Illus 1. The Croke All Ireland Football Challenge Cup.  
(Photo: National Museum of Ireland)
The Croke All Ireland Football Challenge Cup

ETIENNE RYNNE AND MARCUS DE BÜRCA

In 1896 Archbishop T. W. Croke, patron of the Gaelic Athletic Association, presented that sporting body with two All Ireland Challenge Cups, one for hurling and the other for football. Both Cups vanished from public sight shortly before or after the last Croke Cup finals were played in 1916. The football trophy has recently re-appeared and is here described and discussed, and its history outlined.

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About thirty years ago a Dublin antique dealer acquired a rather grubby and slightly battered silvered brass bowl in Cork, portion of a G.A.A. trophy. Knowing that his friend and colleague, Mr. Anthony (Tony) Honan, Antique Dealer, Abbey Street, Ennis, had a genuine interest in G.A.A. activities, he gave it to him in 1980. This bowl (Illus. 1 and 2) is, in fact, of no little historical importance, being the major portion of one of the two All Ireland Challenge Cups presented to the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1896 by its first patron, the Most Reverend Dr. T. W. Croke, Archbishop of Cashel, namely that for football. Both Croke Cups, that for hurling as well as that for football, had long gone missing and been presumed lost without trace. Indeed, they were little more than an historical, almost legendary, memory and, apparently, even their very appearance was no longer known, nor was there any full record of their various winners.

In 1984, the centenary year of the foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association, many commemorative exhibitions and events were held throughout the country. Mr. Honan kindly lent his prized possession, the trophy in question, for an exhibition mounted by the Erin Óg G.A.A. Club, Ennis, and though it did not perhaps excite the attention it deserved it was noticed. Later in the year, when the exhibition was over, Mr. Kyran Kennedy, a friend of both Mr. Honan and myself, brought it to me with the owner's permission to inform the National Museum of Ireland.1

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On November the 1st, 1884, at a meeting held in the Commercial (now Hayes Hotel), Thurles, the Gaelic Athletic Association was founded—primarily to promote field athletics rather than “the hurling of the little ball with hockey sticks or staves” or “handball to play without the walls”, or even “foot-ball kicking according to Irish rules”? The meeting was called by Michael Cusack, an Irish-speaking teacher (and former cricketer!) from Carron, in the heart of the Burren, Co. Clare. Cusack was the instigator and founder of the G.A.A. and Archbishop Croke its first patron—is it not fitting that the G.A.A.'s, indeed Ireland’s, major playing field should be called Croke Park and that

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1I wish to take this opportunity to gratefully thank my friends Tony Honan and Kyran Kennedy for giving me this opportunity to record the Cup, and also to thank Marcus de Bürca for contributing the historical account of the Croke Cups which follows, and the National Museum for the illustrations (photographer Brendan Doyle) accompanying this article.

2The first two quotes are from the statutes of Galway for 1529, the third from Archbishop Croke's letter of acceptance to be patron of the G.A.A.

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Illus. 2. The Croke All Ireland Football Challenge Cup, back showing names of winners from 1896 to 1914 and base showing secondary hole.
the largest stand there should be called the Cusack Stand? As one authority has put it: "The G.A.A. would probably not have survived its early years without Croke's guidance and advice, but, on the other hand, it is almost certain that it would never have started at all without the inspiration of Cusack's ebullient personality". 3

Although promoting field athletics was the original primary aim of the Association, as can be immediately realised from its title, Cusack's commitment to Ireland's team games had always been to the fore. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the Dublin Hurling Club, founded by Cusack in 1883, must be regarded as "the parent of the G.A.A." founded a year later. 4 It would, nonetheless, appear that it was not until the presentation of the Croke Cups in July 1896, and the resultant competitions, that the national games of hurling and 'Gaelic' football really began to take precedence in G.A.A. activities.

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The surviving portion of the Cup consists of an ornamented and inscribed two-handled brass bowl, hammered into shape and silvered on its external surface. Slightly oval in plan, 24.5cm. \times 21.5cm. in height. There is a roughly hand-cut hole, 5.1cm. \times 4.9cm., in its base, slightly off-centre, clearly in whole or in part a secondary feature and suggesting that the vessel may at one stage been converted for use as a flower-pot; it does, however, indicate that the bowl originally must have been a composite artifact, perhaps with a pedestal-type foot. The ornament is stamped, the lettering is incised (as also is the portrait and signature of Archbishop Croke—see below), while the handles were cast and fused/soldered to the vessel.

Apart from the elegant cast handles with their cherubic heads in high relief (Illus. 3), which seem to be perhaps standard mass-produced pieces which were applied to the bowl rather than made specially for it, the ornament is simple though competent, consisting of shamrocks, foliage, dolhins, very elementary interlace, and the arms of Ireland and of the four provinces. It is interesting to note that apart from the national

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4 Greene, op. cit., p. 76, where the club's name is incorrectly given as the Civil Service Academy Hurling Club (I am grateful to Marcus de Búrca for the correction).
and provincial escutcheons, the interlaced frames rather overpower the inevitable shamrock; interesting because it is just about this time, in the late nineteenth century, that among nationalists Ireland's characteristic 'Celtic' art began to take over from the imposed-from-outside national symbols of the shamrock and its accompanying round towers, high crosses, harps, recumbent wolf-hounds, rising sun, etc.\textsuperscript{5}

Just as the craftsman was not very good at interlace (note, for instance, the mistake under the arms of Ulster in Illus. 3), he was also unsure of his Irish lettering and spelling, eschewing all accents and aspirates and mixing Roman with 'Celtic' letters; the mispelled CONAC\textsuperscript{2} above that province's arms provides a good example of his knowledge of such things.

The following is inscribed in large and well-formed letters on the trophy's front:

\begin{center}
ALL IRELAND FOOTBALL CHALLENGE CUP PRESENTED TO THE GAELIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION BY ITS PATRON THE MOST REV. T. W. CROKE ARCHBISHOP OF CASHEL 18th July 1896.
\end{center}

On the back the names of the Cup's winners from 1896 to 1914 are inscribed, though there are some curious gaps, \textit{i.e.} for 1901 to 1906 and for 1913, while the two last winners, in 1915 and 1916, are not named (but see Marcus de Burca, \textit{infra}, for the reasons for the absence of all but 1901 and 1913). The inscribed names are as follows:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
HOLDERS 1896 & HOLDERS 1907, 1908, 1909 \\
YOUNG IRELANDS, DUBLIN & BALLINA STEPHENITES \\
HOLDERS 1897 & HOLDERS 1910 \\
WEXFORD FOOTBALL CLUB & MACROOM, CO. CORK \\
HOLDERS 1898 & HOLDERS 1911 \\
GERALDINES, DUBLIN & BOHERMEEEN MEATH \\
HOLDERS, 1899 & HOLDERS 1912 \\
GERALDINES, DUBLIN & DUBLIN \\
HOLDERS 1900 & HOLDERS 1914 \\
GERALDINES, DUBLIN & LEES CORK
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Illus. 4. Front of the Croke Football Cup showing portrait of Archbishop Croke.

Illus. 5. Back of the Croke Football Cup showing Archbishop Croke’s signature.
Around the rim of the vessel in large letters is written:

(front) • ALL • IRELAND • FOOTBALL •
(back) • CHALLENGE • CUP •

Archbishop Croke is personally represented on the trophy by two medallions, one on the front containing a fine portrait (Illus. 4) and the other on the back containing his archepiscopal signature, T. W. Croke preceded by a cross (Illus. 5). The two medallions are flanked by dolphins, are surmounted by a low-relief mitre, and have the arms of Cashel below; underneath the arms, running on to the underside of the Bowl, is an attractive shamrock-enhanced celtic cross (Illus. 6).

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Illus. 6. Celtic cross below arms of Cashel on the Croke Football Cup.

The year 1895 marked the silver jubilee of Archbishop Croke's episcopal appointment. He had succeeded to the see of Cashel in 1875, having been bishop of Auckland in New Zealand from 1870 to 1874.

The year 1895 also marked a turning-point in the fortunes of the Gaelic Athletic Association, of which Croke was the first and principal patron. According to the founder of the Association, Michael Cusack, the archbishop's famous letter of December 1884, accepting its invitation to become its patron, had been of immense importance in winning support for the G.A.A. in its crucial first year.

From its foundation Croke had been a guiding spirit of the G.A.A. In 1887, when the Association split into two opposing factions after the Fenian take-over at the annual
convention of that autumn, it was Croke who with Michael Davitt (also a patron) brought the two sides together and arranged the so-called (and successful) "reconstruction convention" of January 1888.

More recently, when the G.A.A. had succeeded in regaining its strength after the disastrous effect on it of the Parnell Split, Croke had played a vital "backroom" role in the adoption by the Association of a politically-neutral constitution in 1895. For the first time since the Parnell Split he began once more to attend major Gaelic fixtures.

It was characteristic of this intensely political and nationally-minded churchman that the principal non-religious gesture he made for his own episcopal silver jubilee was to present two trophies to the G.A.A. As the inscription on the football trophy shows, the Croke Cups do not appear to have been handed over until July 1896. Such was the respect in which the donor was held in the Association, however, that the Croke Cups competitions at once assumed an importance in the Gaelic calendar second only to the All Ireland championships in both its codes. It should be noted that both events—the annual (inter-county) championship and the challenge competition (for the Croke Cups)—were run separately.

The first winners of the Croke Cups in 1896 were Clare in hurling and Dublin in football. These 1896 Croke finals were, however, not played until 1897, a year's delay being then a common feature of G.A.A. competitions. Clare, fielding 12 Tulla hurlers out of 17 (those being the days of 17-a-side on Gaelic teams) defeated Wexford (the Crosstown club). Dublin, a mainly Young Ireland selection that included six from Lucan, defeated Tipperary, a mainly Arravale Rovers selection from Tipperary town—the club that had won the All Ireland football championship of 1895 in 1896.

In the 1897 Croke finals played in 1899 (a two-year delay this time!) victory went to Limerick (an all Kilfinnane selection) in hurling and to Wexford in football. The losers were Kilkenny and Cork, respectively. Then in 1898 the central council of the G.A.A. "attached" the Croke Cups to the All Ireland championships. The first winners under this new arrangement were Tipperary (Moycarkey) in hurling, and Dublin (Geraldines) in football. As the recently discovered Cup shows, the latter club won the Croke Cup three years in succession.

By now the G.A.A. was no less than three years in arrears with its major events. In 1898 Croke finals were not played until February 1901 (football) and March 1901 (hurling). Under the system begun in 1898, of course, the 1900 and 1901 winners of the Croke Cups were also the All Ireland champions in each code—Tipperary (1900) and Dublin (1901) in football, and Tipperary (1900) and London (1901) in hurling. The 1900 Tipperary hurling team included Tom Semple, after whom the stadium in Thurles is named, and the defeated London football teams in both 1900 and 1901 included Sam Maguire, after whom the All Ireland football trophy is named.

This new dual-competition arrangement lasted only five years. The 1902 annual congress of the G.A.A. decided to present the Croke Cups for a new inter-provincial competition. But, because of delays in recovering possession of the cups (another frequent problem for the early G.A.A.), it was the autumn of 1904 before the new system began. At Thurles in November, Tipperary (representing Munster) defeated Dublin (representing Leinster) in hurling, and in football Munster (represented by Cork) defeated Leinster (represented by Dublin).

However, only some months later again, in March 1905, the G.A.A.'s central council decided to revert to inter-county competitions for the Croke Cups. The winners for 1905—in finals not played until January 1906 (in football) and May 1906 (in hurling)—were Kildare and Cork, respectively. That same year (1906) saw the presentation by the Great Southern
and Western Railway company of the Railway Shields (forerunners of the Railway Cups, still played for on St. Patrick’s Day) for inter-provincial competitions. Presumably because of the introduction of the Railway Shield competitions, the Croke Cup was restored for competition in its original format of separate inter-county competitions from the following year until 1916.

The last Croke Cup finals were played in Athlone on April 9, 1916—two weeks before the Rising of that Easter. Dublin won both trophies, accounting for Clare in hurling and Roscommon (one of that county’s rare appearances in a major G.A.A. game before the 1940s) in football. Gate receipts that day totalled £100. The reason why the winning team of the football trophy in 1913 is not recorded on the recently recovered Cup is not known, but the absence of the 1915 and 1916 winners can perhaps be explained: the finding of the Cup in the 1950s in Cork suggests that in 1915 the G.A.A. authorities may have once again experienced difficulty in recovering possession.

In 1923 the Liam McCarthy Cup, called after a former chairman of the London G.A.A. board, was first presented to Limerick, winners of the 1921 All Ireland hurling final. Not until 1928, when Kildare defeated Cavan in that year’s All Ireland football final (Cavan’s first appearance in that event) was the now coveted Sam Maguire Cup, also named after a former London G.A.A. official, first presented. The unsettled state of the country between 1917 and 1923 was apparently the major factor in the discontinuance of the Croke or other All Ireland Cups during that period.

MARCUS DE BÚRCA