wanted to have close relations with Britain.

Then there were the nationalists, who had two strands. The less radical, constitutional nationalists did not want to break away from England completely. They only wanted partial autonomy in politics, like what they had before the Act of Union. Protestant and Catholic communities both had members in the constitutional Nationalist Party.

On the other hand, the more radical nationalists wanted Home Rule as well as cutting any ties with Britain that was the result of wars. Later known as Fenians, they got engaged in a series of failed rebellions. In choosing their name, taken from Fianna—the warrior band that followed the leader Finn McCool—they were making references to the Gaelic Irish past.

The identity crisis was only a problem for nationalists because Unionists identified themselves with the British. It was the nationalists who were divided in their principles and attempts to achieve their desired Irish identity. Some of them were focused on political change, and others tried to help Irish farmers by making reforms in the economy.

Celtic Revival in the Field of Sports

Other attempts for a Celtic revival focused on preserving the cultural traditions of ancient Ireland. These efforts encompassed several cultural arenas, including arts, literature, and sports. The first attempt in the form of organized movements took place in the field of sports. One of the games that, according to evidence, was ancient Irish was hurling.



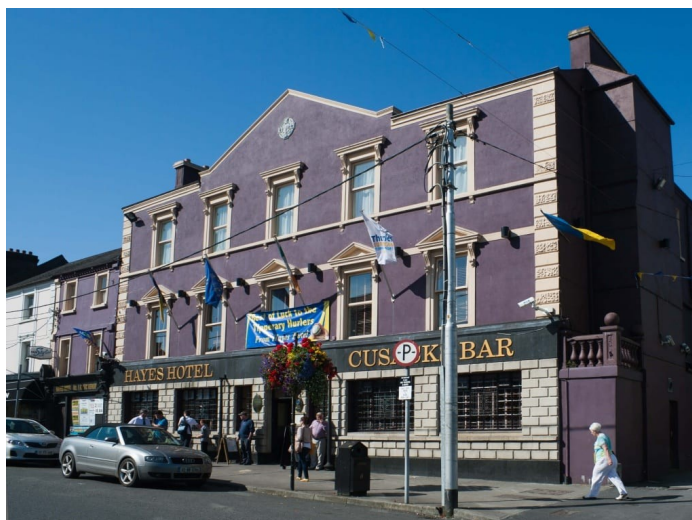
Hurling was an ancient Irish sport that was revived. (Image: jjmtphtography/Shutterstock)

Hurling has a literary legacy. It is described in the Irish epic, *The Táin*. The hero Cú Chulainn plays a game with the boy troop at the royal court of Ulster. The game is described as hitting a ball with a stick. By hitting and beating all the other boys single-handedly, he is shown to be a hero.

In 1366, the Statutes of Kilkenny banned some sports from being played by English settlers. The purpose was to prevent them from becoming native sports. Hurling was one of them, which shows this sport was played in the Middle Ages.

The Founding of Gaelic Athletic Association

Another Irish sport that was revived in the 19th century: Gaelic football, which is a cross between soccer and rugby. In the 19th century, soccer and cricket were leading to the decline of hurling and football. To reverse the decline, a teacher named Michael Cusack founded the Gaelic Athletic Association on November 1, 1884, in the billiard room at Hayes Hotel in Thurles, County Limerick.



Hayes Hotel, where the Gaelic Athletic Association was founded. (Image: Andreas F. Borchert/CC BY-SA/3.0 DE/Public domain)

Another prominent figure who had a key role in establishing the organization was Thomas William Croke, Archbishop of Cashel. Being an ardent nationalist, he firmly believed in an Irish Ireland. He also supported the Land League, a movement to better the conditions for Irish tenant farmers.

About the decline of Irish sports, Archbishop Croke said, “Indeed, if we continue traveling in the next score years in the direction that we have been going in for some time past, condemning the sports that were practiced by our forefathers, effacing our national features as though we were ashamed of them, and putting on, with England’s stuffs and broadcloths her masher habits, and such other effeminate follies as she may recommend, we had better at once, and publicly, abjure our nationality, clap hands for joy at the sight of the Union Jack, and place ‘England’s bloody red’ exultantly above the ‘Green.’”

One of the five largest stadiums in Europe, the GAA stadium in Dublin, is named after him: Croke Park. In a purely nationalist movement, the stadium turned into a place for playing Gaelic games. Initially, playing other games, those that were considered “foreign”, was not allowed to be played there.

Common Questions about Celtic Revival in Ireland: Political Backgrounds and Aspects

Q: What did the Act of Union do?

The Act of Union was the British government’s response to the rebellion of the **United Irishmen** in 1798. According to this Act, the Irish parliament was dissolved, and **Ireland** came under the direct rule of the British Parliament in London.

Q: What was Unionism in Ireland?

Unionism was the view among the people of **Ireland** who supported the Act of Union. Unionists identified themselves with the British and were happy being part of Great Britain.

Q: What does GAA mean?

GAA stands for the **Gaelic Athletic Association**. It was founded by Michael Cusack on November 1, 1884, in the billiard room at Hayes Hotel in Thurles, County Limerick in **Ireland**. It was an attempt to reverse the decline of hurling and football caused by cricket and soccer.