

ISSN 1652-7224 :: Published 17 May 2006

Printer-friendly pdf-file

Read more in English at idrottsforum.org

There are a number of cultural phenomena that we – mostly correctly – perceive as typically Irish: The Dubliners, Riverdance, James Joyce, Guinness, Roy Keane (?). Few Scandinavians are familiar with the most typical of Irish sports, however, which is hurling, a team game played with sticks and a ball, and not unlike field hockey. Someone who knows a lot more is Seamus J. King, author of *A History of Hurling*; someone else, who also knows quite a bit about hurling is Terry Goldie, a Canadian English Professor with a peculiar interest in odd sports. In his review of King's book, exclusively written for idrottsforum.org, Terry Goldie points out that in terms of nationalist connotation, English cricket and American baseball can't even touch hurling, the pride of Ireland. Still, hurling is losing ground in the modern-day Irish tiger economy; and understandably so, considering King's forward-looking last chapter, which displays deep ignorance of contemporary Irish society. But Terry Goldie has a helpful suggestion...

“Best game in the world”: A History of Hurling

Terry Goldie

Faculty of Arts, York University, Toronto

*Seamus J. King***A History of Hurling:****Second Edition**

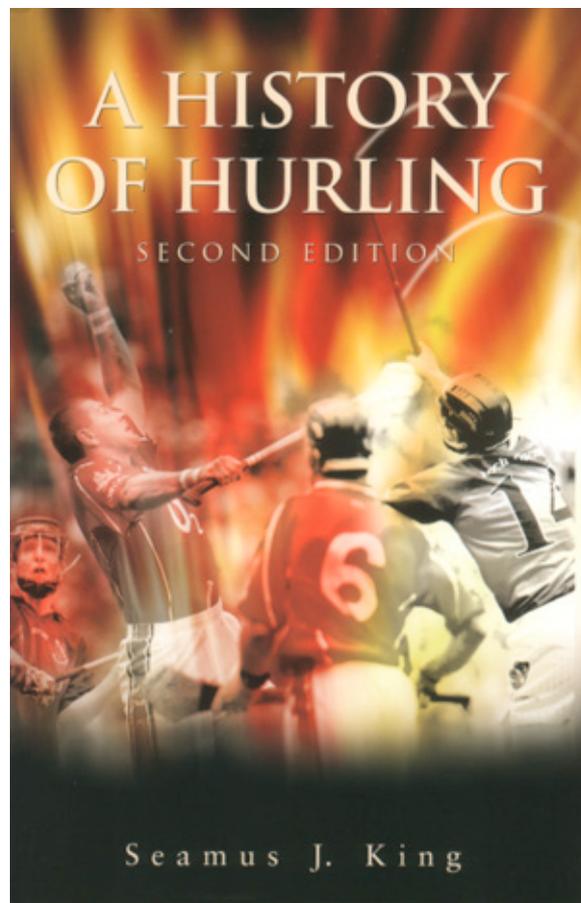
439 sidor, hft., ill.

Dublin: Gill & Macmillan 2005

ISBN 0-7171-3938-7

Early in the film, *The Crying Game*, the IRA volunteer, Fergus, is guarding the black British soldier, Jody. As time goes on they develop a deep affection. As is so often the case when two men are looking for a point of communication, they discuss sport. Fergus says to Jody, “And you like cricket?” Jody replies, “Best game in the world.” Fergus responds, “Did you ever see hurling?” Jody says, “That game where a bunch of paddies whack sticks at one another?” and Fergus responds, “Best game in the world.”

This is not a bad encapsulation of what the world thinks about hurling. First, it is IRISH, as profoundly Irish as Guinness or the Chieftains. Thus when a film such as this is looking for a symbol of Irish nationalism, it comes immediately to mind. Second, it is incomprehensible. Presumably many viewers of the film had never heard of the game but for those who had, such as the English audience, Jody's summary would seem accurate. And Fergus's final line would be just an exemplification of the blind insularity so often associated with the Irish.



A foreigner is confused by an initial encounter with most sports. I grew up with American football, what many countries call “gridiron,” but I have heard from many non-North Americans that this battle of over-padded giants running at each other looks like nothing so much as a science fiction war. When I first saw hurling my initial impression was of extraordinary danger. It might look a bit treacherous when an Australian Rules footballer leaps high to catch the ball but the gesture is quite tame in comparison to hurling, with a bare hand in the air trying to catch a ball while hurleys, sticks not unlike a combination of lacrosse and hockey sticks, are batting at it. I remain amazed that matches can be completed without everyone suffering broken fingers.

One of the primary points of interest for an outsider is that the Irishness of hurling is just as monumental as it might seem. Baseball might be identifiably American and cricket is theoretically English but not in the same way that hurling is Irish. The most obvious difference, of course, is that those other sports are played in many countries, to the extent that the English are often beaten by other countries at cricket and the mighty Americans failed to make it into the top four in a recent world baseball tournament.

Of deeper importance, however, is the extensive mythology of hurling. I have a book of international fairylore in which the only sport mentioned as played by fairies is hurling enjoyed by the Irish contingent. While most sports have obscure and undefined origins they usually begin in modern times. The Irish claim the first recorded match of hurling took place in 1272 BC. As well as age, it has the imprimatur of greatness in that Cu Chulainn, the epic hero of Irish mythology, is claimed to have been a magnificent player. If only Beowulf had played cricket or Siegfried soccer.

Seamus King’s *A History of Hurling* is primarily a record of the modern game. Thus both text and photographs are devoted to minutiae of the sort cricket fans pore over in *The Wisden Cricketer’s Almanack* or baseball fans look for in *The Bill James Handbook*. In other words, if you are not interested in hurling at that level, this is unlikely to be the book for you. Still, particularly in the earlier section it offers a number of moments that will be of interest to anyone looking for insights into the Irish character.

Hurling is, with Gaelic Football, one of the mainstays of the Gaelic Athletic Association, created in 1884. One of its founding patrons, Archbishop Croke, linked his interest in Irish sport with an irritation at things English:

One of the most painful, let me assure you, and, at the same time, one of the most frequently recurring reflections that, as an Irish man I am compelled to make in connection with the present aspect of things in the country, is derived from the ugly and irritating fact that we are daily importing from England, not only her manufactured goods, which we cannot help doing, since she has practically strangled our own manufacturing appliances, but, together with her fashions, her accents, her vicious literature, her music, her dances and her manifold mannerisms, her games also and her pastimes, to the utter discredit of our own grand national sport and to the sore humiliation, as I believe, of every genuine son and daughter of our old land.

This seems a worthy precursor of Fergus’s rejection of cricket. Of course, later in the film Fergus moves to England, a not uncommon thing for an Irishman, at least until recently. This need not make him less Irish. King’s history records that in the early twentieth century the GAA declared England “a province of Ireland” and London Emmets actually took the national cup in 1901, a very brief moment of internationalization for hurling.

My mention that today’s equivalent of Fergus would be much less likely to “cross the water” reflects the new Ireland. For two hundred years Ireland was associated in the imagination with emigration. A 1907 commentary about that year’s All-Ireland hurling championship presents resentful attitudes that would prevail until the 1990’s:

If the young men of Ireland could only be made see the fact as it really is, namely that one grand day like that at Dungarvan (no matter who wins) gives pure enjoyment and more genuine satisfaction than a thousand years of America or other foreign lands, they would know how privileged they are and would choose the better part of staying in the old country working for her weal, living and dying within the four walls of her holy hills?.

But the “privilege” of the “holy hills” of nationalism and poverty has been replaced by the Celtic Tiger with his eager trade with the outside world. Ireland has become a place to stay, to return to, and even to move to. Yet, you ask, what does this mean for hurling?

King’s final chapter is on “the future of hurling.” The future might not be bleak but it is certainly fragile, as King himself recognizes. He laments the departure of the [Christian Brothers](#) “who saw the promotion of Gaelic games as an essential part of their educational philosophy.” He admits that they had an “authoritarian approach” but he neglects to mention that a large part of the reason for their departure was their reputation for both physical and

sexual abuse. This slur is no doubt unfair to the majority of brothers who were strict but not abusive and who devoted all their energies to the improvement of young boys, many of whom had few opportunities outside of those offered by the brothers.

Still, the brothers were part of a different era, in every sense, and the fact that King seems to wish they were still here suggests that his love for hurling is also a love for a beautiful past. If controlled by that view, hurling might become like Real Tennis, extolled by its devotees as “the best game in the world” but seen by even the neighbours of those devotees as more like a question in a game of trivia. One of King’s comments suggests how far his sensibility might be from today’s Ireland: “Primary schools now have a preponderance of female teachers, and this has also taken attention away from the promotion of the game.” One would think a more forward vision would learn from soccer that the greatest potential of growth in sport is in young girls playing. King suggests professionalization might save the game. I suppose that would be one way to hitch the Celtic tiger to the hurley but I would think a more effective move would be to turn to the Celtic tigresses.

© **TerryGoldie2006**

 **Buy the book from [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)**

 **Köp boken från [Bokus.se](https://www.bokus.se)**

 **Kjøp boken fra [Akademika.no](https://www.akademika.no)**

 **Køb bogen fra [Polyteknisk.dk](https://www.polyteknisk.dk)**