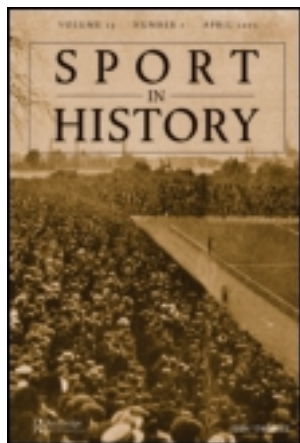


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Dick Fitzgerald – A Revolutionary Like No Other

Andrew McGuire and David Hassan

While the history of the relationship between sport and politics in Ireland has been a long and often turbulent one, few men have embodied this interplay as vividly as Dick Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was a revolutionary in every sense of the word. His politics were unashamedly republican in form and he was a longstanding member of the Irish Volunteers. At the same time he was an outstanding Gaelic footballer with the famed Kerry team of the early part of the twentieth century and published what was at that time a seminal text on the coaching of the indigenous Irish sporting code. This article captures the essence of Fitzgerald's impactful dealings in Irish sport and politics and argues that he was both an architect and an outcome of an important and revolutionary era within Irish life.

Introduction

Dick Fitzgerald was born in Killarney, County Kerry, Ireland on 2 October 1886 to Michael and Bridget (née Heely) Fitzgerald. His father is listed in the 1901 Irish Census as an 'export merchant' and Dick is identified as still being 'at school'.¹ By the 1911 Census, Michael Fitzgerald is identified as an 'egg merchant' while, by now, Dick is recorded as an accountant with the same business.² According to the 1901 Census, all members of the Fitzgerald household living together at that time – Dick, his parents and four siblings – were all able to read and write in both Irish and English.³ It would of course be overly simplistic to ascribe Dick's subsequent involvement in revolutionary Irish politics solely to his early use of the Irish language, but by the same token it would prove equally

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reductive to completely discount the effect of the cultural environment in which he grew up on Dick's later leanings. As this article will demonstrate, Fitzgerald led a full and interesting life, and for many, embodied the revolutionary events – both political and sporting – that defined life in Ireland during much of the early twentieth century.

Many Irish people know Fitzgerald as the famed Gaelic footballer from Kerry, a man who won five All-Ireland medals and many more honours during a remarkable sporting career. Indeed during the early twentieth century Fitzgerald was a major sporting figure in Ireland; his heroic standing unquestioned. Founded in 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which governs the indigenous Irish sports of which Gaelic football is the most popular, was a new aspect of Irish culture during Fitzgerald's career; yet if anything the lived experiences of the Kerry native can be understood as an embodiment of how the organization developed and evolved in the early part of the last century.

Thus Fitzgerald can lay claim to the title of Gaelic football's first major superstar – a hero to all those that followed the game in its formative decades. Evidence of his heroism is witnessed in three areas. Firstly, Fitzgerald, like other sporting icons, existed in the vanguard of evolution for his sport. He characterized a transformation in how the sport was understood by the Irish people. His rise coincided with his first success at inter-county level, when Kerry won the 1903 All-Ireland championship, defeating Kildare and then London in a two-tiered final. During the so-called 'home' final Fitzgerald played a central role in the three-match battle with Kildare, scoring a late goal in the first match to secure a replay. This contest aroused unprecedented interest in the GAA, propelling it to the core of Irish popular culture.

Secondly, Fitzgerald, like many sporting icons, all too often stood alone against a world of opponents, which in his case emerged both beyond the Kerry county boundaries but also within them. It was a frequent complaint of the Dr Crokes club that Fitzgerald was singled out for abuse by supporters of their fierce local rivals Tralee Mitchels, whenever the two teams met, despite his importance to the Kerry team's early successes.

Finally, sporting icons are best understood through their failures, reminding us of our own humanity. Their demise is typically a sad affair and the death of Fitzgerald, both in its poignancy and its circumstances, evidences this. In September 1930 Fitzgerald died following injuries sustained when falling from the roof of the Killarney courthouse in his native county Kerry. It remains unclear whether his death resulted from a sense of despair he was experiencing alongside the suggestion he was drinking heavily at the time. Fitzgerald's passing was particularly

regrettable for it fell on the eve of that year's All-Ireland Final in which Kerry opposed Monaghan. The GAA's central council resolved that the national flag would be flown at half-mast and the players don black armbands in memory of Fitzgerald.

Less well-known in an eventful life is Fitzgerald's substantial political involvement in Irish affairs. Beginning as a member of the Gaelic League, Fitzgerald would become progressively more engaged in the Kerry political scene as he aged. A staunch Irish Republican, he would be arrested and interned after the Easter Rising of 1916. During the War of Independence and following the subsequent Irish Civil War, Fitzgerald served as a member of the Killarney urban council. Almost inevitably there were times when his political and sporting lives intertwined as he served on various GAA councils, from the committee of his local GAA club all the way to hearings of the organization's central council in Dublin, while at the same time his political stock was in the ascendancy.

Tracing Fitzgerald's life through the most tumultuous period in Irish history (the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), this article will utilize his experiences as a means of illustrating the sporting and political cultures of the time; two fields which often revealed the line between both as blurred, and even erased outright on certain occasions.

Footballing career

Dick Fitzgerald made his debut appearance for Dr Crokes Gaelic football club, Killarney on 3 August 1902 against Kerry rivals Caherciveen at the age of only 16. This was during the playing of the 1901 county final, which had spilled over into the following year due to various objections and challenges by defeated teams along the way. Dr Crokes won the game on a score line of 1–2 to 0–2.⁴ It would be the first of many successes on the football pitch for Fitzgerald in representing both club and county. Indeed, as alluded to, Fitzgerald's first taste of success at county level came as Kerry won the 1903 All-Ireland title, defeating Kildare to be crowned home champions, then eclipsing London to be named All-Ireland Champions. Interestingly, Sam Maguire, after whom the All-Ireland Football championship trophy would later be named, captained the London side on this occasion.⁵ Kerry defended their title the following year by defeating Waterford 2–3 to 0–2 following a replay, after the first match ended in a low-scoring deadlock, 0–3 apiece. In reality, the two titles were earned less than three months apart, from 12 November 1905 to 8 January 1906, due again to scheduling delays following various objections, delays and replays.⁶

Fitzgerald would assume his first leadership role with Dr Crokes when becoming club secretary in 1908.⁷ That year, Kerry again won the Munster championship, but lost to Dublin in the All-Ireland Home Final. In keeping with the achievements of their defeated opponents from 1903 and 1904, the latter would go on to defeat London for the All-Ireland title.⁸ With a renewed sense of purpose, Kerry again won the Munster championship the following year. But as was the norm for GAA matches at the time, this success was not without controversy. Cork won the first game between the sides by a score of 2–8 to 1–7, but Kerry protested that Cork had fielded an illegal player. Their challenge was upheld by the Munster council, but Kerry asked for a replay rather than forfeiture of the match, which would have resulted in the title being automatically awarded to them. In the rematch, Kerry prevailed with a scoreline of 1–6 to 0–6. In due course, Kerry defeated Louth in the All-Ireland Final 1–9 to 0–6 to give Fitzgerald his third All-Ireland medal.⁹

In 1911, Fitzgerald resigned as club secretary for Dr Crokes for an increased role as a member of the club committee.¹⁰ That year, during a particularly contentious match against Dr Crokes' main Kerry rivals, Tralee Mitchels, Fitzgerald and the rest of Dr Crokes left the pitch in protest. Because of a newly enacted rule that made any such walk-off a mandatory suspension, in an attempt to curtail a growing number of such incidents, Kerry were without the services of Fitzgerald and other Dr Crokes players for the county team. That year, Cork would go on to claim the All-Ireland title as Kerry's internal problems continued to simmer.¹¹ Despite these on-going issues 1913 would be a banner year for Dick Fitzgerald. At a meeting of the Kerry County Board, over which he presided, Fitzgerald moved that Kerry, who had been playing in their by now iconic green and gold hoops since 1902, confirm this as their chosen playing attire. Interestingly when Kerry defeated London in the aforementioned 'away' final versus London in 1903 they were reported to be wearing the unusual combination of green and red. Later in 1913, Kerry would face Wexford in the All-Ireland final, with Fitzgerald by now captaining his county side. Interestingly, Harry Boland the prominent Irish Republican Brotherhood figure and Dublin GAA leader refereed the final. The match ended with a score of 2–2 to 0–3 in Kerry's favour.

On 25 November 1913, prominent Irish Republicans including Eoin MacNéill, Bulmer Hobson and Pádraig Pearse met at the Rotunda Rink in Dublin, as part of a gathering that resulted in the formation of the Irish Volunteers 'to secure and maintain the rights and liberties common to the whole people of Ireland'.¹² One of the men in attendance was the author Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha (known in some circles by his pen name *An*

Seabhac, or ‘The Hawk’). Three days later, on 28 November 1913, Ó Siochfradha formed a company of Irish Volunteers in Killarney. This formation of the Killarney Company took place at a meeting of the local Gaelic League, wherein the men in attendance, numbering approximately 40, unanimously voted to form the company.¹³ Dick Fitzgerald was among the men at that meeting, and would later be elected second lieutenant of the company.¹⁴ Less than a month later, on 13 December 1913, Austin Stack, chairman of the Kerry GAA Board, joined the Irish Volunteers at a meeting in Tralee. In January 1914, GAA president James Nowland remarked that all GAA members should ‘join the Volunteers and learn to shoot straight’. It appeared that many in Kerry would take Nowland up on his suggestion – membership of the Kerry Company reached a peak later that year and by September its numbers had swollen to 120 men. That said, from its formation in late 1913 to Easter Sunday 1916, membership of the Kerry Company would fluctuate from anywhere between 60 and 120 personnel.

Also in 1914, Fitzgerald’s seminal manual on coaching Gaelic Football, entitled *How to Play Gaelic Football*, was first published. Printed by Guy & Co. of Cork and retailing for the princely sum of one shilling, it was instantly recognized as the authoritative tome on Gaelic football instruction and training.¹⁵ More to the point, for coaching enthusiasts of the modern era, it is the continued relevancy of much of Fitzgerald’s views on the game that is most compelling. His comments on the temperament and physical presence that Gaelic footballers in the different positions on the field of play should possess proved remarkably insightful. Of course, his writings at this time also helped to confirm the growing mythology around the Kerry team of which he was part – the idea that they were proving increasingly invincible in the eyes of their opponents.

Shortly after the release of *How to Play Gaelic Football*, and back on the field of play, Kerry defeated Cork 0–5 to 0–1 to retain their Munster title and advance to the All-Ireland semi-finals. After dispatching Roscommon, Kerry again faced Wexford for the All-Ireland title. As in 1913, Harry Boland was appointed referee. Boland penalized Wexford for a foul late in the game, and Fitzgerald duly converted the free-kick to tie the match and force a replay. Boland again was the official for the replay, which Kerry won by a score of 2–3 to 0–6. Dick Fitzgerald had captained Kerry to back-to-back All-Ireland titles. But rough waters would lie ahead for Europe, and especially Ireland, as sporting matters – and the achievements of Fitzgerald as a Kerry icon – would be relegated to a secondary concern.

When the First World War broke out, the Irish Volunteers suffered a split in their ranks, with a large part of the membership forming the National Volunteers. The National Volunteers were established as a response to the pleas of John Redmond, MP, leader of the Irish parliamentary party and prominent home rule politician, for Irishmen to serve in the British armed forces against Kaiser Wilhelm's German empire. Volunteers across Ireland were forced to choose between joining Redmond or not. Eventually more than 140,000 men would follow Redmond's lead and serve in the British Army. In contrast, fewer than 10,000 remained as Irish Volunteers. For a time, the Killarney Company remained undecided and osculated between both camps. If anything, it was expected for the men to join the National Volunteers as its treasurer William D.F. O'Sullivan was himself a Redmonite. However, a vote was held on 7 May 1915, and the decision to remain Irish Volunteers proved overwhelming. Dick Fitzgerald, and indeed all the officers, were re-elected to the positions they had previously held.

An incident later that year, on 1 August, further illustrates the strength of Fitzgerald's political beliefs. That day, Kerry were scheduled to play Cork in a football match in Fermoy. However, upon hearing that the fixture was scheduled at the same time as the funeral of noted Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin, Fitzgerald refused to play. Shortly after the incident in August, Fitzgerald attended a training camp for officers in the Irish Volunteers located at Coosan, Athlone. The camp was run by J.J. O'Connell. Future TDs Pierce McCann (East Tipperary) and Peter Galligan (Cavan) were there to gain instruction from O'Connell.¹⁶ Other notable attendees were Austin Stack, Terence MacSwiney and Richard Mulcahy. At Coosan, the first week was spent on basic military actions such as drill movements, scouting and communications, before moving on to more strenuous drills and marches over the course of the second week. Interestingly, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) observed the men drilling in full uniform, yet made no move to curtail their activities.¹⁷

In January 1916, before a replay of the Kerry county final, a formation of Irish Volunteers was led onto the Lawn at Rathmore by a marching band. Dr Crokes would eventually win the championship replay by a score of 1-2 to 1-0 over their close rivals Tralee Mitchels. Local RIC Sergeant Enright is said to have remarked of the Irish Volunteers that they were 'the best conducted and most helpful people in Rathmore on the day'.^{18,19} The specific events of Easter week 1916 are well documented and need not be recounted for the purposes of this article. This work will, however, briefly mention a few of the GAA members who played a role in

these events, before moving on to examine how the GAA was affected in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Rising.

The GAA and the Easter Rising

Among those GAA members who were active during the Easter Rising were a handful of men who held key positions. Harry Boland was chairman of the Dublin GAA County Board in 1916 at the time of the Easter Rising.²⁰ Boland would find himself among the hundreds imprisoned after Easter week. Members of the GAA would also find themselves in pivotal roles in the fighting that took place, among them Frank Burke and Peadar Boyle. Frank Burke, who would go on to win two All-Ireland Senior Hurling and three All-Ireland Senior Football championships for Dublin, was a second lieutenant in the Irish Volunteers.²¹ Peadar Boyle, who served as quartermaster of the South Dublin Union Garrison, would go on to hold several important governmental positions, serving on Dublin Corporation, as Lord Mayor of Dublin and as Fine Gael T.D.²²

The response of the British government after the Easter Rising was swift. The rebellion was quelled within a week, many hundreds arrested, and its main leaders executed. As William Nolan notes, 'four of the executed leaders of the Easter Rising – Patrick Pearse, Con Colbert, Michael O'Hanrahan and Eamon Ceannt – were associated either in a playing or administrative capacity within the GAA in Dublin'.²³ The officers of the Killarney division, including Dick Fitzgerald, were arrested on Monday 1 May 1916. According to the witness statement of Spillane and O'Sullivan, the men were first held at the Great Southern Railway Hotel, where the military had set up headquarters. From there the men were moved on to Victoria Barracks, Cork, and subsequently to Richmond Barracks, Dublin before being transported to England and held at Knightsford Prison, Cheshire and finally interned at Frongoch, Wales.²⁴

County Inspector H.O.H. Hill, County Kerry, testified to the Royal Commission on the Rebellion as to the nature of the relationship between the GAA and the Irish Volunteers. On 22 May 1915, the volunteers held a parade of 550 armed men under the direction of Eoin MacNeill immediately after a GAA match.²⁵ On 19 November 1915, Hill testified that 113 volunteers, among whom 82 were armed, attended a match between two of Kerry's GAA clubs, Killarney and Castleisland, where the sum of £16 was collected for the purchasing of arms.²⁶ And on 26 February 1916, mere weeks before the Easter Rising, Pádraig Pearse

inspected a contingent of 248 volunteers assembled in the sports fields in Tralee.

According to Tom Looney, a total of 2,519 people were arrested and placed into one of ten different British jails and camps.²⁷ Within the confines of the camps, Gaelic games were very popular among the men. Not only did Gaelic games offer the men some form of entertainment, but the games also played a role in establishing a structure and routine in the camp, and through playing the games the interned men felt able to retain their Irish identity while under the control of British authorities. Of course, Fitzgerald excelled in this area and was a strong leadership presence at the games.

Frongoch

Located in Wales, near the village of Bala, Frongoch was a former prisoner of war camp that had been home to some 1,800 detainees during the First World War.²⁸ After the Easter Rising, the German prisoners were moved and many of the interned Irish were sent to Frongoch, or a similar camp, where they were held without trial for weeks, and in some cases months, at a time. During their internment at Frongoch, the prisoners were left to occupy their time in any fashion they could. The main forms of entertainment were academic courses, primarily learning of the Irish language, military drill and instruction, and sport. As Lyn Ebenezer puts it, 'self-created entertainment was important for the men not only to relieve the boredom but also to lighten their minds. Physical recreation was just as important'.²⁹

The camp itself was separated into North Camp and South Camp. Many of the buildings had been converted from an old whisky distillery. First reports out of the camp in the Irish press were that the conditions there were not of a sufficient standard for the prisoners being detained against their will. The *Anglo-Celt* reported that 'it is said that the detention camp at Frongoch was condemned by Americans when being used for German prisoners of war'.³⁰ A report by an American envoy, in which the *Anglo-Celt* claimed Frongoch had been deemed unfit for German prisoners of war, reached quite the opposite conclusion. In his report, Boylston Beal, special attaché to the German division of the United States Embassy, found that 'there was no ground for criticism of this camp'.³¹ In all, the conditions for the Germans at Frongoch were quite adequate for prisoners, and not at all worthy of being 'condemned' as the *Anglo-Celt* claimed.

Though the United States Embassy report itself found no fault with the camp while it was home to German prisoners of war, reports of substandard conditions for the Irish continued to appear in the press. The *Irish Independent* ran an interview in August 1916 with a recently released prisoner who claimed that the camp had ‘very bad sanitation arrangements’ due to overcrowding and that the meat used for meals was ‘frequently condemned by the doctor as unfit for human food’.³² The complaint about overcrowding stemmed from the fact that more than 3,000 men had been arrested in the initial stages of the internment process. However, 1,200 men had been released by July 1916, which eased the problem of having too little room for the men interned.³³ As more and more men were being released, the authorities moved all the men to the North Camp, which had better facilities for the prisoners.³⁴

Despite the conditions of their internment, the men tried to lead as normal lives as they could. They devised for themselves a schedule that included specific times for meals, bathing, chores, education classes and recreation. The regimented schedule of the day provided a means of keeping discipline among the large number of prisoners. Of particular interest in the context of this article are the types of classes the men attended and the forms of recreation enjoyed by them. When the men first arrived at Frongoch, one of the first things they noticed was the prevalence of the use of the Welsh language in everyday life. Any of the local people who worked within the camp used Welsh to communicate among themselves on a regular basis.³⁵ Séamas Ó Maoileoin noted in his memoirs ‘how faithful they were to their native language. Even the shopkeepers, it was Welsh they spoke among themselves, even though the customers did not understand a word. It was the very opposite of Ireland’.³⁶

Inspired by the use of Welsh among the general public, a large number of the Irish prisoners sought to learn their own native language while interned at Frongoch. W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, commandant of the interned men, wrote that ‘in the civilian studies, the major portion of our time was devoted to the Irish language, which was only as it should be’.³⁷ No extant records show Fitzgerald’s involvement with the Irish classes, but it is not unreasonable to imagine that, as a native speaker able to also read and write in the language, he would have taken the opportunity to assist in instructing the other men to perfect their competency in the native tongue. The educational classes in Frongoch were deliberately Irish in nature. Classes in the Irish language were held three days a week, Irish history every Thursday, Irish step-dancing twice weekly, while debates were held in Irish every Sunday evening.³⁸ However, the British authorities were not as

supportive of these Irish initiatives as the ‘new arrivals’ had proven to be. Censors routinely prohibited items in the Irish language from reaching the men inside the camp. Ebenezer relates an example which illustrates the disparity between the treatment of the Irish and German prisoners. When the Irish arrived, one of the signs above the water tap was inscribed with the German “*Trinke Wasser*” [drinking water]. However, the request of the internees for a similar sign in Irish was denied by the authorities.³⁹ That said, the camp authorities were more accommodating to the requests of the Irish prisoners when it came to the matter of recreation.

In early July, there was a report of Tom O’Donnell, MP for West Kerry, working to secure the release of the men for the Kerry county team. This was met unfavourably by the interned. In 1915, O’Donnell was ‘the principle speaker at a recruiting meeting for the British Army in College Square, Killarney’. During the meeting, the volunteer pipers’ band interrupted by playing and marching and everyone followed the volunteers, save the military and police in attendance.⁴⁰ Needless to say, the Irish Volunteers from Kerry were not on great terms with O’Donnell. In fact, his attempts to free the men were met with such hostility that a notice in the *Kerryman* read, in part:

At a special meeting of Kerry men held this day, it was decided to repudiate the assistance of Mr Thomas O’Donnell in the matter of our release and it was the unanimous wish of all the undersigned to REMAIN INDEFINITELY AT FRONGOCH RATHER THAN HAVE THEIR FREEDOM ATTRIBUTED TO THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF THE MEMEBER FOR WEST KERRY.

Dick Fitzgerald was among the undersigned.⁴¹

The recreation field was open to the men for two hours between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. each day.⁴² M.J. O’Connor recalled that the games played ‘were football (Gaelic, or course), skittles, and “Cat” or baseball, as well as weight throwing, weight lifting, etc.’⁴³ Football matches were played twice per day.⁴⁴ The men wanted to play hurling as well as Gaelic football, but the camp authorities would not allow the prisoners to have camáns, on account of the obvious security risk the men would pose if they decided to wield their hurleys as weapons.⁴⁵ McPartlin wrote that the prisoners were ‘allowed to drill under their own officers and kick footballs which are also been sent from here [Manchester], as well as other games’.⁴⁶ Sean O’Mahony wrote in *Frongoch: University of Revolution* that Frank Burke recalled how the men were given a football by Father Moore, the chaplain of Stafford Jail who was visiting Frongoch.⁴⁷

Fitzgerald's most documented involvement in the life of the camp comes from when the men in Frongoch organized a football tournament consisting of four teams, three from South Camp and one from North Camp.⁴⁸ The South Camp wore uniforms of 'a blue stripe running from the right shoulder to left waist, while North Camp sported red bands'.⁴⁹ The team from North Camp and two of the teams from South Camp were named after executed leaders of the Easter Rising.⁵⁰ Ó Maoileoin is the best source for a first-hand account of the tournament that ensued, as he played on the third team from the South Camp, which was called 'The Leprechauns', captained by Dick Fitzgerald.⁵¹ Of course, as has been established, this was the same Fitzgerald who captained Kerry to victory in the 1913 and 1914 All-Ireland football championships.⁵² As it happened, the Leprechauns were made up of those men who were left over after the 'pick of Ireland's footballers' were claimed by the other teams, men such as Frank Burke, the playwright Frank Shouldice, future TD for Kerry Paddy Cahill and Michael Collins.⁵³ Shouldice played senior football for Dublin before being interned, Cahill played for Kerry, and, as has been established, Burke would win five All-Ireland medals combined between hurling and football.⁵⁴

The Leprechauns played two matches against each of the other three teams. Though the team was made of the 'rubbish [that] was left' after forming the other teams, Dick Fitzgerald would lead them to become camp champions. Ó Maoileoin praised Fitzgerald's ability to take a team that was 'mainly composed of little fellows' and lead them to victory.⁵⁵ Fitzgerald 'was well versed in the game and taught [his team] every trick he had'.⁵⁶ Ó Maoileoin was 'convinced that he [Fitzgerald] was better in Frongoch than he ever was at Croke Park'.⁵⁷ In July, a match between Kerry and Louth was played as the final to the annual Wolfe Tone Tournament, with a second match played between teams representing Wexford and Dublin. The matches were mentioned in the sports sections of Irish newspapers. The *Anglo-Celt* reported that Kerry beat Louth by a single point, while Wexford scored 2 goals and 3 points to defeat Dublin, who scored 1 goal and 3 points.⁵⁸

Athletic competitions were also held on the recreation grounds. Michael Collins excelled at these meetings, winning the 100-yard dash in a time under 11 seconds.⁵⁹ Collins placed second in the 56-lb throw, losing to Munster champion Seán Hales.⁶⁰ Hales was one of Collins's best friends in Frongoch, and would later be killed in Dublin by anti-treaty IRA forces for his Dáil vote authorizing the army to execute prisoners.⁶¹ There can be no doubt that Fitzgerald and Collins would have become acquainted during their time at Frongoch. It is, however, still unclear how

much, if any, effect this relationship would have on the decisions Fitzgerald would make following the granting of Irish independence. Newspapers back home in Ireland picked up on the news of the Gaelic activities of the men and reported the news proudly. The *Meath Chronicle* quoted a man known only as 'the Carp' remarking how 'the intense Gaelicism of the Irish Prisoners of War at Frongoch Internment Camp is clearly demonstrated in their eager attendance at Irish Language classes, organised under the direction of capable teachers and their zeal in pursuing the Gaelic games arranged by well-known G.A.A. men in their midst'.⁶²

Dick Fitzgerald and three other men were released on 1 August 1916. However, his freedom was short-lived, as he found himself arrested again only to be returned to Frongoch on 22 September 1916.⁶³ He was detained there under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), but never had any charges formally brought against him. He would be permanently released from Frongoch following the general release of prisoners in time for Christmas 1916. By 1918, Fitzgerald's football career was on the wane. For the first time in 15 years, he was not included in the Kerry county football panel. However, he continued to serve the GAA in two important functions. First, he was by now a member of the county board of selectors that would meet to select the Kerry representative teams, and indeed would go on to serve in other administrative functions as well. In 1919, Fitzgerald was a delegate to the Kerry GAA Convention, where he was selected as a representative to the GAA Congress in Dublin.⁶⁴ While there, he strongly defended the amateur status of the GAA and its players. He had earlier touched on this subject in *How to Play Gaelic Football*, writing that

It is to be hoped that Gaelic Football will always remain as natural a game as it is to-day; and accordingly we trust that while it will ever be developing on the scientific side, it may never become the possession of the professional player.⁶⁵

The second manner in which Fitzgerald continued to serve the GAA was as a referee in both codes. He was a well-respected official and was often called upon to adjudicate important matches. In fact, Fitzgerald refereed both All-Ireland football semi-finals in 1918. In the first, Louth defeated Cavan 2-4 to 0-4, and in the second Tipperary defeated Mayo 2-2 to 1-4. The semi-finals were held prior to the completion of the Leinster finals. This is significant as Wexford would later beat Louth and take their place in the All-Ireland Final, defeating Tipperary 0-5 to 0-4. While it was not the most high-profile game he would ever referee, a hurling match

between Kenmare and Kilgarven on 4 August 1918 may have been one of the more significant matches in the wider history of the GAA.

Gaelic Sunday

On 4 July 1918, a proclamation was signed into effect by Lt Gen. Frederick Shaw, commander-in-chief of the British forces in Ireland, which prohibited 'the holding or taking part in any meetings, assemblies, or processions within the whole of Ireland'.⁶⁶ Concerns arose almost immediately among the indigenous Irish. Newspapers reported that meetings of the Gaelic League and workers' unions were banned by police under the proclamation.

John Devlin, MP for Belfast West, gave an impassioned speech before the House of Commons against the proclamation. In his speech, Devlin asked:

Is it the law which makes it treasonable to play Gaelic games because they say they are political? Is it the law which says it is treasonable to hold hurling matches? ... Is it the law that football matches, athletic sports, Gaelic festivals, Irish concerts are to be held only if the local police and military permit?⁶⁷

While Devlin was speaking in rhetorical questions, in contrast MP for Wicklow West John Donovan asked very pointed questions of Chief Secretary for Ireland Edward Shortt in response to reports that GAA matches had been interfered with by police. Donovan asked Shortt:

Whether, in the view of the fact that the Gaelic Athletic Association was not within the category of organisation recently proclaimed as illegal in Ireland, will he say why the police authorities banned the playing of football and hurling matches under the auspices of this body except with the special permission of the authorities.

Shortt replied that 'any gathering which comes within the regulation requires a permit, which is always granted in the case of bona fide sports or entertainment'.⁶⁸

At times, the confrontation between the GAA and police reached violent levels. The *Nenagh Guardian* outlined one such account of a football match in Banagher, Co. Offaly. Though the match had not been advertised ahead of time, a small contingent of police was present at the pitch as the game began and cautioned the players against staging the contest at hand. The match proceeded as intended until the halftime interval, when District Inspector Knox arrived with further police back-up

and some soldiers. Several people were injured by police batons as the armed forces charged the field; players and spectators beat a hasty retreat over an adjacent fence and down a road leading back into the nearby town.⁶⁹

Similar confrontations were reported across Ireland. Police charged the crowd assembled to watch a football match in Ballymena, Co. Antrim and, at the other end of Ireland, attacked the players assembled to take the pitch at a match in Co. Kerry. Spectators' and players' names were taken down by police at a junior football match in Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan.⁷⁰ Indeed, police interference in Gaelic matches went so far as to arrest nine young boys playing a match in Phoenix Park, Dublin.⁷¹ Even Fitzgerald's beloved Dr Crokes had its encounter with the police. In his witness statement, Maurice Horgan relates the tale of how before a match between Dr Crokes and Tralee Mitchels 'the members of the teams on their way to the playing field were attacked and batoned by the RTC, who were supported by the military with fixed bayonets'.⁷²

In the face of such pressure, the GAA was forced to consider its response. Not only was the existence of the GAA as an organization at stake, but so too was an integral part of Irish culture. A GAA delegate met with the authorities at Dublin Castle where it was spelled out in very stark terms that 'no hurling or football matches would be allowed ... unless a permit was obtained'.⁷³ Understanding that the GAA would be required under the law to seek permits for any matches it wished to hold, the central council unanimously decided that 'no permit be asked for under any conditions'.⁷⁴ This decision was relayed to provincial and county boards, along with notice that no individuals should apply for permits as well. The central council warned that 'any individual or club infringing the foregoing order becomes automatically and indefinitely suspended'.⁷⁵ A date of 4 August 1918 was set on which Gaelic matches would be held simultaneously across Ireland, all without the application for a permit.⁷⁶

At this juncture, the authorities were forced to react to the GAA's plans. One option available was a mass mobilization of police and military troops in an attempt to oppose as many matches as possible from taking place, keeping in line with previous conduct. However, this option had the potential for large-scale and widespread rioting and violence. Rather than potentially incite violence, the government decided to reconsider its stance on Gaelic matches being played. Throughout the first week of August, newspaper reports outlined the government's new position on Gaelic matches. It came to light that the authorities sent a circular around to the police outlining how Gaelic matches were no longer considered to fall under the restrictions of the proclamation.⁷⁷ Previous police interference

in matches was said by Secretary Shortt to have been a result of police who 'had unfortunately misunderstood their instructions'.⁷⁸ The move by the government to reconsider was applauded by some outsiders. The *Manchester Guardian* ran an editorial praising the decision, saying that what 'the consequences of the police and military interference with that enormous number of fixtures might have been many people here would prefer not to think about'.⁷⁹ Indeed, the consequences feared by the *Manchester Guardian* of just such a confrontation would unfortunately be realized two years later at Croke Park on what has since been infamously referred to as 'Bloody Sunday'.

Once the desired effect of the authorities reversing their position in the light of the plans for Gaelic Sunday, what incentive was there for the GAA to carry on with the games? Gaelic Sunday was to be used as a show of cultural nationalism so that the authorities might know not only the seriousness with which the GAA viewed the ban on Gaelic games, but also the sheer numbers it had at its disposal. The importance of Gaelic games within society necessitated that those who treasured Irish culture take the opportunity to stand with the GAA.

On Gaelic Sunday, the North Tipperary Board organized no fewer than 16 matches in 16 different locations across the county, which were to be 'whole-heartedly carried out'.⁸⁰ County Cavan organized 17 matches and County Monaghan 27, as reported by the *Anglo-Celt*.⁸¹ In Meath, the Gaelic Sunday activities were to be incorporated into the annual harvest festival for the Patron of Kieran.⁸² On the day, over 1,500 hurling, football and camogie matches were played across Ireland.⁸³ With two teams competing in each match, 15 players per team, it suggests that over 55,000 athletes took part in Gaelic Sunday, to say nothing of the number of spectators who showed their support by patronizing games. All of these matches were played without permits and all without interference from the police. The matches in counties Meath, Cavan, Monaghan and Tipperary (discussed above) were all carried out as planned, even with heavy rain in Tipperary. Similarly bad weather forced the cancellation of another 40 matches in Co. Cork.⁸⁴ In a most interesting hurling match, a team of priests and their opponents, a side comprised exclusively of Christian Brothers, competed in Kilkee, Co. Clare.⁸⁵

Almost no police interaction was reported on Gaelic Sunday. In Athlone, two RIC officers and a 'large number of soldiers' were present at a match. However, these men were in attendance as paying spectators rather than in any official capacity under the law.⁸⁶ Similarly, in Kilruane, Co. Tipperary, a police sergeant and constable sought admission to a match being played, only to be informed that only paying spectators were

allowed within the stadium grounds. Rather than either pay or force their way into the match, the two men instead elected to watch from a street adjacent to the grounds.⁸⁷ The sole police action taken in Dublin on Gaelic Sunday was only tangentially related to the games being played. Fourteen boys, aged between 12 and 17, were taken into police custody for selling flags on the street. The boys' names and addresses were taken down by the police and they were allowed to go home without charge.⁸⁸

Across Ireland, Gaelic Sunday was carried off with great success. With the exception of cancellations due to inclement weather, as was the case in Co. Cork, not a single match was impeded or cancelled. The RIC and military did not attempt to interfere with any of the matches being played, in accordance with their new orders from Dublin Castle. The Enniscorthy GAA board passed a resolution congratulating the central council for the 'effective means it had devised for defeating the attempt that had been made to crush the GAA out of existence'.⁸⁹ In an editorial in the *Meath Chronicle* prior to Gaelic Sunday, it was written that 'every Irish man and woman worth of the name is expected to patronise in some practical manner their national pastimes'.⁹⁰ It was in this spirit that Fitzgerald donned his whistle and refereed the hurling match in Kilgarven, the only match to be completed in the whole of county Kerry on this date (again, due to the weather most were cancelled). It could be no coincidence that Fitzgerald was a key factor in the game being played in its entirety! Indeed, moving forward, Fitzgerald is shown to be very active in the community and local politics.

It is also important to give due credit to another remarkable achievement by Fitzgerald in 1918, which came when he managed a Clare team that had never had any tradition in Gaelic football, and were consistently one of the poorest sides in the Munster championship at that time, to that year's All-Ireland final. This achievement only served to confirm Fitzgerald's quite exceptional coaching ability. It is also interesting that the Clare team in question paraded behind a banner which read 'Up de Valera' during its All-Ireland run. It's reasonable to conclude that again Fitzgerald may have had more than a passing influence on the decision to publicly endorse the politics of De Valera at that time.

In 1918, as Ireland continued to move towards independence, the Irish Parliamentary Party suffered heavy losses in Westminster. In all, the IPP lost approximately 90 per cent of their seats, falling from 80 MPs to seven. These seats were all now held by Sinn Féin candidates, who would go on to form the First Dáil. Among the cabinet of that first Dáil was Austin Stack, the former Kerry County Board president. Fitzgerald himself played a role in the election season, having first been sent to help the campaign of

Seán McGarry in Dublin, before moving on to assist in the election of Seán Ó Muirthuile in Donegal.⁹¹

The best account of Fitzgerald's actions in the Irish War of Independence emerges from the witness statement of Michael Spillane and Michael O'Sullivan. Though they don't mention Fitzgerald often by name, the actions of the Killarney Company should give an idea of his activities during the time period. The Killarney Company was active in the manoeuvres against the British Army in the areas around the Black Valley and Gap of Dunloe in the countryside outside Killarney. O'Sullivan related a tale in which Spillane, Fitzgerald and two others were nearly spotted near the Gap of Dunloe by a passing British patrol. They only escaped by a coincidence of timing, having stepped behind a hedge to relieve themselves just as the convoy passed.⁹² After the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Ireland was split along pro- and anti-treaty lines, and Fitzgerald felt the strain. He had been elected to the Killarney Urban District Council (UDC) in 1920 as a Sinn Féin candidate. However, on the matter of the treaty he sided with his old Frongoch camp-mate Michael Collins. In the 1924 Killarney UDC elections, Fitzgerald was re-elected, this time standing as a pro-treaty Cumman na nGaedheal candidate. Two members of the Labour Party and one independent candidate were also elected. It was later remembered by Danny O'Sullivan of the East Kerry board that Fitzgerald, around this point in his life, would greet boys at football matches with the greeting '*Dia bhur mbeath-sa, a bhuachaillí, agus failte*' – roughly translated as 'God bless your lives, boys, and welcome'.⁹³

In 1927, Fitzgerald was approached to lead a tour of the United States by the Kerry football team. At the outset, the tour was undertaken with the aim of raising funds for the outright purchase of the Tralee sports grounds by the county board.⁹⁴ However, the tour quickly became a logistical and financial nightmare. Instead the entire tour was organized clandestinely by the IRA leadership both in Ireland and New York as a fund-raising exercise to buy weapons to ship them back to Ireland. While this was done with the full knowledge of the Kerry players, it's unclear the extent to which Fitzgerald (a public pro-treaty supporter) was kept wholly informed of the behind-the-scenes activities. Beyond this the tour promoter, Ted Sullivan, disappeared early on, leaving the men to scramble to schedule matches and collect fees. Eventually, thanks in large part to many Kerry expatriates by then living in the United States, the men were able to complete the tour and return to Ireland. The lessons of the 1927 USA tour were hard learned, but they were well-taken. Subsequent tours were run much better and the county board was able to amass the £20,000

needed for the purchase of the grounds in Tralee, which were renamed the Austin Stack Memorial Park.⁹⁵ In 1928, Fitzgerald was again up for re-election to the Killarney UDC. He again stood as a Cumann na nGaedheal candidate, and was returned to his position by a small margin.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, Fitzgerald would not live to see out his third term. As previously mentioned, on 25 September 1930, Dick Fitzgerald passed away from injuries sustained from falling from the roof of Killarney courthouse. The official verdict on the cause of death following a coroner's inquest was 'shock and hemorrhage due to internal injuries to abdomen and chest' as a result of the fall.⁹⁷

Though there is never an opportune time for death, the date of Fitzgerald's passing was particularly cruel, for it happened on the eve of the 1930 All-Ireland Final in which Kerry were to take on Monaghan. It was resolved by the central council that before the match the Irish flag would be flown at half-mast and the players would wear black armbands in memory of Fitzgerald.⁹⁸ The match itself was described in the *Kerryman* as a 'fiasco – a huge disappointment to the thousands who had made the long journey to Dublin in expectation of seeing a good match'.⁹⁹ Kerry sound defeated Monaghan 3–11 to 1–4, securing their ninth All-Ireland football championship. The Monday after the final saw Dick Fitzgerald's funeral. It had been delayed at the request of the Kerry county board to allow those supporters who had already purchased tickets for the match and paid a rail fare to travel to do so without having to decide whether or not to forgo the trip to Dublin for the sake of paying their respects to the Kerry great. The members of the county board and the players who had achieved All-Ireland glory the previous day all marched in the cortege behind Fitzgerald's coffin. The services were attended by a host of prominent figures, including members of the many groups of which Fitzgerald was a part – the Kerry, Munster and GAA central councils, the Gaelic League and Killarney UDC. The mass itself was presided over by Dick's brother, the Rev. Edmond Fitzgerald.¹⁰⁰ Dick Fitzgerald was buried with other members of his family near Killarney. The inscription on the Celtic cross at the plot reads '*Thugadar a saol ag obair ar son teanga, ceol, cluichí agus saoirse na hÉireann*' ('They gave their lives working for the language, music, games and freedom of Ireland').¹⁰¹

Only six weeks after Fitzgerald's death, the Dr Crokes club convened a meeting to decide on an appropriate way to remember the man who had been so integral to club and country. It was resolved that they should build a stadium to be named in Fitzgerald's honour. Over the next six years, the club endeavoured to fulfill this goal. Fund-raising included an

investment of £300 from the GAA's central council and £400 from the Munster council, in addition to £756 from the Munster council for the purchase of the land itself. Funding and construction took more than five years to complete. Fitzgerald Memorial Park was opened on 31 May 1936 to much fanfare. The park was officially blessed by Dr. John Harty, Archbishop of Cashel and Emly, who said: 'This Park is the finest playground in Ireland, and can compare favourably with any stadium in the whole world. ... It will inspire the present and future generations of Kerry Gaels to follow his [Fitzgerald's] example'.¹⁰²

D. Griffin of Mallow said that park 'fulfilled his fondest dreams'.¹⁰³ In an article titled 'Limerick Visitor's Impressions', the author, only identified by his initials J.D.H., called the park 'Ireland's Jewelled Stadium', saying that much had been anticipated but it paled in comparison to 'the reality of the inauguration left on the minds of delighted visitors'.¹⁰⁴ Since then generations of Kerry Gaelic footballers, regarded as amongst the finest exponents of the sport in Ireland, have taken to the field at Fitzgerald Stadium to honour one of their own.

Conclusion

Through the many facets of his life, Dick Fitzgerald touched upon many of the historical happenings around him in Ireland during his lifetime. As the GAA was emerging as a cornerstone of Irish life, Fitzgerald led his Dr Crokes and Kerry's county sides ably for many years and garnered many trophies and medals as a result. Not content merely with making his contribution on the field of play, he went one step further and became involved in the running of his club and served on many council and committees at community, county, provincial and national levels. His coaching manual *How to Play Gaelic Football* was understood as the model upon which an untold many clubs were trained, further helping spread Gaelic games and cement the GAA's place in Irish society.

While many may have been content with such a successful footballing career, Fitzgerald also took his politics very seriously. He joined the Irish Volunteers in Killarney a mere three days after the organization was founded in Dublin and served time at Frongoch, Wales after the Easter Rising for his role as an officer of his company. After his release, he immersed himself in Killarney politics as a member of the UDC. There is no telling what Fitzgerald may have accomplished in the political arena were it not for his untimely death. However, his legacy lives on not only in the strong tradition of Kerry football that he helped foster, but also as a

principled man who served his county and country during some of the most difficult years of its history.

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