

North Belfast Gael studies American dream

St Enda's man investigates the social and economic impact of Gaelic Games in North America

BY ED MCGINLEY

AS the GAA celebrates its 125th year, a new book from a North Belfast Gael and University of Ulster academic examines the role of the organisation in the United States.

Gaelic Games, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora in the United States', written by Dr Paul Darby, a senior lecturer in the School of Sports Studies at UU and 'veteran' St Enda's player, charts the history of Gaelic games in the US and explores the social, economic and political impact of the GAA in Irish-America.

The book was inspired by Paul's experience as an Irish immigrant in Liverpool, where he lived for five years, and his involvement in Gaelic football in England.

He moved to Liverpool in 1997 a couple of months after making his full Championship debut for Antrim and thought that his move would call time on his involvement in the GAA.

Within a matter of weeks Darby was making regular trips down the M6 to Birmingham to turn out for the John Mitchels club and had started a Gaelic football team at Liverpool Hope University where he was lecturing in sports studies.

"My involvement in the GAA across the water helped me to settle in England and allowed me to keep in touch with home and my sense of being Irish," said the UUJ soccer player.

"I also developed an interest in the significance of the GAA for Irish migrants across the

world."

Three years later, an opportunity to spend a summer playing for the Notre Dame Gaelic football club in Boston allowed Darby to combine his involvement in the sport with his academic interests.

"Over the next six years I spent part of each summer in Boston, New York, Chicago and San Francisco," added Darby.

"At times, it was gruelling work trying to piece together the origins of the GAA in each city in the late 1870s but I also met some wonderful people who helped me understand the value of GAA culture in their lives in more recent years."

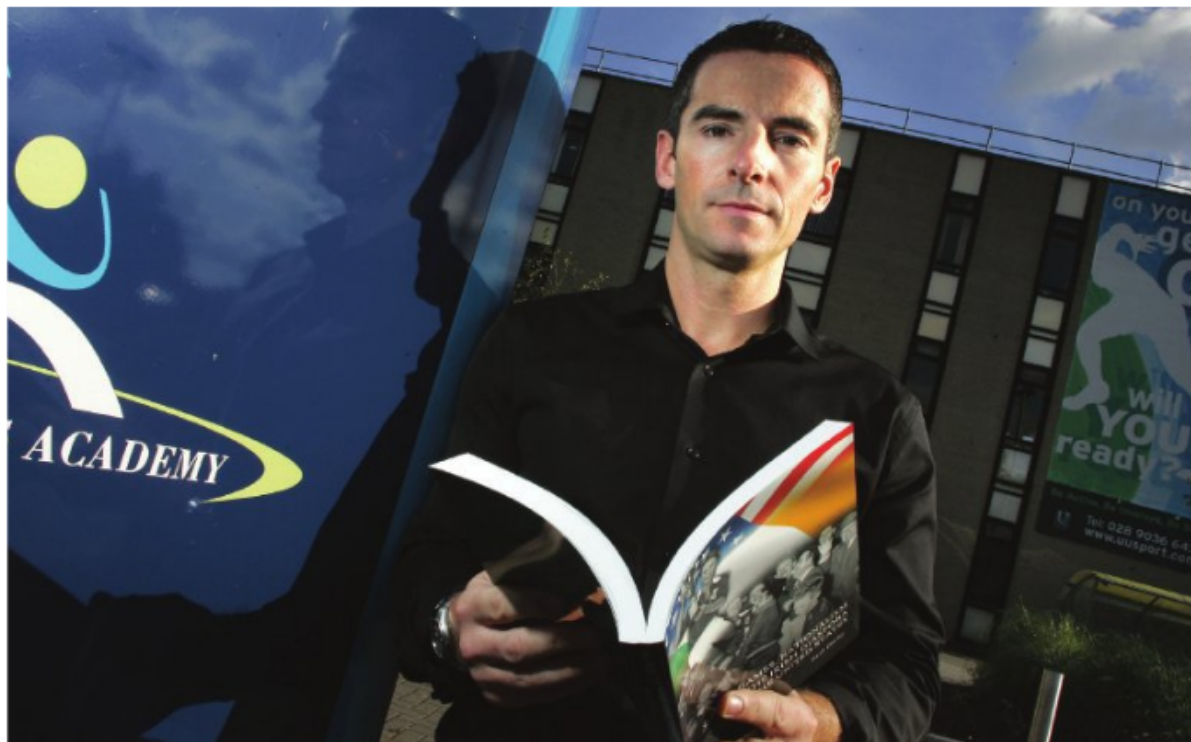
Paul was also driven by the fact that virtually nothing had been written about the GAA in the States.

"What struck me most when I started to think about writing about the GAA in America was that the role of the Gaelic games was largely ignored in previous studies of Irish-America," said Darby.

"I found this unusual because I was finding that there was a strong, long-standing culture of Gaelic games in the US. This culture was crucial for countless migrants because it gave them a sense of the familiar in unfamiliar surroundings.

"It provided entry into social networks that allowed them to find work and somewhere to live and it helped them to hold onto their sense of who they were and where they were from."

One of the main themes of the book is the relationship be-



Paul Darby has published a new book that studies the role of Gaelic games in North America

tween US branches of the GAA and Irish nationalism. Paul's work shows that this relationship fluctuated and shifted over time according to developments in Ireland and in the USA.

"In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, US Gaels named their clubs after popular nationalist figures, they raised funds for nationalist organisations in Ireland, both militant and parliamentary and they saw their involvement in the GAA as an extension of their nationalist politics," continued Paul.

"The outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland saw the

ing financial support to organisations such as Noraid and galvanising support in America for republicanism."

As the book shows though, in recent years, GAA clubs and divisional boards in the US have become far less political, something which Paul argues reflects the broader changes in republican politics brought about by the peace process in the North.

The book concludes by looking at the impact on the GAA of slowing immigration from Ireland to America on the back of the Celtic Tiger and the introduction of tighter border controls in the US following 9/11.

"The downturn in immigra-

tion over the last 10-15 years has seen a whole host of Irish organisations in America struggle," said Paul.

"The GAA has been no different. This has been recognised by those who are passionate about preserving Gaelic games and they are increasingly looking to young Irish-Americans as well as children without any Irish lineage to sustain these sports in the future."

The Irish Government and the GAA at Croke Park recently provided funding to help North America's Gaels keep Gaelic games alive and this should hopefully go some way towards ensuring that Gaelic games remain healthy and vi-

brant for another 125 years.

Paul hopes that writing this book will play a small role in ensuring continued support for the Association in America and in the year when the North American County GAA Board is celebrating its 50th anniversary, he sees the book as a tribute to the countless volunteers who have invested so much time, energy and money in order to preserve and promote Gaelic games in America.

'Gaelic Games, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora in the United States', is published by University College Dublin Press and is available from ucdpress.ie or amazon.co.uk

Zoom out