

*A Sporting Challenge?*

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Review of

Tom Hunt, *Sport and Society in Victorian Ireland: The Case of Westmeath* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), ISBN 978-185918-415-8, 374pp.

There has been a gradual expansion in recent years of our understanding of sport in nineteenth-century Ireland. Although the picture is still very incomplete, through the work of historians such as Mike Cronin and Paul Rouse we are slowly gaining a much better comprehension of sporting events in Ireland, their meanings, as well as the nature of those who participated in them, and their motivations. Having said that, Tom Hunt's book marks perhaps the first important revision of what is becoming our accepted knowledge.

Hunt's study of Westmeath sport before 1905 is based on a sound research base, including an examination of the parliamentary papers, unprecedented trawls through the records of local sports clubs and association, and a comprehensive mining of the press. The result is a study full of detail, yet which always looks to the wider contexts. In some cases its conclusions will force those interested in the field to rethink some of their usual assumptions. For example, those who think of cricket in Victorian Ireland, who are admittedly a small constituency, usually have a number of preconceptions about the sport. The élitist nature of the game is largely accepted without question, as are its connections to the military and the public schools. The pattern of development, orthodoxy would have us believe, sees an always limited spread of the game prior to the 1870s, followed by a swift decline and near extinction over the next two decades. This was not least due to the souring of landlord-tenant relations during the Land War. The *coup de grace* was then administered with the founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association in the 1880s. Hunt qualifies this situation considerably. Although the élite origins and military role remain, by the 1880s cricket was disseminated well down the social scale in Westmeath, and it had taken root as a truly popular sport. The game probably reached the peak of its popularity around 1900, with a rapid and near absolute decline following rapidly thereafter.

In other cases Hunt's work does tend to confirm accepted interpretations, but it always does so with a dependence on a meticulous examination of the evidence. Regarding association football he notes the élitist origins of the sport, its encouragement in the public schools and by at least one paternalist employer, and the sport's benefit from the collapse of interest in Gaelic sport in the 1890s. All these are familiar themes. Much less so is his assertion, supported by fine details from the census returns, that the game had an exclusively Catholic following in Westmeath in the decade from 1895.

The expected assessment of the GAA is here. Activity began in 1885 but remained limited until 1893. At that point it declined still further. It then enjoyed a huge resurgence after 1900. Less expected, and just as interesting are the accounts and analyses of horseracing, the hunt, croquet and tennis.

However this book goes rather further than just outlining the sporting practices of a county. Sport is used to explore the relationships that existed between the local population and the garrison, the roles of women in local society, and the nature of dealings between the landed élites, the farming classes and those beyond. In short this is

a useful and interesting contribution to the social history of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland.

No book is ever without its faults though. Though extremely well presented and embellished with some useful illustrations, occasionally the prose clunks along in a rather inelegant manner, perhaps betraying the work's origins in a doctoral thesis. There are areas that perhaps could have been explored in greater depth. The roles, or lack of them, played by institutions such as hospitals and asylums, as well as local bodies such as the militia and friendly societies could have stood greater reference. Very occasionally the conclusions drawn warrant some further qualification. The persistent claims that sport in Westmeath in the 1890s displayed a marked lack of politicisation (for example 180 and 185) need to be qualified by noting that this period was one of an interlude in Irish nationalist politics, when a unified party and ideology failed to emerge. The lack of politicisation perhaps had less to do with any conscious disengagement between sport and politics than just the fact that the dominant political faction had become divided and its power consequently declined in this field. However these are very small criticisms of what is a splendid county study.

Less of a criticism than an observation is the nature of that county itself. Although centrally located in Ireland, Westmeath was a very untypical county. It was small, with relatively fertile soil and therefore enjoyed a certain unrepresentative prosperity. Relations between landowners and tenants were comparatively stable, to such an extent that the Land War had little impact. Politically the county enjoyed considerable stability too. Communication links to the capital were very good and there was a surprisingly large resident gentry. In truth no county can be seen as completely typical. The best we can hope for is a critical mass of examples. This study will hopefully set the standard for those to follow.