

Catholic, Male and Working-class: The Evolution of the Hurling Club into a Wide-Ranging Irish-Argentine Institution (1920-1980)

By Ronnie Quinn



Game of hurling in Mercedes, 1917
(Hurling Club collection)

The Hurling Club of Buenos Aires presents an eloquent case study for the researcher of Diasporic Irish identities. Established by an initial group of enthusiastic young men - most of them with Roman Catholic and urban middle-class backgrounds - the Club never attracted the traditional rural population of wealthier Irish immigrants or their families. With the support of Roman Catholic missionaries to the Irish in Argentina, hurling was introduced in this country by the writer William Bulfin and other nationalists shortly after the foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ireland. This article is an account of the different events that led to the foundation of the Club, and its further development from the restricted Irish Catholic social circle of employees of the British companies in Buenos Aires to its current status as an inclusive and prominent supporter of rugby, field hockey and other sports.

Introduction

From the mid-1850s, there was a rapid spread in Ireland of organised sports of English origin, in particular cricket. This coincided with major land-reform and an agitation towards self-government in the form of the Home Rule movement. Allied to this was the increase in literacy and transportation links, which made it easier to distribute British goods. A logical reaction to these events was a growing feeling that a distinctive sense of Irish culture was being

slowly eroded. Archbishop Croke of Cashel, a leading member of the Irish Roman Catholic hierarchy, voiced his indignation 'by the ugly and irritating fact that we are importing from England not only her manufactured goods, but her fashions, her accents, her vicious literature, her music, her dances and her manifold mannerisms, her games and her pastimes, to the utter discredit of our own grand national sports, to the sore humiliation, as I believe, of every genuine son and daughter of the old land' (Mandel 1979: 100-101). In November 1884 the

Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was founded in Thurles in County Tipperary to revive and nurture traditional Irish pastimes such as hurling [1] and a local variant of football.

As Whelan (1993) postulates, there were historically two variants of the game of hurling: *iomán* [2] a summer game which was played in the southern part of Ireland where the ball could be handled or carried on the hurley and *camán*, which was akin to modern field hockey in that it did not allow handling of the ball. As in England with other traditional sports, *iomán* was patronised by the gentry as a spectator and gambling sport, associated with fairs and other public gatherings. They picked the teams, arranged the hurling greens and supervised the matches, which were frequently organised as gambling events. 'Landlord patronage was essential to the well-being of the southern game; once it was removed, the structures it supported crumbled and the game collapsed into shapeless anarchy' (Whelan 1993: 29). Other factors also played a part in its demise, including political turbulence, modernisation and the dislocating impact of the potato famine. By the mid-nineteenth century the game had virtually disappeared, only remaining in a few pockets, including Cork city, South East Galway and north of Wexford town. It was to be the southern version *iomán* which would form the template for the organised game of hurling.

Such was the rapid spread of the organisation that three to four years after the GAA's foundation, hurling made its first appearance in Argentina. Generally it has been viewed that political nationalism was the primary reason for the rapid spread of the organisation. Whilst it is impossible to ignore the important contribution that it made to the dissemination of the sport, recent work by historians such as Cronin (1998) has argued that other factors led to the growth of the GAA including 'codification, fair play, muscular Christianity' (Cronin 1998: 89), which are similar reasons given for the spread of British sports. But there may be broader social and cultural reasons for this as well, especially in the Diaspora. We examine below how hurling initially helped a section of the Irish-Argentine community form a distinct identity differentiating them from others in the English-

speaking community, as well as from the wider community.



Jim Hoare (left), F. Gaynor and J. Gaynor, of the Federation of Hurling, 1927
(Hurling Club collection)

Introducing Hurling in Argentina

The first record of hurling in Argentina is from 1887 and 1888, three to four years after the founding of the GAA, when Irish immigrants and those of Irish descent began playing the game in Mercedes [3] and near the Passionist monastery of Saint Paul in Capitán Sarmiento. [4] It is likely that the games being played were largely un-codified and not competitive in nature (King & Darby 2007: 430). No information exists as to the motivation of the first players of hurling or their country of origin. It was not until May 1900 that the first attempts were made at organising and promoting the game when an exhibition game was played in the lands of the Irish Catholic Association in the district of Caballito, which is now a public square known as Plaza Irlanda. It would appear that the key instigator was William Bulfin (1864-1910) of Birr, County Offaly, who was editor of the weekly newspaper for the Irish community, *The Southern Cross*, which became an important organ for promoting the game. Indeed over the course of the early 1900s there were many

articles explaining the rules and nuances of hurling.



The Fahy Boys, c. 1926
(Hurling Club collection)

The first 'official' match took place in July of the same year, between teams from two districts of the city of Buenos Aires, Palermo and Almagro, though the game had to be limited to nine players per team, rather than the usual seventeen, due to the shortage of hurleys. The following month the Buenos Aires Hurling Club was established with James Patrick Harte (d. 1932) of County Cork elected as its first president. For all intents and purposes it was to 'be institutionally and officially a branch of the GAA' (King & Darby 2007: 431). Games were played most weekends and received good coverage in the local press including the Argentine daily, *La Nación*.

Generally those that played hurling in the early days were urban middle-class workers who had settled in the western districts of the city of Buenos Aires, principally Villa Devoto, Belgrano, Flores and Caballito, and worked for such firms as Swift, [5] Agar Cross, [6] Duperial, [7] and the railroads, or were clerks for the insurance companies and banks. In the rural areas it tended to be more popular among labourers rather than landed Irish-Argentines. Not only was the game likely to appeal to these social groups, but it was also heavily promoted by the Roman Catholic Church as a way of nurturing identity and ensuring the preservation of religious adherence in a social and commercial environment dominated by Protestantism.

Following the end of World War One, the importation of hurleys resumed and there was a revival of the sport. In August 1920, Miguel Ballesty (1876-1950) of Salto, son of County Westmeath immigrants, convened a meeting with delegates from four of the most prominent hurling clubs in the country: Buenos Aires Hurling Club, Mercedes, Bearna Baoghail [8] and Wanderers. At the first meeting it was decided to create a commission, which subsequently became the Argentine Federation of Hurling, to examine the feasibility of renting, on a long-term basis, a dedicated space where the game could be played. Hitherto, hurling clubs had rented football fields and other sports fields on an ad-hoc basis. The first committee was formed by Miguel Ballesty (president); S. Farrell (secretary); Jack Dowling (treasurer); J. Clinton, P. Murtagh, P.J. O'Reilly, E. Ennis and M. Kennedy (committee members) .

Initially the committee rented the grounds of Club Singer, located at Alberdi 400 in the district of Boedo, which was accessible by the new metro. On 21 October 1921 a special game was played in Mercedes in honor of Laurence Ginnell, diplomatic envoy of the Irish Republic who was visiting the country. Another game that would go down in the folklore of the club took place on 8 October 1922 between Irish-born players and another composed of Irish-Argentines in which the Irish-Argentines convincingly defeated their opponents (The Southern Cross 1975:58). The game itself was a re-run of another game that was played in 1914 just before the outbreak of World War One.

A short time afterwards the committee moved to the sports grounds of Banco Nación in the neighbourhood of Floresta, acquiring a longer lease. The site was redeveloped and two hurling pitches and tennis courts were built, as well as a wooden clubhouse, painted in the colours of the Irish flag: green, white and orange. Other sports played there included *pelota a paleta* and *bochas* (a type of boules). It was inaugurated on 15 August 1922 and a week later on 22 August 1922, the Argentine Federation of Hurling, the forerunner of the modern Hurling club, was founded.

After only twenty months at the Banco Nación site, the Argentine Federation of Hurling was to

move again when in April 1924, they had to vacate the site due to a road building scheme. A new ground was located in the western district of Villa Devoto, located near the intersection of Santo Tomé and Sanabria streets. Although the original intention was to buy the site, Miguel Ballesty could not convince the other committee members to agree. Some felt the ground was too remote from a transportation perspective and the area was underdeveloped, whilst others felt that it was more prudent to continue renting. Finally, it was decided to rent part of the land. In front of a large audience in Villa Devoto on 13 July 1924 the grounds were opened and blessed by Monsignor Santiago Ussher. [9] The inaugural match was between Capilla Boys and Saint Patrick's Alumni.

Some of the clubs that played hurling during the early days of the new Argentine Federation of Hurling were: Buenos Aires Hurling Club, Mercedes, Wanderers, Bearn Baoghail, La Plata Gaels, Almirante Brown Capilla Boys, Saint Patrick's Alumni, Saint Patrick's Mercedes, Fahy Boys, St. Pauls, Irish Argentines, Juniors, New Lads, Santos Lugares, [10] Club Nacional and Belgrano. There was to be a strong influence from the Catholic Church and many teams had in their ranks priests or students of the Pallotine or Passionist religious orders, who had either come from Ireland or were of Irish-Argentine descent.

The Decline of Hurling

It is generally accepted that the advent of World War Two led to the demise of hurling as it once again became impossible to import hurleys. Although the potential of sourcing wood from the Delta region north of Buenos Aires was investigated, no suitable substitute could be found to replace the strength and resilience of ash. [11] Arguably, and notwithstanding the impact of the war, the importation of hurleys would have become problematic anyway, as Argentina's economic policy moved towards import substitution industrialization, or ISI, from the 1940s onwards.

However, there were more important social factors leading to the disappearance of the game. The small numbers playing hurling and the small number of clubs led to an unacceptable level of

violence, causing much discord in the community. It was felt by the community leaders and the clergy that the only way to deal with the issue was to put an end to the playing of hurling. From that point on, hurling would only be played as an exhibition game once a year on 25 May, known locally as Revolution of May Day and a public holiday.

A Permanent Abode

In May 1941, a number of clubs that were members of the Argentine Hurling Federation came together to form the Hurling Club. It was a major challenge to integrate what had until then been a number of disparate clubs with bitter rivalries. As hurling had been abandoned, many of the ex-hurlers began to take up field hockey.

The newly formed Hurling Club was soon on the move for a second time, as a consequence of the city government's street building programme. Exasperated by the repeated need to relocate its grounds, the committee decided in late 1942 to find a site for purchase. An ambitious fundraising initiative was commenced, which included a small bond issue. By the end of 1945 the club had raised sufficient funds to enable the purchase of seven and a half hectares of what had been agricultural grazing land in the district of Hurlingham, in Greater Buenos Aires. The club was finally inaugurated on 25 May 1948 and for the first time in its history it had a permanent premises. The first official game to be played at the new grounds was a men's hockey match against the Chilean-German team, Club Deportivo Manquehue from Santiago in Chile. There was also a rugby game against the Pacific Railway & Athletic Club de Saénz Peña, now Club Atlético Ferrocarril General San Martín, which Hurling won by 8-6. The club went from strength to strength in the early 1950s.

The date of 14 February 1955 was to be an inauspicious one in the club's history, when an electrical short circuit caused a fire that burnt the wooden clubhouse to the ground. Only part of the locker room was to escape the flames. As a measure of the standing the club had achieved among the English-speaking community and indeed the wider community, there were many

acts of solidarity which helped the club get back on its feet again. Hurlingham Club [12] provided a marquee to serve as a hall and a bar and the *Círculo de Villa Devoto* sports and social club opened its doors to members of the Hurling Club so that they could use its facilities. The Pacific Railway Club organised several fundraising events to enable the re-building of the clubhouse. A group of club members who had knowledge of the construction sector, known as *Los Horneros*, [13] led the rebuilding work in what was a significant voluntary effort.

The Introduction of Rugby

In early 1941 a group of junior members of the club led by Jimmy Ussher showed an interest in forming a rugby team in the Hurling Club. They invited José Daniel Moché to a meeting to explore the feasibility of taking up rugby. Moché himself was a former player with the first division at *Olivos Rugby Club*, and had a connection to Hurling through his wife's family. A nucleus of a team began to practice the game from mid-1941 onwards under the management of Moché. To meet the requirements for affiliation to the Rugby Union of the River Plate, the predecessor of the current Union of Argentine Rugby (UAR), they needed to play a number of friendly games against affiliated clubs before they could formally seek union membership.

Their first competitive match was held on 17 May 1942 in Villa Devoto, against *Lomas Athletic Club*. Hurling's first try in competitive rugby was scored by Guillermo 'Mozo' MacAllister with Sean Sill making the first conversion. The visiting team, steeped in a long tradition of rugby, won 19-5. A second friendly took place two weeks later on 31 May 1942 against St. Andrew's College in Llavallol, Lomas de Zamora. As a novice rugby club, Hurling received much help and assistance from other clubs such as *Porteño Athletic Club* (a club which itself was founded mainly by Irish-Argentines), who allowed them to use their pitch in Palermo, as the Hurlingham site was still under development. They later also used the grounds of the Buenos Aires Cricket and Rugby Club. It would be 1948 before Hurling acquired

its own grounds, as mentioned above. Media support was also forthcoming, in particular from Hugo Mackern, a freelance journalist who worked for one of the leading English-language newspapers *The Buenos Aires Herald* and the sports magazine *El Gráfico*.



Rugby Blue vs. White - Father Fahy Centenary Celebration, 13 September 1943. (*Top row, left to right*): D. Thompson, D. Jack, F. Morrow, D. Kelly, J. Carmody, D. Fitzpatrick, S. Sills, J. Kelly, F. Colson, T. McCormack, A. Suarez, S. Shamoun, D. Farrell, J. Ferro, T. Fitzsimon, J. Laffan, T. Elliot. (*Bottom row*): Cromayne, B. Fox, G. MacLoughlin, D. MacLoughlin, E. Shanly, E. Aguirre, L. Shanly, F. Farrell, A. Geraghty, D. Lewis, R. Harten, L. McCormack
(*Hurling Club collection*)

Hurling became an official member of the River Plate Rugby Union in 1943 and began to compete in the tournament of the Third Division in the same year. It played its first official match on the grounds of *Porteño Athletic Club* on 9 May 1943 against *Kangurú Rugby Club*, losing by 17-3. In their first year they came fifth, just behind *Obras Sanitarias*. The team included South African Rybeck Elliott, who had first come to Argentina as part of the Junior Springboks in 1932.

At that time in the history of rugby union no substitution of players was allowed. Not being able to alternate meant that it would be difficult to develop the talents of the younger generation of players. Hurling overcame the problem by joining the Catholic Rugby League (LCR) in 1943, an organisation which ran in parallel to the River Plate Union. In 1945 Hurling came second in the tournament organised by the LCR.

The early 1950s was a time of great progress for the club in rugby, despite the setback of the clubhouse fire. The first junior team was created in 1953 and later that decade Hurling made its first tour at the invitation of the Tucumán institution, Lince Rugby Club, to open their new playing pitch. It also played another game with a fledgling team from the city of Concepción, Concepción Rugby Club, now Huirapuca Rugby Club. By the early 1960s the Club had started to reap rewards. In 1963 the junior team were runners-up in the UAR Reserve Division Championship. This formed the nucleus of the team that would go on to win the Third Classification in 1966 against Banco Nación, gaining promotion to the third division of the Ascenso championship. The specialist rugby magazine *Tercer Tiempo* devoted significant coverage of the ascent of Hurling in the world of rugby.

In 1980 the club embarked upon its first major tour abroad, playing five matches in Ireland and one in England. They won two matches against Galwegians Rugby Club in Galway and Malone Rugby Club Belfast, tied a game against Lansdowne Rugby Club in Dublin and lost three games against University College Cork, Limerick and Bohemians Rugby Club in Staines, London.

Excelling in Field Hockey

In June 1930 a notice was published in *The Southern Cross*, seeking players interested in playing field hockey for the Argentine Federation of Hurling, in a move orchestrated by Mary P. Richards and Tabby Gramática Brown. There was an enthusiastic response to the call and with the collaboration of Patrick (Paddy) Gramática Brown - one of the most famous referees at that time in the sport - a team christened the Golden Wings began training with a view to competing in the Women's Hockey League. The club joined the Argentine Association of Amateur Field Hockey (AAAH) and the following May made its debut in associations league against Saint Andrew's Past Pupils. The team was quick to make an impact in the sport and some time later the sports magazine *El Gráfico* published a photo of six sisters from the Fox family who played for the

Golden Wings. The ladies team won their First Division championship in 1958.

Whilst the motivation of the male club members in adopting hockey is unclear, one can identify some of the influences involved. In particular, members were already familiar with the game through the women's division 'Golden Wings'. There was also likely to have been a feeling among members that they could excel at the game given their expertise with a hurley. They began to practice and play friendlies in the latter part of 1941, and in 1942 they joined the AAAH and began to compete in its main tournament. Another group took up rugby.



The first official male field hockey game played by Hurling Club was in May 1943 against Quilmes Athletic Club 'B' team. They won the first match by 2-0 and the first goal in competitive hockey was scored by Cecilio McCormack, who some years later would become president of the AAAH. *The Standard* newspaper reported that Hurling had committed a number of unusual offences during the match, including kicking the ball with their feet. By the end of the first season the men's hockey team were crowned champions of the second division. In their first year in the premier division, they were unlucky in losing the top spot to Quilmes by a single goal. Following that, however, Hurling came to dominate Argentine hockey for the next seven years, winning the first division championship in 1949, 1950, 1951, 1953, 1954, 1955 and 1956.

Such was the club's rise to prominence in the sport that three forwards and two midfielders were chosen to be part of the hockey team that competed in the 1948 Summer Olympics in London. These were Tomás Quinn, Luis Scally, Tomás Scally, Tomás Wade and Guillermo Dolan. The goalkeeper Mario Vieytes from the Club was pre-selected, but was not included in the final list. The team travelled to London by ship, together with distinguished sportsmen such as the basketball player Oscar Furlong, and Delfor Cabrera, winner of the marathon. Their training and practice sessions were held on the ship's deck. In their first group game they lost to India 1-9 (eventual gold medal winners), won 3-2 against Spain and drew 1-1 with Austria. Overall they came second in the group, but this was insufficient to allow them to progress to the semi-finals.

The Hurling Club and Identity

The early group of predominantly male, Catholic and urban middle-class employees who started the Hurling Club in the 1920s resisted the Anglophile attitudes typical of many contemporary Irish and Argentine landed families. Though hurling originally represented a factor of differentiation from these other groups, it also led to insularity. The adoption of the more widely played sports of rugby and hockey enabled club members to assert their identity in the wider community. Whilst hurling was first viewed as masculine entertainment, perceptions began to change from the 1930s onwards, when women were not only accepted as companions of the male members, but as full

members themselves. The success of female hockey is a manifestation of this successful integration of women in the Club.

The Club still continues to successfully maintain an Irish identity, though this is being challenged through a decline in participation from members of the Irish-Argentine community and a concomitant rise in members from the wider community. The then Irish Foreign Minister Dick Spring paid an official visit to the Hurling Club in 1996 and recalled that 'it was a memorable experience to see the green jersey, complete with shamrock, worn with distinction by the players of the Hurling Club with such names as Scully (*sic*), [14] Rush and McAllister - in a match against the Rugby Club of Buenos Aires (*sic*)' (Spring, 1996). To some extent the impact on the unique identity of the club through the diminution in participation from the Irish-Argentines has been offset by the large number of touring Irish rugby clubs, other sporting clubs and official delegations from Ireland that visit the club on a regular basis. In recognition of its strong Irish-Argentine ethos and its capacity to continue the Irish-Argentine sense of identity and links with Ireland, in 2007 the Club was given a grant by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs as part of their annual grants programme to Irish community organisations in the Southern Hemisphere.

Ronnie Quinn
Member of the Hurling Club, Buenos Aires

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Athletics meeting at Santo Tomé, 1926
(*Hurling Club collection*)

Notes

- [1] Hurling is a game similar to hockey, played with a small ball and a curved wooden stick called a hurley. You may strike the ball on the ground, and, unlike hockey, in the air. You can also put the ball on your hurley and carry it.
- [2] The modern Irish language word for hurling is *iománaíocht* and a hurley stick is *camán*.
- [3] Mercedes is a town in the province of Buenos Aires. It is located 100 km west from the city of Buenos Aires and 30 km south west of Luján.
- [4] Capitán Sarmiento is a town located around 160 km north of the City of Buenos Aires.
- [5] Swift was a company set up in 1907 to export meat products to Europe.
- [6] Agar Cross began importing and selling machinery and farm equipment in 1875, later branching into windmill sales and the agrochemical sector.
- [7] Duperial is an Argentine chemical company.
- [8] *Bearna Baoghail* ('gap of danger'), refers to the moment in a siege when the fortification has been breached and the area is extremely dangerous for defenders. These words were included by Peadar Kearney in his *Soldiers Song* (1907), which in the Irish language is the national anthem of Ireland: 'Tonight we'll man the Bearna Baoghail, / In Erins cause come woe or weal, / 'Mid cannons roar and rifle's peal, / We'll chant a soldier's song.'
- [9] Santiago Martín Ussher (1867-1960), Roman Catholic priest, was born in San Andrés de Giles. He received the orders on 22 December 1894. Ussher was parish priest of Baradero and a member of the ecclesiastical courts of the Buenos Aires archdiocese. He published *Los Capellanes Irlandeses en la Colectividad Hiberno Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1954).
- [10] Translated as 'Holy Places'.
- [11] However, *Fraxinus* sp., including American and European ash, is the genus most frequently cultivated in the streets and parks of Buenos Aires.
- [12] Hurlingham Club was founded in 1888 by influential figures in the British Community led by John Ravenscroft, as a sporting and social club.
- [13] In English 'ovenbirds'.
- [14] The surname referred to should have been Scally rather than Scully.

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