

**Shinty, Nationalism and National Autonomy**  
**in Scotland, 1887 – 1928**

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**Abstract**

Studies of the relationships between sport and nationalism have often overlooked how different sports may depict alternative expressions of nationalism. This paper examines how social, cultural and political ideas associated with nationalism and national autonomy in Scotland touched the sport of shinty between 1887 and 1928. During this period the transformation of shinty from a traditional folk game to a modern sport was consolidated within Scottish Highland society. The paper probes some of the ways that shinty was contoured by, and connected to wider social, cultural and political circumstances of the period. Three strands are considered in the analysis: (i) the place of shinty as a conduit for aspirations of national autonomy; (ii) the different expressions of nationalism in Scotland that oscillated on the landscape of culture and politics; and (iii) the connections between shinty and Gaelic sports in Ireland, and the relationship with expressions of nationalism. The analysis is developed using the concepts of national autonomy and civil society. These conceptual components help to probe how shinty symbolised alternative aspirations and expressions of nationalism between 1887 and 1928.

**Introduction**

Scholars in both the history of sport and the sociology of sport have long acknowledged the idea that sports have a role as symbols of nations, and as rallying points to express nationalism. However, studies of the complex and diverse relationships between sport and expressions of nationhood have often overlooked how nationalism expressed through cultural

practices may depict alternative meanings and images of the nation in different historical periods. This is important: nations and nationalisms are neither abstract and nebulous concepts nor static, unchanging and uniform entities. If we are to understand fully the myriad ways in which sport may be used to project ideas of nations and meanings embedded in expressions of nationalism, it is necessary to consider how ‘sport in all its forms both contributes to and is constitutive of the social, cultural and historical milieu in which it moves’.<sup>1</sup> Building on this point, this essay probes how social, cultural and political ideas associated with nationalism and national autonomy in Scotland touched the sport of shinty between 1887 and 1928. In probing the relationship between shinty and nationalism during this period, this paper contributes to scholarship on the sport – nationhood axis in two distinctive ways. First it considers a sport that is considered to have a unique place in the culture of Gaelic Scotland hitherto overlooked in analyses of sport in the life of the nation. Second, the essay incorporates the concept of *national autonomy* to understand the diverse aspirations that may be associated with sport and nationalism in a particular time and nation.

The focus on shinty for an analysis of nationalism is interesting. With its profile limited mainly to Highland Scotland, and its roots in Gaelic culture, shinty does not embody mainstream and popular ideas of the nation. This assumes however, there is an essential homogeneous Scotland, but overlooks the assertion that there are ‘alternative ways of being Scottish’<sup>2</sup> including for instance the distinctions between Lowland and Highland Scotland or Gaelic and non-Gaelic Scotland, as well too amongst first and subsequent generations of immigrants to Scotland. With its antecedent origins in Gaelic culture during the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, shinty was one of a number of cultural practices that symbolised a self-conscious Highland cultural community within the Scottish nation and British state. These two points allude to the space shinty occupies in Scottish, British and global sport; in particular they affirm the suggestion made in previous historical

accounts that shinty is the ‘national game of the Gael’.<sup>3</sup> However, neither previous studies of shinty, nor studies about the social significance of sport in Scotland, accommodate a critical analysis of how this sport might represent an image of the nation, expressions of nationalism or aspirations for national autonomy. It is important to address this omission if we are to understand fully how different sports contribute the ideas and expressions associated with nations and alternative forms of national autonomy.

To examine the relationship between shinty, nationalism and national autonomy the discussion concentrates on the period 1887 – 1928. This period has been chosen for two reasons. The first concerns the development of shinty during this period, the second concerns the presence of radical social, cultural and political movements on the landscape of the then United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Between 1887 and 1928 the transformation of shinty from a traditional folk game into a rudimentary formalised sport was consolidated. It is beyond the scope of this paper to reproduce a detailed chronology of the processes associated with this transformation, although an overview of the origins, patterns of decline and transformation of the game is included.<sup>4</sup> Instead the paper probes some of the ways that shinty was contoured by, and connected to wider social, cultural and political circumstances of the period. Three strands are of particular interest for the analysis presented: (i) the place of sport as a conduit for aspirations of national autonomy; (ii) the different expressions of nationalism in Scotland that oscillated on the landscape of culture and politics; and (iii) the connections between shinty and Gaelic sports in Ireland, and the relationship with expressions of nationalism.

There is an interesting parallel to this consideration of the confluence of shinty with social, cultural and political dimensions of nationhood and autonomy between 1887 and 1928. The development of shinty and the emergence of nationalism in Scotland coincided with the organisation of Gaelic sports in Ireland through the Gaelic Athletic Association

(1884) and its connection to other nationalist organisations. In contrast to the cultural and political campaigns concerning Irish nationalism, nationalism in Scotland was less concerned with becoming an independent state. Nevertheless, the relationship between Gaelic sports and radical social and cultural politics in Ireland is relevant to exploring the more opaque associations between shinty and nationalism in Scotland. In Ireland, the development of Gaelic sport was connected to the ideas that underpinned land reform politics, home rule and nationalism. Similar but separate radical social and political activities were also evident in Scotland, notably in the Scottish Highlands. In fact, certain scholars have noted that the Highlands and Ireland became the focus for radical activity on the north and west Celtic frontiers of the British imperial state.<sup>5</sup>

In Highland society, as both a geographic and a cultural community, certain individuals involved in the promotion and development of shinty were connected to some of these radical social, cultural and political movements, and to their counterparts in Ireland. There are also some intriguing threads to suggest some of the more radical individuals associated with shinty aspired to the idea of Scotland as an independent nation. These connections are considered in this analysis of shinty, nationalism and autonomy, although it is not intended to offer a formal comparative analysis between the sports culture of Ireland and Scotland and their convergence with nationalism. However, the development of Irish sport and nationalist politics was an important dimension of the intriguing relationship between shinty, nationalism and autonomy in Scotland.

The discussion is developed through a synthesis of primary sources (e.g. minutes of the Camanachd Association, archival documents and newspaper sources) and secondary material to probe the relationship between shinty and expressions of nationalism and national autonomy in Scotland. The discussion is organised around four sections: Civil Society, Nationalisms and National Autonomy; Shinty: An Overview of the Game of the Gael; Shinty,

Unionist Nationalism and Celtic Autonomy; and Shinty, Gaelic Nationalists and the Irish Connection. The paper concludes by reflecting conceptually on the relationship between Shinty, Nationalisms and National Autonomy. These themes provide the framework to explore some of the ways that shinty contributed to, and was constitutive, of different expressions of nationalism and autonomy between 1887 and 1928.

### **Civil Society, Nationalisms and National Autonomy**

Some commentators on Scottish nationalism have argued that during the nineteenth century, when Scotland could have turned its status as a nation within the British state into a nation-state, it failed to mobilise its national consciousness.<sup>6</sup> This argument is persuasive if we accept a narrow understanding of nationalism as a political ideology that is concerned only with demanding its own nation-state. However, expressions of nationalism are ideologies that have social and cultural phenomena which may be associated with politics.<sup>7</sup> The contextual articulation of ideology through cultural practices like sport makes nationalism work as a social and political expression in a variety of ways. Sport in Scotland is one cultural practice where ‘different and competing identities, all claiming the terms national and all laying claim to forms of patriotism’ are expressed.<sup>8</sup> The contention here is that in order to examine critically the relationship between shinty and nationalism between 1887 and 1928 it is necessary to conceptualise expressions of nationalism in the context of that period.

Between 1887 and 1928 various expressions of nationalism were evident in Scotland. This included campaigns associated with political home rule for Scotland, as well as articulations that were cultural, and less overtly political in orientation. Over these four decades a variety of organisations were part of the fluid agenda around expressions of nationalism, including the Scottish Home Rule Association (1886), the Scots National League (1920-28) and the National Party of Scotland (1928-33). Each of these organisations drew varying support throughout Scotland, from political and social figures of different

political persuasions, and from individuals associated with Highland society who advocated a radical form of Gaelic cultural politics. Simultaneously, various cultural expressions of nationalism were also apparent. In this latter form, cultural practices including sport and *civil society* were crucial 'in keeping ideas about Scotland and nationalism alive'.<sup>9</sup>

*Civil society* reflects an institutional network that mediates the set of practices, values, and attitudes that constitute culture, encapsulating 'the space or arena between the household and the state ... which affords possibilities of concerted action and social self-organisation'.<sup>10</sup> Since at least the end of the nineteenth century sport has been part of self-regulated civil society, although by the late-twentieth century there was a much closer regulation of sport by national governments. Sport therefore is part of the day-to-day space within which both collective official (political) identities and distinctive contrasting but meaningful national, ethnic or cultural identities are expressed, without disrupting the apparent unity of the political state.

In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, civil society was an important part of the social and political world of the urban middle classes in Britain. Their autonomy over the institutions that comprised civil society meant they assumed an important place in local, and in national (rather than imperial) government.<sup>11</sup> It was through the self-regulating clubs, societies and associations of civil society including those concerned with sport that social and cultural identities were constructed; expressions of nationalism - political and cultural - were strands of those collective identities. Significantly, the framework of civil society also provided spaces where alternatives to dominant nationalist - political and cultural - discourses could be cultivated and promoted.

The concept of *civil society* is considered here in relation to *national autonomy*. Autonomy is concerned with the search for and arrangement of the administration of power in cultural, national and state territories. In a consideration of nationalism, Anthony Smith

explained it as ‘an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity of a human population, some of whose members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential “nation”.’<sup>12</sup> During the age of nationalism nationalist movements in small European nations usually sought independence from larger states, however statehood is not the inevitable or the only objective of such movements. Certain nations have in particular contextual circumstances been satisfied with some form of devolved political power or with opportunities to assert cultural parity through the autonomy of institutions that are national in character.<sup>13</sup> In providing the institutional structure for self-regulation and the development of specific identities, civil society provides the essential spaces in which different expressions of national autonomy are articulated. The institutional context of sport, and the symbolic and real functions it fulfilled in constructing identities, have generally been absent from studies of sport, nationalism and cultural identity.

### **Shinty: An Overview of the Game of the Gael**

The sport of shinty has a limited global profile. In the nineteenth century, the game was played in places where émigré Scots settled, including for example Australia, Canada and the USA, but such activity was not sustained.<sup>14</sup> Given its limited international profile, shinty may appear an unusual choice to explore the relationships between sport and nationalism, yet this overlooks the point that different sports in particular social, cultural and historical circumstances may speak of the nation in which they exist. This section focuses on shinty, the sport that is the cultural conduit for examining nationalism and autonomy in this paper. The discussion provides an overview of shinty, its origins, patterns of decline and transformation of the game and emergence as an embryonic sport.

As a modern sport with a number of clubs, regional and national competitions and a national association - the Camanachd Association - shinty developed from about the 1870s, but the game is rooted in a culture that once linked Celtic Ireland and Celtic Scotland.<sup>15</sup> The

antecedent origins of modern shinty derive from an ancient pastime rooted in ‘the Gaelic life of old’.<sup>16</sup> Historians of shinty assert the game was introduced to part of what is now Scotland around the sixth century AD along with Christianity and the Gaelic language, and in its modern form the sport retains aspects of its linguistic roots in a number of ways, notably in the name of the national association.<sup>17</sup> A crude stick and ball game called *camanachd* in Gaelic was part of the cultural baggage of the *Scots*, a group of Gaels from north-east Ireland who established a pan-Celtic kingdom – Dalriada - linking the peoples along the western seaboard of what is now Scotland and the area around modern Antrim.<sup>18</sup> Over subsequent centuries, this pastime may have fused with stick and ball games played in other parts of Scotland. However, *camanachd* is recognised as the prototype of the modern sport that in English is called shinty.<sup>19</sup> These links with Gaelic culture and Ireland resonate through the history of shinty and are captured in a contemporary international sport event: a shinty - hurling match played annually between shinty players from Scotland and hurlers from Ireland under a set of compromise rules.<sup>20</sup>

There is some difficulty in tracing the presence of shinty in Scotland prior to the eighteenth century, due largely to a lack of substantive documentary sources recording the social life of ordinary people in Scotland. Nevertheless, a miscellany of sources - including Celtic mythology embedded in Gaelic culture, oral evidence affirming contests between neighbouring parishes, districts and clans, manuscripts, statutory proclamations and rulings against sports, and the personal accounts of travellers – confirm that a stick and ball game similar to modern shinty was played in many parts of Scotland until the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, shinty had disappeared from most communities in Scotland but it survived in specific communities in the Scottish Highlands. The nineteenth century continued to mark a period of decline for shinty in some Highland communities, while in others traditional patterns of play survived. In those communities where it survived shinty

was a game of diversity rather than uniformity. Tradition rather than universal rules and standards provided structure and a sense of antiquity for the folk games played.

Examining the impact of metropolitan culture on regional games David Whitson highlighted the case of shinty.<sup>21</sup> Whitson's account was hitherto the only conceptual sociological analysis of specific circumstances that characterised the survival, transformation and decline of shinty in the Highlands. Substantive attention was paid to the pressures on shinty in Highland communities from a hegemonic metropolitan culture by the 1970s and early 1980s. This included for example, the presence or absence of industry and employment opportunities in Highland communities, the expansion of mass communications media such as television, and the accessibility of a greater variety of sport leisure pursuits that are perceived as the 'modern' pursuits of a dominant, but alien, metropolitan culture. In contrast to the hegemonic metropolitan culture, a regional game like shinty may be perceived as a curiosity, the quaint survivor of a 'rustic past'.<sup>22</sup> Whitson's analysis is a strong conceptual account that identifies the social, cultural and ideological tensions that reside in and through the processes of cultural change. It also illustrates how, in any specific period, selected elements of residual and modern practices blend to establish an emergent cultural form, as happened with the transformation of shinty from a folk game into an institutionalized modern sport between 1887 and 1928.

Four features appear to have provided some commonality to the diversity of traditional games in Highland communities where the game survived throughout the nineteenth century. First, shinty games involved large numbers of players, drawn from within one community, or from neighbouring communities. Second, particular local traditions were used to decide who played for which side. For instance, in the northern Highland community of Strathglass the men of the *braes* (hillsides) formed a team to play the men of the *strath* (river valley bound by hills). On the island of Mull teams comprised the Campbell clan

against those of the Maclean clan on the Calgary Sands in the 1820s, in Garve ‘married men [met] single men’, while in Tain matches were between ‘town and country’.<sup>23</sup> Third, in the era before regular organised sport was established, shinty was part of community activities that marked traditional festivals such as Christmas, New Year (January 1) and Old New Year (12/13 January). In those Highland communities where Catholicism was the dominant religion, shinty games were associated with holy days that were part of the religious calendar in winter such as St Stephen’s Day (December 26), St John’s Day (December 27) and Epiphany (January 6).<sup>24</sup> The evidence confirms that these communities ‘made their own entertainment, and this entertainment - piping, dancing, and whisky drinking, as well as shinty – was precisely the stuff of their distinctive way of life.’<sup>25</sup>

The fourth feature of shinty as a folk game concerned the patronage of games by the landowning class in the Highlands. In particular patronage of shinty by the Highland aristocracy - a residual element of the old Highland clan structure - appeared to sustain traditional ties of kinship between different social groups. In Kintyre, shinty was played on the lawn at Inverary Castle, seat of the Dukes of Argyll. On one occasion a game between Inverary and Ardkinglas involved 41 players on each side, and the Inverary team was led by the Duke of Argyll’s sons, Lord Archibald Campbell and his brother Lord Walter.<sup>26</sup> Like the Campbells in Argyll, the Frasers of Lovat supported shinty games on their estate around Beaufort Castle in Beaully (Inverness-shire), as did the Duke of Gordon (Kingussie) and the MacPherson clan in Badenoch.<sup>27</sup> At Christmas or at Old New Year, the MacPherson clan, led by the chief “Old Cluny”, provided the annual *cluid-bhall* (ball play) for local people at Cluny Castle (near what is now the village of Newtonmore), beyond the 1880s. A newspaper report of the *cluid-bhall* of December 1875 conveys a sense of the occasion, as well as its function in sustaining the unique social and cultural obligations of the chief.

Cluny, with his usual *duinealas* [manliness] in preserving the customs of his ancestors, gives a ball-play in the grounds of Cluny Castle, when the bards ... sing original compositions in honour of the occasion. [...] On Christmas Day the shinty players in the Newtonmore district assembled on *Eilean Bheanachair* ... and the game was kept up ... with much enthusiasm for some hours.<sup>28</sup>

During the 1870s new patterns of playing shinty began to emerge. It was during this period that shinty was transformed from a folk pastime into an activity with identifiable structures and events associated with modern sports. Specifically this included the formation of a substantial number of shinty clubs, the introduction of formal competitions and the inception of the first umbrella association - The Shinty Association (1877) - to co-ordinate competition between teams in the urban conurbations extending around Glasgow. By 1880, twenty-four shinty clubs were established. The majority of these clubs were in urban communities around Britain where Highland migrants had settled, including London, Manchester, Edinburgh and most notably around the area of Glasgow.<sup>29</sup> This was not a fortuitous coincidence. The development of formalised shinty practices was part of the social and cultural activity of a distinct and semi-autonomous Highland civil society that fulfilled at least two important functions in late-nineteenth century Britain. First, it was an institutional repository of an apparently benign cultural identity built on the ideas of Celtic revival. Second, Highland civil society functioned to accommodate definitions of collective identity for Highlanders in urban environments that reinforced unique components of identity for Highland Gaels. Notably, *dùthchas* (native place); *dualchas* (referring to people or kin); and *gnàthas* (concerned the norms of personal behaviours against which the man was measured). In the urban environment of Glasgow in particular, the names of shinty clubs embodied these

components of identity, as well as the clubs' links to social organisations of the diverse Highland diaspora.<sup>30</sup>

This embryonic development of shinty clubs and competitions mainly in urban communities during the 1870s contrasted with the northern Highlands where traditional shinty games were still largely untouched by the characteristics of a modern sport. This changed in 1880 with the formation of Strathglass Shinty Club (*Comunn Camanachd Straghlais*), the first formally constituted shinty club in the northern Highlands. The formation of Strathglass Shinty Club was a watershed for shinty in the north of Scotland, and over the following six years a further twelve shinty clubs were established in north Highland communities. This included Oban Camanachd and Bonawe, also in Oban (1881); Glengarry and Ben Nevis (1882); Lochcarron (1883), Glenurquhart (1884) and Strathpeffer (1886). The formation of these clubs in the northern Highlands is indicative of the communities where traditional shinty games had survived.

Between 1887 and 1928 shinty fortified its transformation from a folk game into a modern sport commensurate with the period. This was characterised by the creation of the Camanachd Association (1893), a national administrative body to govern the game and the introduction of a range of formal competitions. The Camanachd Association provided the sport of shinty with a national organisation responsible for establishing an agreed system of rules. It was also responsible for introducing a national competition - the Camanachd Association Challenge Cup (1895-96) - that remains a feature of the sport in the twenty-first century. The development of a North district association and South district association for shinty as well as various local competitions characterised the growth of the sport. During this period, shinty was still played largely on a local basis and subject to the impact of employment opportunities, migration out of Highland communities and war. Nevertheless,

this traditional game of the Gael had adapted to become an emergent form that reflected aspects of hegemonic institutionalized sport.

In his analysis of Scottish culture Malcolm Chapman contends that since the eighteenth century the image of the nation Scotland displays to the world is a Highland one.<sup>31</sup> However, he asserts that Gaelic culture and the Highlands have ‘a paradoxical position’ in this image of Scotland.<sup>32</sup> The next section considers the relationship of shinty to this paradoxical image of Scotland. More specifically it probes the confluence of shinty with the dominant expression of Unionist nationalism in Scotland between 1887 and 1928.

### **Shinty, Unionist Nationalism and Celtic Autonomy**

Developing his argument about the position of Gaelic culture and the Highlands in the national image of Scotland Chapman notes:

the Scottish people have increasingly looked to the Highlands to provide a location for an autonomy in which they could lodge their own political, literary and historical aspirations. They have thereby been allowed to reap all the benefits of Union, while at the same time retaining a location for all the virtues of sturdy independence. This ... occurred over a period when Highland society was being reduced and scattered by clearances and forced emigrations, and by religious and cultural imperialisms of various kinds.<sup>33</sup>

A number of scholars have noted that symbols of Scotland’s Gaelic past - such as tartan, the cultivation of Highland Games and a de-politicised notion of the clan system - were incorporated selectively into a particular representation of Scotland as a “Celtic” nation within the British imperial state. Chapman argues this constructed Celtic vision obscured the realities of the Highland experience and marginalised elements of Scotland’s Gaelic past, including in particular the Gaelic language.

In sporting culture, the dominant expression of this constructed Celtic vision of Scotland was embodied in the depiction of the Highlands as a sporting playground for Britain's social elite.<sup>34</sup> The image depicted included the reproduction of tartan symbolism and clan regalia, and images of harmony between social classes in the Highlands. This constructed representation came to symbolise an unstated acceptance of a particular expression of Britishness. This Anglo-British Celtic vision of Scotland drew on a sentimental and romantic image of Scotland's Gaelic past, but reinforced the hegemony of the British (including Scots) social elite in the Highlands.

Between 1887 and 1928, as the transformation of shinty from a folk game to an organised sport was consolidated, the game of the Gael also projected a romantic image of "Celtic" culture. The social elites of British society, particularly in London, and the indigenous social elite of Highland society cultivated this romantic image of the Highlands.<sup>35</sup> Shinty was therefore one element of the "Celtification" of Gaelic culture that was cultivated as a fashionable accessory of polite anglicised Highland society<sup>36</sup> that reinforced the hegemonic position of the British social and political elite.

One illustrative example of this is evident in continued patronage of traditional shinty games in Highland communities by social elites. These arrangements often encapsulated the paternalistic social relations between the traditional clan chief and his people, although this relationship had been eroded by the emergence of commercial landlordism, land clearance and the status of the Highland aristocracy as anglicised gentlemen who 'were active agents of Anglicization' in the Highlands.<sup>37</sup>

The Camanachd Association also incorporated traditional social relations and the hierarchy of Highland society into its arrangements. At its inception in 1893 the Camanachd Association appointed a Chief - Captain Archibald Chisholm of Glassburn, (founder of Strathglass Shinty Club, and a former British army officer); the use of this terminology by the

national association, and some shinty clubs, invoked a residual connection with the dismantled clan system and with social relations in contemporaneous Anglicised Highland society. The other office bearers were: the President, Lord Simon Fraser of Lovat, who became Chief of the association in 1898 until his death in 1933 and three vice-Presidents, Cluny Macpherson, C.J.B Macpherson of Balavil and L.A Macpherson of Corrimony. The status of these men in Highland society and their appointment as office bearers of the Camanachd Association reveals a continued deference towards Highland social and political elites.

The nature of the nineteenth century British state can be defined, at least in part, by its imperialist political and economic agenda. Social scientists and historians have noted this did not destroy the identity of Scotland, but reinforced the dominant expression of nationalism in Scotland, rather than challenging the premise of the union and Empire. In Ireland during this period, the formation of a national organisation for Gaelic sports that aligned with other cultural and political nationalist movements provides an interesting contrast to the relationship between shinty and nationalism in Scotland. The national aspirations of the Gaelic Athletic Association were transparent from its inception in November 1884. In a letter to Michael Cusak, Archbishop Croke, one of the organisation's patrons, captured Irish national sentiments:

[W]e are daily importing from England ... her accents, her vicious literature her music, her dances, and her mannerisms, her games also and her pastimes, to the detriment of our own grand national sports.<sup>38</sup>

In comparison, it appears the leaders of shinty did not consider national aspirations - cultural or political - as part of their agenda. At the inaugural meeting of the Camanachd Association, the reason for the convention was recorded:

The Clerk [Mr John Campbell, Honorary Secretary of Kingussie Club] had been requested by its members to call this conference in terms of letters which they had received from several influential gentlemen throughout the country desirous of having a central Association formed to regulate the Game of Shinty.<sup>39</sup>

The Camanachd Association does not appear to have expressed collective support for a rearrangement of the constitutional settlement of Scotland or the Highlands within the British imperial state. There are no references in the Association's records between 1893 and 1921 to the Scottish Home Rule Association established in 1886, or to other political organisations concerned with an emergent political nationalism in Scotland during the 1920s. Indeed, there is no explicit evidence to suggest that leading administrators of the Camanachd Association considered their sport or other cultural pursuits should be part of the terrain to mobilise sentiments of national autonomy as a political aspiration for either home rule, or independence. Yet the absence of any explicit statements aligning shinty with the nationalist movement in Scotland raises an intriguing question: did shinty's administrators exhibit allegiances to any form of nationalism between 1893 and 1921? This question requires a more subtle understanding of the ways that nationalism and national autonomy suffused the sport.

In actual fact the national and political loyalties of the Camanachd Association's leaders were analogous to the Unionist nationalism that was dominant in Scotland during this period. It encapsulated the idea of Scotland as a distinctive nation, and the Highlands as a unique cultural community, within the imperial British state. These strands of nationalism and autonomy were negotiated through a particular anglicised vision of Scotland as a Celtic nation. Some light is cast on this through the gentlemen who were elected office bearers of the Camanachd Association at its inception in 1893. As noted in the previous section their

election signified their standing in Highland communities, whilst their contribution to British imperial politics is indicative of their national aspirations. This combination of circumstances was consistent with hegemonic expressions of Unionist nationalism in Scotland, including the Highlands, during this period.

This expression of imperialist nationalism is illustrated in particular in relation to Lord Simon Fraser of Lovat, the first President of the Camanachd Association and its second Chief from 1898 until his death in 1933. An avowed Conservative with considerable political presence in Highland and British politics, Lord Lovat had supported some measure of land reform in the Highlands, but he held a conservative line that opposed to home rule in all its potential manifestations. Between 1899 and 1902 the Boer War in southern Africa mobilised British patriotism throughout Scotland, and Lord Lovat's contribution to the military campaign, as noted by Camanachd Association:

The Camanachd Association respectfully offers their heartiest congratulations to The Right Honourable Lord Lovat .... on his patriotic action in raising a Corps of Scouts and Sharpshooters at a critical time in the history of the Empire ... They are delighted to know that the Corps has won honour and fame for itself in the great South African Campaign ... They are glad to know that many shinty players, members of the Association, have followed the noble example of their Chief.<sup>40</sup>

During this period Highlanders were able to assert their distinctive identity through their sport while engaged in the military service of the British imperial state. Two years later the Secretary of the association reported that the 1901 - 02 shinty season had been a successful one even though 'a large body of the best players of the game were absent patriotically fighting their country's cause in the late war in South Africa'. At this meeting the association made a presentation to Lord Lovat as a mark of the esteem in which he was

held 'as an exponent of the old Highland game of shinty' and for his 'patriotic action ... for the defence of Queen and Country'.<sup>41</sup> The contribution of Highland regiments in the First World War reiterated the commitment of the Highlanders to the imperial cause. When formal shinty activities resumed after the First World War, the Camanachd Association noted shinty clubs had been 'very seriously ... hit in players being killed in the war' and compiled a Roll of Honour to be included in the annual handbook.<sup>42</sup> The loss of lives had a devastating effect on small Highland communities and shinty struggled to survive in many of these communities in the 1920s.<sup>43</sup> The willingness of Highlanders to serve in the British imperial forces is not an accurate measure of an individual's national aspirations. Yet it is indicative of an implicit allegiance to the union and the empire that was always displayed more overtly by Highland communities in times of imperial crisis. If the game's administrators held any vision of the collective community shinty represented it was a Highland one, but tied to a notion of distinctive culture, rather than to formal political objective.

In assessing the confluence of organised shinty with nationalism, one point captures the essence of the matter; it appears the Camanachd Association viewed sport as an activity that should be unfettered by formal politics. This position was in keeping with the dominant *laissez-faire* ideology that underpinned Victorian and Edwardian society throughout Britain. If shinty's leaders exhibited a sense of political nationalism it was aligned to the formal politics of Unionist nationalism and empire that prevailed in Scotland during this period. As a component of a distinctive Highland civil society organised shinty, and in particular the Camanachd Association, embodied the benign vision of Celtic nationalism consistent with the paradoxical place of the Highlands and Gaelic culture identified by Chapman. Although the Camanachd Association did not formally align with the political campaigns between 1887 and 1928, it loosely exhibited the Unionist nationalist hegemony embedded in the objectives

of the political and cultural objectives of home rule, and rooted in the national autonomy of civil society.

### **Shinty, Gaelic nationalists and the Irish connection**

The distancing of shinty from wider social and political currents of nationalism between 1887 and 1928 was not absolute, nor was Unionist nationalism the only expression of nationalism that projected a Celtic vision of the nation. An alternative, arguably more radical vision of Celtic Scotland, was apparent between 1887 and 1928 and it also embraced Gaelic cultural practices and ideas of the Highlands. In contrast to the romanticised ideal of Highland society associated with the Anglo-British nationalism, some advocates of Gaelic nationalism were influenced by the detrimental experience of British hegemony on Highland society including the clearances and forced emigrations, and by religious and cultural imperialisms of various kinds. Furthermore, some of these individuals espoused an overt anti-imperialist position in relation to the second Anglo-Boer War in southern Africa (1899 - 1902). Many of them also expressed support for various strands of nationalism in Ireland in that nation's question for national autonomy. This relationship with Ireland, in particular Gaelic sports in Ireland, is the focus in this final section. The analysis probes the links between shinty in Scotland and hurling in Ireland, reflecting on extent to which these activities contributed to the idea of a pan-Celtic community embedded in a shared vision of Gaelic nationalism. This sporting interaction is considered in relation to other activities that emerged from similar social and political organisations in the Highlands and Ireland between 1887 and 1928.

The renewed vision of a pan-Celtic community in the late-nineteenth century was part of Michael Cusack's vision of cultural nationalism that appears to have been shared by Michael Davitt, founder of the Irish Land League and a patron of the GAA.<sup>44</sup> Their vision to connect Celtic communities through the celebration of sport and culture was raised in one Irish newspaper three years after the GAA was formed:

The Gaelic Athletic Association has established a complete system for regulating Celtic pastimes in Ireland with affiliated branches in every parish where the Celtic element prevails. We hope to see our Celtic brethren in Scotland adopting a similar course.<sup>45</sup>

The recognition of the cultural bond between Ireland and Scotland perhaps reflected the editorial team of this newspaper. Alongside Michael Cusack was a Scotsman A. Morrison Miller, the founder of the Irish Caledonian Society and secretary of the Caledonian Games Association of Ireland.<sup>46</sup> The proposal attracted support from Scotland as one correspondent offered 'to assist in organising international SHINTY versus HURLING matches' between the Gaels of Scotland and Ireland.<sup>47</sup> However proposals to play an 'International match with Ireland' on Saturday 17 March 1888 were unsuccessful and it was a further nine years before these aspirations were fulfilled.

On 5 June 1897 the first formal matches between shinty and hurling codes took place. One match was played in London between London Highland Camanachd and Ireland United Hurling Club; a second match was played that day between Glasgow Cowal Shinty Club and Dublin Celtic Hurling Club in Glasgow, and a month later the return game between these clubs took place in Dublin on 17 July.<sup>48</sup> These three games resonated with the different identities that had infused the resurgence of shinty and hurling. The London game was hosted by the London Highland Athletic Association, one of the societies that had contributed to the presence of shinty in that city. Members of the old and new Highland social elite attended, their presence typifying the patronage that was being incorporated into the administrative structure of the Camanachd Association and many of the clubs which had been established. In contrast to the benign nationalism embodied by the London Highland Association's patrons, the games in Glasgow and Dublin resonated with a more radical symbolism. The game was played at Celtic Park, the home of Celtic Football Club the champion of Irish

immigrants in Glasgow. The Irish Land League founder Michael Davitt, one of the GAA's patrons, was also a patron of this football club and is reputed to have laid the first turf at the Celtic Park ground in 1892. Moreover Michael Cusack, the founder of the GAA who had espoused a place for sport in promoting Celtic unity, refereed the return match in Dublin.

These games were well received, yet further shinty - hurling games were only played intermittently in Dublin until 1919. This perhaps reflected the pragmatic difficulties associated with regular travel between Scotland and Ireland. Nevertheless instability within the GAA during the 1890s, and its alignment with the wider nationalism movement in Ireland appears to have diminished opportunities to cultivate Cusack's vision of a pan-Celtic sporting community.

Sport in Ireland was inevitably affected by the war of independence and the civil war, but the GAA continued to function in a limited way.<sup>49</sup> Unsurprisingly no pan-Celtic shinty - hurling events appear to have been played until some measure of stability had returned to Irish society. In 1924 the idea to revive the Tailteann Games which Michael Cusack and Michael Davitt had discussed forty years earlier was realised. The sixteen-day government sponsored event was a celebration of Irish cultural identity and national autonomy which drew 2,000 competitors from a variety of countries including New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and Britain.<sup>50</sup> The opening event of the Tailteann Games at Croke Park Dublin on 2 August 1924 was 'a clash between the Irish caman and the shinty stick of Scotland.'<sup>51</sup> Interestingly the Camanachd Association did not share the views of the Irish press that this was an 'International Hurling-shinty match'.<sup>52</sup> Two months later at a meeting of the national Secretary reported:

he had no communication from any responsible person regarding any so called “International Match”. If such a match took place it was not representative of the Association, who, as the parent body controlling Shinty, should have made arrangements for such a match”.<sup>53</sup>

No shinty team attended the Tailteann Games in 1928, but a team did participate in 1932. On this occasion the Irish press reported that the shinty team which attended the Tailteann Games in 1932 ‘was not so representative of Highland shinty strength’ it having been drawn from ‘the Glasgow shinty men’.<sup>54</sup> One conclusion that could be drawn from this is that if any agency did organise the shinty teams that participated in these “international matches” it was likely to have been the south district association, rather than the national body.

Outside the world of shinty, there was a cross-fertilisation of ideas involving Celtic radicals in Scotland and Ireland. In Ireland the land reform movement had merged with the two strands of Irish nationalism under the New Departure in 1879.<sup>55</sup> By the 1890s the GAA and the Gaelic League, the Irish language organisation, were two of a number of social, cultural and political agencies which sought greater autonomy over Irish national affairs. In Scotland there were similar cultural and political organisations, but they did not have the same objectives, and there was much less co-operation between these groups than appears to have been the case in Ireland. In spite of some cross-fertilisation of ideas, few formal links were established to promote pan-Celtic nationalism between 1887 and 1921. In the first decade of the twentieth century there were some attempts made to give some kind of organisational form to the idea of a pan-Celtic cultural community. The attempts by Cusack and Davitt to establish sporting links between hurling and shinty are illustrative of this. However, it is not clear if this vision was shared by individuals with influence within the world of organised shinty.

This cultural movement underpinned the launch of a monthly pan-Celtic journal, *Celtia*, by the Dublin Celtic Association (1901) which aimed to inspire ‘militant Celticism’ against ‘the dead and demoralising influence’ ” of Anglicisation.<sup>56</sup> The launch of this publication was followed by a series of Pan-Celtic Congresses, the first of which was held in Dublin in August 1901 which attracted delegates from Ireland and Scotland, as well as Wales, the Isle of Man and Brittany. The Scottish representative was Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar, one of the new generation of nationalists who recognised the Gaelic connection in Irish and Scottish nationalism.<sup>57</sup> As a cultural nationalist, Erskine recognised the importance of language and culture in defining nationality, and argued that Scotland must once again become a Gaelic-speaking nation in order to assert her independence. A similar view was expressed by an anonymous “GAELIC NATIONALIST” in *The Thistle*, a new magazine produced in Scotland to promote nationalism

In common with a great many Scotsmen of my acquaintance I was very pleased to see the advent of *The Thistle*, a paper devoted to the cause of Scottish Nationality ... I am sorry that there has been no reference to the necessity of reviving and extending the use of Gaelic, the national language of Scotland ... Scotland was most prosperous in her Gaelic days. She was then an independent nation with no parliament at Westminster to overrule her wishes ... The promotion of Gaelic is a national matter, and any movement to be genuinely national, and to have the most beneficial and permanent results, must make it one of the main planks in its programme.<sup>58</sup>

James Hunter and Richard Finlay contend that Scotland's Gaelic cultural nationalists were prominent within the home rule and nationalist movements in Scotland at the end of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>59</sup> The Scots National League (SNL, 1920-28) in particular attracted the attention of a new generation of Gaelic

cultural nationalists, many of whom looked to Ireland for their inspiration. The precise founding date of the Scots National League is uncertain since many of the initial members of the organisation knew each other and shared mutual political ideas through their involvement with ‘the Highland Land League and various Gaelic cultural organisations.’<sup>60</sup> One Scottish nationalist newspaper of the period evoked the radical nationalism of some of the SNL’s members, identifying Celtic culture at the core of independence:

Celtic culture, revived and extended in its application will prove the salvation of our country ... Our task, then, is to work for the development of Celtic culture in all its aspects, linguistic, economic and political. Endeavouring to work out those ideals, let us press onwards to the establishment of the Scottish Republic of the future.<sup>61</sup>

The presence of this radical Gaelic element within the fledgling national movement in Scotland is however intriguing in probing potential connections to Gaelic sport. Despite some cross-fertilisation of ideas between strands of radical politics and Gaelic cultural nationalism and in Scotland and Ireland between 1887 and 1928 the place of sport as a symbol of ‘Celtic culture in all its aspects’ was absent in the Scottish context. In Scotland it seems sport in general, but in particular shinty – the game of the Gael - was not part of the cultural terrain on which Scotland’s nationalists, Gaelic or otherwise, developed their objectives.

### **Conclusions: Shinty and Nationalism and National Autonomy**

Reflecting on the relationship between sport, nationalist politics and culture in Scotland, Jarvie and Reid assert:

Any historical consideration of the relationship between sport, nationalism and culture in Scotland must be sensitive to the geography of [the nation’s diverse] communities and localities which have made their own specific contributions to the various images of nationhood in Scotland.<sup>62</sup>

This essay has addressed this point through a case study of one sport, shinty, and its subtle brushes with nationalism in Scotland between 1887 and 1928. There is no single reason that explains the loose and informal connections between shinty, nationalism and autonomy in Scotland. Certainly, the social, cultural and political circumstances of the period had a significant influence. The lack of coherence between Celtic radicalism and Celtic sport may also be important. In a period when shinty, like most sports, was administered by a self-regulating and self-financing autonomous organisation, the nature of that autonomy may have had much to do with the strong cultural identity embodied by the sport. Organised shinty was part of a wider civil society over which Scots, in this case specifically Highland Scots, exercised autonomy over their national domestic and cultural affairs. In contrast to the Irish context, it might be argued that there was no need for shinty to be mobilised in the national cause since it was already part of an established self-regulating, relatively autonomous, civil society. Shinty did, however, provide the cultural terrain on which a distinctive Highland identity was celebrated. The Camanachd Association's formal leadership distanced themselves from radical nationalist organisations, but it is inaccurate to conclude they held no nationalist image. The Highland identity promoted by shinty's leaders may have reinforced the official hegemony of unionist nationalism that was dominant throughout Scotland including the Highlands.

Conventional wisdom asserts Scotland was an oddity in this era because it remained part of the imperial British state.<sup>63</sup> It is important to recognise that in Scotland and the Highlands - a distinctive cultural community - the essence of the nation resided in popular cultural practices and in its self-regulating civil society. Between 1887 and 1928 political nationalism was largely accommodated through imperial politics and Unionist nationalism. Simultaneously national autonomy was accomplished through civil society including the institutions and practices of sport. During this period civil society was an institutional

repository for expressions of collective identity, including alternative meanings and identities associated with the idea of Scotland as a Celtic nation. National autonomy and its expression through civil society are useful components for examining expressions of nationalism through sport in nations-within-states like Scotland. Between 1887 and 1928, this conceptualisation helps to probe how one sport, in this case shinty, symbolised alternative aspirations and expressions of nationalism associated with the sport.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jarvie, 'Sport in the making of Celtic cultures', 2.

<sup>2</sup> McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 193.

<sup>3</sup> MacDonald, *Shinty*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Various histories of shinty provide detailed evidence about the game in relation to its origins, development, structure and organisation in the national, and in specific local contexts. See for example: Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*; Macdonald, 'Shinty; Historical and Traditional'; Macdonald, *Skye camanachd*; MacDonald, *Shinty*; MacLennan, *Not An Orchid*; *Shinty dies hard*; *An Gearasdan*; Robertson, *Kingussie and the Caman*; Thorburn, *The Kyles*;

<sup>5</sup> Cameron, *Land for the People?*; Kee, *The Green Flag*, Vols. I, II & II.

<sup>6</sup> Ash, *The Strange Death of Scottish History*; Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* .

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *National Identity*, vii & 147.

<sup>8</sup> Jarvie and Walker, 'Ninety minute patriots?' 1.

<sup>9</sup> Jarvie and Reid, 'Scottish sport, nationalist politics and culture', 27.

<sup>10</sup> Bryant, 'Social Self-organisation, Civility and Sociology', 399.

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<sup>11</sup> Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 'Nations and Their Pasts', 359.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *National Identity*, 74; Paterson, *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> See MacLennan, *Shinty dies hard*.

<sup>15</sup> Macdonald, 'Shinty; Historical and Traditional'; MacDonald, *A Short History of the Ancient Highland Game*; Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*; MacLennan, *Shinty Dies Hard*.

<sup>16</sup> Macdonald, 'Shinty; Historical and Traditional', 27-33.

<sup>17</sup> Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*

<sup>18</sup> Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, 2; Lynch, *Scotland*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*; MacDonald, *Shinty*, 16, 69-78. MacLagan, *The Games and Diversions of Argyleshire*; Macdonald, 'Shinty; Historical and Traditional', 27-38; Hutchinson, *Camanachd!* MacLennan, *Not An Orchid; Shinty dies hard.*;

<sup>20</sup> Ó Maolfabhail (*Caman*, viii, also 25-26) suggested two traditions of an ancient pastime known as *camánacht* were once popular in Ireland; one played with a short, flat stick is the recognised progenitor of Ireland's unique sport hurling. The other style used a longer narrower stick with more ground play 'survives to the present day in Scotland under the name of Camanachd'.

<sup>21</sup> Whitson, 'Pressures on regional games in a dominant metropolitan culture'.

<sup>22</sup> Whitson, 'Pressures on regional games in a dominant metropolitan culture', 146.

<sup>23</sup> Barron and Campbell, *A History of Strathglass Shinty Club*, 5-6; MacDonald, *Shinty*, 79-80; *The Highlander*, 2 January 1875; 23 January 1875.

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<sup>24</sup> Colin Chisholm, native of Strathglass in *The Highlander*, 5 March 1880. Also Barron and Campbell, *A History of Strathglass Shinty Club*; Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*, 41; MacDonald, *Shinty!*, 65; MacLagan, *The Games and Diversions of Argyleshire*, 27-8; MacLennan, *Shinty dies hard*. 87-96; Murdoch, *Unpublished Autobiograph*, Vol I; Sage, *Domestica Memorabilia*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Whitson, 'Pressures on regional games in a dominant metropolitan culture', 142-143.

<sup>26</sup> *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 6 January 1868.

<sup>27</sup> Barron and Campbell, *A History of Strathglass Shinty Club*, 6-7; Robertson, *Kingussie and the Caman*; *Shinty Year Book*, 1984, 33-34; *Shinty Year Book*, 1992-93, 17.

<sup>28</sup> *The Highlander*, 1 January 1876.

<sup>29</sup> Records show the following clubs were formed by 1880: Aberdeen University (1861); Bolton Caledonian (1877); Edinburgh Camanachd (1870); Furnace (1878); Glasgow Camanachd (1875); Glasgow Cowal (1877); Glasgow Fingal (1877); Glasgow Inveraray (1877); Glasgow Ossian (1876; Glasgow Skye from 1879); Glencoe (1879); Glendaruel (1879); Greenock (1877); Inveraray (1877); Lochgoilhead (1878); London Highland Camanachd Club (1878); Mancheste 187); Manchester Camanachd (by 1876); Manchester & Salford Camanachd Club (1876); Renton (by 1878); Springburn (1876); Strachur (1880); Tighnabruaich (1879); Vale of Laroach (1879); Vale of Leven (1854).

<sup>30</sup> For example: the Glasgow Cowal Society & Glasgow Cowal Shinty Club; the Glasgow Highland Society & the Glasgow Camanachd; Glasgow Inveraray; Glasgow Skye; Glasgow Oban & Lorne; Glasgow Kyles; Glasgow Islay; Glasgow Mid-Argyll; and Glasgow Inverness-shire.

<sup>31</sup> Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture*.

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- <sup>32</sup> Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture*, 13.
- <sup>33</sup> Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture*, 13.
- <sup>34</sup> Jarvie, *Highland Games*; and ‘Highland Gatherings, Balmorality, and the Glamour of Backwardness’.
- <sup>35</sup> Hutchinson, *Camanachd!*; MacLennan, *Shinty Dies Hard*.
- <sup>36</sup> MacLennan, *Shinty Dies Hard*, 224.
- <sup>37</sup> Whitson, ‘Pressures on regional games in a dominant metropolitan culture’, 141.
- <sup>38</sup> Cited Mandle, ‘Sport as Politics’, 100.
- <sup>39</sup> *Camanachd Association Minute*, 10 October 1893 (inaugural meeting).
- <sup>40</sup> *Camanachd Association Minute*, AGM, 21 September 1900.
- <sup>41</sup> *Camanachd Association Minute*, AGM, 19 September 1902.
- <sup>42</sup> *Camanachd Association Minute*, Council Meeting, 22 November 1919.
- <sup>43</sup> Macdonald, *Skye camanachd*; MacLennan, *An Gearasdan*; Robertson, *Kingussie and the Caman* 1994; Thorburn, *The Kyles*.
- <sup>44</sup> de Búrca, *The GAA*, 43; Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics 1884-1924*, 6.
- <sup>45</sup> *Celtic Times*, 19 February 1887.
- <sup>46</sup> de Búrca, *The GAA*; de Búrca, ‘The Gaelic Athletic Association and organized sport in Ireland’, 108.
- <sup>47</sup> *Celtic Times*, 18 June 1887.
- <sup>48</sup> *Celtic Monthly*, June 1897; *Celtic Monthly*, May 1897; June 1897.

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<sup>49</sup> de Búrca, *The GAA*; 154-64; Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics 1884-1924*, 201-12; Bradley, *Sport Culture, Politics and Scottish Society*, 46-48.

<sup>50</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 26 July 1924; de Búrca, *The GAA*, 166-7.

<sup>51</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 3 August 1924.

<sup>52</sup> *Irish Times*, 2 August 1924.

<sup>53</sup> *Camanachd Association Minutes*, 15 October 1924.

<sup>54</sup> *Irish Times*, 30 June 1932.

<sup>55</sup> Kee, *The Green Flag Vol 2*, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Hunter, 'The Gaelic connection', 192.

<sup>57</sup> Hunter, 'The Gaelic connection', 185-87.

<sup>58</sup> 'Gaelic and Nationality', *The Thistle*, January 1909, 96.

<sup>59</sup> Hunter, 'The Gaelic connection', 184-85; Finlay, *Independent and Free*.

<sup>60</sup> Finlay, *Independent and Free*, 30.

<sup>61</sup> *Liberty*, January 1921.

<sup>62</sup> Jarvie and Reid, 'Scottish sport, nationalist politics and culture', 24.

<sup>63</sup> Paterson, *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland*, 73-74.

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