



## 'Croke Park goes Plumb Crazy' Gaelic Games in Pathé Newsreels, 1920–1939

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Author(s)	Crosson, Seán;McAnallen, Dónal
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## **‘Croke Park goes Plumb Crazy’: Gaelic Games in Pathé Newsreels, 1920-39<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*From the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, and over the next two decades, arose great efforts in Ireland to augment political independence from Britain with enhanced cultural separation. During this period the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) enjoyed a boom in numbers of players and supporters, thus confirming hurling and Gaelic football as the definitively Irish national games and the association itself as the most popular mass movement for the expression of independent Irish identity. Yet paradoxically, given the popular association of Gaelic games with Irish independence, nearly all footage of these games from that time was produced by foreign companies with a strong British bias. This article will focus primarily on the coverage of Pathé, a leading newsreel company in this period, through an examination of the content of relevant films in the online digital archive of British Pathé, and will explore the conditions of their production and reception in Ireland, including by the GAA, which was usually wary of portrayals in the British media.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ireland; Pathé Newsreels; Gaelic Athletic Association; Cinema; Culture; Identity

The 1920s and 1930s were crucial decades in the development of modern Ireland. After the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, and particularly after the Fianna Fáil party came to power in 1932, the Dublin government and various national(ist) organisations strove to promote indigenous Irish institutions and an independent Irish identity, and to accentuate the demarcation of Ireland from Britain in political, economic, religious and cultural matters (Brown, 85, 131-142 *passim*; Fallon, 1-26 *passim*; Hanly, 1931, *passim*). While in several respects such endeavours had negligible results, the huge growth in popularity and importance of hurling and Gaelic football in Ireland during this period represented probably the greatest success. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) became the most popular mass movement for the expression of independent Irish identity, as the size of its

playing membership and the crowds attending its major games rose steeply during this period. The GAA's games thus became established as the definitively Irish national sports in tandem with the early development of the Free State.

The role of other media, such as national radio and the newspapers, in giving primacy to Gaelic games in Irish life at this time has already been recognised by academics (Boyle, 623-636), but the part played by cinema newsreels has not. This is a notable omission, as the fact that sport and cinema newsreels were complementary forces has been highlighted by scholars of sport in America (Oriard, 2004) and Britain (Huggins, 2007). Sport, as 'low culture and the passion of the many', is an ideal vehicle to use to understand popular Irish nationalism (Cronin, 1999, 18-19); and cinema likewise appealed to all sections of society and acquired a large following among the working classes. Ironically, given the GAA's staunch support for independence and Irish-made goods, almost all of the newsreels depicting Gaelic games in the 1920s and 1930s were produced by foreign companies with a strong British bias, such as Pathé and British Movietone. This article will focus primarily on Pathé newsreels – which covered the most Gaelic games in this period – through an examination of relevant films in the online digital archive of British Pathé, considering their sometimes problematic depictions of Gaelic games and exploring the conditions of their production and reception in Ireland, including by the GAA itself, an organisation often wary of its portrayal at this time, particularly by the British media.

### **Early History of Newsreels and Cinema in Ireland**

Newsreels played a key role in the early development of popular cinema internationally. In 1909 the first 'specially edited newsfilm' (Chambers, 29) was shown in France by Pathé. Newsreels first appeared in Britain in June 1910 when *Pathé's Animated Gazette* was shown. They arrived in Ireland soon afterwards, though short actuality films had been shown during the previous decade by indigenous firms. A film by the Irish Animated Photo company of a 1901 Dublin club hurling game is the earliest known recording of a Gaelic game; it was exhibited three days later (Monks, 1996).

Newsreels usually consisted of four or five weekly news items, lasting around a minute each, and about five minutes in total (Chambers, 30). Exhibition of newsreels in Britain took place on a circuit that moved from cinema to cinema every three days, taking about three weeks to travel around all cinemas. Such was their popularity by 1912, that newsreels were being issued bi-weekly (Ibid, 36).

The Irish experience of newsreels was one of a strongly British emphasis. Though attempts were made to establish an indigenous newsreel company, such as the short-lived *Irish Events* which ran from 1917 until 1919, the size of the Irish market made it difficult to support such a newsreel series for any sustained period (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill, 32-37). Between the world wars the newsreels exhibited in Ireland came primarily from five major international companies: British Movietone News, Pathé; Gaumont British News; Paramount and Universal (Pronay, 1971, 416; Chambers, 42). While they included some items of Irish interest – separate British and Irish editions of the same newsreel were appearing by 1940 (Pronay, 1982, 201-203) – as Ciara Chambers notes, ‘Ultimately, the distribution circuit was a British one – and newsreels were mostly aimed at audiences throughout Britain rather than Ireland’ (Chambers, 139).

The major focus was on entertainment, not education, and newsreels were careful to avoid controversial matter or perspectives. Yet they did feature a lot of political news, which was not always presented in a neutral way. The importance of newsreels for relaying news of gravity was widely recognized, and utilised by both the unionist and republican political sides (Chambers, 83, 89). This role is illustrated in a memorable scene in Ken Loach’s film *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2007), where we see ordinary footsoldiers of the IRA in a cinema crowd learning of, and reacting to, details of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty conveyed in a news item.

In a study in the mid-1930s, Thekla J. Beere referred to the rapid rise of cinema to become ‘one of the greatest social institutions the world had ever known’ (Beere, 84). In total, Beere estimated that there were approximately 18.25 million admissions per year to cinemas in the Free State by 1935 – an average of over 350,000 people, from a population of nearly three million, attending each week – mainly in Dublin and urban Ireland. There was much opposition to this

growing popularity of cinema in Ireland, on the basis that it was a demoralizing and denationalizing influence. The Catholic church often criticized the corrupting effect of imported films on the morals of relatively innocent young Irish people (Whyte, 27), and in 1923 the Free State government passed the Censorship of Films Act – one of the first acts of post-independence legislation. This particularly restrictive Act reflected the strong Catholic ethos of the State, and concern about film's impact on the moral fabric of Irish society (Rockett, 1980, 11). However, it was scarcely ever used in respect of newsreels, as they tended to raise few objections on moral grounds.

The principal objection to newsreels among laypeople was that their content reflected an ongoing British cultural subjugation of the Irish Free State. There was no established indigenous Irish company producing newsreels between the wars (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill, 6 and 33-37), with the exception of one short-lived regional company,<sup>2</sup> with the result that the British newsreels shown in Ireland still exuded a pro-British, conservative and unionist tone, and featured the British Empire and crown prominently, to the chagrin of some nationalists. The 'completely foreign atmosphere' of the cinema, wrote one Galway viewer, gave young Irish people 'a theoretical education in vice and a close acquaintance with the idiosyncrasies and facial characteristics of the Royal family'.<sup>3</sup> This was further accentuated with the addition of sound in 1929 – first on British Movietone Newsreels, and soon after by the other major providers – when commentaries always featured an authoritative English voice (Chambers, 42).

Films of sport, however, were generally uncontroversial, and their short and exciting nature made them very suitable for cinema showings, so they featured prominently in newsreels. Sport was one of the most popular newsreel items in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, with sales of individual newsreels increasing where sport was included (Huggins, 84). In Ireland, British newsreels covered a wide range of sports, and Gaelic games were featured in the 1920s and 1930s (and in subsequent decades, albeit less often). Cinema managers were sometimes enticed to carry feature films – and to commit to 6-month or 12-month contracts – by particular companies with promises to cover important games of the local team in forthcoming newsreels.<sup>4</sup> At least in covering Gaelic games

newsreel companies were not promoting British culture in Ireland. While both British Movietone and Gaumont British News covered some Gaelic games, Pathé newsreels provided the most extensive coverage of these sports and consequently comprise the primary focus of this study.

### **GAA Attitudes to Modern Media and Cinema, 1920-39**

The 1920s opened chaotically for Ireland and the GAA. The Irish War of Independence – the most infamous incident of which saw British soldiers opening fire at a Gaelic game in November 1920, as depicted in Neil Jordan’s film *Michael Collins* (1996) – carried on until July 1921. The achievement of independence in the southern twenty-six counties in 1922 was overshadowed by the outbreak of the Irish Civil War of 1922-23 and the partition of the north-eastern six counties into the new unionist-dominated state of Northern Ireland. Gradually, however, with the advent of political and sporting normality, the GAA thrived, especially in the favourable climate of the Free State.

The GAA continued to play more than a sporting role, however. It espoused the aim of re-Gaelicising the nation and eliminating British imperial and cultural influences (Ó hAnnracháin, 1326-1337), and its ethos encouraged the view that the Free State was merely a stepping-stone towards a future all-Ireland and Irish-speaking republic, outside the British Empire. But in order to maximise its influence the GAA needed to utilise all available media, most of which operated through the English language, while some were British-based or -owned. GAA officials had long believed that an anglocentric culture in Ireland showed contempt for indigenous Irish culture, and they were very sensitive to depictions of Gaelic games in the Dublin and London press. They had three major grievances: the portrayal of Gaelic games as very violent, playing to stereotypes of the rural Irish as a savage people;<sup>5</sup> undue coverage of ‘foreign’ games vis-a-vis Gaelic games; and the propagation of un-Irish and un-Christian ideas in these organs. The GAA equally reflected the censorious spirit of the era. Pádraig Ó Caoimh, the General Secretary (1929-64), asked radio commentators not to report whether players were sent off, so as to protect the association’s image

(Ó Ceallacháin, 138, 214); and between 1930 and 1936 members were forbidden by rule to supply information to British newspapers.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, the GAA did not object to the biggest British media organ, the BBC, reporting its results – but some unionists did (Cathcart, 66-67), and likewise the British origin of newsreels was not in itself a huge ideological barrier for the association.

Some GAA aficionados, however, suspected that the influence of film would undermine the Gaelic cultural, moral, athletic and commercial impact of their association. In 1921 a local Gaelic games columnist lamented that many Derry citizens preferred ‘Charlie Chaplin, soccer, and jazzing, [and] filthy English periodicals’ to Gaelic games.<sup>7</sup> A columnist in Fermanagh wrote in 1939 that cinema was ‘succeeding to a greater extent than foreign games in undermining our Christian Nationalism’, and criticised GAA officials for not combating it.<sup>8</sup> Clerical GAA members above all warned about cinema’s moral impact. The influential Fr. Michael Hamilton (Clare) related to the GAA’s congress in 1940 that ‘the artificial heroism of filmland’ and demoralising literature were undermining the association’s national efforts.<sup>9</sup> Cinema-going was also feared to have emasculating effects. Claims that it was ‘working havoc on the physique of the younger generation’<sup>10</sup> were not unusual. The Waterford County GAA Secretary blamed his county’s failings in 1936 partly on the effeminacy of picture houses and jazz halls.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, a Donegal club official lamented that young men preferred ‘to go and see Greta Garbo and Shirley Temple’ than play Gaelic games.<sup>12</sup>

The cinema was seen, furthermore, as a commercial rival to *céilithe* [traditional Irish dances] and other social functions that GAA clubs ran to raise funds. Apparently many GAA members preferred foreign pictures to native dances and Irish social events.<sup>13</sup> Some GAA officials in Dublin complained they could not run their own social premises, as there were ‘too many cinemas’.<sup>14</sup> Gaelic games actually featured in an American-made film in the 1930s, *Hurling* (David Miller, 1936), but the violent portrayal of the sport annoyed some GAA members; London GAA officials raised the issue and Pádraig Ó Caoimh led a GAA deputation to the film censor to seek the deletion of the offending scenes. The film’s distributors eventually agreed to the request.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, other officials capitalised on the popularity of cinema and encouraged it. The GAA in Belfast secured screen announcements of upcoming local games in several of the city’s picture-houses;<sup>16</sup> and the Derry City GAA Board ran a comedy matinee to raise funds.<sup>17</sup> Collective team trips to the cinema, such as one by Cavan footballers in 1937, were also organised to build team morale prior to big games.<sup>18</sup> Senior GAA officials apparently exempted the cinema from their castigations of pernicious modern and foreign influences, and accepted its commercial and publicity value. The sheer volume of newsreels produced on Gaelic games indicates how much the GAA facilitated newsreel companies.

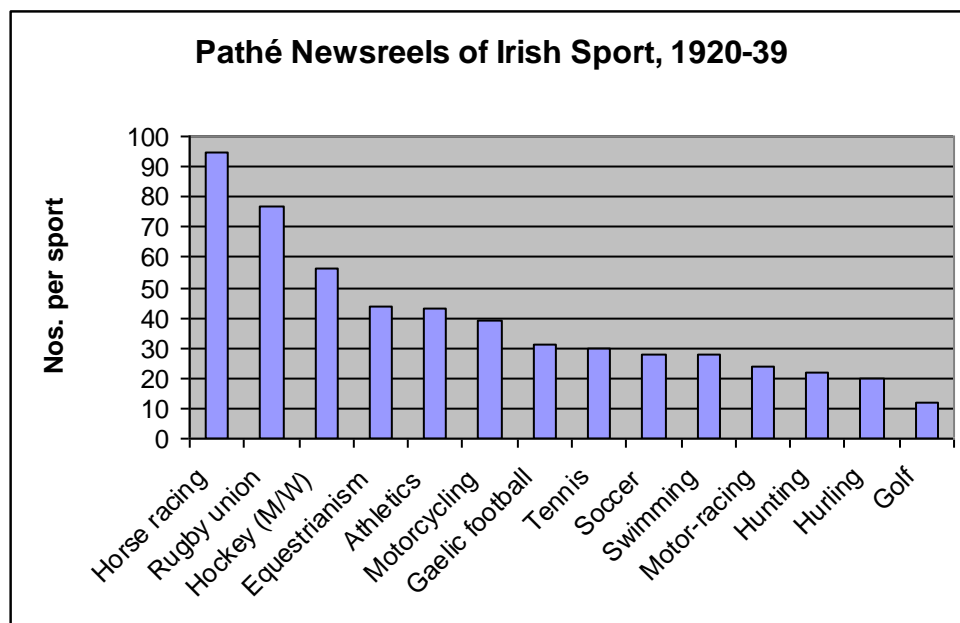


Fig. 1. Pathé Newsreels of Irish Sport, 1920-39

### Pathé Coverage of Gaelic Games relative to other Sports

Given the focus of newsreels primarily on a British audience, naturally Gaelic games were not the commonest subject for newsreels screened in Ireland. Of the films on Pathé’s online archive for the years 1920-39, Gaelic football is only the seventh most-covered sport in Ireland with thirty-one films, and hurling thirteenth with twenty. As figure 1 above indicates, the most commonly filmed sports were, in order of appearance on the British Pathé online archive, horse racing (95 newsreels),

rugby (77), (men's and women's) hockey (56), equestrianism (44), athletics (43), motorcycling (39), Gaelic football (31), tennis (30), association football (28), swimming (28), motorcar-racing (24), hunting (22), and hurling / camogie (20). This list does not include Pathé films of Irish sports teams playing in other countries. It seems that sports played and frequented by the middle and upper classes were the most commonly covered: horse-racing, rugby, hockey, equestrianism and motor-sports got a disproportionately high amount of coverage, relative to their numbers of members and participant clubs in Ireland. This is understandable, insofar as British audiences were familiar with sports of British origin. Yet the fact that Gaelic games featured in programmes in Britain suggests that they did engage audiences, and not only in areas of large Irish immigrant populations. They may also have appealed to British audiences as novelties, just as many items on American football appeared on British newsreels 'not because anyone in Britain knew or liked the game,' avers Luke McKernan, 'but because sporting activity (particularly if vigorous) seems always to have gone down well'.<sup>19</sup>

While Gaelic games and association football in Ireland appear to be under-represented in newsreels, it is possible that officials of these sports were reticent about film coverage, fearing a reduction in attendances and in gate-receipts. There is also the fact that Gaelic games did not have an annual international series, unlike rugby, hockey and soccer. Yet it is clear that Pathé preferred certain sports to others in Ireland, irrespective of their popularity in the country. It appeared to confine its Gaelic games coverage primarily to matches played at Croke Park or other Dublin venues, but it frequently covered horse races around the country, and motor races and rugby internationals in Northern Ireland.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, most major games in the GAA championships took place during summertime, when other team-sports (except cricket) were in abeyance, but Pathé usually ignored all of the matches up to and including All-Ireland semi-finals. The women who played the Gaelic game of camogie were almost entirely ignored: only two newsreels, of a practice session in Ireland and a game in England, remain, whereas 32 newsreels were made of women's

hockey games in Ireland during this period. After describing camogie as ‘the Irish Ladies National Game’ [sic],<sup>21</sup> Pathé did not treat it so royally in its coverage.

Because of the focus on big games and little else, Pathé newsreels do not give a true portrayal of grassroots activity in Gaelic games. There is no real sense of the intense local club, inter-county and inter-provincial rivalries on which the GAA’s strength was largely based. Nor is there any indication of the many other activities of GAA units, beyond sporting matters, such as running *céilí* dances, Irish language classes and outdoor carnivals (Cronin, 2009, 221-226; Ó Tuathaigh, 2009, 237-256). Nonetheless, the incomplete image of the GAA conveyed by Pathé films was still very favourable, compared to several mainstream media organs which emphasised its cultural policies and rules in derogatory and controversial terms. Indeed, Pathé newsreels gave a positive portrayal, even illusion, of the GAA’s international strength, by featuring several international Gaelic games between Ireland and the USA at the Tailteann Games (a Gaelic mini-Olympiad held in Ireland in 1924, 1928 and 1932), and matches by Irish county teams on tour in America. In reality, the Tailteann matches resulted in easy victories for the Irish national teams over other ‘national’ teams which consisted of Irish emigrant players. But the Pathé stories showed that despite occasional criticism of the GAA’s alleged insularity, the association had international ambitions, and that there was international interest in Gaelic games.

### **Supporting the Status Quo**

As Mike Huggins has identified in newsreel coverage of association football in Britain (Huggins, 96-97), so too Pathé newsreels of Irish sport, including Gaelic games, tended to subtly support the *status quo* in Irish politics and society. The newsreels tried to adapt to the changing circumstances on the island, especially the handover of sovereignty from Britain to the Irish Free State, in an uncontroversial way. A newsreel from October 1921, during the truce after the War of Independence, focuses on ‘Commandant [Seán] McKeon’, dressed in IRA uniform, throwing in the ball to start a hurling match.<sup>22</sup> In the eyes of the British government and the existing Dublin Castle

administration, McKeon had no official status as a commandant,<sup>23</sup> yet Pathé referred to him by his IRA title, as though accepting the popular will to legitimise the IRA as the official Irish army and to establish an independent Irish state as inevitable.

For the most part, Pathé's careful efforts to avoid giving offence succeeded. The newsreels were generally neutral in stance on the political situation, albeit pro-Treaty on occasion. Political figures did not feature prominently in newsreels of Gaelic games during this period. Huggins has outlined how the prominence of the British royal family in English soccer newsreels confirmed the importance of both the sport and the dignitaries in national life (Huggins, 93). At Gaelic games, Catholic clerics were the chief dignitaries. Several newsreels illustrate how bishops threw in the ball to start major games,<sup>24</sup> and the film of the 1937 All-Ireland hurling final shows players kneeling to kiss the ring on the bishop's finger before the start.<sup>25</sup> The importance of ceremony to major Gaelic games comes across strongly on newsreels. Many of the newsreels of Gaelic games from this period open with the parade of the teams behind a band or bands, sometimes with the Irish tricolour carried in front. The depiction of the staple rituals of Gaelic games in Pathé newsreels both dramatised the games and legitimated the social and political order. This is reinforced by seeing members of An Garda Síochána, the new Irish police force on duty in uniform in some films. Similarly, several newsreel companies allowed their items about motor races in Northern Ireland to incorporate publicity for unionist Prime Minister, James Craig, and his cabinet (Hill, 7-8).

Yet even the careful avoidance of controversy by Pathé cannot entirely conceal the continuing political tension in Ireland. Civil war divisions lingered, and mounting republican discontent with the Cumann na nGaedheal government is visible in the background of a newsreel frame of a Kerry-Kildare game in 1930: a banner can be seen protesting about the status of IRA prisoners in Mountjoy Jail.<sup>26</sup>

## **Camerawork and Commentary**

Pathé coverage of Gaelic games was generally positive in tone. At the outset many newsreels refer to a ‘record crowd’<sup>27</sup> or ‘enormous crowds’.<sup>28</sup> While this was a common feature of reporting on various popular sports at the time, for newspapers as well as newsreels, it was powerful publicity for the GAA. GAA officials should also have been pleased with the opening caption of ‘Ireland’s National Game’ for several 1920s newsreels on hurling<sup>29</sup> as its historic Irish tradition was one of the main arguments they used to promote the game.

In the years of silent newsreels, viewers were left to interpret the games for themselves after the opening captions. But with only one camera in use at most of the Gaelic games covered – probably operated for Pathé by the Belfast-born cameraman, John Gordon Lewis – and with it often being positioned at one endline, the pictures tended to focus on action in one goalmouth only. This narrow view, combined with the practical randomness of passages of action shown – typically of more aesthetic value than relevant to the result – made it impossible for the viewer to get any real sense of the flow of play.

Coverage improved gradually over time. By the mid-1930s the standard of pictures and camera angles were slightly better, with the camera following the play more. The biggest change was the addition of a spoken commentary in the early 1930s; for Pathé-covered games it was *circa* 1934. The narration certainly enhanced the quality of reports, and largely took over from the pictures as the main method of explaining the event. Unfortunately, the commentary rarely corresponded with the action shown on screen. The camera remained fixed at one end at many games, and viewers saw few of the scores. The frequent scoring of goals and points of different values rendered Gaelic games more confusing for the uninitiated. Yet the commentators made no attempt to explain the rules, tactics or scoring system. They seemed to decide that these were too complex to explain, and so left long silences and let viewers admire the visual spectacle.<sup>30</sup> Players’ names were not identified either. Admittedly, it would not have been feasible (due to the brevity of reports) to list all the scorers, but not even the star players were highlighted – with rare exceptions

such as Cavan's Jim Smith in a New Empire News newsreel of the 1935 All-Ireland semi-final.<sup>31</sup> Again, the fact is that the films were not intended for serious match-analysis or statistics. Simplicity was a virtue in newsreels.

With most of the commentators being English, they would appear to have known little about Gaelic games, and this was clear to an Irish audience. Their contrived, clipped, upper-class 'Oxford' accents were standard for British newsreels but quite incongruous for a report on 'Gaelic' games. Such accents were not necessarily frowned upon by GAA supporters, however, as they tended to confer a sort of quasi-official recognition on the games as major events. Furthermore, these voices made some obvious narrative mistakes – mispronouncing county names ('Ca-vinn', rather than 'Cavan'),<sup>32</sup> wrongly describing county teams as 'clubs'<sup>33</sup> and referring to a 'kick-off' (rather than the Gaelic throw-in)<sup>34</sup> – which probably had an unintended comedic effect for Irish audiences. Possibly partly due to these defects, in some picture-houses a local live commentary was provided for the pictures shown.<sup>35</sup>

In keeping with the usual Pathé policy of providing light-hearted entertainment and avoiding controversy, commentators emphasised the 'terrific speed' and excitement of the game, the size and the enthusiasm of the crowd. Games were praised, but hardly ever criticized in the commentary. The overcrowding of spectators and pitch invasions were shown but dealt with in an uncontroversial and even light-hearted way. Of the 1935 football final, the commentator reported, '[t]he tightly packed spectators forget all about their discomfort. But all the same when three big men are crushing you – phew, it's hot!'<sup>36</sup> Likewise, of the crowd at the 1936 hurling final, the commentator simply states, 'once the game is on they forget they're packed as tight as sardines'.<sup>37</sup> At some finals, however, the harsh reality was that the crowd was badly crushed, and fans outside forced the gates open on occasion.<sup>38</sup> Other off-screen controversies, mishaps or tragedies that occurred to players, however important, were also glossed over, including the Pathé newsreel of the 1923 All-Ireland football final between Dublin and Kerry which did not mention the recent release from internment of several Kerry players (Barrett, 65-68; c.f. Pathé Gazette, 9 October 1924).

In a similar vein, Pathé consistently ignored or downplayed scuffles or accidents in these Gaelic games, notwithstanding the evident robustness of the newsreel pictures. Hurling was simply described as ‘no game for weaklings’,<sup>39</sup> a sport of ‘hard knocks’.<sup>40</sup> The collapse of a player with an injury in the 1938 All-Ireland final was described euphemistically, even jocularly: ‘It’s fast and it’s tough. He’s down, and he’s out!’<sup>41</sup> A physical altercation between two players, caught on camera, was ignored in the commentary. Focusing on violence might have displeased the Irish censor in any event; up to 1936, he banned scenes of all-in wrestling in newsreels, due to their brutality (Martin, 165-166). Overall Pathé’s surviving footage suggests a generally more respectful, if occasionally condescending, attitude towards these sports.

Other newsreel companies were less kind, however. The main focus of Movietone’s 58-second newsreel of the 1937 All-Ireland Gaelic football final, for example, is on the perceived oddity of Gaelic football, with little comment on the match itself.<sup>42</sup> Movietone had a habit of imposing old British stereotypes of the Irish on its newsreels of Irish sport, in a mocking style. Its film of an Irish athletics meet in 1936, describes the events shown as ‘most peculiar’, yet they were the universally recognised hammer-throw and pole-vault.<sup>43</sup> The other British newsreel company to feature Gaelic games, Gaumont British, occasionally displayed the same disdainful attitude. In its coverage of the Cavan-New York Gaelic football game in 1938, the commentator notes:

It’s not quite soccer; it’s not quite Rugger; it’s not quite netball; it’s a fight. Call out the marines as well and keep the peace. A team from Ireland beat the New York team, they beat them hollow and they beat them up. In the end there was so much red blood flowing they had to call in their girlfriends to help them paint the town white.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Crowd**

Pathé newsreels of sporting events tended to concentrate a lot on the crowds who watched the games, and their coverage of Gaelic games was no different. In almost every film of a major game

the camera scans the crowd to show its immensity, and in several the picture focuses on individual faces. As Huggins points out, this was intended to reflect back to the cinema audience an image of itself (Huggins, 90). During a period when the news was dominated by economic depression, political tension and the shadow of war, images of spectators cheering and celebrating a goal, or a point, or a victory, conveyed real-life communal human joy of a scale otherwise rarely seen on screen, providing cinema audiences with much-needed light-hearted relief. Commentaries frequently emphasized the crowd's delight: 'Croke Park goes plumb crazy';<sup>45</sup> and 'The crowd is wild...except this little fellow.'<sup>46</sup> By focusing on the crowd, newsreels reaffirmed the cinema's power to encourage a communal sense among audiences (Pronay, 98), especially for those watching their own county on the big screen.

Newsreels shed considerable light on the crowds who watched Gaelic games. Nearly all male spectators wore suits, and caps or hats, which many raised to celebrate a score. A few fans carried flags or football rattles. Their enthusiasm can also be seen in repeated leaping in the air by some individuals at the front, and in pitch invasions; but some fans can be seen leaving early if their county was being well beaten. Supporters were not segregated and apparently crowd trouble was virtually non-existent. A most salient aspect of some films, especially in the 1930s, is the crushing of crowds. Fans were visibly very closely compressed, and at times swayed forward and back in a seemingly perilous manner; but as stated above, the reports downplayed the severity of such crushes. The newsreels accordingly conveyed the impression of GAA-followers as good-tempered sports supporters and the Irish generally as amiable people.

### **Playing Styles and Tactics**

The films reveal much about the rapidly evolving games of hurling and Gaelic football. A striking aspect for the modern viewer is that both sports were then *propelling* games, before they became more possession-orientated in later decades. Hurling was the faster game: most of the time the ball (*sliotar*) appears to be struck on the ground, rather than lifted into hands, but owing to its size, it is

very hard to see on newsreels. One can imagine, therefore, that insofar as cinema newsreels helped to popularize Gaelic games, hurling was less attractive to the casual viewer than the more easily followed football. The newsreels confirm that ‘catch and kick’ tactics prevailed in football in this period: players mostly tried to catch the ball with their hands and kick it up the field immediately, in the general direction of the other goal, but not with targeted ‘passes’. The surviving newsreels appear to reveal, though, that high, overhead catching was less common than is often claimed, and soccer-style dribbling of the ball on the ground was quite routine, particularly among less well-trained teams – such as two university teams depicted in a 1924 Pathé newsreel.<sup>47</sup> A great deal of change can also be seen in styles of play in football newsreels in the two decades under study. By the late 1930s dribbling was less evident, but there was more use of the hand-pass, and, therefore, more emphasis on retaining possession. The hand-pass was supposed to involve a striking action, but in many cases the ball was thrown, and the referee did not penalize the passer.

### **Audience and GAA Reactions to Newsreels**

The attitudes of GAA members to newsreel showings of Gaelic games were seldom recorded. The earliest known corporate-level discussion about them consisted of complaints at the association’s annual congress in 1930 that other codes – rugby union and soccer, especially – received better coverage than Gaelic games. A Dublin delegate, Tom Markham, suggested that the GAA form an ‘intelligence department’, with one function being ‘to attend cinemas where foreign games were thrown [sic] on screen’.<sup>48</sup> This idea was not pursued.<sup>49</sup> Markham and the Gaelic games columnist of *An Phoblacht*, ‘Cimarron’ – almost certainly one and the same – were the most vocal critics of the promotion of ‘foreign’ games and ‘imperialistic propaganda’ in newsreels. ‘Cimarron’ wrote that the GAA congress had a duty to take action to get more ‘national events’ on Movietone. ‘Why not screen our hurling, and football matches?’, he asked.<sup>50</sup> At congress in 1933, Markham argued that the association should make more use of the cinema for the propagation of the national pastimes.<sup>51</sup> It is evident, however, that newsreels depicting Gaelic games were distributed throughout Ireland

and occasionally listed in press advertisements for cinemas. In 1931, for example, the 'Empire Theatre, Galway' appealed to viewers, 'See the Galway v. London Football Match in British Movietone News'.<sup>52</sup> Such a listing in an advertisement for the latest Hollywood films indicates an expectation that such newsreels helped to attract a sizeable audience. Due to the dearth of general audience feedback on these newsreels, this much can only be surmised, but as McKernan suggests, 'we have to go by what ended up on the screen, and then deduce reasons why.'<sup>53</sup>

The most noteworthy reaction of GAA members to newsreels was their aversion to Irish Movietone News. Notwithstanding its change from the 'British' name in 1932 in reaction to protests from the IRA and others to the content of its newsreels,<sup>54</sup> its newsreels were seen to retain an anglophile flavour. At the 1933 congress, the GAA president, Seán McCarthy, complained about the company's newsreels showing foreign games, and that it was 'nothing less than a scandal' to have 'Irish' news flashed on the screen which was 'not Irish': 'If Movietone News was not going to be Irish, then they should be stopped using the title "Irish".'<sup>55</sup> Many GAA officials, like McCarthy, believed that the association should flex its muscles to persuade cinema-owners to obtain more appropriate viewing material generally than the usual Anglo-American content, for Irish audiences. At the 1935 congress, Antrim delegate Seán McKeown – who devised the GAA's recent boycott of British newspapers – argued that the GAA should threaten to organize a boycott of cinemas as long as Movietone's 'Imperialist news and ... Imperialist propaganda' was shown. The GAA membership was 'a very effective weapon' for 'hitting the cinema proprietors in the pockets', and forcing them to 'bring the news more in harmony with national feeling'. President McCarthy added that most of Movietone's news was of no interest, educational or national value to the people. In the end, no national initiative was launched on the matter, due to the enormity of the task and the feeling of officials that their efforts at Gaelicisation were not adequately supported by the government and other bodies.<sup>56</sup> Local action was not unknown, however. In County Wexford, GAA officials protested to cinema-owners about the showing of a film of a rugby game, and 'the cinema people afterwards showed a film of a match in Croke Park which the Gaels supported'.<sup>57</sup>

By contrast, one may divine a tacit level of satisfaction among GAA members with newsreel depictions of their games. For example, a Wexford delegate at the 1933 congress described a film of the previous week's National Hurling League final (Kilkenny versus Limerick) in the cinema, as 'inspiring'.<sup>58</sup> To have their games broadcast on the big screen, to national and international viewing audiences, and in a positive way, represented significant progress in the eyes of GAA officials who could recall these games being derided in the recent past (and still) as parochial follies or skirmishes. It was a great step towards gaining global recognition and respect for Gaelic games, and indeed for the Irish nation.

## **Conclusion**

The GAA was arguably the most important cultural, as well as sporting, organisation in Ireland in the early twentieth century. The cinema, one of the most popular sites of public entertainment, projected newsreels of Gaelic games to large audiences on a reasonably regular basis. The substantial surviving footage of Gaelic games in newsreels enables a new comprehension of the modern history of Gaelic games. On an aesthetic level, this footage provides a precious insight into how the games were played in this period, revealing some aspects that are not manifest in contemporary press reports of the games, and disproving some commonly propagated myths. Although not the most frequently featured sports, there are sufficient portrayals of Gaelic football and hurling to track their evolution during this period, while crowds grew, becoming progressively more engaged with these sports.

The newsreels also offer a fascinating perspective on the GAA's cultural policy. Its facilitation of non-Irish newsreel companies, focused primarily on the British market, as a means of popularizing its games demonstrates that the association was not ideologically opposed to all aspects of British media and culture; contrary to the modern perception and the impression created by some culturally protective policies, the GAA was actually alert to the need to use the media to transmit its games to the public, and acted pragmatically in its dealings with the British broadcast

media. Pathé newsreels equally indicate that some mainstream British media were prepared to treat the GAA and Gaelic games in an unbiased manner as worthy and popular sports, notwithstanding the association's overt hostility to aspects of British culture and traditional British prejudices about Ireland and its games. However, occasional discriminatory comments in British Movietone productions disclose that such prejudices were still present. Furthermore, newsreels illustrate that, *pace* some criticism by their detractors, there was a degree of international interest and participation in Gaelic games and the GAA was not entirely insular in its worldview.

It is difficult to quantify exactly the contribution that newsreels by Pathé and other companies may have made to the popularisation of Gaelic games, and thus to their becoming the mass-spectator sports they are today. Pathé newsreels did show, however, that Gaelic games could be exciting and enjoyable spectacles, and big crowd-pullers, which in itself increased their attractiveness to cinema audiences. Hence, although GAA members may not always have realised it, newsreels of Gaelic games in the 1920s and 1930s helped to confirm these sports as *the* national sports of Ireland. For all of these reasons, this article calls for more attention to be paid to these valuable sources for the sporting and cultural history of Ireland in the early twentieth century.

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## Online Resources:

British Pathé Online Digital Archive, <http://www.britishpathe.com>

British Movietone Digital Archive, <http://www.movietone.com>

ITN Source, <http://www.itnsource.com>

Irish Film & TV Research Online - Trinity College Dublin, <http://www.tcd.ie/irishfilm/>

British Universities Film & Video Council Newsfilm Online Database,

[www.bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen](http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen) & <http://www.nfo.ac.uk/>

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The *Ulster Movie Sound News* cinemagazine was set up in 1937, and it featured a couple of sporting items (Hill, 45).

<sup>3</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 25 October 1930.

<sup>4</sup> This information was given in an interview on 17 April 2008 with Robert Monks, a former cameraman on the National Film Institute of Ireland highlights of Gaelic games, produced from 1948 onwards.

<sup>5</sup> See Ulster GAA Secretary's Report for 1936, CÓFLA, for criticism of the 'undue exploiting of occasional seemly incidents at matches'.

<sup>6</sup> See *Irish News*, 22 April 1930; *Irish Times*, 21 April 1930; and GAA Annual Congress minutes, 9 April 1939, for moves to control the reporting of Gaelic games in the British press.

<sup>7</sup> *Derry Journal*, 11 March 1921.

<sup>8</sup> *Fermanagh Herald*, 24 April 1939.

<sup>9</sup> GAA Annual Congress minutes, 24 April 1940; CCGAA minutes, 27 April 1940.

<sup>10</sup> *An Phoblacht*, 26 March 1932.

<sup>11</sup> *Irish Independent*, 25 January 1937.

<sup>12</sup> *Derry People*, 14 February 1936.

<sup>13</sup> *An Phoblacht*, 14 October 1933.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 18 March 1933.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the Central Council, GAA, Croke Park, Dublin (hereafter cited as CCGAA), meetings of 12 February 1938, 16 March 1938. See also censor's notes in *Record of Film's Censored*, no. 12367. For more on this and the representation of Gaelic games more generally in film, see Crosson, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> *Irish News*, 15 November 1927.

<sup>17</sup> *Derry Journal*, 12 October 1934.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Aodh MacGabhann, Cavan GAA secretary, to county football team members, 2 October 1937, CÓFLA.

<sup>19</sup> This information is taken from a personal e-mail communication with film historian Luke McKernan, April 26, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Pathé did, however, cover a county hurling final in Cork [‘Ireland's National Game. And no game for weaklings! "Blackrock" defeat "Redmonds" in final of hurling championship, in which both sides played "to the last ounce"’, Pathé Gazette, 8 December 1927] and an all-Ireland final played outside Dublin [‘Hurling Final at Killarney’, Pathé Gazette, 9 September 1937]. Although it covered far fewer games, Gaumont did film at least one notable Gaelic games newsreel at a provincial location: ‘Gaelic Football at Dungannon’, Gaumont Graphic, 15 May 1929.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Training for the Tailteann Games’, Pathé Gazette, 24 April 1922.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Commandant McKeon starts game between Dublin v Leix at Croke Park’, Pathé Gazette, 1 October 1921.

<sup>23</sup> McKeon, or Mac Eoin as usually spelt, had been sentenced to death just over six months earlier.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, ‘"To Fight Again - All-Ireland Hurling Final ends in draw at Croke Park, Dublin’, Pathé Gazette, 5 September 1934, for Archbishop Harty of Cashel throwing in the ball; c.f. letter from Harty to Pádraig Ó Caoimh, GAA General-Secretary, 24 August 1934, in CCGAA minutes, meeting of 1 September 1934.

<sup>25</sup> Pathé Gazette, 9 September 1937.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Gaelic Football - Kerry defeat Kildare by 9 points to 2 at Croke Park. (Exclusive)’, Pathé Gazette, 20 October 1930.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Kilkenny wins all Ireland Hurling final - at Croke Park, before a record crowd’, Pathé Gazette, 20 September 1923.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Enormous Crowds watch Dublin defeat Kerry in All Ireland Football Final’, Pathé Gazette, 9 October 1924.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Ireland's National Game. Record crowd see Cork defeat Kilkenny in All-Ireland Hurling Final’, Pathé Gazette, 1 November 1926; ‘Cork and Tipperary - old hurling rivals - 'clash' again in Ireland's National game’, Pathé Super Gazette, 9 June 1927; and ‘Ireland's National Game. Enormous crowd see Dublin beat Cork by 20 pts. to 6 in "fast and furious". All-Ireland Hurling Final’, *ibid.*, 11 September 1927.

<sup>30</sup> During one newsreel, the commentator advised, ‘in this game the ball isn't left long in any position – so sit back and watch the struggle,’ and let the pictures continue in silence for over a minute (‘Gaelic Football in New York’, Pathé Gazette, 28 May 1939).

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Cavan v Tipperary - Exclusive pictures of the All-Ireland Football Semi-Final at Croke Park’, *New Empire News*, 21 August 1935.

<sup>32</sup> ‘All Ireland Football Final’, *Pathé Gazette*, 21 October 1937. See also ‘All-Ireland football final at Croke Park, Dublin’, *Pathé Gazette*, 1 October 1936, for reference to ‘Lease’ - a pronunciation of the old anglicised ‘Leix’, but by then the county’s title had been officially changed to ‘Lao(igh)is’ (pronounced ‘Leash’).

<sup>33</sup> *Pathé Gazette*, ‘Dublin – Irish Hurling Year’ catalogue no. 1911.04; date given as ‘1930-39’, but game took place on 6 September 1936. The omission is presumably because the title appears to be missing.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Cavan Defeat Kildare - Exclusive pictures of All-Ireland Football Final at Croke Park’, *Pathé Gazette*, 26 September 1935. Although a number of Irish soccer and rugby films in the 1920s are described in the British Pathé catalogue as ‘Gaelic football’ clips, this is most probably the result of cataloguing exercises as recently as the 1990s. See for example ‘Shamrock Rovers after two drawn games defeat Bohemians in the Irish Free State Cup’, *Pathé Gazette*, 25 January 1926, ‘North v. South. Queen’s University (Belfast [Northern Ireland]) v. University College (Dublin) meet in the final of the Collingwood Cup at Terenure’, *Pathé Gazette*, 29 November 1926, and ‘Oxford’s Irish Team. Wanderers secure victory after a hard fought match. Exclusive Pathe Pictures’, *Pathé Gazette*, 28 December 1926.

<sup>35</sup> This information was given in a personal interview on 19 July 2008 with Mattie Gilsean, captain of Meath’s All-Ireland football final team of 1939, who remembers watching the newsreel footage of the game afterwards, with a local individual providing live commentary on the images.

<sup>36</sup> *Pathé Gazette*, 26 September 1935.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘Dublin – Irish Hurling Year’, 1911.04, game of 6 September 1936.

<sup>38</sup> *Irish Press*, 27 September 1937.

<sup>39</sup> *Pathé Gazette*, 8 December 1927.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 September 1934.

<sup>41</sup> ‘All Ireland Hurling final’, *Pathé Gazette*, 8 September 1938.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Kerry And Cavan Play Gaelic Football And Live To Fight Again’, *British Movietone News*, 30 September 1937.

<sup>43</sup> ‘De Valera attends Irish Games’, *British Movietone News*, 9 July 1936.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Football’, *Gaumont British News*, 6 June 1938. Commentary sheet available on BUND at:

[http://joseph.bufovc.ac.uk/GBN/057778\\_c.pdf](http://joseph.bufovc.ac.uk/GBN/057778_c.pdf), April 2007; quoted in Chambers, 164.

<sup>45</sup> ‘All Ireland Football Final’, *Pathé Gazette*, 30 September 1937.

<sup>46</sup> *Pathé Gazette*, 26 September 1935.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Gaelic Football. Galway v. Cork at TERENCE’, *Pathé Gazette*, 17 January 1924.

<sup>48</sup> GAA Annual Congress minutes, 20 April 1930.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 21 April 1935.

<sup>50</sup> *An Phoblacht*, 26 March 1932.

<sup>51</sup> *Irish Times*, 17 April 1933.

<sup>52</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 28 November 1931.

<sup>53</sup> This information is taken from a personal e-mail communication with film historian Luke McKernan, April 26 2007.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Anon., 'Action in Sligo', *Irish Independent*, 24 August 1932; and Mac Eoin, 1997, pp 228-229.

<sup>55</sup> *Irish Press*, 17 April 1933.

<sup>56</sup> GAA Annual Congress minutes, 21 April 1935.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> *Irish Times*, 17 April 1933.