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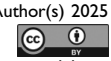

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Tests of Manhood: Uncovering the History and Popularity of Stone Lifting in Ireland

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Abstract
The general public, both within Ireland and further abroad, has begun to take an interest in Irish lifting stones. A simple premise, lifting stones are historically significant stones which were typically lifted as tests of manhood within rural and fishing communities in Ireland. It is an Irish practice with global parallels in Europe and Asia. The popular history of this endeavour is currently being written with claims that this practice, once popular, was wiped out during the Great Famine. This article marks the first academic study of lifting stones in Ireland. It situates them in a domestic and global context, discusses the sources one can use in studying the topic and uses a combination of folklore, anthropology and fiction to evaluate known written sources on the topic. More importantly it highlights the multifaceted and gendered histories which can be told through this topic. The article thus seeks to do three things: first to raise awareness of the public histories being written on this topic, second to implore a more rigid groundwork for studying this practice and third to stress the value such an area has in the growing field of masculinity studies in Ireland.

Keywords
stone lifting, masculinity, strength, public histories, leisure history

At the time of writing stone lifting in Ireland is experiencing an incredible resurgence of both national and international interest. Led by amateur historian and strongman David Keohan (whose online handle is wonderfully titled 'Indiana Stones'), stone lifting has been featured on Irish and international television, international magazines and podcasts and is now driving a small but dedicated tourism industry to largely rural sites in Northern

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Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.[1] For those ignorant of the activity, stone lifting involves the lifting of heavy stones from the ground to either the waist or the chest. It is a simple activity but one with great cultural significance, a point discussed later in this article. In Scotland and Iceland, for example, stone lifting has a century's old history, and is widely celebrated within these nation's strength cultures.[2] The resurgence in Irish stone lifting, which is largely down to the efforts of Keohan, was professed to be an effort to 'rediscover' Ireland's stone lifting history. Keohan has been joined in recent months by other amateur historians like Andy Downes and Martin Gallagher among others who have similarly publicised and rediscovered other lifting stones.[3] While this is a niche topic, it is one of utmost importance for Irish social and sporting historians.

In the first instance, what we do know about stone lifting in Ireland, offers the potential to further deepen our understanding of masculinity, strength, and performance in rural parts of the country. Typically lifting stones are found in rural and agrarian hubs or, at times, within fishing villages around the west coast. The stories (and it is largely stories) which exist surrounding lifting stones focus on ideas of virility, strength, national politics, and manhood. To be simplistic, lifting stones in Ireland were used to physically demarcate the strongest and weakest men in the village. Studies of masculinity are growing in Ireland, and to that end a much-needed handbook was published several years ago.[4] Stone lifting offers the opportunity to study a more demarcated form of masculinity and masculine rites within the country but it also provides a new line of research

[1] David is most popular on Instagram – David Keohan (@_indiana_stones_). On television appearances see Cathal Ryan, 'Tommy Tiernan Show viewers all saying same thing about "fascinating" guest', *Irish Mirror*, Feb 17, 2024. Available at https://www.irishmirror.ie/showbiz/irish-showbiz/tommy-tiernan-show-viewers-saying-32152140, accessed June 24, 2024. Feature pieces have also appeared in GQ magazine. See Alyssa Ages, 'The Quest to Pick Up the Lost Lifting Stones of Ireland', *GQ Magazine*, August 28, 2023. Available at https://www.gq.com/story/the-quest-to-pick-up-the-lost-lifting-stones-of-ireland, accessed June 17 2024. Finally the *Irish Times* covered David's story. Colin Gleeson, 'Indiana Stones: Meet the man bringing back Ireland's 'lost culture' of stone lifting', *Irish Times*, Oct 29, 2023. Available at https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/10/29/indiana-stones-meet-the-man-bringing-back-irelands-lost-culture-of-stone-lifting/, accessed June 2 2024.

[2] This is not a topic which garners a lot of academic attention despite its cultural resonance. On Iceland an excellent piece is Thorlindsson, Thorolfur and Vidar Halldorsson. 'The roots of Icelandic physical culture and sport in the Saga Age', In Mikkel Tin, Frode Telseth, Jan Ove Tangen, Richard Giulianotti (eds.), *The Nordic model and Physical Culture* (London, 2019), pp. 101–116. On Scotland see Frank Zarnowski, 'The Amazing Donald Dinnie: The Nineteenth Century's Greatest Athlete', *Iron Game History*, 5 (1998), pp. 3–11.

[3] Likewise see Andy Downes (@handmedownes) and Martin Gallagher (@martin.gallagher666) on Instagram. There is critically a core group of individuals now engaged in discovering these stones. Equally important have been Conor Kenny, Stevie Shanks, Seán Ó Coisdealbha, Michael Gannon, Connor Slattery and Tiernan Canny.

[4] Barr, R. A., Brady, S., & McGaughey, J. (eds.) *Ireland and Masculinities in History* (New York: Springer, 2019). See also Jyoti Atwal, Ciara Breathnach, and Sarah-Anne Buckley (eds.), *Gender and History: Ireland, 1852–1922* (London, 2023).

into studies of popular culture, rural play and social spaces within the country.[5] What is necessary at present, however, is to discover the historical, and verifiable basis for stone lifting's history in Ireland.

As stone lifting's profile begins to push into the mainstream, a narrative around stone lifting's disappearance has grown in public consciousness. This is that stone lifting was a popular activity in Ireland, largely wiped out by the Irish Famine of 1845–1852 and part of a broader cultural downturn in Irish practices under British rule in the nineteenth-century and before. Take Colin Gleeson in the *Irish Times* who, with no references or verification, asserted that the practice began to disappear in the 18th and 19th centuries during British colonisation and vanished almost entirely around the 1840s when the Great Famine devastated the country. Most of the stones remain untouched where they were last lifted.[6]

This narrative is set against a backdrop of the culture's 'disappearance' or 'forgetting' and should, by itself, cause historians to take interest in this public history. In a sense, stone lifting is caught up in a broader discourse of decline or forgetting after the Famine. It is said to have disappeared or declined just like the nation's population, the Irish language, or, in a sporting parallel, the sport of hurling.[7] One of Ireland's major national newspapers accepted this story without any critique or commentary. Early amateur histories of stone lifting did not include this narrative and it is an explanation offered from 2021 onward by those promoting the practice.[8] This narrative has featured in both domestic and international coverage of the practice. While it is likely that post-Famine decline is part of the activity's trajectory given its association with 'older generations' in the National Folklore Collection, there is, at present, not enough historical research to verify this interpretation. David Keohan and others have found an area of historical research with both domestic and international interest and it is important for historians to support, and grow, such efforts by delving into both the written and oral record.

In the absence of a substantial historical record, untethered histories can invent traditions and narratives.[9] Sporting and social traditions are invented ideas, which change and

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[5] On masculinity and Irish sport see the still influential text Patrick F. McDevitt, 'Muscular Catholicism: Nationalism, masculinity and Gaelic team sports, 1884–1916', *Gender & History*, 9 (1997), pp. 262–284. On rural masculinities Aidan Beatty, 'Fianna Fáil's Agrarian Man and the Economics of National Salvation', in Barr, R. A., Brady, S., & McGaughey, J. (eds.) *Ireland and Masculinities in History* (New York, 2019), pp. 155–175.

[6] Gleeson, 'Indiana Stones'.

[7] Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: a history* (Oxford, 2015), p. 95.

[8] One of the early discussions on Irish stone lifting was Peter Martin, *Twixt the Stone and the Turf* (Peter Martin: Scotland, c. 2014). See also Conor Heffernan, 'Like A Rolling Stone: Stone Lifting in Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century Ireland', *Playing Pasts*, November 9, 2017. Available at https://www.playingpasts.co.uk/articles/physical-culture/like-a-rolling-stone-strong-lifting-in-nineteenth-century-and-early-twentieth-century-ireland/. Accessed June 2 2024.

[9] An excellent example of invented traditions and their potential problems is found in Dell Upton, 'Ethnicity, authenticity, and invented traditions', *Historical Archaeology*, 30 (1996), pp. 1–7.

mutate over time.[10] Stone lifting in Ireland, unlike the sport in other nations, does not have a strong written record. The primary written resource is the National Folklore Collection, and the records collected by Irish schoolchildren in the 1930s. There is thus scope for using oral histories, studies of literature, poetry and archaeology, not to mention mythology, to understand this practice. At the time of writing there is a significant debate among the general public interested in contemporary stone lifting about the history of the practice and why it disappeared from Ireland's sporting and social consciousness. Historians have yet to verify, disprove, or even examine this topic in any depth. While histories should not be driven solely by public interest, at least those in academia, it is nonetheless critical that historians examine a topic which is being incorporated into grander national stories.[11] This paper provides the first in-depth study of stone lifting, examining what we know, how we know it and the limitations of the source guide. Conscious that many reading this paper will be unfamiliar with stone lifting, this article opens with a broader discussion about the study of stone lifting, specifically what source bases exist and what they contain. From there the paper asks why stone lifting seemingly 'disappeared' during the nineteenth and twentieth century with reference to domestic and international sporting cultures. Finally, the paper studies the practice of stone lifting in Ireland through an examination of written sources, with a focus on sites of strength, masculine tropes and political discourses.

Stone Lifting in Irish History

The lifting of heavy stones is not unique to Ireland. Within a European context the practice can be found, in various guises, in Scotland, Iceland, the Basque Region, Germany and Switzerland among other countries. Likewise it is a practice with deep historical roots in parts of Asia and Oceania.[12] Each culture of stone lifting is distinguished by its own strict norms on how to perform a lift, and how to classify successful from unsuccessful lifts. More importantly, each culture has its own means of archiving this history. Illustrative examples of stone lifting sources include inscriptions on stones as occurred in Greece and Japan, paintings of the practice, newspaper reports, placenames and sporting recollections.[13] In other contexts, including many sites in the West of Ireland, oral histories and lineages are largely used to preserve the history. In the Irish context written sources have tended to come in one of four forms: placenames, Ordinance Survey Memoirs, fiction/memoirs and the National Folklore Collection. Amateur historian Peter Martin has done some work on the relationship between Irish placenames and

[10] The problems inherent in sport history, which veers towards simple narratives and hagiography are dissected in Douglas Booth, *The field: Truth and fiction in sport history* (London, 2007).

[11] Indeed, this is a very recent issue of concern for our field. Mike Cronin, 'Irish History Online and in Real Time: Century Ireland and the Decade of Centenaries', *Éire-Ireland*, 52 (2017), pp. 269–284.

[12] David Nemeth, 'The Lifting-Stones of Cheju Island', *Emnekode: HIMAS*, 5 (1984), pp. 30–33.

[13] Nigel B. Crowther, 'Recent Trends in the Study of Greek Athletics (1982–1989)', *L'Antiquité Classique* (1990), pp. 246–255; Ryuta Imafuku, 'A Castaway Ishmael Who Turned to Stone in the Amami Islands', *Leviathan*, 18 (2016), pp. 84–89.

stone lifting although far more work is needed in this regard.[14] One such example given by Martin was Cloghnart in County Monaghan, which translates roughly to the stone of strength, a name Martin believed to be indicative of a practice within the region.[15] In this regard, Martin likely relied on P.W. Joyce's 1901 work on Irish placenames which associated Cloghnart with this translation.[16] Such snippets and snatches at established practices can be found in occasional passages within the Ordinance Survey Memoirs written during the first half of the nineteenth century. One topical example, and the lifting stone has been rediscovered, is the Sefin Stone in Co. Derry/Londonderry which was mentioned in the Ordinance research in the region during the 1830s.[17] Other archaeological work from the century has passing references to strength testing with stones. The *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* in 1892 noted that Timoleague Abbey contained a lifting stone that was to be lifted solely by the thumb.[18] Included as a curio, the piece is indicative of the kinds of sources that currently exist.

There are also a series of memoirs, poems and studies from the first half of the twentieth century noting stone lifting's importance within local and rural communities. The most famous example comes from Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty's 1935 short story, 'The Stone'. In it, O'Flaherty tells the story of an elderly man in the Aran Islands stumbling across the lifting stone of his youth and, in a battle reminiscent of Ernest Hemmingway's 1952 short story *The Old Man and the Sea*, dies in his struggle to lift it once more.[19] The story gives both a location and general description of the heavy stone lifted and is often used in current retellings of stone lifting in popular culture to delineate the practice's importance. In non-fiction pieces, author and seanchaí Peig Sayers wrote admiringly of her brother Seán, who earned the nickname of the 'Pounder' for his ability to lift stones. Sayers recalled one Sunday afternoon when the 'young men of the parish had gathered at the cross-roads… they were testing one another to see who best could raise a great heavy stone off the ground'.[20] Seán had not only managed to lift the stone, he also raised another on top of it and lifted them in unison. This event would have likely occurred in the late nineteenth or early twentieth-century given Peig was recollecting childhood memories from the Blasket Islands. From a historical perspective, it is a safe, and logical assumption, that some form of stone lifting

[14] Martin, *Twixt the Stone and the Turf*, 38.

[15] Ibid.

[16] P.W. Joyce, *Irish Names of Places: Vol. 3* (Dublin, 1901), p. 512.

[17] Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland: Parishes of County Londonderry VIII 1830, 1833–7, 1839. East Londonderry. Angélique Day & Patrick McWilliams (eds.). (Liverpool, 1994), p. 98. On its rediscovery see Brendan McGilligan, 'County Derry man keeping Irish tradition alive by lifting the heaviest stone in Ireland', *Derry Now*, July 11, 2024. Available at https://www.derrynow.com/news/county-derry-post/1552054/maghera-man-keeping-irish-tradition-alive-by-lifting-the-heaviest-stone-in-ireland.html. Accessed October 11, 2024.

[18] Denham Franklin, 'Timoleague Abbey', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society,* 1 (1892), pp. 173–174.

[19] Liam O'Flaherty, The Short Stories of Liam O'Flaherty (London, 1937), pp. 395–401.

[20] Peig Sayers, *Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island* (New York, 1974), pp. 24–25.

culture existed in Ireland during the nineteenth century and that it existed into the first half of the twentieth. Indeed, a number of current discoveries are being made with reference to the memories and recollections of local men and women from rural and fishing communities around Ireland.[21] However, there is not yet a historical record, written or otherwise, to verify them against.

One source for studies of stone lifting which indicates a declining interest in the practice is Conrad Arensberg's anthropological study of Ireland during the 1930s, the same period that the National Folklore Collection was collected and Liam O'Flaherty wrote 'The Stone'. Noting that the 'past is a favourite pastime' in Ireland, Arensberg cited the older men's generation as begrudging of the youth.

> men were stronger in the past, they worked harder, while you try to get any young person to do as much work as the old men now and they would laugh at you. The young people today seem to see how little work they can do rather than how much…[22]

It is interesting, in this regard, to contrast Arensberg's observations with Bryce Evans' research on youth during the same period. Focused more on urban than rural areas, Evans identified a generational division wherein those who had fought in the Irish War of Independence, or at the very least lived through it, deemed the younger generation as less masculine, hard-working, or industrious.[23] Arensberg did not catch the same political undertones to these divisions but did cite the symbolic value of stone lifting. 'Even now', he wrote, 'the men of Luogh point out a large stone. With that stone the 'men' and the 'boys' competed at tests of strength till just a few years ago […]'.[24]

Arensberg's broader research findings highlighted the damage that migration, both internal and external, had had on local communities in the West of Ireland, alongside broader social changes in both work, communal beliefs and sport. Nevertheless his sources provide a neat pathway into the most valuable sources for understanding stone lifting: the National Folklore Collection (henceforth NFC). It is the NFC where Keohan, and those following in his efforts, have attempted to construct verifiable histories of Irish stone lifting. The Main Manuscript Collection and, more significantly, the Schools' Collection, which includes over 740,000 pages of children's contributions from around 5,000 schools collected between 1937 and 1939, have been particularly valuable.[25] This initiative, directed by the Irish Folklore Commission, captured a wide array of cultural narratives directly from elders in the community, providing a unique

[21] Again see David Keohan (@_indiana_stones_) on Instagram.

[22] Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study* (New York, 1950), p. 115.

[23] Bryce Evans, 'How Will We Kill the Evening?':'Degeneracy' and 'Second Generation' Male Adolescence in Independent Ireland. In Catherine Cox, and Susannah Riordan (eds.) *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (London, 2015), pp. 151–175.

[24] Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, pp. 115–116.

[25] Mary E. Daly, 'The State Papers of a forgotten and neglected people'; the National Folklore Collection and the writing of Irish history', *Béaloideas*, (2010), pp. 61–79.

snapshot of rural life and traditions that were at risk of being lost.[26] Among these traditions was the practice of stone lifting, a test of strength that was common across various Irish communities but rarely documented in official historical records. These stories, which form the basis of popular histories of stone lifting, have a number of limitations. First these sources were collected by schoolchildren from locals within their villages. Such individuals were family members or individuals known to them. Stories were sometimes corroborated with reference to more than one person but the collection was largely one of oral histories and half remembrances – at least when it came to stone lifting. This is not to discount the NFC, and indeed Caoimhe Nic Lochlainn's recent discussion of child–adult dynamics in the Collection showcases its important historical value.[27]

The interwar period (1918–1939) was a particularly important time for the recording of both fictious and non-fictious sources about the practice of stone lifting and typically the narrative was that stone lifting was something which used to occur in either the near past or decades ago. The NFC is particularly illustrative in recording recollections from older generations within communities. It is important to note, however, that the NFC was not conducted as an academic project but rather a cultural project mediated through the writing of schoolchildren. Nevertheless it is clear that some form of stone lifting occurred during the nineteenth century as both a formal and as an informal practice. Formal stone lifting cultures represented specific sites and specific stones which were used to test men's strength across generations. This is romantically captured in O'Flaherty's short story. Information about informal stone lifting cultures were often collected in the NFC and were commonly stories about impromptu tests of strength using the nearest heavy object, be it a stone, horse cart or sack.[28]

To contextualise stone lifting we must turn to the historiography of sport and games in nineteenth-century Ireland. Work on popular culture and sport within Ireland has stressed both the importance of community sport and spectator sport during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Sean Connolly, for example, has previously commented on the importance of ball and stick games as a form of communal bonding and fun, played for the benefit of participants rather than spectators.[29] This, he contrasted with upper-class sports during the eighteenth century which were conducted with spectators in mind and as an occasion more so than a game. Informal sporting practices and shows of strength or athleticism were commonplace at county fairs and, in particular, the circus. A great deal of work has been written on events like the Donnybrook Fair in Dublin during the first half of the nineteenth century wherein sport and 'rural pastimes' took on a

[26] Daly, 'The State Papers of a forgotten and neglected people'.

[27] Caoimhe Nic Lochlainn, '"A work of National Importance": Child–Adult Dynamics in Bailiúchán Na Scol/The Schools' Collection, 1937–1939', *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 9 (2016), pp. 203–211.

[28] Heffernan, 'Like A Rolling Stone…'

[29] Sean Connolly, 'Ag Déanamh Commanding: Elite Responses to Popular Culture, 1660—1850', in James Donnelly Jr. and Kerby Miller (eds.), *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 1–30.

fun, carnivalistic bent which bordered on lawlessness.[30] In less extreme terms, work on road bowls, bullets, or boules, during the nineteenth century highlighted a largely region-specific form of sport in pockets around the country. Should stone lifting fit into this broader folk and games culture? Or is it best understood in strict sporting terms?

Why Did Stone Lifting 'Disappear'?

Did stone lifting disappear in Irish society? Maybe, and if it did disappear then Keohan has spearheaded its revival to a surprising degree. In Keohan's own research and publications he has often discovered living testimonies from elderly people within towns and villages about their memories of men lifting various stones.[31] A recent example occurred in November 15, 2024 when Keohan and fellow stone lifting enthusiast Martin Gallagher were tipped off to the *Cloch na Mharig* stone in Gweedore, co. Donegal. The 'lead' came from a local who had spoken to a recently deceased local.[32] Thus, while it is true that the practice may well have disappeared during the nineteenth century writ large, there seems to have been significant lingering practices in various towns and villages around the country.

During the nineteenth century, Irish sport underwent a considerable process of 'modernisation' by which it is meant that sports such as rugby, soccer, Gaelic football, hurling, etc., became more organised, codified and commercialised.[33] Spurred on, in large part, by developments in Great Britain, many sports increased in popularity, institutional use within schools and, also within militaries. The 'Muscular Christian' ethos which arose in British public schools went a long way to justifying and adding respectability to the idea that sport was not only a social good, but a moral one.[34] Driven by the idea of *mens sana in corpore sano* ('a healthy mind in a healthy body'), many British public schools set about an associational revolution centred on sport. While it would be facile to describe this process as an elite one, and indeed a great deal of work has been done on examining both folk and working-class sporting cultures during the same period, it is a historical truism to say that nineteenth-century in Britain and Ireland witnessed

[30] James Kelly, 'Sport and recreation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', in James Kelly (ed.) *Cambridge history of Ireland* Vol. 3 (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 489–491.

[31] Again see David Keohan (@_indiana_stones_).

[32] Martin Gallagher, 'Well guys….', 'The Gweedore Parish Group', *Facebook*, November 15, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/groups/thegweedoreparishhistorydiscussiongroup/posts/8406208799502115/ Last accessed January 23, 2025. See also David's post from April 1, 2024 on (@_indiana_stones) Instagram. 'Was contacted again by locals, about This beautiful stone and plinth in the Anne valley walk. I have trawled through historic maps of the Dunhill area. This stone and plinth was important enough to be pictured on the maps! As my hunch suggested, it was on right hand side riverbank of the river Anne almost 200 years ago'.

[33] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: a history*, pp. 84–132.

[34] Nick J. Watson, Stuart Weir, and Stephen Friend, 'The development of muscular Christianity in Victorian Britain and beyond', *Journal of religion and society*, 7 (2005), pp. 1–21.

massive changes to the nature and popularity of sport.[35] This is relevant within the context of stone lifting as within Ireland the practice did not formalise into a recognisable pattern. Although in Ireland it appears to have remained a rural and at times ad-hoc practice, stone lifting cultures in other parts of Europe did undergo a period of formalisation during the same period.

Within Scotland, the re-emerge of the Highland Games in the early nineteenth century led to stone lifting events being incorporated into a much broader sporting and cultural festival. Revived as part of a reimagining of Scottish cultural identity, the Games included athletic events such as racing and shotput and, depending on the region in question, stone lifting.[36] Such was the cultural force of the Highland Games that, by the mid-nineteenth century, they had received the official patronage of reigning British monarch Queen Victoria (1819–1901).[37] While stones were more often thrown in the air, similar to how a modern shot put is thrown, heavy stone lifting was included very early in such events. Take, for example, a snippet from the *New Times* in October 1818 which noted a Glengary event which included 'lifting the stone'.[38] The same festival was described, in more detail, four years later in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, wherein the unnamed journalist sympathised with those athletes who 'failed in lifting the stone, a Garry pebble of some eighteen stones weight'.[39] This weight amounted to just over 114 kilograms and was required to be lifted and thrown over a bar roughly five feet from the ground. Recorded newspaper accounts of stone lifting were sporadic in later decades, although there is clear evidence that lifting stones existed as part of various region's own Highland celebrations.[40] What is less clear, and indeed there is little evidence for, is whether stone lifting was included in those Highland events in North America which began in the 1830s, and later in Oceania.[41] Nevertheless stone lifting was brought in as a formalised competitive practice with verified weights and strict form guidelines. Given the broader migration, both sporting and otherwise, between Scotland and Ireland, it is interesting that stone lifting practices did not become harmonised between the two regions.

A similar process emerged in the Basque Region in Spain and France which did not boast a Highland Games but rather, a rich betting culture related to stone lifting. Stone lifting in the Basque region occurred in a similar fashion to the Highland Games in that it was not done in isolation but oftentimes in conjunction with some other form of

[35] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: a history*, pp. 84–90.

[36] Sarah Solberg, 'International: The Highland Games', *Journal of Health, Physical Education, Recreation*, 45 (1974), pp. 19–21.

[37] Grant Jarvie, 'Highland gatherings, Balmorality, and the glamour of backwardness', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 9 (1992), pp. 167–178.

[38] 'Sporting Extraordinary', *New Times*, October 17, 1818, 3.

[39] 'Savage Sports', *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, October 28, 1818, 1.

[40] Martin Jancsics and Bill Crawford, *STONELIFTING: An Ancient Test of Strength Revived* (Chicago, 2018), pp. 5–10.

[41] It is not, for example, mentioned in Emily Ann Donaldson, *The Scottish Highland Games in America* (Pelican Publishing: Louisiana, 1999).

strength or athletic activity.[42] There are stories, therefore, of stone lifting events being coupled with events centred on dragging a heavy stone along the ground or, in some cases, of more mainstream strength activities concerning dumbbells and barbells.[43] The first recorded competition, using the Basque method of lifting the stone to the shoulder, comes from March 1885 when two young men met in Ermua (in Biscay/northern Spain) to test each other in a feat of strength.[44] Attracting a great deal of attention, not least among those with a penchant for gambling, the event focused on the lifting of a stone to shoulder height, this being the now traditional form taken in the modern age. Bets were laid between each of the lifts and, supposedly in front of 1,200 people, the weights were increased until one man failed to lift the weight.

Newspapers, as opposed to festivals like the Highland games, proved to be particularly important in the spread of stone lifting. It was here where challenges, and the opportunity to lay a wager, were publicised for stone lifting and other feats of strength. In March, 1890, the *Bilbao News* advertised a challenge by Miguel de Echevaráa, a native of Hernarni, for 5,000 pesetas. Whoever could lift the most weight, using a heavy iron bar would be declared the winner.[45] Another kind of challenge involved timed competitions to see who could chop the most amount of logs in the shortest amount of time. Others included carrying heavy sacks of wheat, or barrels of charcoal. The implements used were those easily accessible to working men, and it was near exclusively men who were mentioned in the newspapers. In this context, the stones appear to have been 'just' another object to test one's strength in competition.

Basque stone lifting did not come with the same lineage of manhood rites dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth century as was the case in Scotland. These were 'manhood' stones but stone lifting was rarely distinguishable from other events. At a time when many strength competitions were being crafted and created, the practice of lifting stones to the shoulder, as opposed to just raising it from the ground or to the chest, became the most accepted form in the late nineteenth century.[46] This change created a distinct form of Basque stone lifting distinguishable from other parts of Europe. The second, far more important change, was the increasing frequency with which stone lifting events were held. In other contexts, it would be silly, if not outright spurious, to cite a 'foundational' figure for a nation's stone lifting lineage. For Basque stone lifting, however, historians are generally clear that Bittor Zabala (nicknamed Arteondo) helped to standardise stone lifting practices.[47] Born in 1886, Arteondo is typically credited with creating a taxonomy of boulders for athletes. In a career spanning 1910 to 1945, Arteondo popularised four distinct lifting objects (a ball, a cylinder, a cube or a cuboid) all with varying heights, sizes and weights. For this reason, he has been credited in some regions as being the great 'reformer' of the sport. He even

[42] An excellent history of the Basque practice is Lucio Doncel Recas,. *Harri-Jasotze: Levantamiento de piedras en Euskadi y Navarra* (Madrid, 2021).
[43] Ibid., pp. 30–34.
[44] Ibid., p. 34.
[45] Ibid., p. 38.
[46] Ibid., pp. 38–45.
[47] Ibid., pp. 48–56.

created a 'regulation' stone in 1917.[48] There are other snippets of stone lifting competitions in Germany and Switzerland during this period.[49] Perhaps the oddest historical anecdote is that stone lifting was a tested event at the 1900 Olympic games in Paris, in the gymnastics rather than weightlifting category.[50] There was thus a certain formalisation of stone lifting within other countries that simply did not occur in Ireland during the nineteenth century.

Why was this the case? At the moment popular discourses have centred on the impact of the Famine and vague allusions to impact of the penal laws before the Famine or a general sense of cultural erasure by British authorities.[51] More work is needed in this area although some preliminary observations can be made. Migration within and outside of Ireland during and after the Famine did, unquestionably, empty many rural and fishing communities of younger men and women who may have otherwise kept this practice alive.[52] Returning to Conrad Arensberg's work, which noted the older generation's dismissal of the younger generation as weaker, one wonders whether this was part of a broader post-Famine, and often nationalist, sentiment that Ireland's most vibrant and strong peoples had been forced away.[53] Even within the NFC this may explain why many memories collected have poignant tones about the strong men of a previous age. Certainly, Marguérite Corporaal's work on nineteenth-century social and political fiction noted the regularity with which the 'scourge' of migration was noted in popular medical, educational and political discourses.[54] So the Great Famine (1845–1852), and the aftermath of migration is a likely factor in stone lifting's decline. Indeed from the rediscovered stones at the time of writing, it is worth noting that few are located near industrial or semi-industrial cities of the nineteenth century like Dublin, Belfast or Cork. Internal migration and urbanisation may well have been as damaging as external migration.

We do know through Brian Griffin's work that sport and play did continue during the Famine itself and certainly the popularisation of sport in the post-Famine period in Ireland shows that the Irish appetite for physical activity remained, if not deepened, in its aftermath.[55] Equally useful and informative is James Kelly's work on pre-Famine sport which traces the class conflict and tensions around sport during this period, nevertheless highlights the strength and allure of formal and informal practices.[56] Is another explanation

[48] Ibid, p. 52.

[49] Jancsics and Bill Crawford, *STONELIFTING*, pp. 4–10.

[50] Kate Haycock, *Gymnastics* (New York, 1991), p. 10.

[51] Gleeson, 'Indiana Stones'.

[52] Timothy J. Hatton, and Jeffrey G. Williamson, 'After the famine: emigration from Ireland, 1850–1913', *The Journal of Economic History*, 53, (1993), pp. 575–600.

[53] James S. Donnelly Jr, 'The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora, 1850–1900', *Éire-Ireland*, 31, (1996), pp. 26–61.

[54] Marguérite Corporaal, *Relocated Memories: The Great Famine in Irish and Diaspora Fiction, 1846–1870* (New York, 2017), pp. 22–53.

[55] Brian Griffin,. 'The More Sport the Merrier, Say We: Sport in Ireland during the Great Famine', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 45, (2018), pp. 90–114.

[56] James Kelly, *Sport in Ireland, 1600–1840* (Dublin, 2014), see in particular 250–275.

then that the popularisation of sports like Gaelic football, soccer, rugby, hurling and athletics pushed stone lifting from the margins?[57] Tony Collins's work, *Sport in a Capitalist Society*, proves useful here. Collins makes the claim that the 'modernisation' of sport during this century was more a case of codified and rule-bound sports being promoted as a means of inculcating groups into the language and competitiveness of capitalist society.[58] Whatever the cause, sport in Ireland and Britain clearly moved away from 'games' and more towards formalised sport. Whereas stone lifting in Scotland and the Basque region codified during the nineteenth century, the same was not true for Ireland. Certainly it is interesting to note how few accounts of stone lifting mention any sort of training or practice. The event was often presented as a test of 'natural' strength as opposed to one of sporting ability. Perhaps the booming interest in associational cultures and the sociability of the sport club also helped push individuals away from the practice? In newly emerging sports like Gaelic football and hurling, the nationalist and masculine undertones found in stone lifting discourses were replicated and indeed, it is telling that staunch Irish nationalist and GAA founding figure Michael Cusack never wrote of stone lifting in his polemics about muscular Gaels. Modern sport, and the modernisation of sport, excluded stone lifting.[59] Certainly other rural pastimes such as fiddle playing, dancing or boxing were sportified in Ireland during the nineteenth century.[60] Perhaps the intense localisation of stone lifting prevented easy organisation. It would have been difficult to transport stones that only a select few could lift and perhaps even harder to transport spectators to often isolated sites to see competitions. An interesting parallel can be found in Andreas Malm's work on steam power which found that coal driven power thrived over water-driven power in the nineteenth century because the latter was severely restricted to its locality.[61] Coal, on the other hand, could be transported or used anywhere.

There is also the question of what impact the physical culture movement had within Ireland. As discussed elsewhere, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland became alive to the possibilities of gymnasium cultures.[62] The 'physical culture' movement, as it was termed by contemporaries, represented a new wave of keep fit cultures within the country. Coinciding, and being preceded by, an institutional adoption of physical education in schools and mandatory drill in the military, physical culture was defined by regimented forms of gymnasium training.[63] A subtle, but

[57] Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: a history*, pp. 84–90.

[58] Tony Collins, *Sport in capitalist society: A short history* (London, 2013), pp. 2–22.

[59] Dónal McAnallen, 'Michael Cusack and the revival of Gaelic games in Ulster', *Irish Historical Studies*, 37 (2010), pp. 23–47.

[60] 'Grand Band Contest', *Freeman's Journal,* Dublin, June 6 1877, 1; Helena Wulff, *Dancing at the crossroads: Memory and mobility in Ireland* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 24–30; Adam Chill, *Bare-Knuckle Britons and Fighting Irish: Boxing, Race, Religion and Nationality in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (North Carolina, 2017), pp. 120–140.

[61] This was such a wonderful observation from Reviewer 3. Andreas Malm,. *Fossil capital: The rise of steam power and the roots of global warming* (London, 2016), pp. 1–12.

[62] Conor Heffernan, 'State of the field: Physical culture', *History*, 107 (2022), pp. 143–162.

[63] Conor Heffernan, *The History Of Physical Culture In Ireland* (London, 2020), pp. 17–52.

powerful, contributing factor in the decline of stone lifting may have been the rise of 'scientific' physical culture practices using callisthenics, dumbbells and barbells as signifiers of strength and wellness rather than stone lifting. Additionally, the physical culture movement was attached to broader ideals about bodily perfection and beauty which are absent in stone lifting records.[64]

Popular discourses, repeated in major national and international outlets, have cited the Great Famine as the key, if not sole, contributor to the decline in stone lifting in Ireland. It is here that historians can play a role in contextualising and critiquing the practice's history and significance. At a time when some fitness practices, especially those related to 'natural' strength and masculinity have been co-opted by far-right and extremist groups, there is a danger in promulgating a political discourse which is nationalist and concerned with 'traditional' Irish masculinity.[65] Nuance and care is needed, both in assuming why the practice existed, what sources exist and also if, and how, it was a culturally important practice. With that in mind, the article's final section examines stone lifting recollections within the National Folklore Collection, this being the largest, and most easily accessible, repository on stone lifting in Ireland.

Stone-Lifting Practices in Ireland

At present the National Folklore Collection is the largest and broadest archive for studying the practice of stone lifting. While snippets exist in other sources, such as the Ordinance Survey Memoirs or in individual memoirs, nothing else matches the depth of the NFC. This, it must be said, relates solely to written sources and there is a real need to collect oral histories of stone lifting around Ireland. This is especially the case as anecdotal collections taken by David Keohan depict a profile of individuals aged seventy onwards who remember stone lifting practices from their youth.[66] Time is of the essence in collecting oral histories. Stories within the NFC, and these recordings, are treated as stories more so than verifiable facts, to highlight the keen value in studying the practice. As will become clear, a great deal of the stories, both in Irish and English, relate to the cultural importance of the marketplace or fair, masculinity as expressed through bodily strength and, occasionally, how stone lifting was very much a political practice within communities. How much weight historians should place in these stories is up to professional preference and risk tolerance but one could happily view the stories themselves as historical artefacts denoting gendered ideals.

Writing on local heroes in County Tipperary, Michael Kehoe noted a famed 'Lonergan Stones' lifted in the Shanrahan graveyard by local man Thomas Lonergan (said to have 'died ten years ago'). Lonergan was celebrated for his ability to lift the stone – and incidentally this stone to has been discovered thanks to the physical description in the NFC.[67]

[64] Ibid., pp. 32–34.

[65] Jason Luger, 'Celebrations, Exaltations And Alpha Lands: Everyday Geographies Of The Far-Right', *Political Geography*, 96 (2022), pp. 1–13.

[66] Again see David Keohan (@_indiana_stones_) on Instagram.

[67] Ages, 'The Quest to Pick Up the Lost Lifting Stones of Ireland'.

Lonergan 'was the strongest man in the parish. He could lift weights, and big stones and irons'. Men 'came from all round the district' to lift the stone but none could match him. The Lonergan case is particularly illustrative in where it was situated within the folklore collection.[68] 'Local heroes' is typically where the schoolchildren recorded stories of stone lifting and while most focus on individual men, a scant few do focus on the broader culture of stone lifting. John Walton's recording of local heroes in Kilkenny noted crossroads where 'the young men met nearby … every Sunday… there were certain big stones or rocks which it took a very strong man to lift clear off the ground'.[69] Walton's writing ends with the story of a man named 'Dooley' who could lift a heavy weight over his head a dozen times without rest. This same stone was thought to be unliftable by many of the local men. Walton's collection is fascinating because of the hints at a regular stone lifting practice wherein the crossroads – which were points of socialisation and sport in Irish life – were sites for these strength challenges. There is also some evidence that markets played a similar function. One submission from County Clare, noted a stone 'above the market in Ennis and all the strong men used to try lift it' (this being included in the 'Great Men' Chapter).[70] There is also, occasionally an overlap between folk medicine and superstition. Writing in Irish, Galway based student Caitlín Ní Chonnaire noted a local custom wherein

> Before giving birth, the mother goes out and finds a strong man, and she picks a heavy stone and asks the man to lift the stone. If he is unable to do so, it indicates that the child will be weak and of no good, but if he can lift it, it shows that he is on par with any man…[71]

Sites of strength are critical within this research and help to distinguish stone lifting cultures from more general strength cultures within the NFC. The NFC abounds with stories of strong men who could lift sacks of hay, anvils, wagon wheels and other heavy ephemera found at markets, farms, or in sailing professions.[72] Equally popular are stories of mythical giants who helped shape the landscape by lifting heavy stones around the countryside. One such story from Aghagower in Mayo explained the dimples in a large rock surface by a story of a giant lifting and throwing a stone

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[68] NFCS 0573:390; Mr Kehoe (45), Clogheen, Co. Tipperary. Collector: Michael Kehoe, Cloichín an Mhargaidh National School, County Tipperary, 1936. Teacher: Séamus Ó Teacháin.

[69] NFCS 867: 118; Mr S. Walton (65), Remeen, Co. Kilkenny. Collector: John Walton, Tullaroan National School, County Kilkenny, 1936. Teacher: Daniel Brennan.

[70] NFCS 613: 204; William Whelan (36), Toonagh, Co. Clare. Collector: Mary Whelan, Tamhnach National School, County Clare, 1936. Teacher: Proinnsias Gordún.

[71] Translated by Conor Heffernan. NFCS 59: 200; Toonagh, Co. Clare. Collector: Caitlín Ní Chonnaire, Killeenadeema, School, County Galway, 1936. Teacher: Uinsionn Ó Conáin. Original wording is *Roimh an [?] a beire téigheann an mathair amach agus fághann sí fear an láidir agus tóghann sí cloch trom agus íarrnigheann sí ar an bhfear an cloch a árdú muna nach raibh sé inann bheith an páiste a lag agus gan maith ar bith agus go raibh sé inann bheith sé co-lairir le fear araimh*.

[72] Heffernan, 'Like a Rolling Stone'.

('the trace of his fingers is in it').[73] Perhaps the most common stories are utilitarian feats of strength in helping to move objects. Tomás Ó Ciardha's writings in Waterford, under the heading of 'Strength', record a local strong man Matta Faney who lifted large limestones from the local quarry.[74] Likewise the Patsy Hynes collection on Portumna cited a strong man 'in the olden times' called Jack McCormac who 'was able to lift heavy sacks' on his back.[75] Such feats solidified a connection between masculinity and strength but they were not routine feats or ones attempted by others within a community. In other words, they were once-off feats rather than a custom itself.

Contrast Faney or McCormac's stories with that recorded by Nan Scanlon in County Leitrim. Writing this time under the heading of strong people, Scanlon cited a stone near the local national school that was 'always considered too heavy for any men to lift' yet despite this 'it was often tried by strong men who failed'.[76] Eventually Pat Flynn (then still working as a ganger nearby) 'succeeded in raising the stone to the height of his knee'. There is a fascinating comparison to be made in many of these stories with Conrad Arensberg's previously mentioned anthropological study of Ireland during the 1930s, the same period that the NFC was collected. Arensberg cited the older men's complaints that those left in the village were lazy and feckless compared to the generation which had gone before them.[77] The Luogh lifting stone, previously a popular test of strength but, at the time of Arensberg's study, a near forgotten relic, seemed to aptly illustrate how dire the state of the village's health and vibrancy had begun. The stone was a metaphor for the village's lost and depleted strength.[78]

In line with other research on the Folklore collection, the theme of disappearing is common within the stone lifting stories. As noted earlier, this theme was often present in both nationalist and medical discourses.[79] Indeed work on eugenics in Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century noted the concerns many raised with Ireland's 'depleted' racial stock.[80] In a stone lifting setting, and certainly reified in the NFC, men of the past were stronger, and strength cultures had died out or were dying out. Thus, several of the stone lifting stories were written definitively and deliberately in the past tense. This was a practice that had ***once occurred*** but was no more.

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[73] NFCS 88E:05_017; Aghagower, Co. Mayo. Collector: Eneas M. Noonan, Aghagower National School, County Mayo, 1936. Teacher: Hannah T. Kevilla.

[74] NFC 189: 241; Jem Coady, Aghagower, Co. Mayo. Collector: Tomás Ó Ciardha, Lismore and Mocollop, Co. Waterford, 1936.

[75] NFCS 57: 413; Nicholas Kosley, Portumna, Co. Galway. Collector: Patsy Hynes, An Clochar, Port Omna National School, County Galway, 1936. Teacher: An tSr. M. Lorcáin.

[76] NFCS 199: 283; Patrick Harte, Kinnara Glebe, Co. Leitrim. Collector: Nan Scanlon, Newtownmanor, Co. Leitrim, 1936. Teacher: P. Mac Néill (Nelson)

[77] Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study* (Peter Smith: New York, 1950), p. 115.

[78] Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, pp. 115–116.

[79] Bryce Evans, 'How Will We Kill the Evening?'

[80] Greta Jones, 'Eugenics in Ireland: the Belfast eugenics society, 1911–15', *Irish Historical Studies*, 28 (1992), pp. 81–95.

Maureen Wall's contribution for Kilkenny began with a story from 'many years ago' in which a local 'runner and very strong man' Bill Kelly impressed the locals by lifting a heavy stone and carrying it to the other side of a road.[81] No man was thought to have repeated it since. One of the more interesting stories of 'lost strength' came from Lisnamrock in Tipperary where 'time and again strong men from various parts of the country made attempts to lift the stone'. Eventually a coal carter named Charles Ryan, 'urged on by some of his fellow coal carters' raised it as high as his knees.[82] The story continued by mentioning the health and strength of his surviving son William before poignantly noting that all his grandchildren had emigrated to New York. Charles was, in essence, one of those impacted by Ireland's migration patterns. Thomas Kiely, the contributor, continued with longing comments about past generations. In a similar vein, John Devlin's collection on local heroes from Donegal cited 'long winter nights' where 'the old people meet … and discuss the feats which the strong and great men did long ago'.[83]

Religious tensions around masculinity are also found within these stories. Writing in Irish, Domhnall de Búrca echoed others in telling a story 'from about 80 or 100 years ago'. Set at the fair of Béal Átha Buidhe in Mayo the story centred on a Protestant farmer, 'Tyner', who supposedly lifted a large stone in the fair field. None was able to lift the stone until Tyner raised it from the ground.

When he performed this act, he bid farewell to any 'Papist', the act itself being a challenge. The Catholics were humiliated and searched the country to see if they could find a man who would lift the stone.[84]

Eventually they found such a man who not only lifted the original stone, but found another and dropped it on top of it. The locals 'celebrated their vindication and sent word to the Protestant'. This was one of the few times that a religious tension was situated within a stone-lifting story but the basic theme of stones being equated with strength and virility remained. There are also stories of visiting Englishmen being embarrassed through the stones. Seán O'Connor in Kerry recorded a story about a group of English visitors at Fitzmaurices in Duagh. The visitors stumbled across a big stone one of the party, 'who did great feats in England and had a great opinion of himself', claimed that there was no man alive who could lift it. Mr. Fitzmaurice, himself a Protestant, then called upon Shone Burns, a man now in his sixties who had raised the stones repeatedly in his youth.

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[81] NFCS 848: 22; Thomas Kiely, Kiltorcan, Co. Kilkenny. Collector: Maureen Wall, Ballyhale, Co. Kilkenny, 1936. Teacher: Eibhlín Ní Shúilleabháin

[82] NFCS 562: 163; John Connors (Clerk), Clashduff, Co. Tipperary, Lios na mBroc. Co. Tipperary, 1936. Teacher: Séamus Ó Cinnéide

[83] Ibid.

[84] Translated by Conor Heffernan. NFCS 338: 219; Murphy Rahy, Coolsnaghtig, Co. Cork. Collector: Domhnall de Búrca, Toames, Maghcromtha, Co. Cork, 1936. Teacher: Seán de Búrca. Original wording is *nuair a dhein séan ghníomh seo tug sé an dubh-slán do aon "Papise", an ghníomh san a dhéinamh. Bhí seirbhrean ar na Caitilicigh agus chuarduigdear an dúthaigh feichaint an bhfaithidís fear a thógfadh an chloch*.

> Upon being told the Englishman doubted Shone's strength, Shone made one drive at it and raised to his knees, the Englishman put his hand in his pocket to give Shone some money, when Shone said, tis lifted now and I would defy any English *séonín* [sic] to do it, at the remark the English man drew his hand from his pocket and gave Shone nothing, but Fitzmaurice was very proud of the act…[85]

The heroism of the aging Shone was contrasted with the arrogance of the English visitor and the inclusion of *seoinín* left little doubt of the contempt Shone exhibited towards the group.[86] Fictitious, embellished or faithful retelling, the story highlighted how stone lifting, as a practice, could be used to distinguish Irishmen's strength from their cultural and political rivals.

Stone lifting was also situated in man's struggle with mortality in a semi-mythological manner and indeed it is easy to see how even some of the above stories delved into the mythological. Such stories often appropriated Irish origin myths, inspired by the story of *Tír na nÓg* in which the son of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, Oisín left the mortal world to live with Niamh of Tír na nÓg (the land of the young). After several centuries living in a place where no one aged or died Oisín returned to Earth on Niamh's horse under the strict instruction not to dismount from the horse or else he would age rapidly and die. At *Gleann na Smol* Oisín saw a group of men struggling to lift a large stone. Attempting to lift the stone from horseback, Oisín fell to the ground, quickly aged and died.[87] The inability to lift the stone became a trope in both the stone lifting stories, and in Irish fiction, with a man's loss of youth and vitality. Within the NFC, Annie Miley told the story of a Kildare man who saw 'some little men trying to lift a big stone… after a while all the little men died except one of them… the stone fell on him and crush him to death'. This came against the backdrop of a 'hard winter' wherein only 'a strong man would live until the end of that winter'.[88] The unnamed strongman lifted the stone and threw it over his head. He survived the winter and used the blood of the small men as paint for the stone.

An equally morbid story comes from Liam O'Flaherty's short story, 'The Stone'. Written in 1937, overlapping in time with the NFC, the story focus on an old man wandering the coast of the Aran Islands. Reliving his vibrant days, he recalled that

> it was a great day in each young man's life when he raised the stone from the ground and 'gave it wind' as they said… if he raised it to his chest, he was a hero, a phenomenon of strength and the men talked of him. Whereas, he who failed to lift it from the ground became the butt of everybody's scorn…[89]

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[85] NFCS 406: 413; O'Connor, J., Rathoran, Co. Kerry. Collector: Seán O'Connor, Islandanny, Rea, Co. Kerry, 1936. Teacher: Máire, Bean Uí Chatháin.

[86] Aaron Ó Maonaigh, 'Who were the Shoneens?': Irish militant nationalists and association football, 1913–1923', *Soccer & Society*, 18 (2017), pp. 631–647.

[87] Darrell Figgis, *The Return of the Hero* (London, 1923), pp. 254–256.

[88] O'Flaherty, The Short Stories of Liam O'Flaherty, pp. 395–401.

[89] Ibid.

As the story continues, the old man becomes more and more animated about his former glories. He decides once more to lift the stone. Summoning his strength, he begins to pull it to his chest. Fighting against gravity, the stone and his ailing bones, the man succeeds in 'chesting' it but dies from the exertion. At his funeral, tales are shared about his strength and heroic end. The story concludes with the next generation of men attempting to equal his feat. The stone, in some of these tests, was not about man versus man but rather man versus mortality.

Lifting stones in Irish society, whether real or simply fictionalised, were taken to be tests of masculinity against a variety of backdrops. More work is needed to bridge the gap from oral traditions and the arts into definitive practice but such an area provides a view of masculinity, popular culture, recreational pastimes and local rivalries. In it we find parallels with the rural masculine tropes studied by Aidan Beatty, the generational divides highlighted by Evans and the strength-based masculinities studied by Heffernan.[90] Source limitations exist but this paper suggest that such limitations warrant future study. This is especially the case for oral histories which, at present, at in very real danger of being lost.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, stone lifting is undergoing a period of intense revival within Ireland. Regional newspapers are abounded with 'rediscovered stones', David Keohan appears regularly on television and small tours of stone lifters are coming into Ireland to lift Irish strength stones.[91] This is a small corner of Irish sporting life, but it is one defined by its constructed history. The history of stone lifting in Ireland is currently being created in the public space with minimal academic engagement. An opportunity exists for historians to examine an area combining folklore, gender, rural–urban divides, and sectarian strife. There is a significant part of the general, and international public, interested in this history and, as this article has suggested, there is historical value to its study. Keohan has already demonstrated the value and cultural appeal such work has in bringing community stories together and acting as a form of cultural history. His gathering of stories has been done without the supports of a University or funding body, a point which deserves commendation. Put simply, its time support, and an academic preservation are applied to buttress these efforts. Stone lifting, as a cultural practice, offers more than just insight into the physical capabilities of individuals: it provides a window into anxieties and desires in Irish cultural identity. Stone lifting was, and in the modern iteration is, linked to traditional masculine tropes and norms. It is part recreation and part rite of passage. This is a masculinity influenced by broader social norms but one simultaneously unique to this practice. Stone lifting is an Irish pastime but one with global parallels. More work is needed to illuminate regional differences in stone lifting practices and to examine the retelling of these practices. What exists

[90] Beatty, 'Fianna Fáil's Agrarian Man and the Economics of National Salvation'; Evans, 'How Will We Kill the Evening?'; Heffernan, *The History of Physical Culture in Ireland.*

[91] Again this information is found on Instagram – David Keohan (@_indiana_stones_).

thus far makes clear that this was linked to youth, vitality, and masculinity. The body was a marker for manhood and manhood could be delineated by strength. This was a rural practice rather than urban and was often mythologised. Stories of stone lifting deal with themes of loss and life itself. Men were cast as 'strong men' or 'local heroes' by schoolchildren and immortalised by writers like O'Flaherty. The next step is to further our source base, building in oral histories and truly contextualising these histories while the public demand exists.

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