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Nation and sporting places: exploring the national stadia of a (dis)United Kingdom

Introduction

It has been argued that natural landscapes play a significant role in establishing relationships between sport and the nation (Bairner, 2009).This paper argues that the built environment can be equally influential in this respect, not least in terms of the stories that so-called national stadia tell us about nations and the complex relations which citizens have with them. The main focus of the paper is sports stadia in Britain and Ireland and, by implication, the politics of identity in a multi-national United Kingdom, arguably more divided than at any time since the Act of Union in 1707 because of the decision to leave the European Union.

"Space and place", according to Yi-Fu Tuan, "are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted" (Tuan, 1997: 3). That said, space is only natural in part for, as Henri Lefebvre observes, "social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information" (Lefebvre, 1991: 77). As for public or semi-public spaces, according to Doreen Massey "from the greatest public square to the smallest public park these places are a product of, and internally dislocated by, heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting social identities/relations" (Massey, 2005: 152). Thus, the analysis of social space, Lefebvre argues, "involves levels, layers and sedimentations of perception, representation, and spatial practice which presuppose one another, which proffer themselves to one another, and which are superimposed upon one another" (Lefebvre, 1991: 226). In addition, amongst those social spaces, sporting sites and sights perform an important role in identity formation and consolidation not least as repositories of collective memories (Bale, Vertinsky, 2004).

In many European countries, notably Italy, Germany and Spain, the idea of the national stadium seems virtually unknown as it is in the United States. It is true that when selected cities play host to the Olympic Games, the main stadium constructed for that

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purpose assumes a degree of national importance. In many cases, however, this can be a temporary phenomenon. International football matches take place in various cities in Italy, Spain and Germany and others such as Sweden, where fixtures in the past were shared between the two main cities of Gothenburg and Stockholm, and Poland, where important matches in the past were staged in the industrial city of Katowice. It is almost certain that, should the United Kingdom ever have a single international football team as opposed to the four which are currently allowed to operate even though they do not represent nation states, matches would need to be rotated as they are in other countries. For the time being, however, the belief that a nation should have a national stadium appears to be strongly held in the UK. But what about more than one national stadium for each nation and is it possible for a multi-national nation state to have a single, or, in the case of each nation, only one national stadium? These are the questions which this paper addresses with specific reference to Britain and Ireland.

Since 2012, the United Kingdom has had its most recent Olympic Stadium (now called the London Stadium). To what extent though can it be described as a national stadium whether the nation in question is England or the multi-national United Kingdom? This article examines the relationship between nations and sports stadia in the United Kingdom and includes an extended discussion of Northern Ireland not least because, even though it has a national football stadium, its status as a nation – unlike that of England, Scotland and Wales – is contested by many of its own citizens who look elsewhere for their nation's national stadia.

Sport and nationhood in the United Kingdom

According to Calvin Jones, "the largest stadium developments in the UK are primarily seen as serving a national need, although the long-term future of each facility may include the tenancy of a professional team" (Jones, 2002a: 161). Examples of the latter are the City of Manchester Stadium built for the Commonwealth Games and now occupied, as the Etihad Stadium, by Manchester City Football Club, and the 2012 London Olympic Stadium now leased, as the London Stadium, by West Ham United Football Club Football Club. Jones's comment implies that the national need is always obvious whereas, in a multi-national country, that is far from being the case as the following discussion of so-called national stadia in Britain and Ireland will seek to demonstrate.

The national stadia of England

The obsession with national stadia is highlighted in the redevelopment of Wembley Stadium in London as the venue for England's international football games. While this work was taking place, international games were staged at numerous well-appointed venues throughout the country; yet the desire to get matches back to Wembley persisted. The

fact that plans to incorporate a running track into designs for the new Wembley were rejected makes something of a mockery of the idea that this is a truly national stadium, built as it is primarily for a single sport even though the Rugby League Challenge Cup Final is also played there, as it was before Wembley's redevelopment, and increasingly the stadium has also played host to NFL games (Bond, 2001).

Part of the initial purpose of building Wembley Stadium was to house the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. However, it actually opened as a football stadium in 1923 when it played host to the Football Association (FA) Cup Final. The attendance was around double that of the official capacity and an inevitable pitch incursion ensued. Nevertheless, order was soon restored with a white police horse prominent in dispersing the crowd. As Jeff Hill and Francesco Varrasi note: "The circumstances of its opening scenes went a long way towards establishing Wembley Stadium as a national monument" (Hill, Varrasi, 1997: 35), thereby begging the question: which nation? Britain with its Empire or England, home to the FA?

The FA Cup Final would continue to be played at Wembley from 1923 until 1939, when the competition was suspended for the duration of World War Two, from 1946 until 2000, when renovation of the stadium took place and, as New Wembley, from 2005 to the present. However, as Hill and Varrasi make clear, it was not intended, at least initially, to serve only English needs, "in the two Exhibition seasons it staged concerts of mas military bands, marches and the Pageant of Empire, a parade divided into several episodes where each country of the Empirepresented a show" (Hill, Varrasi, 1997: 37-38). At the time, "Wembley set its sights well beyond London and claimed to offer an imperial vista for surveying the globe" (Cohen, 2004: 88). Here indeed was an attempt "to narrate imperial geography and history in suburban London" (Cohen, 2004: 90). Ultimately though, as Hill and Varrasi concede, "it became possible for Wembley to act as a symbol of Englishness" (Hill, Varrasi, 1997: 39), playing host not only to the FA Cup Final (and semi-final games in 1993, 1994 and 2000 and from 2008 to the present), but also the Rugby League Challenge Cup Final, most England football international home matches and, since 1987 with a short interlude between 2001 and 2006, when the New Wembley was under construction, the play-off finals for promotion within the English Football League.

As Jonathan Leib suggests, "one place where the power to control the landscape ideologically is most obvious is the placing of public monuments commemorating the past in public spaces" (Leib, 2002: 289). The monumentalization of memory at the stadium provides visible symbols of Wembley's status as national, as long as the nation in question is England and not Britain or the United Kingdom.The best known statue at Wembley is of Bobby Moore who captained England's FIFA World Cup winning team in 1966 at the end of a tournament during which the English team played all its matches at the stadium. It is worth noting, however, that the English football museum is located not at Wembley but in Manchester and, in relation to monuments, more surprising perhaps,

although in recognition of the annual playing at Wembley of the Challenge Cup Final, is a statue of five of rugby league's greatest English players – Eric Ashton, Billy Boston, Martin Offiah, Alex Murphy and Gus Risman.

Discussions in 2018 about whether the FA might sell the stadium to Shahid Khan, owner of Fulham Football Club and the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars, with the possibility of an American football franchise taking up residence in the near future revealed that, for some at least, the stadium's value can best be measured in financial rather than symbolic terms (Conn, 2018a). In the end, the sale did not go after loud vocal opposition was raised at a meeting of the FA's council leading Khan to withdraw his £600 million offer. It would appear that "football people seriously questioned whether world famous, emotive, Wembley, the FA's £426m rebuilding debt largely repaid, really had to be sold for an NFL marketing base, as the price of doing up community football facilities" (Conn, 2018b).

The deliberations concerning the future of Wembley also serve to remind us that it is not the only potential English national stadium in London. An almost equally strong case can be made for Twickenham, home of the Rugby Football Union and of the English national rugby union team. Despite long-standing access and exit difficulties due to transport problems, "what used to be a loss-making relic of a bygone sporting era has been so remarkably transformed without a single penny of government money" (Jones, 2015: xii). Twickenham is home to a museum of world rugby and to a 27-foot tall bronze statue depicting a rugby line-out. This has no specific reference to England. Instead inscribed around the bottom of the statue are what are identified as the five core values of rugby union – teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline and sportsmanship.

Equally deserving of English national status is Lord's Cricket Ground, home to the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), and a major venue for test match cricket matches. Lord's has been at its present site since 1814. Here one can find the MCC museum, library and archive and a statue of the first ever celebrity cricketer, W.G. Grace, who is also immortalized in the name of the ground's main gates. Two other statues depict a batsman and a bowler but both are anonymous. However, other famous former cricketers, including Sir Pelham 'Plum' Warner, Denis Compton and Bill Edrich, are remembered in the names of grandstands at Lord's.

One other London venue is worthy of consideration. Fred Perry was the last Englishman to win the men's singles at Wimbledon as long ago as 1936 and, albeit more recently, Virginia Wade was the last English woman to win the ladies' singles in 1977). Nevertheless, Wimbledon is not only one of the four venues for grand slam championships, but together with Lord's is more evocative of a certain version of Englishness than the other grounds discussed above. The extensive grounds have been home to the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club since 1877. A statue of Fred Perry can be found at Wimbledon as can a museum.

The national stadia of Scotland

In Scotland, what might normally be described as the national stadium, Hampden Park in Glasgow, is set aside for football with the considerably larger and better appointed Murrayfield in Edinburgh in Scotland's capital, but smaller, city acting as the home of the Scottish rugby union team.

By the 1990s, Hampden, which had once housed some of the largest crowds in world football, was no longer fit for purpose. An added complication was that it was also home to and owned by Scotland's oldest extant football club, Queen's Park (Black, Lloyd, 1992: 45-49). Over the years, it undoubtedly acquired an iconic status. In 1960, Hampden hosted the European Cup Final which was attended by almost 130,000, mainly Scottish, football fans. The opposing teams were Real Madrid and Eintracht Frankfurt and the only Scot on the field of play was referee, Mr. J.D. Mowat (Crawford, 1992: 433-438). By the end of the 20th century, such heady days were very much in the past, however, and the redevelopment of Hampden which was completed in 1999, resulted in a safer (according to FIFA rules), but considerably smaller and less intimidating venue. The redeveloped stadium houses the Scottish football museum but there are no monuments to illustrious Scottish footballers of the past.

Hampden was used, as were the city's two larger football grounds, Ibrox Stadium and Celtic Park, for the Commonwealth Games of 2014. In 2018, however, its role as the home ground of the Scottish national football came into question with Murrayfield being suggested as the logical, although symbolically less convincing, alternative. Both rugby and football international games have been played at other grounds. However, the possibility of the Scottish football team moving from Hampden to Murrayfield on a more permanent basis was a different matter altogether.

According to Professor Grant Jarvie, "this is not just about the fact that the origins of the relationship between football and Hampden go back to at least 1873; that the oldest football international in the world is associated with Hampden; or that Hampden is part of the story of Glasgow at play which cannot simply be relocated" (Jarvie, 2018). In addition to the historic arguments in favour of Hampden, Jarvie went on, "Scotland has a recognised base, role and reputation through football and therefore why would and should it move to a base where in the words of the SRUs [Scottish Rugby Union's] chief operating officer "rugby has to take priority" (Jarvie, 2018). Apart from the comfort of spectators, the ease of access and the overall match day experience, why indeed! Nevertheless, the decision for international football to stay at Hampden was made after the Scottish Football Association agreed to buy the stadium from Queen's Park. There followed a promise to consider improving the stadium which has be criticized by fans ever since its redevelopment (McLaughlin, 2018).

Murrayfield has been home to Scottish rugby union since 1925. It was redeveloped in 1993 and is now officially called BT Murrayfield. It is currently the largest sports sta-

dium in Scotland. Outside the ground, there is a statue of Bill McLaren, an illustrious BBC rugby commentator and a native of Hawick in the heart of Scotland's rugby-loving borders. However, the museum which was located there before a major redevelopment took place has not been replaced although a collection of memorabilia can be found in the SRU President's suite.

One thing that Hampden and Murrayfield have in common is the regular singing of *Flower of Scotland* which officially replaced the British national anthem, *God Save the Queen* in the pre-match rituals before games played by the Scottish national rugby and football teams in 1990 and 1997 respectively. This Scottish dimension differs markedly from the prevailing atmosphere at Ibrox and Celtic Park where singing, more often than not, is confined to songs about Britishness and Irishness respectively.

Finally as far is Scotland is concerned, as with Lord's and Wimbledon and their relationship to Englishness, there is a plausible case to be made for nominating as Scotland's other national venue the Old Course at St Andrews, the so-called home of golf. In the words of James Dodson, the course was built by no man, "shaped only a bit by Old Tom Morris and others, and it therefore abounds in eccentricity: massive double greens, crisscrossing fairways, target lines that seem to shift with the ever-shifting sea winds or don't exist at all" (Dodson, 1997: 211). It can be regarded as an archetypical Scottish landscape even though nearby is ironically, in the circumstances, the British Golf Museum. Watching over the first tee and the eighteenth green stands the iconic Royal and Ancient Clubhouse.

The 'national' stadia of Northern Ireland

More complex still and requiring more detailed attention is the situation in Northern Ireland. The question of whether this part of the UK is even a nation in its own right is a matter of considerable debate with the result that, in discussing the national sports stadia of the Northern Irish, it is necessary to look outside of the UK's jurisdiction and consider the role of the Republic of Irelands stadia.

As Chris Curtin et al. point out, "the contests over space, power, history and image in the urban areas of Ireland are inextricably linked to the ways people adapt to the perturbations of their urban environments" (Curtin, Donnan, Wilson, 1993: 14). Sport has been long recognised as a marker of identity in Northern Ireland (Bairner, 2002: 181-195). The sports that one plays and watches and the places that one chooses to do so regularly testify to communal loyalty centred on national identity and social space. Even participation in physical activity more generally has been greatly influenced by feelings of fear and mistrust (Bairner, Shirlow, 2003: 203-221). The city of Belfast's sports grounds such as the Gaelic Athletic Association's [GAA's] Casement Park and Irish league soccer grounds, including Windsor Park, the Oval, Seaview and Solitude are vitally important inscriptions on Belfast's cultural landscape (Bairner, 2008:

417-430). Even though the composition of the teams that play at the soccer grounds may evolve over time, most of the fans who attend their games remain constrained by the cultural myopia that has underpinned inter-communal conflict (Lowenthal, 1994). Thus, attending sports matches is often about affirming either explicitly or, at the very least implicitly, one's political allegiance.

At the level of international football in Northern Ireland, a generic Ulster unionist pro-British perspective has tended to prevail (Bairner, Shirlow, 1998). Although much has been done by the Irish Football Association (IFA) in recent years to reduce the sectarianism associated with Northern Ireland international football matches, the fact remains that most home fans on such occasions come from the Protestant/unionist tradition (Fulton, 2005). That Northern Ireland has its own international side is, of course, hugely important to them. It provides evidence of the existence of Northern Ireland as a separate place in a way that is facilitated by only a few other sports. Not surprisingly, therefore, home games are imbued with nationalist symbolism and rhetoric as they are elsewhere. Northern Ireland may not be a real nation. But it is certainly celebrated on such occasions as if it was.

Rugby union, on the other hand, is administered on an all-Ireland basis by the Irish Rugby Football Union, although competitive matches are played between the four provinces – Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster. The latter nominally refers to the nine counties of the historic province but in practice the team is made up largely of players from the six counties that constitute Northern Ireland and could, therefore, be construed by some as being Northern Ireland's 'national' rugby team. However, the rejection of Irishness in all its manifestation is by no means universal within Ulster unionism. Indeed, a sense of being Irish, amongst Irish international rugby players can co-exist with political unionism.

The GAA. formed in 1884 with the aim of preserving traditional Irish games and pastimes and in so doing contesting what was deemed to be evidence of British cultural imperialism in the world of sport, is in many ways far less problematic with regard to national identity. Organized on an all-Ireland basis, albeit with councils presiding over activities in each of the four provinces, the Association promotes inter-provincial matches (with 'Ulster' again referring to the nine counties in this instance), although it would be fair to say these are of secondary importance to county and club competitions. Although these contests are the highly competitive, they also manage to convey a noticeable impression of people celebrating a shared understanding of Irishness.

What does all of this tell us about the national sports stadia of Northern Ireland? In October 2001, a ministerial advisory panel (of which the author was a member) charged with considering the future of association football in Northern Ireland was set up by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the devolved power sharing Executive (Bairner, 2007). Amongst its numerous findings and recommendations, the panel noted that "Northern Ireland does not have a sports stadium that meets all the expected stand-

ards for hosting international football" (Armstrong et al, 2001: 73). As a consequence, the panel supported the idea of a large venue for football in Northern Ireland to cater for international games, major European club matches and major domestic games such as the Irish Cup Final. The panel expressed an awareness of "previous discussions on the feasibility of establishing a national stadium" (Armstrong et al, 2001: 73). Indeed, a National Stadium Working Group had been set up under the auspices of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland in 1999 but no further progress had been made. Thus, the panel argued that "Government, in conjunction with the governing body [i.e. the Irish Football Association – IFA] should act quickly to end the uncertainty by making a firm commitment to establish a national stadium" (Armstrong et al, 2001: 73). Fundamental issues that would need to be explored included the question of which other sports, if any, "would be accommodated in the stadium" (Armstrong et al, 2001: 73). And so the gauntlet was thrown down.

The idea that there should be a national stadium for Northern Ireland inevitably led back to the question of whether Northern Ireland can be legitimately described as a nation. In terms of football, the answer is almost certainly yes, thereby making the case for a 'national' football stadium. It is certainly a sporting country within the context of association football with the IFA being recognized as a national governing body by FIFA. As for rugby and Gaelic games, however, the sporting nation is clearly Ireland. Thus, given that it is proposed that both rugby and Gaelic games should also be played at the Maze, other considerations come into play, not least because both the GAA and the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) are happy to embrace their Irishness, as opposed to a Northern Irish identity, albeit interpreted rather differently.

Viewed from a purely sporting perspective, according to some criteria, association football is the national sport of both parts of Ireland and of the island as a whole. Yet, the united Irish rugby team is undeniably inclusive in relation to religio-cultural identity, although not in terms of social class or within the narrow confines of the north of Ireland, whilst Gaelic games are certainly presented as national or, as some might prefer, nationalistic. With Croke Park already available for major Gaelic games and Lansdowne Road being redeveloped by the IRFU, it became easier to argue that Northern Ireland did not need a national stadium for those sports.

The ultimate stumbling block, however, was arguably the choice of location for the new national stadium. Because the Maze Prison was both symbolically and factually at the heart of so much of the conflict in Northern Ireland, its selection as a sporting venue could be interpreted as a testimony to a new spirit of reconciliation. On the other hand, fears have already been expressed that as has happened with so much of the material culture and of the significant places of Northern Ireland, it will prove to be either a contested space or one that comes to be owned symbolically by a single community. The idea of having the stadium play host to rugby and Gaelic games, as well as to football, is clearly intended to ensure that the latter does not happen. However, because the

GAA and the IRFU already have national stadia, it is likely that the new stadium would inevitably mean more to unionists than to nationalists and arguably more to working class unionists than to middle class ones. The solution may seem obvious – an all-Ireland football team with games played in both Dublin and Belfast, thereby replicating a pattern familiar in many European countries. But that is an argument for another day. In the meantime, it is worth examining those stadia in the Republic of Ireland which are home to sports that are undivided at the international level in the context of the island of Ireland.

Croke Park and Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland

The Republic of Ireland has been taken as part of the British Isles for this specific purpose. Lansdowne Road had been the only home of the Ireland rugby team since the 1950s with Irish Free State (latterly Irish Republic) football games being played at Dalymount Park in Dublin. More recently, Lansdowne Road became the venue for football, as well as rugby games. However, while it was being transformed into the Aviva Stadium which is now home to both codes, Croke Park, the home of the GAA and the venue for major club and county Gaelic games, was used for rugby and football international matches between 2007 and 2010. Making this possible, however, was no easy matter (Fulton, Bairner, 2007).

According to Tim Carey, "Croke Park is not just a sporting venue. The single most important asset of the GAA, it has been a reflection of the strength of the organisation as well as an influence on it" (Carey, 2004: 9). The stadium which has been home to the GAA since the early 1890s is, with a capacity of 82,300, the third largest in Europe after Camp Nou, in Barcelona, and Wembley. It is home to an impressive museum outside of which stands a statue of GAA founder, Michael Cusack. Various grandstands and areas of the ground are named in honour of important figures and events in the history of the Association and of Irish nationalism more broadly.

More significant for the purposes of this article, the distinctive character of GAA facilities, including Croke Park, was enshrined in the association's rules.

> Rule 42: Uses of Property:
> (a) All property including grounds, Club Houses, Halls, Dressing Rooms and Handball Alleys owned or controlled by units of the Association shall be used only for the purpose of or in connection with the playing of Games controlled by the Association, and for such other purposes not in conflict with the Aims and Objects of the Association that may be sanctioned from time to time by the Central Council.
> (b) Grounds controlled by Association units shall not be used or permitted to be used for Horse Racing, Greyhound Racing, or for Field Games other than those sanctioned by Central Council (Gaelic Athletic Association, 2003: 27).

On Sunday February 11, 2007, Ireland played France in the first ever rugby match to take place at Croke Park. Just under two weeks later, even more momentously, the Irish

team played England. Neither of these events, but particularly the latter, could have been envisaged only a few years before.

In fact, only two years earlier, on Saturday April 16, 2005, GAA delegates had gathered at Croke Park for their Annual Congress. Although the election of a new President, the reform of the GAA's disciplinary system, and a range of relatively mundane rule changes were all on the agenda, one issue, the status of Rule 42, dominated the proceedings.

The Rule 42 debate did not simply reflect a broader public discourse concerned with competing Irish nationalisms. Whilst the debate contained its own internal dynamic, the centrality of the stadium contributed a distinct spatial dimension to the prevailing discursive politics of Irish national identity (Fulton, Bairner, 2007). Irish national identities were enshrined in Croke Park; they revealed themselves, however contingently, in this particular sports space. In the process, Croke Park emerged, as it had at various times in the past, as a space in and through which Irish national identities are reproduced. In addition, at least some of the narratives around Irishness which were central to the debate were explicable only in relation to a new and ever changing socio-cultural context, no longer dominated by the relationship with Britain, but also deeply affected by membership of the European Union and more generally by global forces. These developments underlined the extent to which material culture, memory and identity are closely interwoven, not only in Ireland where there exists particularly stark evidence, but also more widely.

In theory, Rule 42 governs the general use of Association property. In practice, however, it was more specifically understood as that rule which bans the playing of rugby and soccer on GAA grounds in general, and at Croke Park in particular. Although it had been part of the GAA rulebook since the organization's inception, it was only relatively recently that the merits of the rule have been seriously questioned, and its very existence challenged. In the weeks leading up to Congress, plans for the future redevelopment of Lansdowne Road served to bring the status of Rule 42 into sharp focus. Anticipating the temporary closure of Lansdowne Road, plans required that the international rugby and soccer sides play at an alternative venue during this period. In the absence of a suitable stadium elsewhere in Ireland other than Croke Park, which Rule 42 rendered unavailable, concerns were voiced about the possibility of Irish international teams having to play their home games abroad. As a result, support for the removal of, or changes to, Rule 42 gathered momentum both within the GAA and amongst an anxious sporting public. A vote on the status of Rule 42 was scheduled for Congress, giving delegates the opportunity to provide their seal of approval (Fulton, Bairner, 2007).

What might initially have seemed to be a fairly straightforward decision for the powerbrokers of a sporting organization – either to allow or refuse permission for another sporting body to use their facilities – was, in fact, a highly contentious and divisive issue. This was reflected, in the first instance, in the voting procedure which made it easier for delegates to vote according to personal conviction rather than according to the

wishes of the county they represented and from whom they received their mandate. The significance attached to Rule 42 was evidenced, furthermore, in the conflicting views expressed by delegates during the debate preceding the vote. As they put their case for either retaining or amending Rule 42, delegates infused their contributions with highly emotive language.

Northern Irish delegates, i.e. representing the six counties of Northern Ireland, voted in overwhelming numbers not to amend Rule 42, their vote being widely interpreted as an expression of a hard-line, traditional nationalism, one increasingly confined to nationalists in the north. The day after Congress voted to amend Rule 42 the editorial in *The Sunday Times* commended the Association and encouraged it to take the next step and repeal the rule altogether. But it also bemoaned the votes of the northern counties:

> Unfortunately, the vote also revealed the traditional fault lines that run through the GAA. It is deeply disappointing that, after a decade of peace in Northern Ireland, the northern counties should vote in favour of the status quo. Their refusal to countenance change demonstrates how far the peace process has still to travel if it is to decommission mindsets as well as illegal arms (*Comment: GAA back to the future*, 2005).

Insofar as the editorial presents the political developments of the peace process in a singularly positive manner, it misrepresents the social and political context within which Northern Irish GAA delegates cast their votes. For example, the very different historical experiences of GAA members in the north and south of Ireland are ignored as insignificant mitigating factors. Instead the implication to drawn from the geography of the vote was that northern Gaels were more traditional, less globalized and less modern, than their southern counterparts.

International rugby and football are now being played at the Aviva Stadium and normality has returned to Croke Park. As a consequence, for many rugby and even football supporting northerners together with followers of Gaelic games residing in the six counties, their national stadia are situated in the Irish Republic. That does not mean, however, that it is only citizens of the Irish Republic who are entitled to pronounce on the symbolic importance of these stadia.

The national stadium of Wales

In Wales, the situation is very different and rather less complicated. Whereas in the past rugby internationals were played at Cardiff Arms Park and football internationals took place at various grounds – in Wrexham, Cardiff and Swansea, the Principality Stadium in Cardiff is now home to both the national football and rugby teams, although it is worth noting that the national football team has also played recently at Swansea City's and Cardiff City's new stadia.

According to Jones, "Cardiff, the capital of Wales, has latterly come to the fore of those UK cities identifying sport and related infrastructure as important drivers of

growth and urban regeneration" (Jones, 2002b: 821). The centrepiece of that project is the Principality Stadium which was opened, as the Millennium Stadium, for the 1999 Rugby Union World Cup. It had been constructed in around 30 months between 1996 and 1999 at a cost of £130 million. As noted earlier, in addition to hosting the national football and rugby teams, the Millennium also hosted a numerous high profile English club football games in the 2000s.

According to John Harris, "The Millennium [Principality] Stadium is a visible signifier of metropolitan Wales" (Harris, 2008: 304). Moreover, it is undoubtedly a national stadium. One wonders, however, if it serves to further distinguish the capital city from the rest of the country in a number of meaningful ways. It is interesting, for example, that in a country which has produced so many world-class rugby players and footballers, the only statue at the Principality is that of Sir Tasker Watkins, a Deputy Lord Chief Justice and holder of the Victoria Cross, the highest British award for gallantry in the face of the enemy. Watkins was also a sports administrator and held the post of President of the Welsh Rugby Union from 1993 until 2004.

Conclusions. The United Kingdom's national stadia and representations of the nation

What then do these various examples tell us about the relationship between sport, national identities and nationalism in the constituent parts of the UK? First, they tell us that a national stadium that can be regarded as such throughout UK is impossible. Second, they inform us that within these constituent parts, sport and its places are contested with the contestation reflecting divisions within the nations themselves, usually but not always, emanating social class differences.

In England, the decision to redevelop Wembley meant that football's national stadium would remain in the south-east of the country instead of being moved to the midlands or the north. While rugby league fans from the latter no doubt enjoy their annual trip to the capital for the Challenge Cup Final, many football fans might feel disgruntled that their opportunities to see the national team are limited and they are now expected to travel south not only for FA Cup Finals, but also for semi-finals and promotion play-off deciders. Their concerns question to some extent, the national status of Wembley.

In addition, the presence of three other major sport venues in London (four if one includes the London Stadium) leads one to question whether there can be a definitive national stadium if it is used primarily by a single sport. If so, then Twickenham, Lords and Wimbledon should be accorded the same status as Wembley. Taken together, these four venues represent different readings of England and the English.

At the heart of the debate in Scotland about Hampden's future as a venue for international football, according to some, was a challenge to Glasgow's status as Scotland's football city *par excellence*. To that extent, it was also a debate about social class and possibly

about nationalism. Novelist Eric Linklater viewed the rugby-soccer class distinction in Scotland "as a line of division between the working and middle classes which is inimical to the creation of national community" (Linklater, 1959: 128-9). Whilst this was to underestimate the cross-class character of support for rugby union in the Scottish border region, it is worth noting that in the Scottish independence referendum which took place in 2014 that region together with Edinburgh were strongly opposed whereas cities of Glasgow and Dundee where football is dominant voted in favour of independence.

The issue of national stadia reflects the identity politics of Northern Ireland. It also tells us something about the ways in which different sports adopt different positions in relation to identities. For football administrators and most fans, Northern Ireland exists as a discreet entity but, in the case of rugby union and, above all, Gaelic games, the border is more porous and, thus, stadia in Dublin become part of a shared cross-border sporting landscape.

Finally, as hinted at earlier, it is possible that the Principality Stadium also symbolizes the differences between Cardiff and the rest of Wales – rural Wales, Welsh-speaking Wales, the post-industrial valleys of Wales and the north-east of the country with its closer proximity to the English cities of Liverpool and even Manchester. Harris suggests that "in many ways rugby union is the most visible signifier of 'Welshness' in the post-industrial age". However, as he also points out, "rugby's assumed position as 'the national game' has often been questioned on the basis that it is predominantly a game played and followed in South Wales" (Harris, 2008: 303). This is, of course, to ignore the fact that the two most successful professional football clubs in the country, Cardiff City and Swansea City, are both based in South Wales. In addition, although it is undeniable that there are Welsh people who are interested in only one or other of these sports, most would take some degree of interest in the performances of the national teams in both. With that in mind, the fact that these teams both play matches at the Principality Stadium is, therefore, highly significant in ensuring that this venue can rightly be described as a national stadium – perhaps the only stadium in the UK that deserves that title.

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is sports stadia in Britain and Ireland and, by implication, the politics of identity in a multi-national United Kingdom, arguably more divided than at any time since the Act of Union in 1707 because of the decision to leave the European Union. The paper discusses sports stadia in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and, by necessary extension, the Republic of Ireland. I argue that, because of the multi-national character of the United Kingdom, it is impossible to identify a single British national stadium. In addition, in the UK's various constituent nations, sport and its places are contested with the contestation reflecting divisions within these nations, making the Principality Stadium in Wales the only true example of a national stadium in the United Kingdom.
Keywords: sport, stadia, nationalism, United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland

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