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Rugby Union, Irish Nationalism and National Identity in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article represents part of a wider research project examining the role sport performs in the construction of identity for Irish nationalists living in Northern Ireland (northern nationalists). A common thread running through this work is the idea that rugby offers certain northern nationalists an opportunity to demonstrate a form of quasi-unionism (with Britain) in the context of Northern Ireland. In this regard rugby performs a function for northern nationalists that other sports, for a variety of reasons, do not. How northern nationalists have utilised rugby in this regard has been subject to little academic investigation, due in part to the inherent contradictions the sport is thought to contain within Irish sporting circles. Moreover, it is only in the last decade that a more heterogeneous approach to identity construction in this subject area generally has been acknowledged and followed. Prior to this the principle agency central to this analysis, nationalism, with some notable exceptions, was often crudely defined and poorly thought out. This research builds on the more sophisticated approach to the study of sport and nationalism in Northern Ireland that has emerged in recent years. This article also provides a new dimension to this debate by applying a more focused approach to the particular identity expressed by some northern nationalists involved with rugby in Northern Ireland. It reveals how nationalists use the game as a medium through which to disclose wider socio-political views, including retention of the constitutional status quo in Northern Ireland. They do so in part because, as members of a burgeoning Catholic middle-class, the comparative stability that consensual politics in Northern Ireland provides, allows for the creation of 'space' in which economic benefits for nationalists become more apparent. As a result overt alliance with counter-hegemonic practices appears to subside. Therefore the extent to which rugby can act as a cultural adjunct, on the part of certain northern nationalists, to wider constitutional and identity issues represents a recurring theme throughout this work.

Introduction

Amongst the nationalist people of Northern Ireland, defined overwhelmingly as members of the minority Catholic community, sports such as Gaelic games, association football, horse racing and boxing excite significant numbers of followers. In recent years, however, the most noteworthy changes, in terms of an increase in actual numbers participating, have occurred in the sport of rugby union. That this is the case may, upon preliminary examination, appear entirely logical. With an all-Ireland team, a league organised on a thirty-two county basis, the location of its international stadium in Dublin and an Irish side consisting of sizeable numbers of southern Catholics, rugby fulfils much of the criteria that Irish sporting nationalists seemingly desire. That said, academic study into the relationship between sport and national identity in Ireland has tended to avoid any in-depth examination of rugby union.[1] This is due to the supposed contradictions it presents in challenging the well-established dichotomy of sporting pathways thought to exist in Northern Ireland.[2] Rugby has traditionally been associated with the majority Ulster Unionist community in the Province (those who wish Northern Ireland to remain part of Britain), a situation that has led to the marginalisation of many nationalists in the sport and their subsequent reluctance to become involved as active participants.

The seminal work of John Sugden and Alan Bairner (1993) constituted the first concerted attempt at recording the social significance of sport in Northern Ireland. On the whole though, their interpretations of the sporting allegiances of different ethnic groupings in Northern Ireland were overly simplistic and monolithic. Indeed, Bairner has since engaged in a process of critical appraisal of this earlier work and his subsequent analyses offer a more sophisticated and nuanced depiction of the often complex inter-relationship between sport and national identity in Northern Ireland. That said this initial work remains a useful point of entry into the study of sport in a divided society, such as Northern Ireland, due to the continued resonance much of this analysis retains to the present day. Indeed, Sugden and Bairner's early work did much to ignite interest in the subject area and introduce new writers and perspectives to the field. Of these, the observations of Jason Tuck (2001) appear worthy of comment in the context of the ensuing analysis. Although he fails to deal specifically with the issue of northern nationalist involvement with rugby, Tuck (2001: 24) nevertheless concludes that 'rugby union does appear to have been significantly connected to the national habitus of Ireland during the post-war period. In Ireland, rugby creates a unique arena for the testing of "Irish" and "British" identity'. Tuck (2001: 24) demonstrates a subtly of analysis by highlighting the ways in which rugby allows a 'union of private and public worlds . . . when players possessing more than one "nationality" have to select an affiliation'. This discussion unfolds amid a more general examination of the symbolic role rugby performs in constructing a uniquely Irish identity for members of the 'Emerald' nation. It is this theme of how rugby operates as a site for the transformation or manipulation of identities that will be revisited and engaged with in greater depth throughout this article.

The analytical framework underpinning this research examines the construction and significance of northern nationalism. Whilst the most recent work in this area recognises and exemplifies its existence, in the main, academic writings specifically portraying the experiences of northern sporting nationalists have been rare. Although the analyses of Bairner, Tuck and Sugden and Bairner suggest the presence of different shades of nationalist opinion in Ireland and how these have become manifest through sport, work still remains in exploring fully how and why, amid all its inherent contradictions, some northern nationalists have appropriated rugby union. Furthermore, in the context of a fluid political situation in Northern Ireland during the late 1990s, what conclusions can be drawn from such activities as a means of exploring possible changes in identity construction amongst sections of the northern nationalist populous? A devolved power-sharing executive in Belfast, inaugurated in 1998 following the signing of the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement, has allowed for a greater degree of local accountability in Northern Ireland in which nationalist political representatives, including Sinn Fein, an Irish republican party with links to militant republicanism, have participated fully. With this, some nationalists, conscious of the intrinsic benefits of political stability and comparative normality, have recognised the economic advantages of broad constitutional compliance and profited accordingly. As a result, one of the defining features of the latter part of the twentieth century, continuing until the present day, has been the rise of the Catholic (nationalist) middle-class in Northern Ireland. In order to demonstrate how this situation has evolved and to contextualise subsequent empirically based discussions, it is necessary to provide a brief conceptualisation of northern nationalism.

Northern Nationalism

Jennifer Todd (1990: 31) defines northern nationalism as ‘a complex, internally differentiated ideology, based on an interrelated core of concepts which cut across and qualify each other. It has a rich and flexible conceptual structure which allows it to express divergent interests and accommodate very different political tendencies’. Thus nationalism for northern nationalists is not a single-issue demand, that is ‘a romantic desire for a united Ireland’ (Todd, 1990: 32). Instead more localised factors, such as the pursuit of equality and justice and recognition of a sense of community amongst Catholics in Northern Ireland sets northern nationalism apart from what could otherwise be termed ‘classic’ Irish nationalism:

> In effect we have here a group thust into existence (as northern Catholics and northern nationalists) by partition, against their will in a situation not of their choosing, whose interests begin to be articulated only as new options are opened and a level of self-determination becomes possible, and whose views are therefore fluid, open-ended, changeable, and hard to catch in surveys (Todd, 1990: 31).

Similarly, northern nationalism should not be understood as an all-encompassing ideology, one that somehow avoids the discord typical of even the most resolute ethnie. For the purposes of this study it is important to recognise that northern nationalism is itself a splintered ideology. There are those nationalists for whom the pursuit of justice and equality within Northern Ireland, and an acceptance on the part of Ulster Unionists of the legitimacy of a nationalist presence in the north, is sufficent to meet their needs. Yet, as Bairner (2001: 80) argues, there are others who hold what might be classified as a 'purer' nationalist vision which 'in the short term at least, places the cause of Irish freedom above all other considerations'.

Further complication is added to this analysis when it is revealed that none of these three standpoints are stubbornly adhered to and in fact are liable to wax and wane according to changing circumstances 'on the ground'. As if to illustrate the often paradoxical position held by northern nationalists, one need only examine the philosophy adopted by large numbers of this community during the late 1960s and early years of the following decade when it was subjected to one of the most violent and oppressive periods of the recent ethno-sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. It was during the era defined by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement, which had as its principle aim egalitarianism for the Catholic/Nationalist minority, that nationalists in Northern Ireland were forced to decide between justice and nationalist ideology and they overwhelmingly chose the former (Todd, 2001).

There remained a sizeable body of opinion within the nationalist community that favoured some form of 'internal', that is Northern Ireland, settlement (Elliott, 2000). Whereas nationalists had previously abstained from participating in the governance of Northern Ireland, certainly by the early 1970s they had taken seats at Westminster and also partaken in a power sharing, devolved assembly in Belfast that had been initiated following the signing of the Sunningdale Agreement, a forerunner to the Belfast-Good Friday Accord, in 1974. Thus, far from holding a uniform view as to their immediate or future demands, northern nationalists appeared to be tom between full participation in the workings of Northern Ireland and outright opposition to its very existence. What resulted was a greater awareness of the need for an ideological reworking of the nationalist position. In accepting its minority status, nationalism was forced to face up to the fundamental question that had shaped it since the foundation of the Northern Ireland state, co-operation or conflict with the British/Unionists. Todd (2001: 8) outlines the personal philosophy of John Hume, leader of the moderately nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.), who she claims, 'was to change the question and Europeanise the problem'. In making Europe the focus, by promoting principles of legitmacy, which demanded nationalism and reform, and crucially by rejecting the classical nationalist theory that nation and state should coincide, Hume and the S.D.L.P. sought to ensure nationalist rights through dialogue and agreement.

In recent years Hume's continued concern for liberal nationalism and a peculiar form of republicanism, which received implicit backing from the electorate through their support of the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement in May 1998, has resulted in the first sustained period of 'peace' in Northern Ireland for over thirty years. Yet in many respects what the Agreement confirmed was the existence of Northern Ireland as a legitimate political entity, very much part of the United Kingdom. Nationalists had historically expressed some degree of willingness towards accepting this compromise, albeit largely as a temporary measure ahead of Irish unity. For instance, during the early decades following the partition of Ireland in 1921 'most Catholics did not actively work against the Northern Ireland State: even though they disliked its political leaders, and there were times, like the late 1930s or the 1950s when increasing numbers would have accepted intergration into the State had they been given any encouragement' (Elliott, 2000: 384). This reluctance to portray nationalists as natural rebels in the context of Northern Ireland is a recurring theme of recent political analysis in Ireland. Throughout the 1990s the percentage of nationalists seemingly content for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom has doubled, from sixteen to 32 per cent *(Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1995-96:* 35). This commitment to the constitutional status quo has allowed for a greater 'sense of belonging' and signalled the return of nationalist self-confidence damaged by years of insecurity arising from the activities of militant republicanism (Todd, 2001).

The impact of these developments upon political attitudes is becoming increasingly clear. As individuals assume a greater stake in society, regardless of their supposed aspirations, modernisation and conservatism become guiding doctrines. Less than thirty years ago, the Catholic middle-class in Northern Ireland was comparatively insignificant, largely consisting of those who serviced, and thus benefitted from, their own community (Elliott, 2000). Whereas recent research concludes that Catholics remain underepresented in many well-paid professions, nevertheless growing numbers of this community are finding their ways into high-status positions. Currently, almost two-thirds of the annual intake of trainee solicitors and barristers are Catholics, whilst similar studies show that Catholics comprise almost thirty per cent of managers and senior administrators in both the public and private sectors (Fair Employment Commission for Northern Ireland, 1993). Moreover, whilst the Northern Ireland Civil Service had historically been seen as the most recognisable source of Catholic discrimination in the workplace, nowadays 35 per cent of its senior managers are Catholics, which is broadly representative of the wider community. Most significant of all is the changing composition of the graduate pool eminating from Northern Ireland's two universities. In particular, whereas Queen's University had an over seventy per cent Protestant enrolement in 1970, presently it is Catholics who are in the majority as the growing trend for young Protestant school-leavers to attend higher education institutions in Britain becomes more prevalent (Fair Employment Commission for Northern Ireland, 1993). A combination of these factors has contributed to a changing social landscape in Northern Ireland, one that has taken increased account of the rise to prominance of the minority community. As Finnuola O'Connor (1993: 17) concludes: 'The altered Catholic social class profile is due to a combination of direct rule administration, fair employment legislation, expanded employment in education, health and welfare, and increased educational opportunity'.

The two key questions to be explored further are as follows. Firstly, why, and there is already some indication of this from the preceeding discussion, are increasing numbers of northern nationalists embracing rugby union, a sport with clear links to the Protestant (unionist) middle-classes in Northern Ireland? Secondly, what role does rugby union perform for the northern nationalist community in the modern era that other sports, such as association football and Gaelic games, both eminently more popular activities in terms of participation numbers, fail to achieve as convincingly? Whilst the answers to these two questions form the focus of the remainder of this discussion, at this point it is important to provide a brief history of the formation and significance of rugby throughout Ireland in order to properly contextualise the ensuing analysis.

The Development of Rugby in Ireland

The ancient game of Caid indicates the predisposition of some early Irish people towards a ball carrying game, similar in form to modern day rugby. In particular, one version of this activity, Field Caid, popular in the ninth century, was played within a defined space and between a predetermined number of players. The suggestion that rugby somehow evolved out of Field Caid, however, is dispelled by a prominent Irish rugby historian (Van Esbeck, 1999). Whilst the exact origins of the game in Ireland remain a matter of historical debate, the impact of Trinity College rugby football club upon the promotion of rugby in Ireland, particularly amongst the middle and upper classes, is widely recognised (West, 1991). Formed in 1854, it was the influence of students returning from public schools in England, specifically Cheltenham and Rugby, that was most significant in the initial primacy of the university club. A short time later rugby began to gain a foothold in the schools of Ireland. By 1867, Trinity second XV were playing matches against St. Columba's College and Hume High Street, two Leinster schools and, importantly for the game in the north of the country, Royal School, Dungannon. Following the adoption of a set of official rules in 1868, rugby football began to spread quickly throughout Ireland. The Wanderers club in 1869, Lansdowne in 1872, Dungannon the following year and Queens College, Cork in 1874 demonstrated that the game had assumed a truly national dimension (Van Esbeck 1999).

Significantly, rugby in Belfast struggled to attract the interest it had elsewhere in the country, even at North of Ireland Cricket Club, formed in 1859. It was to be a further nine years, 1868 to be precise, before a rugby division of the North club was established, The following year Queens University, Belfast fielded a team and shortly after other sides, representing various parts of Belfast, including Windsor, Ulster, Belmont, Lisburn and Albion, were playing regular rugby matches. In spite of its growing popularity, rugby continued to be seen as the almost exclusive preserve of one section of the Irish people. According to Sugden and Bairner (1993: 54) 'Some nationalists were attracted to the game, but the vast majority were not and the development of rugby depended to a huge extent on the participation of Protestants or, at the very least, those who identified with the union'.

The interest in rugby union, however, was now sufficiently strong to facilitate the formation, on 12 December 1874, of the Irish Football Union, the game's first governing body. A separate entity, the Northern Football Union, established two months later, administered rugby in the north, an indication that even at this stage, relationships between Belfast and Dublin were less than harmonious. By February 1879, however, any problems had been resolved as both bodies fused to form the Irish Rugby Football Union. What this early 'split' suggests is that rugby in Ireland was exposed to the same political and nationalistic issues that other sports were to encounter some years later, despite the valiant efforts of the game's administrators to ensure rugby remained apolitical. In the words of Sean Diffley (1973: 46), 'Like rugby unions everywhere the Irish have an almost paranoiac attitude towards anything that would involve it in any sort of controversy'. Thus, following the partition of Ireland in 1922, issues relating to the playing of rugby on a Sunday, the flying of the Irish national flag during home international matches in Dublin, and the playing of *Amhran na bhFiann* (The Soldiers Song) as the national anthem of choice, came increasingly to the fore.[3] Commenting on the role of the rugby authorities, Sugden and Bairner (1993: 56) claim that, 'at no time has the game been wholly free from political controversy and rugby's role in helping to consolidate certain political and cultural attitudes should never be overlooked'.

Catholic participation in rugby throughout the first half of the twentieth century remained sporadic. Many factors had contributed to this, not least the Gaelic Athletic Association's (G.A.A.) ban on so-called 'foreign' games. The founding rationale of the G.A.A., closely tied to that of Irish political nationalism, dismissed rugby as 'anti-nationalist', which seriously inhibited the growth of the game throughout the country. Even following the removal of this 87 year-old prohibition in 1972, Catholic involvement in rugby in Northern Ireland remained low. That said, rugby had always occupied something of a contradictory role in Irish sporting life. Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, and indeed to a large extent this remains the case in Northern Ireland, the sport had been seen as culturally Anglicised It is somewhat remarkable therefore that amongst the main instigators of the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland, designed to achieve independence from Britain by force, were active participants in the game of rugby. Kevin Barry was a member of the University College Dublin team during this time, whilst Eamonn deValera was selected as a replacement full back for Ireland and had publicly recommended rugby as a game ideally suited to the Irish temperament (Diffley, 1973). More ironic perhaps was the involvement of Michael Cusack and Synge McCarthy, two founding patrons of the G.A.A., with rugby throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. Their participation in the sport appears to contradict the belief that rugby represented the antithesis to nationalism as it was defined during this critical period in Irish political and cultural history (Van Esbeck, 1999). As the next part of this discussion makes clear, however, the significant rise in the numbers of Catholics playing rugby in Northern Ireland, largely dating from the early 1970s, can be attributed to one specific aspect of life there – social class.

Northern Nationalists, Rugby and the Rise of the Catholic Middle-Class in Northern Ireland

Contemporary research into the impact of social class in Northern Ireland concludes that there is 'considerable evidence to suggest that in terms of social interaction the middle classes are more integrated than the working classes' (Bryan, 2000: 14). Bairner (1996: 331) goes further to claim that factors such as class appear to dilute the ability of sport to act as a coherent focal point for the projection of national sentiments, claiming: 'sport's capacity to help forge national identities is weakened by the fact that sport is also intimately bound up with those divisions that are a feature of even the most homegenous nation-state'. This research also highlights the possibility that identities projected through the medium of sport may not equate to political or constitutional views implied through the composition or construction of representative sports teams. This explains why Ulster Unionists, for example, are able to countenance their wish for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, and hence British, with their willingness to represent an all-Ireland rugby team, which alludes to the presence of a sovereign and independent Irish nation-state. Conversely it may permit some northern nationalists to play rugby in Northern Ireland, a context in which the sport remains the preserve of those keen to retain links with Britain, yet still aspire towards the achievement of a united Ireland in broader political terms. In reality, however, the latter's willingness to become involved with rugby appears to reveal a wider form of quasi-unionism, a passive retention of the status quo in Northern Ireland.

Northern nationalists who are involved in rugby in Northern Ireland, either as players or officials, typically fall into one of the following categories that I have identified elsewhere (Hassan, 2001). First, the growth of the Catholic middle-class, in part a response to political developments in Northern Ireland, has inevitably led to Catholics being socialised into rugby, on occasions at their own behest. Second, changes to policies governing the provision of physical education and games within Catholic grammar schools has resulted in rugby been played by young Catholic boys attending secondary school throughout the Province. In 1997 St. Columbs College, Deny, the largest Catholic boys grammar school in Northern Ireland with over 1500 students, became the first Catholic school to enter the premier rugby tournament for second level institutions, the Schools Cup, albeit with only limited success. A third factor relates to developments in wider society that have allowed Catholics to aspire to higher positions of responsibility, often in the workplace. This, in turn, has brought them into contact with individuals whose cultural interests are more narrowly defined and often closely associated with golf or rugby, two sports ostensibly played by members of the middle-classes. Finally, some nationalists have become involved in rugby as a result of a pro-active campaign on the part of individual clubs to recruit them into the game. In some cases the motivation has been to address the religious imbalance evident at a club or, more positively, recognition of the skills some Catholics possess, arising from their participation in Gaelic football, which can be transferred to rugby. There are some well-publicised examples of clubs administering 'cross-community' projects in Northern Ireland, ostensibly to attract Catholic boys to play rugby. In February 2000, Ballymena R.F.C. launched a mini-rugby programme, successfully enticing Catholic schoolchildren from the area into their ranks. In April 2002, Belfast Harlequins R.F.C. embarked on a particularly ambitious programme of cross community activity, as they sought to promote rugby in secondary schools throughout the staunchly republican district of west Belfast. According to Jimmy Davidson, former Irish International team coach, 'I think clubs recognise that there is a huge pool of talent that has remained untapped. The skills that are required by the Gaelic boys, the handling attributes for example, are ideal for rugby. I recall players (from the Gaelic code) such as Moss Dineen who went on to play for Ireland' (Interview with author, 24 April 1999).

Whatever the exact reasons for their participation in the sport, 'in certain cases once Catholics join a club they almost immediately shed any sense of an exclusively nationalist identity' (Hassan 2001: 264). Some are even reluctant to describe themselves as Irish, as if to do so would be to promote a very narrow definition of this term. As Brian Graham (1997: 7) states:

> National identity is created in particular social, historical and political contexts and, as such, cannot be interpreted as a fixed entity; rather it is a situated, socially constructed narrative capable of being read in conflicting ways at any one time and of being transformed through time.

In recognising their minority status in the sport, the reluctance of some nationalists to highlight particular expressions of Irishness, and thus abide by the established conventions of the majority unionist membership, is perhaps not totally unexpected. By exercising an overwhelmingly unionist ethos and amid the reality of a largely Protestant officialdom, the Ulster Branch of the I.R.F.U. promotes a form of unionist hegemony that belies its involvement with an all-Ireland association. There are some exceptions, such as City of Derry Rugby

Football Club (R.F.C.) which has a disproportionate number of Catholics involved in the club and where a more 'nationalistesque' environment permeates. This is, in part, a reflection of the context in which it operates, as Catholics constitute a majority of those who live in Northern Ireland's 'second' city, Derry. City of Derry R.F.C. also has an extremely progressive cross-community strategy, one that recently received the unlikely support of Mitchel McLaughlin, Sinn Fein Assembly member for the area. In congratulating the club upon the occasion of its Ulster Senior Cup success in 1999, Mr. McLaughlin spoke of the excellent work the club had done in attracting cross-community support and personnel *(The Irish News,* 25 Oct. 1999: 5).

Upon initial examination, rugby appears to be a sport that offers solace for those who abhor the divisive nature of association football and G.A.A. in Northern Ireland. Yet it remains so, in this context, only to the extent that nationalists in particular must be prepared to compromise on their perceived political ambitions and in turn are 'rewarded' by unionist willingness to countenance an all-Ireland team. In practice this has resulted in an overt policy of assimilation by nationalists playing and administering rugby in Northern Ireland (Hassan, 2001). Such individuals can definitely not be described as 'radical' in their nationalist viewpoints. Mark McFeeley, a middle-class Catholic lawyer practising in Derry, typifies the approach adopted by many nationalists who, like him, have become socialised into rugby. 'I have a big house and a earn a good living. To be perfectly honest, I don't think a united Ireland is going to give me anything I don't already have' (Interview with the author, 2 Sept. 1999). McFeeley (1999) evidently personifies those middle-class northern nationalists who have located a newly found confidence and affluence in Northern Ireland, something they were denied for the greater part of the twentieth century. They are keen to promote this but are wary of being reviled by their own community, many of whom ironically appear more comfortable cast in the role of a member of the oppressed minority. In such cases nationalist participation in rugby symbolises a 'staged withdrawal' from the underclass and is often endorsed by educated young men who have experienced the benefits of inclusion beyond the boundaries of their own communities. Unquestionably they are viewed with suspicion by the wider nationalist population, on the one level because of their involvement with a 'foreign sport' but equally because they see themselves as middle-class and therefore 'above' their fellow people, O'Connor (1993: 41) cites the feelings of a number of nationalists who deeply resent the new-found status of their co-religionists, quoting quotes one respondent as saying 'some accuse this new class of being hedonistic, not fired with any strong ethos, much more materialistic than anything else, They are very much participators in the good life – and that doesn't make for radicals'.

Nationalist Support for the Ulster Rugby Team

It could be argued that the most significant sporting achievement in Northern Ireland during 1999 was the victory of the Ulster rugby team over Colomiers in the European Cup Final played at Lansdowne Road, Dublin on 31 January (Bairner, 2001). Not only did this victory reflect favourably upon the team itself, it was also thought to have proved useful in attracting a greater cross-community involvement in the sport generally. Whilst it achieved this aim in a measured, albeit temporary, fashion some commentators appeared to attach far greater significance to the success of the side than seemed warranted.[4] Gerry Thornley (1999) was one of the few authors to bring a sense of realism to the impact one match could have in bringing two entrenched communities closer together. His claim that 'soon after the dust has settled today, life will go on in Ulster and the extremists will poison the Ulster air, if nothing else it is glorious escapism' was a considered appreciation of the backdrop against which the game was played (Thornley, 1999: 1). In fact, although a sizeable number of Catholics did travel to Dublin to watch the team play, they remained very much in the minority as, unsurprisingly, most of the 'home' support eminated from the Ulster Unionist tradition. Once again, according to Bairner (2001: 35), it was members of the emerging Catholic middle-classes that 'showed most interest in the fortunes of the Ulster rugby team and created the impression of a people united by a shared sporting enterprise. Many working-class nationalists in the north, however, found little cause to cheer on "the Ulster boys"'.

The presence at the final of Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, however, was viewed as significant in the context of the signing of the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement one year earlier. Despite assuming the provincial title of Ulster, incorporating not only the six counties of Northern Ireland but also three counties from the Republic of Ireland, Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan, the Ulster team was a *de facto* Northern Irish side. No players with any links to the latter counties played on the team. The support from the border areas generally remained negligble and rugby, with the exception of a small number of clubs in Donegal and Monaghan, has virtually no tradition in any of the three counties located south of the border. Precisely why two prominent members of Sinn Fein, a party that has campaigned vigorously for the disolutionment of Northern Ireland, should join with many thousands of Ulster Unionists, some from the loyalist tradition, to support such a team, was a question many working class nationalists and republicans appeared to ask, Sinn Fein's attempt to hold its traditional republican support base at one with a new generation of nationalists who dislike and distrust loyalism, has been a defining feature of latter day Northern Irish politics. It involves a constrant rhetorical 'balancing act' on the part of Sinn Fein spokespeople, such as Barry McElduff, the party's spokesperson on sport. 'Adams and McGuinness went to the rugby match because it was an Ulster team, an Irish team, which was doing exceedingly well in a European context and it was natural that all political and civic leaders identified with that success' (Interview with author, 24 June 1999).

More likely the Sinn Fein leadership were wary of the potential damage to the party's credibility if they did not attend the match. Politicians of all shades are conscious of the reflective benefits of sporting success, but in this case republicanism as an ideology was in a state of flux (Todd, 1999). Others have offered a sober appraisal of the presence of both Sinn Fein and their Ulster Unionist counterparts at the final:

> There is no doubt that Ulster now has a huge momentum and it has even been suggested that their match has united communities in the north of Ireland. That's a tad fanciful. David Trimble, the First Minister, will attend the match on Saturday and the vast majority of those travelling south will be from Protestant backgrounds. There is some way to go yet before Trimble and Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness dance together (English, 1999: 8).

That said the changing political climate in Northern Ireland, despite enjoying far from unilateral support, has created space in which previously unlikely relationships have been formed. In certain cases it has allowed those with apparently entrenched views on constitutional, political or identity issues to at least demonstrate their willingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of other views. Ultimately it has underlined once more the splintered nature of northern nationalism, divisions seemingly more transparent through the medium of sport. In this case rugby demonstrates how it retains the capacity, moreso than other 'mainstream' sports, to highlight differences within ethnic groupings. As such, the claim by Mike Cronin (1999: 22) that the game 'does not make a huge impact on any understanding of Irish nationalism or national identity' may need to be revisited in the light of evolving circumstances in Northern Ireland.

It is still too early to state convincingly that increased nationalist participation in rugby throughout Northern Ireland will necessarily equate to long term shifts on constitutional matters, that is, a lessening in support for the realisation of a united Ireland. What this paper does show, however, is that some nationalists, keen to promote their comparative wealth and comfort, are exploring new avenues for their cultural and sporting outlets and this has drawn them in the direction of rugby. They do so in the knowledge that they continue to represent a minority in the context of Northern Ireland, where the game remains dominated by those sympathetic to the union with Britain. Perhaps inevitably therefore, such nationalists are themselves adopting the norms and values associated with the majority, in order to preserve group cohesiveness and demonstrate further evidence of their ability to step outside the narrowly defined ethno-sectarian boundaries that define social and political life in Northern Ireland. One result of this has been a less potent demand for a change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as the economic and social benefits of a cessation of violence, a welcome aspect of political agreement there, are enjoyed most by the middle-classes.

Conclusion

The function rugby has performed for some northern nationalists, in proving a cultural adjunct to evolving political, constitutional and identity issues, has been highlighted and discussed at some length in this study. This article has also identified the unique ethos of rugby in Northern Ireland and how this has helped shape a definition of Irishness for those involved in the game, including increasing numbers of Catholics, which is less politically determined than either association football or Gaelic sports. In so doing, it breaks comparatively new ground in the social study of sport in Northern Ireland as only Bairner (2001) and Hassan (2001) had previously undertaken any analysis of this subject matter. This may have been because rugby has never been easily located within the apparently dicotomised sporting landscape of Northern Ireland. Yet, what this work demonstrates is that even a cursory analysis of some of the issues surrounding nationalist participation in rugby union, reveals significant social patterns and motivations. In a wider sense it adds to a growing body of work that recognises the splintered nature of northern nationalism. Both these points need to be appreciated by those examining the relationship between sport and national identity in Northern Ireland. Nationalists who play rugby are, by definition, unique. Yet members of this community are finding their way into the sport in ever increasing numbers through one of a number of avenues open to them. Many nationalists who do so adopt the cultural persona of rugby in Northern Ireland, one of a largely self-satisfying, compliant acceptance of the constitutional status quo. As such it is the increased acceptance of the legitmacy of the State in Northern Ireland by middle-class nationalists, that has become one of the defining features of latter day life in Northern Ireland. The fact that many are involved in rugby merely reveals a cultural manifestation of deeper, albeit still evolving, social and political identities.

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