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Rugby in Munster: a social and cultural history

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years of endeavouring to write women into Irish history, that task still presents such challenges.

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Rugby in Munster: a social and cultural history, by Liam O'Callaghan, Cork, Cork University Press, 2011, 286 pp., €39.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781859184806

This history of Munster rugby reminds the author of the arrival of the Roman Legion in Gaul and the reports of the commanders back to Rome. They gave graphic accounts of the legion's skirmishes with the fierce Celts and many tribes who defended the area with fanatical and bloodthirsty zeal. They even commended individual natives who 'excelled in physical violent effort'.

O'Callaghan is to be praised for the assembly of a myriad of isolated pieces of information and facts while relating them in a stream of words conducive to continuity and comprehension. His portrayal of Goulding and McMullan as the twin towers of the advent of rugby in Cork and to a lesser degree of Barrington in Limerick gives the reader an idea of the social level at which rugby was played and hence the origins of 'the sport of gentlemen'. That these three gentlemen were products of English public schools, where rugby was played, proved to be the conduit from the fields of Rugby and Cheltenham to those of Musgrave and Thomond. Soon other public school boys became involved in the game and later were joined by Irish school representatives, members of the police forces and personnel from the English garrisons of local towns. However, this led to a demise from the aristocratic social level – more pronounced in Limerick than in Cork – to an urban level influenced by inner-city and parochial classes. The lack of sufficient numbers of socialite players and the need for more competitive games accelerated this demise. Over time the grandees of former years were replaced by more plebeian types, particularly in Limerick, while Cork still held to smaller numbers but of an upper-middle-class variety. From these events grew a bitter rivalry between these cities which exists to the present day. In turn both cities hold a rebellious attitude to the governing body – the IRFU – which they regard as bigoted and condescending, even though it is their financial benefactor. O'Callaghan handles this adversity in a forgiving manner.

This social and cultural history in turn explores the expansion of rugby throughout Munster – mainly following the lines of communication provided by the railway network. The arrival in local towns of past pupils of the elite education system, taking up employment as bankers, school principals, Post Office engineers, and so forth, looking for leisure facilities and outlets for exercise, led to the formation of junior rugby clubs among other social forms. However, as these clubs had to compete with native pastimes such as 'caid' or the arrival in time of Gaelic games, a lot of them withered owing to lack of support or dearth of competition. Some did survive, yet their more proficient players found it extremely difficult to progress to a Munster team, never mind an Irish national team.

Like the schoolboy's Latin translation that 'all Gaul was quartered into three halves', Munster Rugby now had three sections – Cork, Limerick and the country areas. While the old malevolence between upper-class Cork and mundane Limerick existed, the country areas were regarded as complete outsiders. The two cities vied for Munster team places

and even exceptional country players found themselves excluded, with Cork claiming the majority of players, leading again to allegations of 'snobercrazy', as reported in the *Limerick Leader* newspaper. Equality did not arise. Also into the arena arrived the spectre of professionalism, much to the disgust of the gentry of the amateur era. Money starts to influence matters from this point forward. The author details in precise amounts the financial affairs of various clubs, gate receipts and attendances and how facilities were brought to acceptable levels by community funding and IRFU grants.

This social and cultural scene had moved totally from the era of heirs to family dynasties and agriculture lands to workers in industry, retail and manufacturing. These people worked regular hours, had leisure time and money. Attendances grew, pitches became safety conscious and eventually Musgrave and especially Thomond became the home of Munster rugby.

These improvements were achieved only by the sacrifice of local clubs and the intervention of the mistrusted IRFU. The debt that had been incurred was caused as much by the rivalry between the two cities over the establishment of grounds in each city – one not ceding primacy to the other – as to their actual needs. This was resolved by the IRFU awarding massive grants and taking ownership of both grounds. Club grounds also improved dramatically from often waterlogged fields to enclosed drained pitches. The players who joined these clubs tended to come more from working-class backgrounds as industry became more prevalent in Munster. Cork still remained the exception in that the professions supplied the majority of players to their local clubs; as stated above, Cork somehow managed to get a greater number of their players on the Munster team. This usually led to a flood of letters to the Limerick press expressing the view that to get picked for Munster you needed a hyphenated name, an Oxford twang or at least four initials to your name! The antipathy remains.

No progress of Munster rugby could be commented upon without mentioning their famous victory over the All-Blacks in 1978. This gave credence to the mystique of Thomond Park being 'a fortress' and that 'Munster rugby' was somehow different. The difference that was appearing was more to do with players' payments. Money from the UK and France (Gaul) was beginning to attract native players. Once again Munster had to dig deep, this time to retain its promising players. This they did, and O'Callaghan highlights payments of £50,000 becoming available in the early 1980s. Progress on payments, salaries and transfers continues into the twenty-first century and Munster ultimately becomes something of a superpower, especially in European Heineken Cup competitions.

In his study of Munster rugby O'Callaghan often emphasises the influence of certain personages either as administrators or active club members. These personages often served as 'stepping stones' from one social stratum to another. The famous Garryowen Club evolved in this way through a man called Stokes – a Protestant businessman educated at Rathmines public rugby players' school. His two administrative understudies were a seaman and a banker who commanded great respect from the working classes of Limerick. They later became involved in politics and served as Labour representatives. Their contacts with working-class people widened their sporting and social interests and, critical to the expansion of rugby in Limerick, was their establishment of Sunday competitions for junior clubs. This allowed workers, who were duty bound to work Saturdays, free to play on Sundays. Needless to say this was frowned upon by the Sabbath-observing elders. In Cork a similar competition was formed by two locals, namely an O'Sullivan and a Murphy. The junior clubs in Cork were under the auspices of the senior clubs where the ethos of Sunday observance held sway – and slowly Sunday matches died. However, the void was filled by the schools, and Catholic schools specifically, such as the Christian

Brothers, became very prominent. As their pupils progressed to professional status, the social status in Cork was maintained. The data on these personages are duly authenticated, and under the patronage of Stokes, and through the Garryowen Club Munster rugby prospered.

In contrast, the active members and players enjoyed fame under different headings. O'Callaghan resurrected an Obituary Notice of an emigrant who was killed in America. Praise was lavished on him by both a GAA club and a rugby club, and the point was made that 'foreign' or 'native' games did not matter to such a sportsman. In another news item the fact that a Limerick family of pig dealers amassed thirty-nine cup medals made prominent headlines.

Owing to the popularity of rugby, many players were elected counsellors and politicians, while others achieved notoriety by their fierceness or brute strength on the field. Under professionalism European adulation was gained by those Munster players involved with the Irish team or in the various European competitions. In this regard perhaps one could say that O'Callaghan got lost by the number each claiming 'his place in the sun'.

In conclusion, the reviewer must relate an episode relative to Munster rugby of a personal encounter while on holiday in south-west France. On stopping at a restaurant situated among the pine forests of Les Landes region, the proprietor, on discovering that I was from Ireland, became quite excited. 'Ah' he said, developing a forward crouching movement, 'McLaughlin, the Munster man, carrying and dragging four Frenchmen on his back fighting the last three metres to the line – TRY!' Somewhere in the psychic of this native of Gaul a chord was struck as he recognised those who excelled in physical violent effort!

To anybody interested in sport and the evolution of sport, this book gives an illuminating insight into the work required to ferret out the facts, present them in a readable manner and retain the pleasure that sport provides for countless people. It is to be recommended without hesitation.

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Celtic revival? The rise, fall and renewal of global Ireland, by Sean Kay, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 264 pp., €39.95, £24.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4422-1109-4

I found that this book fell between a number of stools. The author is a respected academic (Professor of Politics and International Relations at Ohio Wesleyan University and an adviser on aspects of Irish policy to President Obama). He has a strong publication track record and wrote the book as a visiting scholar at the Institute for British and Irish Studies at UCD in 2010. As such, the book has very valuable insights into Irish culture and some very interesting reflections from interviews with key politicians, academics and observers. On the other hand, the style of the book is less than objective; the author has clear family connections to Ireland and clearly loves the country (he is also connected to Micheal Martin (now leader of Fianna Fáil (80))). This makes for a curious mix. While clearly well researched, the book is less academic in nature, with no formal citations or footnotes. Curiously, there is an index but no bibliography. Some of the book's observations are grounded in elite interviews while others seem grounded in little other than pub talk and