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Abstract (199 words)

This paper extends knowledge about the interconnected practices of state formation, national identity, and sport in three novel ways. First, we examine the British Empire Games of 1930, 1934 and 1938. These had a Janus-faced role in bolstering diplomatic relations between those who were committed to empire but also in expressing the aspirations of those who sought independence from it by degrees. Second, we explore the interconnected practices of state formation and diplomacy therein – which we term sportcraft. We do so in the distinctive context of a divided society, Ireland. In the period under examination, a gradual but significant hardening of ideologies and identities occurred in certain sports on the island, notably athletics. This hardening of ideological mortar mirrored the effects of partition and reflected British and unionist political actions and sportive interests. Third, we present original archival and documentary material from state archives, in Dublin, London and Belfast, and from official sports collections, in Birmingham, London, Melbourne and Hamilton. Together, these demonstrate that, by the late 1920s and 1930s, government officials and sports administrators had already recognized the propaganda functions and utility of sport for state formation purpose and for issues of political control, jurisdiction, and territorial boundaries.

Key words: Empire, Ireland, state formation, cultural diplomacy, sport

This paper examines the socio-historical significance of ‘Irish’ involvement in the British Empire Games (BEG). Initially, we outline a brief history of the ‘Irish question’, which involved the changing complexion about the right of a national athletics association to govern within a stated territory. This right was sanctioned by the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) whose executive board was clearly steered by British interests in the interwar period. This question is set against the backcloth of the newly created statelet of Northern Ireland, where unionists sought both to project their affiliation to the United Kingdom as British subjects and bolster a six-county Ulster. This was the contested terrain within which the propaganda functions of international sport, notably athletics, were grasped by government officials and sports administrators, north and south. There then follows an overview of the emergence of the British Empire Games and an in-depth examination of the trajectory of ‘Irish’ involvement throughout the 1930s. Drawing on extensive archival, documentary and newspaper research across several countries, as well as family histories and interviews, we present four original insights into Ireland’s involvement in, and association with, the Games.

Firstly, are the actions of the Stormont government who declined on political grounds to contribute to the costs of the 1928 all-Ireland Olympic team. Issues of flag and anthem arose here. Secondly is the symbolism of, and the politics underpinning, the selection of an all-island team selected for the Hamilton Empire Games in 1930. Thirdly are the protests led by all-island sporting bodies who at the 1934 London Empire Games contested the restriction by the British hosts of their jurisdiction to the Irish Free State, and fourthly, is political and ‘ordinary’ Unionists’ active evoking of the propaganda value attached to sport. This was reflected in the claiming of medals won in 1934 by

boxers as well as a reversal of the decision not to release members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary for the 1938 Sydney Games. Unionist newspapers too actively promoted the image and status of Northern Ireland and sought to make this synonymous with a six-county Ulster during this ‘period of rituals’.¹ We now turn attention to the sportive context of the ‘Irish question’, which involved the changing complexion about the right of a national athletics association to govern on an all-island basis.

The ‘Irish Question’ in International Sport and Athletics

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sport was ‘an imperial umbilical cord’ and ‘a means of propagating imperial sentiments’.² One cultural expression of this was the British Empire Games movement. The inaugural games, held in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1930, were clearly incepted as a form of imperial glue and the choice of host reflected Canada's growing assertiveness in imperial affairs. But some of the athletes and national sports associations involved were also ‘ambivalent about imperialism’³ and they grasped the opportunity to be recognized as separate teams. The more the British used sports generally, and the British Empire Games particularly, to forge an imperial bond, the more the colonies and dominions also employed sport to foster their own sense of distinct identity and nationhood. Ireland was one of several

¹ G. McIntosh, ‘Symbolic mirrors: commemorations of Edward Carson in the 1930s’, in *Irish Historical Studies*, 32, 125 (2000), pp93-112. Response in the British Empire’, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30, 4 (1988), pp 649-673.

² J. A. Mangan (ed.), *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society* (London, 1992), p.6, p1.

³ D. Gorman, ‘Amateurism, Imperialism, Internationalism and the First British Empire Games’, in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27, 4 (2010), pp611-634.

other examples of dominion nationalism within the empire,⁴ and played a key role in raising fundamental questions of representation and power in imperial relations.⁵ As much as the Irish Free State sought to loosen imperial bonds and alter its status as a dominion within the Empire,⁶ Northern Ireland sought to cement its place within the United Kingdom, politically and sportively. Ulster unionists sought to project themselves as ‘more reliable subjects of the empire than the English’.⁷ This struggle was played out in the context of sport and led to differing interpretations by relevant international sports bodies about the rights of athletes to be selected for Ireland, Britain, or Northern Ireland.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) espoused the idea that Olympism would foster internationalism, yet nationalism became written into their rituals and ceremonies. In May 1936, one Hungarian Olympic representative wrote of this issue that the Olympic Charter ‘admits to represent a country in the Olympic Games acquired from the said nation or the sovereign state of which that nation is a part. Now a man from Ulster is no longer Irish and Ulster is a constituent part of the British Kingdom’.⁸ This letter was penned concerning the question of whether the Irish Olympic Council

⁴ M. P. Llewellyn, 'Dominion Nationalism or Imperial Patriotism?: Citizenship, Race, and the Proposed British Empire Olympic Team', in *Journal of Sport History*, 39 (2012), pp 45-62.

⁵ D. W. Harkness, *The Restless Dominion* (London, 1969); D. W. Harkness, 'Mr. De Valera's Dominion: Irish relations with Britain and the Commonwealth, 1932-1938', in *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, 8 (1970), pp 206-228.

⁶ L. McDonagh, 'Losing Ireland, losing the Empire: Dominion status and the Irish Constitutions of 1922 and 1937', in *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 17, 4 (2019), pp 1192-1212.

⁷ P. Buckland, 'The Unity of Ulster Unionism, 1886-1939', in *History*, 60, 199 (1975), pp220.

⁸IOC Archives, Lausanne. Kankevsky, Budapest, to Honorary Secretary of IOC, 14 May 1936

could select athletes on an all-island basis. All-island jurisdiction was enshrined by the international Olympic movement when Ireland joined in 1922. The genesis of what came to be known as ‘the Irish question’ lay in the imposition of the 1934 political boundary rule by international sportive bodies, acting on British efforts. Over the course of the twentieth century, it inflected sportive relations for the worse, on a north-south and east-west basis between Ireland and Britain, and between the various athletic bodies on the island. It also came to be embodied at an interpersonal level where relations between people involved in athletics were tense and even rancorous.

Olympic archives reveal that founder, Pierre de Coubertin, had reservations concerning the right to change the status of all-island jurisdiction ‘so radically’,⁹ that is, to 26-county jurisdiction. But the imposition of the political boundary rule was supported by Count de Baillet-Latour (IOC President) and British executive members, including Lord Aberdare, British representative from 1931 to 1951. The rule in question was interpreted by some international sports officials to mean that athletes from Northern Ireland had become ‘English because of the creation of a new state’.¹⁰ But such interpretations were strongly contested by Irish Olympic and other sporting representatives, notably the (Irish) National Athletic and Cycling Association (NACA), also founded in the early 1920s and accepted into the international athletics federation on an all-island basis. Like many other divided/dividing societies, identity was thus both claimed and imposed in Ireland.

⁹ IOC Archives, cited in Lewald to de Baillet-Latour, 26 November 1935.

¹⁰ IOC Archives, 26 November 1935.

National field and track athletics championships were first organized in Trinity College Park in 1873. Irish (male) athletes achieved notable international successes in the early modern Olympic games, winning 25 Olympic titles for Great Britain (officially the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland). The ‘Irish Whales’, a group of Irish-born athletes, also represented the United States and Canadian Olympic associations, and dominated the Olympic hammer throw and shot putt events between 1896 and 1924.¹¹ Following in this tradition, Pat O’Callaghan won gold for Ireland in the hammer throw at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, saying on his return that: ‘I am glad of my victory, not of the victory itself, but for the fact that the world has been shown that Ireland has a flag, that Ireland has a national anthem, and in fact that we have a nationality’.¹²

This was not the first case of Irish sportive nationalism on international athletics or Olympic stages. Harry Reynolds’ complaint at the 1896 World Amateur Cycling Championships about the playing of ‘God Save the Queen’ and the flying of the Union Jack at his victory, and long and triple jumper Peter O’Connor’s raising of an old Irish flag in 1906, were cases of Irish resistance to imperial rule.¹³ In the 1920s and 1930s, national, political, and cultural identities in Ireland were entwined with questions concerning the organization of sport on an all-Ireland basis, and allegiance to national teams in international competition. In late 1922 the NACA was formed from a merger

¹¹ K. McCarthy, *Gold, Silver and Green: The Irish Olympic Journey 1896-1924* (Cork, 2011).

¹² M. Cronin, ‘The Irish Free State and Aonach Tailteann’, in A. Bairner (ed) *Sport and the Irish: Histories, Identities, Issues* (Dublin, 2004), p. 54.

¹³ T. Dunne, ‘Harry Reynolds’ in Balbriggan and District Historical Society, *Balbriggan: a history for the millenium* (1999), pp 170-172; McCarthy, *Gold, Silver and Green*.

of three other bodies. Some two years later a separate northern athletic and cycling group formed. This northern group became ‘masters of [their] own household, having [their] own local autonomy’¹⁴ and it affiliated to the (English) Amateur Athletic Association, becoming the Northern Ireland AAA (NIAAA) in 1930.

Several unsuccessful attempts were made in the late 1920s to reintegrate the northern and southern athletics organizations into one all-island body. At best relations in this were pragmatic, if not strained. At worst, as the ideological mortar hardened between them, they became overtly protectionist and hostile. Continual accusations were made that in asserting their claims to jurisdiction each was bringing politics into sport. But politicians on the island were already actively involved in the utilization of sport for non-sportive ends, namely, the symbolism of separate sportive representation on the international stage as a means of asserting the right to independence. Northern Ireland was a case in point where Ulster unionism was the movement that did most to complicate Anglo-Irish relations. There, despite class and economic internal rivalries, a formidable front was maintained in Ulster unionist leadership.¹⁵

Unionism Rules: Stormont, State Formation and Sport

¹⁴ Marris, NIAACCCA, 30 Dec 1930, cited in P. Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics 1850-1990*, (Monaghan, 1990), p. 99.

¹⁵ P. Buckland, *Irish Unionism: The Anglo-Irish and the new Ireland, 1885-1922* (Dublin, 1973).

Ulster unionism was vehement and cohesive¹⁶ and the northern parliament was a safeguard against official unionism's enemies, internal and external.¹⁷ Prepared to use force against home rule, it was dominated by two influential ministers, Sirs James Craig (who became Lord Craigavon in 1927), and Richard Dawson Bates. Along with Thomas Moles, MP for Belfast South, Stormont Speaker, managing editor of the Belfast Telegraph, and President of the NIAAA, the trio engaged sports in the political advancement of the newly created Northern Ireland.¹⁸ Their actions furthered the right of the NIAAA to govern athletics in the six counties and, in so doing, hardened sportive partition. As noted above, Ulster athletics formally split in July 1925 as did cycling when the (English) National Cycling Union claimed jurisdiction in Northern Ireland.

Such jurisdictional and eligibility claims were part of a much greater political, diplomatic, and cultural drama. Several questions arose. Firstly, there was an ostensibly *English question* of how to recognize those in Northern Ireland who held greater affiliation to Great Britain in sport. Secondly, there was a *British question* concerning the new Irish Free State and its claims to nationality and citizenship. Thirdly, *Irish questions* arose about how to resolve internal tensions – sporting and political. Fourthly,

¹⁶ P. Buckland, *Irish Unionism: The Anglo-Irish and the new Ireland, 1885-1922* (Dublin, 1973); D.

Bryan and G. McIntosh, 'Sites of Creation and Contest in Northern Ireland', in *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 25, 2 (2005), pp 127-137; B. Walker, *Irish History Matters: Politics, Identities and Commemoration* (Dublin, 2019).

¹⁷ P. Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789-2006* (Oxford, 2006), p458.

¹⁸ Moles was a militant unionist, confidant and advisor to Edward Carson, and involved in the Larne gunrunning of 1914. He sat on five governing bodies of sport. These were the council of the Irish Football Association and its international selection committee, the NIAAA, the Ulster Centre Cycling Union and the Belfast Sports Club. He also made regular contributions to the athletic and cycling press.

for the international athletic and Olympic worlds, questions emerged concerning claims to jurisdiction beyond political boundaries as they saw it, that challenged their preferred interpretation of ‘country’. In the Olympic and athletics movements, the British view held on the primacy of British over Irish citizenship and national identity in the period under examination. Moreover, actions of Stormont ministers affirmed that athletics was unfinished business for them. It was a means of promoting a separate identity and jurisdiction, thereby ensuring unionist hegemony: political and sportive.

Prompted by Moles and Dawson Bates, and supported by Finance Minister, Hugh Pollock, and others in the fledgling Stormont civil service, the Northern Ireland government intervened directly in the question of athletic jurisdiction in the late 1920s, first in response to a request from the Irish Olympic Council for funding towards the cost of sending an all-island team to the 1928 Olympics. Athletics, boxing, and swimming were also Olympic sports and representatives of each were central in the formation of the Irish Olympic Council. ‘No thought of forming it on a territorial basis as between the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland arose’.¹⁹

Following a letter from John Chisholm, secretary of the Irish Olympic Council, to Pollock, at Stormont in January 1928, Pollock’s secretary, W. Duggan, wrote to the Irish Department of Finance, enquiring about their attitude towards funding the costs of sending an Olympic team.²⁰ Robert Rowlette, Irish Olympic Council, personally assured Duggan that Ireland was ‘one country, and the teams in the different branches

¹⁹ Rowlette, Irish Olympic Council, to Duggan, Ministry of Finance, Stormont, 28 January 1928, in

PRONI FIN/18/17/319

²⁰ PRONI FIN/18/17/319

of sport will be representative of both north and south'. Rowlette also felt that if Pollock were to consider the request for a grant favourably, it would be reasonable if the Stormont Minister were to nominate members to the council.

On 27 January 1928 Chisholm duly confirmed to the Stormont Ministry of Finance that the Irish Olympic Council was representative 'of all Ireland without distinction or reservation' and that two positions on their executive committee had been reserved for members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. This letter also confirmed that the athletics, boxing and swimming associations were 'the only Irish associations affiliated to, and recognized by kindred associations in England, Scotland, Wales and the other countries of the world'.²¹ On February 13th 1928, Duggan noted in his own handwriting that Pollock 'did not appear very sympathetic' and, elsewhere on the same letter, a yet unidentified official in Finance at Stormont wrote that there were some grounds for help as long as the 'flavour wouldn't be wholly green and gold'. Duggan subsequently wrote a personal reply to Rowlette on the same day, identifying two points of difficulty: the first was the growing tension between the northern athletics body and the all-island NACA. The RUC's Inspector General was thus 'marking time in the hope that the two associations [would] compose their differences view of the impending Olympic sports, and the second (political) point was whether and how the idea of there being two governments on the island would be conveyed if the team was to be draped in the Free State flag or parade in a certain way'.

²¹ PRONI FIN/18/17/319

Later that month, Rowlette, in his reply to Duggan, was (wrongly) of the view that the northern athletics body (then chaired by Moles, MP) would not obtain recognition from England and Scotland. On the question of a team flag, he felt that many members of the Irish Olympic Council would agree to a representative all-Ireland flag. Rowlette's various personal assurances were not matched in Duggan's official assessment, however. He predicted the potential for the Irish team to become an outlet for 'European propaganda on behalf of the Free State'. Thus, Duggan recommended to Pollock that as a condition of any Northern Ireland grant, the Irish Olympic team be representative of 'Protestant British interests' by requiring that the Union Jack be flown in the procession of athletes and with the emblem of the shamrock badge. Having then spoken with Moles, Pollock felt that no useful purpose would be served either by seeing a deputation from the Irish Olympic Council or making financial aid available to them. This decision was communicated to the council on March 5th 1928. A little over a year later, Northern politicians intervened with the English AAA and British members of the Olympic and athletics movements to ensure that the NIAAA was assured the right to govern athletics in the six counties and be affiliated to British (not Irish) sport.

In May 1929 Dawson Bates, regarded as the 'Strong Man of Ulster',²² wrote to the AAA, concerning the jurisdiction of the Northern Ireland athletics group.²³ Separately he also wrote to the RUC concerning any association with the playing of the Soldiers' Song (*Amhrán na bhFiann*) or the display of Free State emblems.²⁴ He noted that the northern athletic association had for some years endeavored to affiliate to the AAA but

²² *Daily Express*, 6 November 1937

²³ PRONI FIN/30/AA/4

²⁴ PRONI CAB/9/B/160/1. Copied in FIN/30/AA/4

that the Irish Free State association had put obstacles in the way, and had ‘used as an argument the fact that Northern Ireland is part of the Irish Free State’. He also raised the question of the risk incurred by RUC members involved in athletics in Northern Ireland. No evidence was supplied as to this risk or to the years of endeavors to join the AAA. It was also pointed out that members of the military forces stationed in Ireland were debarred from events held under the auspices of the Northern Ireland association.

Pollock also urged the AAA to act on behalf of the Northern Ireland athletics group seeking affiliation. Stephen Williamson, sub-editor at the *Belfast Telegraph*, wrote to him about the issue of RUC involvement with NACA athletic events and said, ‘it is really too bad that a body of men under Ulster government auspices and paid by Six County ratepayers should thus openly proclaim their sympathies with a Dublin organization whose flag for Olympic Games purposes is the Tricolour and marching air “The Soldier’s Song”’. Williamson acknowledged that the minister responsible for the RUC was the Home Secretary, but he was then communicating with Pollock in his role as Acting Prime Minister (Premier). It appears that Williamson and Moles coordinated their efforts because a personal handwritten note from Moles to Pollock on 22 January 1930, also on *Belfast Telegraph* headed paper, included an annotated draft of the letter that was subsequently sent by Pollock, in his role as Acting Prime Minister, to the AAA. Pollock was also urged by Dawson Bates to act in this way.²⁵ A month later, a copy of the Attorney General's notes on legal jurisdiction was forwarded to the Stormont Ministry of Home Affairs. For Dawson Bates there were now two athletic associations of comparable status on either side of the border. For others however, such as Charles

²⁵ PRONI FIN/30/AA/4

Wickham, RUC Inspector General, the northern athletics group had constituted themselves before receiving any recognized status, they had tried to induce other clubs to affiliate to them because of their weaker representation and he did not think that ‘the North would wish to sink its identity into the English team’.²⁶ Nevertheless Sir James Craig, pressed the case personally with Lord Desborough, British Olympic Chairman and executive member of the IOC,²⁷ to ensure the NIAAA obtained British affiliate status. In this way, the case for separate athletic (and sportive) jurisdiction was pressed by leading Unionist government politicians through official channels to British counterparts and, onwards, to international sports bodies. This sportcraft triggered a series of events in Britain, involving consultation with the Foreign Office, and that led to the production of a memo which favored the claims of the Northern Ireland athletics association. It asserted that ‘when a new unit is created by political action, the authorities in that new unit are entitled to apply for membership of the IAAF’.²⁸

This heightened ideological climate surrounding sportive jurisdiction, eligibility, and nationality, was also manifest elsewhere e.g., the Finns used the 1908 Olympic Games to claim an independent nationality.²⁹ But, in Northern Ireland and Ulster more broadly, the situation was even more knotty because of the forcible creation of a double minority. Not only was there a smaller population of Irish nationalists relative to the unionist majority but there were also sportive unionist enclaves in Ulster. Some of these were in

²⁶ PRONI RUC CAB/9/G/45/1

²⁷ PRONI CAB

²⁸ NA HO45

²⁹ Rouse, *Sport in Ireland*, p.260.

athletic and cycling clubs³⁰ who felt that recognition by, and affiliation with, their British/English counterparts was preferable: politically and sportively. Their interests and actions generated more impetus for autonomy, separate from the NACA. The NACA regarded these moves as having been orchestrated by British athletic and cycling groups, who they believed sought to intervene in their jurisdiction. Moles' prominence in athletics also ensured that the emerging ideological split between 'northern' and 'southern' athletics became deeper and more enduring. In this way, articulations of sportive nationalism on the island used the same symbolic devices, of anthem, emblem, and flag, but did so to express very different identities. These competing sportive nationalisms would also find expression in the 1930s in the British Empire Games.

Ireland (via the NACA) selected and sent an all-island team to the inaugural games, held in Hamilton, Canada in 1930. This decision was taken without consultation with the NIAAA, and some unionist newspapers claimed that, in fact, the northern association was invited. On the balance of available evidence, this appears unlikely. Given the events outlined above, the NIAAA were certain to object strongly to the selection of an all-island team, especially one that included a Belfast athlete, and to the team's official name - Ireland. They may well have claimed their right to be represented too given the inclusion of Scottish and English teams at the British Empire Games.

Even so, there were doubts about the participation of an Irish team. The NACA were in a double bind owing to nationalist sensitivities and the changing face of international

³⁰ K. Howard, *Territorial Politics and Irish Cycling* (Dublin, 2006)

sport.³¹ Their central council debated at length the invitation to take part in the games.³² On April 5th, 1930, the AAA passed a resolution that the territory under NACA jurisdiction extended to the Irish Free State only, thereby delegating to the NIAAA full powers to control amateur athletics there.³³ Some in the NACA did not want to send a team to the Empire Games because that would create further athletic discord ‘as a political significance might be attached’.³⁴ Others maintained the illusion that sport and politics did not mix at all. More in the NACA saw participation in the Games as an opportunity to brand Ireland on the Empire stage saying ‘it would be for the good of *the country* ... to send out ... athletic ambassadors to these countries’, the ‘team would represent Ireland ... if (we) did not receive such an assurance, then (we) might not send one’.³⁵ The assurance being sought was that the team name would be Ireland – in this demand they succeeded. A few others, including Rowlette who (earlier) lobbied Stormont for funding for the Irish Olympic team, argued that they ‘should have nothing to do with any part of the British Empire’.³⁶ Following a vote – 8 to 4 – it was agreed to send a team on condition of separate representation for Ireland.

³¹ *Irish Times*, The Trouble with the North, 19 July 1930; *Irish Independent*, International Protest, 19 July 1930

³² Full reports on this meeting were published in the *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *Ireland's Saturday Night* on the same day (19 July 1930).

³³ NA HO 45

³⁴ Cassidy, cited in *Irish Times*

³⁵ Nolan, cited in *Irish Times*; McManus, cited in *Irish Times*. Ireland's participation in Imperial conferences (in 1926, 1930 and 1932) was also critical in this regard.

³⁶ Rowlette, cited in *Irish Independent*. Rowlette was part of the Anglo-Irish elite. He served in France during World War One, was president of the former Irish Amateur Athletic Association (1908-1920)

In the build-up to the 1930 Games (March to July), national and international developments overlapped and that reflected a burgeoning globalization of sport. These developments included a visit to London by a leading Canadian organizer to rally support for the games, the formal imposition of restricted jurisdictional status for the NACA by international athletics, and the affiliation of the NIAAA with the (English) AAA. Yet the NACA was intent on the selection of a 32-county British Empire Games team as was the Irish Amateur Swimming Association (IASA), invited to the second British Empire Games four years later.

Identity politics were brought to life at the British Empire Games through the elements of anthem (*God Save the King*), oath of allegiance to imperial rule, emblems, and flags (imperial and national). The oath read: ‘We declare that we are all loyal subjects of His Majesty the King Emperor, and will take part in the British Empire Games in the spirit of true sportsmanship, recognizing the rules which govern them and desirous of participating in them for the honour of our Empire and for the glory of sport’.³⁷ Rule Britannia was also sung as teams retired from the opening parade.³⁸ These sporting rituals around citizenship and pageantry reinforced and abetted the Imperial ethos.³⁹ For the British Empire Games enabled competitors and spectators to portray their varied national and Empire ideals. But the Irish case had ramifications for understanding the

subsumed by the NACA merger, honorary physician to the 1920 British Olympic team and Irish Olympic team manager in 1928.

³⁷ British Empire Games, Official Programme and Handbook 1930, also reported in full in *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 August 1934 and in *Northern Whig*, 1 August 1934.

³⁸ *Ireland's Saturday Night*, 5 February 1938

³⁹ A. Guttmann, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (US, 1994).

growing nexus of state formation and sportcraft. In this were several distinct questions that are addressed next.

First, who was represented at the British Empire Games and for what purposes? Who was attracted to this representation and why (not)? And how were identities imposed or embraced? Second, how, and in what ways did Irish involvement in the Empire Games change over the decade in question? Third, how did the Northern Ireland government and the NIAAA come to view the British Empire Games and the inclusion of sports governed on an all-island basis? As we shall demonstrate, they sought to grasp the soft power and propaganda utility of sport to forge a distinctive separate identity, and the bond to Empire, but without either placing themselves on the footing of a dominion or through disassociation from Britain.⁴⁰ Hitherto overlooked, the participation of a *separate* team from Northern Ireland in 1934 and 1938 lessened the insecurity felt there and gave unionists a place within the UK and the Empire. The examination that follows also strengthens analytical and interpretive accounts of the British Empire Games themselves.

The British Empire Games and the Forging of Imperial Bonds

By the 1920s the British Empire was experiencing increasing strain across the globe. Several internal and external conflicting processes were at work. Countries such as Australia and Canada were seeking to establish their own independent status from the 'Mother-Country'. The USA had also grown to such a degree as to pose a challenge to, and perhaps surpass, the Empire, whose future then was less certain. Successive British

⁴⁰ P. Ollerenshaw. 'Northern Ireland and the British Empire-Commonwealth, 1923-61', in *Irish Historical Studies* 36 (1) (2008), pp227-242.

governments sought various economic, political, and cultural responses to these ongoing tensions. Two were the move to 'imperial preference' and the notion of a common citizenship across the Empire.⁴¹ Political leaders in London and across the Dominions recognized that stronger cultural bonds were needed to hold the Empire together.⁴²

Some in the executive of the Olympic movement (such as President de Baillet-Latour) regarded the Empire Games initially as calculated to militate against the success of the Olympics,⁴³ but diplomatic assurances were received from Canadian athletic and Olympic representatives.⁴⁴ Canada was chosen to host the inaugural Empire Games because they were holders of the Lonsdale Cup, 'the symbol of Empire athletic supremacy'.⁴⁵ Their diplomatic efforts to boost the event included a visit by Canadian organizing representative, Bobby Robinson, to London in May 1930. Robinson was

⁴¹ D. Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship, Empire and the Question of Belonging* (Manchester, 2013); S.E. Lobell, 'Britain's Choice of Freer Trade or Imperial Preferences: 1903-1906, 1917-1923, 1930-1932' in *International Studies Quarterly*, 43, 4 (1999), pp 671-693.

⁴² B. Stoddart, 'Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and Colonial Response in the British Empire', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30, 4 (1988), pp 649-673.

⁴³ IOC Archives, 15 February 1929, de Baillet-Latour to all IOC delegates, Great Britain and Dominions Ireland. The conflation of Imperial Sports Meeting and Olympiads was also reflected in a local newspaper report (*Mid Ulster Mail*, 24 August 1929).

⁴⁴ IOC Archives, 8 March 1929, Merrick, Canadian Olympic Council to de Baillet-Latour; 16 March 1929, Coombes, Amateur Union of Australia, to de Baillet-Latour

⁴⁵ IOC Archives. Merrick to de Baillet-Latour, 8 March 1929. The Lonsdale Cup was presented by Lord Lonsdale during the 1911 Festival of Empire. It was then given to the British Empire Games Federation for use as a trophy.

also a well-known Canadian Olympic official. Also included in the organizing committee were Hamilton city residents, and industrial and municipal leaders, such as the President of Canadian Pacific Railway and the city mayor.⁴⁶ This committee embodied English Canada's imperial connection and capitalized on the pan-Britannic movement of the late nineteenth century that included Richard Coombes and John Astley Cooper. Both proposed and supported periodic festivals to celebrate imperial relations and the athletic prowess of the Anglo-Saxon race.⁴⁷

But, given his Olympic experiences in 1928, where he was enraged about the behaviour of German and American teams, it is said that Robinson was also motivated by a desire to promote friendlier relations between teams compared with the growing competitiveness of the Olympic movement.⁴⁸ Thus, the moniker of the 'friendly games' was born. In London, he pressed the AAA's general committee to ensure the participation of the 'motherland'. Based on a report in the *Belfast Telegraph* in May 1930, at their congress meeting in Berlin, the IOC were also concerned that 'England' would 'break away from the Olympic Games and devote herself to the development of British Empire Games because of their stance on the preservation of amateur status.'⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *The Times*, 16 August 1930. Robert Kerr, born in Fermanagh, was also a member. He was an Olympic medalist for Canada and represented Ireland in 1909.

⁴⁷ K. Moore. 'A Neglected Imperialist: The Promotion of the British Empire in the Writing of John Astley Cooper', in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. 8 (2) (1991), pp256-269;

⁴⁸ K. Moore. "'The warmth of comradeship": the first British Empire Games and imperial solidarity', in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. 6 (2) (1989), pp242-251.

⁴⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 May 1930

In this way the Canadian hosts overcame suspicions from within international sport and the empire and, in so doing, attracted ten other dominion/Empire teams to Hamilton. The principle of independent representation by a national team⁵⁰ was a central issue for the NACA. On that condition, they responded favourably to the invitation from the Canadian hosts who also wanted a separate Scottish team.⁵¹ The Irish Amateur Boxing Association declined the invitation, instead claiming to focus on preparation for the 1932 Olympics.⁵²

‘Ireland’ at the 1930 Hamilton Games

Five Irish athletes – not three as is claimed in another source⁵³ – travelled to compete in athletics under the team title, Ireland; four on the track and one in field athletics. All were members of the NACA, including one from Belfast. Though the *Newsletter* and the *Northern Whig* reported that the Hamilton organizers had been in touch with governing bodies in Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State,⁵⁴ and that ‘encouraging

⁵⁰ The Times, 24 August 1928. Athletics in Scotland was also put at the service of centrifugal forces of nationalism at this time. However, the AAA proposal to form a British Amateur Athletics Board, with representation on it from Scotland, England and Wales, and Northern Ireland, preserved internal unity within athletics in the United Kingdom and meant that Great Britain retained a right to select athletes from the four Home Countries for the purposes of international competition.

⁵¹ R. Haynes, ‘Why Team Scotland and not Team GB?’, in *Sport Heritage: From Sporting Past to Future Wellbeing*. Available online at <https://sportheritage.wordpress.com/2014/04/23/why-team-scotland-and-not-team-gb/>

⁵² *The Irish Times*, 27 February 1930.

⁵³ B. Phillips, *Honour of Empire, Glory of Sport: The History of Athletics at the Commonwealth Games* (England, 2000, p.12).

⁵⁴ *Newsletter* 6 January 1930, 29 January 1930; *Northern Whig*, 4 January 1930

responses' had been received from 'many parts of the Empire, including Northern Ireland', no official correspondence has been located to confirm whether a separate invitation was issued to the NIAAA. Connections to Northern Ireland were celebrated in local newspapers, such as the Ballymoney Free Press, who noted that 'Jimmy' Gordon (son of local, William Gordon) was 'making a name for himself' at the Canadian British Empire Games boxing trials.⁵⁵ But the Irish team was all-island in composition. The *Belfast Telegraph* covered the opening day of these games on 15 August 1930, describing 'a sporting spectacle which will go down in history as the Empire's first Olympiad'. 'Eleven units of Empire' sent teams, it said, that included 'Ireland' and 'the Motherland'.⁵⁶ The NACA Council explored the selection of a team comprised of more than five representatives, but the timing of the International University Games in Darmstadt, Germany, from August 1-10, prevented those who competed there from travelling to Hamilton in adequate time. Birth qualification criteria also ruled out others who did not possess an Irish passport. Bill Britton won silver for Ireland in the hammer throw event. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Britton was *Aonach Tailteann* winner and a leading field athlete. He also represented Ireland and Great Britain in invitational events, including bi-annual meets between the Empire and the USA (see image one).

Insert Image One: Bill Britton's dual athletic representation

Insert Image Two: 1930 Medal podium for hammer throw

⁵⁵ *Ballymoney Free Press and Northern Counties Advertiser*, 9 August 1930.

⁵⁶ 15 August 1930

Four athletes represented Ireland on the track in 1930. Newspapers claimed that Mick O'Malley and Bill Dickson (North Belfast Harriers) missed their events due to the fog-delayed arrival of the team.⁵⁷ Archival records indicate that this claim was incorrect. Dickson's selection represented the NACA's continued all-island claim in the face of imposed restriction of their jurisdiction, as well as the agency exhibited by athletes from the north who sought to keep politics out of sport. Folklore within the NI Commonwealth Games Council today (gleaned via an interview with a leading official) suggested that Dickson may have deliberately missed an event for political reasons, i.e., he was uncomfortable or disagreed with 32-county Irish representation. However, an official stamped original photo of the 1930 BEG (image three) was uncovered in a family collection showing that O'Malley and Dickson started in the same qualifying round of the one-mile run. However, it is unclear whether one or both finished. A nephew of O'Malley recalled a family claim that 'Mick was treated very badly because of the Games by the NACA' but he had not probed this further (email to authors, 12 May 2020).

Of the evidence to date, it does appear that Joe Eustace was late for another of his events. The fourth Irish track athlete, Jack O'Reilly, an emigrant living in Canada, wrote to the NACA stating his availability for the marathon if selected. O'Reilly was

⁵⁷ O'Malley was listed (retrospectively and incorrectly) by a provincial Irish newspaper, *Western People*, as a member of the British team (13 November 1937). *Ireland's Saturday Night* reported that the Welsh and Free State representatives were detained by fog and, as a result, Eustace missed the 220 and Dickson and O'Malley the half mile (23 August 1930).

winner of the Dublin-Navan marathon and medalist in the US and Canada.⁵⁸ It is likely that he was the sole Irish representative pictured in film footage of the opening ceremony (see image four).⁵⁹ Reflecting the complexities of ‘Irishness’, a County Down runner, Sam Ferris, won silver for England in the same marathon event. He was in the Royal Air Force stationed in England and registered with an English athletics club. Ferris had previously represented Ireland in cross country running (1925-1927) and earned silver for Great Britain at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. Ferris’ medal was reported by the *Belfast Telegraph* under the headline ‘Free State Defeats’. These defeats referred to Eustace who placed third in his 100 yards heat, Britton’s silver medal and Reilly.⁶⁰ All three were listed in this newspaper as representing the Irish Free State.

Insert Image Three: 1930 BEG one-mile start

Insert Image Four: Ireland at 1930 opening ceremony

The complexity of Irish-Imperial relations was reflected in protests, from within and outside the NACA, about the 1930 Ireland team. GAA President Sean O’Ryan published an objection as did the Cork County Board of the GAA.⁶¹ Neither wished to be associated with empire and reflected a strong nationalist ethos in Munster that prevailed throughout the NACA’s prolonged struggle for all-island recognition. The

⁵⁸ The *Connacht Sentinel* (26 August 1930) lists O’Reilly incorrectly as having represented the Irish Free State.

⁵⁹ Library and Archives, Canada, Ottawa 8502-0086, Empire Games Film Footage, V1

⁶⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 August 1930; *Derry Journal*, 21 July 1930

⁶¹ *Kerryman*, 2 August 1930. The GAA ceded organizational control over athletics to the NACA when it was formed in 1922 but it retained the term ‘athletic’ in title.

decision of the NACA to send a team led to the disbandment of one of their clubs, Croke AC, who “viewed with deep concern the seriousness of any association claiming to be national participating in British Empire projects by consent, as it has no precedent in our long and trying history”.⁶² At the conclusion of these games, standards were presented to each of the teams, including Ireland for whom it appears Britton was the nominated captain/manager owing to his medal success.⁶³ These standards were to be ‘taken home (and) to be preserved until the next games’⁶⁴ in 1934, but it is unclear whether this happened given the increasing animosity between the NACA and NIAAA. In any case, the Dublin government began to assert its preference for the use of the tricolour flag and the choice of Irish national anthem at international sporting events, such as rugby, and at other official functions abroad.⁶⁵

In the intervening period between the first and second games (1930-1934), an international athletics commission was established, presided over by Swedish Consul General to Britain, Emil Sahlin, to adjudicate on the question of all-island jurisdiction. A seven-hour meeting was held in London in November 1931. Various accounts of this (from Irish and British perspectives) suggested that the AAA would not object to Ireland competing as one geographical unit at the 1932 Olympics and that a genuine desire existed to permanently end the dispute. Yet, the AAA and BOA retained a

⁶² *Belfast Telegraph* (11 August 1930). On 15 August, the same newspaper also explained why the Dublin club had disbanded. JB Eustace, a member of Croke AC, was selected on the Irish team.

⁶³ Hamilton Public Library, Record 32022189115583

⁶⁴ *Irish Independent*, 25 Aug 1930, *Ireland's Saturday Night*, 30 August 1930

⁶⁵ National Archives Ireland NAI DFA WA 3/1; DFA GR 1489, Seán Murphy (for Joseph P Walshe) to Count Gerald O'Kelly de Gallagh (Paris).

durable interest in sporting jurisdiction on the island, going on to lay claim, unsuccessfully, to a GB *and* NI 1932 Olympic team. Discussions continued between the two Irish athletic associations, and, by February 1932, the question of national flag was principal in attempts at athletic unity between them. Agreement was reached on the arms of the four provinces on a field of St Patrick's Blue but, at their annual congress in April 1932, NACA delegates insisted that the tricolour be used for all international events. This change of preference was unacceptable to several Belfast-based athletic clubs (Ulsterville, North Belfast, Duncairn Nomads, Albertville, 9th Old Boys and Queen's University) who seceded connection with the NACA's Ulster council and affiliated to the NIAAA.⁶⁶ This hardened the sportive boundary, in ideological and jurisdictional terms.

The NACA's (February) 1934 congress voted to reject the IAAF's political boundary rule, by 27 votes to 24. This congress was attended by PJ O'Keefe, secretary of the GAA, who was quoted as saying 'the GAA had the same interest in athletics today as they had forty-nine years ago when the Association was first formed, primarily for the development of athletics in Ireland'.⁶⁷ At this congress, Pat O'Callaghan (representing Cork) was also quoted as saying that while Ireland had secured the majority of support at the Los Angeles meeting of the IOC in 1932 on the matter of all-island jurisdiction, one English delegate remarked to him then that 'we will get you in committee'.⁶⁸ This threat was correct.

⁶⁶ Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics*, p.117-118.

⁶⁷ *Irish Press*, 5 Feb 1934

⁶⁸ Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics*, p. 129.

The question of jurisdiction in NI was subsequently tabled at the 1934 IAAF Congress held in Stockholm on 28-29 August. There, a high number of abstentions and a vote of 9 to one supported the formation of the International (British) Board of the AAA, including NI.⁶⁹ Just weeks before this, the second British Empire Games took place in London from August 4th to 11th. There, the question of all-island representation became much more contentious than in Hamilton, owing to the hardening of ideological, political, and sportive boundaries on the island in the ensuing period. But an added dimension was the influence of the British hosts of these games. They imposed their views of restricted sportive jurisdiction on all-island bodies. In these ways, what British and international sport officials termed the ‘Irish question’ became more contentious and it also drew the attention of the wider Northern Ireland public by virtue of newspaper coverage.

‘Northern Ireland’ at the London 1934 Games

1934 official reports list 16 entrants and 500 competitors. The treatment of entries from the island of Ireland by the British hosts carried much symbolic weight, in terms of who was permitted to compete and for what recognized team - the Irish Free State, Northern Ireland or Ireland. The approach adopted by the British also had consequences for the

⁶⁹ 10 members abstained. President Edström pushed for a vote on the IAAF Council’s interpretation of rule one (political boundary), which was passed by 12 votes to 0, and in which seven members abstained. No documentation is available (yet) that explains these abstentions. In their 1946 pamphlet, *Partition in Irish Athletics*, the NACA claimed that ‘the main purpose of the Council in asking the IAAF Congress to sanction an interpretation of a longstanding rule, and passing a bye-law to define same, was to nullify the appeal of the NACA(I) against the Council’s ‘26 Counties’ decision and to justify and make legal that decision which would otherwise have been *ultra vires* (p.8-9).

organization of later empire games. Being the host, and the ‘motherland’, gave the British scope to impose their preferred views on eligibility and jurisdiction in Northern Ireland.

A British Empire Games Federation was fully operational by 1934, under Lord Lonsdale as President and Lord David Burghley as joint treasurer.⁷⁰ The formation of this federation was first discussed in 1930 and again at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics.⁷¹ ‘Subsequently most of the dominions having formed their own national councils, a meeting was held in London and the parent federation was formed’.⁷² NIAAA minutes show that they had cemented their official status by then, thus claiming jurisdiction over athletics in the six counties and affiliation to the British Amateur Athletics Board. Chair of the Empire Games Federation, Sir James Leigh Wood, wrote to them in January to nominate a team.⁷³ This invitation to ‘a Northern Ireland team’

⁷⁰ Lord Burghley (British Olympian, 1930 BEG medalist and Conservative MP) went on to play an indispensable and often secretive interlocutor role in thwarting the quest for all-island recognition until the late 1970s. He was IAAF Executive member (1933-1970), BOA Chair (1936-1966), President of the IAAF (1946-1976), IOC Vice-President (1952-1966) and BOA President (1966-1977). Burghley competed in the RUC sports meeting in Belfast in June 1933, which was used to decide NI title holders.

⁷¹ *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 March 1933

⁷² *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 March 1933. This summary of the inception of the federation is also included in the 1934 Official Programme and Handbook (p.15). The national amateur associations of England acted towards the Council of England in the same way as the international federations function with the organizers of the Olympic Games, that is, they ensured that events were contested according to the rules, they appointed officials and were responsible for technical arrangements for each sport.

⁷³ PRONI D4282/A/1/1, NIAAA Minutes 5 January 1934

was also reported in the *Belfast Telegraph* one day later and in its weekend sports paper, *Ireland's Saturday Night*, that ran two editions, one for the north and one for the south of Ireland.⁷⁴ But there was disagreement within the NIAAA as to whether the invitation extended to all Ireland bodies or 'clearly discriminated between the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland'. Some NIAAA members, notably assistant secretary, Tom Ferguson, expressed doubts about communicating with other 'kindred sporting organisations' to enter a Northern Ireland contingent, because these might accept the invitation as all-Ireland bodies. Similarly, press coverage noted that difficulties would arise if other branches of sport might draw teams from all over Ireland but also that the letter from the Empire Games Committee specifically stated the intention to invite teams from Northern Ireland and the Free State.⁷⁵

The NACA were also invited to nominate a team, but the British hosts stipulated that this would be from within the Irish Free State. The NACA declined the invitation on this basis at their annual congress. NIAAA minutes in January 1934 note that 'the Free State had intimated their intention to compete in the European Games only'. Together, the Empire Games Council (of England) and the NIAAA ensured that Northern Ireland had separate athletic representation in 1934. By April, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that the Free State would probably be 'the only dominion unrepresented'⁷⁶ and the *Newsletter* and *Northern Whig* confirmed that Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

⁷⁴ Ireland's Saturday Night was launched in 1894 as Ulster Saturday Night. Despite the name change, it retained the nickname 'The Ulster'. The final edition was printed in July 2008.

⁷⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 January 1934; *Ireland's Saturday Night*, 6 January 1934.

⁷⁶ 19 April 1934

were to have independent representation after a meeting of the AAA.⁷⁷ In July 1934, the NIAAA unanimously agreed to nominate athletes.⁷⁸ Attesting to this, a singlet, worn by triple jumper Eddie Boyce in 1934, from North Belfast Harriers (image five), captures the official team title and crest: a crowned blue cross with a red hand of Ulster. The official 1934 handbook (in private possession) also lists the athletics team entry. John/Jack Parker, a Brighton-registered runner, competed in the three-mile race, Bertie Shillington and Maurice Tait (also spelt Tate) in the long jump, Ian Bell in the 100/200 yards and DJ Corr in a cycling time trial. Boyce was reported as feeling unwell during the games,⁷⁹ and was placed third and fourth in his event by differing sources. NIAAA minutes of September of that year note that they received much adverse criticism for the selection of Tait,⁸⁰ who was reported by the *Belfast Telegraph* as unplaced in the long jump.⁸¹

Insert Image Five: 1934 team title and crest

The 1934 lawn bowls team was titled *Ireland* (in newspaper reports,⁸² on the official scoreboard and in reports across the Empire) (see image six). Other accounts refer to Northern Ireland as the team title, most likely because, though an all-island body, the

⁷⁷ 16 May 1934

⁷⁸ PRONI D4282/A/1/1

⁷⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 August 1934

⁸⁰ PRONI D4282/A/1/1. This criticism was anticipated by the athletics writer for the *Newsletter* who wrote that there was general wonder about the inclusion of Tate (23 July 1934).

⁸¹ 8 August 1934

⁸² *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 August 1934; *Londonderry Sentinel*, 7 August 1934; *Newsletter*, 31 July 1934; *Northern Whig*, 18 July 1934

Irish Bowling Association selected a team from northern clubs.⁸³ Ireland's bowlers were runners-up in 1934. Their success was described in some detail under the byline "Ireland's Pluck" in *Ireland's Saturday Night*, who said, 'Well played Ireland. This salutation, often heard at the Empire championship games this week, will find a warm echo in the hearts of all Irish bowlers. The Irishmen were making their debut, and happy and successful it was'.⁸⁴ Ireland's bowlers competed again in 1938 but were then unsuccessful.

Insert Image Six: 1934 Lawn Bowls scoreboard

In 1934 the sport of swimming was highly contentious from an Irish perspective. In May 1934, the Irish Amateur Swimming Association (IASA) referred the question of taking part to their emergency committee.⁸⁵ Some months later, they published a detailed statement in the *Northern Whig* on 4 August 1934, under the byline 'Ireland not represented in swimming events – Entry refused – English Council introduces politics'. This revealed some of the contents of correspondence with the hosts (via Evan Hunter/Empire Games Council secretary and AAA).⁸⁶ It was clear that relations had become quite barbed⁸⁷ because of the insistence of the IASA's claim to all-island jurisdiction and, thus, to the title Ireland. But Hunter toed the British line.

⁸³ G. Bolsover, *Who's Who and Encyclopaedia of Bowls*, (Nottingham, 1959); 1934 Empire Games Official Handbook.

⁸⁴ *Ireland's Saturday Night*, 11 August 1934

⁸⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 May 1934

⁸⁶ NA HO 45/15758

⁸⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 August 1934; *Newsletter*, 4 August 1934; F. Barron, *Swimming for a Century: Irish Amateur Swimming Association, 1883-1993* (Dublin, 1993), p.48-50.

In his words: ‘we must keep to the political style and title of the respective territories by which they are known within the British Empire’.⁸⁸ Hunter's interpretation mirrored official British government guidance three years previously i.e., the term Ireland acknowledged the geographic actuality but, politically, the island was comprised of two governments and two territorial divisions. The IASA regarded Hunter's opinion – on jurisdiction and official national title – as ‘absurdly illogical and entirely unsustainable’ and ‘unnecessarily biased and inconsistent’ and, in response, IASA secretary (1930-36), Frank Cunningham said that ‘we endeavour to keep sport and politics apart’.⁸⁹ The IASA lobbied the Stormont government via Commander Oscar Henderson, who was then comptroller in the governor’s household. Correspondence on the all-island jurisdiction of the IASA and their right to admission at the Empire Games as representatives of ‘Ireland’ was sent onwards to the Home Office (to CG Markbreiter) who then wrote to the King’s secretary, Sir Clive Wigram, about this. However, no government official intervened on the record. The Department of Interior (at the Home Office) regarded the matter as outside their official remit: the Secretary of State for the Dominions, James Henry Thomas, having been consulted by Sir James Leigh-Wood, President of the BEG Federation. Thomas took the line, somewhat disingenuously, that this was not ‘the sort of matter in which any form of government intervention’ was ‘at all desirable or even practicable’. This office also advised against an approach to the King's secretary on the matter.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ NA HO 45/15758

⁸⁹ NA HO 45/15758; *Newsletter*, 4 August 1934

⁹⁰ NA HO 45/15758

The IASA regarded the actions of the British hosts as an intolerant interference that propagated disruption and discord rather than strengthening goodwill.⁹¹ They maintained their right to all-island jurisdiction in the face of British pressure exerted elsewhere via the international swimming association, then known as Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA), but they did not secure an all-island entry for the 1934 Empire Games that was to include three northern swimmers. Fourteen years later the IASA was forced to withdraw its team from the 1948 London Olympic Games for similar reasons, having included two NI swimmers. Another all-island sport, boxing, took a different route in 1934, owing to political intervention from Stormont.

In this sport, exemptions were granted by the Irish Amateur Boxing Association giving permission to individual RUC and *Garda Síochána* members to compete.⁹² This body declined an official invitation, based on what they said was their closed season but a report in the *Midland Counties Advertiser* claimed that two boxers from Birr Boxing Club had been entered for the games.⁹³

Dawson Bates resisted any all-island authority invested in the IABA (as he had done previously with the NACA). Having been asked by Belfast unionist politician, William Grant, whether the RUC boxing team could enter,⁹⁴ Dawson Bates considered it desirable 'to send members of the force to represent them'. Medals were won by Willie

⁹¹ *Belfast Newsletter* 14 August 1934; F. Barron, *Swimming for a Century: Irish Amateur Swimming Association, 1883-1993* (Dublin, 1993), p.48-50

⁹² *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 May 1934

⁹³ 7 June 1934.

⁹⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 March 1934; *Newsletter*, 14 March 1934; *Northern Whig*, 14 March 1934

Duncan at welterweight and Jim Magill at middleweight. These were officially credited by the British organizers to Northern Ireland despite the boxers having no sportive status to that effect (image seven).⁹⁵ Two years later, Magill (image eight) was selected by the Irish Olympic Council for the 1936 Olympics. Not only did the RUC authorities refuse him permission to compete for Ireland but British Olympic officials exerted their right to select him. Following an official complaint from the IABA about this, Magill did not compete in the Berlin Olympics, which were also boycotted by the Irish Olympic Council. Thus, it can be seen that while activities were well underway to bolster the political status of Northern Ireland, the national eligibility of athletes within some sports was ambiguous and jurisdictional rights were yet contested. Divisions in Irish athletics hardened further over the next four years such that, by the 1938, a third men's athletics body was formed on the island. The Amateur Athletic Union of Éire accepted 26-county jurisdiction and became the recognized body affiliated to international athletics. Though duly suspended from international athletics, the NACA retained the support of most athletic clubs on the island.

Insert Image Seven: 1934 Boxing medal won by Jim Magill

Insert Image Eight: Constable Jim Magill

'Northern Ireland' at the Sydney 1938 Games

The third Empire Games were held in Sydney in February 1938. This host city was decided at a meeting of the Empire Games Federation on 4 November 1935, at which

⁹⁵ Duncan's bronze medal was described in the *Newsletter* under the byline 'Ulster welterweight secures third place medal' (9 August 1934) while the *Northern Whig* reported that 'Ulster boxers, though beaten, were by no means disgraced' (13 August 1934).

it was reported that England, Australia, New Zealand, Newfoundland, Canada, Scotland, South Africa, and Wales were present, but not Northern Ireland.⁹⁶ By then, the IAAF had formally suspended the NACA from international athletics for not accepting their political boundary ruling. After being lobbied by the British, de Baillet-Latour (IOC President) and Edström (IOC Vice President 1931-1942 and IAAF President 1912-1946) led the move to cement the adoption of the political boundary rule. But some Olympic officials expressed reservations. De Coubertin wrote that ‘Ireland in its new form ... could not be properly split in two’ because the Irish Olympic Committee was first accepted as a member country; not as a state.⁹⁷ In February 1936 the NIAAA recorded the consequences of the political boundary ruling, which was that ‘no organized governing association could compete with or against the NACA without also courting immediate suspension’.⁹⁸ A few months later, the *Newsletter*, *Northern Whig* and *Belfast Telegraph* reported that provision had been made by the Australian organizers of the 1938 Empire Games to bring two athletes from Northern Ireland.⁹⁹ In March 1937 it was reported that the International Bowling Board were ‘holding back the arrangements for the British team they were sending to visit Australia until such time that the Australian Council could give a guarantee that none but official bowling teams would be recognized from the British Isles’.¹⁰⁰ At their annual congress in

⁹⁶ *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 November 1935; *Newsletter*, 5 November 1935

⁹⁷ IOC Archives, Lewald to de Baillet-Latour, 26 November 1935

⁹⁸ PRONI D4292/A/1/1. At their meeting on 7th February, there were differing views within the NIAAA on whether it was time to open negotiations with the NACA for a settlement of the dispute. One speaker ‘regretted to have to say it but it appeared the diehards would have to be dead and gone before a settlement could be brought about’.

⁹⁹ *Newsletter*, 4 April 1936; *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 May 1936; *Northern Whig*, 16 March 1936

¹⁰⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, 17 March 1937

February 1938, the NACA was addressed by former Irish Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, JJ Walsh, who applauded the association 'for keeping the national banner floating'.¹⁰¹

Some months before the Sydney games, the Dominions Office clarified with its various representatives that for official British purposes the title Irish Free State was to be replaced by Éire or Ireland and Downing Street also insisted that the title United Kingdom *and* Northern Ireland be used officially to 'avoid referring to Ireland when references to Éire are intended'.¹⁰² Likewise, under British prompting, the International Olympic Committee had by then moved to adopt Éire. Though Irish representatives wrote to them to affirm their official title was Ireland when using the English language and, if using Irish/Gaelic, then Éire, this was ignored by the IOC. Correspondence continued throughout 1938 on the name of the Irish Olympic team, and concerning the new Irish athletics association that accepted the political boundary rule. Reflecting their recognized status, NIAAA minutes record that in February 1938 they were asked by the British Amateur Athletics Board (retitled so in November 1937)¹⁰³ for their viewpoint in relation to the international affiliation of this new Irish Free State body.¹⁰⁴ This was the same month during which the third Empire Games were held.

These games were not as strongly supported across the Empire. Lengthy travel to Australia, high costs and the need for extended leave for competitors were explanatory

¹⁰¹ Griffin, p.145.

¹⁰² NA HO 45/15758

¹⁰³ AAA Papers, 2 November 1937

¹⁰⁴ PRONI D4282/A/1/1

factors. Even so, the diplomatic and propaganda benefits were recognized, however belatedly, by Dawson Bates who, having received representation from the NIAAA,¹⁰⁵ sanctioned leave for RUC athletes to compete. The official 1938 programme lists thirteen visiting teams, including Northern Ireland but, as in 1934, 'Ireland' competed in lawn bowls.¹⁰⁶ The Irish Free State Bowling League was invited to participate but did not accept owing to prohibitive travel costs. It voted to change its title to the Bowling Association of Ireland,¹⁰⁷ Éire and the Southern Section having also been considered. This sport was among a list of eight on the 1938 programme that included athletics, swimming, cycling, boxing, rowing, diving, and wrestling.

A photograph of the Northern Ireland athletics team was included in the official 1938 report (image nine). This team included Shillington, also a 1934 competitor. He had first competed under the NACA before being selected by the NIAAA.¹⁰⁸ Chairman of the BEG Council for England, James Leigh-Wood, wrote to the NIAAA 'urging the desirability of having Northern Ireland represented at the games'.¹⁰⁹ He also wrote to Lord Craigavon on 13th August 1937 to seek his support for granting extended leave to two RUC officers (Haire and Clarke),¹¹⁰ who were to form part of the British travel contingent to Australia. Initially, the participation of RUC members was not regarded

¹⁰⁵ PRONI D4282/A/1/1

¹⁰⁶ The *Sydney Morning Herald* (9 Feb 1938) recorded official results for an Irish singles bowls player and the Irish team, under the title Ireland, was listed in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 18 October 1937 as including members from Belfast, Ballymena and Dundonald.

¹⁰⁷ *Irish Times* 3 Feb 1938

¹⁰⁸ *Ireland's Saturday Night*, 28 August 1937; PRONI D4282/A/1/1

¹⁰⁹ *Ireland's Saturday Night*, 31 July 1937

¹¹⁰ PRONI RUC CAB/9/G/45/1

by Dawson Bates as being ‘in the public interest’, given that their services would be lost for a prolonged period. He concluded that:

the representation from the RUC could not be sufficiently numerous to be effective *from the point of view of propaganda* [...] their identity would be simply submerged in the very large number of competitors who will take part in these Games' [and he did] 'not think it right that the public should be deprived of the services of these men for a period of perhaps more than four months.'¹¹¹

But political pressure was exerted on him and on the Prime Minister. At question time in the Stormont House of Commons on October 20th, Dawson Bates was asked about his decision by Mr Midgley, of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, who highlighted the ‘honour and prestige which would accrue through Northern Ireland’s participation [that would] far outweigh the value of the services that the men might contribute in the interim period’.¹¹² And having replied to Leigh-Wood to explain that various reasons prevented the release of RUC personnel, including the issue of extended leave, Craigavon's secretary wrote some weeks later to revise this view.¹¹³ Between August and November 1937, Dawson Bates was also lobbied by the NIAAA¹¹⁴ and it was

¹¹¹ PRONI RUC CAB/9/G/45/1, 30 August. Emphasis added.

¹¹² *Newsletter*, 21 October 1937.

¹¹³ PRONI RUC CAB/9/G/45/1, 31 August, 15 November

¹¹⁴ PRONI D4282/A/1/1/, Minutes 4 November 1937; *Ireland’s Saturday Night*, 27 November 1937.

As reported in the *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 September 1937, the NIAAA had also agreed that members of the Northern Ireland government would be approached individually by them, ‘made conversant with the urgent need of a properly equipped sports ground and asked to reinforce the claim of association’.

This report also noted that Shillington had been nominated to represent Northern Ireland. *Ireland’s Saturday Night* and the *Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner* (11 September 1937) similarly reported that

finally agreed that the Northern Ireland team would travel to Australia with the English and Scottish teams.¹¹⁵

This sportcraft was reported in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 5 November 1937 under the headline ‘Police Athletes for the Empire Games – Decision of Ministry’ and in the *Newsletter* on the same day. A message from the NIAAA President, Major Baird, to the athletes was printed in *Ireland’s Saturday Night*, on 27 November 1937, which reaffirmed their symbolic representational value and read: ‘I have every confidence that the athletes selected from Ulster will do all they can to achieve it [success] and to uphold the proud prestige of the province [...] the honour of Northern Ireland is safe in their keeping’. In the same paper it was also reported that ‘Northern Ireland will thus be able to participate in the Empire Games, and there is no doubt her representatives will worthily uphold the prestige and sporting traditions of the province’. The Prime Minister also sent a telegram to Leigh-Wood wishing good luck to ‘Ulster’s contingent and the other representatives of the homeland on their departure for Australia’.¹¹⁶

The 1938 souvenir programme records the flag of Northern Ireland on a flagstaff at the Games village. In the opening ceremony, teams lined up behind flags and the oath of allegiance was sworn to the monarch. The ‘athletic form’ of the three members of the Northern Ireland team was outlined in one press report under the byline ‘Ulster

Stormont MPs would be canvassed by NIAAA members on the question of an athletics stadium in Belfast.

¹¹⁵ *Newsletter*, 20 September 1937

¹¹⁶ *Newsletter*, 4 December 1937; *Northern Whig*, 4 December 1937

competitors'.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere in the same newspaper was a celebration of the 'loyal sentiment of Ulster, which so much prizes its place within the Empire [...] Not one of the 500 Empire athletes now ready for the fray in Sydney represents Southern Ireland'. The *Larne Times* reported the attendance of an Ulster representative, MP Lieutenant Colonel Gordon, at the pageant to mark the opening of the 150th celebrations of New South Wales, held on the same day as the Empire Games finals.¹¹⁸ Field athlete, Clarke, was reported to have been 'outclassed' in the javelin and Haire was forced to retire in the half-mile heat owing to 'a recent indisposition'.¹¹⁹

At the conclusion of the games, it was acknowledged by the athletics writer, 'Spiked Shoe', in *Ireland's Saturday Night* that the Northern Ireland representatives 'were up against better men'.¹²⁰ This writer also lauded the 'capable display' of Shillington, who placed sixth in the final of the hop, step and jump. One year later, the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) issued over 500,000 free labels/stamps bearing the slogan 'Ulster Within the Empire'. These were pasted to the backs of envelopes and parcels in accordance with a post office ruling,¹²¹ and were dispatched from Northern Ireland to counter an 'anti-Ulster propaganda' move by Northern nationalists who had already used a similar label bearing the words 'Partition Must Go'.¹²² Sir Wilson Hungerford, MP, secretary of the Propaganda Committee of the Ulster Unionist Council was quoted

¹¹⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 February 1938

¹¹⁸ 1 January 1938

¹¹⁹ *Newsletter*, 7 February 1938; *Northern Whig*, 7 February 1938

¹²⁰ 19 February 1938

¹²¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 January 1939

¹²² *Irish Independent*, 21 December 1938; *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 December 1938.

in the *Belfast Newsletter* as saying: ‘The stamps define Ulster’s position clearly ... and will let the people across the water know that we are part of the United Kingdom’.¹²³ The use of these labels was considered a ‘move in the right direction’ by the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council.¹²⁴ Such was the demand for them that a reprint was ordered in February, the *Belfast Newsletter* noting that requests for supplies had also come from Unionist headquarters in Dublin.¹²⁵

The outbreak of World War Two led to the suspension of all international sport. But the British Empire Games Federation, which was dominated by the AAA, had already expressed a disinclination to participate in Olympic Games held in any country at war.¹²⁶ The London ‘Austerity’ Olympics in 1948 signaled the relaunch of the Olympic movement after this hiatus and the growing role of sport in international relations.

Image Nine: Northern Ireland athletics team 1938

Image Ten: Haire and Shillington, Northern Ireland

Conclusion

Collectively, the British Empire Games of the 1930s were used to underline and reinforce Empire solidarity. The choice of Canadian, British, and Australian host cities reflected this. The games also reveal how centralized sports authorities often governed in their own interest, sharing beliefs, conventions, ideas, and practices. At the heart of

¹²³ *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 January 1939.

¹²⁴ *Belfast Newsletter*, 17 January 1939.

¹²⁵ 22 February 1939

¹²⁶ *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 February 1938

this were questions of national identity that, in the Irish case, led to a hardening of the sportive border in athletics. These issues were signalled in official pronouncements from national and international sports bodies. But Stormont leaders also intervened to cement both their identity and place within the United Kingdom, their right to sportive jurisdiction and their contribution to empire. National symbols such as flags, emblems and flags also played a key role in these expressions of identity.¹²⁷

In discussions between northern and southern athletics bodies concerning an all-island team and a unified sports body, the way had been paved for the adoption of the old Irish flag – a golden harp on a blue background. This was the flag of azure or sky blue, also known as St Patrick's Blue, and worn by the team of the Irish Football Association (Belfast) from 1882 until 1931, and by the Football Association of Ireland Free State team as their change strip at the 1924 Olympics. The harp was one of few symbols that survived centuries of colonial relations and had a twofold function. In its crowned form, it was a dynastic icon of incorporation into the Empire, having first appeared on coinage in Ireland in the mid 1500s.¹²⁸ Uncrowned, it was a symbol of ancient Gaelic heritage nationalism but it also 'carried a rich array of ideological associations and a history of adoption and dismissal' at particular historical moments.¹²⁹ During World War One,

¹²⁷ M. Dawson, 'Acting global, thinking local: "Liquid imperialism" and the multiple meanings of the 1954 British Empire & Commonwealth Games', in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 23, 1 (2006), pp 3-27.

¹²⁸ A. Jackson, *The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland, and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1701-2007* (Oxford, 2012, p.38).

¹²⁹ E. Cullen, 'Summoning her children to which flag?', in *History Ireland*, 24, 6 (2016), pp 32-34.

the harp flag became tied to Home Rule, imperialism and to the British Army's recruitment efforts.¹³⁰

Such issues reappeared in discussions concerning the 1930 Hamilton Games. Irish Olympic Council President, JJ Keane, also an executive member of the international committee, saw 'no reason why [...] a flag should make any difference to a man (sic) who wins for his country'.¹³¹ Thus, the adoption of the harp flag (on either a blue or green background) for the 1930 Games can be seen as an attempt to project an inclusive vision. The same can be said of Rowlette who, as noted above, felt that separate northern representation could be incorporated into the Irish Olympic Council. By 1938, however, clear lines had been drawn in terms of state formation and the flag, emblem and title of Northern Ireland were clearly delineated in all Empire Games material. Subsequently, the team title, Great Britain and Northern Ireland, was formally adopted at the 1948 Olympics to counter the continued claims of the NACA and Irish Olympic Council to all-island jurisdiction.¹³² Moving in a different direction, and reflecting the heterogeneity of Irish unionism, was the Irish Rugby Football Union whose international matches were then played in Dublin and Belfast. In 1925, they adopted a flag which incorporated four provinces with the shamrock logo.¹³³

¹³⁰ Cullen, *op cit.*

¹³¹ *Irish Times*, 6 July 1928

¹³² It was not coincidental that this occurred in 1948, and again in Melbourne in 1956, due to the influence exerted by the British within international sport.

¹³³ See NAI DFA GR 1489, 16 December 1930 as one illustration of attempts to 'avoid anything in the nature of partition' within rugby; E. van Esbeck, *The Story of Irish Rugby* (London, 1986).

This paper has explored the historical interconnected practices of state formation, national identity, and sport in three novel ways: via consideration of the British Empire Games, Ireland's involvement in these and the use of original archival and documentary material. In this way, it contributes to knowledge on modern Irish formation,¹³⁴ and to the sportcraft practiced by politicians and sports officials alike. It is clear from archival evidence presented here that, by the late 1920s and into the 1930s, government officials and sports administrators had already recognized the propaganda functions and utility of sport to state formation in Northern Ireland and to issues of political control, jurisdiction, and territorial boundary. Sport played a propaganda role in the new Northern Ireland but also for the Irish Free State. While the beliefs of these northern and southern male elites may have differed concerning the acceptance of partition – political and sportive – nonetheless their actions were driven by similar motives of nationalism and nationhood.

¹³⁴ D. Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (London, 1995); M. Cronin and J. Regan (eds.) *Ireland: The Politics of Independence, 1922-49* (London, 2000); J. Coakley, 'National territories and cultural frontiers: Conflicts of principle in the formation of states in Europe', in *West European Politics*, 5, 4 (1982): pp 34-49.