

# Limerick GAA in 1916

by Tom Toomey

**B**y the start of 1916 the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was well established in County Limerick since its foundation thirty two years previously. It is ironic that one of the strongest features of the association, its sense of parochial identity, was also one of its weaknesses when it came to putting its best foot forward, especially at inter-county level.

This parochial spirit ensured that clubs sought every advantage over each other. Matches were often delayed with disagreements over venues and referees. With some clubs it was a delaying tactic to ensure that students, especially clerical students, were available to play while they were home from college. Thus, some clubs that were very tardy about fulfilling fixture earlier in the year would all of a sudden become most anxious to facilitate the 'fixtures committee' to maximise the availability of their students whether they were lay or clerical. Sometimes, as in 1913, the county championships for that year were cancelled altogether in the hope that the county might get back on an even keel. By 1915 these best intentions had come to naught and the championships, especially the Senior Hurling Championship, were hopelessly behind schedule. Fedamore refused to play Cloughaun in the 1915 County Final, which was due to be played in July 1916, because it was fixed for the Market's Field which they maintained gave the city team an unfair advantage. The County Board lost patience and Cloughaun were granted a bloodless victory in the form of a walk over. In a sense this was the straw that broke the camel's back and the Fedamore club was eventually suspended for a period of twelve months when they refused to reimburse the County Board for its losses incurred in promoting the final.

Not daunted, Fedamore made contact with an organisation called the NAGAC (National Association of Gaelic Athletic Clubs) that had broken away from the GAA and set up in opposition

to it. The Fedamore club was immediately affiliated to the new body and were joined in the breakaway by their near neighbours, Croom which also seemed to have some grievance with the Limerick County Board. Thus it transpired that in 1916 Limerick was represented by two county teams.

In the Munster Senior Hurling Championship run under GAA rules Limerick were drawn against Clare in the first round. This match was played at Listowel on the 16 July 1916 and the Limerick men were victorious by 3-3 to 3-0. To put this victory in context it should be borne in mind that Clare had won the All-Ireland in 1914. The Munster semi-final was not played until 10 September when Limerick encountered Tipperary at Dungarvan. The match was a very even hard fought contest and as it entered its final minutes, locked at 2-4 apiece John 'Tyler' Mackey, the Limerick captain, broke through the Tipperary defence and when it seemed that he must score the decisive goal his shot rocketed back off the post into play, where it was cleared by the Tipperary captain, Johnny Lahy, and in a flash the ball was in the Limerick net at the opposite end. From the puck out Tipperary attacked again and they fired home another goal to give the scoreboard a surreal look. It was no consolation to the Shannonsiders that Tipperary went on to win the All-Ireland that year and that the game against Limerick was the only close contest that they got.



Willie Hough, from Monagea, who captained Limerick to two All-Ireland Hurling titles, played for his native county from 1915 until he retired in 1929.

Meanwhile under NAGAC rules the Fedamore/Croom combination travelled to Dublin on 29 October and disposed of a Dublin selection at Kichham Park in what was termed an All-Ireland semi-final, under NAGAC rules. The score in this match was 5-2 to 3-1. This qualified them for the NAGAC All-Ireland final which was played at Wexford Park on 10 December against what was regarded as a very strong Wexford combination involving the strongest clubs in that county including Crossabeg, Curraclloe and Castlebridge. At half-time the Wexford team led, in a very low scoring game, by 0-1 to 0-0. Shortly after half

time Mick Harrington of Fedamore equalised for Limerick and when the Limerick captain, Dick O'Donnell of Grange shot home a goal the Limerick men were in the ascendancy and they went on to win the first All-Ireland under NAGAC rules by 1-1 to 0-1.<sup>1</sup>

In the County Championship for 1916, under GAA rules, Cloughaun overwhelmed Caherline by a score 8-3 to 2-1. This final was not played until 1 July 1917. This match was played at Pallaskeenry. An interesting inclusion in the Cloughaun line-up was Paddy Champion who had captained Laois to win their one and only All-Ireland in 1915. Champion had moved to Limerick and decided to throw in his lot with Cloughaun.

In the County Senior Football Championship for 1916 the title was won by Kilmallock. It was the southern town's third senior football title exactly 45 years before it was to win its first Senior Hurling title in 1961. One of the mainstays of the 1916 team was a future IRA leader and government minister, Sean Moylan who was a native of Kilmallock and although he was reared in Newmarket, County Cork he came back to Kilmallock to serve his apprenticeship as a carpenter and while there he joined the Irish Volunteers and he also played football with his native town.

In the Junior grades Granagh recorded a victory when they defeated the Castleconnell second string by 3-5 to 3-1. One of the outstanding players for Granagh was Michael O'Shea who was later killed in the War of Independence at Coolruss near Bruree, in May 1921.

Probably the most dramatic incident involving the GAA in Limerick during the period after the 1916 Rising had very little to do with on field activity but it had a lot to do with the growing split between the RIC and Nationalist Ireland. The alienation of the RIC was a process to which the police themselves were to be major contributors. In November 1916, when two RIC men demanded free admission to a hurling match between Bruff and Cloughaun that was being played at Pallasgreen, they were refused admission unless they paid the admission charge. The two policemen then withdrew and returned later with eight other members of the force. For his audacity in demanding

the entrance charge the Secretary of the County Board of the GAA, James Ryan, was arrested and taken to the barracks where he was held for some time. Ryan was later charged, before a court-martial held at Richmond Barracks in Dublin, with obstructing the police and sentenced to three months in jail. His solicitor Mr Hugh O'Brien-Moran in the course of his defence of James Ryan, quoted from some documents which were considered confidential by the police authorities.<sup>2</sup> The documents that he quoted from stated that the RIC were instructed to pay for admission to matches, if requested to do so. While O'Brien-Moran was technically correct the fact was that he was quoting from documents that he was not entitled to have in his possession. As a consequence O'Brien-Moran found himself charged with being in possession of confidential documents and of failing to reveal how he came to be in possession of these documents. He was also tried by court-martial at Richmond Barracks in Dublin in January 1917 and, despite a very able defence, mounted by Tim Healy and John Power, Hugh O'Brien-Moran was found guilty and sentenced to six months in prison without hard labour. James Ryan was also imprisoned, during this time, although it is difficult enough to know what law he had broken. It was actions such as these, where it was felt that ordinary RIC men had acted with unwarranted arrogance that contributed to the police and their families being ostracized as much as any politically motivated actions. It was in March 1917 when O'Brien-Moran was released from Mountjoy and when he arrived back in Limerick on 23 March he was accorded a very enthusiastic welcome by a large crowd.

The year 1916 was an extraordinary one in terms of Gaelic Games. The county was represented by two separate county teams affiliated to two separate organisations and the secretary of the County Board of the GAA was jailed for demanding that two policemen pay the admission fee to a match like everyone else. It was indeed an extraordinary year.

#### References

- 1 In 1917, membership of the NAGAC grew dramatically in County Limerick and twelve clubs were affiliated. In the County Senior Championship, surprise packets, South Liberties, defeated Fedamore and Croom to win the title. Limerick went on to retain their All-Ireland title again defeating Wexford in the only All-Ireland Hurling final ever played at the Markets Field when they won on the score of 5-2 to 1-1. In October 1918, Michael Considine of Ballysheedy was killed in a gold medal tournament involving South Liberties and Croom. Although Considine's death was totally accidental it did bring home the futility of two parallel organisations running separate county hurling teams. At a meeting convened by Fr Stephen Connolly in December 1918 the NAGAC, in Limerick, disbanded and the twelve clubs involved returned to the GAA.
- 2 Hugh O'Brien-Moran (1886- 1950) was a son of James Hishon Moran a solicitor with strong Nationalist credentials. James H Moran had also been jailed during the Land War for making a seditious speech at Ballyneety in 1889. He was a close friend of William O'Brien, who was unmarried and stood as Godfather to Moran's son, hence the O'Brien which was used as a form of Christian name. Hugh O'Brien Moran went on to become the State Solicitor for the Limerick area. He lived at Landscape House near Clonlara, County Clare. -Information received from a family document per David O'Mahony, grandson to Hugh O'Brien-Moran.



Old time hurling