Come on boys and have a day with our bowling club so gay, The loft of the bowl it would make your heart thrill, When you hear the Shea boy say – ‘Timmy Delaney has won the day,’ We beat them all, says the boys of Fairhill.
Long Bullets
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Long Bullets

A History of Road Bowling in Ireland

Fintan Lane
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The history of sport in Ireland is an area that has received increasing attention from historians in recent years, yet still remains substantially under-researched. Road bowling – very much a minority sport – has scarcely been noticed and, hence, this present study is the first concerted effort to deal with its origins, development and codification in modern Ireland. This is also the first detailed history of Ból Chumann na hÉireann, the organisation that has overseen the game since 1954. Like all books, it has benefited significantly from the assistance and enthusiasm of a great many people, who aided the project as it developed.

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Finally, I wish to thank Deirdre Clancy for her patience, which was much tested by my recurrent ruminations on the game of road bowling and its history. I suspect she will be delighted to finally see this volume in print and off the living-room floor.

F.L.
Dublin
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Motorists moving through the Irish countryside, particularly on a Sunday, occasionally come across crowds of people on quiet back-roads engaged with a game of road bowling, hundreds of spectators leisurely walking the road in unison with the competing bowlers, as their throws bring them further along the course. My own earliest memories of the game are from family drives in west Cork in the 1970s, stalled as we inadvertently arrived at the rear of such a gathering. For the many people who are unaccustomed to these scenes (it is, after all, a game played in only a handful of Irish counties), it must appear an unusual and even archaic sport, a throwback to the days when roads were not monopolised by fast-moving traffic. In bowl playing localities, however, it is a traditional pastime, a component of local culture that has as much claim on the road as the cars, trucks and tractors that typically hold sway.

Bowling matches – properly known as ‘scores’ – can be found in Counties Limerick, Louth, Waterford, Wexford, Mayo and Tyrone, but the heartlands are Cork and Armagh, particularly the former where the game is widespread. Originally known as ‘long bullets’ or ‘long bowls’, it is a recreation that was popular in Britain, Ireland and North America in the eighteenth century, but now is extant only in parts of Ireland, where it has battled successfully against extinction. An almost identical game, however, exists on the Adriatic coast of Italy and its similarities with the Irish version lay open the possibility that it too is a surviving remnant of long bullets, though further research is required on its provenance. In Germany and the Netherlands, there are also forms of outdoor bowling,
which, though different in significant ways, have points of commonality with the Irish game.

THE GAME
The overwhelming majority of scores are contests between two bowl players, but they can also involve three or four people, and sometimes more (these are known as ‘double-hand’ and ‘triple-hand’ games, and so on). Road bowling is not a team sport; rather, it is individual combat between sportsmen and women for pre-eminence and, more often than not, for a financial prize – the ‘stake’ – and, when part of a tournament or championship, for a trophy. Side-betting by spectators and supporters is common at most scores, though not permitted when children are bowling.

The object of the game, simply put, is to cover the course – invariably a country road – with the least number of throws of a 28oz iron bowl (pronounced ‘b-owl’, as in ‘fowl’). The term ‘score’, for a game, was coined at a time when the usual number of throws per contest was 20, whether it was expected that a given stretch of road could be traversed, in normal circumstances, by this number of throws, or, in a variation, when the winner was the person who covered the most ground with 20 shots. By the mid-twentieth century, however, a score of bowling often involved considerably more throws than this, so much so that the regulatory body, Ból Chumann na hÉireann, introduced a rule in 1956 stipulating that a score was complete after 30 throws. Today, a score is normally complete after 18, or less, throws over a course of two to three miles in length.

The score begins after a referee tosses a coin to decide who has the choice of bowls and first throw; importantly, once the referee has tossed, no more practice shots can occur and the initial throw of the game only takes place when he or she deems the road free of traffic and uninvolved.
pedestrians. The bowler, who throws from a marked spot called the ‘tip’ or ‘butt’, is guided in the game by ‘road showers’ (generally one or more of his/her mentors); the most famous of all road showers was the consummate bowling tactician Jack O’Shea, of Fair Hill in Cork city, who acted first for the famous Tim Delaney and later for Tom O’Neill and other top-class bowlers. Bowlers often use two showers during a score – one at the ‘tip’ and the other further out the road marking the target that the player should aim for. The road shower is crucial because, aside from directly advising the bowl player during a score, the role involves placing the ‘sop’, that is, marking the optimal spot on the road (usually with a tuft of grass) which the bowler throws towards to get the best length from a shot; the road showers determine the strategy of each shot, and require an intuitive sense of what the bowler is capable of and where the bowl should land to maximise a throw. Where the bowl halts is called a ‘tip’ (or ‘butt’ in Ulster) and an official called a ‘marker’ chalks or otherwise marks this spot, as it is from there that the subsequent throw is taken. A bowler who is a shot ahead in a game is said to have a ‘bowl of odds’.

The bowl itself is made of iron and comes in three weights: the standard 28oz, the 24oz for under 14s, and the 16oz for children under 12-years-of-age. Bowls, or ‘bullets’ as they are called in Ulster, were not always made of iron; indeed, stone bowls were commonly used in Mayo, Armagh and Cork at various times, particularly before the twentieth century. In south Armagh, stone bowls remained in use for eminently practical reasons, until the game died out in the area in the 1920s, though iron versions were also deployed. According to Michael J. Murphy, a native of Dromintee in south Armagh:

Iron bullets had been used in local scores . . . but players always appeared to prefer the stone variety. I have heard them complain that an iron bullet, due to hard impact with the rough surface of a road, developed scallops which could lacerate the fingers upon release from the hand. Just the same I remember a few of us when very young using a hacksaw blade in the clouds of night on the round bulb of a water pump handle at Francey O’Hare’s on the Dromintee Old Road; we never succeeded in making more than an impression; the idea was to saw off a bullet!

Murphy was neither the first nor last person to attempt to create bowls from whatever was at hand. In the days before the codification of the game in the twentieth century, the weights were not standardised and could vary significantly from area to area. Moreover, ready-made iron bowls were not always easily available; indeed, some localities had well
regarded bowl or bullet finders, whose primary purpose at a score was to retrieve lost bowls, regardless of their situation. Bowl players who could not obtain ready-made bowls from the local blacksmith or foundry sometimes improvised with unhappy results; one such individual was 19-year-old Daniel Coughlan, a labourer from Carrigaline, County Cork, who on 13 July 1881 met with an unfortunate accident as he and some friends were bowling near Carrigaline village, on the road to Coolmore. The *Cork Examiner*, adopting an air of puzzlement, reported:

The iron ball or ‘bowl’ used in the game had been, it is stated, used for some weeks previously, and from what occurred on Wednesday evening it seems strange that a serious accident had not taken place in the interval. After bowling for some time Coughlan took up the bowl and then, as he alleges, he, for the first time, saw that there was a hole in it, which aroused his curiosity as well as that of the other persons around. The strange story then goes to state that Coughlan, with his spirit of inquisition inflamed, proceeded in a spirit of investigation to light a match and apply it to the hole in the ball. This done, the result was not far off. The harmless-looking bowl was shattered into a hundred pieces and poor Coughlan’s right hand was destroyed in a fearful manner. He also received a severe wound in one of his legs, portions of the flesh being torn away. Some other persons who were by at the time were also hurt.4

Coughlan’s hand had to be amputated. Subsequently, he claimed that he found the ‘bowl’, which was patently a bombshell or grenade, on a heap of earth at Coolmore, but it transpired that he worked regularly inside the British army bases at Haulbowline and Camden Fort, where he almost certainly acquired his hazardous bowl.

Ready-made iron bowls were more easily available in the early decades of the twentieth century. Certainly, Flor Crowley, reminiscing about those years in west Cork, was of the opinion that the cheapness of road bowls made the game an attractive prospect for the poor in rural districts. Describing it as ‘a question of economics’, he remarked:

A bowl cost only a few pence. You could play your score along any boreen with no special type of footwear, even barefoot if you were tough enough (and many of the early bowlers were) with no special togs or jerseys beyond a frieze trousers and a flannelette shirt, and that was the ordinary work-a-day wear of the day.

In other games you had to have a pitch which had either to be bought or rented. You had to have togs and boots and jerseys, all costly by the standards of the time, costly beyond the humble limits of ordinary country dwellers.5
There is obviously a great deal of truth in Crowley’s observation and it is evident that, in city districts particularly, the game was played mostly by young working-class men. A bowl today costs roughly €5 and is easily obtained, though, remarkably, they are currently manufactured in India and not in Ireland. Cronin Precision Engineering Ltd at Derinachara, Dunmanway, County Cork, is the leading importer and supplier.

THE TECHNIQUE
Long bullets, when pervasive from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries, was a sport with noteworthy local variations, including the use of leather slings in some districts; the game often adapted to local conditions and in Ireland road bowling is played with significantly different techniques in Cork and Armagh.

In Cork, bowl players throw using a full-circle underarm swing, sometimes called the ‘windmill’ or ‘full-swing’ style. This involves an approach run to the ‘tip’, followed by a short jump as the bowl is thrown using a full-circle arm motion; this technique achieves a lofting of the bowl, generally keeping it high in the air for a substantial portion of the shot. The bullet throwers of Armagh and Tyrone, by contrast, throw using a shorter approach run, followed by a swift underarm shot, causing the bowl to hit the road earlier than the Cork (and Mayo) technique would allow, but often with great speed. The difference in technique is particularly obvious at corners, which Cork bowlers generally loft, bringing the bowl above the obstacles and dropping it onto the road around the corner, while the Armagh bowlers use a ‘spin’ or ‘screw’ motion to twist the bowl around the corner at ground level.

The games in Cork and Armagh are variations of the game of long bullets; the use of much common terminology, such as describing a match as a ‘score’, indicates their common derivation. However, following the spread of the game in the late seventeenth or early to mid-eighteenth centuries, contact between Munster and Ulster bowlers was rare; in fact, these bowl playing regions had little interaction for more than 200 years. During that time, local techniques developed, almost certainly to deal with local conditions. The technique of lofting, for example, was used in Cork precisely to counteract poor road surfaces – the idea was to get the bowl as far down the road as possible before the rough and potholed highways slowed its progression. In Ulster, on the other hand, the road system seems to have been in a better state, perhaps because – as an increasingly industrialised region – the upkeep of roads was considered an essential expenditure. County Cork, though it developed a significant textile industry in the eighteenth century, suffered from savage deindustrialisation, particularly from 1815 onwards, probably causing less
attention to be paid to the upkeep of roads in many rural districts.

It is unclear when the techniques in Munster and Ulster began to diverge – perhaps they were always different – but such variation does not suggest that they were separate games. Long bullets in Britain and North America also contained regional differences in style and technique.

THE ROAD

The Irish bowling arena is the public highway and changes to the road system and surfaces have had a massive impact on the game. One of the most important events in the history of road bowling was the tarring of southern country roads in the post-Second World War period. For bowlers used to rough roads, this was a difficult adjustment period and many were unable to transfer effectively to the new smoother surfaces. In the past, bowl players had dominated with long lofts, but the tarred roads greatly reduced the importance of this skill. Moreover, the bowl hit the road differently, it moved differently and skills that were once essential, such as the ability to manoeuvre over bumps, away from depres-
sions, and so on, became less relevant. A mental map of the geophysics of a course was no longer as crucial as it had been (though a knowledge of the road is clearly still important). Some bowl players, such as the maestro Mick Barry, made the transition; others did not. In general, the smoother tarred surface means that bowlers today can play to a high standard, achieving lengths from throws that would have been much more difficult on the rough roads available to bowlers such as the great lofters Michael McCarthy Quirke and Bill Bennett.

The problem of changed road surfaces recurred in the 1980s and 1990s, with Ból Chumann na hÉireann in February 1995, for example, harshly criticising Cork County Council for employing large chips and poor-quality fixatives on traditional bowling roads in west Cork, thereby rendering them unplayable. One such course, the Marsh road near Skibbereen, was resurfaced with large chips in June 1993 and it was several years before it could be properly used again. In 1995, the then Public Relations Officer of Ból Chumann, James Caverly, hit out at the county council following a score on the Fernhill road, near Clonakilty, in which the new surface had caused a bowl thrown by senior bowler Bill Daly to hop off the course, almost striking three spectators. Caverly firmly blamed the incident on 'the condition of the road.' He was backed in his remarks by a local councillor, Michael Pat Murphy, who pointed out that bowl playing 'is the only social activity for many people in West Cork' and argued that the council should act to facilitate, not hinder, the sport. In the event, the county engineer agreed to examine a list of bowling roads provided by Ból Chumann, with the intention of using the smaller chips and better fixatives. Although an apparently minor dispute, this incident nonetheless exemplifies how changes to road surfaces can have a dramatic impact on the sport, in effect shutting down its venues in traditional localities.

A dispute in 1996 exemplified another problem facing bowl playing, when some residents of the Lower Killeens/Old Blarney Road in Cork objected to scores being held on the road, which had long been a popular bowling course on the outskirts of Cork city. The difficulty was resolved following interventions in favour of bowling from the Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Cork, John Buckley, and Brendan Devlin, the county engineer. Buckley's comments were apposite:

The greats of bowling have all displayed their skill on the old Blarney Road. It has seen bowlers like Timmy Delaney, who has his own verse in the 'Boys of Fair Hill'. Bowling is part of the texture of life in Cork city and county and attracts thousands of people, both participating in and supporting the sport . . . [It is] more than a sport. It is a sub-culture with its own language and traditions. Every summer evening it is played at 100 venues in Cork city and county.
In fact, many formerly popular bowling roads have fallen foul of urbanisation; the Lough Road in Cork city, for example, a popular venue in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, now lies a few kilometres inside the city boundaries, while the course further out at Togher, to where bowling was relocated, has succumbed also in recent years to urban sprawl. Dublin Hill in Cork city’s northern suburbs, once the ‘Croke Park’ of Munster bowling, has not seen a score since the early 1980s, when a singular event was organised. Also in Cork, the Rochestown Road and the Black Ash were surrendered to heavy traffic and housing. The story elsewhere is the same, as traffic and urbanisation have impinged on traditional bowling roads. The importance of roads to bowling cannot be overstated; without the use of the roads, the game would be forced into fields or onto sports tracks and its very nature would be altered. Quite simply, off the roads, from being the cultural entity described by Buckley, it would become just another athletic sport.

This book is an attempt to accentuate the rich history of Irish road bowling, tracing its development from the early 1700s to the present day. It is a neglected history, though pioneering work by enthusiasts such as T.G.F. Paterson, Dermot Hicks and Raymond Murray, all Ulster-based, has ensured that the bowling community is not entirely without a sense of its past. The present study does not claim to be a definitive history; rather, it is a beginning and, one hopes, may serve to stimulate further research.
Road bowling, or ‘long bullets’ as it was originally called, has existed as a sport in Ireland since the beginning of the eighteenth century, and possibly earlier, but its genealogy remains unclear. Writing in the nationalist newspaper United Ireland in late October 1884, Michael Cusack, one of the key founders of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), listed road bowling alongside hurling and Irish football as a traditional Irish pastime, and during its first few years the GAA made some perfunctory attempts to promote it as a ‘Celtic’ game worthy of preservation. ¹

Cusack had seen bowling played on the country roads around Lough Cutra, some four miles from Gort, in south-west County Galway, when he worked there as a schoolteacher in the 1860s and 1870s.² It was a game played principally by the local labourers, tradesmen and tenant-farmers, rather than by the gentry, and, at a time when the west of Ireland peasantry was often perceived as a repository for Gaelic tradition, it is scarcely surprising that a cultural nationalist such as Cusack saw road bowling as an indigenous sport. Moreover, though the sport was not played in many parts of the country by the late nineteenth century, it had a large following in some localities and clearly was an important element of popular culture in those areas. Its popularity among country people undoubtedly persuaded Cusack that the game was of Irish derivation, but in fact this was not the case and there is compelling evidence that road bowling originated in the lowlands of Scotland and northern England, arriving in Ireland sometime in the late seventeenth century.

MYTHS OF ORIGIN
The origin of Irish road bowling has not received much attention, but three distinct explanations have been offered over the years. First, it...
has been suggested that it is an ancient Irish or Celtic sport with long roots in the country. Secondly, it supposedly arrived with Dutch soldiers in 1689 when William of Orange came to Ireland – a less common variation of this theory postulates its arrival some decades earlier with Cromwellian troops, who allegedly eased their boredom by rolling cannonballs for sport. Thirdly, it was introduced by British weavers sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries and over time transmogrified into an ‘Irish’ sport.

An ancient Celtic provenance for the game is highly implausible given its format, but there have been fanciful attempts to root it in Irish prehistory and to associate it with the legendary hero Cú Chulainn. However, it is clear that road bowling could not have gained widespread popularity before the advent of a decent road system. An entry on road bowling in the *Oxford Companion to Sports and Games* (1975) places the ‘heyday’ of the game in the nineteenth century, ‘when traffic was slow and sparse on relatively good clay-and-stone roads’, and, while the game almost certainly peaked earlier than this, the assumption that road bowling requires a developed road network of some sort is incontrovertible. At present, there is no evidence indicating that road bowling existed in Ireland before the seventeenth century.

The suggestion that road bowling was brought to Ireland by Dutch soldiers in 1689 appears to be a very recent one and seems to be based entirely on the existence of a form of moor bowling in the Netherlands. Strong links have developed since the late 1960s between Irish and Dutch bowlers and it is probable that this interaction has encouraged notions of historical connections. However, a cultural transference of this nature between Dutch-speaking soldiers and the local population would be most unusual, and it is telling that this theory is heard rarely in bowl playing localities in south-west Munster, which has always been a stronghold of the game. Likewise, a similar hypothesis, popular in Armagh city folklore, that Cromwellian soldiers introduced the game, is purely speculative and, as yet, there is no evidence that this occurred.

‘A GAME MUCH PRACTISED BY THE WEAVERS’
The tradition among some bowlers, buttressed by historians of the sport such as T.G.F. Paterson and Raymond Murray, that British weavers first introduced road bowling to Ireland is much more plausible. In fact, one of the earliest recorders of the sport, the English traveller and social

*Michael Cusack, a key founder of the GAA, listed road bowling as a traditional Irish pastime.*
commentator Edward Wakefield, came across the game in Ulster at the beginning of the nineteenth century and at that time it was clearly, in that region at any rate, the preserve largely of those descended from Scottish and English settlers, and it was especially popular among weavers. In his *Account of Ireland*, published in 1812, Wakefield broke the inhabitants of Ulster into four 'classes', not all of which played long bullets (road bowls):

1st. The old native Irish, who . . . speak their primitive language; 2nd. The Scotch Hibernians, whose ancestors settled in Ulster in the time of James I; 3rd. A mixed race between the old Irish and Scotch highlander; 4th. A class sprung from English progenitors, whose descent may be traced in their features, language and names. These last delight in the recreations of the country which gave birth to their forefathers, and in this they are joined by the descendants of the Scotch. Horse-racing, cock-fighting, and bull-baiting, therefore, are their favourite amusements. They play also at long bullets, a game much practised by the weavers. When they intend amusing themselves they assemble in great numbers, and select for the scene of action the most level roads. The ball is of lead, and it weighs about six pounds; he who hurls it to the greatest distance in the fewest throws, making it roll along the ground, is declared victor.°

The 'native Irish' and 'the mixed race of half Irish and half Scotch', on the other hand, primarily played hurling and were 'fond of shewing their dexterity at cudgels, their agility in leaping, and their strength and vigour in throwing the shoulder-stone'.°

In fact, the earliest known references to road bowling in Ireland come from the province of Ulster and date from the beginning of the eighteenth century. Ulster (or, rather, certain areas within that province) was a significantly industrialised region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was particularly known for its strong linen industry. Weaving and spinning had a long history in the province, but the rapid development of the textile industry from the end of the seventeenth century, and especially during the eighteenth century, encouraged the migration of significant numbers of Scottish and northern English artisans to the region.°

English colonists in the Lagan valley began to focus on linen manufacturing following the Cattle Acts of 1667 and 1681, which put them at a competitive disadvantage in the cattle trade compared with farmers in Leinster and Munster.°

There is some evidence that road bowling was once popular in west Yorkshire and east Lancashire in the north of England, where it was played largely by weavers, and it is possible that workers from there helped to bring the game to Ulster.° According to a correspondent to the journal *Ulster Folklife*: 

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° Long Bullets 10/26/05 1:40 PM Page 12
The game was played on the high roads crossing the moors and, as in Ireland, was frowned on by the authorities. Contests attracted considerable crowds, leading to obstruction of the highway, and were finally stopped by the police. Large sums were wagered and the followers were often patrons of rival public houses.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition, Richard Holt, in his survey of sport in Britain since 1800, mentions road and moor bowling as sports popular in the nineteenth century among mining communities in the pit villages of south Northumberland – the object was to cover an agreed distance with the fewest throws of an iron bowl.\textsuperscript{14} The game died out among north of England miners as a consequence of suppression, when road traffic increased at the end of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{15}

LONG BULLETS IN SCOTLAND AND NORTH AMERICA

There is even more evidence of the existence of the game in weaving districts of lowland Scotland, though the format sometimes differed from the Irish version.\textsuperscript{16} The Scottish sport of long bullets – also called ‘bulleting’, ‘hainching’, ‘langie-spaingie’, ‘lang bowlis’ or ‘long bowls’ – occasionally, though not generally, involved the use of a leather sling to project the iron ball and, by the early nineteenth century, it was played on public commons as well as on roads, though otherwise it was the same game that existed in Ireland.

Bulleting existed in Scotland as far back as the fifteenth century; the earliest known reference is a mention of ‘lang bowlis’ in the Scottish Lord Treasurer’s accounts in 1496.\textsuperscript{17} According to a historian of Scottish sport, John Burnett, long bullets was widespread in the lowlands of Scotland by the mid-seventeenth century and there are repeated references to it in kirk session records from that time because of objections to games on the Sabbath.\textsuperscript{18} In the seventeenth century, the game was played by landowners and aristocrats as well as by the lower classes, but the middle and upper classes appear to have abandoned bulleting by the 1750s and it survived thereafter as a working-class recreation. Sir Walter Scott, the Scottish writer, referred to the game, which he called ‘long bowls’, in his novels \textit{The Antiquary} (1816) and \textit{The Heart of Midlothian} (1818).

It was in decline in Scotland, however, by the nineteenth century and came under pressure as the authorities sought to keep bullet players off the busier roads. For example, the minutes of the Irvine District Road Trustees recorded the following item on 5 July 1837:

There was also laid before the meeting, an information lodged by James Willis one of the Surfacemen on the road from Kilmarnock to Stewarton...
There was also a gradual change in popular attitudes towards ‘rough’ or dangerous sports, particularly in the second half of the century, which saw the demise of formerly popular recreations such as cock-fighting, bull-baiting, and other boisterous recreations. Road bowling lost popularity, though it retained a presence in Scotland up to the late nineteenth century – a version of the game called ‘yetlins’ survived at East Wemyss in Fife until around the time of the First World War.21

The origins of long bullets in Scotland are unclear, but, in the context of other games, Burnett has pointed to the cultural interplay that existed between Scotland and the Netherlands, due to strong trading links, from the late middle ages. According to Burnett:

The social practices of the Low Countries were . . . more advanced than those in Scotland. New sports and pastimes were created, and inevitably the flow of ideas about sport was from the Continent to Scotland . . . The relationship between the sports of the Low Countries and those in Scotland has been discussed most often, most passionately and most inaccurately, through the case of golf. Several sports, however, came from the Netherlands to Scotland, including caich and curling.22

Though it is not mentioned, Burnett could have plausibly added long bullets to his list of games imported from the Netherlands, as that country has a traditional sport – called moor bowling by Irish bowlers – with strong similarities to bulleting. It is possible that a version of this Dutch game transferred to Scotland, where it was modified into the game of long bullets. The creation of sport is a fluid process and it seems reasonable to assume that the Dutch game changed to suit Scottish preferences. Nonetheless, because long bullets was once so widespread in parts of Scotland and the north of England, and from as far back as the fifteenth century, it is highly likely that the game we know today originated in that region.

Long bullets, however, was not confined to Britain and Ireland. It also existed in the North American colonies by the 1720s and was popular as a form of recreation among settlers, though soon deemed a nuisance by the authorities in Boston, Massachusetts, where a town by-law referring to the game was passed in 1723.23 One historian of American sport, Jennie Holliman, has claimed that long bullets was especially widespread.
during the eighteenth century, and the presence of large numbers of Scot-
tish and Scotch-Irish settlers at that time may be significant.

This sport took place on the streets, highways and all designated places
where people assembled on Saturday afternoon for the express purpose.
There was not a section of the country where it was not practised by a
certain class of people unless it was prohibited by law. Long bullets was
practised to such an extent on the highways and near towns as to endan-
ger the safety of people travelling about. Gambling was a strong feature
of the game and soon became one of its most objectionable phases.24

It was engaged in also by American soldiers during the war of inde-
pendence, though considered dangerous by some officers.25 Nonetheless,
as it was played in Pennsylvania at the beginning of the nineteenth century,
the game clearly involved skill as much as physical prowess, judging by
one local historian’s account written in 1891.

The game of long bullets was a popular sport at the beginning of the
present century. Iron balls were used, one of which, four-and-three-
fourths inches in circumference with a weight of twelve and three-fourths
ounces, is now in [the] possession of Doctor Awl... In grasping the
ball, the index and third fingers were tied in front of the second finger;
the ball was then projected with a jerk and made to bound along upon
the ground the greatest possible distance. If elevated too high, the force
was spent when it reached the earth; the fine art, therefore, consisted in
projecting the ball at the proper angle to secure the least resistance as
it rebounded from the ground.26

Another description of American long bullets in the mid-nineteenth
century indicates that – like in Scotland – a leather strap was used in some
districts.

The player had a long leather strap, one end of which was fastened about
his wrist. An iron ball would be rolled up in the strap and, with an under-
hand swing of the arm, it was pitched ahead of the player. An expert
could send it several hundred yards along a straight road. It was gener-
ally played along the public roads... The side that got the ball there
first won; that was all there was to the game.27

However, although long bullets was a favourite recreation among Amer-
ican revolutionaries at Valley Forge, it was suppressed systematically in
the early nineteenth century, when it fell foul of urbanisation and economic
development. In the State of Maryland, for example, a series of laws
passed between 1802 and the 1830s specifically banned the playing of bullets from the environs of most major towns. It was similarly outlawed in Indiana in 1817. The game seems to have died out completely in the United States by the late nineteenth century.

**EARLY DAYS OF ROAD BOWLING IN ULSTER**

Long bullets was a proletarian rather than an elite sport and it required few resources to play other than skill, a quiet country or suburban road, and an iron or stone bowl. In Ulster, it spread quickly through Antrim, Armagh and parts of Derry, Down and Tyrone. It was often played by urban workers on the outskirts of towns, such as Armagh and Lisburn, and was popular on the edges of Belfast for many years. One thing is certain: the game was played in Ulster between 1700 and the early 1840s primarily, though not exclusively, in areas with significant numbers of weavers and mostly by people of Scottish or English descent, who were Presbyterian and Anglican in religion. However, in some localities it appears to have been adopted by Catholics, who certainly played the game in Belfast and Armagh.

The earliest known reference to the sport in Ireland comes from the city of Derry in north-west Ulster. A city ordinance, dated 18 June 1714, indicates that the playing of road bowls on the city walls was so persistent at that time as to be considered a nuisance by the local authorities, who banned the game from the ramparts ‘on paine of paying five shillings for each offence with long bullets . . . to be levied by the Constables, by direction of the Mayor or any other Justice of the Peace, and one moiety thereof to be paid to the informer and the other to the poor.’

In September 1729, the writer Jonathan Swift included a passing reference to a lice-infested bowl player in his satirical, and occasionally obscene, anti-rustic poem ‘A Pastoral Dialogue’, which was written while he was staying at Markethill, County Armagh.

When you saw Tady at long-bullets play,
You sat and loused him all the sunshine day.
How could you, Sheelah, listen to his tales,
Or crack such lice as his betwixt your nails?

Another unhappy report of the sport came the previous year from the Rev. Philip Skelton who, while attending a game in Ulster, received a severe blow from a road bowl that ‘flattened the projecting part of my skull which, together with the extreme abstinence and large evacuations necessary to prevent fever, greatly shattered an excellent constitution.’

In fact, however, Skelton, who came from Derryaghy, County Antrim,
was an accomplished bowl player, who participated in games in Down and Antrim, and he was a confirmed advocate of the sport. His home parish of Derryaghy was still a strong road bowling area more than a century later, though the game is no longer played there today.  

It is clear that road bowling was a popular recreation in Ulster during the eighteenth century, but it was a game suited to a particular stage in economic development. From the late 1700s, it came under acute pressure, largely because of increased commercial and other road traffic, and the consequent state intolerance of sports played on the public highway. Indeed, the Summary Jurisdiction Act (1851), section 10, sub-section 2, made it an offence to play games on public roads and was used to prosecute road bowlers well into the twentieth century, though road bowlers in fact were subject to legal sanctions for many decades before this.  

From at least 1816, the police in Belfast, for example, made repeated efforts to suppress road bowling on the outskirts of the city and they were ultimately successful in helping to fatally undermine the game in that area.  

However, police interference alone cannot account for the decline in bullet playing in Ulster during the nineteenth century and complex societal change, related to the impact of modern industrialisation, was undoubtedly an important factor. As weaving moved from being a domestic industry to being primarily factory-based in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, far-reaching cultural changes occurred and disruptive road sports became less popular. Crudely put, the social discipline of the factory seeped into everyday life. Activities such as bull-baiting and cock-fighting were frowned upon because of their boisterous character and more sedentary recreations were encouraged. Road bowling, which was criticised as dangerous and disruptive, was discouraged by the authorities and by the ‘respectable’ middle class. Importantly, the Protestant and Catholic clergy were generally advocates of this new moral order.  

The change in recreational habits is discernable in the Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland, commissioned by the British government in the 1830s, which record many aspects of social life in Ulster at that time, including a decline in pastimes such as bullet playing. The growing prevalence of clocks and watches (a sure sign of social progress to officials in Dublin and London) was of particular interest to some of those compiling the survey and testifies to the changes that were occurring. Indeed, it is worth noting that more than a few parishes are described as having abandoned former amusements, according to one witness, because of ‘improved habits of industry and frugality.’ The Ordnance Survey Memoirs are patchy in their treatment of recreational activities and the reports on some counties, such as Armagh, give us no information. However, the more detailed reports do indicate that in the 1830s road
bowling was still played extensively in County Antrim (in the parishes of Lambeg, Drumbeg, Derryaghy, Magheramesk, Blaris [Lisburn] and Aghalee) and, to a lesser degree, in County Derry (in the parishes of Maghera and Termoneeny). In the parish of Carrickfergus, County Antrim, it was found that the game had existed into the 1810s, but had now 'ceased almost altogether.' Similarly, it had died out in recent memory in the parish of Magheragall, County Antrim, where it was recorded that,

Bullet playing, which consists in rolling a heavy iron ball along the surface, was so extensive in this and Blaris parish at a former period that the 2 parishes often contested for bets of 10 guineas a side, to be decided by the above play.

The game was still played in Blaris (Lisburn) parish, though 'not to the extent as in former years.'

The image is of a sport under pressure and in fact the retreat continued through the nineteenth century. By 1900, road bowling in Ulster was associated almost exclusively with County Armagh and it had died out in its former stronghold of Antrim with the exception of Ligoniel, where a handful of players remained until perhaps as late as the 1940s. In Armagh, however, the game lived on and retained a large and dedicated following, particularly in the vicinity of Armagh city. Interestingly, however, the overwhelming majority of Armagh bowl players today are from the Catholic community and this seems to have been the case from at least the late nineteenth century, though some local Protestants also continued to play. It is clear that the game in Ulster – initially identified with immigrant textile workers – became a community-based sport involving Catholics as well as Protestants. Such cultural transmissions between the English and Scottish settlers and the predominantly Catholic native Irish community were not uncommon and the historian S.J. Connolly has recorded similar instances from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with regard to card-playing, other recreations and even superstitions.

Road bowling was very popular throughout County Armagh in the nineteenth century and was also played on the Armagh/Louth and Armagh/Tyrone borders. In south Armagh, localities such as Dromintee, at the foot of Slieve Gullion, were well known for bullet playing. Exceptional bowlers from the period – such as the blacksmith Jim ‘the Hammerman’ Curran of Knockaconey – have lived on in local folk memory, but none more so than James Macklin of Creighan, near Armagh city, who was immortalised in verse. Macklin, whose heyday was later than that of ‘The Hammerman’ Curran, was a strongly built man, renowned for
his athletic abilities, and the subject of many stories. Dermot Hicks in his booklet, *Road Bowls in Armagh* (1973), has related tales of Macklin, a noted long-jumper, leaping over canals while drunk: ‘He would jump over two cart horses for a pint of beer; other feats were jumping in and out of a barrel and over a half-door and back without hitting his head.’

He is best known for his score on 24 July 1886 with another accomplished bullet player, Hugh Murtagh (O’Neill) of Castle Street in Armagh. Murtagh was considered the pre-eminent Armagh bowler until challenged by the young Macklin, who comprehensively defeated him in a score that lasted two days. His victory was recorded for posterity in a lay written by one of his supporters, Thomas ‘Bubbly’ Mallon of Tullygaron.

The day was fine, along the line
The men in groups did stand,
Young Macklin he came forward
With the spirit of a man,
His aspects they were charming
And good spirits bloomed within;
Says he, ‘My boys, throw down your bets,
For the laurels I will win.’

At the Bridge Hill the butt was made
For to commence the play,
When Macklin he stripped off his coat,
His heart was light and gay,
The bullet it came down the road
Like the roar of a cannon ball,
The cheers and the cries did rend the skies
From bogmen one and all.44

James Macklin remained the dominant road bowler in County Armagh until his death in 1895 from diphtheria. He was only 32-years-old when he died and still in his prime as a bullet player.45
oad bowling, of course, was not peculiar to Ulster and it existed in other parts of Ireland from the eighteenth century onwards. Michael Cusack, as we have seen, came across the game in south Galway in the 1860s and it has also been played at various times in Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Mayo, Carlow, Wexford, Cavan, Louth and Waterford, although in most of these counties it is likely that the interest was highly localised and existed only in pockets. From the beginning, however, Cork was an exception and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries road bowling was widespread across the county, and very popular on the edges of the city itself. Cork remains the strongest road bowling region in Ireland, with west Cork a particular stronghold, though the sport also continues to thrive in the city and in the east of the county.

ROAD BOWLING IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CORK
The origins of road bowling in Cork are unclear, but, as in Ulster, it is almost certain that the sport arrived with weavers and migrant textile workers. Significantly, the county had a vibrant and important linen industry from early in the eighteenth century, with a number of estate villages in west Cork organised around the cultivation of flax and the spinning and weaving of linen. The first linen manufacturing village to be established was Dunmanway, which was set up by Sir Richard Cox in 1735, and, importantly, weavers were brought down from Ulster and provided with houses, wheels and looms; in other words, they were invited in as long-term settlers, not as transient workers. Likewise, when a similar enterprise was established at Inishannon by Thomas Adderley, more Ulster weavers were drafted into west Cork and this migration continued as the linen industry embraced the villages and towns of
Doneraile, Bandon, Clonakilty, Ballinascarthy, Rosscarbery, Macroom, Annagh, Villierstown, Newgrove, Skibbereen, Blarney and Cork city itself. Indeed, the influx of Ulster artisans may have begun in the very earliest decades of the eighteenth century, in many cases involving no more than the settlement of a few domestic linen workers to encourage local industry. Importantly, according to David Dickson, Ulster weavers ‘formed a majority of the industrial households in the landlord-sponsored enterprises at Dunmanway, Inishannon and Killarney’ in the middle decades of the century, and Ulster Protestants were particularly favoured. It is hardly coincidental that the localities in which linen manufacturing was carried on in the eighteenth century correlate neatly with the geographical area in which road bowling is most popular and while one cannot rule out the game arriving with English weavers, it seems much more likely that the Ulstermen brought it south.

By the late eighteenth century, the game was well established in Cork where it was popularly known as ‘long bullets.’ Much has been made on occasion of the fact that road bowling today is known as ‘bowling’ in Cork and as ‘bullets’, or ‘long bullets’, in Armagh, and this is sometimes seen as proof of separate origins. In fact, the change in name in Cork seems to have occurred slowly in the late eighteenth century, with the game variously called ‘long bowls’ (as in Scotland) and ‘long bullets’ in the 1780s and 1790s. By the late nineteenth century, the term ‘bullets’ had disappeared completely and the game was simply referred to as ‘bowling’. Interestingly, both ‘playing at long bowls’ and ‘playing at long bullets’ were military expressions denoting much the same thing – the use of long-range fire. ‘Long bowls’ was the term more commonly utilised in that context and is originally a naval expression, used in the 1600s and probably long before then. Sir Walter Scott employs it in this sense in his novel *Guy Mannering* (1815), as does the American writer James Fenimore Cooper in *The Pilot* (1823). ‘Long bullets’ is a synonym that referred mostly to long-range musket-fire or the use of field artillery; indeed, the United Irishman Theobald Wolfe Tone used the phrase in a 1796 diary entry, when considering the attributes of Irish soldiers: ‘Platooning at 40 yards distance may answer very well to the English and German phlegm, but as we have rather more animal instincts, I vote for the bayonet. I do not love playing at long bullets.’

The earliest references to road bowling in the Cork press are generally critical and it is clear that the local middle class viewed the game with a cold eye. In August 1788, for instance, the *Cork Hibernian Chronicle* highlighted the playing of ‘long bullets’ near the Lough, which was then on the outskirts of the city, but within the Liberties and on the busy road to Kinsale.
The Kingsale passengers and the gentlemen living near the Lough complain much of the number of idlers who infest the latter place at the game of Long Bullets, to the manifest danger of the lives and limbs of those who pass that road. Lately a young Gentleman riding there was very near having his horse’s leg broke by the bullet which came close up to him. The Sabbath is the day mostly reserved for this horrid amusement, where blasphemy, fighting, &c. are the general attendants on this nuisance and profanation.

The fears and prejudices of the Cork bourgeoisie were confirmed the following year when a 12-year-old boy was killed by a stroke of a bowl during a score on the Passage Road and again in August 1791 when an 8-year-old boy died following a blow on the head from a bowl near the Lough. After the second death, the Cork Evening Post demanded ‘a final stop’ to what it termed ‘an illegal exercise so dangerous to society on the King’s highway.’

However, the hostility of the press and the authorities towards the game seems to have had little impact on its popularity in the environs of Cork city, and in the late 1790s it was still played every Sunday on the Lough and Kinsale Roads, and on other roads out of the city. A newspaper report from August 1797 also revealed that the game was played in the parish of Grenagh, north of Blarney, while reporting the fatal injuring of a 17-year-old girl, who was struck on the head by ‘a large ball from some person playing at Long Bowls.’ Unfortunately for enthusiasts of the sport, most newspaper coverage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries focused on such accidents, and road bowling was generally portrayed as dangerous and disruptive, though its prevalence was also conceded.

‘AS POPULAR AS EVER’

A renewed attempt was made by the Sheriffs of Cork to suppress road bowling at the outset of the nineteenth century and in February 1803 six people were apprehended on the Upper Glanmire Road for playing the game. Significantly, the six were released following an ‘admonition’, which indicates a level of tolerance for the sport and, perhaps, a recognition of its standing within local popular culture. Two months later, the Cork Mercantile Chronicle admitted sadly that, despite the actions of the authorities, the playing of ‘long bullets’ continued ‘to be persisted in.’

Road bowling in the nineteenth century was essentially a local sport, with occasional games between parishes (such as those, for instance, between the Antrim parishes of Blaris and Magheragall), and it is clear that contests involving bowlers from other counties were extremely rare.
The Lough Road in Cork city (shown in this early nineteenth-century map and recent photograph) was a popular bowling venue in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; it now lies several kilometres inside the city boundaries.

Photo: Fintan Lane
Nonetheless, there is some evidence from the early years of the century of accidental contact between the bullet players of Cork and Ulster. In April 1805, for example, the *Cork Mercantile Chronicle* published an interesting report of a game between a man called Powell, from the Bandon area, and a County Tyrone road bowler. Bearing in mind the newspaper’s previous calls for the suppression of the sport, the report was surprisingly magnanimous in accepting that this ‘immense’ gathering was good-natured and well behaved, despite the defeat of an overconfident Corkman.

On Wednesday [10 April 1805] a match of long-bowls was played for a large wager, between a person of the name of Powel and a Soldier of the Tyrone Light Company, on the road between Brinny and Bandon. The odds were at one time five to one against the Tyrone man; but, however, the issue of the contest proved him the winner. There was an immense concourse of spectators, consisting of the country people and the privates of the garrison of Bandon; and notwithstanding the performers had partisans respectively, and that the emulation was high, yet, not the smallest misunderstanding occurred. Above Three Hundred guineas were depending on the match.14

The financial wager between Powell and the Tyrone man was substantial and would have been gathered from a large number of their respective supporters. Moreover, it is certain that many spectators would have placed their own bets on the outcome and on individual throws, and this points to one of the reasons for the continued popularity of the sport, despite official disapproval. Road bowling scores involved large and small wagers and, as Edward MacLysaght has indicated in his work on seventeenth-century Ireland, there was a strong tradition of recreational gambling in the country – in the eighteenth century, heavy wagering on hurling matches, for example, was commonplace.15 The custom of gathering the ‘stake’ from the supporters of the contesting bowl player also served to bind them together, and coteries were formed, often referred to simply as the player’s ‘crowd.’

The tone of the above report, however, was atypical and the injuring in 1807 of ‘a respectable lady’ in the vicinity of Cork city saw the press reiterate its animus.16 The depiction of road bowling as an activity played by ‘idlers’ and repudiated by ‘respectable’ people was repeated throughout the nineteenth century. On 21 May 1829, for instance, the *Cork Constitution*, a unionist paper, complained of the number of injuries caused by road bowling and remarked tartly that ‘every respectable individual, in the neighbourhood where bowl-playing is practised, should raise his voice and remonstrate against it, or give such information to the
Mayor and Sheriffs, as may enable them to have it crushed at once.’ In truth, the authorities did make a determined effort on that occasion to eliminate bowling from the outskirts of the city and the following notice was posted:

The Mayor, Magistrates, and Sheriffs, notwithstanding the circulation of their printed cautionary notices, against playing at bowls on the roads and avenues leading to this City, having ascertained, that one or two serious injuries were within these few days sustained by this dangerous practice, will feel obliged to such Gentlemen, who reside in or frequent the Liberties of Cork, as will kindly come forward and be, under the approval of the Sessions Court, appointed Special Constables, the better to prevent a recurrence of such Acts.17

The appointment of special constables to stamp out the sport failed in its objective, and it continued to be enjoyed in the vicinity of Cork city for the rest of the nineteenth century, though still heartily disapproved of by ‘the respectable inhabitants’, as the *Cork Examiner* termed the objectors in 1869.18 On the other hand, the authorities did harass bowl players persistently and many were brought to court and fined – in 1886, for example, four young boys caught bowling on the Wilton Road were brought before the Petty Sessions court and fined ten shillings.19

A measure of ambiguity on the part of the police, the civil authorities and the political elite was sometimes apparent in their dealings with Cork road bowlers, undoubtedly because it was recognised that they were confronting a genuinely popular pastime. This ambiguity is exemplified by a wonderful painting, titled *Bowling match at Castlemary, Cloyne, 1847*, which currently hangs in the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork (see over). Painted by a local artist, Daniel MacDonald, a version was first exhibited in 1842 and apparently revised towards the end of the 1840s. It is a remarkable painting of a mid-nineteenth century bowling match, but what is especially interesting is that the bowlers depicted are Abraham Morris, a leading Cork businessman, conservative and Orangeman, and Montifort Longfield, likewise an Orangeman and conservative.20 Neither were typical bowl players and it is likely that this was a challenge match rather than their usual recreation. Nonetheless, it is revealing that members of two important families from the local political elite would engage in a sport that was officially condemned and marked for suppression.

A more mundane but equally telling example of ambiguity and negotiation was the behaviour of the policemen who interrupted an important score near Blarney, County Cork, on 4 July 1869, but then allowed it proceed, having noted the names of the participants. The match between Daniel Twomey, an outstanding bowler from the city, and a
Blarney man called Daniel Sullivan received a lengthy and friendly report in the *Cork Examiner*.

The pastime of bowling seems as popular as ever in the country, the indignant complaints of newspaper correspondents and police prosecution notwithstanding. Last Sunday there was a match played in the neighbourhood of Waterloo, a few miles from this city, which, considering that it was witnessed by about three thousand persons from Cork and other places, must have been of special importance. It originated in a challenge between a Cork man named Daniel Twomey, and a Blarneyman named Daniel Sullivan, and the friends of the two entered with spirit into the contest, backing their men in good sums. The play had not well begun when the Blarney Constabulary, under Constable Slattery, came upon the bowlers, and made them aware of the legal consequences of their proceedings. The match, however, was not to be interrupted by the fear of a mere summons to Blarney Petty Sessions, and a fine of 2s. 6d. The police took down the names of the parties engaged, for the purpose of prosecuting them; and then the bowling was contin-
ued for a distance of three miles, the police accompanying the match throughout to preserve order. The result of the play was a victory for the Cork man, who won by a ‘fluke’, his adversary’s last bowl having been stopped by a gate pier, a few yards short of his own final score. A closer match probably was never played; and the jubilation of the Cork folk was immense. The vast assemblage then separated in an orderly manner. The moral of the story remains to be pointed [out] by their worship at the next Blarney Court.21

The real ‘moral of the story’, of course, was that police attempts to suppress the sport in Cork were ineffective and bowl players viewed court appearances as a routine risk that they were willing to take.

THE GAA AND ROAD BOWLING

The formation of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in November 1884 is a crucial event in the history of Irish sport. Its emergence mirrored similar developments across Europe, where the final decades of the nineteenth century saw an upsurge of interest in organised sport and the creation of professional and amateur sporting bodies, often associated directly with religious, social and political movements. The GAA was linked intrinsically to cultural nationalism and it was focused very specifically on the revival of traditional Irish games.

Clearly, this should have been beneficial for road bowling, which by 1884 was considered very much an Irish sport, enjoying substantial support in Cork and Armagh. Moreover, Michael Cusack was an admirer of the game, having attended many scores while working in south Galway. In the event, Cusack did push for the inclusion of bowling and writing in United Ireland, a week before the GAA was founded, he listed the national games that should be revived as weights, jumps, hurling, Irish football, wrestling and road bowling.22 How the dwindling number of Protestant unionist bowl players in Ulster would have viewed such a development is another question and it is extremely likely that some at least would have seen the sport’s adoption by the GAA as a nationalist appropriation. Ultimately, however, the GAA’s interaction with road bowling was short-lived.

The GAA initially favoured athletic sports, but within a few years the focus was almost entirely on hurling, football and, to a lesser extent, handball. Road bowling, which did not have an organised lobby to push for its continued inclusion, was gradually forgotten. According to one historian of the GAA, W.F. Mandle, bowling was abandoned because it proved ‘too dangerously anti-social a pastime in a world becoming increasingly conscious of the value of roads’, and this perception may well have
In fact, the GAA was interested essentially in promoting field sports and bowl playing was problematic in that regard. Cusack, regardless, continued to promote the sport into the late 1880s and his newspaper, the *Celtic Times*, carried a number of reports on road bowling in the south of Ireland. Indeed, now out of the GAA leadership and at odds with the executive, he used the association’s lack of interest in road bowling to attack it. In June 1887, for instance, his paper congratulated the ‘Gaels’ of Dungarvan, County Waterford, for organising weekly bowling scores, and he went on to remark that the revised rules of the GAA excluded a paragraph he had written on bowling:

> It was stated in that paragraph that the police had suppressed Bowling, and that it was the duty of the rising generation to revive it for the benefit of the well-flanked youths and men that could be produced by one generation of National Athletics. That now utterly-discredited section of the Executive which set about destroying the GAA, suppressed the Bowling, and started on police duty with a fairly good record.

A few weeks later, he published an article, written by ‘An Old Bowler’, which was a nostalgic homage to road bowling in west Cork, presenting the sport as ‘in the highest degree favourable to muscular development and to the keeping alive of a healthy manly spirit’ (see Appendix 2 for full text).

In the event, the brief interest shown by the GAA almost certainly gave a boost to road bowling and it demonstrated that well regarded public figures endorsed its revival. Moreover, even when the GAA no longer promoted the game, ordinary members in bowl playing localities were supportive and respected it as a ‘national pastime’. Likewise, thousands continued to attend bowl playing events such as the important encounter between the leading Cork bowler of the 1880s, Owen Egan of Bishopstown, and Thomas Buttimer of Ballyheeda, which took place in 1887 on a course from Ardarostig Mill on the Waterfall road to Corran Cross for the enormous stake of £150 a side; Buttimer triumphed following three consecutive Sundays of bowling. Huge crowds also turned out at Clancool in west Cork on 9 December 1888 for a score between ‘Scotty’ Leonard of Bandon and ‘Block’ Coleman of Blackpool in Cork city. Both were considered champions of their respective districts and it appears that this was one of several challenges involving the two, with no conclusive outcome. Indeed, the rivalry was continued when both emigrated to the United States at the end of the 1880s, where they ended up working in the Boston rail-yards – in 1891, with 200 fractious supporters, they met on a road outside Lowell, near Boston, and resumed the contest. The Mayor of Lowell ensured order by sending in police
and the score ended with a victory for Coleman, though it seems another challenge was issued before the men parted.  

Back in Ireland, the 1890s saw the emergence of a new Cork champion in John ‘Buck’ McGrath, who, like Coleman, was from Blackpool in the city. Born in 1876, McGrath (an oil painting of whom still hangs in the Bowlers’ Rest public house on Mallow Road) secured his reputation as the best in Cork by defeating Jer O’Driscoll and James Barrett, both highly respected bowlers, in challenge scores in July and October 1898, and he remained the county’s leading bowl player into the twentieth century, becoming something of a legend for later generations of bowling enthusiasts. A clerk in Murphy’s Brewery, he was remembered by the sports journalist P.D. Mehigan (‘Carbery’) as having ‘the biggest heart of any man that played.’

The sport continued to feel hostility from the authorities, but it also found new friends among cultural nationalists and, importantly, it retained their goodwill over the following decades. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, the construction of road bowling as a ‘traditional Irish sport’ was complete, despite its exclusion from the list of games actively promoted by the GAA.
At the outset of the twentieth century, road bowling was still a highly localized sport and, despite the flicker of interest from the GAA, it had no representative national organisation or even local club system. Scores were organised organically at local level and there was no real sense of road bowling as a game with a national presence. Moreover, it still subsisted in the recesses of Irish sporting life, a subaltern cultural activity, with a lingering aura of disrepute. The first half of the twentieth century saw many changes in terms of how road bowling was viewed, but also in terms of how enthusiasts regarded themselves and their sport. The transitions that occurred meant fundamental alterations to how the game was promoted, played and regulated, and a demise of the localism that had always characterised the sport.

**BOWLING BEFORE THE 1920S**

There were no structured championship tournaments before the 1920s and major bowling scores were largely individual challenges between prominent bowlers, with the prestige and the stake as the objectives. Eamonn O’Carroll of Ballygarvan, County Cork, who first bowled in the 1920s, has claimed that before that decade the challenge score was the only type of bowl playing known.

Challenges were issued by one group of backers of some top class player to another, and a very necessary part of this challenge and acceptance was the ‘binding money.’ This was the guarantee that the score would be played on the road selected, at the time appointed, for the ‘stake’ agreed upon. This ‘binding money’, which could be up to £10 aside, and was usually put in on the day of the score, was part of the ‘stake.’ It was
looked upon as being a very serious contract and was seldom broken.
If one player could not fulfil his engagement the ‘binding money’ was
forfeit, and was always handed over without a quibble. It was ‘held’
by a person of known integrity.1

O’Carroll, a senior bowler himself, has indicated, however, that ten
shillings was a more usual amount for the ‘binding money’, when the
contenders were not considered ‘top class’ bowlers.2

The stake itself was made up, as it is today, of money collected from
supporters of the bowl players and this was levelled off so that an equal
amount came from each side. A contributor got back double what was
put in, if his bowler won. Extant records from some bowling matches
held in west Cork between 1897 and 1908 indicate that the stake was
often quite significant, bearing in mind that the bowlers and their backers
were most often from working-class and small-farming backgrounds.
Indeed, a number of stakes for challenges played at Clancool (off the
Bandon to Clonakilty road towards Carey’s Cross) amounted to £20 and
£30, which was a substantial sum at the time. The figure increased when
John ‘Buck’ McGrath was involved and his challenge score in July 1898
against Jer O’Driscoll, on the Waterfall to Crossbarry road, was for £50.
Likewise, when he took on and defeated Denis ‘Sonny’ O’Leary of Bandon
at Clancool, in October 1902, it was for a stake of £60.3 In late 1908,
£40 was the wager when two local champions, Patrick Long of Bealnab-
lath (north of Newcestown) and Laurence Quirke, a 22-year-old farmer’s
son of Carrigroe, Rathbarry (near Clonakilty), confronted each other
at Ballinsascarthy.4 Cork champions in the 1910s and 1920s – such as Bill
Bennett, ‘Rocksalt’ O’Mahony, ‘Tiger’ Ahern, Miah Deasy and Michael
McCarthy Quirke – played for even larger sums; McCarthy Quirke and
Ahern, for example, contested at Clancool in 1925 for £440.5 More
typical bowling matches attracted lesser stakes – anything from five
shillings to £1 – and some had none, particularly if they were friendly
scores between men from the same parish.

The lack of formal organisation accentuated the local character of the
sport; it was rare for people to support bowlers from outside their parish
against one of their own and, with no significant interaction between the
strong bowl playing counties of Cork and Armagh until 1928, there was
no developed sense of county or regional solidarity. The game was marked
by local rivalries. Remembering the scene in Cork during the 1920s
and 1930s, Eamonn O’Carroll has commented:

Woe betide a backer who dared back against a neighbour in former
times. He was a marked man from that on. All Fairhill backed [Tim]
Delaney; all Blackpool backed Batna Barrett, or Jim Fitzgerald or
[George] Betson, or Jack Murphy; all Bandon backed Red Crowley or Donie Lehane; all Upton backed the Bennetts, or Mick O’Brien, Tadhg Drew or Murphy Ban; all Pouladuff backed Tiger Ahern; and I also had my faithful followers.6

This strong allegiance between neighbours was a feature of the game from its inception in Ireland and reflective of a pronounced sense of local identity, even within cities. In Cork city, for example, faction fighting between the residents of Fair Hill and Blackpool occurred regularly in the eighteenth century. One of these inter-locality conflicts on 8 March 1772 was graphically depicted as a battle between ‘the warlike sons and daughters of Fair Lane and Blackpool, who met in a long field near Fair Hill and fought with one another till night came on. The females were armed plentifully with stones, and the male combatants, according to the Chewkee custom, with tomahawks of a new construction, which were about four feet long.’7 This intense Fair Hill and Blackpool rivalry was expressed through locality-centred fife-and-drum bands in the nineteenth century, with occasional riots and fights between band followers, and it is in this context that one should view the competitive localism that characterised road bowling, which provided a relatively serene alternative.8

‘A MOST DANGEROUS PRACTICE’

The authorities, however, were poor sociologists and they remained focused on what they saw as the negative aspects of road bowling, principally that it occurred on public roads, allegedly obstructing traffic, and that spectators and passers-by were at risk of injury from stray bowls. Police antipathy, of course, was exacerbated by occasional complaints from members of the public, highlighting instances of reckless play, such as the following pseudonymous letter published in the Cork Examiner in early July 1910, which referred to bowling on the Curragh Road:

Some weeks ago, when walking with my daughter, we met a party of those youthful bowlplayers, who, utterly regardless of those walking on the road, flung their dangerous missiles. One crashed across the footpath in front of us, but fortunately we escaped injury. I spoke to the boy, but abuse was flung at me in reply. Surely this and ‘hurling’ should not be permitted on our country roads or city streets – both being dangerous when carried on by irresponsible and reckless persons.9

In reality, the frequency of injuries from bowl playing was not high – probably no more than on a rugby pitch, or from hunting – and a custom developed of placing sentinels on the road to warn pedestrians and watch
out for policemen. Moreover, bowling matches were held on quiet suburban and country back-roads, where traffic was light.

Nonetheless, members of Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) continued their efforts to suppress the game and frequently raided scores, seizing bowls, and taking the names of both bowlers and others they could implicate. In early July 1913, for example, a 1,000-strong gathering was broken up on the New Road outside Bandon and fines were later levied not only against Jeremiah and Daniel O’Donovan for bowl playing, but against Mary Barrett and Maurice Hurley, the proprietors of public houses in Oldchapel and Crossmahon, for supplying drink to some of those present. In a similar vein, charges were brought against three men for ‘aiding and abetting’ a bowling match held on 24 August 1913 at Kilbarry, County Cork. The four men charged with actual bowl playing on that occasion – Michael Coleman, James and Jeremiah Riordan, all from Blackpool in the city, and Joseph McCarthy of Monard – were less than contrite and refused to give undertakings not to engage in the game again, prompting the magistrate to remark that if the defendants were ‘going to do the same thing again, it looked simply like charging a rent for the use of the road to fine them.’ It was, he reminded the court, ‘a most dangerous practice.’ In fact, more summonses were outstanding against the four defendants for bowling on a subsequent occasion and their backers probably paid the fines incurred. Coleman, a 31-year-old brewery labourer from 45 Commons Road, was a stalwart of the game and may have been related to ‘Block’ Coleman, the leading city bowler in the late 1880s.

The attempt to suppress the sport gave road bowling, in the eyes of some nationalists, additional credibility as a ‘national pastime’ under threat from a hostile British state. ‘We have, at least, one national game left us,’ wrote a contributor to the magazine Ireland’s Own in 1924, ‘even if it is “agin the law”. This last fact is a great point in favour of its claim to being a national game. Otherwise, why should they have banned it?’ Jeremiah O’Mahony, writing for the same magazine in 1913, was of the opinion that police action against this ‘distinctively Irish’ game actually increased its popularity: ‘The efforts to evade the law add a spice of excitement to the game which appeals to the heart of the Gael.’ In truth, the efforts of the authorities constituted a very real difficulty and scores were organised surreptitiously into the 1920s, with newspapers steadfastly refusing to promote an ‘illegal’ game. The resentment that this undoubtedly created is probably well reflected in an apocryphal story told to the travel writer Robert Gibbings and included in his book Sweet Cork of Thee (1951):

There was a policeman and he was for ever fining the boys; every evening he’d be out taking away their bowls and getting convictions. So one day
they went along to the forge on the hill, and they reddened a bowl in the smith’s fire, and when they got word that the policeman was coming along they carried the bowl out on a shovel and sent it rolling down the hill. When the policeman seen it coming, he stopped it under his boot and he picked it up to put it in his pocket. Well, if he was quick to pick it up, he was quicker to drop it. I tell you, ’twas some time before he interfered again.15

However, while the relationship between bowlers and the state was relatively straightforward, and based on hostility, interaction with individual policemen could be more complicated. Some pursued the bowl players with zeal, but others did not. Indeed, one of the most significant scores to take place on the Cahermore road in west Cork occurred in 1921 when Mick Cullinane, a noted bowler from Caherbeg, took on a member of the RIC from nearby Rosscarbery Barracks. In the event, the contest ended because of a dispute over a stopped bowl and Catholic clergymen were forced to intervene to prevent fighting between locals and heavily armed policemen.16 Clearly, one of the most interesting aspects of this

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Summons issued in 1928 to the leading bowler, James ‘Toots’ Mackle from Armagh city, for playing ‘bullets’ on the public highway.
score was that it happened in 1921, at a time when the paramilitary RIC was in open conflict with the IRA, though it is likely that it took place after 10 July, when a truce was called in the war of independence. The presence of a bowl player in the RIC is less surprising; Michael ‘Mikey’ Deasy, for example, a leading road bowler in west Cork, was one of those who joined the police, becoming a member of the Dublin Metropolitan Police in the early twentieth century.17

Individual magistrates could also be sympathetic towards bowl playing. In 1904, for example, Lord Bandon, while presiding at a Petty Sessions court, described road bowling as ‘a fine, manly game’, and asserted ‘that if scores were thrown on bye roads . . . he thought the obstruction next to nothing.’18 Nonetheless, despite these sentiments, he still fined those before him for engaging in the game, and for aiding and abetting, though the amount imposed was small. Likewise, in the early 1930s, Thomas McLoughlin, a resident magistrate in Armagh, imposed light fines, declaring that ‘the men were better off out in the country throwing bowls than loitering on street corners.’19

The partition of Ireland between 1920 and 1922 caused some change in official attitudes towards road bowling in the territory of the newly formed Irish Free State, but the police force in Northern Ireland was essentially the same as before (with the local RIC simply renamed) and this relative continuity meant that the prosecution of bowlers in Armagh and east Tyrone continued unabated. For example, in 1928, the leading bowler James ‘Toots’ Mackle, from Mill Row on the outskirts of Armagh city, received three summonses for playing ‘bullets’ on the public highway on separate occasions in the month of April.20 His case was not unusual and prosecutions occurred regularly in Armagh until the mid 1950s, when attitudes began to change.

The position of road bowling in Munster was
somewhat different after 1922. The new police force – the Gárda Síochána (Civic Guard) – was unarmed and intent on policing largely by consent, particularly in the wake of the bitter civil war of 1922–3. Moreover, the nationalist ethos of the new state militated against the continued suppression of the ‘indigenous’ game of road bowling, which, of course, had long since been constructed by cultural nationalism as an endangered Irish national pastime. Consequently, while the authorities in the Irish Free State viewed bowling on the public roads with grave suspicion, police action was not as stringent as it had been under the old regime; bowlers were still fined on occasion, but court appearances were less frequent and decreased considerably as the years went by. By the late 1920s, road bowling in Cork had emerged into the open and prominent bowlers became public figures in the region. Champion bowlers in the early to mid 1920s, such as Michael McCarthy Quirke (aka Michael McCarthy) of Kilgarriffe near Clonakilty; Bill Bennett of Killeady; and Jim ‘Rocksalt’ O’Mahony of Blackpool were scarcely known outside bowling circles at the time compared to Tim Delaney of Fair Hill and Redmond Crowley of Bandon, who prospered just a few years later.

McCarthy Quirke, who defeated a fledgling Tim Delaney at Clancool in 1925, was an extraordinary bowler – a tall, tough man, with large, powerful hands and long arms, he is remembered for his lofts, which typically drove his bowl beyond the 80-yard mark, and aficionados of the sport still believe that he was one of the best bowlers ever. Born Michael McCarthy in Ardfield, near Clonakilty, at the end of the 1890s, he was related to Laurence Quirke, who was the Clonakilty district champion circa 1913. He later lived at his sister’s house in Kilgarriffe and it was from there that he emerged as a formidable bowler in the early 1920s at a time when the sport was almost entirely dominated by
champions from Cork city. In west Cork, McCarthy Quirke quickly over-
came highly respected bowl players such as Dan Grady, J. Hourihane of
Leap, Felix Connolly of Ballineen, Mick Cummins of Shannonvale, and
Tim McCarthy of Ring, before being beaten at Clancool on St Patrick’s
Day, 1925, by the IRA activist Miah Deasy of Kilmacsimon Quay. A
brother of Liam Deasy, the well known IRA commander, Miah was an
officer in the West Cork Brigade during the war of independence and had
been imprisoned for a time in Ballykinlar Camp.\textsuperscript{22} In a return score,
however, two weeks later, McCarthy Quirke defeated his rival for a stake
of £200 in a magnificent match that firmly established his reputation; he
got on that year to beat the leading city bowlers, Timothy ‘Tiger’ Ahern
of Pouladuff, Jim ‘Rocksalt’ O’Mahony of Blackpool, and the emerging
Tim Delaney of Fair Hill, all for stakes of £440. Delaney requested a return
score, but his backers were only able to muster £110 in stake money and
McCarthy Quirke refused to play for anything less than £440; this refusal
led to accusations of poor sportsmanship, though Flor Crowley, writing
in 1949, suggested that the reason was more complex:

\textit{Leading Cork bowl players and mentors in the 1920s: (left–right) Jack O’Shea,
Tim Delaney, Bill Bennett and Mickey Walsh.}
The fact was that [McCarthy] Quirke's stakes were always collected in advance in Clonakilty. Each man's stakes were entered up and his donation for the bowler accepted. Many of the men who contributed towards those stakes never attended the scores. The position was that Tim Hurley and the other backers of Quirke would have to pay back all the money they had collected and make up a complete new stake – an almost impossible task under the circumstances.23

McCarthy Quirke's hardest fought contests occurred in 1926, when he came up against Bill Bennett and was badly beaten in a score on 17 March. Three weeks later, the Clonakilty man made a comeback in a second contest with Bennett, but the two remained serious rivals in the drive for dominance of Cork bowling.

In the spring of 1927, Michael McCarthy Quirke emigrated to the United States, bringing his bowl playing career to an abrupt end. He died there just three years later.24 Back in Cork, his supporters continued to celebrate his many bowling victories in verse and the following song, written after his win against 'Rocksalt' O'Mahony, remained popular for years after his departure.
It was in the month of August
And on to Bandon we did go
There to meet a famous Corkman
For a contest you all know.

From the start, McCarthy led him,
We were with him to a man,
Brave McCarthy, lion-hearted,
You’re a credit to old Clon.

Up McCarthy, young and hearty,
Clasp his hands should every man
And drink the health of this great bowler
For the honour he has won.

He played Grady, Mick Deasy, Rice, Ahern
and Mahony too,
He did meet and defeat them
On the road at sweet Clancool.

Though the road was rough and greasy,
Yet he bowled it as of yore
Winning all his points victorious
For his backers in the score.

In the end when we all looked hopeless,
He proved himself a man
And from the grasp of great O’Mahony
Brought the honours back to Clon.25

Other exceptional bowlers in that period were Bill Bennett and Jim ‘Rocksalt’ O’Mahony. Bennett, a Protestant, was an all-round athlete who excelled in boxing, shot putting, and at both the high jump and long jump; he became a formidable bowl player and remained so into the 1930s, though his heyday was undoubtedly pre-1927. Born in 1877, he had a police and military background, having served with the Cape Mounted Police during the Boer war and with the British army for four years during the First World War.26 He died in January 1967 and was buried in Inishannon.27 Jim O’Mahony, who worked as a nurse in the mental asylum on the Lee Road, was an outstanding bowler in the 1920s and came close to defeating McCarthy Quirke in a spectacular score in 1925. He was regarded as a great stylist with an impressive loft and, according to Flor Crowley, possessed ‘one of the strongest bowls ever known to bowl playing.’28
CONTACT BETWEEN CORK AND ARMAGH BOWL PLAYERS, 1928–32

The transition of Cork road bowling from being an underground sport to public visibility and official tolerance coincided with the development of the first serious links with the bullet throwers of County Armagh. There had been some accidental contact between southern and northern bowlers before the 1920s – in the late nineteenth century, for example, a Cork soldier named Connor played and defeated several local bowlers while he was barracked in Armagh – but the contact was never sustained and these random scores were singular events.29 There were no challenges or competitions between provincial champions.

In fact, it is not clear how much the Cork and Armagh bowlers knew about each other prior to the late 1920s. What is certain is that the first meaningful interaction occurred entirely by accident in 1928 when two Christian Brothers from Cork, walking in the Armagh countryside, came across some bowling practise. According to one account:

[Peter] Donnelly, the Hammerman as they called him, was on the road with his crowd and the opposition crowd were there too. The two of the crowds were trying to arrange a match, and they were having a practice shot and the bullet overtook the two Christian Brothers, and to their surprise one of them, the Brothers, took off his coat and threw the bullet...
back overhand and the bowl came flying back into the crowd. All their eyes opened and the opposition crowd to Donnelly went after them and said: ‘Would you ever come back and play a match and we’ll back you.’ And they backed him for £7 against Donnelly. He beat Donnelly, it was the talk of Belfast, or of Armagh at least.30

The Christian Brother, a man named Buckley, had been an accomplished bowl player in his youth, but his win was a very significant achievement in that Donnelly was considered the pre-eminent bowler in County Armagh. Donnelly quickly reasserted himself, securely winning a return match, but his vulnerability prompted three Belfast-based Corkmen to challenge him to a score, supposedly against one of their workmates, and, when Donnelly’s backers agreed, they wrote to Cork asking if Tim Delaney of Fair Hill would be willing to travel to accept the challenge. Jack O’Shea, Delaney’s mentor and road shower, agreed and £100 was raised as stake money before Delaney and his supporters headed north. The Corkman

*Fair Hill and Blackpool (Cork) bowlers pose in front of the North Monastery CBS in the late 1920s. The pre-eminence of Tim Delaney (sixth from left in the front row) is indicated by his central position. Others present include Jim ‘Rocksalt’ O’Mahony (fourth from right, front row) and Jack O’Shea (third from left, second row).*
defeated Donnelly in a tough contest on the Knappagh road near Armagh in September 1928, but it was taken well and cordial relations developed.

Some months after Delaney’s victory, another Cork bowler, Pat Cummins, travelled to Armagh and was beaten by Donnelly. An exceptional bowler, who threw with tremendous speed, Peter ‘the Hammer-man’ Donnelly of the Rock had replaced James Mackle in 1927 as the dominant figure in Armagh bowl playing; his defeat by Delaney was a testament to the Fair Hill man’s abilities and it did not indicate that Donnelly was easily beaten. In fact, Donnelly is still remembered in Armagh as one of the best bowlers ever produced in the county. Nonetheless, it is clear that he had difficulty countering the challenge from Cork and Red Crowley of Bandon defeated him in 1932 on the Knappagh road in a remarkable score during which Donnelly threw some powerful shots. According to Patrick Lyttle, a bowler who was prominent in the 1930s and 1940s, Donnelly’s delivery was dramatic:

There was something about Donnelly’s delivery and the power he had behind it. He proved that in some shots against Crowley, although there was that unfortunate thing about him that he never proved himself entirely against the Corkmen, never up to form with them. There was nobody really ever in Donnelly’s class. He was physically fit and had the power.31

However, the fundamental difficulty for Donnelly and for Armagh bowlers in the following decades was the sheer number of excellent bowl players that Cork could produce.

By the late 1920s, road bowling had finally died out in south Armagh and the region in which the game was played in Ulster was reduced to Armagh city, Droim, Cairn, Aughatarra, Keady, Madden, Tassagh, Tullysaran, Port Mor and Grange in County Armagh, along with Benburb, Moy and Eglish in east Tyrone. This is a relatively compact geographical area compared to the situation in Munster, where the bowl playing region is much more extensive, stretching from Dungarvan in west Waterford, south of the River Blackwater, across east Cork from Youghal to Midleton and beyond to Cork city, up north as far as Kilcorney and Buttevant, and across into west Cork, where the game is widespread. It is also played in parts of Limerick. The popularity of road bowling in Cork meant a steady stream of competent bowlers, who were in a position to develop their skills through interaction with a substantial bowling community. The pool of players in Ulster was, and remains, much smaller.

The effort that bowlers in Cork and Armagh put into sustaining contact after 1928 is indicative of significant attitudinal changes, and particularly of a new self-confidence in Munster. It was also an outcome of increased travel in the country. Armagh was still many miles from Cork,
but, while growing traffic on the roads caused some problems for road bowling, greater access to motor cars and public transport meant that bowlers were more mobile than before. Indeed, although many bowl players and spectators continued to cycle to distant scores, it became common for drivers of cars and lorries to transport people for a reasonable fee. A lorry journey to Bandon, County Cork, from a bowling match at Newcestown, for example, could be had for one shilling in the early 1930s. The development in Cork in the late nineteenth century of an extensive local railway network also allowed residents of the city to travel more easily to scores on the outskirts of country towns such as Bandon; the contest at Clancool (outside Bandon), for instance, between John McGrath and Denis O’Leary in October 1902 attracted a crowd of some 5,000, of which 1,000, and a musical band from Blackpool, had come by train from Cork city. A long-time resident of Clancool, writing in 1973, recalled many people arriving by train from the city for important scores in the early 1900s:

*Private vehicles were still transporting spectators to games for a small fee in the late twentieth century. Pictured here at Dunmanway, Co. Cork in the late 1950s are (left–right) Dan O’Neill (Hollyhill), Dan O’Connell (Hollyhill) and Denis Kenny (Clogheen). O’Neill regularly used his lorry to transport people to scores.*
In those early days of big scores at Clancool, the common thing was to see Fair Hill and Coal Quay trading ladies arriving from Cork by train for the scores with full supplies of ‘pigs’ crubeens’ (pigs’ feet: a local ‘delicacy’) which were very popular at the time. The ‘crubeens’ were very salty, but there was a way of quenching the thirst at 2d. a pint not far away. We used to call the ‘crubeens’ ‘mouth organs’, and there weren’t many men of the road who didn’t have a ‘mouth organ’ at some time during a score.\textsuperscript{34}

In fact, across the country, there was a remarkable increase in the number of third class railway passengers – those on the cheapest fare – towards the end of the nineteenth century and this continued into the twentieth century. In 1871, for instance, third class passengers accounted for 59.7 per cent of total passengers, this rose to 74.3 per cent by 1891 and was as high as 80.4 per cent in 1900.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, the creation of light railways after the passing of the Tramways and Public Expenses (Ireland) Act in 1883 saw the building of the cheap-fare Cork and Muskerry Light Railway, and this directly linked the city to many important bowling localities in mid Cork.\textsuperscript{36} The railway system was used extensively in the early decades of the twentieth century and, added to increased access to motor vehicles, this improved considerably communication and interplay between bowling localities within both Cork and Armagh.

\textit{Rail routes from Cork city to popular bowling locations at the end of the nineteenth century.} (From Colin Byrne, \textit{The Industrial Archaeology of Cork City and its Environs}, 1999)
Increased official tolerance, a greater ability and willingness to travel, and the interaction with Armagh combined with general societal shifts to undermine the highly localised character of Cork bowling and, crucially, the manner in which scores were conducted. Until 1932, bowling matches still consisted primarily of challenge scores between individuals and, while the backers of some leading bowlers might declare them the best in the county, there was no formal tournament to decide if this was so.

By the beginning of the 1930s, a debate was underway within the bowling community on the need for a more structured method of selecting champions and for a representative body to act as a sort of formal authority for the sport. Central to this discussion was the group around the leading Fair Hill bowler Tim Delaney, in particular the hugely respected Jack O’Shea, a shrewd individual who has been described by bowling commentator Brian Toal as ‘the greatest road bowling tactician of all time.’

Ultimately, the first move was made by Thomas Healy, a young publican and bowling enthusiast from Cloghroe, who in 1932 established a committee to organise and run a Cork county senior road bowling championship for a gold watch; the committee was made up mostly of local men and some others from nearby Berrings, such as the prominent bowler Jim O’Mahony. Healy’s initiative was immensely important, as this competition, organised with clearly defined rules, was the first open tournament to arrive at a senior champion for County Cork. It was attended by leading bowlers from Cork city, mid Cork and the Bandon area, and, following a stiff competition, the finalists on the Cloghroe road were Jim O’Mahony from Berrings and Jim ‘the Sinn Féiner’ O’Leary from the city. O’Mahony prevailed, beating O’Leary by six yards in a score that finished at Healy’s public house (now Blair’s Inn) and a new era in Irish road bowling was inaugurated.
THE FORMATION OF THE ALL-IRELAND BOWL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION

The success of the Cloghroe tournament in 1932 coincided with the formation of an organisation called the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association and it is clear that the two events are connected. In fact, the new association immediately took on the task of organising the following year’s County Cork championship and one of its key aims was to encourage local tournaments that were inclusive and properly structured. The custom of challenge scores between individuals continued, but not as a means of deciding who were the pre-eminent bowlers; instead, the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association initiated a regulated annual competition, with leading bowlers having to pass through several rounds before competing in the final of a county championship. Moreover, referees were appointed to oversee such scores and the association was accepted as the arbitrator when disputes occurred. In short, it meant, for the first time, a formalisation of the sport and greater uniformity regarding conventions and procedures. It was a dramatic shift from the ad hoc basis on which the game had been organised.

The prime movers behind the new association were based in Cork city, though the organisers of the Cloghroe tournament were also involved. The key figure was undoubtedly James F. Cadden of Gillabbey Street,
who, though not a player himself, remained a prominent advocate of the sport until his death in December 1955. A popular individual, Cadden worked with the Merchant Navy on the New Zealand Shipping Lines and for many years afterwards was connected with Irish Lights, as well as running his own public house at 14 Gillabbey Street. Self-assured, energetic, willing to travel, and influential in bowling circles, he acted as secretary for the bowl players’ association from its inception and, by default, often fulfilled many other functions as well.

Other people central to the formation of the association included Cornelius O’Connell from Blackpool (who became chairman); James Deane from Churchfield (treasurer); Jack O’Shea from Fair Hill; Thomas Healy; Jim O’Mahony; and, interestingly, the legendary John ‘Buck’ McGrath, who was long retired from the game, but who agreed to help with the organising of a tournament at Dublin Hill, the traditional venue
for Blackpool bowlers. With the exception of Healy and O’Mahony, the leading members of the bowl players’ association were from Cork city. Nonetheless, it is clear from the inclusion of the term ‘all-Ireland’ that the new body had aspirations to broaden its membership beyond the city and its environs, and in fact it quickly won the respect and adherence of bowlers throughout the county. Moreover, Cadden and O’Shea, building on previous contacts, made some efforts to establish formal links with bowl players in County Armagh. The contest in 1932 between Red Crowley and Peter Donnelly was one consequence of the renewed interaction. By 1937, individuals from Armagh were attending meetings of the association in Cork, though it seems that a branch was never formed in the north.4

The committee of the Munster Championship bowling tournament at Dublin Hill, Cork, 23 December 1934: (left–right) Jimmy Deane (secretary), Jack Looney (treasurer), Jim Fitzgerald, John ‘Buck’ McGrath (chairman), Con O’Connell, Jack O’Shea, J. Jones. Photo: Irish Examiner
THE CORK BOWLING RENAISSANCE OF THE 1930S

The establishment of the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association in 1932 was evidence of the growing self-confidence of the bowling community in southern Ireland and marked an important step in the transition to ‘respectability’. Only ten years before, bowlers had operated clandestinely, were routinely brought before the courts, lectured and fined, and faced repeated efforts by the authorities to stamp out their sport. By the 1930s, however, enthusiasts were no longer afraid to identify themselves in public, tournaments and scores were openly organised, and, in a very real sense, road bowling experienced a renaissance in County Cork.

Road bowling tournaments proliferated in the 1930s. In 1933, for example, there was the Whelton Gold Medal Tournament on the Ring road outside Clonakilty; in 1935, there was the important Rochestown Bowling Tournament, with both junior and senior scores, and tournaments were also organised for Carrigaline, Cobh and Youghal; in 1936, there was an All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association tournament on the Killumney to Aherla road. There were also regular official scores from the early 1930s at Douglas, Killeens, Clancool, Whitechurch, Waterfall, Pouladuff, Kilpatrick, Cloghroe, Coachford, Killeady and Glanmire, all on roads that had long been used for bowling. In fact, by the end of the 1930s, tournaments had more or less replaced individual challenges as the preferred format for competition scores. This allowed more people to participate in the actual bowling and, importantly, the emergence of junior and senior grades meant that it was possible for bowl players to take part in competitions at their own level.

Many of the tournaments were directly organised, or encouraged into existence, by the bowl players’ association, with officials such as Jimmy Deane, a taxi-driver, occasionally travelling 30 or 40 miles to arrange a score. Moreover, newspapers such as the Cork Examiner, Evening Echo and Southern Star began to carry regular news items on bowling matches and tournaments for the first time, and negative commentary disappeared. These reports often came from members of the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association, in particular from Con O’Connell, the chairman, and in the late 1930s from Flor Crowley, an avid bowler and a teacher at Behagh National School near Dunmanway.

The most important tournament organised by the bowl players’ association was the annual contest held at Dublin Hill, which was intended as a continuation of the County Cork senior championship held at Cloghroe, though from 1933 it was dubbed the Munster, rather than Cork, senior championship; indeed, the Dublin Hill tournament was also referred to at times as an ‘All-Ireland’ championship – as was a competition in west Cork in 1945 – but in reality it was an entirely Munster affair, with no involvement by Ulster bowlers. Nonetheless, Dublin Hill,
in the words of Noel Magnier, who first bowled in the 1950s, was undoubtedly regarded as the ‘Croke Park’ of road bowling and it was particularly associated with the achievements of John McGrath, who had dominated the sport at the turn of the twentieth century.8 In fact, McGrath was persuaded to chair the tournament organising committee, which also included Con O’Connell, Jimmy Deane, Jack Looney and other leading members of the bowl players’ association.9

The 1933 Dublin Hill tournament was a significant success from the outset, with bowlers across the county accepting its legitimacy, and huge crowds turned out for many of the rounds. On 28 May, for example, more than 3,000 spectators were present to view a battle between Tim Delaney and Redmond Crowley; the score, which had a stake of £124, proved disappointing as Delaney performed badly, providing Crowley with an easy win.10 A similarly large crowd attended the final on 17 December to witness Crowley comprehensively defeat Jim O’Leary (who had lost to O’Mahony the previous year) by five bowls of odds, having reached the Boot House – the finish line – in 35 bowls.11 Red Crowley,
who lived at 7 Clancool Terrace in Bandon, was one of the outstanding bowlers of the 1930s and arguably the dominant figure for a significant part of that decade. Born in 1911, of athletic build, 5 feet 11 inches in height, over 13 stone in weight, he was a ciotóg (a left-hander) and known for his extremely fast throws, accuracy and overall consistency.12 His dominance was hard-won at a time when there was no shortage of excellent bowlers in the county. Tim Delaney, for example, was a tremendous bowl player, noted particularly for the precision of his loft, and he had a remarkably devout support base, becoming something of a folk hero on the northside of the city. Indeed, both Delaney and his road shower, Jack O’Shea, are mentioned in the famous Cork anthem ‘The Boys of Fair Hill’.

Come on boys and have a day with our bowling club so gay,
The loft of the bowl it would make your heart thrill,
When you hear the Shea boy say – ‘Timmy Delaney has won the day,’
We beat them all, says the boys of Fairhill

The list of other senior Cork bowlers in the 1930s is long and included Timothy ‘Tiger’ Ahern (Pouladuff); George Betson (Blackpool); Jack Murray (Bandon); Thomas Murphy Bawn (Killeady); Jack Murphy (Dublin Hill); Mick O’Brien (Begley’s Forge); Bill Bennett (Killeady); Jim ‘the Sinn Féiner’ O’Leary (Barrack Street, Cork); George Bennett (Killeady); Rory O’Donoghue (Dublin Hill); Eamonn O’Carroll (Ballygarvan); Ned Spriggs (Blackpool); Dan Rice (Blackpool); Jim O’Mahony (Berrings); Timothy Herlihy (Waterfall); Tadhg Drew (Upton); Tadhg Lynch (Upton); Donal ‘Buzzer’ O’Sullivan (Sunday’s Well); Jim Barrett (Friars’ Walk); Tom Crowley (Monard); Paddy Twomey (Blarney); Michael McAuliffe (Glansion); Jack Riordan (Ballineen); Denis ‘Densa’ Healy (Rochestown); David Mulcahy (Blackpool); Miah Deasy (Kilmacsimon); Tommy Murphy (Pouladuff); Con Collins (Commons Road, Cork); Dan O’Neill (Hollyhill); John Noonan (Fair Hill) William O’Shea (Fair Hill); Michael O’Regan (Bandon); Paddy Murphy (Blackpool); and Edward O’Brien (Dublin Hill). This is an incomplete compilation, but it does give a sense of the strength of competition and vibrancy of the sport at that time.

Red Crowley failed to retain his Munster title in 1934; instead, George Bennett, a son of Bill Bennett of Killeady, defeated Rory O’Donoghue in the final at Dublin Hill on 23 December, winning a silver cup and a £10 prize.13 Tim Delaney did not compete in that year’s tournament, although, regardless, his ever-loyal supporters continued to describe him as the ‘Irish champion’ because of his victory over Armagh champion Peter Donnelly in 1928, apparently forgetting Crowley’s similar win four years later.14
THE CHALLENGES OF ORGANISATION

The Dublin Hill Munster championship remained a focal point for senior bowlers in County Cork throughout the 1930s and associated scores were sometimes played at other venues in the county. Meanwhile, the All-Ireland Bowl Players Association rented rooms at 50 South Main Street in Cork city, where business was transacted at weekly meetings of the executive. A constitution and rules were drafted, individual subscriptions were levied, local bowling committees were encouraged to affiliate, and occasional dances were held to raise funds to cover running expenses. In addition, localities selected as venues for rounds of the association’s tournaments were asked to subscribe £5 each to a central fund for prizes.

However, by 1937 it was clear that there were serious difficulties with regard to funds and at that year’s annual meeting, held in the committee rooms in South Main Street, it transpired that many of the areas selected as tournament venues had not contributed towards the central fund; moreover, a recent céilí, intended to ease the association’s financial problems, had been an utter failure as a fundraiser, though a great social success, and left them with a reverse balance of £6. The problem, according to Jim Cadden, was that the association had to cover the ‘fares for stewards, competitors and sundry other items’, with no help from the localities in which the scores were played. An Armagh man named McKeown chaired the 1937 annual meeting and he was more frank when explaining how the shortfall was actually covered:

The Association had transacted more business than could be paralleled by its funds, and . . . this fact had forced the Hon. Sec., Mr. J. F. Cadden, into the unfair position of having to meet liabilities from his own pocket. Mr. Cadden’s interest in this Gaelic pastime . . . had led him into unnecessary expense, from the aspect that if the Association was unable to function on the substance as contained in subscriptions received each year, the members should refrain from continually voting Mr. Cadden into the office of Hon. Secretary, since this position appeared to have resolved itself into that of Fairy Godmother to the Association.

Following McKeown’s reprimand, the members agreed to treat the issue of funding as a priority at their next meeting and Cadden remained on as secretary; the other officials and executive members elected at the conference were George Walsh, Coachford (president); John P. Lane, Cork (vice-president); Jack O’Shea, Fair Hill (vice-president); S. McKeown, Armagh (joint secretary); C. Meaney, Cork (treasurer); Mick O’Riordan, Dunmanway; A. Dunne, Cork; Dan Crowley, Pouladuff; Thomas Healy, Cloghroe; Jim O’Mahony, Berrings; and P.J. Lyons,
Kilnamartyr. Con O’Connell and Jimmy Deane, both stalwarts of the association, were absent from the meeting, though they were still involved in organisational work, particularly with the committee running the Dublin Hill Munster championship. This committee, now chaired by O’Connell, met at 45 Commons Road (home to Michael Coleman, who was fined for bowl playing in 1913) and continued to operate under the auspices of the All-Ireland Bowl Players Association. It also seems that O’Connell continued in his role as chairman of the bowl players’ association, despite his non-appearance at the conference.

Posing before a contest on the road from Mill Lane to Waterfall, Co. Cork, on 26 May 1935, are Red Crowley (centre, with waistcoat) and George Bennett (white shirt). Mickey Walshe of Bandon, Crowley’s mentor, stands to his left.

Photo: Irish Examiner.
It is clear the Jim Cadden remained the driving force behind the association. In the 1930s, for example, he travelled to France, where he persuaded the manufacturers of Hennessy cognac to sponsor the Munster road bowling trophy. Likewise, in 1937, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alfie Byrne, an independent TD, presented the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association with a gold medal to be used as a tournament prize. This gesture seems to have encouraged the Lord Mayor of Cork to offer his support and the following year he agreed to sponsor a tournament at Fair Hill. Moreover, a bowl playing Cork city councillor, Jeremiah Buckley, became involved in promoting the sport, describing it, in August 1938, as ‘a fine manly art and one of our oldest national pastimes.’ He praised the men of Fair Hill for the part they had played ‘to foster the game and keep it in existence.’ Cadden and the bowl players’ association were determined to transform road bowling into a fully ‘respectable’ sport and endorsements from politicians and businessmen were seen as especially helpful.

There were also efforts to popularise the game outside of Cork and exhibition matches were organised for non-bowl playing regions such as Kerry, Tipperary and Kilkenny, generally in association with a local mayor or other officials. Unfortunately, one of these exhibitions, a triple-hand score between Red Crowley, Tim Delaney and Eamonn O’Carroll, held at Clonmel in late 1936 or early 1937, ended badly when a dispute arose between Crowley and O’Carroll over one of the throws, leading ultimately to the latter withdrawing from the sport for a period of 14 years (though it seems that this withdrawal did not actually happen until 1938). O’Carroll, a schoolteacher who had won the 1936 Munster championship, later labelled this match ‘the great fiasco’ and, while praising the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association for its work, insinuated that ‘manipulation’ had occurred to suit Red Crowley and his backers.

Interaction between the bowlers of Cork and Armagh was limited during the 1930s and the game in the north did not experience an equivalent revival. Donnelly remained the dominant bullet thrower until about 1937 or 1938, but there were also other top class bowlers, such as Dan Gribben (whose career spanned from 1910 to 1945), Pat Lyttle and Bill George. The latter, from Cabra near the Yellow Ford, emerged in the late 1930s as Donnelly was retiring and was considered a gentleman of the game. Described by one follower as ‘the Mahommad Ali [sic] of the roads in the late 30s and early 40’s’, Bill George had a distinctive style of delivery, ‘a long run up, a graceful swing back followed by a piston-like thrust,
every muscle working in harmony.’23 His mentor, or chief ‘handler’, was James ‘Toots’ Mackle, who had been a powerful force in Armagh bowling in the 1920s, prior to the emergence of the ‘Hammerman’ Donnelly.

Armagh bowling was not organised in a formal sense until the early 1950s and challenge scores, rather than tournaments, remained the primary method of deciding champions during the 1930s and 1940s. According to Pat Lyttle, commenting in the early 1970s, it ‘was very different then to now. When two cliques met on a Sunday morning, there might have been up on six throwers there from the two ends of the town and they worked to arrange a score on the road.’24 In a sense, this was not much different to Cork, where similar informal gatherings and challenges happened daily on roads such as those near Fair Hill. The crucial difference was that in the south more formal arrangements existed to determine champions and the bowl players’ association was making a serious effort to standardise the rules used in all matches. Gambling, and bowling for a stake, remained central to the game in both provinces. Indeed, Lyttle was candid about the importance of the stake when explaining why he bowled in the 1930s.

I can say now that I never played bullets entirely for sport, especially in the early years. Played it sportingly alright. But it was for money in those days. Money was scarce. There was no work and money had to be won ... It was tough. Attempts were made to demoralise you too. Sometimes fellas putting on an act of gambling beside you or standing with big sticks at the butt. Most of the bets then were on the score and only occasionally on individual shots. The contestants were well paired. An exceptional individual player then could be left without a challenger. The crowds were bigger too. The play was worked out
between the player and his coach and nobody else interfered. Now you will get all kinds shouting advice at a score.25

In Cork, scores between leading figures, such as Tim Delaney or Red Crowley, could involve stakes amounting to hundreds of pounds, and side-betting by spectators occurred even at the most minor of bowling matches. Generally, however, the prize money awarded to the winner of a tournament by the bowl players’ association would average £10 or £15 and participants were encouraged to view the cup or medal, and not the money, as the objective.

Players and officials prior to the final of the Fair Hill (Cork) tournament for the Lord Mayor of Cork’s cup, 10 December 1939: (left–right) J. Sullivan (Killeens), Con O’Connell, T. Mulcahy (Fair Hill), Jack O’Shea. Photo: Irish Examiner
THE WAR YEARS AND BEYOND, 1939–53

The war years witnessed a downturn in bowl playing, both north and south, and the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association appears to have suspended its Munster championship. Some tournaments continued and the Hurley Cup, for example, was played for at Whitechurch, County Cork. New talent was also emerging, with Mick Barry of Waterfall making an impact in the early 1940s, despite losing to Red Crowley and Donal ‘Buzzer’ O’Sullivan in separate matches at Whitechurch in 1940.26

In the north, the involvement of Britain in the war meant that a hard line was taken against republicans and individuals suspected of involvement with Sinn Féin or the IRA were interned. This had some impact on the bowling community, as prominent Armagh bowler Pat Lyttle was one of those interned and he remained imprisoned until the end of 1945. However, shortly before his internment in 1942, Lyttle played two important challenge scores on the Moy road in Armagh against Tommy Hurley of Cork, defeating him both times for a total stake of £300, a huge sum at the time.27 This was possibly the only significant contest between Ulster and Munster bowlers during the Second World War.

Jack Riordan of Ballineen, Co. Cork (shirtsleeves, left) and Tim Delaney of Fair Hill, Cork (shirtsleeves, right), who met in the senior final of the Rochestown tournament, 26 January 1936. Standing to the right of Delaney is Donal ‘Buzzer’ O’Sullivan (Sunday’s Well), who won the junior tournament. To the rear, between Riordan and Delaney, is Jack O’Shea. Photo: Irish Examiner
There was still occasional bowling at Dublin Hill in Cork during the war years, some of it for large stakes. Certainly, by June 1945, the venue was back in use, when Rory O'Donoghue took on a man called Carey, from Dillon's Cross, for a stake of £284.28. In the west of the county, a particularly important tournament was held on the Derinasafa road near Dunmanway in 1944 and, running until May 1945, was attended by almost all the leading bowlers in Cork and was ultimately used to determine that year's county champion. The winner, and the accepted Cork champion for 1945, was Paddy O'Sullivan, a powerful bowler from Rath near Baltimore, who defeated, among others, Mick Barry and the highly regarded Jack Barrett (from Colomane, near Bantry, but living in the city).
during the course of the competition before overcoming Jerry Farrell of Togher, Dunmanway, and Denny Murphy, Bandon, in a triple-hand final.\textsuperscript{29}

By the end of the war, the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association was in a weakened state – many of its members having been preoccupied with other matters during the ‘emergency’ – and it was not until the early 1950s that the Munster championship was properly restored. Challenge scores, of course, continued in the interim and often attracted large crowds; there was a huge attendance, for example, at Waterfall in early September 1948 to witness Séamus Allen, a local soccer player then based in Limerick, defeat the leading bowler Mick O’Brien of Begley’s Forge in a tough contest.\textsuperscript{30}

To a great degree, the Munster championship was eventually re-established because of Jim Cadden, who approached a Cork city businessman, Joe Waters, and secured sponsorship for a new provincial tournament. By the early 1950s, the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association – due to the efforts of Cadden, O’Connell, Deane, O’Shea and other unpaid volunteers – was back on a solid footing and had much reason for optimism. The ‘respectability’ of the sport, for instance, was firmly established; indeed, as if to emphasise this point, Red Crowley – a member of the Labour Party, an activist with the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union and now retired from bowling – was elected to Cork County Council for his party in the 1950 local elections, winning 1,421 votes in the Bandon area.\textsuperscript{31}

In Ulster, the formation of an Armagh Bowls Association in 1952 was a particularly significant development, with implications for the sport nationally. The founding committee members – Jim McAneney, Dan Gribben, Joe Horan, Harry Molloy, John Coulter and Dan Mackle – were focused, as Dermot Hicks has put it, on bringing ‘some organisation into this haphazard sport.’\textsuperscript{32} They ran raffles and dances, encouraged the creation of local clubs, and, most importantly, in 1953 started the Armagh Bowls’ Perpetual Challenge Cup tournament, which was to take place on an annual basis. The emergence of formal structures in the north was also hugely important in terms of inter-provincial competition, and contact between Cork and Armagh increased significantly from the early 1950s. This ultimately led to greater organisational co-operation and a tangible sense that the game had a national, as well as a local, existence.
CHAPTER FIVE

Emergence of Ból Chumann na hÉireann, 1954–1963

The 1950s began well for the All-Ireland Bowl Players Association. A Munster championship for the Joe Waters Cup was established and the formation in 1952 of the Armagh Bowls Association meant that the prospect of inter-provincial championships was back on the agenda. In the event, it was the Armagh bullet throwers who took the initiative and issued the first challenge, when in 1954 they sent a message south that they would take on any Munster bowl player for a guaranteed stake of £100.1

CORK VERSUS ARMAGH IN 1954

The confident attitude in Armagh was based on the arrival of a new force in Ulster bowling – ‘Red’ Joe McVeigh, an exceptional bowler from Irish Street in Armagh city. McVeigh had been bowling since the 1930s, but came to prominence in 1946 when he took on the champion bullet player Pat Coulter of Legar Hill Road.2 He was initially defeated by Coulter on the Moy road, but comfortably overcame his formidable opponent in a return score for a stake of £426 and then went on to dominate Ulster bowling until well into the 1950s; in the process, he beat many redoubtable Armagh bowlers, such as Pat McCormack, Tullyard; Terence Toal, Banbrook; and Packy Mallon, Kilmore.3 In 1953, his pre-eminence in the north was confirmed when he defeated John Mitchell in the inaugural tournament for the Armagh Bowls Challenge Cup.

The challenge from Armagh was accepted by the committee of the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association, who decided to approach Mick Barry, of Waterfall, and Denis O’Donovan, of Fishers’ Cross near Clonakilty, to see if one of them would be willing to represent Cork against McVeigh. O’Donovan, a highly regarded and steely bowler, was born in 1925,
the son of a farmer/publican, and he grew up throwing bowls outside his front door; his first major challenge win was on the Miltown road in 1951 against the senior Dunmanway champion Flor Crowley. In the early 1950s, he bowled at Clancool against the leading Cork champion Mick Barry, narrowly losing the match but establishing himself as a serious challenger to the man from Waterfall. Indeed, the hard-fought contest at Clancool boosted O'Donovan’s confidence and on 14 June 1954 he again took on Barry in a spectacular score at Dublin Hill before a crowd of thousands – this time he prevailed after seven hours of bowling, winning a combined stake of £300 by a full bowl of odds, and proving himself one of the country’s most remarkable bowlers. The bowling commentator Noel Magnier has aptly described Denis O’Donovan as ‘the best player never to win the senior championship title.’

The man O’Donovan defeated in June 1954 was, and remains, a legend in the world of Irish road bowling. A strongly built man with a tremendous loft, Mick Barry was a towering presence among senior bowlers from the 1950s to the late 1970s, winning 11 Munster championships.
and eight All-Ireland titles, as well as securing medals at international level. Born in 1919, he grew up and resided most of his life at Waterfall, a well known bowling locality, just a few miles to the west of Cork city. He learned his bowling at an early age from his father, Patrick, who was an enthusiastic bowl player. In addition, the Waterfall road was a favourite bowling road for men from the city, particularly on Wednesday evenings, so Mick, and his brothers Ned and John, who also became senior bowlers, grew up immersed in the culture.

Despite losing to ‘Buzzer’ O’Sullivan and Red Crowley at Whitechurch in 1940, Barry made an impact from the outset of his bowling career and his skills continued to improve until, by 1954, he was considered, in the words of his rival Denis O’Donovan, almost ‘unbeatable.’ Unlike some bowlers from the 1930s and 1940s, he adapted well to the tarred roads that increasingly replaced the old rough roads in the post-war period. A non-drinker and non-smoker – and a gardener by occupation – he later ascribed his success to his single-minded approach to the game:

Well, I suppose, as a man lives, so shall he live, that’s what I think, and I believe that the main reason for me remaining on top so long is that I first of all lived for bowl playing . . . I have known several good players in past generations, the generation just before my coming, who were outstanding players, but I feel that their drinking habits didn’t allow them to remain there as long as I have lasted.

He had a tendency not to attend the winner’s reception if he lost and, for this reason, Dermot Hicks has suggested that he took his defeats badly; whether or not this is true, he was markedly competitive. Barry’s physical strength and general fitness were undoubtedly key factors in his success, but so too were his uncanny accuracy with a loft and his dogged determination.

Mick Barry agreed to travel to Armagh, but the issue of money, and the distribution of the stake in particular, caused serious friction between his backers and the bowl players’ association. Jim Cadden and Jack O’Shea had insisted that the first £50 of the stake – if won – should go to the bowl players’ association, largely to cover the travel expenses of five members of the committee, a stipulation agreed to by Barry but vehemently opposed by his backers, who ultimately refused to go north with him. Their chagrin was palpable evidence of how important the stake was in the sport; gambling, as Hicks has pointed out with regard to Armagh bowling, has

(facing page) Donal ‘Buzzer’ O’Sullivan of Sunday’s Well, Cork, in action at Cloghroe, late 1950s.
always been intimately associated with the game. Barry’s backers remained in Cork, but he was accompanied to Armagh by some family members and by four officials from the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association, including Cadden and O’Shea (who acted as his road shower).

The contest between Barry and McVeigh brought a huge crowd of spectators onto the Knappagh road on 12 September 1954, including Peter ‘the Hammerman’ Donnelly, who, more than 20 years before, had been defeated by Tim Delaney and Red Crowley in similar challenges. It was an exciting score from the beginning and especially nerve-racking for the Corkmen, some of who had invested heavily in the stake and in individual side-bets. Jack O’Shea recalled the atmosphere years later:

I had the price of a car on the first shot, I had everything I had on the first shot, and McVeigh threw a very short bullet, so much so that Mick Barry could loft over it, as we thought. I stood road for him, we practised over the first shot in the morning early, it was most suitable for Mick Barry, but Mick lifted well inside me on the verge of the dyke and it came out on the road and it rolled, and rolled a foot over the line. There was a sight of money lost at 6/4 if he had lost the shot, we were all skinned. Anyway Joe McVeigh threw again the next shot and threw another short bullet. I came back to Mick Barry and I said in order to give him a bit of encouragement, because you can bring a man on too you know, you can get him over his stride, I said ‘Look here, Mick . . . this score is 22 shots, he’s after throwing two of them in the dyke, he’ll throw five or six more before he is to the finish; throw one shot and the score is over’ – knowing that Mick Barry had a powerful shot in him. Mick Barry threw the next shot and you might as well say the score was over. It took Joe McVeigh two shots to overtake it; he had a bowl and a half of odds in the next shot, and from that on it was all over, he beat him by almost three shots.13

Barry’s victory was comprehensive and his lofting particularly impressed the northerners; indeed, he set a new record for the course, completing it in 23 shots, and the Armagh Observer was generous in its praise, remarking that the manner in which he lofted the corner at Stewart’s Bridge would ‘long be remembered and talked about round Armagh.’14 The visit also renewed and strengthened friendships between bowling organisers that had existed since the first inter-provincial contacts. Cadden and O’Shea, in particular, got on well with a number of the Ulstermen, especially with George McKenna, who helped to facilitate the early interaction between Cork and Armagh.
THE MUNSTER CHAMPIONSHIP AND THE FORMATION OF BÓL CHUMANN

Mick Barry’s visit to Armagh was a triumph for the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association, despite the clash with his backers. However, it was quickly overshadowed by difficulties back in Cork, arising from the ongoing 1954 Munster championship in which a player refused to finish a score, leading to strife with the committee and eventually a court case.\(^\text{15}\)

The tournament continued regardless and was won by Liam O’Keeffe of Ballymaw, Waterfall, when he defeated Ned Barry, also of Waterfall, by a bowl of odds at Cloghrooe near Blarney. O’Keeffe, who was born in 1930, was an extremely fast and accurate bowler, and among those he overcame on the way to the final was the 1936 champion, Eamonn O’Carroll, who had come out of retirement to participate.\(^\text{16}\)

A photograph of the presentation of the Munster championship cup to O’Keeffe was published in the *Cork Examiner* in late November, showing most of the leading members of the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association present:

Players, officials and supporters prior to the 1954 Munster championship at Cloghrooe, near Blarney, Co. Cork. Liam O’Keeffe (left) and Ned Barry (right) can be seen in the centre of the photograph. Jim Cadden is standing on the extreme left looking towards the contestants.
Con O’Connell (chairman), Jack O’Shea (president), Jim Cadden (secretary), Jimmy Deane (treasurer), Eamonn O’Carroll (re-involved after a long absence), Jim O’Mahony and Thomas Healy. The image is of smiles and bonhomie; however, the award ceremony was a swansong and the association that had, among other achievements, pioneered regulated bowling tournaments, and developed enduring links with the bullet throwers of Armagh, had already agreed to effectively disband.

The linchpin of the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association was the Munster championship (misnamed the ‘All-Ireland championship’); indeed, whoever ran the championship controlled, to a large degree, organised bowling in Cork. In late 1954, following the bitter dispute that ultimately ended up in the courts, the committee members decided to cede control of the Munster championship; Cadden consequently approached Flor Crowley of Dunmanway to suggest that the 1955 championship be organised in west Cork. Aside from the tournament dispute, which clearly was one wrangle too many for some members of the executive
committee, it is likely that diminished energy also played a role – the committee was composed of people who had overseen the Munster championship through the 1930s and kept the flame flickering in the war years and beyond; there was little new blood and the beleaguered officials may have balked at the idea of launching into a new decade of tournaments. As it turned out – following consultations with Eamonn O’Carroll, now living at Farran, and Denis McSweeney of Enniskeane – Crowley decided to ‘give it a try’ and he drafted a short letter, more of an order than an invitation, to the bowling enthusiasts of west Cork:

A Convention of West Cork Bowling enthusiasts will be held in the Hall, Enniskeane, on Monday night, November 20th [actually 22nd], 1954 for the purpose of organising the game in this portion of the county. It is suggested that the All-Ireland [Munster] Championship Tournament for 1955 should be run in West Cork. It will be the main business of the Enniskeane meeting to decide if this is to be done, and if so, to select suitable venues for such a competition. You are requested to be present at the meeting and to bring with you three other followers of the game.18

Born in 1908 in Behigullane, Dunmanway, into a family that was actively involved in the war of independence, Flor Crowley was a devoutly Catholic nationalist, with a penchant for order and discipline, attributes he quickly brought to bear on the sport of road bowling. A teacher at the local primary school from 1930, he later moved to work in Bandon. His involvement in bowling was reflective of a general interest in sport; he was an All-Ireland champion at hammer and weight throwing, a competitive sharp shooter with the army reserve force, Foras Cosanta Áituil (FCA), and active in the Gun Club Federation. In addition, from the late 1930s, he regularly contributed reports on scores to local newspapers and this access to the media alone would have encouraged the committee of the bowl players’ association in its choice.19 Highly competent, intelligent and workmanlike in his approach, Crowley was well suited to convening and organising the Munster championship. Moreover, he was tough and equally suited to dealing with the type of dispute that had undermined the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association (of which he was a member).20 In the early 1970s, he was candid in describing his style of leadership: ‘We were called dictators and we were, but only dictators could have taken the game, as we found it, off the ground and built [it] into something worthwhile.’21

The Enniskeane meeting on 22 November was a success, with bowl players and enthusiasts present from Macroom, Kilcrea, Bandon, Enniskeane, Dunmanway and Ballineen. Men from Bantry, Drimoleague, Clonakilty, Skibbereen, Drinagh, Courtmacsherry and Timoleague were...
also invited and, though they did not attend that night, they became involved as time went on. The meeting agreed to organise the Munster championship and a committee was elected. The position of chairman was contested by the two schoolteachers Flor Crowley (proposed by Neilly O’Donovan, Ballineen, and seconded by Mickey Walshe, Bandon) and Eamonn O’Carroll (proposed by Steve O’Connor, Macroom, and seconded by John Sheehan, Kilcrea), with Crowley emerging as the winner following a vote. O’Carroll was subsequently elected secretary and Hugh O’Neill of Ballineen became treasurer (proposed by John O’Mahony, Ballineen, and seconded by M. Looney). Denis McSweeney was unanimously appointed as joint-treasurer and, at a later meeting, John O’Mahony was made vice-chairman. Venues were then selected for the various rounds of the 1955 Munster championship, taking into account the changing road surfaces: Dunmanway (rough), Enniskeane (all tar), Macroom (rough and tar), Clancool (all rough), Ballineen (rough and tar) and
Kilcrea (rough and tar). Some of these venues were dropped, and others adopted, at a later stage.

The meeting dealt largely with the planned senior championship, but the prospect of a new organisation, at least for west Cork, also featured on the agenda. Indeed, it is clear that from the outset some members, particularly Crowley, O’Carroll and McSweeney, felt a need to formally replace the now moribund All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association; indeed, O’Carroll expressed the hope that a new organisation could be formed that ‘would be bigger in every way, and more representative of genuine followers of bowlplaying.’ During this discussion, Cornelius Warren of Enniskeane suggested that they adopt a short name in Irish, and it was left to Crowley and O’Carroll to come up with something appropriate.

At the following meeting, on Monday, 13 December, they proposed the name Ból Chumann na hÉireann (bowling association of Ireland) and this was adopted. Consequently, the committee appointed at the previous meeting became the founding executive of this new body.

Relations between Ból Chumann and the old All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association were strained initially, with O’Carroll first being delegated to write to Con O’Connell and then being prohibited by motion from engaging in correspondence. It is not entirely clear what the difficulties were. The situation with Cadden was different and it appears that he did his best to be helpful, even sending Flor Crowley the remaining stationery from the 1954 championship, which Ból Chumann declined to use, and the Waters Cup was also handed over in time for the 1955 final. Some bowling enthusiasts, such as Bill Bennett of Killeady, were suspicious of the new organisation; he insisted on a meeting, which in the event fell through when he failed to turn up. In fact, it was not until the completion of the 1955 Munster championship that Ból Chumann gained widespread support in the bowling community and more than a few bowlers adopted a cautious attitude at the beginning. The Catholic Bishop of Cork, Dr Cornelius Lucey, was invited to be the organisation’s patron, but in a courteous letter in February 1955 he declined; there seems to have been no approach made to the Protestant bishop, or to any other public figure, and the gesture is strongly redolent of the dominant socio-religious mores of the time.

The committee had more success with the 1930s bowling legend Red Crowley, still a Labour Party councillor, who agreed in February 1955 to become president of the organisation, having been proposed for the position by his erstwhile mentor Mickey Walshe. Moreover, Red Crowley actually attended and played an active role for much of 1955. He stood down at the end of the year and was replaced by Denis McSweeney, who was one of the central figures behind the initial meeting.
ORGANISATION AND EXPANSION, 1955–61

The Munster senior championship for the Joe Waters Cup went well in 1955 and the transition from the old committee was relatively smooth. Mick Barry took the title, defeating ‘Tedser’ Murphy from Deanrock, Togher (Cork city), in a score held at Dunmanway. Until 1963, when a national championship was properly constituted, the Waters Cup was conducted on an annual basis by Ból Chumann as an ‘All-Ireland’, though in reality it was a Munster championship. The winners of the Waters Cup (All-Ireland/Munster championship) between 1956 and 1962 were Pat Joe O’Mahoney (1956), Denny Murphy (1957), Séamus ‘Seamie’ Allen (1958), Mick Barry (1959), John Creedon (1960), Jack Forde (1961) and Mick Barry (1962). It was accepted as the premier trophy for bowlers in Munster and Ból Chumann derived much of its authority from its continued existence.

The first years of Ból Chumann were marked by slow growth – several tournament committees and clubs that were affiliated to the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association gave their allegiance to the new body, but it was the late 1950s before real organisational progress was made. Certainly, in early 1955, when Mick Barry wrote to the Armagh men challenging them a return score in Cork, it was an individual initiative and Ból Chumann was not involved; he offered the northerners a one-shot advantage and the choice of road. In the end, it was Jim Cadden and Jack O’Shea, in conjunction with George McKenna of Armagh, who selected the Cloghroe road for the contest, which took place between Barry and Joe McVeigh on 29 January 1956. McVeigh had returned to form since his defeat in 1954, setting a new record on the Knappagh course by completing it in 22 shots in July 1955, and he arrived in Cork intent on beating his southern rival. On the other hand, Barry’s confidence was
reinforced by McVeigh’s defeat, on the Moy road on 18 September 1955, by the outstanding Bandon bowler Denny Murphy. In the event, Joe McVeigh triumphed, with a magnificent performance on the Cloghroe course, winning comfortably by three shots. It was a singular victory for Armagh bowling enthusiasts.

The presentation ceremony, however, was tinged with sadness. Jim Cadden, one of the prime organisers of the event, had died suddenly on 30 December and it was his daughter who presented the cup to the victorious McVeigh in Leary’s public house at the end of the course. According to Jack O’Shea,

He [Cadden] was always anxious to see an Armagh man win, and that was the first one that won. He hadn’t the pleasure of seeing it. But his daughter came there and presented the cup in tears, she was crying.

Cadden’s death was a hard blow to the bowling community, both north and south. As an organiser and promoter of the sport, particularly from 1932, his contribution was immeasurable. Writing in the *Evening Echo*, Flor Crowley was unstinting in his praise for a man he credited with eradicating many abuses from the game:

That bowlplaying has to-day outlived those abuses, that it is now almost entirely an organised and controlled game, is due more to the untiring efforts of Jim Cadden than to any other man, and surely he has left behind him a name that always will be, as it always has been in the past, synonymous with clean sportsmanship, with honesty, unwavering integrity, with all that is good and fine and honourable in a very ancient sport. In losing Jim Cadden, bowlplaying has suffered an irretrievable loss for few men can hope to attain to the stature which that fine gentleman achieved in the world of bowlplaying.

Cadden’s demise, of course, also served to accentuate the shift in power within organised road bowling from Cork city, which had dominated the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association, to west Cork, which was the predominant element in the early years of Ból Chumann na hÉireann.

However, the executive of Ból Chumann was anxious not to appear like an exclusively west Cork organisation and moves were made to recruit clubs and bowl players from across the county. Moreover, the committee was not interested in replicating the loose ad hoc manner of the defunct bowl players’ association. Insurance was taken out to cover injuries at scores and Ból Chumann tournament rules were widely circulated. Grades were introduced – senior and junior – to allow bowlers to play at their own level; grades had existed from the 1930s (at the Rochestown tournament,
for instance), but had not been uniformly used. Regulations were also imposed regarding the stake at official scores – 5 per cent of every stake would go to the local organising committee, who were to deduct the running costs and then send the outstanding sum to the Ból Chumann treasurer. The remaining 95 per cent went to the victorious bowl player. In effect, this was a reiteration of the existing custom, but with the crucial proviso that some money must end up with the new central authority, a departure that local committees were naturally slow to embrace. A modified version of this ‘5 per cent rule’ still operates today.

The first convention of Ból Chumann was held at Aherla on 15 January 1956, two weeks before the McVeigh visit, and, despite a small attendance, it was a productive gathering. Among those present were several men from Cork city, including Jack O’Shea, Con O’Connell, ‘Tedser’ Murphy and Mick Barry (then living in Togher on the southside of the city). A comprehensive 17-point ‘rules of play’ was adopted, building on custom, but including additional regulations aimed at curbing abuses and disputes at ‘scores.’ Included in the rules were stipulations that the stake should never exceed £150 a side and that a score was complete after 30 throws (see Appendix 3 for full document). The rules and the committee, however, were not always respected and when Flor Crowley, for example, intervened in a dispute between Mick Barry and Denis O’Donovan, at a score in late April 1956, he was physically attacked by four or five supporters of one of the bowl players. Nonetheless, the rules were distributed widely and the authority of the committee was slowly but gradually accepted.38

In addition, in the late 1950s, in an effort to encourage adhesion, Ból Chumann decided to divide Munster into discrete bowl playing ‘regions’, each with its own regional board subservient to the central executive committee. Flor Crowley was intent on establishing control over all scores and tournaments across the province, and in a real sense his objective was to give Ból Cumann na hÉireann the same authority over bowling that the GAA held with regard to hurling and Gaelic football. A Cork city region, including outlying towns and parishes, was set up at a meeting chaired by Crowley in the CYMS Hall at Castle Street; those present elected a regional board with Dan O’Leary (chairman), Tom O’Neill (president), Paddy Desmond (vice-chairman), Pat Kerrigan (secretary) and Gerard Hough (treasurer).39 The same procedure occurred in other parts of the county and by the beginning of the 1960s there were regional boards also for East Cork (embracing west Waterford), Mid Cork, South-west Cork, West Cork and North Cork. Even more significantly, by 1959–60, Ból Chumann had roughly 70 affiliated clubs and 37 registered senior bowlers, graded as ‘A’ or ‘B’ players according to their abilities.40 The clubs were all locality-based, with the exception of
one at the Cork Opera House. These were impressive achievements and point to the vibrancy of the sport in County Cork.

Aside from the affiliated clubs there were also some local committees and independent clubs not connected to Ból Chumann, though Crowley was determined to incorporate or marginalise these. The minutes of the Ból Chumann annual convention held at Crookstown, County Cork, on 21 February 1960, indicate that the leading members of the association saw what they termed ‘flapper’ (non-Ból Chumann) tournaments and scores as a major problem. Indeed, in an effort to stamp them out, motions were passed requiring all participants in official tournaments to be members of Ból Chumann and barring such ‘affiliated’ bowlers from playing in ‘flapper’ tournaments (or face a year-long suspension). In short, if a bowler played in a non-Ból Chumann tournament, he was immediately ineligible to contest the Munster championship, or other official scores. It was a simple but remarkably effective rule that made the holding of ‘flapper’ scores extremely difficult, and it was rigorously enforced over the following years.

**FORMING AN ALL-IRELAND ORGANISATION**

Challenge scores between Cork and Armagh bowl players became almost commonplace after Mick Barry’s visit to Ulster in 1954. Apart from McVeigh’s contests against Barry and Denny Murphy, the leading Armagh bowler also played against Liam O’Keeffe, the Munster champion, suffering defeat at his hands in 1955. In fact, McVeigh’s magnificent win at Cloghroe was the exception and, between 1954 and 1956, he actually lost every other challenge score against the Corkmen. Likewise, Harry Toal of Armagh lost by 40 metres in a match against Tom O’Neill, a butcher from Blarney Street, Cork, at Knockbridge, County Louth, on 13 November 1955. Mick Reilly of Armagh, however, did manage to beat the Inishcarra bowler Con Desmond in a hard-fought contest in 1956.

Nonetheless, the sharp competition between Cork and Armagh bowlers was convivial. A group of six Armagh bowling enthusiasts, for example, attended the Munster senior championship final between Liam O’Keeffe and Ned Barry in 1954, and the following year McVeigh and Harry Toal travelled to Kilkenny to take part in an exhibition organised from Cork.

By the early 1960s, there was routine contact. Individuals such as Brian Toal, a prominent member of the Armagh Bowls Association, began to push for a proper, recognised all-Ireland final between the annual winners of the Munster and Ulster senior championships; he also argued for more formalised relations with the much larger southern organisation and suggested that the Ulster championship needed to be reformed to approximate its better organised Munster counterpart. In the event, in early 1963
a meeting was arranged between the leadership of the northern bowling association and the officers of Ból Chumann na hÉireann to discuss the feasibility of such a national championship.

Held in the Devonshire Arms Hotel in Bandon on Easter Sunday evening, 14 April 1963, the meeting was scheduled to coincide with a return score between the Armagh senior Danny McParland and Derry Kenny of Clogheen, Cork. Kenny had won the initial contest in Armagh and on 15 April, following a postponement due to rain, he again defeated McParland, winning a combined stake of £280. At the meeting in Bandon, the Armagh Bowls Association was represented by Brian Toal (secretary), Henry Neary (treasurer) and Danny McParland, while Flor Crowley (chairman), Eamonn O’Carroll (secretary), Denis McSweeney (treasurer), Cornelius Warren and Donal Moynihan were present on behalf of Ból Chumann. Denis Kenny (father of Derry) and John O’Leary of Clondrohid also attended.

There were two items on the agenda: the formation of an amalgamated national organisation and the establishment of an All-Ireland championship. Following a lengthy discussion, it was agreed to form a single body, with a national board, retaining the name Ból Chumann na hÉireann because it was by far the larger organisation, its insurance policy was held in that name and, as the minutes note, simply because ‘the name An Ból Chumann just meant bowlplayers’ association, there was no point in changing the name.’ A new ‘All-Ireland Board’ was established, containing the officers from both groups: Crowley, O’Carroll and McSweeney from the south, Joe Horan, Toal and Neary from the north. It was also agreed to run an annual All-Ireland final between the provincial champions; Flor Crowley suggested that they toss for the inaugural venue and Armagh won, choosing the Moy road for a final to be held in August 1963. Writing in the

Henry Neary, treasurer of Ból Chumann (Ulster), who with Joe Horan and Brian Toal effectively managed northern bowling for many years, with little input from the Cork-based executive.
Armagh Observer afterwards, Brian Toal gave a glowing account of the proceedings, in the process revealing another of Crowley’s concerns:

At a reception held in the Devonshire Arms Hotel, Bandon... Mr Flor Crowley, firstly speaking in Irish, welcomed the people of Armagh and went on to express his admiration for the sporting qualities of their northern counterparts. He stated that in recent times inter-provincial scores had been arranged unofficially in the south and had done a great deal of harm to the game as a result. Mr Crowley went on to say how thankful his organisation was to his northern friends for the necessary assistance in rectifying the matter and he looked forward to the day when they could work as a complete unit.45

In practice, the Ulster section of Ból Chumann retained a large measure of autonomy. The southern executive controlled the sport in Munster and, ultimately, in Mayo, Wexford and London, where there were pockets of players, but Ulster continued to manage its own affairs. The All-Ireland Board established in Bandon was essentially a co-ordinating body. Ból Chumann (Ulster) appointed its own officers – Joe Horan (chairman), Brian Toal (secretary) and Henry Neary (treasurer) – who effectively ran northern bowling, with little input from the Cork-based executive. Nonetheless, the meeting in Bandon on 14 April 1963 was a seminal event and marks the true beginning of Ból Chumann na hÉireann as a national organisation and an unambiguous end to the localism that had once characterised the sport.
The amalgamation that occurred at the meeting in Bandon in April 1963 between the Munster and Ulster organisations was a critical event in the history of Irish bowl playing, and over the following two decades a number of other important physical and cultural borders were traversed. Indeed, between 1963 and the early 1980s, Ból Chumann na hÉireann successfully transformed road bowling from a game in which the ceiling was formed by provincial championships to a well organised and regulated sport with both annual All-Ireland finals and regular international competitions involving athletes from similar sports in other parts of Europe. Moreover, a branch of Ból Chumann was established in Britain and, in a hugely important development, for the first time women began to play an active role, establishing their own All-Ireland senior competition in the early 1980s.

DISPUTES
The Bandon meeting was a useful morale boost in a year that began with a potentially damaging court case over the distribution of a £260 stake at a Ból Chumann score held in 1961 at Pouladuff Road, on the south side of Cork city, between Jack Forde of Carrigrohane and Timothy ‘Tedser’ Murphy of Togher. It was a dispute that had dragged on relentlessly, before eventually ending up in Cork Circuit Court on 27 February 1963, and is an interesting exemplar of the difficulties faced by bowling officials while regulating the game.

The dispute arose initially when Forde refused to continue the score because he felt that the Ból Chumann referee, Christopher Myers, should have ‘called’ a bowl thrown by his opponent, who allegedly overstepped the line while throwing. In Forde’s mind, a foul had occurred and it
was up to Myers to penalise Murphy; however, the referee refused, Forde stopped play and, in adherence to Ból Chumann guidelines, Myers issued a warning to the recalcitrant bowl player. This went unheeded and, 35 minutes later, he instructed the stake-holder, a Ból Chumann official named Seán Cronin, to hand over the money to John O’Halloran, the chief backer of ‘Tedser’ Murphy (who was declared the winner). It was an entirely predictable outcome and, at a subsequent meeting of the executive, two other officials who were present, Cornelius Warren and Denis McSweeney (then treasurer), insisted that Myers and Cronin had acted correctly. McSweeney’s view was especially important because at the score he had acted as Forde’s chief backer, collecting his side of the stake, and had intervened at the time to warn Cronin not to pay over the money to Murphy. Forde, despite a letter to Ból Chumann objecting to Murphy being awarded the score, ultimately accepted the decision, remained a member and continued to play in official tournaments.

Some of his backers – those who provided the stake money – decided, however, to pursue the matter through the courts and legal proceedings were instituted to recover the £130 they had contributed, leading to a hearing in the Circuit Court in February 1963. It was an interesting case, partly because the plaintiffs included Forde and McSweeney, but largely because it involved a direct challenge to the authority of Ból Chumann by Jimmy Deane, the erstwhile secretary of the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association. The case was technically brought against Seán Cronin, the stake-holder, but in reality was against Ból Chumann and, consequently, the association’s legal advisor, J. Hedley McCay (a barrister who later became a District Court judge), acted for the defence, enlisting Flor Crowley and Eamonn O’Carroll as witnesses. Deane, who had contributed £20 towards the stake, was emphatic in asserting in evidence that he ‘did not accept the rules of An Ból Chumann’, but, under cross-examination from McCay, he weakened his position significantly, admitting that he had never objected to 5 per cent of his money going to its coffers. Moreover, he also conceded that he knew that the stake-holder and referee were bound by the rules of Ból Chumann, under whose auspices the Pouladuff score was held. The kernel of his case was that, as the score was not completed and no replay was ordered, the stake money should be returned. Deane was supported in evidence by Timothy Cronin of Blackrock, who had also contributed £20 to the stake, but, significantly, neither Forde nor McSweeney put in an appearance; indeed, eight of the ten plaintiffs failed to turn up and it is possible that they had made their peace with Ból Chumann prior to the court case. McSweeney is unlikely to have wanted an involvement in an attack on the association, though his name did remain on the list of complainants. In the event, the judge ruled in favour of Ból Chumann, awarding costs and
expenses to Cronin; in the process, he remarked that ‘everything was done fairly and above board, and it is quite obvious that everything was done according to the rules of the organisation.’

The outcome of the case, however, did little to dissuade others from similar legal action. Moreover, disputes on the road between bowl players and with officials continued; in fact, the minute books of the association from the past 40 years are replete with references to minor and major conflicts, where decisions and actions at scores have been questioned, and it is clear that one of Ból Chumann’s primary functions has been to act as a final authority during disputes. Indeed, relatively minor, and sometimes very petty, disputes often occupied inordinate amounts of time at meetings of the executive of the organisation. On the other hand, some disputes were quite serious and had far-reaching consequences for the sport.

THE FORMATION OF THE WEST CORK BOWLING ASSOCIATION

One such dispute occurred in early 1964, when a conflict arose at a score in west Cork between Jerry Sheehy of Castlehaven and Jackie Kingston of Drinagh over a stopped bowl. Sheehy was highly critical of the referee’s actions on the day, but, when the matter was discussed at a meeting of the executive of Ból Chumann in early May, it was decided that Kingston should be declared the winner and Sheehy’s concerns were discounted. Sheehy and his backers, however, refused to accept the executive’s decision and legal measures were taken to retrieve their stake money, forcing Ból Chumann to reluctantly hand back £70. In October 1964, the executive officially expelled Jerry Sheehy and threatened to do likewise to ‘any of his supporters who can be proved to have been members’ of Ból Chumann at the time of the original incident. An apparently minor dispute had become very ugly.

Overtures to resolve the conflict were made in early 1965 by the west Cork men, but when Sheehy and some supporters turned up at an executive committee meeting in Crookstown on 3 March, they were refused a hearing unless the £70 was first handed over; no money was produced and the deputation was ordered to leave. Later, Sheehy offered to pay £35 as a goodwill gesture, but he was ignored and remained expelled. Ból Chumann, however, was not dealing with one or two obstreperous bowl players – Sheehy and his supporters were well respected in the bowling parishes and villages of west Cork, and there was a widespread perception that Flor Crowley and his committee had acted in a dictatorial and high-handed fashion. There was no personal animosity between Sheehy and Jackie Kingston; rather, the issue was seen to revolve around the behaviour of the Ból Chumann executive and that of Sheehy’s close
supporters. In fact, it is clear that the executive adopted an intransigent attitude as soon as legal action was threatened, and later seemed almost uninterested in a negotiated settlement. Likewise, a number of Sheehy’s backers appear to have taken entrenched positions early on and Flor Crowley – whose tough-minded approach sometimes shaded into obduracy – was the subject of significant hostility.

In any case, Sheehy had substantial support and Ból Chumann began to fracture in the west Cork region, with local clubs refusing to attend regional meetings. Moreover, in May 1965, an ‘unofficial’ tournament was organised in Castlehaven, principally by John Brown and Jerry Sheehy, and this was later followed by regular non-Ból Chumann scores in the south-west area. These scores and tournaments were dismissed by Crowley and Ból Chumann as ‘flapper’ events, but in fact they were very successful and led to the formation of a West Cork Bowling Association with Sheehy as chairman and Jim O’Brien, who worked with the Southern Star in Skibbereen, as secretary. Those involved with this association included John Brown of Castlehaven, who was the driving force behind the initial tournaments, and bowling enthusiasts from Rossarbery to Mizen Head. Headquarters was established at the Corner Bar on Ilen Street in Skibbereen, which was owned by O’Brien’s brother, and the association began to grow.

The West Cork Bowling Association was soon the dominant organisation in south-west Cork and for the following two decades it largely managed bowl playing in that part of the country, as far east as Rosscarbery. Its officials were competent, widely respected and motivated. By the 1970s, the association had roughly 500 members and ten clubs in places such as Schull, Goleen, Leap, Skibbereen and Rossarbery; this was at least equal to the strength of the Armagh region and thus was a severe loss for Ból Chumann. Sheehy was eventually replaced as chairman by Willie Walsh of Leap, who in turn was succeeded, in the early 1970s, by Michael O’Sullivan, a Garda stationed in Cork city, though from Reenascreena. O’Sullivan’s presence in the city was an irritant for Ból Chumann because it meant that he was accessible to local bowlers; indeed, at various times, prominent bowl players, such as Mick Barry and Dooley O’Mahony, who were having difficulties with Ból Chumann, temporarily transferred their allegiance to the west Cork association and participated instead in its tournaments. This remained a serious problem until relations with the West Cork Bowling Association improved in the late 1980s.

THE ALL-IRELAND CHAMPIONSHIPS, 1963–1984
The situation in south-west Cork, while a blow to Ból Chumann, did not receive a great deal of attention and was allowed to fester, partly because
the association was making impressive progress in other regions. East Cork, for example, which initially had not been a priority for the association, was gradually brought firmly within the fold in the mid 1960s and clubs as far east as Clashmore in County Waterford were ultimately established or amalgamated. The delayed integration of east Cork was surprising in many ways, as this was a strong bowl playing area and had witnessed significant tournaments and scores at venues near Cobh, Ballymacoda, Youghal and elsewhere during the 1930s.

In a similar vein, the links with Ulster were solidified, with Dan O'Mahony, Waterloo, County Cork, and Henry Neary, Armagh, appointed as liaison officers and the first All-Ireland senior championship went ahead on the Moy road, near Armagh city, on 4 August 1963. A perpetual trophy was donated by Hughie Trainor, the owner of a music shop and newsagents at Upper English Street in Armagh, and the contesting provincial champions were 23-year-old Derry Kenny from Cork and Danny McParland from Armagh.12

Since the retirement of ‘Red’ Joe McVeigh in 1960, McParland, who first made an impression in the late 1950s, had emerged as a serious force in Ulster bowling, vying for dominance with other outstanding bowlers such as Mick Reilly, Harry Toal (senior) and Danny Reilly. McVeigh himself briefly came out of retirement to challenge for the Armagh senior title in 1963, but following his defeat by Toal once again left the stage, this time forever. Toal was subsequently routed on the Knappagh road in the Ulster final by McParland, who then automatically qualified for the inaugural All-Ireland against the current Munster senior champion. In August, a massive crowd turned out on the Moy road for the McParland versus Kenny score, and they were not disappointed by the standard of play. Refereed by Flor Crowley, it was a magnificent contest, tense and exciting, and both bowlers put in a superb performance; it was a close finish, according to Noel Magnier, who had travelled from Cork to support Derry Kenny that day:

Danny’s opponent, Kenny, had already thrown his last shot past the finishing line. It was now down to McParland in front of his own ‘home’ crowd. Thousands of heretofore vocal followers were now virtually muted in anticipation as McParland prepared to throw. It was not such a big shot to beat, but there was so much at stake. Everyone knew that.

On that Sunday evening McParland took his option playing down the right hand side of the road, his shot veered from the road and it ran a wide grass verge to beat Kenny’s tip. McParland was the inaugural All-Ireland senior champion.13

McParland was ahead by roughly 11 yards, which was more than enough.14
At a reception afterwards at the Charlemont Hotel in Armagh, Magnier asked McParland how he felt prior to that last throw: ‘Ach man’, he responded, ‘sure I was nervous, wouldn’t ye be?’ \(^{15}\) In fact, he was a bowler who thrived under pressure and his playing was always marked by fierce determination, allied to great speed and wonderful skill at rounding corners.

McParland came up against the mighty Mick Barry in the All-Ireland final the following year, and defeated him. Played at Dublin Hill in August 1964, the score was a tremendous event, remembered by Brian Toal as a ‘final [that] will forever rank amongst the greatest and go down in history as a thrilling, pulsating and highly sporting occasion.’ \(^{16}\) The closely fought contest saw the two powerful champions throw some remarkable bowls, with Barry, on one occasion, lofting a public house in order to round a corner. One of those present subsequently recalled this loft:

The pub was O’Connell’s, better known as Mary Ann’s, and was situated at White’s Cross (now renamed the Stirrup Bar). It is estimated that a crowd of close on 15,000 were in attendance . . . and saw Barry throw the bowl over the roof of the bar to land it ‘inch-perfect’ on the road of play – anything less perfect would have cost Barry a full bowl of odds. Naturally all the patrons of the pub were evacuated with the permission of the proprietor Mary Ann, and it is said that not a single drop of porter was swallowed as the house full of imbibers bade a hasty retreat to the safety of the roadway. When Barry succeeded so expertly with his loft of around 100 yards, a spontaneous round of applause broke out amongst everybody present, including the Armagh supporters, who had never seen the like. \(^{17}\)

McParland fought back and, despite exceptional throwing from Barry towards the end, he responded with a ferocious final shot that hurtled past his opponent’s tip, defeating him by 50 yards. In 1973, Barry paid tribute to McParland’s skill by naming him as the best player he ever faced from Armagh:

Our own people here who have seen Danny McParland playing could not believe that a man with no swing at all could be as fast as Danny McParland is, and there is no doubt that I have a special regard for him, and irrespective of what I hear about the Hammerman [Peter Donnelly], I still feel that it would be very, very difficult to get a man as good as Danny McParland was when Danny was playing at his best. \(^{18}\)

The competition between Barry and McParland was fierce but friendly, and their rivalry produced some extraordinary contests. A wonderful photograph exists of the two before a score in 1964 at Tinker’s Cross,
west Cork, posing with contemporary top-class bowlers Denny Murphy and Jack Forde, and legends from the 1920s and 1930s, Tim Delaney, Bill Bennett, Red Crowley, George Bennett and Jack O’Shea. It is an apposite photograph, placing Barry and McParland among the greats of bowling – two members of the pantheon that assembled that day, Bill Bennett and Red Crowley, died just three years later, receiving large funerals from the people of Cork.19

The rise of Danny McParland, however, came as a shock to some southern bowling enthusiasts, who had grown sanguine regarding Cork victories. In April 1965, Flor Crowley, for example, publicly despaired after the defeat of Mick Barry and Denis O’Donovan (Fishers’ Cross) by McParland and Aidan Toal in a double-hand score in Armagh; writing in the Evening

_Tinker’s Cross, Co. Cork, 1964: (front, left–right) Tim Delaney, Denny Murphy, Mick Barry; back row includes Jack O’Shea, Bill Bennett (third from left), Jackie Forde, Danny McParland, Red Crowley; George Bennett is first far right._
Echo, he harshly complained of ‘the total collapse of our men once the score started to go really against them... at the finish we were so completely beaten that we were very nearly disgraced as well.’ He continued:

[We must] face up to the fact... that Mick Barry and Denis O’Donovan were literally nowhere at all with Danny McParland and Aidan Toal on last Sunday... We now have no man in the South who can be confidently backed to beat Danny McParland, north or south. This comment applies to Mick Barry as well as to our other seniors, for Barry, so long the sole remaining bulwark between us and Armagh dominance is no longer the threat he used to be to the men of Armagh. I do not say that Barry cannot beat McParland, but I do say that his chances are considerably less than they were a year ago.20

It was a remarkable loss of faith and scarcely justified in retrospect, as Barry remained preeminent, but it did indicate that Munster bowlers were no longer sure of their dominance. Predictably, Crowley’s article drew critical responses from bowling supporters in Fair Hill and Clonakilty, and he was accused in the process of encouraging large stakes at scores in his reportage.21

In truth, writing in the Echo under the pseudonym ‘Boitreach’, Crowley did tend to publicise high stakes, though in doing so he was probably dispensing information of some interest to bowling enthusiasts, as gambling remained intrinsic to the sport. In the mid 1960s, the stakes, even in parochial scores, were often noteworthy – in late March 1965, for example, Jackie Lenihan defeated Miko Kelleher at Macroom by just under a bowl of odds for a stake of £300; two weeks later he beat Neilly O’Donovan by a full bowl of odds for £256. At the same venue, again in late March, Denis...
Cronin won a stake of £200 in a score with Mick Tom Bradley. Likewise, Dooley O’Mahony beat John Joe Crean at Ballindee on Easter Sunday for a stake of £220.22 These were certainly large sums of money at the time, but they paled alongside the double-hand score in Armagh in April, which involved an enormous stake of roughly £1,600, though it was organised as a fundraiser for the local Sacred Heart Convent. It was the money brought to this inter-provincial that incensed one critic, using the appellation ‘Up Fair Hill’, who claimed that on Crowley’s ‘head and shoulders, fairly and squarely, lay the blame for large amounts of money going “north” in recent times.’ The critic continued, with regard to the Armagh score:

I would point out that he advocated a large stake. And a large stake there was. Almost £1,600. In God’s name, where is the sport in that? Over the years, thanks no doubt to Ból Chumann, the game of bowls has risen into new heights. Its players and supporters are renowned for their sportsmanship, their prompt willingness to aid a charity or a worthy cause cannot be denied. For the sake of the game, let us have no lowering of these standards . . . I appeal to the ‘mentors’, to the Executive of Ból Chumann, to revert back for the salvation of the game of bowls as a fine sport to a stake of £100 a side.23

Interestingly, as well as fundraising for the nuns, Ból Chumann had a private audience with Cardinal William Conway of Armagh, which was attended by Flor Crowley, Henry Neary and Eamonn O’Carroll.24 The earnestness of Crowley’s Catholicism was further accentuated in his Evening Echo column, where on 2 April 1965, for instance, while referring to a forthcoming score at Ballygarvan, he reminded the bowlers to ensure that their game was ‘finished in time to allow city supporters to get back to Cork in good time for the Retreat that afternoon.’ Moreover, by the early 1970s, Ból Chumann had two official patrons and both were Catholic clergymen: Dr Cornelius Lucey, Bishop of Cork and Ross, and Fr D.J. Burns, a curate based in Dunmanway.25

McParland actually contested the final nine times during that period; Barry was in the final on ten occasions. Only two other bowlers won the senior title prior to 1976: John Creedon of Clondrohid, near Macroom, overcame McParland in the 1968 final, while Denis Scully of Fair Hill beat Harry Toal (senior) in 1973. It is clear that Mick Barry was the dominant figure – winning more titles and over a longer period – but Danny McParland is also remembered as a serious challenger and champion, whose extraordinary bowl playing left an indelible mark on the sport. Scully, though he only won the senior title once, is similarly remembered as a phenomenal bowler of that period and his victories included several against Barry and McParland. Born in 1949, he retired from bowling at a relatively young age in the early 1980s, but made a temporary comeback in 1988, winning the All-Ireland intermediate title, and in 1992 played at international level.

No single bowl player dominated the senior championship in the same way as Barry and McParland, following their retirement from that level. A son of Harry Toal’s, also called Harry, took the title in 1977 and 1981; he also won in 1985. Other senior champions in the 1977–84 period...
were Pat Butler (1978), Pat Mallon (1979), Gerry Boylan (1980), Donie Coveney (1982), Michael Buckley (1983) and Bill Daly (1984).

All-Ireland junior championships were initiated by Ból Chumann na hÉireann in 1966; the inaugural final at Grenagh, County Cork, was won by Fachtna O’Donovan, a Garda based in Limerick. This grade was later re-categorised as junior ‘A’ when a junior ‘B’ stream was introduced in 1980; twelve years later a junior ‘C’ grade was also created. In the meantime, in 1969, an All-Ireland intermediate championship was held for the first time; this grade was positioned between senior and junior, and the winner automatically qualified for the seniors. In addition, between 1967 and 1982, under 18, under 16, and under 14 All-Ireland championships were introduced to facilitate teenage boys. From the mid 1980s, similar grades were introduced for girls and these were preceded by the first All-Ireland senior women’s championship, which was held in 1981. This proliferation of grades – which continued in the 1990s, including novices and veterans for the first time – meant that a much wider range of bowl players could aspire to participation in national championships and this did much to stimulate involvement in the game.

THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL CONFLICT IN ULSTER

There were positive developments for road bowling in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly with the establishment of All-Ireland championships, but the sport was not unaffected by the political and social implosion of Northern Ireland. The partition of Ireland, formalised between 1920 and 1922, meant that six counties of Ulster – including Armagh and Tyrone – continued within the United Kingdom as an autonomous region buttressed by a deliberately inbuilt Protestant unionist majority. Serious discrimination against the Catholic minority was prevalent from the outset, but when a peaceful civil rights movement began to campaign for change in the late 1960s, it was violently suppressed by the forces of the state. Northern Ireland, never a stable political entity, descended further and further into street conflict, with riots, bombings and gun battles as daily events. Armed conflict between republicans (primarily the IRA) and British forces (including paramilitary police) escalated in the early 1970s, and hundreds died, many of who were innocent civilians caught up in shootings or bombings. Loyalist paramilitaries killed Catholics indiscriminately, terrorising areas such as the bowl playing regions of Armagh and east Tyrone. By the time the war ground to a halt in the mid 1990s, thousands of people had been killed.

The war, often euphemistically called the ‘troubles’, impacted badly on the northern bowl playing community. Brian Toal, in his richly detailed book Road Bowling in Ireland (1996), has listed the names of some of
the many bowlers and supporters who were killed during the conflict: Eamonn Gamble, for example, a leading bowler killed on 8 March 1972, aged 27, in an explosion in Keady, County Armagh; Patrick Cunningham, a keen bowling enthusiast, shot dead, aged 26, close to his home at Benburb, County Tyrone on 15 June 1974; Fred McLaughlin, aged 49, a bowl player, who died on 31 May 1976, two weeks after being injured in a gun attack in Charlemont, County Armagh. 26 Many more were also killed and injured, and the years of conflict were bleak and tragic decades for Irish road bowling.

The sectarian polarisation that accompanied the ‘troubles’ also further reduced the number of Protestants playing the game, though it should be remembered that this withdrawal was underway long before the 1960s. Writing in 1976, Raymond Murray, an Armagh-based Catholic priest who has produced seminal work on the history of the sport, suggested that the decrease in Protestant bowlers had occurred ‘especially since the game has switched generally from Saturday to Sunday.’ 27 The sabbatarianism of many Protestants would have precluded their involvement once this switch became general; however, this is clearly a chicken and egg scenario because it is difficult to envisage a wholesale move to Sundays unless the game was already dominated by Catholics. Certainly, it is evident that northern Protestants in the twentieth century viewed bowling as a Catholic-dominated sport and in a sharply divided society this inevitably reduced their involvement. Moreover, it is certain that Protestant unionists would have categorised Ból Chumann, with its Irish name and Catholic clergy patrons, as a Catholic nationalist organisation in the same tradition as the GAA and would have found this off-putting. In that regard, Ból Chumann did not take into account the sensitivities of non-Catholic and unionist supporters of the sport, a singular failure when one remembers that the game was introduced to the country by Protestant artisans.

In 1975, three All-Ireland finals were not contested; one of the reasons for this was that an Ulster bowler had been injured in a bomb explosion and thus was unable to compete. 28 The main reason, however, for the difficulties that year revolved around resentment at the southerners’ continued unwillingness to travel into Northern Ireland for All-Ireland scores. As the north descended into violent conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a pronounced decrease in the number of people travelling from the south to areas that were considered to be dangerous; the Munster bowlers were no different in this regard and they cited safety concerns as they insisted on southern venues from 1972 onwards. Indeed, it was 1979 before an All-Ireland men’s senior championship was once again held in Armagh; a senior final did take place in Ulster in 1977, but in Monaghan on the southern side of the border. From the point of view of some Armagh bowling enthusiasts, this was symptomatic of poor
solidarity and a decided lack of understanding of their sense of isolation. The stand-off was ultimately resolved, but southern bowlers remained reticent about travelling north.

The temporary coldness between north and south in 1975 was not the first inter-provincial dispute. In 1972, Mick Barry had won the senior championship at Dublin Hill in a ‘walk-over’ when Danny McParland refused to participate because of an argument that occurred at the end of the under 16 final the previous day between John Carroll of Dunmanway and Harry Toal (junior) of Armagh. Carroll was declared the winner, but there were bitter objections from the Armagh contingent, which vehemently disagreed with the referee’s decision regarding a wall and certain road markings close to where the bowls landed. A special meeting of the Ból Chumann executive that evening confirmed Carroll as the winner and the men from Armagh, enraged, withdrew from the rest of the championship. It was an acrimonious dispute that dragged on into 1973 and threatened to permanently derail inter-provincial competition. Explaining their position to Cork bowler Noel Magnier in February 1973, Paddy Comiskey, secretary of the Ulster Region of Ból Chumann, was clear about where the blame lay:

Our quarrell [sic] is with the Cork executive of An Ból Chumann whom we feel have on many occasions slighted not only our executive but indeed their own players. When your intermediate, junior and under 18 champions visited Armagh last year not one member of the Cork executive was present to say a word of appreciation of the players concerned. When a dispute arose regarding the juvenile final in Cork the same executive refused to recognise that we had a point of view even though our Chairman, Sec[retary], and Treasurer were present and to crown matters Mr Crowley and O’Carroll had other engagements when the showpiece of bowling, the senior all Ireland final, was to take place. What you saw happening at Dublin Hill was the last straw, it was inevitable.

On Flor Crowley’s shoulders lies the total blame for the decision given at White’s Cross. A decision he gave without recourse to official marker or referee.

He has tried to justify that decision by reports in your local press, by maps of different locations that were totally irrelevant. He went so far as to take a blackboard to convention to defend a decision that was indefensible.

In Cork, the Dublin Hill dispute also played a role in the formation of a Bowlplayers’ Representative Body (BRB) in late 1972, an organisation that was accepted very reluctantly by Ból Chumann, which felt that it already adequately represented the interests of active bowl players. In
fact, according to Noel Magnier, a leading member of the group, the BRB, though short-lived, went on to play a significant role in ending the rift with Armagh. Certainly, there was sympathetic communication between the BRB and the Ulster section of Ból Chumann regarding the debacle at Dublin Hill. The BRB remained small, and centred on Cork city, but included leading figures such as Mick Barry, John Kenny and Eamonn Bowen. At a meeting in the city on 9 October 1972, Johnny Creedon was elected as chairman (proposed by Tony Murray, seconded by Mick Barry), Noel Magnier was made secretary (proposed by Dan Warren, seconded by Liam Cotter) and Paul Manley became treasurer (proposed by Mick Barry, seconded by Jim Fitzgerald).

The main reason for the formation of the BRB was a deep dissatisfaction among some bowl players regarding the executive of Ból Chumann, which they felt was dominated by retired bowlers and non-players. There were a number of issues involved: the perfunctory nature of the annual conventions, the unchanging composition of the executive (particularly the dominance of Crowley and O’Carroll), the rules used to exclude bowlers from tournaments, and the allegedly small figures given in prize money for the senior tournament. In addition, Magnier had agreed largely with the northern objections during the 1972 Dublin Hill incident and entered into communication with the Armagh men in an effort to heal the north/south rift, leading to a formal meeting between both groups in Naas, County Kildare, on 4 March 1973. Eamonn O’Carroll, however, made efforts to undermine this tentative alliance between the BRB and the Ulster Region of Ból Chumann – writing to Magnier in April 1973, Paddy Comiskey, as secretary of the Ulster Region, enclosed a copy of a letter received from O’Carroll and remarked that, ‘I wasn’t too pleased at his [O’Carroll’s] reference to the bowlplayers’ association, and the impressions we got from our meeting with you at Naas were much more favourable than he suspects.’ Portadown-based Comiskey, a brother of the current Catholic Bishop of Ferns, was a key official in Ulster bowling for many years and, during the rift with the national executive, he engaged in regular correspondence with Magnier, offering advice and co-operation to the newly formed Bowlplayers’ Representative Body.

The north/south row was resolved ultimately in late 1973 after a meeting in Naas, County Kildare, between members of the national executive and representatives of the Ulster branch, and All-Irelands were resumed. The Bowlplayers’ Representative Body had played an important role in bringing this about, but were not in attendance and it seems that members of the national executive harboured some hostility towards the group. In January 1974, Comiskey felt the need to write to Magnier to assure him that the Armagh delegates said nothing at the Naas meeting to undermine the BRB:
Regarding Flor’s statement at convention that there were three known enemies of the Cork executive exposed at Naas, I would like to know who they are. We certainly didn’t say anything that could lead to this conclusion . . . I have a tape recording of the meeting and I intend to let you hear it the first time I’m in Cork. I have listened to it several times and each time I am more convinced that ‘We were robbed’.

Let’s leave it there for the moment and concentrate on the game which in your own words is all important.34

Competition was resumed between Ulster and Munster, but the BRB – which, to some degree, was probably maintained by the split – soon collapsed and was wound up in 1974.

Presiding, incidentally, at the north/south rapprochement in Naas was Senator Pat Kerrigan of the Labour Party, who was then Lord Mayor of Cork, and who had been a founding member of the Cork City Region of Ból Chumann. Active in the Ballyvolane Bowling Club, Kerrigan was a trade union official by occupation; in 1977, he was elected a TD, but suffered recurrent bad health and died, aged 51, on 4 July 1979. While Lord Mayor between June 1973 and July 1974, he did much to promote road bowling and hosted an official reception for the Ból Chumann executive within weeks of taking office.35 He continued to bowl and according to one vivid description:

Having completed an engagement as Lord Mayor, Pat would instruct his driver to take him to Ballyvolane where he joined with his colleagues in the Ballyvolane Bowling Club in a score of bowls. Pat would remove the Mayoral Chain of Office from his shoulders and for the duration of the score, he was just another one of the locals, whose enthusiasm for road bowling became a way of life and a pivotal part of the culture of the area.36

LONDON AND LIMERICK REGIONS FORMED
By the late 1960s, Cork and Armagh were well organised, and west Waterford was integrated into the Ból Chumann East Cork Region. However, there were still pockets of bowl players in other parts of the country, and elsewhere, who were not linked with organised bowling. There was bowling in parts of Galway up to the 1960s, but the game seems to have died out there before Ból Chumann had a chance to make contact. Elsewhere in Connacht, Mayo had – and still has – a small bowl playing area around Westport and, though Cork and Armagh men travelled there for exhibition scores in the late 1950s, it was the early 1990s before it became a region of Ból Chumann. Pockets of bowlers in Louth and Wexford were
also integrated around the same time. Rathmore in County Kerry had
some bowl playing, but this was directly on the Cork/Kerry border and
these bowlers could play within the North Cork Region.

Outside of Ireland, there was road bowling among emigrant workers
in London from at least 1940 and Launders Lane was a favourite venue,
with Eugene ‘Goggins’ McCarthy and Dan Murphy, both from Blarney
Street in Cork city, as the chief organisers.\(^{37}\) The existence of bowling
in London is scarcely surprising, when one considers the huge number
of emigrants to Britain from Ireland throughout the twentieth century
and before; moreover, there was a particularly strong connection between
Cork and Dagenham in Essex because of the existence there of a major
Ford’s car plant. Ford’s, a large employer with a good reputation, was
a key component of Cork’s industrial infrastructure after 1919, and conse-
quently the city was able to supply experienced workers to the company’s
new factory in Dagenham when it became operational in 1929.\(^{38}\) Substan-
tial numbers of Cork workers relocated to Dagenham during the mid
and late twentieth century, and among them were many bowl players.

There was probably little point in London bowlers affiliating to Ból
Chumann when it was essentially a Cork-based organisation, but from
1963 the emergence of a national structure and All-Ireland championships
made formal integration a more attractive prospect. In March 1969, a
London Region of Ból Chumann was formed, the first branch of the
organisation outside the country, and members from Britain thereafter
were allowed to participate in All-Ireland competitions. Central to this
initiative were the Jennings brothers, Barney and William, who were origi-
nally from Reenascreena in south-west Cork. A London committee was
formed with Barney Jennings (chairman), Con Connors (president),
William Jennings (secretary), George Buckley (treasurer), Tim Kelleher
and Paddy Carroll (registrars). All of these individuals were from County
Cork, as were most people involved with the game in London.\(^{39}\)

Another Ból Chumann region was established in May 1969 when
bowlers in County Limerick affiliated to the national body. Limerick had
a strong bowl playing tradition, particularly around Fedamore, and indi-
viduals from the county, such as Garda Fachtna O’Donovan (who was
originally from Cork), had already participated in Munster and national
competitions. The Ból Chumann Limerick Region was centred on Bally-
clough Bowling Club and it was decided to hold committee meetings on
the first Monday of each month at the Royal George Hotel in Limerick
city. Fedamore was agreed as the venue for bowling.\(^{40}\) In reality, the numbers
involved in Ból Chumann activities in Limerick were always small, but the
country’s inclusion in the association, like that of London, was an impor-
tant expansion beyond its Cork/Waterford and Armagh/Tyrone axes.
EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

Nineteen-sixty-nine was unmistakably an historic year for Irish road bowling, and not simply because of the incorporation of London and Limerick into Ból Chumann. In late June, the first European Bowling Championships were held over two days in the Dutch town of Losser, with teams present from the Netherlands, Germany and Ireland. This event marked the beginning of regular international competitions between these three countries, which have bowling games with significant differences but also similarities. In addition, bowlers from the Italian province of Pesaro (who have a game uncannily like the Ulster version of road bowling) joined the international competitions in the late 1990s.

The central figure behind this internationalisation of games that were somewhat localised in each country was a Dutchman called Johann P. Poorthuis, who came from the town of Losser where locals practise a game of moor bowling called ‘klootschieten’. In the spring of 1934, Poorthuis became aware of a similar sport around Jever in northern Germany and he made contact with players there, eventually meeting them during a cycling holiday and persuading them to participate in regular joint championships with their Dutch counterparts; the first such international competition was held at Jever on 2 September 1934 and the interaction was maintained afterwards. In 1952, Poorthuis came across an article in an American magazine that referred to another similar game in Ireland and through the publisher he eventually managed to establish contact with Flor Crowley, who had written the piece.41

Correspondence between Poorthuis and Crowley continued for several years, and in 1965 Gerhard Poorthuis, a son of Johann’s, arrived in Ireland on a cycling holiday with two others. They spent the first week of August with Crowley in west Cork and attended that year’s Munster senior championship at Dunmanway between Mick Barry and Denis O’Donovan; afterwards, Gerhard Poorthuis took on and defeated local man Marshall Clarke in a score of road bowling. On the subsequent Saturday, the Dutchmen travelled to Armagh and witnessed the 1965 All-Ireland senior championship between Mick Barry and Danny McParland.42 The visit did much to strengthen links between Dutch and Irish bowlers. According to the then secretary of Ból Chumann, Eamonn O’Carroll:

They were delighted and took back such a glowing account that the father, Johann, invited a few of us to Losser to show the locals how we played and to show us their own particular form of the game, which was played on flat fields or sand dunes. We immediately named it Moors Bowlplaying and it stuck. We took over a small group, including the later District Justice Hedley McCay. He was our interpreter, as he was fluent in both French and German. We had a few very pleasant days in Holland.43
Poorthuis, in turn, visited Ireland in 1967 with his wife and another couple, and were fêted by Ból Chumann who, through Pat Kerrigan, arranged a civic reception for them at City Hall in Cork. This was also the year in which the Nederlandse Klootschieters Bond (NKB) was founded as a national umbrella body for the sport of bowling in Holland.

The interaction ultimately led to the first European Bowling Championships, which were held in Holland on 30–1 June 1969. As well as Ból Chumann and the NKB, the participants included two north German bowling associations: the Friesiche Klooschießerverband (FKV), representing the bowl players of Ostfriesland, and the Verband Schleswig-Holsteiner Boßler e.V. (VSHB), representing the Schleswig-Holstein region. The German game – whether known as Bosseln or Klootschlessen – is essentially a lofting sport; the differences between the two regions were explained in 1992 by a member of the VSHB:

The ‘Klootschiesser’ of Ostfriesland and Oldenburg use a 30m long carpet with a springboard [actually a ramp] at the end of a running surface. After a fast run-up the bowl is, while jumping on the springboard, thrown away with a vertical twist of the arm. The longest distance of a bowl (from the throwing off to the impact) of a ‘Klootschiesser’ is 105.20m thrown with a 475g ‘Kloot’.

But the ‘Bossler’ of Schleswig-Holstein throw their 500g ‘Bossel’ after a fast run-up (up to 30m) and a terrific twist around their own body axis like a discus thrower. With this the ‘Bossler’ can achieve up to 99m. The hundred metre mark has not yet been reached.

Both the ‘Kloot’ and the ‘Bossel’ have a diameter of 58mm. Both are made out of wood filled with lead, and the main difference is only a minimal difference of 25g in weight.

The German associations are also substantially larger than Ból Chumann – in 1994, the FKV, for example, had 41,394 registered members. The Irish association caters for 2–3,000 members. An additional difference is that the continental bodies, particularly the Germans, have long viewed their games as athletic sports and there is less of the informality that has characterised road bowling in Ireland. Tracksuits, for example, are still uncommon at Irish bowling scores – bowlers usually play in loose-fitting clothes – and the sporting apparel donned by the Germans, such as shorts, are almost never worn at typical bowling events in Ireland, though they are used for international competitions. Irish bowlers, who once attended and played in contests in their Sunday best, continue to wear ordinary clothes to scores, though a training video (and the companion literature) produced in 1996 by Ból Chumann appears to be encouraging changes in this regard. One discernible change has occurred in
terms of footwear, with Irish bowlers today invariably wearing runners, while in the past they wore ordinary shoes, and even work-boots on week nights. It is clear that the interaction with German and Dutch bowl players has caused some to rethink the format and style of the sport. According to the leading Armagh bowling enthusiast Brian Toal:

The cultural socialisation deriving from such high profile events has had the subtle effect of persuading some traditional road bowlers in Ireland into a more athletic and fitness orientated approach to these and domestic competitions. The sight of well trained athletics from Germany and Holland meticulously limbering up before taking each shot and then, without breaking their concentration, deliberately removing the sports garments superfluous to their actual playing gear, was in sharp contrast to the traditional approach of many Irish players. For years, if not generations, the bowl player in Ireland was dressed like any other individual and consequently was indistinguishable from the spectators at any score. That particular tradition has been gradually waning as the younger players especially present themselves for competition in a manner and appearance that portrays an image of preparation and fitness.47

The first championship at Losser was an unmitigated success and the Irish team performed well; each team competed in the three national games – Irish road bowling, German lofting, and Dutch moor bowling – and the Irish team dominated at their own sport, while the Corkmen put in a credible performance in the other specialities. The competitors from Armagh were at a slight disadvantage because their bowling technique involves an underhand throw, without the long loft favoured by Munster and Mayo bowlers, who use a full-circle arm swing.

Importantly, an International Bowlplayers Association (IBA) was formed in the wake of the Losser gathering. Flor Crowley was its first president, a role he retained until 1980 – the position was subsequently held by leading bowling officials from Germany and Holland; other later Irish presidents of the IBA were Jerry Desmond, Brendan Roche and Séamus Ó Tuama, who were also chairpersons of Ból Chumann. Further international championships were held in Cork (1970), Garding in Schleswig-Holstein (1972), Jever in Ostfriesland (1974), Cork (1977), Tubbergen in the Netherlands (1980), Garding (1984), Norden in Ostfriesland (1988), Cork (1992) and Tubbergen (1996), and they continue to occur every four years. The competitions have always been surrounded by pageantry, parades and civic receptions, and have involved a huge effort by local bowling officials and enthusiasts each time they have taken place in Ireland.
THE DEATH OF FLOR CROWLEY

Flor Crowley was as central to the formation and development of the International Bowlplayers Association as he was to Ból Chumann, and his death on 25 July 1980, aged 72, was a blow to both organisations.48 He had, in fact, only recently returned from a trip to the Netherlands. Resident in Bandon at the time of his death – having taught for nine years at St Patrick’s National School prior to his retirement – Crowley was buried, following a huge funeral, in St Patrick’s cemetery in the town. He was survived by his wife Mary McCarthy – originally of Sherkin Island – son, Raymond, and daughters, Clare and Imelda.

Flor Crowley is self-evidently a figure of immeasurable importance in the history of Irish road bowling and he was also pivotal in bringing together the European bowl playing community. His impact on the game in Ireland was immense, bringing a localised sport into the national and international arenas, while simultaneously building an organisation that was possibly crucial in averting a gradual erasure of road bowling from Irish social life. Crowley, of course, did not work alone and he was not without precursors; Jim Cadden and the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association, which Ból Chumann displaced, made an enormous contribution, particularly in terms of the drive to dispel the aura of disrepute that kept the game underground for so long. Nonetheless, it is clear that Crowley’s energy and intelligence were key elements in the success of Ból Chumann and in bringing road bowling to where it is today.

A year before his death, Crowley’s short book *In West Cork Long Ago* was published by Mercier Press. Essentially a paean to his beloved west Cork, it included a tribute to bygone bowlers and, in particular, to the great Bill Bennett of Killeady. Oddly, however, when referring to the game itself, he contentiously claimed that it was a countryman’s sport and suggested...
that townsmen preferred football. This may have been true in parts of west Cork, but road bowling was, and remains, extremely popular in districts of Cork and Armagh cities, and even prominent west Cork bowlers such as Red Crowley were town-based. It is difficult to understand Crowley’s depiction in the book of a strict urban/rural divide; in his opinion, ‘townies’ were GAA footballers, while ‘cábógs’ (rural dwellers) were bowlers.49

WOMEN IN IRISH ROAD BOWLING
Whatever about townsmen bowling, one half of the human race – women – were firmly excluded from the sport until the closing decades of the twentieth century. The absence of women is strikingly obvious when one examines old photographs of road bowling, especially those from the 1920s and 1930s; the male bowlers, occasionally with sleeves pulled up to display their muscles, are invariably surrounded by crowds of men, and women are nowhere to be seen, even as spectators. It was a male recreation in a very self-conscious sense in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, writing in 1946, the Ulsterman T.G.F. Paterson ruminated:

Joan Shannon in action during the first women’s tournament, 1981. Photo: Denis McGarry

that townsmen preferred football. This may have been true in parts of west Cork, but road bowling was, and remains, extremely popular in districts of Cork and Armagh cities, and even prominent west Cork bowlers such as Red Crowley were town-based. It is difficult to understand Crowley’s depiction in the book of a strict urban/rural divide; in his opinion, ‘townies’ were GAA footballers, while ‘cábógs’ (rural dwellers) were bowlers.49

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The game is a man's game and is not attended by women, though the wives, sweethearts and sisters of the players take an almost equal interest in the results. The sweetheart of a champion player reflects his glory, but the game is not always played by bachelors, or indeed young men, and wives can be equally proud. I have a friend now over seventy, who half a dozen years ago was matched against another excellent player of almost equal age, and won. Was his wife pleased, did she expect him to win, and did she have a special supper ready for the occasion? The answer is in the affirmative, and from personal experience I can assure you that the supper was worth 'sitting down to'.

In short, a woman's place was in the home, preparing for the return of her conquering hero, possibly following his customary thirst-slaking detour to the local public house. Women were meant to be decorative and competent homemakers, and female involvement in physical sports was considered vulgar, unhealthy and unfeminine. In general, the sporting associations that mushroomed across Europe in the late nineteenth century were cold houses for women and most were explicitly men-only. The GAA, for example, was a male organisation and the Camogie Association, founded in 1904, struggled to exist. Moreover, and importantly in the Irish context, the Catholic Church continued to oppose female participation in sport well into the twentieth century and, in a deeply sexist society, the views of the clergy were deployed frequently by social conservatives. The *Irish Times*, for instance, quoted the Pope in May 1928 when it editorialised against women in sport:

> In France, Germany and even in England, many girls are devoting themselves to public sports which demand violent exertion and sometimes, it would seem, a notable scantiness in clothing . . . These performances are done before crowds of male spectators. His Holiness is surely right when he says that they are 'irreconcilable with women's reserve'.

This hostility to female athletes has diminished significantly in recent decades, but still exists in some quarters, albeit in modified form; indeed, writing in the *Irish Times* as recently as early October 2004, the right-wing columnist Kevin Myers opined that people 'don’t want to watch women playing sports because, generally speaking, they’re not very good. They’re small and they’re weak and they’re slow, and watching an average women throw an object is a deeply moving tragedy.'

It was against such prejudice that the pioneer women of bowling had to struggle and the world of road bowling was a particularly macho environment. Nonetheless, by the 1960s, women, primarily from strong bowling families, had begun to challenge their exclusion and they took
to the roads, organising their own scores. In the early 1960s, an ‘unofficial’ women’s tournament was held at Dripsey in west Cork, despite the efforts of a local priest who tried to persuade a number of competitors not to participate in this supposedly unfeminine game – regardless, it went ahead and was won by Mary Barry (née O’Keeffe), an excellent bowl player and the mother of Susan Greene, the current chairperson of Bóл Chumann. Women continued to play against each other in scores throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In March 1976, a women’s tournament was held at Ardcahan, Dunmanway, attracting more than 50 entries. The organisers were Gretta Crowley and Mary Lordan, and participants included Margaret Hurley, Derinsafa; Mary Crowley, Ardcahan; Kitty O’Leary, Direens; Marie Buttimer, Ahakeera; and Helen Dunne, Dunmanway. In 1978, a women’s bowling club was formed at Ballinacurra, County Cork. These developments in Munster caught the imagination of followers of the sport in Ulster and women increasingly took up bowling there also. By 1980, the involvement of women was significant in the two strongholds of Cork and Armagh.

The real breakthrough for women in road bowling came in 1981 with the establishment of the first All-Ireland women’s senior championship, which saw Joan Shannon from west Cork defeat the Ulster champion,
Bernie Dynes of Drumbreda, County Armagh, in an exciting final on 6 September. This was the culmination of a process that saw women bowlers carve out their own niche within the sport, sometimes with the assistance of fathers and brothers who also played. For instance, in the 1970s, Gretta Hegarty (later Cormican) of Lyre in west Cork was entered in male bowling scores at under 16 level by her father Mick, who felt that she was good enough to take on the boys. 'There wasn’t a mention of women’s bowling then’, she recalled in 1995. In the event, Mick Hegarty’s assessment was accurate and his daughter’s success against male bowlers helped to bring about the official Ból Chumann championship in 1981. Gretta Hegarty, an exceptional bowl player, went on to win the All-Ireland women’s senior championship in 1982, 1983, 1987, 1989 and 1994, as well as winning a gold medal in the first ever European Women’s Championship at Garding in Germany in 1984. Her colleagues on that first European team included Mary Barry, a long-time bowler; Susan Barry (later Greene); and Agnes Hurley, who won the All-Ireland senior championship that year.

Other women’s grades were subsequently added to cater for different age groups and differing levels of skill, and female road bowlers are now fully integrated into the sport. For younger participants, the women’s scores are as intrinsic and crucial to the sport as the men’s. Quite a few veterans of the game, such as the founding secretary of Ból Chumann, Eamonn O’Carroll, emphatically welcomed the change. Among some older bowling enthusiasts, however, it seems that reservations still exist. The erstwhile senior bowler Denis O’Donovan of Fisher’s Cross, whose daughter Bernie is an active bowl player, in a recent interview with Dominic Carroll of Ardfield expressed views that are perhaps not rare among a certain generation, though clearly less prevalent than they once were:

*My last question – did you ever see women bowl?*
I did – plenty of them. Gretta Hegarty, there, is very good. From Lyre. Gretta Cormican I suppose – she’s Mrs Cormican, now. She’s very good. *And were there any women around here that bowled?*
Bernie bowls a bit. *Anyone else before that?*
No. Really – not going against the women bowling – bowling is a man’s game. I don’t care whether they shoot me down or not – I’ve nothing against women bowling – but it’s a man’s game. But fair play to the women – they’re able to do it, alright. But I still maintain it’s a man’s game. *Fair enough – we’ll turn off the tape now before you say something you’ll really regret.*
Begad, you’d better!
By the mid 1980s, the Irish road bowling landscape was dramatically different to that which existed when the handful of men who formed Ból Chumann met in the village of Enniskeane on a Monday night in late November 1954. One constant in the initial decades of development was the figure of Flor Crowley and his loss was keenly felt in 1980. However, from the beginning, the leadership of the association was broader than Crowley and significant contributions were made by a wide range of individuals on, and outside, the national executive; moreover, the influence of the various regional committees was especially important from the 1960s onwards and their delegates attended executive meetings regularly, playing a central role in the discussions.

Brendan Roche, a foreman mechanical engineer, from Tramore Road in Togher (on the southside of Cork city), replaced Crowley as chairperson in 1980. An indefatigable worker for Ból Chumann, Roche had been treasurer between 1970 and 1977, a generally thankless role in most organisations, and secretary from 1974 to 1980, replacing Eamonn O’Carroll who had retired after 30 years in the position. For three of those years, Roche combined the roles of secretary and treasurer, which in itself was a testament to his tremendous work rate and commitment to the association. Between 1980 and 1990, the principal officers on the national executive were Brendan Roche (chairperson), Pádraig Crowley (secretary) and Jerry Desmond (treasurer). In 1990, Séamus Ó Tuama from east Cork took over as secretary. In Armagh, between 1979 and 1993, the regional executive officers were John Gribben (chairperson), Aidan McVeigh (secretary) and Paddy Comiskey (treasurer). Positions on the Ból Chumann national and Ulster executives are not remunerated and, at every level, it was an enormous and consistent effort by unpaid volunteers that kept the financially under-resourced sport vibrant.
Road bowling is not a closed-field sport, which means that the organisers of scores, tournaments and championships are not in a position to charge entrance fees to events, closing off a potentially lucrative source of income available to most sporting bodies, such as, for example, the GAA, which takes in substantial sums at the gates during hurling and football matches. Unfortunately, again unlike the GAA, Ból Chumann has not done well either in terms of grants or other forms of funding from government; rather, more often than not, road bowling has been treated in a niggardly manner by government departments and funding agencies, partly because of its limited geographical compass. A notable exception in this regard, however, was the Cork North-Central Fine Gael TD Bernard Allen, when he was Minister for Sport in the mid to late 1990s. Allen not only provided generous funding, he actively promoted the sport and attended several important bowling events during his time in office; the motivation behind his attention to the game was clearly twofold: as a northside Cork TD, he was aware of the importance of bowling as a community-based sport (particularly in the Blackpool and Fair Hill districts) and, secondly, he undoubtedly had a personal interest in the game, derived to some degree from family tradition – one of his uncles was the well known top-class bowler (and erstwhile soccer player) Seanie.
Allen, who won the All-Ireland/Munster senior championship in 1958.

In addition, the fact that the current Catholic bishop of Cork, John Buckley, is an avid bowling enthusiast served to heighten the profile of the game in the 1980s and 1990s, possibly making it more acceptable in the eyes of the civic authorities. Indeed, Bishop Buckley and Minister Allen teamed up on 1 February 1996 to play a score of bowling live on RTE’s Gay Byrne radio show. Interviewed by Joe Duffy, they explained the rudiments of the game, giving it a useful boost just as residents in the Lower Killeens/Old Blarney Road area of the city were in the process of objecting to it being played on what is a traditional bowling road.1

Despite a paucity of funds, the bowling community has regularly involved itself in fund-raising for good causes. In 1989, for example, a significant bowling exhibition – titled the Super Ból – was held in the Phoenix Park in Dublin, raising a considerable sum of money for Cerebral Palsy Ireland; the contest was won by senior bowler Bill Daly of Cork. The organising group behind this hugely successful, but uncommon, incursion into the capital city included Christy Santry and Séamus Ó Tuama from east Cork, Pat Healy of Macroom, Dinny O’Leary, also of Macroom but resident in Dublin, and Bob Ryan of Cerebral Palsy Ireland (and formerly of Allied Irish Banks). The commissioner of the Phoenix Park, Michael Moore, was especially helpful; in fact, it transpired that Moore had bowled in his youth in his home area of east Galway, a region in which the game has since died out. Other Ból Chumann events have also been organised over the years to raise funds for a wide variety of charities. The association itself, however, remains reliant on its own members and supporters to finance its operations; a small levy on the stake, a subscription fee and two regular annual draws provide much of the funds, which are consequently limited. These limited finances restrict Ból Chumann’s ability to expand and develop the sport, though voluntary effort and sheer energy tend to make up the shortfall in some respects.

Members of Ból Chumann were also directly responsible for a great deal of the press coverage that the game has received. Indeed, from the 1930s, bowlers have doubled as journalists in order to ensure reports in newspapers, and in doing so they have contributed hugely to the public profile of a minority sport. Con O’Connell of the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association supplied many of the reports published in the Cork papers in the 1930s and 1940s, while Flor Crowley later acted as a bowling correspondent for a diverse number of papers including the Cork Examiner, Evening Echo, Southern Star, Kerryman and Sunday Review. Eamonn O’Carroll, the founding secretary, also contributed regularly to newspapers, including a weekly column in the Muskerry Herald in the late 1980s. Today, members of Ból Chumann who act as sports journalists include leading figures such as Séamus Ó Tuama, Brian Toal,
Christy Santry, Pat McCarthy, Aidan McVeigh and Noel Magnier. In terms of photo-journalism, another bowling enthusiast, Denis McGarry of Whitechurch, County Cork, has steadily built up a huge collection of pictures from scores and championships since the mid 1980s, creating an indispensable visual record of the game. Many of his remarkable images have been published in newspapers and books.

WORLD ROAD BOWLING CHAMPIONSHIPS

The All-Ireland championships continued to add new grades during the 1980s – in 1982, for example, the under 14 boys’ competition was introduced, while in 1986 Ból Chumann initiated the long overdue under 18 women’s championship. The variety of levels expanded commensurately in Ulster and Munster, stretching the association, but also drawing more people into organising and coordinating the sport. Moreover, as well as the routine scores and tournaments, bowlers and officials participated in a growing number of charity fundraisers, local festivals and exhibition events.

It was a busy decade, but perhaps the most productive year was 1985, though this was also the year that bowling maestro Tim Delaney died. Delaney, who lived at Knocknaheeny Cottage in Fair Hill, on the northside of Cork city, died on 1 May and was buried in Kilcully cemetery a few days later; it was an enormous funeral, attended not just by the bowling community, but by many, including civic leaders, who viewed him as a legendary figure and as one of the greatest sportsmen ever produced by the city. He had outlived most of his erstwhile opponents and in later life acted as a willing mentor to many aspirant champions. Nonetheless, despite the sadness surrounding the death of Tim Delaney, 1985 can be described equitably as an annum mirabilis for the association. It was the year that Cork Corporation (since renamed Cork City Council) celebrated the 800th anniversary of the granting of a royal charter to the city. Somewhat implausibly – bearing in mind the city’s ancient origins – this recognition, bestowed by the English crown, was promoted as marking the birth of the city, and events and festivities were organised throughout 1985 in celebration. In point of fact, the charter being celebrated was issued in 1189 and not 1185, but the civic authorities were primarily interested in marketing the city. This opened up significant sponsorship and promotional opportunities for the road bowling community and Ból Chumann managed to secure funding for a number of important events in the environs of Cork city that year.

One such event was the inaugural World Road Bowling Championship, which was held outside the village of Whitechurch, just a few miles north of the city, on 28–30 June 1985. According to Christy Santry, Southern Star bowling correspondent at the time and later secretary of Ból
Chumann (1992–4), the makers of Paddy Whiskey – Irish Distillers Limited – offered themselves as a sponsor for an event to coincide with the ‘Cork 800’ celebrations. Ból Chumann, in conjunction with the International Bowlplaying Association, decided to organise an international competition specifically dedicated to road bowling, with teams from Ireland, the Netherlands and Germany. For the Irish, it was a way of enhancing the international standing of their sport and, they hoped, encouraging increased interest and participation beyond Ireland. It was an unqualified success, drawing thousands of people to Whitechurch, and, in the words of Brian Toal, was ‘undoubtedly the biggest event in the history of the traditional road game.’ Accompanied by much pageantry, competitors from the three bowling countries fought it out on the roads of north Cork, with 26-year-old Henk Lammerink (Netherlands) and 27-year-old Bill Daly (Ireland) winning their way through to the final on Sunday, 30 June.

It was a close score, with Daly leading at the outset, but Lammerink close behind and in danger of gaining the advantage. Daly, like all Cork bowlers, played using the full-circle arm technique, while Lammerink (and all the other contestants that weekend) used the short, but fast, underarm throw favoured by Ulster bowlers. Unfortunately, at the halfway stage, as the Dutchman threw to put himself 150 metres ahead of Daly, he suddenly winced with pain and, despite having his injured thigh strapped, he was soon unable to continue. Daly was declared the winner and became the first ever world road bowling champion.

Bill Daly, a Garda living in Glanmire, had won the All-Ireland senior championship the previous year; in 1985, he was the runner-up, losing narrowly to Armagh’s Harry Toal (junior). Originally from Leap in west Cork, Daly first came to prominence when he won the men’s under 18 All-Ireland title in 1975; he was one of the outstanding senior bowlers of the 1980s and 1990s, and he remains a powerful presence in road bowling today. He has won the Munster senior championship four times and is a consistent winner of tournaments, including the prestigious King of the Roads competition at Ballincurrag in east Cork, where he has emerged victorious on five occasions.

The success of the inaugural World Road Bowling Championship meant that a second competition, again with sponsorship from Irish Distillers Limited, was held at Whitechurch on 19–21 June 1987. On a wet course, Bill Daly once again fought his way through, beating the German Harm Henkel (who had earlier eliminated the All-Ireland senior champion Declan O’Donovan of Bandon) in a tough semi-final, before successfully defending his title against Gerry Boylan of Armagh in the final score. Commenting on the tenacity required to win a world title, Brendan Roche remarked at the time:
Normally a player would throw 16 times, on average, in the usual score here, but the World Championship course is exactly 2,400 metres out and the same distance back, and that will require some 33 shots at a minimum. A player might have to play four scores in four days to win the title. That is a huge order.9

It was a huge order, but Bill Daly delivered twice, firmly consolidating his reputation as a top-class senior bowler. An interesting feature of the 1987 World Championship was the participation of a team from Scotland, though their two competitors, Graham Jarvie and Keith Lindsay, failed to make it through the early rounds.10

A third World Championship was held in Armagh on 9–10 May 1998, in conjunction with the Armagh Apple Blossom Festival; the competition on that occasion also included a women’s senior championship for the first time, which was won by Gretta Cormican (née Hegarty) of Cork. Among the teams participating in the men’s section was a group from Italy, who played road bowling with a technique very close to that used in Armagh, though using a larger bowl made of stone mixed with plastic and glue. The connection between the International Bowlplaying Association and the Italian bowlers developed in the late 1990s when Dutch bowling officials Jos Leussink and Hennie Kemma learned of the existence of road bowling in Pesaro Province, near the Adriatic coast, and visited the region.11 Ból Chumann’s interaction began in April 1997, when Irish bowlers and officials travelled to participate in an international competition at Monte Cucco and Mondolfo; the Irish were hugely impressed by the standard of bowling, astonished by the similarities with their own game, and eager to maintain relations. The Italian game of ‘boccetta’, like road bowling in Ireland, is a community sport and the courses on which they play are typically hilly back-roads. It is a localised sport, focused mainly on the east coast, almost directly opposite Rome.12 The membership size of the Italian bowlers’ association, at 3,000, is also roughly the same as that of Ból Chumann.

Those who travelled in 1997 included the prominent bowling figures Séamus Ó Tuama (then chairman of Ból Chumann and president of the International Bowlplaying Association), Michael McSweeney of Fair Hill (long-time honorary president of Ból Chumann) and Christy Santry, bowling correspondent with the Southern Star. On his return, Ó Tuama wrote warmly in the Cork Examiner of his impressions of the Italians:

Watching them bowl was a revelation. Their style and approach is very similar to the Ulster technique. Like Ulster bowlers too they could put ‘spin’ and ‘pull’ on the bowls. They played with the same passion and fervour as the Irish. They loved road bowling or boccetta and were good
at it. They quickly showed us just how good they were. One of their top players, Mario Bonci, was the first Italian to win an international score using an Irish bowl and his compatriot, Patrizio Vagnini, was not far behind him.\textsuperscript{13}

The Italians joined the International Bowlplaying Association and have participated in recent European Bowling Championships.

THE MOUNT EVEREST OF ROAD BOWLING

Another bowling event to receive crucial sponsorship during the year of ‘Cork 800’ was a lofting competition at the Chetwynd railway viaduct on the Bandon road, a few miles to the west of Cork city. The viaduct, long regarded as the ‘Mount Everest of road bowling’, had defied many attempts to loft it cleanly with both 16oz and 28oz bowls, though success would mean an indelible place in the history of Irish road bowling. In 1985, Murphy’s Brewery in Cork offered a prize of £5,000 to the first man to loft the 90 feet high, 21 feet wide viaduct with the 28oz bowl and £1,000 for a clear loft with the 16oz.

Efforts had been made to loft the viaduct from early in the twentieth century. Dan Hurley, a champion bowler from Bandon, was reputed to have succeeded in the early years of the century and the Killeady bowler Bill Bennett, who had a huge loft, allegedly cleared it in the early 1930s, but there is no evidence to back these claims; certainly, Bennett was well past his heyday by the 1930s and it is unlikely that he managed it so late in his bowling career. In January 1955, Tom O’Neill of Blarney Street tried and failed.\textsuperscript{14} Later that year, Mick Barry, who actually lived close to the viaduct, also attempted to put a bowl over, watched by a crowd of 8,000 people. Capable of enormous horizontal lofts of over 90 yards, Barry was always the Irish bowler most likely to succeed and in fact he did manage to bounce a 16oz bowl across the top and over, but his 28oz bowl rebounded off the upper ironwork. His brother Ned managed to put a 16oz bowl on the railbed, but failed to make it cross.\textsuperscript{15}

Another series of attempts occurred in 1970 on the fringe of that year’s European Bowling Championships, which were being held in Cork. By that stage, the railway was disused and the viaduct was suffering from dereliction, which reduced its height marginally. A serious but unsuccessful effort was made by Denis Scully, who did manage to put a German bowl of cherry wood, with a lead core, through a hole in the upper structure. A German named Arno Domeyer lofted a 16oz bowl cleanly over the bridge, but still no-one was able to clear it using the solid iron 28oz bowl.\textsuperscript{16} Mount Everest remained unconquered.

Murphy’s challenge was taken up on 8 September 1985 when more
than 10,000 people gathered at the Chetwynd viaduct to witness Reinhard Christensen (Schleswig-Holstein), Hans Georg Bohlken (Ostfriesland) and six Ból Chumann bowlers, including world road bowling champion Bill Daly, attempt to loft it with 28oz and 16oz Irish bowls. Three of the Irish bowl players – Bill Daly, Eamonn Bowen and Dan O’Halloran – succeeded in putting over the 16oz bowl and they consequently shared the £1,000 prize money for such a feat. They were unable, however, to make any headway with the 28oz bowl, though Daly put in one exceptional effort, hitting the upper ironwork on the bridge. The German sport was based on lofting and both German were expected to put in a good performance. In the event, Christensen, despite some sufficiently high throws, was not able to push the 28oz bowl across the bridge and he eventually admitted defeat.

Hans Georg Bohlken, a superb athlete, standing 6 feet, 6 inches tall, was favoured to succeed, particularly as he was using the ramp associated with the Ostfriesland game, and he came with a formidable reputation, having broken long-standing records in his own discipline. In fact, the German technique gives a much greater vertical loft than that achieved by the Cork style of road bowling, which incorporated a loft primarily to round corners, or to ‘carry out’ (to travel long distances over rough roads). Much was expected from Bohlken and the crowd’s confidence was spectacularly rewarded. His first attempt missed the viaduct completely, but his second struck high up on iron structure, giving renewed hope to those watching. His subsequent lofts were later described in the *Cork Examiner*:

> When his third attempt went over (although it struck a girder on the way down) all hell broke loose. He was immediately set upon by frantic autograph seekers, and but for his enormous height he would have been trampled on in the rush. He signed his autograph on all types of paper including fivers, ten and twenty pound notes and even ‘Murphy Stout’ mats. But to the officials and the sponsors they would have preferred a clear loft. To this end Bohlken obliged with his fourth and last attempt. It was a superb loft clearing the viaduct by eight to ten feet.17

It was precisely 4:48pm on 8 September 1985 when Hans Georg Bohlken made bowling history with his loft. ‘They said it could not be done’, said Brendan Roche afterwards, ‘but it has.’ Rejecting criticism that the loft was compromised because a ramp had been used, Roche told a local newspaper:

> Some of our guys tried it and they could not manage it at all. There is an incredible technique to it. You have to run onto the ramp, and with
your two feet and throw . . . [Bohlken is] an incredible athlete. He is wasted in lofting. He put the 28oz almost into the Regional Hospital!18

KINGS AND QUEENS OF THE ROAD
The third event that made 1985 an historic year for road bowling also took place in County Cork. In late October, the Ballincurrag Bowling Club, based near Midleton in east Cork, hosted the first King of the Roads festival, a senior tournament which was to become an annual event and, in the minds of many, second only to the All-Irelands in terms of prestige in the world of Irish road bowling. The main mover behind establishing this end-of-season competition was Séamus Ó Tuama, an ardent bowl player and academic based at University College, Cork. Ó Tuama – widely regarded as a motivated, innovative and extremely capable individual – has remained a key organiser as the official King of the Roads festival coordinator. From the outset, however, it was a team effort by members of the local club, including the Southern Star correspondent Christy Santry, who, although originally from Ardfield in west Cork, is resident in the east Cork town of Carrigtwohill. It was Santry and Ó Tuama who jointly persuaded the bullet throwers of Armagh to participate in the inaugural event.19

A small group of roughly 20 people travelled from Armagh for the first King of the Roads contest, including top-class bowl players such as Harry Toal (junior) who was that year’s All-Ireland senior champion, having beaten Bill Daly at Whitechurch on 18 August. Daly, of course, had won the World Road Bowling championship over the same course in June and was eager for a return score against Toal. The King of the Roads festival was to provide such an opportunity. Conceived as a senior championship with a broader range of participation than the All-Ireland final (which is essentially an inter-provincial between Munster and Ulster), the King of the Roads event is a contest to which bowlers can qualify in three ways:

1. The current holder of the ‘King of the Road’ title automatically qualifies for the semi-final of the subsequent competition;
2. The current Munster and Ulster senior champions automatically qualify for the semi-finals;
3. There is a qualifying competition for all other senior bowlers to gain entry to one place in the semi-finals. In some years, there are two places for such players if the current title-holder is either the Munster or Ulster champion as well.20
In recent years, the current European champion has also qualified automatically, which means three contestants in one of the semi-finals. In many ways, the competition is a better measure of the best in Ireland than the inter-provincial All-Ireland which, for example, effectively excludes bowlers not from Ulster or Munster. Moreover, the All-Ireland arguably suffers from a privileging of the Ulster Region (whose champion is invariably a finalist), even though that bowl playing area is no bigger than many of the nine Ból Chumann regions in Cork, which are obliged to win the Munster title in order to compete in the All-Ireland final.

The inaugural King of the Roads final in October 1985 was between Harry Toal (junior) and Bill Daly, Ulster and Munster champions respectively, and in a sense it was like a re-run of that year’s All-Ireland senior final. Daly was the favourite, partly because it was Toal’s first time on the Ballincurrag road, and events proved the pundits right. According to Aidan McVeigh (a son of ‘Red’ Joe McVeigh and then secretary of Armagh Ból Chumann), the All-Ireland champion ‘had difficulty handling the twists and turns of a road he had never set foot on before’, and in the end Daly defeated him by two bowls of odds. Daly was crowned the first King of the Roads, and he subsequently took to the competition with alacrity, winning the title several times more in later years.

The first festival was relatively low-key, but within a few years the reputation of the Ballincurrag tournament had grown considerably and it became an essential fixture in the senior bowler’s calendar. The numbers travelling from Armagh increased dramatically and athletes from Germany and the Netherlands have also participated. However, the title has generally gone to a Munster bowler, though Armagh men have managed to reach 10 out of the 20 finals that have occurred since 1985. Michael Toal, easily the best Armagh senior bowler from the late 1980s onwards, has won the King of the Roads title on two occasions (1997 and 2001). Among the consistent winners have been Bill Daly (1985, 1986, 1994, 1999 and 2000), James Buckley of Fair Hill (1989, 1990 and 1993), Pat Butler of Mayfield, Cork city (1991, 1992 and 1993), and Kieran Gould of Fair Hill (1998, 2003 and 2004).

In 1996, a Queen of the Roads championship was added to the festival programme, a belated recognition of growing female involvement in a still male-dominated sport. In an interview in advance of the first contest, Ó Tuama explained this development in terms of very recent increases in the number of women bowlers:

Up until a few years ago there were only about 20 or 30 women bowlers. Their number can be counted in hundreds these days. The numbers haven’t just increased in Cork but in Armagh and Tyrone as well.
The criteria for entry are the same as that for the men’s competition. In the event, the inaugural women’s final saw a fierce three-hand score between Agnes O’Gorman, Kathleen Cooney and Antje Schöttler from Germany. Schöttler, a member of the FKV in Ostfriesland, ultimately put in an amazing performance, surprising some of those present, and she defeated both the Irish bowlers to secure her place as the first Queen of the Roads. The 1996 final is still remembered as one of the most exciting scores ever in the festival, though a riveting contest for the 2004 title, tenaciously fought out in torrential rain between the Carrigtwohill bowler (and eventual third-time winner) Caitriona O’Farrell and Dervla Toal of Armagh, has been described by Christy Santry as a serious contender for the best. Antje Schöttler competed again in 1997, but on that occasion lost out to Kathleen Cooney.

East Cork also benefited significantly from its hosting of these competitions in that it helped to promote the sport in a weakening region. In fact, the East Cork Region of Ból Chumann has suffered from a diminishing local interest in road bowling for a number of decades; where once there
were seven clubs in the Midleton area alone, now there are only four (Ballincurrag, Bridesbridge, Cobb and Knockraha) in the entire East Cork Region. This is remarkable erosion in an area that has strong bowl playing traditions and was relatively vibrant as recently as the 1950s. The game has clearly suffered as a result of increased urbanisation and the transformation of some towns and villages, such as Carrigtwohill and Midleton, into satellites of the city, but this does not explain the decreased interest further east. Unfortunately, weakened areas can become increasingly vulnerable to the extent that the disappearance of a single organiser can mean the demise of the sport in a locality.

Regardless of the reasons, it is evident from the situation in east Cork that road bowling as a community sport remains under threat and it is almost certainly the proactive measures taken by organised bowlers that slows the erosion. The establishment of the King and Queen of the Roads festival by the Ballincurrag Bowling Club was such a measure, though clearly the vision of the founders was national as well as local.

THE FORMATION OF NEW BÓL CHUMANN REGIONS

The 1980s and 1990s saw the formation of a number of new Ból Chumann Regions, incorporating bowlers outside of Munster and, most significantly, the several hundred-strong membership of the rival West Cork Bowling Association (WCBA). In fact, the improvement of relations between Ból Chumann and the WCBA was a gradual process that probably had its origins in the early 1980s, at which stage both organisations had new leaderships with little connection to the original 1963 dispute.

In south-west Cork, Michael O’Sullivan had retired as chairman of the WCBA and a new executive was in place with James Caverly of Skibbereen as chairman and Pat O’Sullivan of Rosscarbery as secretary; other prominent members of the WCBA in the 1980s included John Scully, Caheragh, and William O’Brien, Skibbereen. The appointment of Brendan Roche as chairperson of Ból Chumann in 1980 was viewed positively by the members of the WCBA because he was somebody they respected and, critically, he had no real involvement in previous hostilities between the associations; in addition, the treasurer Jerry Desmond, a farmer from Kilbrittain, was especially well liked and trusted by the west Cork men. Within Ból Chumann itself, prominent younger members such as Séamus Ó Tuama were arguing for some sort of rapprochement. Another factor was that, with insurance costs rising, many in the organisation increasingly saw a large injection of new members as an attractive prospect. Ó Tuama pushed hard for some resolution of the conflict and later was involved in the negotiations that led to a reunion. A crucial figure in bringing the two sides together was Edward O’Driscoll, Ból Chumann’s
Bandon-based legal advisor, who engaged in much behind-the-scenes work. O’Driscoll, who took over from Hedley McCay, was an influential figure within Ból Chumann and over the years was central to most discussions on the rules and constitution of the organisation. Eventually, formal negotiations were held in May 1986, with Ó Tuama, James O’Driscoll and Christy Santry representing Ból Chumann. The WCBA refused to join as part of Ból Chumann’s West Cork Region because they were intent on maintaining their own identity. Consequently, they were invited to form a new Carbery Region, which they did, though it was done gradually and it was 1987 before the two organisations were properly merged. The bulk of the membership and all of the clubs of the West Cork Bowling Association became part of Ból Chumann; it was the largest and most significant influx of members since the amalgamation of the Armagh Bowls Association in 1963, and more comprehensive, since the Armagh Region continues to operate autonomously of the rest of the organisation (underlining, in a tangible sense, the impact that partition has had on popular mentalities since 1920).

Outside of Cork, Ból Chumann managed to establish contact in 1989 with the group of bowlers around Drogheda, County Louth, and the local club affiliated to the national association two years later. With roughly 100 members, the Drogheda and District Road Bowls Club includes bowlers and supporters from Drogheda, Tullyallen, Clogherhead and Termonfeckin, some of whom participate at All-Ireland level in the novice championships. Another pocket of bowl playing was discovered in County Wexford around the same time and also incorporated into Ból Chumann; the Wexford bowlers are concentrated around Ballywilliam and Clonroche near Enniscorthy, and in 2003 one of their number, Kevin Cowman, competed at junior C level, while ten others were registered as novices.

The origins of bowling in Drogheda and Wexford appear to be quite recent, and partly to do with an inflow of Munster and Ulster bowling enthusiasts. The same is not true of the last known bowl playing region in Connacht, the area around Westport in County Mayo. It is not clear when, or how, road bowling arrived in Mayo, but there is a long tradition of the sport in the environs of Westport and probably has been present since at least the late nineteenth century. One local theory is that it came with Cork railway workers, perhaps navvies, as the rail network extended into the west of Ireland in the nineteenth century. Certainly, Mayo bowlers play with the full-circle arm swing favoured by Munster bowlers and not with the underarm throw used by their Ulster counterparts. On the other hand, the game is called ‘bulleting’ in Mayo, a term that fell into disuse in Munster in the early to mid nineteenth century. This could mean that Cork bowlers brought the sport to Mayo at an early stage, but in truth...
further research is required before we can make any assumptions about the origins and development of road bowling in Connacht, which, for instance, may be entirely independent of Munster and Ulster. To begin with, Mayo was not the only area playing the sport; we know for certain that it was once popular in south Galway and it is probable that it also existed elsewhere in the province.

From the 1950s, there had been intermittent contact between the Mayo bowlers and those in Armagh and Cork; in 1959, for instance, an exhibition score had taken place in Westport between Armagh’s Mick Reilly and Owen Healy, which was won by the latter. The interaction was inconsistent, however, and it seems that contact was very irregular until about 1990, when a group of Cork bowling enthusiasts hired a coach and headed west to play some scores with the ‘buleters’ of Mayo; the area they visited was Aughagower, the main bowling district, close to Westport. The Cork party was made up largely of members of the Ballincurrag club – including the then national secretary of Ból Chumann, Séamus Ó Tuama – but also included bowlers from other parts of east Cork, including Willie O’Donovan of Churchtown South, who represented Mayo in the All-Ireland junior A championship in 2004. A relationship subsequently developed between Ból Chumann and the Mayo bowlers, and the area – consisting of two clubs, at Knockrooskey and Larkill – officially affiliated in 1991. Ó Tuama, in his secretary’s report for 1992, described the Mayo affiliation as one of the highlights of his period in office. Members of the Connacht Region currently play at junior C and novice levels; indeed, a Mayo bowl player, Michael Kennedy, won the inaugural All-Ireland title in the novice championship in 1992, while another, Peadar Tunney, was the runner-up in 1993. Likewise, Mayo bowler Willie Carroll performed credibly in both the veteran and junior C All-Ireland championships; Carroll, in fact, was the leading Mayo bowler for many years before the region affiliated to Ból Chumann at which stage he was past his prime.

A North America Region of Ból Chumann was also founded in the early 1990s, largely as a result of a visit by Irish bowlers around that time to Boston; those who travelled on this first exploratory trip included Armagh’s Patrick Comiskey and Pat Mallon, and Cork bowlers Billy McAuliffe, Kevin ‘Mr Bowls’ Leahy and Séamus Ó Tuama. In fact, road bowling by expatriate Irishmen has existed in the United States since the nineteenth century, though it was only in recent times that a club was formed and competitions organised. Many of the participants are originally from Counties Cork and Armagh, but the game also has Irish-American players. In recent times, Ból Chumann has extended its membership in North America to include Irish bowlers resident in other parts of the continent and, in an effort to encourage growth in the region, a
number of All-Ireland finals were successfully held on a remote park road in Boston on 9–10 October 2004.

By 2004, Ból Chumann na hÉireann had branches in all four provinces and in both Britain and the United States. Its one disappointment was the collapse of the Limerick Region, though the game is still played in parts of that county, especially by the Travelling community. At present, the association comprises the following regions: Ulster (ten clubs), Cork City (13 clubs), Carbery (nine clubs), East Cork (four clubs), Gaeltacht (eight clubs), Mid Cork (11 clubs), North Cork (ten clubs), North East Cork (eight clubs), South West Cork (11 clubs), West Cork (12 clubs), Connacht (two clubs), London (one club), Boston (one club), Wexford (one club) and Drogheda (one club). In total, therefore, Munster has 86 clubs, Ulster has ten, Connacht has two and Leinster has two. Moreover, there are ‘social clubs’ in many regions that cater for bowlers who prefer not to play in competition or for stakes.

CONTINUITY OF LEADERSHIP, 1980–2004
The association has benefited from a very stable leadership from the outset, in that most officers have remained in place for significant periods, ensuring a measure of continuity, though equally, in the minds of some members such as Séamus Ó Tuama, leading to a degree of complacency.30 Brendan Roche continued as chairperson until 1991 when he stood down because of work commitments; he was replaced by Jerry Desmond of Kilbrittain, who had already served on the executive since 1977 in the role of treasurer. Desmond secured the position in a straight vote between himself and Noel Magnier of the City Region. A large-framed man, who like Flor Crowley and Brendan Roche was a teetotaller, Jerry Desmond was prominent in west Cork as a member of both the Irish Farmers’ Association and the National Ploughing Association; he was also actively engaged in politics, strongly nationalist in his outlook, and a staunch member of Fianna Fáil. Christy Santry, who worked closely with him on the executive of Ból Chumann, has written of Desmond:

I feel it would be fitting to say that he was ‘a man of the soil’, a man of the ordinary people of this country, a man like many more of us of strong nationalistic feelings, a man who had admired the many great patriots of this country and indeed who at every suitable opportunity extolled the virtues of the men who had fought in the interests of Irish freedom.

It was such beliefs and idealising surely that steered him towards the Fianna Fáil political party, that steered him towards openly expressing his support and admiration for the policies and philosophies of the party and indeed for former Taoiseach, Charles J. Haughey.31
Desmond was a popular chairperson, but his reign was short-lived (compared to those of Crowley and Roche). On 9 November 1996, he had a massive heart attack while waiting to deliver an oration at the graveside of 12-year-old Finbarr Murphy of Templemartin, a rising star in the sport, who had been killed tragically by a car at Ballinacurra near Upton. Attempts by Christy Santry and others to revive Desmond failed; there was an appropriateness of sorts, Santry remarked afterwards, that ‘he breathed his last right in the midst of bowl playing men and women, young and old alike, with whom he had laboured and toiled voluntarily and unselfishly in the best interests of the sport throughout an almost entire lifetime.’

Jerry Desmond was also president of the International Bowlplaying Association at the time of his death, a position he had held since 1994. The sudden death of the chairman created an unexpected vacancy in the association and at the annual convention on 30 November, held in St Finbarr’s GAA Hall in Togher (Cork city), there were two candidates for the position – the energetic and innovative east Cork man, Séamus Ó Tuama, and the experienced former chairman of the West Cork Bowling Association, James Caverly. In the event, Ó Tuama won the vote and became the fourth chairperson of Ból Chumann na hÉireann; Caverly...
was subsequently appointed as Public Relations Officer. Ó Tuama, a lecturer in University College, Cork, and bowling correspondent with the *Cork Examiner*, also took over the presidency of the International Bowlplaying Association, an organisation he had considerable experience of because of his key role when the European championships were held in Cork in 1992. In Ból Chumann, he had always shown himself eager to expand the organisation beyond Cork and Armagh, and this interest in other regions was equally evident in his work for the IBA; in 1997, for instance, he travelled to Italy on behalf of the international association in order to solidify links with recently discovered bowlers there.

His tenure as chairperson of Ból Chumann was renewed at the 1998 convention, which was an unusually large and at times acrimonious gathering that witnessed some open discontent regarding the allegedly high-handed behaviour of the executive. Ó Tuama was accused of having a distant and non-transparent leadership style. In a more positive vein, the convention endorsed motions – put forward by Susan Greene and Gretta Cormican on behalf of the executive – that expanded the range of women’s All-Ireland championships and made the Ladies’ Committee a statutory body of the association. A motion, however, from the West Cork Region recommending the expansion of the Ból Chumann executive by one to include a Ladies’ Officer was defeated. Nonetheless, the new executive committee did include women in central positions; the members were Séamus Ó Tuama (chairperson), Susan Greene (vice-chairperson), Linda Bowen (secretary), Michael McSweeney (president), John O’Donovan (treasurer), John Cronin (fixtures secretary), Denis Kelly (registrar), Dan McCarthy (youth officer) and Christy Santry (PRO). Another motion was passed calling for the appointment of a development team to be financed by grants from the LEDA programme; the funding was subsequently secured for Ból Chumann by James Caverly of Skibbereen, and one significant outcome was the production of the training video *Splitting the Sop*. Additional funding from the Department of Sport and from the Sports Council allowed the appointment of Ger Tobin and John Kenny as development officers, and Larry O’Reilly at a later date.

In late 1999, Ó Tuama was replaced as chairperson by Brendan Roche, who emerged from retirement to take up the position for a second time. Roche, in an interview with the *Evening Echo*, claimed that it was his intention to ‘delegate more, to get others involved and make our organisation more transparent.’ Another of his priorities was the continued

(facing page) 2004 All-Ireland champion, Kieran Gould of Fair Hill, Cork. Runner-up that year was Michael Toal of Armagh. The match was played at Ballincureig, Co. Cork. Photo: Denis McGarry
promotion of the bowling ‘social clubs’ that had emerged over the previous decade – these clubs, 26 of which existed in 2000, are often linked to Ból Chumann, though some are entirely independent, but are not involved in championships and strictly exclude stakes or any type of gambling at scores. Ból Chumann continues to promote these social clubs and many now exist throughout County Cork and elsewhere.

Brendan Roche died at his home on Tramore Road in Cork city in late March 2001, the third Ból Chumann chairperson to die in office. He was replaced, on an interim basis, by the Ballincollig-based vice-chairperson Susan Greene, who thereby became the first-ever female chairperson of the association. From a strong bowling family, Susan Greene (née Barry) is a formidable bowler as well as administrator; in 1995, the leading bowler Gretta Cormican rated her as her most powerful Irish opponent: ‘We had two great scores in Macroom. We both threw milers, no-one could believe it, we couldn’t shake one another off.’38 By 2001, Greene was also an experienced bowling official and at the annual convention in December that year she was confirmed in her new role, despite a challenge from James Caverly. Her election was indicative of a huge cultural shift within the world of bowling. Women are no longer seen as outsiders to the sport; indeed, the changed atmosphere was evident by the mid 1990s and the election in 1995 of Linda Bowen of Whitechurch as the first-ever female chairperson of the Cork City Region was a hugely significant event.39 Bowen subsequently gave the opening welcome at that year’s Ból Chumann convention. The Southern Star spotted the historical import of the occasion, remarking that the gathering ‘did create its own modicum of history in that for the first time ever the official words of welcome were spoken by a woman, Ms Linda Bowen, the newly elected chairperson of the city region.’40 Important as well was the publication in 1996 of Brian Toal’s book on the contemporary game, Road Bowling in Ireland, which not only recognises the role of women in the sport, but gives extensive coverage to the All-Ireland women’s championships since their establishment in 1981.41 The election of Susan Greene to the highest position in the association was the culmination of a long process, whereby women first established themselves on the roads and then in the administration of the game.

Greene has proved a singularly popular choice as chairperson and is seen as a progressive and steadying influence. The other principal officers of Ból Chumann in 2005 are Brendan Hayes (secretary), a Garda serving in Cork city but from Drinagh in the county, and the energetic James O’Driscoll (treasurer), also from Drinagh, but now resident in Ballincollig. O’Driscoll is a key figure whose contribution extends far beyond the role of treasurer, and he is engaged particularly in promoting youth involvement in the sport and the creation of inclusive non-competitive social clubs.
TRAVELLERS AND ROAD BOWLING
One section of the road bowling world that has received little recognition, despite a considerable presence in the sport, is the Traveller community. Irish Travellers have made an immense, and particularly valuable, contribution to the game, despite their small numbers. In fact, the Traveller population amounts to roughly 20,000 people in the entire country, yet they produce as much as 10 per cent of the sport’s senior players each year, including top-class bowlers such as Pat Butler of Mayfield, Cork; John O’Driscoll of Knocknaheeny, Cork; and Mikey O’Driscoll of Carrigtwohill. Pat Butler, an exceptional bowler, is one of the outstanding figures from the 1990s and has unquestionably secured a place in the history of the game, having won the All-Ireland senior championship and the King of the Roads festival on multiple occasions. Moreover, on 18 August 1992, Butler became the first-ever road bowler to enter the Guinness Book of Records when he covered in excess of a mile in

Declan O’Donovan of Bandon (holding trophy) shakes hands with Bill Daly (runner-up), Grange, near Courtmacsherry, Co. Cork, mid-1990s. Photo: Denis McCarr
11 throws at Whitechurch, County Cork; the record was set during a score with James Buckley, staged principally to raise funds for Romanian orphans. He remains a powerful force in contemporary bowling.

Road bowling is a Travellers’ game, in so far as, like handball, it is one of their main sports. Bowling belongs to Travellers as much as it belongs to the settled community and there is a high level of integration between the two groups on the bowling roads of Ireland; it is not a game in which Travellers are outsiders to be ‘welcomed in’ by others, and most bowlers accept this reality. Indeed, in parts of County Limerick, the game is kept alive entirely by the Traveller community, who generally start to learn at a much earlier age than children from the settled community. Unfortunately, the bigotry and prejudice faced by Travellers on a daily basis is not entirely absent from road bowling circles and, according to Séamus Ó Tuama, there are some who believe that an association with the Traveller community is detrimental to the public image of the sport. Ó Tuama, however, believes that such bigotry is not representative of the majority of bowling enthusiasts from the settled community and he points to the high level of integration as evidence of significant amity. Nonetheless, it is clear that road bowling is not free of anti-Traveller prejudice and it is striking that almost no articles and books on the sport have thus far mentioned their considerable presence in the game.

One person who did acknowledge publicly the involvement of Travellers was Eamonn O’Carroll, the founding secretary of Ból Chumann. Writing in the Muskerry Herald in 1987, O’Carroll contrasted the attitude of Ból Chumann favourably with that of the GAA and other sporting bodies:

A great deal has been said and written about the integration of the ‘Travelling people’ into the community. So much of it has proved to be either lip-service, or a vote catching exercise. How many of them have been invited or encouraged by the GAA? How many are members of the NACA or BLE? This list is long and revealing.

In fact, Travellers have been involved with organised bowling since it was first codified and have produced many champions at all levels of the game.

‘ENDOWED WITH GREATNESS’

Since the foundation of Ból Chumann na hÉireann in 1954, the number of national championships, local tournaments and scores continued to increase as each decade passed. For a sport that exists entirely through voluntary effort, it is remarkably vibrant. It also continues to produce great sportsmen and women who are ‘heroes’ to those that follow the sport: athletes such as Pat Butler, Gretta Cormican, Michael Toal, James
Buckley, Caitriona O’Farrell, Bill Daly, Kieran Gould, Dervla Toal, John O’Driscoll, Eddie Carr, and many others.

The towering presence in road bowling over the past half-century, of course, remains Mick Barry, who retired from bowling as late as 1997. In his late 80s now, he is a living legend among road bowlers and a man many hope to emulate. A life-long teetotaller, Barry began paid work early, entering employment at University College, Cork, in 1933 as a 14-year-old assistant to Harry Glavin, then head gardener. He went on to work for over 50 years in the university, retiring in 1985, after serving 20 years as head gardener himself. On 18 December 2003, he returned to the university, this time to receive an Honorary Master of Arts degree in recognition of his immense contribution to the world of sport; it was a significant occasion and among the many present on the day were Bishop Buckley and leading members of Ból Chumann such as Susan Greene, James O’Driscoll and Séamus Ó Tuama.

Another member of Ból Chumann – Professor Seán Ó Coileáin of the Department of Modern Irish – gave the speech in honour of Mick Barry. A mixture of fond memories and heartfelt admiration, he detailed the events that made Barry such a dominant figure on the bowling roads of Ireland. He went on:
He was a man among men, who took them as he found them, a man of extraordinary presence, a presence that derives less from physical stature than from a natural authority and self-belief which must have contributed significantly to his achievements. In victory or defeat he was never known to lose his dignity even under the most extreme pressure that comes with gladiatorial combat for high stakes. An iron discipline and will went to supplement and prolong his natural talents: he neither drank nor smoked, and left the invariable celebrations to others. He himself stresses that his greatest good fortune was to have married his wife Betty in 1948; their six children grew to adulthood and their spouses are here to celebrate with them today.

It is appropriate that we should honour him on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Ból Chumann na hÉireann, the regulatory body of the popular sport that he endowed with greatness. One thinks of him as a monumental presence not unlike the Chetwynd Viaduct near his home in Waterfall, perhaps his only true rival, one that he finally conquered with a mighty loft on St Patrick’s Day, 1955, when it was still decked out in elaborate ironwork, not stripped down as it later became.46

The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Ból Chumann was marked in 2004 with celebratory dinners and the placing of a plaque in the village of Enniskeane to commemorate the historic event. The most significant legacy, of course, is the sport itself and that it still thrives despite the pressures it has endured; its survival is the work of individuals and communities from Cork to Armagh, people and places that believe it is more than just a game. ‘Bowling’, remarked Bishop John Buckley in 1995, ‘is bred in our bones. It is part of the texture of Cork.’47 This sense that the sport is an organic part of local cultural life is one that is shared by many people from localities in Cork, Armagh, Mayo and other parts of the island.
long bullets, or road bowling, survived in Ireland, despite intermittent efforts by the civil authorities into the early decades of the twentieth century to suppress it out of existence. Urbanisation, increased traffic on the roads and the rise of organised field sports also failed to fatally undermine the game; indeed, by the 1930s, the bowling community had begun to organise and codify the sport in the Munster region. In Cork the game enjoyed a renaissance and prominent bowlers, such as Tim Delaney and Red Crowley, became household names; the sport firmly emerged from the underground existence it endured over the previous century and more. Moreover, the emergence in 1954 of Ból Chumann na hÉireann was a crucial development that heralded a second and more enduring renaissance, with the game transformed from one constricted in localities to a sport with a tangible national and international presence. In real terms, Ból Chumann made the codified game that exists today.

However, despite the achievements of organised bowlers from the 1950s, road bowling remains a sport with a narrow geographical base and this is unlikely to change in the medium-term. Indeed, in some areas, such as east Cork, it remains under some pressure. Nonetheless, it is clear that Ból Chumann, despite its limited resources, has adopted a proactive approach, defending the bowling heartlands by going on the offensive, seeking new regions and new international allies. In addition, officials in the association, particularly leading officers such as James O’Driscoll, are concerned with changing the look of the sport, producing professional signage and other paraphernalia for Ból Chumann events, with the intention of giving the game a more sophisticated image. Likewise, Ból Chumann is planning the establishment of a bowling arena, probably for west Cork, that will facilitate off-road training and the promotion of the game among young people.
The increased involvement of teenagers and children has been a key objective of Ból Chumann throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Youth officers have been appointed, a professional training video produced and brochures aimed at children have been widely distributed. Such a strategy, if pursued consistently, should pay dividends for the sport, though a survey carried out in the 1990s, suggesting that most people are introduced to the sport by a family member, indicates that it needs to find ways beyond the parameters of the existing bowling community. The planned bowling arena could be crucial in this regard, in that such a centre would provide easy access to the game. Ból Chumann, of course, does not own road bowling, which is played by many people who are not members of the association, and the encouragement of independent, as well as affiliated, social clubs could play an important role in involving enthusiasts who want to play, but would rather avoid competitions and scores for stakes.

In 2004, Ból Chumann na hÉireann celebrated 50 years of existence. It was a half-century of significant achievements during which bowling enthusiasts came together and by their own efforts ensured that the sport will surely survive another half-century and beyond. Long bullets is a remarkable game that has come through inimical times, and its maintenance and promotion should be of concern to everybody with an interest in national heritage and local culture.
Glossary of terms used in road bowling

The following is a list of terms used commonly in road bowling, including expressions and words peculiar to the Cork, Mayo and Armagh bowling regions.

**Bowl of odds** (Cork): Used when one bowler leads another by the length of one full throw.

**Bullet** (Armagh): The bowl.

**Bullets** (Armagh): The game of bowling.

**Bulleting** (Mayo): Playing road bowling.

**Butt** (Armagh) or **Tip** (Cork): A mark placed on the road to indicate the starting point of a game or ‘score’, and also the finishing point of a throw from which a bowler must throw his next bowl.

**Fore/Front bowl**: When a bowler’s throw passes the end position of his opponent’s last throw.

**Make a book**: Make up the stake.

**Hind bowl**: When one bowl is behind another after an equal number of throws.

**Loft** (Cork): A technique favoured by Munster (and Mayo) bowlers, whereby a full-circle arm action hurls the bowl into the air at the beginning of the throw. The bowl often covers up to 80 yards in the air before hitting the ground and rolling. Sometimes used to round corners.

**Long bullets** or **Long bowls**: The original name of the game, which fell into disuse in Munster from the early nineteenth century, and was shortened to ‘bullets’ in Ulster.

**Open a corner** or **‘Out and all!’**: Gaining a position at a corner that means the next throw can be a straight one.
Referee and Markers: The referee takes charge of the game and is responsible for accurate score-keeping. The markers place a chalk mark on both sides of the road where the bowl has stopped after each throw.

A score: A game of bowling.

Shot (Ulster) or throw (Cork): The distance travelled from the ‘tip’.

Spin or screw (Armagh): To move a bowl to the right or left to negotiate a curve in the road.

The stake: Sum of money played for. It is made up of equal amounts from backers of both bowl players. The sides must be balanced before the game begins.

Stake-holder: A neutral official who holds the stake until the score is complete.

Stuck or dead bowl: This is where a bowler’s shot did not come onto the road of play after leaving his/her hand. The penalty is the loss of one throw.

Tip (Cork): see Butt.
In rural districts, along the quiet roads, bowling is one of the pleasantest and finest of summer games, and the boys should not forget it in their ardour for hurling and football. It is a pastime which is in the highest degree favourable to muscular development and to the keeping alive of a healthy manly spirit. It may be inferior to hurling in this respect – hurling requires more dash and activity, and more can take part in it; but, nevertheless, I repeat that bowling is a splendid pastime and worthy of every encouragement and support. In most places the police authorities always keep an eye to the bowlers, and sometimes haul them up before magistrates, who weep over the ‘bowling nuisance’, inflict small fines, and tell the ‘culprits’ not to do it again. Whether there is any special law against bowling I have not been able to ascertain, but I am inclined to think the laws against obstructions of thoroughfares are strained to be levelled against the bowlers. The existence or non-existence of any specific regulation, and the watchfulness of the ‘Peelers’, are of small importance, however, and should not be taken at all into consideration by the hardy votaries of this game. Of course, I do not mean that bowlers should allow themselves to be taken by surprise and mulcted in fines, no matter how small. I would recommend that a few scouts be always on the alert to ‘spot’ any Peelers who may be inclined to make themselves disagreeable, and give timely warning of their approach. It is a perfectly legitimate game for all I know to the contrary. With ordinary care on the parts of the participants and the spectators, it is not at all more dangerous than any other manly amusement. By keeping it alive, my friends, you will benefit yourselves and the cause of true athletics at the same time.

For the benefit of those who are not acquainted with bowling, I will give some of my own experiences of it, as obtained during a period of twelve years – partly from active engagement in it and partly from the part of an interested spectator. My earliest recollections are intimately associated with it. I remember the great brawny West-Corkonians marching past my father’s house to the rendezvous in the main road, about half a mile away, where the young men from the whole country-side around congregated to engage in the manly art. I remember quite well how I used to stand on a fence at the back of the house on a fine Sunday evening, to see at a distance the bowlers in their white shirts and jackets scattered all over the whole length of the road for a distance of two miles. I was
yet too young to be allowed to go with my bigger brothers to see the fun, and how I longed to be big enough to join the laughing crowds, who, on Sunday after Sunday during the summer months, wended their way to the scene of the action! After a few years, however, I was permitted with many admonitions to be very careful, to take part in the marshalling of the clans. What a time I had of it then! With what pleasure I trudged along with the bowlers, bearing a great frieze coat of one or other of the players, and, as a rule, also wearing his great soft felt hat, while he wore my little cap on the side of his big nut, finding it much more convenient in the practice of the game than his own head gear! And what a proud youth I was when one day, being in a neighbouring town, I plucked up the courage to enter an ironmonger’s shop to purchase a bowl! It was a nice round one, of cast metal, with a little ring round the circumference of it, marking where the molten metal penetrated into the interstices of the mould, and it had the figures ‘16’ marked plainly on it, denoting that it was sixteen ounces in weight. A sixteen ounce bowl is very serviceable, but a twenty ounce one is more favoured by the best players – ‘It has a better hoult,’ some of them might say. What care I kept of it, what a watch I kept over it when in play, for fear it would get lost among the furze or briars bordering the road, and at times when it did get into ambush, how I used to tremble for its safety! At last it was actually lost, and that evening I went home in a very disconsolate state of mind. It was the first bowl I possessed and it was the last.

Well, years flew by, and with them I grew bigger and stronger, and at length was able to take active part myself in bowling. Three others and myself (though sometimes six and even eight of us took part) would arrange ‘partners’ – two against two, and when six played, three sets of two each. On rare occasions we had as many as four sets of partners. We would then agree upon the boundaries or ‘score,’ as they are called in West Cork. One from each set went forward to watch where each try would stop, to make a ‘tip’ there, and throw back the bowl, till one from each set of partners had had his try. Then from those ‘tips’ the others would throw, each throwing from the mark where his partner’s had stopped. This procedure was repeated until the ‘score’s end’ was reached, when, whichever two had passed the ‘score’ the farthest, after each side had thrown an equal number of ‘shots’, were declared the winners. Then we repeated the same course backward and forward, again and again, until the going down of the evening sun warned us to our homes. Other portions of the road, and, indeed, all the good roads for miles around, were similarly occupied in my time.

It was the custom, in my neighbourhood, for a champion of one parish to meet the champion of a neighbouring parish at some convenient place for both on one or two occasions in the year. This meeting was looked
upon as of much importance, was talked of for weeks and weeks before it actually took place, and when it finally came off attracted thousands of spectators from both parishes. I have a distinct recollection of one of these, which took place between a really splendid young fellow of our parish and the ‘best man’ of the next parish. After last Mass crowds could be seen crossing fields, and bounding over ditches and hedges, on their way to the rendezvous, which was at a little bridge, over a rivulet forming the boundary between the parishes. The preliminaries having been arranged, the road was cleared, and the champions opened the proceedings amid much excitement. Our side won the toss, and consequently chose the road leading into our parish. The champions were the observed of all. Both were bereft of coat and vest, and had handkerchiefs tied round their waists. There was a period of breathless excitement, when our champion stepped out, folded his shirt sleeve high up his arm, took up the bowl, and with it a fistful of the road-dust to counteract the perspiration, then stood at the starting point, studied the ground carefully with his eye, and mentally marked the spot where he wished to ‘play it.’ He then walked smartly backwards for a few yards, turned round, ran some steps, and, with a magnificent bound, made a swift revolution of his arm, and shot the 20-ounce bowl high through the air. There was a rather sharp turn in the road, and a good rise. However, the bowl went bounding forward, after being ‘played’, and the champion’s admirers breathed freely that he had commenced so well. The ‘score’ on this occasion was about two miles long, and, in the course of it, our man succeeded in getting a ‘bowl of odds’, or, in other words, got the length of one try ahead of his opponent, and won easily. A terrific cheer burst out at this result, and the victor was universally congratulated. So ended one of our greatest bowling contests.

In all my experience of bowling, I never knew of a serious accident, though I heard of a few as having taken place in another part of the county. The ‘Peelers’, too, seldom troubled us; and when they did, by chance, come round, we knew of their approach (indeed, I frequently acted as scout), and we either got up an impromptu dance, or engaged ourselves in ‘casting’ stones, until they passed by. It is some years now since I have seen the bowlers of my ‘native heath’; but I have only heard last week that the boys are at work still, and with unabated zeal. Long may they continue so; and may their good example bear fruit!

[Published in the Celtic Times, 2 July 1887]
APPENDIX 3

‘Rules of Play’ (1955)

The following are the earliest extant ‘Rules of Play’ used by Ból Chumann na hÉireann, and were adopted for use in 1955; there were significant changes made at the beginning of 1956, restricting the stake, for example, to £150 a side. The revised 1956 rules also deemed that a score was finished after 30 throws (the average is 18 or less today) and instructed bowl players to go to the venue regardless of the weather, or face suspension.

The rules below are those used in 1955 during the first competition for the Joe Waters Cup held under the auspices of Ból Chumann na hÉireann. In large measure, they were an adaptation of the rules previously used by the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association.

- Players are subject to the Rules of the Association, whose decisions in all matters shall be final and binding. Players may not alter these rules.
- The members of Ból-Chumann na hÉireann shall give decisions on the spot.
- The Committee shall decide the starting time, and players must be ready to ‘throw off’, half an hour after time of assembly.
- Only the committee have power to postpone or cancel a score; or postpone the finish of a score.
- The committee shall hold the stake, which shall be handed over to the declared winner.
- The committee shall not be responsible for accidents to players or spectators.
- No bowl shall be thrown until the committee is satisfied that the road is ‘clear’. Deliberate delay in throwing may entail disqualification.
- Betting points shall be marked. If bowls are declared ‘even’, the bets shall go on to the next throw.
- The bowls used shall be 28 oz and marked.
- The player who wins a toss of a coin shall have choice of bowls and choice of first throw.
- A tape shall be used if necessary.
- If, when lofting a corner, a player leaves his bowl inside or on a fence, wall or pailing, it shall be a ‘bowl of odds’. The player must then again throw from original mark. The whole road given for lofting.
- All runs given, all stops down. (At special points the committee shall decide where a bowl is to be marked).
· Bowls must be delivered from road of play.
· A player shall be called once only by his opponent, for running out. The committee shall then ‘stand’ the player, who shall be disqualified after two further calls.
· In the event of a player lofting a corner, he has the option of delivering his bowl from behind his mark.
· There is no entry fee. Sixpence per pound in the stake shall be deducted, which shall be used in defraying expenses, and towards the prize fund. This shall be deducted in the first round only.
· The Joe Waters Championship Cup shall be presented to the winner, who shall have custody of it for a period to be decided by the Committee.
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Eamonn O’Carroll Papers (private possession)
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Cork Mercantile Chronicle
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Introduction
1 In west Waterford, and around Youghal in east Cork, however, it is pronounced ‘b-oul’, like the dish.
2 The term ‘butt’ is used exclusively in Ulster; in east Cork, the ‘tip’ was once known commonly as the ‘mark’.
4 Cork Examiner, 15 July 1881.
5 Flor Crowley, In West Cork Long Ago (Cork, 1979), p. 27.
6 West Cork, 24 February 1995.
8 The Examiner, 17 February 1996.

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1 United Ireland, 25 October 1884; W.F. Mandle, The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics, 1884–1924 (Dublin, 1987), p. 17; Marcus de Búrca, Michael Casack and the GAA (Dublin, 1989), p. 120.
2 De Búrca, Michael Casack and the GAA, p. 25.
3 Jeremiah O’Mahony, ‘Irish bowl-playing’, Ireland’s Own, 14 May 1913; Ból Chumann na hÉireann, Let’s Go Road Bowling (Cork, 1999), p. 1. Also, see the instruction video, Splitting the Sop: A Young Person’s Guide to Road Bowling, produced by Ból Chumann na hÉireann in 1995, which refers to Cú Chulainn as a bowl player. On the other hand, the prominent bowl player and official Eamonn O’Carroll has suggested that the game was introduced to Ireland in the late nineteenth century by landlords and the aristocracy, and subsequently imitated by the peasantry (see the Muskerry Herald, 16 October 1987 and 20 May 1988). Like the practitioners of most sports, many bowl players are more concerned with the present rather than the historical past of their game.
9 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 156.
16 Dictionary of Scottish Language (Edinburgh, 1818).
18 Ibid., pp 32–3.
19 Ibid. p. 33.
20 Quoted in ibid., p. 33.
21 Ibid., pp 34–5.
22 Ibid., p. 13.
24 Jennie Holliman, American Sports, 1785–1833 (Durham, N.C., 1931), p. 83. Holliman’s brief description of the sport, however, is of one version and cannot be taken as an accurate general depiction of the game in North America. She wrote, for example, of ‘goals’ on either side, which may have been an aspect in some regions, but certainly were not used everywhere and do not feature in many other accounts.
27 Emmitsburg Chronicle, 27 March 1908.
28 Holliman, American Sports, 1785–1833, p. 84; Session Laws Made and Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Maryland, 1828, 1829 (Annapolis, 1830– ), vol. 540, pp 629, 668; Session Laws, 1830, vol. 212, p.24; and Session Laws, 1832, vol. 547, p. 527. These banned ‘long bullets’ from the environs of Creager’s town and Middletown, both in Frederick County, and from Charleston in Cecil County.
29 Holliman, American Sports, 1785–1833, p. 84.
31 Pat Rogers (ed.), Jonathan Swift: the Complete Poems (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp 387 and 798–9. The first two lines of this verse are well known among road bowlers, but invariably the second line has been quite wrongly rendered as ‘You sat and low’d him all the sunshine day’, imposing an entirely misleading idyllic sensibility on Swift’s decidedly mocking allusion. Moreover, the omission of the final two lines obfuscates the context.
36 Day and McWilliams (eds), Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland, vol. 6, parishes of Londonderry, I, 1830, 1834, 1836: Arboe, Artea, Ballinderry, Ballyscullion, Magherafelt, Termoneeny (Belfast, 1990), p. 17.
37 Day and McWilliams (eds), Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland, vol. 8, parishes of Antrim, II, 1832–8: Lisburn and South Antrim (Belfast, 1991), pp 46, 113, 130, 141; eid., Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland, vol. 21, parishes of County Antrim,
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4 David Dickson, Old World Colony: Cork and South Munster, 1630–1830 (Cork, 2005), p. 204.
5 Ibid., p. 205.
6 Cork Hibernian Chronicle, 11 August 1788, 7 August 1797.
8 Cork Hibernian Chronicle, 11 August 1788.
9 Cork Evening Post, 15 August 1791.
10 Cork Hibernian Chronicle, 7 August 1797.
11 Cork Hibernian Chronicle, 10 August 1797.
12 Cork Mercantile Chronicle, 23 February 1803.
13 Cork Mercantile Chronicle, 22 April 1803.
14 Cork Mercantile Chronicle, 12 April 1805.
16 Cork Advertiser, 23 June 1807.
17 Cork Constitution, 21 May 1829.
18 Cork Examiner, 5 April 1869.
Chapter 3

3 See the records published in John L. O’Sullivan, By Carraigdonn and Owenabue (Ballinhassig, Co. Cork, 1990), p. 354.
4 Cork Examiner, 7 October 1908. For Quirke’s age and occupation, see the 1911 census household schedule for John Quirke and family, Carrigroe, parish of Rathbarry, Clonakilty, Co. Cork, National Archives of Ireland (NAI).
5 See the article by Flor Crowley written in 1949 and published in the Southern Star, 21 December 1990.
7 Francis H. Tuckey, The County and City of Cork Remembrancer; or Annals of the County and City of Cork (Cork, 1837), pp 161–2.
9 Cork Examiner, 7 July 1910. Also, see a similar letter published in the same paper on 5 July.
10 Cork Examiner, 4 July 1913.
11 Cork Examiner, 10 September 1913.
12 For Michael Coleman’s age and occupation, see the 1911 census household schedule for 45 Commons Road, Cork, NAI.
13 Chris M. O’Sullivan, ‘A real national game’, Ireland’s Own, 2 July 1924.
14 Jeremiah O’Mahony, ‘Irish bowl-playing’, Ireland’s Own, 14 May 1913.
17 O’Sullivan, By Carraigdonn and Owenabue, p. 351.
19 Dermot Hicks, Road Bowls in Armagh (Armagh, 1973), p. 12.
Chapter 4

3 Cork Examiner, 30, 31 December 1955.
4 Cork Examiner, 1 March 1937.
7 On Flor Crowley’s press work in the 1930s, see his comments in ‘The chairman’s column’, An Ból Chumann Monthly, June 1973, p. 18.
8 Interview with Noel Magnier, Cork, 15 June 2003.
10 Cork Examiner, 29 May 1933.
11 Cork Examiner, 18 December 1933.
12 Sunday Independent, 8 May 1955.
14 Cork Examiner, 24 May 1935.
15 Cork Examiner, 1 March 1937.
16 Ibid.
17 Cork Examiner, 28 August, 23 December 1937.
18 Cork Examiner, 31 December 1955.
19 Cork Examiner, 28 August 1937.
20 Cork Examiner, 23 August 1938.
21 O’Carroll, for example, participated in a tournament at Passage West in 1938; see Cork Examiner, 18 July 1938.
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23 Gerald Rafferty, ‘At the Mill Row corner, they’d meet there’ in Murray (ed.), The Armagh Bullet Thrower, p. 46.
25 Ibid., p. 63.
26 Cork Examiner, 27 February, 16 August 1940.
28 Cork Examiner, 26 June 1945.
30 Cork Examiner, 8 September 1948.

Chapter 5

3 Hicks, Road Bowls in Armagh, pp 20–1.
5 County, 1 July 2003.
6 Mick Barry was born at Waterfall, County Cork, but his birthplace is often given mistakenly as Barryroe in west Cork, which was where his father came from.
8 Carroll, ‘King of the roads’, p. 48.
9 Dermot Hicks, ‘Mick Barry interviewed’, in Murray (ed.), The Armagh Bullet Thrower, p. 79.
10 Hicks, Road Bowls in Armagh, p. 24.
12 Hicks, Road Bowls in Armagh, p. 17.
13 Jack O’Shea quoted in Hicks, ‘How the Cork men and Armagh men met,’ p. 54.
14 Armagh Observer, 18 September 1954, quoted in Hicks, Road Bowls in Armagh, p. 21; Brian Toal, Road Bowling in Ireland (Armagh, 1996), p. 12.
15 Eamonn O’Carroll, ‘How Ból Chumann was born, named, grew and developed,’ An Ból Chumann Monthly, July 1973, p. 9.
16 On Liam O’Keeffe, see Noel Magnier’s profile in County, 17 June 2003.
17 Cork Examiner, 26 November 1954.
18 Flor Crowley, ‘The chairman’s column’, An Ból Chumann Monthly, July 1973, p. 10. The date of the first meeting of Ból Chumann is often given as 20 November 1954, but in fact the minutes book indicates that the meeting occurred on 22 November.
20 For Flor Crowley’s membership of the All-Ireland Bowl Players’ Association, see O’Carroll, ‘How Ból Chumann was born, named, grew and developed’, p. 9.
21 Crowley, ‘The chairman’s column’, p. 11.
22 Ibid., pp 10–11. Those present on 22 November 1954 were Donal Moynihan, Diarmuid Buckley and Steve O’Connor (Macroom); Eamonn O’Carroll, John Sheehan,
Chapter 6

1 Cork Examiner, 28 February 1963.

2 Ból Chumann na hÉireann (hereafter BCE), executive committee minute book, minutes of meetings held on 7 and 27 March 1961.

3 J. Hedley McCay was prominently involved with Ból Chumann from the 1960s and was particularly close to Flor Crowley. Like Crowley, he was a devout nationalist with a strong interest in history – on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 rising, Mercier Press published a book by McCay on Patrick Pearse; see Hedley McCay, *Padraic Pearsse: A New Biography* (Cork, 1966).

4 Cork Examiner, 28 February 1963. The ten plaintiffs who brought the case were listed as Denis McSweeney, 7 Morrison's Island; Jimmy Deane, 3 St Vincent's Street; Richard Barry, Ballintober, Carrigtwohill; Jack Forde, Curraheen, Carrigrohane; William Whelton, Gortnaglough, Ballinhassig; Séamus O'Shea, Colleen Lodge, Castle Road, Ballincollig; Michael O'Driscoll, Carrigtwohill P.O.; Timothy Cronin, 44 Marian Park, Blackrock; James McCarthy, Mawmore, Enniskeane; and John Duggan, Carrigrohane.
5 Ibid.
6 BCE, executive committee minute book, minutes of meeting held on 6 May 1964. The issue had also been discussed at a meeting on 4 March, but it was agreed to seek legal advice before making a decision.
7 Ibid., minutes of meeting held on 7 October 1964.
8 Ibid., minutes of meeting held on 3 March 1965.
9 Ibid., minutes of meeting held on 3 November 1965.
10 Ibid., minutes of meeting held on 19 May 1965.
11 Information from James Caverly, erstwhile chairman of the West Cork Bowling Association, 10 October 2004.
12 On Hughie Trainor (1920–2003) and the story of his perpetual All-Ireland senior men’s trophy, see Brain Toal, ‘Hughie Trainor was a valued patron of road bowling’, in Ból Chumann na hÉireann, All-Ireland Bowling Finals, Ballincurrag, Co. Cork, 10–11 July 2004 (Cork, 2004), pp 6–8.
13 County, 15 July 2003.
15 County, 15 July 2003.
16 Armagh Observer, 8 August 1964.
17 County, 24 June 2003.
19 Bill Bennett died in January 1967; Red Crowley in May that year. See Cork Examiner, 7 January, 29 May 1967.
20 Evening Echo, 23 April 1965.
21 Evening Echo, 1, 8 May 1965.
22 Evening Echo, 2, 16, 30 April 1965.
23 Evening Echo, 1 May 1965.
24 BCE, executive committee minute books, minutes of meeting held on 19 May 1965.
26 Toal, Road Bowling in Ireland, pp 87–8.
28 Toal, Road Bowling in Ireland, p. 101.
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31 Interview with Noel Magnier, 15 June 2003.
32 Noel Magnier Papers, Minute book of Players’ Representative Body, meeting held on 9 October 1972.
33 Noel Magnier Papers, Paddy Comiskey to Noel Magnier, 29 April 1973.
34 Noel Magnier Papers, Paddy Comiskey to Noel Magnier, 29 January 1974.
146 Long Bullets

40 Southern Star, 10 May 1969.
45 Kujas, Klootschießen, Bößeln, Schleuderball, p. 98.
46 The video, Splitting the Sop: A Young Person’s Guide to Road Bowling (1996), shows bowlers training in sporting apparel, though it also includes footage of typical games in which the participants are seen to wear ordinary clothes.
47 Toal, Road Bowling in Ireland, p. 249.
52 Irish Times, 8 October 2004.
53 Casey, Bowling Down London Way, p. 91.

Chapter 7
1 Evening Echo, 1 February 1996.
5 Brian Toal, Road Bowling in Ireland (Armagh, 1996), p. 147.
6 Cork Examiner, 1 July 1985.
7 County, 12 August 2003.
10 The Scottish bowlers learned the game while in Cork on a youth exchange organised by Séamus Ó Tuama.
11 Southern Star, 28 September 1996.
12 Interview with Séamus Ó Tuama, 5 May 2003.
13 Quoted in Santry, ‘A world championship with a difference’, p. 27.
14 Cork Examiner, 10 January 1955.
15 Cork Examiner, 1 August 1985.
16 Evening Echo, 1 August 1985.
18 Cork Examiner, 9 September 1985.
19 Aidan McVeigh, ‘The crowning of the first king’, in Ballincurrag Ból Chumann
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Come on boys and have a day with our bowling club so gay, the loft of the bowl it would make your heart thrill, when you hear the Shea boy say – 'Timmy Delaney has won the day,' we beat them all, says the boys of Fairhill.

Road bowling is a sport very much associated with County Cork; one of its great exponents, Tim Delaney, is immortalised in the famous Cork anthem, 'The Boys of Fairhill'. Part of the social texture of Cork, it is undoubtedly an important element of local culture in many parts of the city and county. The game, however, does not belong to Cork alone; it is also popular in County Armagh, and in pockets of Counties Mayo, Tyrone, Louth, Waterford and Wexford.

Road bowling is a sport widely thought of as peculiar to Ireland, but this has not always been the case. This book uncovers the rich history of road bowling in Ireland, tracing its roots back hundreds of years, and reveals a sport – originally known as 'long bullets' – that was once widespread in Ireland, Scotland, the north of England and North America.