Cusack, Michael

by James Quinn

Cusack, Michael (1847–1906), GAA founder and sportsman, was born 20 September 1847 in Carron, on the eastern edge of the Burren, Co. Clare, third of five children of Matthew Cusack, herdsman, and Bridget Cusack (née Fleming), both native Irish-speakers. Educated at Carron national school, where he became a monitor, he completed his teacher training at Enniscorthy's District Model School (1864–5) and the Central Model School in Marlborough St., Dublin (1866). After he qualified he taught at St Colman's College, Newry, Co. Down (1871–4), Blackrock College, Co. Dublin (1874–5), and Clongowes Wood, Co. Kildare (1876–7). In October 1877 he set up an academy in Dublin to prepare students taking civil service and other public examinations; it prospered, moving from premises in Nelson St. to 4 Gardiner Place, and at its height Cusack was earning £1,500 a year. In June 1876 he married Margaret Woods, sister of a Dublin barrister; they had seven children.

Cusack was a strongly built man and a good all-round athlete who played hurling, football, and cricket, and excelled at the high jump and weight-throwing events. In May 1875 he entered the Dublin Athletic Club sports meeting, and his excellent performances in the 16-lb (7.25 kg) and 42-lb (19 kg) weight-throwing events were praised by the Irish Sportsman. He competed in further competitions during the year, including the O'Connell centenary games at Lansdowne Road in August. He was also a keen cricketer and a member of the French College Cricket Club from 1875. His academy promoted athletic spirit as well as academic achievement; in 1879 he fielded and captained a Cusack's Academy rugby XV, and he continued to play rugby occasionally till about 1882. He returned to athletics as a competitor and became Irish 16-lb shot champion in 1881. He regularly attended athletics meetings as an official and a participant, but soon became disillusioned with the poor organisation, social exclusivity, and increasing professionalism of Dublin athletics; he was also appalled by the association of gambling and sport. At first he attempted to reform Irish athletics from the inside, by working through established clubs and organising open meetings. In 1879 he became a member of the council of the ailing Irish Champion Athletic Club, and a founding member of the City and Suburban Harriers (although he had a poor opinion of cross-country running), and in 1882 helped to found the Dublin Athletic Club; but he soon despaired of these efforts, concluding that the sporting establishment was unwilling to welcome working people or include traditional Irish sports in their programmes.

Cusack had strong cultural as well as sporting interests. A native Irish-speaker, he was a member of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language founded in 1876, and became treasurer of the breakaway Aontacht na Gaeilge (the Gaelic Union) in January 1882. He also helped found Aontacht na Gaeilge's Gaelic Journal,
which first appeared in November 1882 and was an important milestone in the language revival movement. By 1882 he had linked his desire to reform Irish athletics with a plan to revive hurling, his interest in traditional Irish sports possibly reinforced by his involvement with Aontacht na Gaeilge. In 1879 he had discussed his intention to revive Irish games with the athlete and Fenian P. W. Nally (qv), who had established the National Athletic Sports of Mayo in September 1879 to counter the elitism of the controlling body in Dublin (Cusack later singled out McNally as the key influence in persuading him to found the GAA). In February 1883 Cusack helped to found the short-lived Dublin Hurling Club, of which he was vice-president and team captain. Although it attracted little interest and dissolved within a year, it managed to formulate and publish new rules for the game, and in his column in the Shamrock he advised young people to take up hurling and gave useful hints on how it should be played. In October 1883 he made another effort to revive hurling by founding Cusack’s Academy Hurling Club and in December the Metropolitan Hurling Club; he regarded the latter as the direct precursor of the GAA. His club had only about forty players but he soon established contacts with like-minded enthusiasts throughout Ireland in Galway and Munster, and on Easter Monday 1884 his Metropolitan club played a game in Ballinasloe against a local team.

By now he had turned sharply against games of English origin, denouncing rugby and cricket as corrupting alien influences, and he regularly used his columns in various publications – United Ireland, Irishman, Shamrock, and Irish Sportsman – to criticise the anti-national and socially exclusive character of existing sporting bodies. When in summer 1884 the Dublin weekly sports journals Irish Sportsman and Sport advocated bringing all athletics meetings in Ireland under the control of English rules, Cusack saw this as a challenge to the growing spirit of national self-reliance, and it spurred him to take his own initiative. In an article, ‘A word about Irish athletics’ published in the Parnellite United Ireland (11 Oct. 1884), he claimed that sports in Ireland were organised by those ‘hostile to the dearest aspirations of the Irish people’. As a result traditional Irish games had declined and the strength and endurance of the Irish people were gradually being sapped; the influences that had corrupted the towns and cities were now spreading to the countryside, and most athletics meetings consisted of little other than ‘foot-races, betting and flagrant cheating’. It was imperative, therefore, that Irish people should found their own sporting organisation ‘to encourage and promote in every way every form of athletics which is peculiarly Irish, and to remove with one sweep everything foreign and iniquitous in the present system’. His article elicited an enthusiastic response from Maurice Davin (qv), a well known athlete from Carrick-on-Suir, who like Cusack had often served as a judge at athletics events. They called a meeting in Hayes’s Commercial Hotel, Thurles, Co. Tipperary, on 1 November 1884. Thurles was chosen because of its convenience for many of the best athletes in the country and its proximity to the residence of Archbishop T. W. Croke (qv), an ardent supporter of traditional Irish sports. Only eight men attended the meeting, but Cusack read about sixty messages of support, and they founded the Gaelic Athletic Association, a national sporting body, open to Irishmen of all classes, creeds, and political
persuasions, committed to cultivating and promoting indigenous games. Davin was elected president and Cusack one of three honorary secretaries. Croke, C. S. Parnell (qv), and Michael Davitt (qv) were invited to become the association’s patrons. At a second meeting in Thurles on 17 January 1885 Cusack was involved in drawing up new procedural rules for the association and sporting rules for traditional games.

The GAA spread rapidly, and over the next few months Davin and Cusack regularly organised and attended games to explain the rules of hurling and football and see that they were enforced; by December 1886 nearly 600 clubs were affiliated to the association. Cusack travelled extensively throughout the country promoting the new body, and its growth owed much to his organisational skills and dynamic personality. In its early days the association came under attack from other athletics organisations and from unionist newspapers for its openly nationalist political leanings; but, as Gaelic games correspondent of United Ireland, Cusack defended it spiritedly throughout 1885–6. In the bitter battle with the largely Dublin-based Irish Amateur Athletic Association (founded in February 1885) over the control of Irish athletics, Cusack proved an uncompromising defender of the GAA, denouncing the IAAA as a ‘ranting, impotent West British abortion’ (quoted in Mandle, 426). However, his conduct as secretary was controversial: he had great difficulty in working within a committee system, rarely consulted anyone, neglected routine administration, and was abusive towards both opponents and colleagues. In March 1886 Croke wrote to Cusack advising him to adopt a more conciliatory attitude, but Cusack responded with an insulting letter. When Croke stated that he could not continue as a patron if Cusack carried on with his dictatorial and insolent ways, there were numerous calls for Cusack’s resignation, and he reluctantly apologised. However, criticism of Cusack’s administrative neglect continued and at a stormy meeting in Thurles on 4 July 1886 a majority voted for his removal as secretary, which marked his demise as a genuinely influential force within the GAA.

At the GAA’s request he was denied access to United Ireland to attack his former colleagues, and in January 1887 he founded a weekly Gaelic games magazine, the Celtic Times. He used this to promote Irish language, culture, industry, and trade unionism and to denounce the leadership and administration of the GAA, including criticising the growing influence of the IRB in the association, and to attack rival newspapers, especially the Freeman’s Journal. His language was as vitriolic as ever: he described the GAA executive as a ‘junta of knaves and fools’ and a ‘miserable, mischievous and traitorous gang’ (Celtic Times, 15 Oct. 1887). The circulation of the Celtic Times declined from 20,000 in May 1887 to 10,000 in December, and the last number was published on 14 January 1888. Even without the paper, he kept up his feud with the association and in September 1888 denounced Davin and Davitt for their part in organising a GAA tour of America. From the late 1880s his fortunes and his health declined: his academy had closed in 1887, his wife died in 1890, and several of his children were placed in orphanages. He earned a precarious living through occasional journalism and private tutoring. In March
1893 he regained a role of some importance when elected Dublin county secretary, though his election caused considerable dissension and many resignations from the GAA. From a position of bitter hostility in the late 1880s and most of the 1890s, Cusack's relationship with the GAA's leadership mellowed in his final years, and the contribution he had made to the association was acknowledged, although he was defeated in the election for GAA secretary in September 1901.

In his youth he may have been a Fenian, and he sometimes gave the impression of being an advocate of physical-force nationalism, particularly when attempting to regain his position in the GAA in the 1890s. This, however, stemmed more from his blustering personality than any real commitment to revolutionary republicanism. Pugnacious, boastful, and a heavy drinker, he styled himself ‘Citizen Cusack’ and with his bushy beard, frock coat, broad-brimmed hat, and blackthorn stick, was a conspicuous Dublin character. His irascibility and outspoken nationalism led to him being caricatured as the aggressive and xenophobic ‘Citizen’ in the ‘Cyclops’ episode of James Joyce’s (qv) *Ulysses*. He died penniless in Dublin 27 November 1906 and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery; his funeral was attended by many leading members of the GAA and Sinn Féin.

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