



'Sport and Irish Migration: New Perspectives on -its History and Development'

Heffernan, C. (2021). 'Sport and Irish Migration: New Perspectives on -its History and Development'. *Immigrants and Minorities*, 39(1), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2021.1995361>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Immigrants and Minorities

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 31/10/2021

DOI:
[10.1080/02619288.2021.1995361](https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2021.1995361)

Document Version
Author Accepted version

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‘Sport and Irish Migration: New perspectives on its history and development.’
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Introduction

In 2021 mixed martial arts superstar Conor McGregor will fight Phillipine boxer Manny Pacquiao, a former World Champion at a record eight different weights, and the current WBA Welterweight Super Champion, in an exhibition boxing match in the Middle East.¹ Perhaps the best known Irish athlete of his generation, McGregor’s reputation, and status, has long generated controversy inside and outside his home country. McGregor dropped from fourth to twenty-first in the Forbes rich list of the world’s highest paid athletes in 2019, despite having earned an estimated \$47 million dollars that year, with Northern Ireland-born golfer Rory McIlroy the only other Irish representative in the top 100, placed at number thirty-two.² Dublin-born McGregor is never far from controversy with his ability to attract global attention through his brash nature, quick knockouts, self-acclaimed early retirements, lavish lifestyle and public skirmishes with the law in a manner befitting many previous fighting champions. Nor is he the first Irish emigrant to earn acclaim and wealth for his sporting prowess, having begun as an apprentice plumber before quitting, and, following temporary unemployment, taking up an Ultimate Fighting Championship career in 2013.³ While McGregor continues to divide public opinion through his often unsavoury behaviour, what is unquestionable is his financial success, which has been primarily generated through hard work in the gym. Without question, McGregor’s success, inside and outside of sport, has had a profound local and global impact on perceptions of Irish sport. It is no surprise that MMA gyms have increased in size and distribution across the island of Ireland in the past decade. Nor is it a surprise that McGregor’s pugilistic style has re-iterated now centuries old debates about some sort of innate fighting proficiency found among Irishmen. For historians of sport and diaspora, McGregor’s impact reiterates the importance of Irishmen and women as brand ambassadors for Irishness.

McGregor’s profile, in its own way, serves as inspiration for the present issue. Put differently, the attention given to McGregor, and, to a lesser extent, world champion boxers Carl Frampton and Katie Taylor, provides an opportune time to reflect on the historical records of Irish athletes and the diaspora across the nineteenth and twentieth-century. Studies on sport and the Irish

¹ *Irish Times*, 26 Sept. 2020.

² *Irish Independent*, 13 June 2019.

³ *The Guardian*, 27 Aug. 2017.

diaspora have grown rapidly in recent years but much work remains to be done, especially concerning individual athletes and sporting entrepreneurs. In assessing the role of a number of other Irish emigrants who contributed to the development of key aspects of sport through their athletic or administrative involvement, this special edition of *Immigrants and Minorities* focuses on sport within the Irish Diaspora and will add significantly to this strand of history. McGregor's success, regardless of his personal life, serve as a timely reminder that Irish athletes can, and do, exert a great influence in world sport. Drawing on the work of some of the leading historians on Irish sport over the past two decades, alongside newer voices, this issue examines the role played by Irish emigrants in sporting associations as players, managers, administrators, entrepreneurs and supporters around the world. In doing so, the special edition addresses issues of nationalism, social class, popular culture and gender and ties them into the field of emigration and sport. In the past, a great deal of work on the Irish Diaspora has focused on the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) as a focal point of Irish identity in foreign lands. The reasons for this are perhaps obvious. Within a decade of the GAA's foundation in 1884, sporting tours were held in the United States and it is fair to say that the GAA's connection with the Irish diaspora has not wavered since then.⁴ Across the course of the twentieth-century the GAA has proved pivotal in maintaining links between emigrants and Ireland in far flung corners of the globe. While studies of the GAA have done much to advance understandings of the Irish diaspora and the importance of sport, they have tended to neglect the role of other hubs of émigré identity.⁵

Seeking to expand this area of research, the present collection focuses more so on previously understudied areas including, but not limited to, soccer scholarships, pedestrianism, sports writing and a series of other pursuits. It is within these areas that the fullness of the Irish emigrant and sporting experience can truly be found. The GAA was and is an important hub of Irish identity around the world. The present collection builds on the findings and frameworks found in previous studies to showcase the diversity of sports Irishmen and women excelled in. Where the GAA is discussed, its importance is situated in newer approaches to identity and social mobilisation. Done in this way, the special edition will stress the fact that there was no one diaspora experience, nor one sporting diaspora, but rather numerous approaches and

⁴ See Mike Cronin, 'The Gaelic Athletic Association's Invasion of America, 1888: Travel Narratives, Microhistory and the Irish American 'Other'' in *Sport in History*, vol. 27, no.2 (2007), pp. 190-216.

⁵ Ibid. See also Frances Harkin, 'Where would we be without the GAA?: Gaelic games and Irishness in London,' *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2018), pp. 55-66.

outcomes operating within the same cultural space and time. It is envisioned then that the edition will be of interest to those working in Irish and sporting history, some of whom have previously published in *Immigrants and Minorities* (see Cronin's 1998 article among others) as well as those working on the various ways in which emigrant communities mobilise around singular popular and leisure pursuits.

Mainstream studies of the history of Irish emigration have failed to adequately address the role played by sport in the lives of the Irish who settled abroad as temporary or permanent residents. The work of Fitzpatrick (1984), Sullivan (1992), Kenny (2000), Delaney and MacRaild (2007) and Delaney (2013) can, however, act as a framework for a more specialised study of sport and the Irish diaspora. Despite the early twenty-first century growth of academic studies of the social history of sport in Ireland, which has seen a move away from a focus on the GAA and its political linkage, the Irish Diaspora has not been fully assessed. Darby and Hassan's edited collection (2007) is an important starting point, but focuses heavily on the GAA. In addition, a number of monographs have added to the historiography of sport and Irish migration. Darby's 2009 work on the GAA in the United States of America was a pioneering study in many regards, while Casway's study of Ed Delahanty has shed light on Irish-American involvement in baseball in the nineteenth century (2006). Redmond (2014) has also looked at the growth of Irish participation in sport there in the years from during the years when America was the primary destination for Irish emigrants. More recently, Curran's historical work on Irish soccer players in Britain, Europe and North America (2017), along with sociological studies undertaken by McGovern (2000), Bourke (2002, 2003), Kelly (2014) and Elliott (2015) and Hunt's examination of Irish athletes in the USA (2017) are significant in drawing attention to the careers of those who have sought professional sporting career abroad and their difficulties in assimilation and in earning a living. A number of sporadic articles have also added to this genre including that of McAnallen et al (2007), Curran (2014, 2015, 2018, 2019) and Bracken (2016). Similarly a few book chapters have looked at Irish participation in US sport, including those by Wilcox (2006) and McCarthy (2006). Harkin (2014, 2018), has discussed the GAA in England to great effect, and continues this examination of the GAA in the British sporting world. This new edited collection will add to academic scholarship on sports and immigrant communities and to that of the history of migration itself.

This special edition begins with an examination of the career of Daniel O'Leary, an Irish-born emigrant who rose to success in the sport of pedestrianism – competitive walking - following

his arrival in the USA in the 1860s. One of the most popular sports of the nineteenth-century, albeit largely because of its gambling links, pedestrianism is a sport often overlooked in Irish sporting histories. This does not mean, however, that the sport is undeserving of the attention of historians. Here Thomas Hunt and Ryan Murtagh demonstrate how, despite much anti-Irish sentiment amongst sections of American society at that time, Cork-born O'Leary was able to raise his social status through his success as a walking champion on the American pedestrian circuit in the 1870s. O'Leary's success in the United States was such that he came to be adopted by the American press as a representative of the nation. Through the promotion of Richard K. Fox, an Irish emigrant also studied in this collection, O'Leary engaged in domestic and global world tours wherein he was advertised as both an Irish and an American athlete. Hunt and Murtagh draw out the complex, and confused nature, of Irish sporting identity through O'Leary's many races.

Building on Hunt and Murtagh's research, Conor Heffernan assesses the impact of Belfast-born Richard K. Fox on the *National Police Gazette* following his migration to the USA in the late nineteenth century. Fox, as has been studied elsewhere, was one of America's most successful and influential sporting entrepreneurs of the age.⁶ In the field of boxing, Fox was responsible for the re-organization of the sport through the introduction of prize belts, respectable championship bouts and the patronage of individual athletes. Thus far, historians have dealt with Fox's Irish heritage only in passing phrases and oftentimes in connection with his dealings with Irish and Irish-American pugilists. This, as Heffernan's article demonstrates, does a disservice to a man who played upon his emigrant heritage to promote Irish athletes. Here Irishness became a means of identity but also a shrewd means of advancing one's business. Through an examination of Fox's periodical, the *National Police Gazette*, newspapers and biographies, Heffernan demonstrates the centrality of his Irish identity to Fox's own sporting enterprises.

Michael KIELTY's assessment of transatlantic sporting connections in the late nineteenth century illustrates that tours of Ireland and Britain by North American soccer teams and other sporting selections were not uncommon, and in focusing primarily on the visit of a team representing Canada in 1891, highlights how these served as an important source of connectivity between those who had moved on to a different life through emigration and those who remained.

⁶ Guy Reel, *National Police Gazette and the Making of the Modern American Man, 1879-1906* (New York: Springer, 2006).

Kielty's work makes an important contribution to studies of the history of soccer in North America and also to those on remigration in the late nineteenth century and in assessing the socio-economic backgrounds of a number of players and administrators, adds greatly to work on the earliest professional footballers. In contrasting the 1891 tour with previous trips undertaken to Britain and Ireland by association football and lacrosse teams, his article also highlights the economic motivations behind these ventures. It is a welcome addition to that previously cited growing body of literature interested in Irish sporting tours, especially those interested in soccer.

The study of Irish Olympians is still in its infancy, despite the early successes of many Irish athletes.⁷ One of the few historians involved in this field, Tom Hunt, demonstrates here the importance of uncovering Ireland's Olympic pasts, especially with regard to the Irish diaspora. Here he focuses on the 1908 London Olympics as a means of studying the Irish diaspora. The first modern Olympic games took place in 1896 in Athens after several decades of campaigning by French sporting evangelist Pierre de Coubertin and others. Although symbolically successful, there was little guarantee that the spectacle would be the global phenomenon which it currently is. It is against this backdrop of uncertainty that Hunt situates the 1908 Olympics, and the involvement of Irish athletes. Reflecting the broader pattern of Irish emigration, the 1908 games witnessed Irish athletes, or those of an Irish background, represent Great Britain and Ireland, Canada and the USA. Here, Hunt examines the political and social importance of Irish representation at the Games and provides new insights into the interplay between sport, politics and emigrant identity.

The final two articles centre on the late twentieth century. In assessing the role of Irish emigrants in continental Europe, Frances Harkin assesses their impact on the growth of GAA clubs there. As previously mentioned, the role of the GAA and the Irish emigrant experience has been dealt with in great detail, and in a number of different contexts. This does not mean, however, that new insights cannot be found with Harkin's work being a testament to this fact. Studying the role that the GAA and Gaelic games play in the lives of Irish people living in Britain, which has one of the oldest Irish diaspora communities in the world, Harkin's work provides an excellent counterfoil to historical studies of the GAA abroad from other eras. Here Harkin, building on previous studies (2014, 2018) cites the GAA's dual role for Irish emigrants

⁷ A notable exception is Kevin McCarthy's *Gold Silver and Green: The Irish Olympic Journey 1896-1924* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010).

in Britain; it functions as a familiar institutional network and tangible link to ‘home’ that provides opportunities to play familiar games and engage in familiar rituals in a foreign land while simultaneously representing an identity marker to facilitate the construction, expression and maintenance of Irish identities. Whereas other contributions such as those from Hunt and Murtha, Heffernan or Hunt provide new insights into the individual athlete or entrepreneur, Harkin showcases the very real importance of the sporting club in sustaining Irish identities.

Moving across the Atlantic from London to North America, the issue ends with an evaluation of Irish migration for soccer scholarship purposes to the United States. Studying the movement of Irish students to the USA for academic as well as sporting development, Conor Curran examines an aspect of Irish soccer migration that has not yet been assessed: the recruitment of young Irish footballers by American universities to undertake soccer scholarships. Since the post-war years, Irish athletes have been attractive prospects for athletic collegiate coaches within the USA. While this has briefly discussed in the past – a point Curran address - here Curran examines the historic links, and importance, of this pathway for aspiring soccer players. Irish emigration to the United States was still a common occurrence to the United States by the mid-twentieth century, albeit more restricted through government legislation, and, as other contributions demonstrate, Irish athletes were often well received by the American sporting masses. What was less well developed, however, was the recruitment of young Irish soccer players into the American collegiate system. This began in the late 1960s through the University of South Florida and Fr Michael Devine, who had been heavily involved in underage soccer in Ireland. Beginning with Fr Devine, and those assisted in their migration by him, Curran’s article explores the informal nature of player recruitment until the 1990s when two Dublin courses were established to provide a clearer pathway into the scholarship system. Curran thus examines the creation, and later formalization, of this diasporic pathway. Bringing his study further in line with broader research on Irish emigrants, Curran stresses the importance of word of mouth suggestions and existing Irish-American networks in the recruitment of Irish athletes.

The story of the Irish sporting diaspora is still ongoing and, as Conor MacGregor’s upcoming bout suggests, highly relevant for social, cultural and diaspora scholars. The purpose of the present issue is not to provide a definitive, all-encompassing account of the Irish sporting diaspora, but rather to reignite debate in the field concerning the importance, limits, and boundaries, of the Irish emigrant experience within sport. Irish athletes have often served as

emblems for their nation and this is especially true of the nineteenth and twentieth century examples found here. Individuals, teams and institutions all served to encourage and support Irish athletes eager, or forced, to leave Ireland for other lands. Once there, Irish athletes overcame, or at times solidified, prejudices, established communities, made and lost fortunes, advanced their respective careers and, in turn, their sports. It bears repeating once more that there was no one diaspora experience for Irish emigrants but rather multiple experiences occurring simultaneously. Cognisant of this fact, the present issue explores new stories, revises old narratives and serves as a platform for ever evolving research on Irish communities and sport across the world.

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