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A Brief History of the Irish-American Athletic Club:
The “Winged Fists” of Celtic Park

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Thesis Advisory
Professor Gerardo Renique

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for the Degree of Master of History at the City College of New York
Preface

The research for this thesis began quite unintentionally as an exercise in intellectual curiosity in 2004, when I moved into an apartment complex called Celtic Park, in Sunnyside/Woodside, Queens. I was curious as to where the complex got its name, and when I scratched the surface, I soon discovered that Celtic Park had an incredibly rich and almost completely forgotten history, and that it was once the home of a world-renown group of athletes called the Irish-American Athletic Club, also known as the Winged Fists of Celtic Park.

As a result of my research, I have since become the founder and executive director of a non-profit historical society called the Winged Fist Organization, which is dedicated to preserving the legacy of the Irish-American Athletic Club. The Winged Fist Organization’s advisory board includes a number of prominent historians and published authors, an NYPD Police Chief, and a New York State Supreme Court Justice. Our research has been published for review on our website, www.WingedFist.org.


My research has been supported in no small part by a scholarship from the New York Irish History Roundtable, as an earlier version of this paper received the coveted John O’Connor Graduate Scholarship in 2009. Part of this research is currently being considered for publication in the academic journal of the New York Irish History Roundtable – New York Irish History.
Introduction

In 1897 the Greater New York Irish Athletic Association purchased seven-plus acres of land in the suburban farming community then known as Laurel Hill, Long Island, from George Thomson for $9,000. (In 1904, Greater New York Irish Athletic Association changed their name to the Irish-American Athletic Club). The athletic complex they built on those seven acres was called Celtic Park. For the first two decades of the 20th century, numerous world-class athletes were nurtured, trained and competed at Celtic Park, making it one of the premier track and field training facilities in the world. Even though Celtic Park was the training ground for multiple Olympic medalists and a village green for tens of thousands of Irish immigrants, like many other New York landmarks it was razed — in this case for an apartment complex – by 1931.

Construction began on Celtic Park in 1898, (in an area that has alternately been referred to as Laurel Hill, Thomson Hill, Long Island, Long Island City, and is today considered part of Woodside and Sunnyside, Queens). It wasn’t until 1901 that the park had its proper public debut: “Improvements that…resulted in the practical rebuilding and remodeling of the stands and grounds of Celtic Park” took place three years after the land was purchased, making it one of the “most completely equipped places of the kind about the city.”

The park was intentionally built on the trolley line running to Calvary Cemetery, making it convenient to access for Irish immigrants already visiting their dearly departed in the City’s largest Catholic cemetery. The clubhouse was a two story building, which included a dining room that could seat 1,000, and a basement with 12 foot high ceilings, and bowling lanes. On the second floor, there was café, dressing rooms, reception room and a private dining hall, and piazzas with views of the track and field, and the Manhattan skyline. On the west side of the grounds was an enclosed grandstand with a seating capacity of 2,500.²

“The Wilds of Long Island City”

In a sports column in The New York Times in 1934, Robert F. Kelley wrote:

“Celtic Park, out in what was then the wilds of Long Island City, was more inaccessible than Montauk Point is today to a New Yorker. All of these men worked for a living somewhere in New York City, and after an arduous day on the job, took this tiresome trip in order to engage in training.”³ While Kelley was guilty of slight hyperbole (the park was close to trolley lines that traveled from the ferry depot at the East River), he was accurate in stating that many of these athletes were “on the job,” i.e. the New York City Police Department.

² Ibid
Many of the Irish and Irish-American athletes in the I-AAC were members of the New York City Police Department. An article in *The New York Times* in 1916 asserted that of the 11,000 members of the police force, there were 4,000 who could be classified as athletes and “fully 1,000 could win high athletic honors if they entered the best amateur or professional ranks.”

Many of them had done just that. Detective Martin Sheridan of Manhattan’s First Branch Bureau won “1,000 cups and as many medals” in his thirteen years of competition. “It was not uncommon for him to win … eight or a dozen cups” during one athletic meet. He also won one bronze, three silver and five gold Olympic medals, making him the Irishman to this day to have won the most Olympic gold medals. “Patrolman Matt McGrath* of the Oak Street Station (was) an Olympic Champion, and (held) the world’s record for (throwing a) 56-pound weight” and fellow Patrolman Patrick “Babe” MacDonald, a traffic cop whose post at one time was 43rd Street and Broadway “won more than 1,000 prizes putting the 16-pound shot.”

When the Irish immigrants who formed this organization arrived in the United States, Irish immigrants were still largely distained in amateur athletic circles. Amateur athletics in New York were dominated by the almost entirely Protestant New York Athletic Club, the oldest private athletic club in the United States, which was founded in 1868. In the early 20th Century, amateur athletics were viewed as a rich man’s leisure

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activity, largely influenced by the Victorian and Edwardian perceptions of athleticism. The Irish-American Athletic Club would ultimately redefine this notion, by forming a successful athletic club that was dominated by working class athletes.

In an interview in 1931, after the sale of Celtic Park, Limerick native P.J. Conway, who was a founding member of the I-AAC and served as its’ president for twenty-seven out of thirty-two years of existence, recalled proudly the athletes who trained and competed at Celtic Park, including; “Martin Sheridan, discus thrower and all-around champion, Matt McGrath, the hammer thrower; now Police Inspector, John Flanagan, our first star hammer thrower; Mal Shepard, [sic] (Melvin Sheppard) middle distance runner; Jack Joyce and John Daly, cross-country runners; John Hayes, the Olympic Marathon champion, and many others well known to the public.”

**Gaelic Games at Celtic Park**

From its inception, Celtic Park was built to provide a venue for Gaelic games in New York City. More than twenty years before the Gaelic Athletic Association revived the ancient Taiteann games in 1924 at Croke Park in Dublin, teams with names like the Wolf Tones, the Sarsfield’s, the Maher’s and the Daly’s were engaging in the ancient Irish sports of hurling and Gaelic Football at Celtic Park in Queens. (These teams would

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eventually change their names to county names, and become part of the Irish Counties Athletic Union). The Gaelic Athletic Association frequently held American championship meets at Celtic Park.⁹

John Flanagan, Martin Sheridan and John Mitchell at the Olympic Games in St. Louis, 1904.

|Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division

**The Irish Whales**

The Irish Whales or “The Whales” was a nickname given to a group of Irish and Irish-American athletes who dominated weight-throwing events in the first two decades of the 20th Century. “This group dominated the field events, particularly throwing events, at the Amateur Athletic Union national championships and at the Olympic Games

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between 1896 and 1924.”

Some of these athletes attained a following that can be likened to modern day professional athletes. They were primarily members of the Irish-American Athletic Club or the New York Athletic Club and most were members of the New York City Police Department. They were known as such because of their athletic prowess, physical size, voracious appetites, and their impact on a generation of sports fans.

The Irish Whales included: John Jesus Flanagan, Simon Gillis, James Mitchell, Pat McDonald, Paddy Ryan, Martin Sheridan, and Matt McGrath. (What Sheridan lacked in girth, he made up for with his appetite and athletic accomplishments, nine Olympic medals in all). All but Gillis and Mitchell competed at some point for the I-AAC. “Matt McGrath was built like a wedge. He was a six-footer, but he weighed 248 pounds. John Flanagan was about the same. Simon Gillis was 6'2" and 240. Paddy Ryan was 6'5" and 296, while Pat McDonald was 6'5" and 300 pounds.”

The stereotype of the New York City Irish cop was strongly influenced by the mythic character of the Irish Whales. In their grey-blue flannel wool NYPD uniforms, these men actually looked like whales. “All of the Irish Whales used their talents to elevate their fellow Irishmen.” Their athletic prowess was heralded by the Irish, Irish-American and American press, and Irish immigrants living in the slums of New York.

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City made weekly pilgrimages to Celtic Park, in Queens, New York, the home of the Irish-American Athletic Club “to cheer on their heroic throwers.”

While it is not entirely clear when this moniker came into use, and was likely not used in the face of any of these giant men. The term “Irish Whales” seems to have first appeared in print in 1937 in John Kieran’s “Sports of the Times,” written by John Dreninger (who was substituting for Kieran, and did a brief stint with the I-AAC himself). The term was further popularized in “Sports of the Times” columns written by Arthur Daley, with the first reference to “The Whales” in 1942. On the subject of the origin of this nickname, Daley wrote:

“It was on the Olympic trip of 1912 that the ‘whale’ nickname took hold. Dan Ferris, then a cherubic little boy, recalls it with relish. ‘Those big fellows,’ he related, ‘all sat at the same table and their waiter was a small chap. Before we reached Stockholm he had lost twenty pounds, worn down by bringing them food. Once as he passed me he muttered under his breath, ‘It's whales they are, not men.’ They used to take five plates of soup as a starter and then gulp down three or four steaks with trimmings. That Simon Gillis would think nothing of having a dozen eggs for breakfast. But what fascinated me was the way he ate them. He’d put a dab of mustard on each and eat it whole, shell and all.’ The Irish American A.C. behemoths always were the life of any party.”

The Irish Whales were well known for the ability to consume unimaginable amounts of food in a single sitting. Many of these stories no doubt have been embellished in the retelling. One tale of the Irish Whales voracious appetites came from Arthur Daley’s typewriter twenty-two years later. In a *Times* column in 1964 he wrote:

“Some of their more prodigious feats were at the table. The Irish American A.C. was competing in Baltimore when (Simon) Gillis placed an order for a post-meet snack with the head waiter at a local restaurant. He ordered 27 dozen oysters and six huge T-bone steaks. Slight Miscalculation - The waiter was ready when Gillis, McDonald and McGrath arrived. The table had been set for a party of 33. ‘Do you want to wait for the rest of your group?’ asked the head waiter. He turned pale as he watched three whales devour 27 oysters and six huge T-bone steaks.”14

**Athletic Accomplishments**

During the first two decades of the 20th century, members of the I-AAC held most of the major track-and-field records of their day, including: shot putting, hammer and discus throwing, and many other track & field events. The I-AAC won the Amateur Athletic Union National Outdoor track and field team championship titles in: 1904, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914 and 1916.15 They also won the Amateur Athletic

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15 From the archives of *The New York Times.*
Union National Indoor track and field team championship titles in: 1906, 1908, 1909, 1911, 1913, 1914 and 1915.\(^\text{16}\)

The leaders of the I-AAC had a democratic approach to membership, and they were strikingly open to members of all ethnicities and religions. This stood in stark contrast to that of its great rival, the New York Athletic Club. It was “a poor man’s club with very few college men. The Irish-American Athletic Club was made up of guys out of grammar school or from high school or kids who worked. If you could run or jump, you could try out,” said Abel Kiviat, a Jewish Olympic champion of the I-AAC. “Whereas the wealthy and elitist NYAC discriminated against Jews and other white ethnic, working-class athletes, the Irish Club welcomed them.”\(^\text{17}\) In addition to including the first Irish-born Olympic gold medalist (John J. Flanagan – 1900), I-AAC members included the first Jewish track & field Olympic gold medalist (Myer Prinstein – 1904), and the first African-American Olympic gold medalist (John B. Taylor – 1908).\(^\text{18}\)

Members of the I-AAC competed in the Olympic games from 1900 to 1924, winning fifty-six Olympic medals* for the U.S. Olympic Team.\(^\text{19}\) Their honor roll includes the following Olympic medalists; Charles Bacon Jr., George Bonhag, Frank Castleman, Robert Cloughen, Edward Cook, James Duncan, John J. Flanagan, Patrick J. Flynn, Daniel frank, Sidney Hatch, Johnny Hayes, Marquis “Bill” Horr, Daniel Kelly, Abel Kiviat, Pat

\(^\text{16}\) USA Track & Field (formerly Amateur Athletic Union), http://www.usatf.org/statistics/champions/


\(^*\) Not all of these men were members of the I-AAC when they won their Olympic medals.

\(^\text{19}\) Compiled from numerous sources, including http://www.sport-reference.com.
McDonald, Matt McGrath, Alvah Meyer, Harry Porter, Myer Prinstein, Richard Remer, Lawson Robertson, Paddy Ryan, Art Shaw, Melvin Sheppard, Martin Sheridan and John B. Taylor. I-AAC members who won Olympic medals for countries other than the United States include; Timothy Ahearne (Great Britain), John Eke (Sweden), John Daly (Great Britain), Denis Horgan (Great Britain), Hannes Kolehmainen (Finland), Emilio Lunghi (Italy), Peter O’Connor (Great Britain), Con Walsh (Canada) and Harold Wilson (Great Britain).

The Battle of Shepherd’s Bush

The I-AAC reached the pinnacle of their success with their outstanding showing at the 1908 Olympics in London, held in Shepard’s Bush Stadium. The U.S. Olympic team won a total of twenty-three gold medals in the 1908 Summer Olympic games in London. Ten of these medals were won by members of the Irish-American Athletic Club (or as many as the nations of France, Germany and Italy combined). The games that year were fraught with controversy, in large part owing to the participation of Irish and Irish-American athletes. The first controversy was sparked when Ireland’s athletes refused to compete for Great Britain’s team under the Union Jack:

“James E. Sullivan, President of the Amateur Athletic Union of America, expressed the opinion that it would be a shame if Ireland, which has supplied many of the world’s finest athletes, should have to hide its identity behind the geographical description of the United Kingdom, and now the Gaelic Athletic Association has issued a warning to its
members that they must not, under penalty of expulsion, take part in the Olympic games unless the land of their birth receives official recognition.”

The Irish-American athletes (and Irish athletes who were naturalized U.S. citizens) were not affected by the Gaelic Athletic Association’s ban, and saw the games as an opportunity to win not only honor for their ancestral homeland but also glory for the ‘Stars and Bars’ of their adopted country. Their violation of Olympic protocol was cause for further controversy:

“Traditionally, the Opening Ceremony is officially opened by the Head of State of the host nation and when the flag bearers pass the Dignitary’s Box, it is traditional for them to dip their nation’s flag in honor of the Host of State. But for one nation, the United States, this is not done, and the reasons given are considered traditional and usually relate to an episode which occurred at the Opening Ceremony of the 1908 Olympic Games in London.”

“This flag dips to No Earthly King”

The Irish Whales are credited with beginning the American tradition of not dipping the American flag at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. This tradition dates back to the opening ceremony of the 1908 Olympic Games, when flag bearer Ralph Rose was allegedly persuaded by the Irish Whales to not dip the American flag, as per the

Olympic Opening Ceremony protocol, which called for “all flags being lowered to salute and three cheers will be called from the whole of the teams for His Majesty” King Edward VII. Before his accession to the thrown, Albert Edward held the title of Prince of Wales, but to the Irish, both in Ireland and worldwide, he was known as the “Famine Prince,” having been born a few years prior to the worst years of the Irish Potato Famine.22

Tipperary native and New York City cop Matt McGrath is widely attributed with having threatened Rose, the California giant who was caring the American flag, “Dip that banner and your in a hospital tonight.” Allegedly there was a British backlash to this act of defiance, and Martin Sheridan, a native of County Mayo, is alleged to have spoken for the team in defense of this action by proclaiming that “This flag dips to no earthly king.”23

In a thorough analysis of this Olympic legend, “To No Earthly King…The United States Flag-Bearing Incident at the 1908 Olympic Opening Ceremony” written by Dr. Bill Mallon M.D. and Sir Ian Buchanan, they conclude “that it seems likely that at least one time Ralph Rose “did not dip the American flag to King Edward VII, but the British made very little public comment about this breach of protocol. As to Martin Sheridan’s

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23 “An Immigrant’s Special Tribute to the American Flag,” by Dr. Roger D. McGrath. Quoted from The Congressional Record, June 14, 1989, p. E2116.
famous remark, if he said it, he must have said it privately.” 24 There is no evidence that Sheridan ever uttered the infamous words; “This flag dips to no earthly King.”

Despite some claims that the tradition of not dipping the flag to a foreign head of state didn’t become news fodder until after World War II, there are accounts of the ‘tradition’ that predate the war. In his 1937 column in The New York Times, (two years before the generally accepted outbreak of World War II), John Drebinger wrote the following account of the flag-dipping incident:

“There was, for instance, that little incident of the American contingent failing to dip the American flag as it passed the royal box in the opening parade of all the friendly nations. It seems the American standard bearer was Ralph Rose, the giant shot-putter, who had been sternly advised by several of his colleagues, known as the Whales, that under no circumstance was he to dip that flag. The fact that their names were Babe McDonald, Matt McGrath and Paddy Ryan should make this strange edict self-explanatory, although, of course, it was all in fun.

King Hears Cheers

“But Rose took it all very seriously, and though he was even bigger than the Irish Whales, he was a peace-loving fellow. So in order that there would be no misunderstanding about his intentions, he not only failed to dip the flag as they passed


* As further evidence of the embellishment of this tale, neither Ryan nor McDonald attended the 1908 Olympic Games in London.
His Royal Majesty the King of England but actually raised it a couple of feet, at which
dramatic moment one of the Whales burst forth with: ‘Three cheers for Patsy Monahan!’
said Monahan having been one of their convivial companions who was at that moment
back in New York breathlessly awaiting results. One can readily imagine how this would
have gone over even bigger in these days of radio."^25

Arthur Daley shed light on this mysterious Patsy Monahan in a further
embellished version of this story in his “Sports of the Times” column 35 years later, in
1972:

“Patsy Monahan was their favorite saloonkeeper in the Yorkville section of Manhattan.
That’s the closest Patsy ever came to Olympic glory.” 26

In his 1952 “Sports of the Times” column, Daley wrote a colorful account of the
flag-dipping incident, and what he thought took place the night before the Opening
Ceremony of the 1908 Olympic Games in London:

“Perhaps it’s only a legend, but some historians will have you believe that this practice
began at the 1908 Olympic games in London. It began perhaps, when Great Britain
insisted that the Irish athletes compete under the British flag instead of for Ireland as the
embritted Celts desired. The rebellious Gaels flatly refused. Score victories for
‘perfidious Albion?’ Are you daft man? They’d win ‘em for Ireland or not at all. They sat
it out.

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“This state of affairs didn’t register too happily with the American Olympic forces, dominated as it they were by representatives of the fabulous Irish-American A.C. The president of the Olympic Committee was Jim Sullivan. The head track coach was Mike Murphy. The stars were such as Martin Sheridan, Pat McDonald, Matt McGrath, Simon Gillis, John Flanagan, Johnny Hayes, and the like. None of their ancestors came from Lower Slobodia. They were much too close to the Ould Sod.

“The night before the Olympics opened, the legendary Irish-American Whales were relaxing over a spot of ale in a near-by English pub. The grievances of their ancestors mounted with every passing hour and their brooding grew more intense.

**A Decision is Made**

“ ‘Tis a disgrace, it is,’ said Pat McDonald in his soft County Clare brogue, ‘to think that our glorious American flag will be dipped tomorrow to the crowned head of a kingdom.’

‘And him an English King, too,’ said Flanagan. ‘George Washington, the Lord have mercy on his soul, freed America from the yoke of a British King,’ said Sheridan.

‘Ireland must also be free some day,’ said Gillis, which showed how their minds were working. ‘We can’t permit our flag to dip,’ said McGrath, pounding the table with brawny fist until the pewter mugs danced. ‘Ralph, me lad,’ said McDonald, drawing himself up to his full 300 pounds and 6-foot-5. He transfixed huge Ralph Rose with baleful glare. Rose was to carry the American flag in the Olympic parade. ‘ ‘Tis thinkin’ I’ve been. The American flag bows to no man, King or peasant. Should you be dippin’ it to the King I’ll break you in half with me own two hands.’
“The Olympic parade was an impressive spectacle, as it always is. King Edward VII and Queen Alexandria graciously accepted the acknowledgement of their presence as nation after nation dipped flags while passing in review. But the American flag never wavered or dipped. Ralph Rose held it proudly erect.”

Fact, Fiction and Legend

The story of the flag-dipping incident at the 1908 Olympic opening ceremony is a very good example of the birth of a legend. Grounded in some fact, this story has grown with each retelling. One fact that remains is that the U.S. Congress passed a law in 1942, Federal Law 829. Title 4, chapter 1, section 8 “respect for the flag” states that: “No disrespect should be given to the flag of the United States of America, the flag should not be dipped to any person or thing.” And to this day, the American flag does not dip at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. This is the most lasting legacy of the group of Irish cops and weight throwers of the Irish-American Athletic Club, collectively known as the Irish Whales.

What was never in dispute is the dominance of the Irish and Irish-American athletes in the 1908 Olympics. As Sheridan commented: “Indeed, if one were to go right through the team, the difficulty would be to pick out those who haven’t at least some strain of Irish blood in them.”

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Another controversy of the 1908 Olympics involved I-AAC member Johnny Hayes* disputed victory in the marathon event:

“From the start of the race, Dorando Pietri from Italy and Charles Hefferon, an Irishman from South Africa, were the leaders. After reaching the half way point John Hayes, a nineteen year old member of the I-AAC, started to move up through the field. After passing Heffernon, Hayes was able to see Pietri enter the stadium. Pietri collapsed before he could reach the finish line. English officials helped him to his feet and watched as he collapsed again. Then an official supported him as they walked together across the finish line. Shortly after this scene, Hayes entered the stadium relatively fresh and crossed the finish line second to Pietri. Instead of disqualifying Pietri right away, English officials raised the Italian flag. Not until after an American protest was upheld would Hayes be declared winner.”

Irish become Americans

The opportunity for New York’s Irish-American Athletic Club to compete on a world stage gave them a chance to win recognition for their local athletic club, and it also provided an opportunity to re-define the role of the Irish in America:

“By competing under the American flag, Irish Americans were able to demonstrate their loyalty (to their new country). Turning middle class Americans against the English naturally increased the visibility and respectability of the Irish on the United

* John J. Hayes was not a member of the NYPD, but a ‘Department Store lad’ who trained at night after work on a quarter-mile track on the roof of Bloomingdale’s.

States Olympic team…The pride America took in its Irish American Olympians’ physical vigor and competitive spirit transformed them into a valued part of American society.”\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{A Heroes Welcome}

On their return to New York, the members of the 1908 Olympic team were greeted as heroes. The public appreciation of their accomplishments can be seen in the headlines: “Big Welcome for Yankee Athletes;”\textsuperscript{32} “Athletes’ Parade to be Big Affair - Irish-American A.C. to Turn out to Welcome the Olympic Victors;”\textsuperscript{33} “10,000 to Parade for the Athletes.”\textsuperscript{34} Nineteen-year old gold medalist Johnny Hayes was particularly humbled by the outpouring of support upon his return;

“As the Marathon winner walked down the gangway he was overwhelmed with congratulations. In speaking about his trip, Hayes said: ‘I am glad to get back to my own country, and it is the proudest moment of my life to be able to bring back with me the much-prized Marathon trophy, which I went to England to win. I have had a delightful trip since the race in England and Ireland, particularly at the former home of my grandfather in Nenagh, where they were just as happy over my Marathon victory as here. I traveled from Belfast to Cork, and will never forget the treatment accorded me.’”\textsuperscript{35}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{31} Schaefer, \textit{Ibid}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{34} “10,000 to Parade for the Athletes.” \textit{New York Times} 23 Aug. 1908: p. S3.
\end{footnotes}
Praise for Hayes and the other Irish-American Athletic Club athletes extended from the man-on-the-street all the way up to the White House. President Roosevelt requested a private audience with the Olympic team, and received them at his home in Oyster Bay. As a former New York City Police Commissioner, President Roosevelt took personal pride in the accomplishments of ‘New York’s Finest’ athletes. He told the team “their performance has never been duplicated in the history of athletics.”

Roosevelt was especially happy to meet Hayes: “’Here is the top notcher,’ said the President, grasping Hayes hand. ‘This is fine! Fine! And I am so glad that a New York boy won it. By George! I am so glad to see all you boys.’” Roosevelt was also quite interested in the accomplishments of middle-distance runner Melvin Sheppard, who brought home three gold medals:

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37 Ibid.
“After describing his great run in the fifteen-hundred-meter race Sheppard took a Morocco leather case from his pocket and handed it to the President, saying ‘this is my prize for winning the event.’ The President examined it minutely and remarked that it was a very pretty piece of work, when Sheppard requested that Mr. Roosevelt keep it as a memento of the Olympic games. The latter refused, saying: ‘I could not think of such a thing. In thirty or forty years to come you will be able to point with pride and pleasure to this tribute of your remarkable speed and endurance in a race in which you beat the best running talent in the amateur world.’ ‘I have two others,’ said Sheppard, ‘and I will not miss that one. I beg of you Mr. President to accept it.’ It was some time before the President could be persuaded to accept the trophy, which he finally did with the remark; ‘This will be one of my most treasured possessions Mr. Sheppard, and I am very glad to place it in my collection.’”\(^{38}\)

Sheppard’s medal wasn’t the only gift President Roosevelt received that day. Following Sheppard’s example, weight thrower John Flanagan gave the President one of his medals. Before the meeting was over, I-AAC President P.J. Conway extended honorary membership in the Irish-American Athletic Club to President Roosevelt. The President graciously accepted, and posed for a photo with the athletes, which hangs on the wall today in the American Irish Historical Society on 5th avenue in Manhattan.\(^{39}\)

One of the final tributes to the Olympic team was a gala banquet held by the Irish-American Athletic Club: “The history of the Olympic games of 1908 was placed on official

\(^{38}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{39}\) *Ibid.*
record…at the Waldorf-Astoria when 500 prominent citizens of New York paid a flattering tribute to the athletes who won the world’s championship from the representatives of all nations.” In praise of the I-AAC, keynote speaker James E. Sullivan, U.S. Commissioner to the Olympics games, stated that the “Irish-American Athletic Club could have won the world’s championship without the assistance of any other organization, and the American athletes just swept England off the athletic map.”

President Theodore Roosevelt standing with members of the 1908 U.S. Olympic team.

[Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division]

41 Ibid.
Honored in Poetry and Prose

The accomplishments of the I-AAC Olympians were recorded in at least two literary works; “When Sheridan Hurled the Discus” in Joseph I.C. Clarke’s *The Fighting Race and other Poems and Ballads*, and “How the Yankees Beat the World” by E.P. McKenna, published in the newspaper *Gaelic American*, which read in part:

“They had pitted there against them, the pride of all the earth,

Good men of brawn and muscle, of height and width and girth.

From far-off Greece, from France and Spain, from Italy’s hills of blue,

Germans, Huns and Prussians, and rugged Northmen too.

And some had won great honors and praise over home,

But they never met on turf or track such men of brawn or bone.

So Flanagan and Sheppard, McGrath and Sheridan

Showed them all the kind of stuff’s in a good Cork Yankee man…

At jumping too, and running they showed the English tricks,

Although they knew John Bull could sprint since back in ’76.

They chewed them up, and spat them out, and trounced them good and sound,

That’s how the Yankee beat the world in good old London Town.

So let the Eagle scream, me boys, from ‘Frisco to New York.

From Dublin town to Galway Bay, from Derry down to Cork.

Hang out the starry banner and never take a dare,

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For they still raise brawny Yankees in Donegal and Clare.”

Members of the I-AAC continued to compete regionally and internationally after the 1908 Olympics (including in the 1912, 1920 and 1924 Olympic Games). According to founder P.J. Conway: “In 1914 our club became so strong that we won every senior and junior championship in the United States and Canada with the exception of one event in Pittsburgh which was won by a New York Athletic Club man.”

**Celtic Park, Clan-na-Gael and the Easter Rising**

In addition to being home of the world-class athletes of the I-AAC, Celtic Park played a critical role as the meeting place for Irish fraternal, social and political organizations. The Irish Counties Athletic Union (predecessor of the United Irish Counties), the Irish county societies benevolent associations, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Volunteers all regularly held events, meetings and fundraisers at Celtic Park. Some of these events attracted crowds over 10,000 strong. As early as 1903, the Irish Republican Brotherhood Veteran’s association was holding meetings at Celtic Park, which attracted the most militant and radical elements of the Irish Diaspora in New York City. The Irish-American Athletic Club included amongst its early dues paying members none other than Thomas Clarke, who ten years later would briefly become the first President of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic. Clarke was the first signator of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, issued on the steps of the

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45 The New York Athletic Club was one of the I-AAC’s main rivals. Their emblem was (and is) a winged foot, as opposed to the I-AAC’s winged fist.
46 http://www.wingedfist.com/Gaelic_American_Advertisements.html
General Post Office in Dublin at the outset of the 1916 Easter Rising, and would later be executed by the British Government for his leadership role.

![Thomas Clarke’s 1906 Irish-American Athletic Club membership card.](image)

(Courtesy of Mealy’s Auctions, Kilkenny, Ireland).

A testimony to the central role of Celtic Park in the Irish community in New York can be found in front page article in *The Gaelic American* in 1908:

“Irishmen are responsible in a large degree for the healthy athletic influences now prevalent in American cities. The first centenary of the Irish Revolution of 1798 was remarkable as being the year which saw the birth of the Irish-Ireland Movement and the sweeping of the last vestige of an old world tyranny from the American main. The Spanish War was insignificant compared to the foundation of the athletic America, which can honestly be claimed by the men who conceived Celtic Park… The formation of the Public Schools Athletic League, the Catholic Athletic League, the Military Athletic League and the Irish Counties Athletic Union can be traced directly to Celtic Park.”

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*The Gaelic American* was published by John Devoy and owned by Daniel F. Cohalan,⁴⁷ and was the unofficial newspaper of the Clan-na-Gael. As an incentive to sell subscriptions to the paper, *The Gaelic American* offered a “Brand New Mauser Rifle, with Short Knife-Bayonet and Fifty Rounds of Ammunition, delivered, express paid, to any address”⁴⁸ for anyone selling fifty subscriptions or more.

Cohalan was a lawyer, a jurist, and the in-house counsel for the Clan-na-Gael.⁴⁹ As early as 1903, he served as a member of the Board of Directors of the I-AAC.⁵⁰ In 1918, he chaired the Martin J. Sheridan Memorial Committee,⁵¹ and in 1930 he was the attorney who handled the sale of Celtic Park.⁵² For nearly thirty years, Cohalan was intricately involved with the Celtic Park and the I-AAC, and for most of this time he was also involved with the clandestine operations of the Clan-na-Gael. “It was no secret that Cohalan and the old Fenian soldier Devoy stood at the head of the Clan-na-Gael, the most intransigent of American fighters for Irish independence; and there was little doubt that they were the American sponsors of the Dublin Rising, (and) that Roger Casement was in effect their agent.”⁵³

From as early as 1905, until at least 1921, Clan-na-Gael held fundraisers, picnics and athletic events at Celtic Park. At these events that attracted thousands of Irish exiles

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⁴⁷ http://www.wingedfist.com/Gaelic_American_Publishing.html
⁴⁸ http://www.wingedfist.com/Mauser_ad.html
⁵¹ http://www.wingedfist.com/assets/Sheridan_Memorial_games.pdf
and Irish-Americans, Clan-na-Gael publicly advocated armed resistance to British occupation of Ireland well over a decade before the Easter Rising.\footnote{http://www.wingedfist.com/Journals_and_Programs.html}

In 1914, at a secret meeting held in New York, a delegation from Clan-na-Gael, including Cohalan and Devoy, met with the German Consul General, Count von Bernstoff and German spy Wolf von Igel, to discuss Germany’s support for an armed insurrection in Ireland. “The Clan delegation told von Bernstoff bluntly that a revolt would take place in Ireland sometime soon, while Britain’s soldiers were involved on the Western Front. They had come not to ask for money – \textit{the American Irish would provide cash} (emphasis added)– but for the promise of German arms and officers when the time came for the IRB to rise and strike their preoccupied foe.”\footnote{Golway, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 198.}

On September 23, 1917, a front page headline in \textit{The New York Times} read: “Cohalan and Other Irish Leaders named in New Exposé of German Plots: Von Igel Papers Bared Wide Conspiracy.” The federal Committee on Public Information released an “official exposé” of “German intrigue” in America:

\begin{quote}
“Prominently involving, on its Irish side, Judge Daniel F. Cohalan of the New York Supreme Court and John Devoy of the Gaelic American. The events described were a year and a half old, coinciding (hardly by chance) with the Easter Rising in Dublin and long antedating America’s formal entry into the war. According to the account, Secret Service agents in April 1916 had raided an ‘advertising office’ in wall Street and had trapped a Nordic giant named Wolf von Igel in the act of trying to destroy papers which
\end{quote}
showed numerous acts of complicity between German agents and American sympathizers aiming at sabotage and general troubling of the sentiment for Allied unity. Among the ‘documents’ was a copy of what purported to be a message from Cohalan to Count von Bernstoff, the German ambassador and super-spy, dated April 17, 1916, a week before the Rising, advising the Germans to bomb the English coast, to land arms and officers in Ireland, and to seal off the Irish ports from English access: to promote the rebellion and to help accomplish the eventual defeat of Britain.”

The scope of this paper does not allow space to explore all of the intricacies of the activities of Daniel F. Cohalan, John Devoy, Roger Casment* and the Clan-na-Gael’s involvement in the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, but it does appear that much of the money that the Clan-na-Gael raised to finance the Easter Rising, came from the admission charged at the gate of Celtic Park.

The Decline of Celtic Park

There were a few major factors that combined to contribute to the decline of the Irish-American Athletic Club and the popularity of Celtic Park. The first was the advent of the First World War. Commenting on the impact of the ‘Great War,’ P.J. Conway said: “We decided to give up athletics for its duration. We wrote to President Wilson and offered Celtic Park to the nation for any purpose he saw fit. He thanked us for our patriotism but he had to decline the offer. After the war it was impossible to gather the old crowds

56 Reid, op. cit., p. 323-324.

* Roger Casement was executed on 3 August 1916 by the British Government for his role in a plot to smuggle German weapons into Ireland to support the Easter Rising.
together.”57 In this interview, Conway neglected to mention the other reasons the crowds didn’t return.

Another factor that brought about the decline of Celtic Park was Prohibition, which banned the legal sale of alcohol in the United States in January of 1920. Celtic Park gained notoriety for the illicit sale of alcohol, and hence became a target for law enforcement scrutiny:

“The arrest of a man carrying a flask of whiskey at a union picnic in Celtic Park, Long Island City...led to a battle between the police and picnickers in which four persons were shot and several others were cut by flying bottles. Police reserves had to be called before the four policemen who made the arrest were able to get their prisoner out of the park...Frequent complaints that Celtic Park was being used by bootleggers as a centre for their operations led Inspector Formosa to send four men to the park...all un-uniformed.”58

The illicit sale of alcohol, and the violence that ensued from police raids brought intense scrutiny of the activities at Celtic Park: “For more than six months alleged bootleggers have been arrested at the park every Sunday, sometimes as many as a dozen men being taken into custody. These men have been doing a retail business from bottles of whiskey carried in their pockets,”59 it was charged.

57 Ibid.
The decline of the popularity of Celtic Park as a venue for athletic competitions forced the club to find other events to generate income. In the late 1920’s, for about two years, Celtic Park hosted greyhound races:

Greyhound racing at Celtic Park didn’t last long, in large part because of pressure from the growing residential community:

“George W. Morton Jr., President of the Laurel Hill Improvement Association, announced…that his organization had united with the Thomson Hill Taxpayers’ Association in an effort to prevent the holding of greyhound races in Celtic Park, Laurel Hill, Queens. He said the races would be a detriment to the community, since only a gambling and ‘riff-raff’ element would be attracted by them.”

Sold for Housing

In 1930, after more than thirty years as a meeting place for the Irish in New York and training-grounds for world-class athletes, Celtic Park was sold to the City and

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Suburban Homes Company for the construction of apartments for working-class families. “The plot was irregular in shape, having been originally acquired before the streets were laid out.” The City and Suburban Homes Company had to acquire additional plots from separate owners in order to have two full square blocks, 190 feet wide by 600 deep, between 42nd Street, (formerly Madden), and 44th Street, (formerly Locust), and 48th Avenue (formerly Anable), and 50th Avenue (formerly Gould), with 43rd Street (old Laurel Hill Avenue), dividing them. “It was decided to develop the two rectangular plots with modern apartment houses, attractive in design, thoroughly up to date in equipment, spacious in size of rooms and yet within the means of the wage earner in rental.”

Construction began in 1930, and by September of 1931, rental apartments were on the market:

A photograph in *The New York Times* real estate section in July of 1931 shows the construction of the Celtic Park apartments, before the demolition of the old grand stand.

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63 Ibid.
Almost eighty years after the construction of the Celtic Park apartments, there are still a handful of reminders of the neighborhoods history. To the south of Celtic Park, Laurel Hill Boulevard remains, and to the north is a small city park called Thomson Hill Park, named after the man from whom the land was purchased. But the only reminders of the glorious history of the athletes who trained here is the half-block-long Celtic Avenue, and of course the housing complex named after the Irish-American Athletic Club’s stadium, track and field, Celtic Park.
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