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Ireland in the Dark Ages

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The Imposition of Society on Medieval Irish Sport

There are few people in the modern world who could imagine their lives without sports: from Monday Night Football to Tiger Woods and anywhere in between, aspects of sporting events have become almost necessities of pop culture. However, the deeper implications of these events are rarely considered. The reality, though, as emphasized by prominent psychological theories, is that societies around the globe and throughout time have used games as a way to emphasize cultural values and establish a sense of hierarchy and individual self-worth. Medieval Ireland is an especially interesting example of this concept, due to its high emphasis on the intricacies of status and honor. Legend has it that Prince Lugh organized an event in Ireland called the Tailteann Games thousands of years ago, as a tribute to his foster-mother. The games lasted until the twelfth century AD, and were a way for young Irishmen to show off their talent at various athletic competitions, such as chariot-racing, horse-racing, and hurling.^{1,2} Games such as these have long been used by the Irish as a way to enhance their cultural identity and encourage societal values of status and leadership.

First it is important to gain an understanding of the prominent viewpoints on the correlation between cultural identification and competition. Ernest Becker's "The Denial of Death" begins by stating that we try to fight our inevitable human mortality by achieving

¹ MacLennan, Hugh D. "Shinty and the Celtic Celebration of New Year." *Sport in the Making of Celtic Cultures*. Ed. Grant Jarvie. London: Leicester University Press, 1999. 86. Google Scholar. Web. 24 Nov. 2010.

² King, Seamus J. *A History of Hurling*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 1996. 2. Print.

“heroism”, in which we become something that we believe will last forever. This concept begins in early childhood, the time in which “the struggle for self-esteem [is] at its least disguised” and children will fight for nearly any means of differentiation from their peers.³ However, Becker specifies that even children generally do not seek to become heroes regardless of the consequences, but instead follow society’s socially accepted means of distinction, while still trying to make something special of themselves.⁴ While some find this heroism through success in government or religion, others try to find it within the athletic arena. In fact, the athletic sphere is an excellent example of Becker’s theory. As he describes it, “an animal who gets his feeling of self-worth symbolically has to minutely compare himself to those around him, to make sure he doesn’t come off second best” – there is almost no better realm for socially acceptable competition than is present within the immediate feedback of the sports arena.⁵ Additionally, Becker spends a bit of time specifically describing society’s effects – “this is what society is and has always been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior...”⁶ He says that this interpretation of society is a concept which spans countries and cultures, and is a basic truth in human life. To tie together the statements about culture with those of athletic activity, Becker’s theories can be summarized thus: through society’s rules of status and conduct, people can achieve a sense of socially-acceptable heroism by being successful on the athletic field.

Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon came up with many similar ideas in the creation of what is called “terror-management theory.” Many of their proposals are based on Becker’s

³ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Free Press, 1973. 3. Print.

⁴ Becker, 6.

⁵ Becker, 4.

⁶ Becker, 4.

theories, but they take their analysis a few steps further in the support of entertainment as an important societal function. For example, their article states that “participatory forms of entertainment, such as...board games..., and participatory sports provide individuals with contexts in which they may attain a temporary sense of heroism (i.e., self-esteem). Thus leisure activities may be enjoyable primarily because they allow individuals to bolster their cultural anxiety-buffers.”⁷ Cultural anxiety-buffers can be summarized as those principles within ourselves that make us feel that we belong in a society. Greenberg et. al focus on the value of games and sports as ways to help us find our way within our culture. Children are especially open to the influences of culture, and so by providing them with “values, standards and roles, conceptions of the world, and the possibility of [metaphorical] immortality,” society helps them to navigate their world successfully.⁸ Additionally, the authors state that “...people have a virtually constant need for reminders or new indicators of achievement and being loved.”⁹ The athlete finds his sense of achievement and glory through success on the sports field; the cheers and public recognition from the crowd provide immediate feedback for the competitors. Even more private activities like board games still carry a sense of public import, through the potential for fame to spread through the words of defeated rivals. This opportunity would become especially relevant in a society such as medieval Ireland, in which poets were nearly always present and on the lookout for a note-worthy event to share with the populace.

These two complimentary theories serve to bring out some relevant themes to the discussion of medieval Irish games. First, participation in games and athletic events allows

⁷ Greenberg, Jeff, Tom Pyszcznski, and Sheldon Solomon. "The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory." *Public Self and Private Self*. Ed. Roy F. Baumeister. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986. 203. Print.

⁸ Greenberg, Pyszcznski, and Solomon, 197.

⁹ Greenberg, Pyszcznski, and Solomon, 203.

people to achieve a sense of personal significance within the scope of their culture's most valued beliefs. Simultaneously, social values are imposed upon the very structure of these games as a way to implicitly strengthen cultural norms, beginning when the players are small children so as to have the greatest effect on their future actions. Some of the most meaningful sporting events in medieval Ireland included children's games, hurling, equestrian events, and fidchell, and so it will be these which have the most to reveal about the structure of the society.

A famous medieval Irish myth, "The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind", serves to introduce the presence of games in society. The myth provides a description of "his toy javelin and toy shield", which the young warrior abandons in favor of his uncle's real weapons.¹⁰ This example demonstrates that children were given the opportunity to practice fighting with harmless weapons in a playful setting, while additionally carrying the benefit of preparing them for their ascent into the world of nobility, in which they were expected to know how to fight. In fact, much of what children were taught during their years of fosterage could be directly applied to their future lives, though on a surface level it appears to be largely in fun. For example, the fosterage laws in *Senchus Mor* specify that sons of *aire-desa* and *aire-tuise* chiefs are to be taught horsemanship, *brann*-playing (a board game), shooting, chess-playing, and swimming¹¹. In fact, learning these skills was so important that if the foster-father failed to properly instruct his pupil, he was required to pay a fine to the biological father based on the judgment of a neighbor.¹²

¹⁰ "The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind." Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. London: Penguin Books, 1981. 136. Print.

¹¹ *Senchus Mor*. Vol. II. Dublin: n.p., 1869. 155. Ancient Laws of Ireland. Ser. II. Print.

¹² *Senchus Mor*, 155.

Not all young people merited the education of noble boys in medieval Irish society, however. Sons of *og-aire* chiefs were to be taught herding, kiln-drying, combing, and wood-cutting – much more directly practical skills than those of the noble sons. Similarly, the noble daughters were only required to learn sewing, cutting, and embroidering, which could potentially be sources of enjoyment for some, but are seemingly incomparable to the playing of board games or swimming. Lower-ranking daughters simply learned the practical skills of “the use of the quern, and the kneading trough, and the use of the sieve.”¹³ In contrast, the son of a king was specifically pointed out as requiring a horse in the time of races, while the laws explicitly state that horses were not given to “the sons of the Feini grades, for horsemanship is not taught to them”.¹⁴ The appearance of class differences within children’s lives is stunningly apparent, and may have been used by the society to maintain social order and emphasize the status distinctions that were ever-present in Irish life. Even from such an early age, children learned those skills which placed them into a specified category within society. Someone who knew only how to herd cows had little chance of becoming a king, and in this way, children’s so-called games actually took on a much deeper societal meaning.

However, there was more to children’s entertainment than simply learning and practicing those skills directly applicable to their futures. Even the more directly pleasurable activities were still subject to societal restrictions, though. In fact, *Mellbretha*, an old Irish text about games, gives a distinction of three types of games in Irish society. First are the *ruidles-cluichi*, harmless games. These games include many of the skills taught during fosterage: hurling, jumping, swimming, and making sand castles. In these games, a few minor injuries were

¹³ *Senchus Mor*, 153.

¹⁴ *Senchus Mor*, 155 & 161.

expected, and the injurers were unpunished for any small transgressions. The next level of games was called the *fiancluchi*, or more dangerous games. These games included activities such as playing with spears or rocks, fancy horseback riding, and dangerous climbing. If a child was injured in one of these games, the text requires that a sick-maintenance be paid as compensation. The next level is the most serious, and is referred to as the “guilty games”, or *colcluchi*. These games were essentially “play at your own risk”, and included throwing a javelin into a group of people, “few against many”, and “hiding on a hill” (though exact descriptions of these games have not survived, they are probably similar to the modern children’s game “King of the Hill”). These guilty-games were considered inappropriate for children and meant only for adults.¹⁵

Hurling, one of the most ancient and famous sports in Ireland, would have been considered a much more acceptable means of entertainment for children and adults alike than the guilty games, due to its inclusion in the *ruidles-cluichi* category. It is purported to have its origins as far back as 1272 BC, when the Fir Bolg and Tuatha de Danann engaged in a hurling contest before the Battle of Moytura in County Mayo. Though the story of this famous competition has been passed down by Leabhor na Nuachongbhála, the Book of Leinster, compiled thousands of years after the event is said to have taken place, and thus of questionable accuracy, it can still be used to demonstrate the evident importance of the sport in society.¹⁶ Hurling is also described in some versions of the Gráinne and Diarmaid myth, in which Gráinne is said to have fallen in love with Diarmaid after watching him score three goals on the playing

¹⁵ Ni Chonaill, Bronagh. "Child-Centred Law in Medieval Ireland." *The Empty Throne: Childhood and the Crisis of Modernity*. Ed. R Davis and T Dunne. N.p.: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 24. Online. <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/3812/1/Child2-Centred_Law.pdf>.

¹⁶ King, 1.

field¹⁷. Another example from literature comes in the story of “The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind”, in which the boy departs from home carrying his hurley stick and ball, and proceeds to singlehandedly defeat 150 other boys at the game.¹⁸ Additionally, this is how he receives the name by which he is so famously known – by forcing his hurling ball down the throat of Cullen’s hound (Cú Chulaind can be translated as “Hound of Cullen”). Hurling was evidently an important part of Irish society, as it was deemed deserving enough to become a part of the famous Cú Chulaind stories.

Carrying on the trend of societal restrictions upon entertainment activities, a set of laws called the Brehon Laws was put in place, using the same terminology as the *Mellbretha*, to refer to levels of play in hurling. These laws begin with *ruidles-cluchi*, interpreted as “pucking around” or “slogging”; then *fiancluchi*, or a match; and finally *colcluchi*, specifically dangerous fouls – the same distinctions *Mellbretha* uses to distinguish children’s games. The hurling laws describe different repercussions stemming from the different types of play, and it becomes clear that “pucking around” is less dangerous than a match, but that the most serious are the four specific dangerous fouls.¹⁹ This layout exactly mirrors the divisions laid out in the *Mellbretha*, on an increasing level of severity and punishment for wrong-doing.

The rules surrounding hurling and those in the *Mellbretha* serve a similar purpose as do those rules concerning fosterage lessons. Rules maintain order in society, in an attempt to establish conventions of interaction between people. This concept extends all throughout culture, even down to the youngest of children. As excellently stated by Bronagh Ní Chonaill, “play reflects the socialization of children, who had to learn how to play with each other within

¹⁷ King, 5.

¹⁸ “The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind” , 136.

¹⁹ King, 1-5.

society's rules.”²⁰ The guidelines set out for children's play serve to affirm appropriate behavior, while punishing inappropriate behavior; they determine which actions are to be considered commonplace in society, and which are to be discouraged. For example, while simple pushing and shoving are not generally punished, placing others in direct harm (such as by throwing a javelin at them) is highly intolerable. To quote Ernest Becker, “our whole world of right and wrong, good and bad...is grafted into us.”²¹ People maintain their beliefs because they are the teachings of their society, and in fact they come to know nothing else, but actually become one with these societal ideals.

Similarly, as stated by Holt and Mangan, “heroes epitomize the qualities their society esteems.”²² Children who were victorious at their games would also have been considered good members of society, as they displayed the values their people appreciated. The games most often mentioned for children of the time share similar developmental characteristics: cooperation, negotiation, mental agility and strategy, hand-eye coordination, and strength and fitness.²³ Each of these characteristics was valued within society for revealing the makings of a good leader. Prized leadership characteristics can be found within the *Audacht Morainn*, a teaching of advice for future kings. The emerging values correspond greatly with those from childhood game-playing: justice and the abidance to laws of conduct, skill in physical contests, the importance of apt mental faculties, and care for others, among other things.²⁴ Through its seemingly innocuous regulations, society begins to shape its future by rewarding children for displaying its prized characteristics while at play. Indeed, children are especially susceptible to

²⁰ Ni Chonaill, 25.

²¹ Becker, 48.

²² Holt, Richard, and Mangan, J.A. Preface. *European Heroes*. Eds. Richard Holt, J. A. Mangan, and Pierre Lafranchi. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1996. 2. Print.

²³ Ni Chonaill, 24.

²⁴ Kelly, Fergus, ed. *Audacht Morainn*. N.p.: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976. Print.

this societal shaping because, as Ernest Becker puts it, “the child’s need for self-esteem [is] *the* condition for his life.”²⁵

Aside from hurling and the *Mellbretha* games, there are numerous other forms of entertainment that take their origins from medieval Irish practices, many of which are still played today with wide popularity, and reveal additional insights about the societal nature of entertainment. For example, equestrian sports have been common since the early ages in Ireland. Activities such as hunting and racing have long been practiced, and are mentioned frequently in the literature of the time. Again, the story of Gráinne and Diarmaid serves to demonstrate the culture of the society; the story describes Diarmaid and Fionn Mac Cumhail reuniting to share in the hunt and rekindle their lost friendship (though it ends badly for Diarmaid, who is reportedly killed by a boar). While hunting could be considered necessary for survival in some situations, for many higher-ranking adults, it was used mainly as a means for camaraderie and enjoyment.²⁶ Additionally, horse- and chariot-racing are a central part of the story of “The Labour Pains of the Ulaid & The Twins of Macha,” as Macha is challenged to a race against the king’s fastest chariot team. While her victory is clearly not a representation of fact, the story can be used to show the obvious presence of competitive equestrian events in Irish history. It should also be noted that this challenge takes place at a fair, after a day of races and competition, similar to that of Prince Lugh and the Tailteann Fair. These equestrian events carry on the theme of the importance of publicity in athletic competition, and provide another realm in which the competitors can achieve glory.

²⁵ Becker, 7.

²⁶ Carroll, 25-31.

The representation of society that emerges from these equestrian stories is the frequent emphasis on strength and agility in the public arena, and the honor, or shame, that could be found through participation in such events. Just as Diarmaid found his literal death by hunting, any man could encounter a metaphorical death of shame if he were deemed unsuccessful and unworthy in a culture that placed extreme emphasis on honor. As Landau, Greenberg, and Solomon describe it, when a person does not meet the expectations of the surrounding culture, he or she “may face the possibility that his or her life will end in anonymity, insignificance, and nothingness” – a startling and undesirable prospect.²⁷ For example, the ancient Irish law text *Díre* describes numerous ways by which nobles in society can lose their status and be reduced to the level of “petty folk”, including simply by being deemed “an incompetent noble.”²⁸ It comes as no surprise then, that participating in public events was likely taken very seriously, and it was important to be successful. This again ties into the ideas of both Becker and Greenberg et. al, who stressed the human desire to be recognized within society for one’s achievements. Public events such as these equestrian contests served to provide the potential heroes of sport with a realm in which to prosper.

Another popular medieval Irish game is “fidchell”, thought to be a strategy board game similar to chess. The most common reference to this game is within the literature of the time. One example is in the story of “The Wooing of Étaín,” in which Mider and Echu engage in a

²⁷ Landau, Mark J., Jeff Greenberg, and Sheldon Solomon. "The Never-Ending Story: A Terror Management Perspective on the Psychological Function of Self Continuity." *Self Continuity: Individual and Collective Perspectives*. Ed. Fabio Sani. New York: Psychology Press, 2008. 97. Print.

²⁸ "Dire." *Ancient Irish Law: The Law of Status and Franchise*. Ed. Eoin MacNeill. N.p.: The Royal Irish Academy, 1924. 315. Print.

fidchell match upon meeting each other.²⁹ In the story, Mider is reported to have been carrying a fidchell set of silver and gold with him in preparation for just such an occasion. The two men decide to raise the stakes of their game, and bet fifty horses and bridles upon the outcome. The next day, they again elevate the winnings, and on the last day, they take up the game for a final time, but with completely open stakes – whoever wins will choose his prize. It is Mider who wins this third game, and he chooses Étaín as his prize. It is this match that sets the stage for the remainder of Étaín's story, and so it is clearly a relevant aspect of the myth. In another example, Medb, Aillil, and Fróech are described to play on an equally luxurious fidchell set in "The Cattle Raid of Fróech."³⁰ In this story, Medb and Fróech play the game for three days and three nights, seemingly unaware of the passing time. It becomes clear that this was a game which required great mental focus, as well as one which was common among the noble people of the day.

It is from this idea that another trend within the fidchell stories arises; the characters that are depicted as the exemplars of the game's players are of noble blood, and play on exquisitely decorated sets. Perhaps this was a game reserved for the upper class, used as a validation of their noble rank and elite mental prowess. This idea is strengthened by the appearance of Conchubur in "The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind," as he is described to spend one third of his day watching his foster sons play, one third in fidchell-playing, and the remaining third asleep.³¹ For a royal man to be portrayed as spending eight hours a day playing, it must have been a revered game, and one for which the noble class was proud to display a talent. While the restriction to noble-class players has not survived as an explicitly written rule from the

²⁹ "The Wooing of Étaín." Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. London: Penguin Books, 1981. 52. Print.

³⁰ "The Cattle Raid of Fróech." Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. London: Penguin Books, 1981. 117-8. Print.

³¹ "The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind", 136.

time period, the concept again returns to the idea of rules as enhancing social and cultural distinctions. Even unwritten rules carry extreme weights within society, and often these are as difficult to break as the explicit ones. By restricting fiddell to the upper class, the society was able to create a tangible distinguishing factor for those who were deemed worthy enough to participate. Becker's theory on the necessity of social acceptability within heroism would indicate that for a person of lower-class perhaps fiddell could not have been used as a means to glory, because to play the game at a lower level may have been seen as a disgrace to its true nature by those in power.

As can be seen from these numerous examples, the most popular means of entertainment in medieval Irish society were inherently tied into an attempt to maintain the social structure and teach children to admire their society's esteemed values. Through explicit regulations and inherent rules, order was maintained with none the wiser as to its underlying purpose. To conclude, as Angela Gleason so aptly described it, "sport [is] a social construct,...an aspect that is every bit as important to a culture as its art or politics or economy."³² Though often overlooked and under-analyzed in historical research, a closer look at the setup of games and entertainment in medieval Irish life reveals that within nearly every game, and among every class level, rules exist in order to educate and remonstrate the citizens. While few people would realize that they were being trained to follow society's objectives, each player absorbs these cultural values, and employs them even out of the sports arena, within everyday life.

³² Daniels, Charmaine. "Angie Gleason's Journey." *Saint Joseph's Magazine*. Ed. Charmaine Daniels. Saint Joseph's College of Maine, 2006. Web. 10 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.sjcme.edu/magazine/summer06/angie-gleason-journey>>.

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