

SUCH is the popularity of hurling, football, soccer and rugby that the majority of people, when asked to associate another word with the word 'sport', will inevitably respond with one of the following; hurling, football, soccer or rugby.

This is not surprising because we are fed a constant diet of these four games by the various elements of the sports media. The improving sports book industry is also dominated by publications devoted to the big four. Other than Kieran Shannon's recent *Hanging from the Rafters*, there are very few sports books that examine the social dimension behind the facts of sport.

The Americans have led the way in true sports history. These writers not only produce the facts of their topic but explain them in the context of their time.

A new book, *Gold, Silver and Green: The Irish Olympic Journey 1896 to 1924* by Kevin McCarthy was published by Cork University Press last week. It is a book that can sit comfortably on the history as well as the sports bookshelf. This book examines the stories and circumstance of over 75 Olympic medals which were won by Irish-born athletes in the Olympics prior to 1924. The number is even greater when you include those of Irish parents who were born abroad.

The author, Kevin McCarthy is a native of Cappoquin, County Waterford. He is a senior inspector with the Department of Education and Science. He is a member of the International Society of Olympic Historians, the Hibernian Athletics Historical Association and on the advisory board of the 'Winged Fist', a historical society dedicated to Irish American athletics. He is also a life-long sports fan and member of Cappoquin-Affane GAA club.

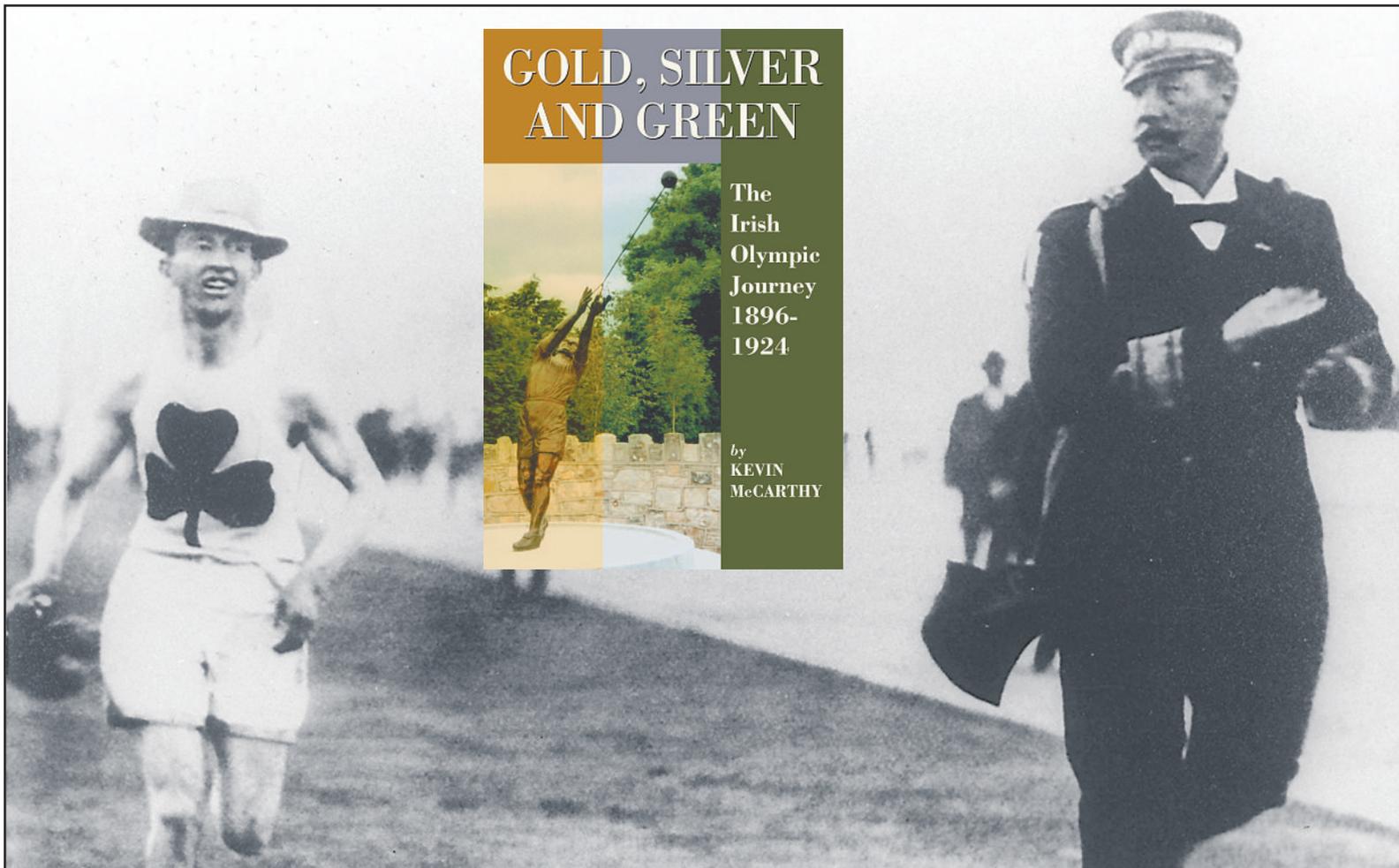
When asked how this book evolved he replied "The initial research for *Gold, Silver and Green* was undertaken as part of my PhD studies in UCC on the 'Irish and Irish American Involvement in the Olympic Games prior to independence and its impact on nationalism and national identity'. Personally, I feel the importance of sport has been underestimated in academic circles."

This begs the question what can we hope to learn from the book?

"I think the book shows how Irish athletics was at the top of the tree in a wide range of events when the Olympics began. The traditions of the Gaelic Athletic Association (IAAA) in areas like hammer throwing, shot put and jumping events were very strong, but it also shows that the GAA did not have an international vision capable of using the great Irish athletes to establish an Irish identity abroad.

"The irony was that a perceived unionist athletic body, the Irish Amateur Athletic Association, was probably responsible for getting more Irish competitors onto this new world stage at the Olympics. What also emerges is the huge role played by Irish sportsmen, many of them in the Irish American Athletic Club in New York, in gaining acceptance for the Irish in the USA, and in helping things like fundraising for the 1916 Rising into the bargain.

"It also shows the degree to which a wide range of political figures like Roger Casement, Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins could see the



Billy Sherring, a second generation Irish runner, winning the Marathon for Canada in the 1906 (10th Anniversary) Olympic Games in Athens. Note the Irish shamrock on his vest and Prince George of Greece jogging along side. (Inset) *Gold, Silver and Green: The Irish Olympic Journey 1896-1924*. By Kevin McCarthy. Published by Cork University Press.

Exiles' search for gold was inspiring



DIARMUID O'DONOVAN

value of an Irish Olympic team as a means of establishing our international identity."

Kevin feels that the GAA was less nationalistic prior to 1916 than people might think. In the course of outlining the amusing story of the Irish Cycling team in Stockholm in 1912, he explains that the row between the GAA and the IAAA at the time was more about the control of the Irish sport than nationalist politics. The events of 1916 changed everything and by the early 1920s the IAAA were as good as gone.

"However, the take-over by the GAA of mainstream Irish athletics did not result in a great athletic or Olympic revival, with hurling and football now very firmly established in nationalist circles and the rest of the world having caught up with and passed Irish standards in Olympic sports by independence."

The appreciation of the achievements of these pre 1924 Olympians is still of the hit-and-miss variety as Kevin found in the course of his research.

"While some Olympic medals are well protected in museums, as with Tom Kiely's 1904 decathlon medal in South Tipperary museum in Clonmel, I have, on more than one occasion, been 'introduced' to Olympic medals taken from hiding places in teapots or displayed in less than secure locations."

One of the unusual stories in the book concerns the proposal to play an exhibition of hurling at the 1900 Olympics which were held in Paris. There are suggestions that a Cork team was to take part in the hurling exhibition. A report in the Kerry Sentinel explained;

"The exiled Gaels of London are sending teams to a Paris exhibition, Cork being unable to accept the invitation to do so... There, in the intellectual capital of the world... will be heard the crash of the camán, and I hope the music of the Gaelic tongue on the lips of excited hurlers."

Another report, in the United Irishman, said that the game was to be between the "Chicago and London Gaels although the original idea was that Cork and the Chicago men should play." It should be added that apart from newspaper reports nothing has been found in either the Olympic or GAA records to suggest that an exhibition game was ever played. What is known however is

that hurling and football were exhibited at St Louis in 1904.

Munster was the power base of Athletics in the latter half of the 19th century. This is reflected in the Olympic success of athletes from the province. Kevin McCarthy's take on this is that economic circumstances and tradition played a large part in Munster's high profile.

"Many of the great Irish weight throwers and jumpers came from good farming stock, with good protein rich diets and more available time and training facilities than urban dwellers or employees.

"Tradition played a huge part too. The quality of the sports meetings in places like Kilmallock, Clonmel, Banteer, etc was world class, with Irish national records broken at such meetings very regularly and occasionally, world records too. Although our greatest Olympian before independence, Martin Sheridan (9 medals, including 5 gold) came from Co Mayo.

"Munster athletes included Tom Kiely from Tipperary broke 28 world records in his career, while Peter O'Connor from Waterford broke four world long jump records in less than two years. In the Golden Vale area, John Flanagan from near Kilmallock won three Olympic hammer titles, Pat O'Callaghan from near

Banteer won two and individual titles were won by Matt McGrath (Nenagh) and Paddy Ryan of Pallasgreen, all between 1900 and 1932 and all hailing from within a thirty mile radius of Croom, Co Limerick."

Gold, Silver and Green is a giant leap forward in helping sports fans and historians understand and appreciate why and how our relish for competitive sport evolved. It reminds us (if we need to be reminded at all!) that sport and politics have never been too far apart. As Kevin McCarthy points out in his conclusion however, the story of these Olympians of the pre-1924 era deserves commemoration in its own right.

Their success raises questions of how generations of political and sporting bodies have failed to develop our international athletic prowess in any consistent way since the foundation of the state.

In the last paragraph of the book, Arthur Griffith's observation that 'revolutions are slow and often barely perceptible things' is alluded to. If Griffith is correct, we can only hope that this book could be the beginning of a proper and reasoned debate on how to harness and re-ignite the sporting prowess of this country for the health and benefit of not just the elite, but for everyone.

DON'T MISS LISA FALLON'S COLUMN IN FRIDAY'S EVENING ECHO