

The Irish Soccer Split, Moore, C., Cork, Cork University Press, 2015, 312 pp., £19.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78205-152-7

Let me begin this review by celebrating the continued willingness of university presses to publish scholarly pieces of research such as *The Irish Soccer Split*. Needless to say, the author, Cormac Moore, is also to be commended for unearthing a huge amount of evidence dating back to the years immediately before and after the emergence of two governing bodies for association football in Ireland and for providing new insights into the reasons which lay behind this development. This book allows readers to consider, with far greater information to hand than was previously available, whether ‘the split’ (one might be inclined to use the word ‘secession’) was primarily caused by politics or status rivalries within the game or a combination of the two.

Moore tells the story, in remarkable detail, of the events that led to a breakaway from the Irish Football Association (IFA) which had been formed in 1880 and to the formation of what is now known as the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), the recognised governing body for football in the 26 counties of the Irish Republic. The IFA, initially an all-Ireland body, has subsequently been responsible only for the governance of the game in the six counties of Northern Ireland.

Unlike other sports, association football established itself in the north-east of Ireland long before it was taken up to any great extent elsewhere on the island, largely because of the close proximity to and ancestral relationships with Scotland. It is scarcely surprising therefore that Ulster, and specifically Belfast, would become the sport’s initial centre of power.

Furthermore, it is undeniable that this power was regularly exercised in such a way as to advantage clubs in Belfast and County Armagh, much to the annoyance of the growing football community in Dublin. Together with political tensions, this abuse of power, often real but on occasions arguably imagined, set in motion events that would lead ultimately to a major change in the governance of football in Ireland.

There had been a temporary break with the Belfast-based IFA in 1912. However, according to Moore, 'The first major split in Irish soccer was neither religious nor political in nature. It revolved around power and money' (p. 35). That said, Moore later observes that 'Of all sports, soccer appealed to people from all religions and political persuasions, a factor that allowed it to become a sport of mass appeal; but it was a factor that also made the sport more susceptible to getting caught up in events outside of its sphere' (p. 60). One should add perhaps that sport was actually an integral part of the sphere in which these events were taking place.

By 1921, as Moore notes, 'The battle lines were now drawn; the battle for the supremacy of soccer governance in Ireland was about to begin' (p. 119). In June of that year, the Football Association of Ireland was constituted, a decision that was ratified on 2nd September. One of the most interesting subsequent episodes discussed by Moore, especially for readers with a particular interest in sport in Northern Ireland, was the decision by the Falls and District League, located in nationalist West Belfast, to affiliate its 23 clubs to the newly established Dublin-based association. The immediate upshot was that one of these teams, the long-defunct Alton United, beat Shelbourne to win the second iteration of the FAI Cup. According to Moore, this defeat for one of the Dublin giants represented 'humiliation for the FAI' (p.

155) although presumably it was also a victory of sorts for the new organisation in its struggle to control football in Ireland. In 1923, in its quest to become member of FIFA and to satisfy the requirements for achieving this, the FAI agreed to change its name to the Football Association of the Irish Free State and 'clubs from the Falls and District League as well as other clubs in Northern Ireland had their membership cancelled' (p. 155).

In addition to tracing these historic events in Irish football, Moore also discusses other sports. In most cases, of course, their governing bodies had been established in pre-partition Dublin and they had less broad appeal than football, catering as they did to specific communities constructed around social class, religion and political attitudes. Moore also seeks to bring the story up to date with some speculation about the possibility, in a much changed political environment, of the unification of the two associations and the re-emergence of an all-Ireland football team. He concludes, 'Perhaps the political climate has changed enough and the fortunes of both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland soccer teams might compel the FAI and IFA to reconvene and once again realise an international soccer team for the whole island as there was before' (p. 235). His qualified optimism about such a future scenario ignores the ongoing, and at times bitter, competition between the two associations to attract players born in Northern Ireland but permitted to pledge their allegiance to the Republic and underestimates not only the persistence of sectarian attitudes in Northern Ireland but also what administrators, players and match officials stand to lose if two governing bodies are turned into one. I am reminded of a comment made to me in the mid-1990s by a republican prisoner in Long Kesh to the effect that 'there's more chance of a united Ireland than a united Ireland football team'.

I have two substantial criticisms of the book. First, given that the main focus of the study is on events that took place in the 1920s, it is regrettable, albeit understandable for marketing reasons, that the dustjacket of *The Irish Soccer Split* portrays Billy Bingham and Jack Charlton, managers of the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland national teams respectively, on the occasion of a meeting between the two teams at Windsor Park, Belfast, in November, 1993. The game itself has attracted considerable attention in light of the tensions which surrounded it but the link between it and the events of the 1920s is in no way causal and the political circumstances are radically different. Some readers may be disappointed, therefore, that the book is far less racy, although considerably more intellectually rewarding, than they might have anticipated.

Second, there is a lack of reflexivity on the author's part. The book is largely written from a nationalist and Republic of Ireland perspective. For example, the use of the word 'soccer' will no doubt jar with association football fans even in nationalist parts of Belfast and Derry where the distinction customarily made is between 'football' and 'Gaelic' rather than between 'soccer' and 'football'. There is no harm, of course, in writing from a particular standpoint. Indeed, it is to be welcomed - but only if it is recognised by the author. With reference to the IFA chairman, Moore writes, 'Despite Wilton's claim that the IFA was a non-political, non-religious body, many of the leaders of the association were closely identified with Ulster Unionism, including Wilton' (p. 111). The suggestion that any sporting organisation can be wholly non-political is surely nonsensical but so too is any implication that there is something inherently wrong about being an Ulster Unionist, even if one's own sympathies do not lie in that direction.

These reservations apart, I salute the author for producing such an authoritative piece of work. Thirty-seven pages of endnotes, the use of countless sources, both primary and secondary, and three informative appendices tell their own story. There is just one final point – not to be taken too seriously. Throughout the book, the author misspells the present reviewer’s surname which, I’m afraid, will do my h-index no good at all!

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