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**PROJECTING IRELAND:**  
**THE HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF IRISH FILM**  
**IN THE 1990s**

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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# ABSTRACT

In the following dissertation, I have undertaken to explore the very wide-ranging yet largely unexplored territory of Irish cinema. I have confined my study to the 1990s (other than a brief overview of the Irish film industry in my Introduction) in an attempt to express the revolutionary global success that all aspects of Irish culture have experienced in this decade.

The central point which I reiterate throughout the dissertation is that, while Irish filmmakers are increasingly concerned with defining "Irishness" for themselves and the world, they inevitably encounter much confusion and ambivalence, and are often criticised for it. For this reason, I have uncovered many ambiguities in the films I have watched, which defy strict categorisation, other than in terms of their settings, which I describe in terms of "war-torn Belfast", modern Dublin and "the rural idyll".

Nonetheless, I have divided the essay into three main sections, other than the Introduction and Conclusion, which themselves contain subsections, and which encompass the major themes which recur in Irish films. The Introduction focuses on the traditional (and continuing) views that foreigners, particularly the British and Americans, have of the Irish, which amount to stereotypes that were evident in all films about Ireland. The tremendous resurgence of indigenous Irish filmmakers has seen an attempt to address these stereotypes and reclaim Irish history.

Section Two is a broad study of those films which deal with the political violence, known as the Troubles, that defines Northern Ireland. This includes stereotyped American portrayals as well as <sup>a</sup> more recent IRA bias, beginning with Neil Jordan's attempt to put a new version of history on film in *Michael Collins*. The conclusion I come to is that filmmakers are ultimately trying to provide a balanced view of the situation and one that condemns violence.

Section Three deals with the intertwined themes of women, family, sexuality and the Catholic Church. The traditional conservatism in Ireland is outlined before I show how recent films reflect the changes in moral attitudes and the new freedoms of sexuality that the younger generation is experiencing. Lastly I look at the special situation of women in the North, where they and their families are the long-suffering victims of the violence.

Section Four continues the theme of the changes which are sweeping over "Modern Ireland", largely due to its opening-up to outside influences, particularly those of America. The dichotomies of this newly-modernised society are still evident, as I discuss in the section on the historical importance of land, which is expressed not only in the "rural idyll" films, but in those which deal with the move to the urban lure and squalor of Dublin. Finally I look at how the traditional and mythical still exist in modern Ireland, and how the combination of these aspects of the past and present is shown to suggest a positive way into the future.

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"There are no overall certitudes in Ireland anymore. There's a lot of diversity of thinking, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of trying to assimilate to other cultures. It's a time when we need to take stock, to look into our hearts and find a sense of Irishness, to find a pride in ourselves that will make us sure of what we are."

--Mary Robinson during her 1990 presidential campaign  
(quoted in Levy, 9).

"Other people have a nationality. The Irish and the Jews have a psychosis."

--Brendan Behan, Richard's Cork Leg  
(quoted in Levy, 204).

## **1.INTRODUCTION: REDRESSING THE BALANCE; ADDRESSING AMBIGUITIES**

There can be little doubt that the Irish have a deep-rooted sense of their national identity—which is strongly relayed to and reinterpreted by the rest of the world.

This patriotism is certainly strengthened by the huge global Diaspora of Irish descendants comparable to that of the Jews, but it is primarily attributable, as John Ardagh suggests (Ardagh, 1), to the need the Irish have felt to protect and promote their culture and identity in the face of eight hundred years of frequently oppressive colonisation by far more powerful Britain.<sup>1</sup> Yet the century which has seen the end of this oppression (except in Northern Ireland, where resistance to it continues),

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<sup>1</sup> This protectionism is arguably as strongly needed as ever today as the generic Anglo-American "culture" of the postmodern age threatens to swamp world society.

has brought this identity into question more than ever. For this has been a century of tremendous change in all areas of Irish society, accelerating particularly in the 1990s—the film industry being one of the most visible indications of this.

After the War of Independence against the British which resulted in the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, the new government of De Valera embarked upon a staunch policy of isolationism which aggravated the insular, self-absorbed nature of Ireland's politics, economy and culture. With a change of government in 1959, modernisation and industrialisation picked up, in the fashion of a newly-emergent post-colonial nation, and the joining of the European Community in 1973 was by all accounts a great boon to the economy and to Ireland's view of itself as a member of the world community (while also bringing it out from <sup>under</sup> Britain's shadow). The election of Mary Robinson as Ireland's first woman president signaled other important changes which had begun by 1990—changes in ways of thinking, from that of a very conservative, traditional and Church-dominated society to that of a more liberal, modern and global public which was willing to debate controversial issues as well as its own position as "Irish". To sum up, in Terry Byrne's words (in Power in the Eye), "the country is experiencing a late reemergence into world consciousness" (vii).

Byrne argues that, for an emergent nation, such as Ireland can claim to be, the process of self-definition is very important, and finds its expression in the eyes of the world largely through the creative arts. While Ireland has always been well established in European literature, it is only since the late 1980s that this process

has gained dramatic momentum (along with a great economic boom, perhaps not coincidentally). It may also be said that there is currently a “trend” for all things Irish; pop musicians such as U2 and Sinead O’Connor, Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney’s poetry, Roddy Doyle and Frank McCourt’s semi-autobiographical novels, the “Riverdance” phenomenon, Brian Friel’s play *Dancing At Lughnasa*, and of course, Irish films from *My Left Foot* to *Waking Ned*, have all contributed to the “world stage” (Ardagh, 11), and achieved both critical and commercial success.

It would appear, then, that the economic and cultural climate (the political will be dealt with later) in the 1990s is such that it would facilitate the revolutionary success of Irish cinema. It is safe to say that Ireland had no film industry of its own until very recently; even when foreigners made films in the country, it was often used merely as a scenic backdrop for romanticised films such as John Ford’s *The Quiet Man* (1952) and David Lean’s *Ryan’s Daughter* (1970), which depicted a peaceful Irish peasantry, without any real engagement with political issues. The 1970s and 80s saw the rise of a group of independent indigenous filmmakers such as Joe Comerford and Cathal Black, who began to break away from the pastoral images of Ireland to show a more urban, modern and trouble-ridden society (Power, 598)<sup>2</sup>. The establishment of the Irish Film Board in 1980 at last provided financial support from the state for local filmmakers, but it was suddenly axed by the government in 1987 and only (successfully) resurrected in 1993. That year saw the completion of twelve major films, where the norm had previously been

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the films of this period, which appear to be more layered and confrontational than those of the 90s, are not easily available and cannot be accommodated by the scope of this essay.

two or three ([members.tripod.com/~JeromeOne](http://members.tripod.com/~JeromeOne))<sup>3</sup>.

But above all, the success in bringing Irish films to the attention of the world has been largely attributable to two native filmmakers—Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan. It was the latter's *My Left Foot* that arguably pioneered the revolution of the decade in 1989, when it won both Academy Awards and box-office fortune. Both Jordan and Sheridan have been successful enough to be able to balance their personal art with the demands of commercialism. They have been at the forefront of Irish filmmakers who are at last debating topical issues around history and politics—while approaching them through very personal stories—and delivering strong messages to a primarily Irish, but also international, audience.

For this reason, both Sheridan and Jordan's films are almost always met with a great deal of controversy (which of course only makes for good publicity), as they approach subjects which are very sensitive in today's Ireland, is still engaged in historical struggles. Both directors have been attacked by both British and Irish critics for distorting facts or being biased in one direction or the other. They also have to contend with patronising attitudes about their nationality on both sides of the Atlantic—Jordan is bemused at the fact that "if I make a good movie they say I'm a British director and if I make what they think is a bad one, they say I'm Irish" (quoted in Levy, 188). Nonetheless, he has often made it clear that he is an

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that all of these films have been successful; Seamus McSwiney (1998) maintains that, as a result of increased production, there have inevitably been a large number of "bad Irish films" in recent years ([ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)).

"Irish voice" telling Irish stories for an Irish audience, and it can only be positive (in this confused time for Ireland) that he and Sheridan and several other filmmakers are concerned with redressing stereotypes about Irishness and engaging in a "dialogue with the Irish psyche" (Byrne, 207).

Irish writers and other artists have long recognised that art is effective in creating national consciousness (Cairns and Richards, 153). In her book Censoring Irish Nationalism, Louisa Burns-Bisogno refers to Louis Althusser's theory that "state apparatuses, such as media, reinforce ideology and give people their sense of identity and their understanding of reality" (3)<sup>4</sup>. She points out that the cinema arrived in Ireland around the same time that militant nationalism grew, and the period before and around the Civil War of 1921-23 involved advocating Irish nationalist ideology in film (the image of the romantic gunman will be discussed later). After independence, the new Irish Free State under Eamon De Valera set about stabilising its position and society, and film censorship was a means towards forming new images of national identity.

De Valera not only plunged Ireland into isolationism, but wished to present to the world an image of an Ireland that was unified, "Catholic and Celtic and politically stable" (Burns-Bisogno, 41), and created a romanticised vision of a traditional, family-based pastoral land, which exists to some extent to this day. The state

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<sup>4</sup> It is this recognition that gave rise to a conference at the Film Institute of Ireland in Dublin which was entitled "Nationalisms: Visions and Revisions", at which images of Irish nationalism at home and abroad and their creation of national identity were discussed (IFTN Newsletter 8).

promoted “Gaelic culture”, including the use of the Irish language, which continued the Yeatsian tradition of the “noble peasant” and the idyllic Western landscape which had begun in the turn-of-the-century Gaelic Revival. In addition, the Catholic Church, which had been re-invented and firmly entrenched in society in the nineteenth century (Cairns and Richards, 63), had much power over the state and the censoring of film images. Independent director Joe Comerford sums up this situation (quoted in Byrne, 2):

There was a conscious level at which the whole idea of art was undermined in favour of religion [...] Catholicism would take care of the emotional needs of the people and the State would run the administration. The State would, as all states do, set up a consciousness for the people about what they're living in.

In addition, because most films were made by and for Americans and Britons in this period, they had to reflect a politically stable Ireland, and did not engage with any political issues. As Comerford continues, the State “discouraged indigenous work which could have dealt with core issues like civil war, the economy, emigration, ownership of property” (ibid.). This censorship took a more radical turn after the start of the current phase of Northern Ireland’s Troubles in 1969, when British government agencies controlled all images of sectarian and military violence and of any nationalist/Republican points of view, particularly on television.

Film historian Kevin Rockett points out that the most familiar and clichéd images that non-Irish filmgoers have of Ireland are those put forward by foreigners (Rockett, 25). Harlan Kennedy goes so far as to question, “Is Ireland a land at all,

in the sense of a self-determining country and culture, or is it a product of everyone else's perceptions?" (Kennedy, 24). More powerful nations, mainly Britain and the United States, have assumed the right to characterise "the nature of Irish culture" (Byrne, 200), which has resulted in historically offensive stereotypes. Starting in the nineteenth century around the time of mass emigration, the Irish were seen in Britain as either devious, violent brutes or slow-witted, blarney-talking, alcoholic country bumpkins—the "stage Irishman". In America, the stereotypes were "lighter" (Burns-Bisogno, 11) and more pro-nationalist, but still denied complexity of character. Patricia Levy lists many other stock figures—peasants, drunks, Viragos, "fighting Micks" and priests—and approaches the most pervasive image in contemporary times of the "villainous" IRA gunman (Levy, 16).

For the first time, in the 1990s (Burns-Bisogno, 4), with the climate more amenable to open debate in both the Republic and Northern Ireland (where talks have at last been taking place between all parties involved in the division), indigenous filmmakers who were previously silenced are finding a voice and addressing the stereotypes. For several of them, the role of their work is like a call to arms: for Joe Comerford, "There never was a greater need for art in order to be informed personally and publicly about what's happening in our society and what's happening to us personally" (quoted in Byrne, 198), while the rather politicised Terry George argues (with reference to the situation in the North) that "We need to fight out this battle of ideas and beliefs in the arts" (quoted in McSwiney, 1996, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)). As Terry Byrne points out, the common theme in

most of the genuinely Irish films of recent years is “the need to address an omission or to reexamine an accepted issue in a new light” (202).

Although filmmakers like Jordan, Sheridan, George and Thaddeus O'Sullivan are conscious of the need to portray a balanced view of contentious issues, specifically of political violence and historical events, the very idea that they are setting out to redress “wrongs” done to Ireland in the past means that some bias is detectable in their work to variable extents. I shall show later how most of the films dealing with Northern Ireland in particular have a distinct nationalist slant. This may easily be explained by their makers' national allegiances<sup>5</sup> and by the need to make up for the fact that all nationalist viewpoints and images of violence by the British were kept from the public for so long. Nonetheless, they are exploring different “authenticities” of Irishness (phrase studied in Graham and Kirkland's Ireland and Cultural Theory) within a country which has only recently emerged from colonialism in which “Irishness” was dictated by the coloniser and defined as “otherness” or “not-Englishness” (Cairns and Richards, 2).

Despite all this hard work, certain stereotypes persist in almost all of the films, and some new ones are created, as I also intend to show. This is largely because of commercial interests—filmmakers continue to rely on financial support from foreign production companies. Unfortunately, as Colin Graham points out, in this post-

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<sup>5</sup> The general population of the Republic—including Sheridan and Jordan—supports a united Ireland at least in theory, while Terry George was once imprisoned by the British for alleged IRA activities.

colonial age, the ex-coloniser, or “the West”, still has a way of controlling or prescribing the “authenticities” of the ex-colonised, and this creates contradictions (15). Aiming at international markets also means catering for international tastes and perceptions, which requires a “mainstream” non-confrontational approach coupled with certain compromises such as using American actors, as in *Circle of Friends* (1995), *Widow’s Peak* (1994) and *The Playboys* (1992) (Byrne, 190). Films such as these (which I do not dismiss as being without value) portray a very sentimental, idyllic Ireland which is almost exclusively rural and beautiful, filled with charming people, where the political almost never intrudes. The epitome of these Americanised films is Ron Howard’s, *Far And Away* (1992), a nostalgic tribute to an Irish-American’s emigrant grandparents which is littered with stereotypes (all the stock characters mentioned by Levy and more) and whose ultimate message is that America is a place worth leaving Ireland for.

Harlan Kennedy has usefully categorised the history of Irish films into “Idyll and Ideology”, those dealing exclusively with the pastoral or the political respectively. He also suggests that the best examples are those films which combine the two themes in a layered and metaphorical fashion—depicting the Ireland captured in Yeats’s phrase “terrible beauty” (Kennedy, 36). I would argue, further, that the films under examination could similarly be labelled “rural” or “urban” (occasionally combining the two), with the latter encompassing settings in either sophisticated Dublin or war-torn post-1969 Belfast. For, as will be explained, **place** is central to virtually every Irish film, as it is indeed a long-standing *element* of Irish writing (Graham and Kirkland, 162).

However, I wish to emphasise at the outset that the task of placing Irish films into neat categories is next to impossible, as the themes and issues explored all overlap. This is an important point to note, as it indicates that the films I have studied are fraught with ambiguities and contradictions—which will be met at every turn—as can be expected from a country only just emerging from its mythologised past into a confusing modernity. Even when they are not directly engaging in debate, these Irish (occasionally British) filmmakers are reflecting the diversity and complexity behind the stereotypes of Ireland's history, politics and character. For, we are informed, "If you ask six Irish people what the Irish think about a given issue, you'll likely get six answers" (Byrne, 197). The Irish characters in these films are very often not behaving as we outsiders would expect; perhaps this is Neil Jordan's message behind the theme of *The Crying Game*—everything is not what it seems.

"You Fenian bastard!"

"Fuck the IRA!"

--Approximations of most frequently heard phrases in all films dealing with the Troubles.

## **2. SCREENING THE "TROUBLES"<sup>6</sup> AND THE IRA—PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

### **INTRODUCTION: *PATRIOT GAMES* AND THE IRA FROM A DISTANCE**

"It's not an American story; it's an Irish one."

--Frankie (Brad Pitt), IRA renegade in *The Devil's Own*.

In the latter half of this century, the predominant images of Irish Catholics produced by foreigners, particularly by the British, in film, have been excessively negative. This was aggravated, perhaps understandably, after the real start of the political strife in Northern Ireland in 1969, when televisions were graced with images of sectarian violence, and more so when the Irish Republican Army began its terrorist bombing campaign within Britain itself in the 1970s. The fear for national security that this invoked meant that all "destabilising" images of the violence were kept from screens and prompted the Irish Government in 1976 to impose a media ban on all interviews with members of Sinn Fein, the IRA, breakaway nationalist groups as well as loyalist paramilitaries such as the Ulster Defence Association<sup>7</sup>. This situation was only rectified in the early 1990s, after

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<sup>6</sup> Phrase adapted from title of Joan Dean's article "Screening the IRA" (*FilmWest* 20, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Brian Caul points out that the victims of the terrorism were also somewhat ignored by the media, where they were treated as mere statistics as a kind of defence mechanism (Caul, 44).

talks had begun between all concerned parties and there at last seemed a real chance for an end to the Troubles (Burns-Bisogno, 169).

While the British view of the Irish is strongly anti-nationalist, the Americans' attitude towards and relationship with the IRA is considerably more ambiguous. The United States is home to some forty million descendants of Irish immigrants who arrived in their largest numbers in the period during the Great Famine. Most Irish-Americans look nostalgically upon Ireland as a romantic motherland—resulting in films like *Far And Away*—while many are highly politicised. America has long been a major source of funding for the nationalist armed struggle, with organisations such as “Noraid” raising many dollars for groups like Sinn Fein. After the 1998 Good Friday Agreement towards peace in Northern Ireland, many hardline Irish-Americans felt they were being sold out: “we don’t want to see peace; we want to see independence”; “as long as the British have occupation forces in Ireland, anyone who opposes them will get help from here”, said two New Yorkers (quoted in Zarembo, 13). The media has a large role to play in this patriotism; Jim Sheridan claims that *In The Name Of The Father* was seen in the White House, and “it was one of the reasons that Gerry Adams got his visa to visit the U.S.” (quoted in Webster, 88).

Yet a negative image of the political violence persists in the United States as much as in Britain, only with far less understanding behind it. With the disadvantage of distance and insularity, Americans on the whole tend to be ignorant about the complexity of the Irish situation, if Hollywood films are anything to go by. The two

most recent high-profile examples are Philip Noyce's *Patriot Games* (1992) and Alan J. Pakula's *The Devil's Own* (1997), both of which, despite "aspirations to moral values, have no integrity when it comes to Irish history, politics or geography, let alone accents" (Dean 1995, 1). Both of them, although set in the USA, present an IRA terrorist as the antagonist, and it is not without significance that both feature Harrison Ford as the leading man. In his roles, Ford is the epitome of the heroic yet "everyman" all-American hero, and when, at the climax of each film he kills the IRA renegade, the audience is subconsciously encouraged to cheer for the fact that America (with its overriding message of family values) always wins the day when it comes to battling nasty, foreign terrorists.

If for Hollywood "Ireland" means, more often than not, the IRA, then "IRA" is represented by the villainous gunman stereotype as mentioned above<sup>8</sup>. This IRA terrorist, as explained by Patricia Levy, is a "merciless killer with hate in his heart" who originated in the British media, where he has a "predictable image" (Levy, 16). He is usually a hard young man who has grown up amidst urban warfare, carries a rifle and masks himself with a black balaclava and green jacket (as do Palestinian terrorists)—this is the image seen in many loyalist murals on the walls of Northern Ireland in films that are set there. This also provides a useful image for Hollywood filmmakers who are searching for new villains in the post-Cold War era when the old ones are no longer valid (Dean1995, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)). As Philip Noyce somewhat proudly argues in response to queries about his hardcore

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<sup>8</sup> There is a lone IRA gunwoman in *Patriot Games*, but she is British (and therefore doubly devious).

portrayal of Irish paramilitaries, "Irish extremist groups have perpetrated terrorist acts. This is not a sensationalizing of the truth" (quoted in Griffin, 82).

However, films like *Patriot Games* and *The Devil's Own* shrink from offering any explanation or opinion of the IRA's tactics, history and political beliefs, instead making use of the armed struggle merely as good (and non-complex) material for hit action/thriller movies. The point worth noting is that, in both these cases as in Irish-American John Ford's *The Informer* (1934), these American films do not so much engage with the organisation that is the IRA as focus on "a fanatical individual who, driven by the need for personal revenge, desperation, or monomania, betrays or operates outside the IRA" (Dean 1995, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)).

The stage is set in *Patriot Games* when a ruthless band of Irish "villainous gunmen" (balaclavas included) attempt to assassinate Lord Holmes, a British royal, in London. Harrison Ford's Jack Ryan can't resist intervening, and manages to kill the little brother<sup>9</sup> of antagonist Sean (Sean Bean), who, when he is arrested, delivers Ryan a silent, glowering look of hatred which is his expression for the rest of the film. This murder (along with that of his father earlier in Belfast) drives the plot as Sean seeks personal revenge on Ryan at all costs, which his comrades berate. This extremist band is shown to be operating outside the authority of their local IRA leaders, whom they assassinate back in Ireland—because "they've got us nowhere"—before leaving for "North Africa", where, of course, all terrorists

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<sup>9</sup> Little Brother is predictably named "Paddy", as is Richard Harris's Sinn Fein leader.

receive military training. The terrorists return to America to retry the assassination when Holmes is visiting the Ryan family, while Sean is driven there solely by his desire for revenge. By contrast, “good guy” Ryan is driven by his noble need to protect his family, which prompts him to leer at the somewhat slimy Sinn Fein leader, “Nobody believes you anymore”. After the CIA kills off most of the band, the final showdown sees Ryan triumphantly defeating Sean. The nationalisms displayed in this film are telling, as the Irish characters are shown as ruthless, cold, barely human killers, while the very British Lord Holmes is extremely affable, witty and heroic. On the other hand, while the Sinn Fein leader is fiercely loyal to his own countrymen, the two “traitors” of the piece, who assist the IRA extremists, are British. Only the Americans are completely without reproach.

*The Devil's Own* also suffers from national stereotypes and superficiality. Its main focus, and possibly its main problem, is its focus on two major stars, Harrison Ford and Brad Pitt, both of whom will elicit support from the audience because of their respective charismatic traits. For this reason, the issues at stake are not so clear, and it is difficult for the viewer to know whom to root for when the two friends eventually battle each other. Here again Ford plays the thoroughly decent family man and heroic server of the law, who can't abide dishonesty. Pitt is, like Sean Bean, driven by revenge and hatred—the film begins with a scene of his father being killed by British soldiers in front of his young eyes in 1972. However, he is a far more appealing character, and one is encouraged to root for him in his villainous gunman guise during a shootout in the streets of Belfast. His love affair with a sensible Irish girl also gives him a human, charming side.

Yet Pitt's character Frank/Rory can only be condemned for his gunrunning activities which involve him lying to and endangering the man who has been so kind to him. After Frank is discovered and arrested, and escapes, he undergoes a character change to make him a bit more ruthless and to make the final chase more exciting. Finally he cannot kill Ford's character—it would have been too upsetting to have the American hero die—but is himself killed, which, we are made to feel, is very sad, but only fitting, as a flawed terrorist deserves.

Although Pitt's character insists that "this isn't an American story, it's an Irish one" when Ford, an Irish-American, questions him about the situation "back home", this film, like *Patriot Games*, is precisely that: a distorted, simplistic view of Ireland from a distance without exploring the complexity of the political situation but reducing it to an inter-personal drama. Irishness becomes a cliché like the stuffed leprechaun that Sinn Fein leader Richard Harris delivers to Ryan; one article sums up *The Devil's Own* as "Clannad, smoky pubs, creamy pints and heroic IRA kneecappings" (Wallace, 94). Little knowledge is required for Hollywood films: "The only Irish history at issue is the fact that there has been sectarian violence in Northern Ireland for the past 25 years" (Dean 1995, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)).

When it comes to recent Irish-made films, however, history becomes a vital tool (albeit frequently subjective) for exploring the very complex and very ambiguous attitudes and struggles that continue within Ireland to this day.

## HISTORY—AND MYTH—ON FILM: *MICHAEL COLLINS* AND THE BIRTH OF IRELAND'S TROUBLES

"I thought the character Christy Brown [in *My Left Foot*] was like Ireland, a child who's been beaten by history."

--Jim Sheridan (quoted in Webster, 88).

"I see the Irish/As a race like a child/That got itself bashed in the face/  
And if there ever is gonna be healing/There has to be remembering/  
And then grieving/So that there can be forgiving/There has to be  
knowledge and understanding."

--Sinead O'Connor, "Famine" (Universal Mother).

The Irish have a uniquely intense and vivid relationship with their history, even within their everyday lives, and it has often been said that they live the present in terms of the past. In a similar manner to the Jews, they continue to remember and mourn great tragedies of the past, such as Oliver Cromwell's oppression of Catholics, the Great Famine, and the 1916 Easter Rising. This is understandable when one considers that the effects of these events are still felt today on both sides of the border: colonialism, mass emigration, resentment against the British, and the division of Ireland which resulted from the Rising and the Civil War. As an indication of the effect the past still has on the present, the Troubles in Northern Ireland are largely attributable to the fact that the issues of 1916 remain unresolved; the nationalist ambitions of a united Ireland unfulfilled. Indeed, the very reason for the existence of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, which took over from the Official IRA in the 1970s, was "to finish the unfinished business of the Easter Rising and boot the British out of Ireland for good" (Caul, 156).

At the same time, Irish history is still very much bound up with myth, and legends of St Patrick as well as ancient Celtic heroes are still proudly alive in the popular imagination, concerned as it is with narrative, and in history text books (Levy, 23). An extreme example of this nostalgic patriotism is the eccentric mother in *The Last of the High Kings*, who asserts that her children contain the pure blood of ancient Irish kings, as did “all the great Irish patriots”, such as Emmett and Parnell, whom she constantly refers to as models of behaviour. There is a tendency to mythologise history and glorify heroes and events of the past, turning them into national myths. The most recent example is that of Bobby Sands and the IRA Hunger Strikers who died in 1981 as a result of their campaign to be recognised as political prisoners—their “martyrdom”, which was used to justify their actions, will be discussed later. However, the most vivid example is still that of the Easter Rising, whose small band of rebels became glorified patriots, martyred by their execution by the British. One must agree with Patricia Levy, who argues that, in the myth-building process, Irish history is given a “masochistic gloss”, as shown by the recurrence of simplistic imagery like that of poor Catholic peasants being oppressed by Protestant landlords (Levy, 33)<sup>10</sup>. This indicates a kind of reverse stereotype to counter those produced by outsiders and loyalists, and will be shown to recur in many films which deal with the IRA (or at least its individual members) from a frequently sympathetic point of view.

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that Northern Protestants do not have their own mythologies; that of the brutal William of Orange, which informs the still-potent Orange Order, and which is still depicted in Belfast murals, is the most visible example (Caul, 156)

When it comes to presenting these turbulent aspects of Irish history on film, the filmmaker faces tremendous obstacles and risks from the outset, as any interpretation of historical events is likely to face criticism from one side of the conflict or the other. Because of their challenging, political natures, both Sheridan and Jordan's films are unfailingly received with controversy on both sides of the Irish Sea. The risky business of their art and getting the facts right has deep resonance in Irish society, where history is of major relevance to modern politics (which are divisive). One Irish critic, questioning the accuracy of parts of *In The Name of The Father*, argued for the responsibility of the filmmaker: "In a society where the present reality is one of instability, division and danger, the facts about the past become critical" (quoted in Burns-Bisogno, 134).

Yet, after the release of Joe Comerford's 1993 *High Boot Benny* which was criticised for republican bias, the question arose as to whether it is possible for any filmmaker to deal with a subject such as the civil war without being "accused of political bias and sectarianism" (ibid.). Historians have long debated the merits of feature films which claim to present historical events. One of the most obvious difficulties is that the nature of drama (as opposed to documentary) is such that it requires a neat, exciting plot with a beginning, middle and end, which cannot incorporate the complexities and continuity of history. The historical feature film will also necessarily focus on one or two heroic individuals (or villains) without a deeper exploration of the larger, abstract and impersonal forces of history over time. Historian Richard Rosenstone makes allowances for the fact that film simply cannot offer an accurate representation of the past, while maintaining that it can

display a large amount of information in visual form and provide a sense of the past and individual motivations. He also allows for the fact that the filmmaker has to take some liberties with the truth to make a coherent story, but he distinguishes between “true invention”, which remains true to the discourse of history and serves merely for compression or metaphor, and “false invention”, which completely ignores the historical discourse (Rosenstone, 72).

In attempting to reclaim their history, Sheridan, George and Jordan make use mainly of true invention, although they may be accused of some bias. Sheridan certainly was when his *In The Name Of The Father* was released. Although it received great acclaim (and Academy Awards) as a film, it was criticised for distorting certain facts. It was based on Gerry Conlon's book about his experiences of his wrongful arrest for an IRA pub bombing in Birmingham in 1974, but Sheridan conflated elements of two stories, of the “Birmingham Six” and the similar “Guildford Four” in order to make a more coherent and “‘dramatic’ composite” (Power, 599). Despite this criticised adaptation, it can be argued that Sheridan was not distorting the course of history in his film, as his main intent and achievement was to show that tremendous injustice was perpetrated by the British police against innocent Irish people who experienced frightened prejudice because of their nationality.

In trying to get across this fact, however, Sheridan was inevitably attacked by some in Britain for being too sympathetic towards republicans (Ardagh, 266), as well as portraying the British and RUC characters in a very bad light (see next

section). The British press was also prejudiced against writer Terry George because of his background in Belfast and his firsthand experiences of violence and imprisonment in Longkesh. This could only have benefited the truthfulness of the film; for instance, George had met Gerry Conlon and knew straight away that he could not have done the IRA bombing, as “he was such an asshole” and “too much of an eejit” (George quoted in McSwiney, 1996a, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)). Sheridan and George are at pains to depict Conlon in this way in the first two thirds of *Father*; he is shown as a no-good loafer and petty thief who continually disrespects his father, lives in a hippie squat in London, and passes the time in prison taking drugs<sup>11</sup>. Yet they were also attacked within Ireland for inventing a fictional character in the form of Joe McAndrews, who turns out to be the real IRA bomber. Although a confessed bomber did exist, McAndrews is depicted as thoroughly evil, viewing his victims as “legitimate targets”, and later cruelly setting a prison warden on fire. It is clear that this character serves to elicit sympathy for the non-violent Giuseppe and Gerry, who puts the fire out (Byrne, 150).

It can be argued that almost every Irish film, even those recent ones set in the apolitical 1950s, deal with the forces and impact of history ([www.iftn.ie/archive](http://www.iftn.ie/archive)). The three filmmakers mentioned above are responsible for the only three films I studied that deal with actual historical events—*In the Name of the Father*, *Some Mother's Son* and *Michael Collins*. In the face of expected criticism, all three make use of the same techniques to create a sense of authenticity. Dates are the first

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that Day-Lewis's Gerry Conlon has not turned into a noble, dedicated and sympathetic hero by the end of the film, which has us cheering for his tearful victory.

things which lend an historical air to the proceedings. *Father* begins with a prologue depicting young people entering the pub which is about to be bombed, and the scene is set with "Guildford, England, October 5 1974". *Some Mother's Son* has the words "March 1, 1981" superimposed over posters of Bobby Sands being put up on the day he commences his hunger strike. *Michael Collins* does even more contextualising, starting with a somewhat history textbook-like written summary about resistance to British rule, and after a retrospective scene of Collins's friend Joe eulogising him, we are transported to "Dublin 1916—Easter Rising", as if we couldn't tell by the faithful recreation of the Dublin Post Office and the epic period war set. The history notes return at the end of the film, informing us of Collins's legacy and achievements. *Some Mother's Son* concludes with a list of the ten men who died on the hunger strike, including ages and precise dates of deaths, while a scan of the names lets one know that the characters in the film are fictional inroads to the story. *Father's* endnotes tell us of the happy futures of the Guildford Four and the outcome of the case. Finally, all three films make use of newsreel footage to add to the realism: *Some Mother's Son* fills several minutes of screen time with Margaret Thatcher's speeches to the press about IRA prisoners and at times shows news reports in the background of shocked world reactions to the Hunger Strikers. The scene of Bobby Sands's funeral is a filmic re-creation, but is faithful to the accompanying radio report which tells us that it was attended by 100 000 mourners. *Michael Collins*, however, closes with archival black-and-white footage of his funeral, which enforces the impression that what has gone before is real.

Actor Stephen Rea has said of *Michael Collins* that “the Irish people are putting their own history on the world stage” (quoted in Burns-Bisogno, 135). Neil Jordan has claimed that he made the film to educate people, both British and Irish, about “what actually went on” in the Irish Civil War period:

Because of the continuing troubles in Northern Ireland, for the last twenty years that period has been suppressed in our minds, people didn't want to talk about it... It is part of our past, part of our history, it deserves examination.

--(quoted in McSwiney, 1996b, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)).

Jordan explains that the version of history he was taught in school stopped at the heroics of 1916 and said nothing about the War of Independence or the Civil War.

Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) its ambitions to be a rectified historical document in the face of decades of silence about the period of the Irish Civil War, no Irish film in recent years has attracted more controversy. Even long before it was released (late) in Ireland and Britain, there were not only criticisms of its accuracy and bias—such as the Times calling it “an anti-British travesty” (Case, 21)—but fears about reactions to it in the heated political climate after the apparent breakdown of the ceasefire in Northern Ireland in 1996. This indicates how closely many people associate Collins with the contemporary IRA (Sheehy, [www.iftn.ie/filmireland](http://www.iftn.ie/filmireland)). The controversy, it seems, is born of a cautious, conservative view. One writer angrily puts forward the view that there is a group of people in Ireland “who believe that films like *Michael Collins* encourage... political psychosis and that they shouldn't be made... Or, if such films must be made, it's

argued, then they ought to airbrush over troubling historical events one wishes hadn't happened" (ibid.).

In addition, there was a diverse range of critical opinion on the film itself, some of which was due to the fact that while Americans saw the film as a thoroughly "Irish" movie, Britain and Ireland saw it as a grand-scale Hollywood production (Dean 1997, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)).<sup>12</sup> The truth is, like so many Irish films which attempt to combine statement with commercialism, it contains elements of both. What Neil Jordan has achieved is not only the reclaiming of his history and the exorcism of simplistic national stereotypes, but he has also undertaken to create a new national myth, despite his claims to objectivity. It does indicate a shift in consciousness with regard to the revolutionary period of 1916-1923, but, as John Devitt has suggested, "it subverts some stereotypes but replaces them with new ones" (personal communication, 1999).

Jordan chooses a telling quotation with which to end his film: Eamon De Valera's 1966 words, "...In the fullness of time, history will record the greatness of Michael Collins, and it will be recorded at my expense". This speaks volumes about the choice of characterisation which informs the whole screenplay. The film focuses the historical events in Ireland of 1916-1922 around the life of one individual, understandably enough for dramatic purposes, so that (unlike in real life) the events fall into a three-part structure involving the beginning of Collins's struggle, his

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<sup>12</sup> One can only wonder at what would have transpired if the film had starred Kevin Costner, as originally planned.

defeats and victories, ending with his death. Indeed, Collins, who has been a fairly obscure figure in history books (and unknown in the United States), is elevated to the glorified position of representative and near-creator of the whole revolutionary period: “the mastermind behind that war was Michael Collins. His life and death defined the period in its triumph, terror and tragedy” (opening notes, *Michael Collins*).

Collins himself has all the makings of a mythical figure, in that he not only managed to “kick the Brits out” after centuries of unsuccessful resistance, but he died young, shot down by adversaries as he was trying to negotiate peace for Ireland after the Civil War. In addition, he was made into a romantic Robin Hood character by means of the dubious virtue of effectively organising the prototype of the IRA and developing modern urban guerrilla tactics, which kept him constantly on the run.

Yet Jordan goes beyond this, managing to make Collins into a thoroughly decent, sensible hero, all the more likeable because of his human, tangible qualities which are emphasised. The audience is made to be sympathetic and “on his side” from beginning to end, and even his involvement in more questionable activities is excused. Actor Liam Neeson’s performance is central to the creation of this figure and to carrying the film as a whole, as the audience’s belief in his motives rests on it. With the Irish fondness for giving their leaders nicknames, Collins was known as “the big fella”, and Neeson certainly qualifies with his commanding height advantage over everyone else. His attractive yet gentle appearance, and powerful

performance conveying both Collins's wisdom and pragmatism are key to Jordan's intentions: "One of my worries was that the audience would perhaps lose sympathy for Collins because what he does is so ferocious, but... I realised Liam could chop up his grandmother and he'd still be a sympathetic guy" (Jordan quoted in Bellafante, 56). His Collins has a reassuring sense of authority; he is able to rouse a crowd into shouting their support should the authorities try "to shut me up", he wins over informers like Ned Broy who finds his speeches "very persuasive", and we are repeatedly shown how efficiently he disciplines his band of gunmen, drilling their orders like a schoolteacher. Although he cries, "I'll make an army out of ye if it's the last thing I do" (which he does), he is no tyrant, but shown as very fair—allowing the said army a chance to leave if they do not wish to take part in the fighting—and well liked by the men under him, who are loyal enough neither to leave nor to inform on him (until he is faced by opposition in the ranks in the second half of the film).

Neeson's Collins also has great personal charisma and politeness, emphasised not only by his romance with Julia Roberts's Kitty Kiernan, but by his self-effacing wit and humour in the face of danger. Early in the film he is shown stopping his car in the middle of a "sheep jam" and going to talk to the "G-men" who he knows have been tailing them, and asking of Ned Broy, "what did you eat for breakfast?" Later, escaping from a raid by jumping through a roof, he politely asks a startled lady the way out. One thing we are told in Joe's eulogy at the beginning of the film is that he never did what one expected, and would cycle around Dublin in a pinstriped suit. This adds to his charm, as it is well known that audiences love an individualist and

rebel, something the Irish are often characterised as, especially with regards to resisting the British. As he tells the angry crowd, their weapon is “our refusal to bow to any order but our own”. We are also expected to side with Collins, the underground gunman, when he rebels against his superiors’ established system.

Jordan tempers and personalises the violence and political talk by constantly bringing out Collins’ human side. This comes about largely through his friendship with Harry Boland (Aidan Quinn), who acts as his obligatory sidekick throughout the first half of the film, when it seems as if every second line of Collins’ ends with the tag “Harry”. They have a very affectionate, playful relationship, filled with wisecracks and mock-fighting, and the men even share a bed. The dramatic problem occurs when they share the same woman. At first they jokingly compete with each other for Kitty, although the three of them are always shown very close and happy together, accompanied by a romantic theme in the music. However, once Harry discovers that Collins has won Kitty’s heart (which happens to coincide with Collins’ return from the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations), he is rather ludicrously provided with a personal motivation for defecting to the other side in the Civil War, driven by his intense, psychotic jealousy. Collins is given a further opportunity to show how noble he is when he tries to rescue the cowardly Harry in the sewers, fleeing from Collins’ own men in the fighting. Of course, in terms of dramatic conventions, Harry deserves to die, although Collins mourns, “he was one of us”.

While elaborating certain issues about Collins, Jordan chooses to suppress others, in this case his notorious womanising. Collins' charm is displayed the first time he meets Kitty, as he nostalgically listens to her singing, and attempts a humorous song himself. While nobly letting Harry woo her, he displays courtesy and commitment to her once she has chosen him, and protects her from the outside dangers as any romantic hero should. One is tempted to believe it is a fabrication of Jordan's to show that the last thing Collins was talking about before his death was his wedding to her, and to have the assassination dramatically intercut with scenes of Kitty trying on her wedding clothes, although I have not come across any historical accounts that disprove him. This heightens the sense of shock and tragedy one feels when Collins is shot down. These romantic, human and universal themes cause one to wonder, as does a Time critic, whether the history Jordan is putting on screen "Is not that of tragic Ireland but of lighthearted Hollywood, making sure that past and principles don't weigh too heavily on a biopic's audience" (Schickel, 55). Jordan certainly, and perhaps justifiably, makes use of many elements in the story to keep the audience's interest; besides the romance there are plenty of realistic battle scenes, car chases, ambushes and exciting night-time raids such as the first one Collins takes his men out on, to steal ammunition from the police. The shots of Dublin at night by lamplight lend a film noir/thriller feel to the piece, which deals with that 1920s gangster period.

Yet some critics such as Joan Dean feel that these aspects humanise the man and undercut the myth, and that Collins "is not simply made a saint" (Dean, 1997, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)). To some extent, Jordan is self-consciously aware

of Collins's mythologised figure, as one angry politician makes clear when pointing a finger at Collins for "selling out" to the British after the signing of the Treaty: "nobody sought notoriety except you. One person was held up by the press and given a position he never held. He was made into a romantic figure, a mystical character, which he certainly is not!" This statement may well be true, but we are not allowed to linger on it, as we are on Collins' side when he counters with a rousing speech of his own.

Collins is continually shown as a good person who can do no wrong, even when he makes mistakes. Always appearing very regretful of the necessity of resorting to violence, he tells Harry about his motivation for undertaking guerrilla tactics against the British: "I hate them. Not for their race, not for their brutality. I hate them because they've left us no way out... I hate them for making hate necessary. And I'll do what I have to to end it". This speech justifies or at least excuses his actions for the rest of the film, implying that he does not advocate his own violence. Later he explains to Kitty what message he is sending out while his boys are killing members of British intelligence: "Give us the future, we've had enough of your past". We are also made aware that by the end of the film he was trying to put an end to the Civil War peacefully, and it was the Anti-Treaty faction that stopped him from doing so: "He died, paradoxically, in an attempt to finally remove the gun from Irish politics" (quoted from endtitles of *Michael Collins*).

Every conventional film needs a conventional antagonist to contrast with the hero, and in *Michael Collins* Jordan preys upon Eamon De Valera, first president of the

Irish Republic, and a patriot almost as mythical as Collins himself. From his first moment onscreen, "Dev" (played by Alan Rickman) is a subtly unlikeable character, if only because of his oddly measured speech pattern and unflinching gaze. John Devitt describes him as "meanly and unconvincingly imagined" (personal communication, 1999), and it is clear that Jordan needs him to be so for the purposes of the plot, as he himself admits: "In the absence of a villain, the villainous principle centres on one character, and I did allow it to centre on Dev" (quoted in Case, 22). Dev is portrayed as a committed, even ruthless and fanatical idealist, with little personal sympathy, and he is contrasted as a man of talk to Collins's man of action (even though many historians argue that Collins was an equally shrewd politician and spokesperson). When Dev returns from America, where he gathered moral support for their cause, to criticise Collins for engaging in guerrilla violence, Collins retorts that Dev was escaping his real duty to fight at home: "there's only one kind of force they understand... Our job is at home!"

Jordan engages in further (and most criticised) historical invention when it comes to portraying the fact that Dev made Collins go in his place to the Anglo-Irish negotiations. The implication made here, deduced by Collins, is that Dev sent him knowing that full independence could not be achieved, so that Collins would take the blame for the failure—it was the resulting Treaty (providing partial independence for the south of Ireland) that split Irish republican ranks and started the Civil War. Again Jordan admits his task: "I've had to interpret De Valera's motivation there... It's a mystery why he didn't go" (quoted in Case, 22). Dev is

further painted in a bad light when he is shown inciting a huge Dublin crowd to violence: "If it is only through civil war that we can get our independence, so be it!" As by now sympathy has been established for Michael Collins, we are on his side in the matter of the Civil War. His option, of standing by the Treaty as a stepping stone towards achieving the Republic peacefully, is shown as the more rational one, and he is shown as having had little choice in the proceedings anyway. Emotions run high in the scene where the cabinet votes in favour of the Treaty (resounding cheers for Collins), as Collins stands by his convictions while his enemies slink out to plan their war—now disloyal friend Harry included.

The Irish Civil War was a shadow of things to come, being the first time that Irish people fought against each other. However, besides addressing the "enemy within", Jordan does not shy away from showing the atrocities committed by the British against the Irish republicans in this period. No British character in the film is portrayed with any depth or sympathy whatsoever (nor are they onscreen long enough to be). The typical "nasty" British villain is one slimy Mr Sloane, who is head of the police intelligence at Dublin Castle. His cold-heartedness is first signalled by his constant inability to get Ned Broy's name right, and all he is intent on is finding and exterminating Collins. Yet the major threat comes in the form of the Black and Tans, British troops sent to quell the resistance fighting and still remembered for their indiscriminate cruelty. Our first view of them shows them marching in faceless, ominous, Nazi fashion. We are disgusted by their behaviour when, driving a tank through a Dublin neighbourhood, one of them suddenly aims his machine gun at all the surrounding walls after the unit is pelted with vegetables

by the residents (and a homemade firebomb). Their biggest crime, however, is the Croke Park massacre, which Jordan has inflated to suit his purposes. In this scene, several British tanks (soldiers unseen) suddenly and without reason drive onto a field where a Gaelic football match is taking place. After a moment of stunned silence, the tanks fire into the crowd, which includes women and children, amidst much screaming. By all accounts, the event, while certainly barbarous, did not happen in such a dramatic fashion, yet, to bring the horror home, Jordan subsequently shows Collins mourning over some of the dead bodies in a hospital, giving him fuel for revenge. Jordan does show that the British were retaliating against the IRA's assassinations of selected "G-men", which are also depicted in all their violence, but he portrays the British killings as worse because more random. In addition, the Irish republicans are shown as having a human side, not only fear, but conscience, as displayed by a shot of one young assassin praying in church before making his kill.

*Michael Collins* presents themes that are relevant to the political strife of the present day that affects both parts of Ireland, albeit not always in a balanced fashion, and including compromises for a mass audience. However, this film, with its heavy focus on Collins as the admirable figure behind the myth, should not be dismissed as a poor attempt at portraying history as it happened (which no film can ever claim to do), but looked at as a provocative account of the making of a myth (*Michael Collins* entry, [www.iftn.ie/archive](http://www.iftn.ie/archive)).

## RE-SCREENING THE IRA—AND TRYING TO GET AWAY

“Ireland unfree shall never be at peace”

--IRA slogan on Belfast wall seen in *The Boxer*

Any film which chooses to depict the IRA will automatically be seen as controversial, whatever its point of view, by virtue of the fact that political fervour runs so deep throughout Ireland, and that, for the moment, the peace process in Northern Ireland, now involving all parties, seems so uncertain. Irish filmmakers, for the most part Catholic in origin, have undertaken to explore the lives of Irish nationalists on their own terms, which frequently involves some degree of sympathy for the IRA. Terry George has explained that “A fundamental basic of the struggles in N.I. is a feeling of disempowerment and a lack of voice from the nationalist community” (George quoted in McSwiney, 1996a, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)), and in *Some Mother's Son* he sets out to give a voice to those people that experienced a group tragedy. He goes on to say that the loyalist (unionist/Protestant) community has also felt this disempowerment and that he would not shy away from depicting one of their stories. However, it is very noticeable that none of the Irish films I have encountered has dealt at all with the personal lives of the Protestant community, with the exceptions of *Nothing Personal* and *This Is the Sea*, which deal more broadly with sectarian relations. This is not to say that the IRA is always painted in a positive light; most filmmakers' intentions are to condemn violence in general, and they try to achieve balance (which as usual results in ambivalence or ambiguity) when dealing with this very complex issue.

In any case, what is seen more often than not is the humanising of the men (occasionally women) behind the mask of the “villainous IRA gunman”. The earliest and most high-profile of this kind of film in the 1990s is *The Crying Game* (1992). Although most of the action takes place in London, and <sup>the film</sup> is not remembered for its politics, Neil Jordan claims that in this film “I did want to make something that came out of the nationalist point of view. I wanted the Stephen Rea character to have a certain coherent set of beliefs” (quoted in Byrne, 92). The character of Fergus is singled out straight away as being more level-headed and human than his radical IRA peers in their forest hideaway, by means of his kindness to the British soldier they are holding hostage. Starting by offering him tea and taking the sack off his head, Fergus develops a wary friendship with Jody, knowing he is about to die, and this relationship reveals the real, human side to both of them, beneath any political ideology. They share jokes and anecdotes from their lives, and several bridges are crossed when Fergus helps Jody urinate. Most importantly, they find they share a common bond as victims of racial prejudice and the position of ethnic minorities within Britain: Jody as a black man claims that Ireland is the only country “where they still call you nigger to your face”, while Fergus is called “Paddy” by the British, most notably by his employer at the construction site later in the film.

We are offered insight into Fergus’s IRA mind when he explains to Jody that the simple reason for his people’s activities is the belief that “you don’t belong here”. However, Jody soon sees through Fergus when he tells him it’s “not in his nature” to kill. Indeed, when it is Fergus’ time to shoot Jody, he half-accidentally lets him go, and the IRA is absolved of any blame for killing him, as he is run over by a

British army truck. Plagued by a guilty conscience not normally associated with Northern Irish terrorists, Fergus flees to London, where he continues to be haunted by Jody. This character was the cause of Jordan being criticised for humanising an IRA terrorist and thereby eliciting IRA sympathy. However, Jordan does portray a very negative side to the IRA, as discussed below, while achieving his main, pioneering goal of “focusing on the minds behind the steely approach of the terrorists” (Burns-Bisogno, 131).

A counter to the stereotype of the “villainous gunman” within the nationalist community (although it doubtless exists in the unionist community too) has been the equally damaging figure of the “romantic gunman” (O’Callaghan, 48). Sean O’Callaghan, a former IRA leader, bemoans this militant tradition which has been handed down to subsequent generations as the one thing standing in the way of ultra-nationalists co-operating with the peace process, as they believe that any compromise with the British is a “sellout” of the old ideals (ibid.). The myth of the romantic gunman was best realised in *Michael Collins*, in the shot of the small band of Easter Rising patriots making their hopeless but brave stand against an entire army, and in the excitingly filmed scenes of Collins giving orders to his loyal guerrillas in the dark of night.

The exaggerated martyrdom of 1916 still has its echoes in the present day, as demonstrated in *Some Mother’s Son* (1996) and its depiction of Bobby Sands and the IRA Hunger Strikers of 1981. These men were held up as mythic heroes justified in their self-sacrificing campaign to be recognised as political prisoners

rather than common criminals. Brian Caul explains that “an honourable Gaelic struggle on behalf of a total people oppressed by British Imperialism was not mere propaganda, it gave basic meaning to actions which others perceived as heinous and cowardly” (Caul, 40). In the film, the prisoners are shown as just that within their communities (and even speak the rebellious Irish language amongst themselves), and although Helen Mirren’s character Kathleen is shocked by her son’s involvement in terrorist activities and wants no part of the violence, she soon joins in the mothers’ campaign to help the Hunger Strikers. We are also shown that there was worldwide sympathy for the strike, which was a “media event” (Burns-Bisogno, 157), as at one stage we hear a television reporter saying, “abroad, a wave of anti-British protest...” This is very similar to the support Gerry Conlon receives in *Father* when he campaigns for his innocence, and we hear on the news that thousands of people are marching in London and Dublin.

Yet the most telling images in *Some Mother’s Son* are those that blatantly associate the prisoners with Christian martyrdom. When Gerry Quigley first sees Bobby in his cell, he gleefully proclaims, “you look like Jesus Christ”—and indeed he does, with his grey blanket and long prophet’s hair and beard, and all the protesting prisoners come to resemble him. When Kathleen goes to visit local Sinn Fein leader Danny Boyle, we see in the background, amongst the usual IRA graffiti, a mural depicting a Hunger Striker as a semi-naked Christ, draped in the Irish flag and being crucified on the cross that forms the central design of the Union Jack.

In addition, the IRA is frequently shown as very sensible, decent “community police” or “moral police” who not only protect their communities but deliver their own punishments on criminals. A Unionist MP has actually claimed, “the loyalist paramilitaries are parasites who extort from their own people, whereas the IRA in their way try to look after their community” (quoted in Ardagh, 364). This situation is depicted in *The Boxer*, in which the local IRA boss protects his own people, such as the wives of political prisoners, and in *In The Name of the Father*, in which the opening scenes tell us that Gerry, who has been given many warnings about his stealing of scrap metal, is finally taken to task by the neighbourhood IRA, who humiliatingly remove his trousers and lecture him, without injuring him.

More often than not, however, nationalist support is more subtly elicited in these films by depicting British (and sometimes loyalist) characters in a bad, often stereotypically villainous light. This results from the fact that for most nationalists/Northern Ireland Catholics, the real enemy has always been the British rather than the Protestant community (Ardagh, 359). I have already pointed out the expression of this sentiment in *Michael Collins* and in the theme of British miscarriage of justice in *Father*.

In the latter film, while the bulk of the villainy resides <sup>in</sup> Chief Inspector Dixon, who lies in court and withholds information from the defence, it is a particular section of the film whose memorable imagery conjures up the most sympathy for the Guildford Four and antagonism for the British police, who are shown as “institutionalised thugs” (Byrne, 129). Under the much-maligned Prevention of

Terrorism Act which allowed the police to hold suspected IRA terrorists for a week without charge, Gerry Conlon and the others are detained<sup>13</sup> and tortured physically and mostly mentally until they are forced into giving confessions, which, it is implied, the desperate police officials know to be false. Dixon and his psychotic Irish sidekick play a cruel barrage of mindgames with Gerry, such as showing him pictures of the bombing victims, with the intent of almost making him believe he is guilty (the audience, meanwhile, is never in doubt about his innocence, largely proclaimed by his immaturity). Emotionally exhausted, Gerry is shown breaking down in tears, and the one shot that is intended to stick in one's mind is the sidekick's view through a spyhole of Gerry in a crucified position in the middle of the screen, wearing a bright orange shirt, surrounded by faceless men who hold his arms out and pull his ears to elicit an unbearable grimace of pain. In a final act of cruelty, after claiming "I can make him confess", the one cop tells Gerry that they are going to kill his father, which makes Gerry give up and sign the confession.

*Some Mother's Son* has one very stereotypical English governmental "baddie" (not counting Margaret Thatcher, often shown in television interviews uttering contextually hypocritical statements). Known as Sam, he oversees the police program<sup>me</sup> of "isolation, criminalisation and demoralisation" from a British war room using an unchangingly menacing expression and a particularly irritating accent. His cold sense of superiority is signalled in the way that he refers to the Irish

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<sup>13</sup> They had been turned in by the sleazy-looking British hippie who shared Gerry and Paul Hill's London squat, and who is viciously prejudiced against their Irishness from the outset.

nationalists as “these people”, and is fixated on getting them in jail and not letting the British government appear to give in.

Like the ever-present British Army in their tanks, loyalist paramilitaries are not excused from being shown as inherently prone to violence against Catholics. After having had our sympathy established for *This Is the Sea*'s star-crossed lovers, we fear the glowering looks of Protestant Hazel's protective brother Jeff, who hates her Catholic boyfriend Malachy and follows them around suspiciously. Jeff's implied loyalist leanings prompt him to plant a bomb under Malachy's car (although it claims Mal's brother's life), aided, as we later find out, by Hazel's kindly friend, Old Man Jacobs. *Nothing Personal* portrays sectarian violence in a realistic fashion and does begin by showing the devastating effect of an IRA bomb, but one is made to feel throughout that the Protestant gangs are more violent and unlikeable. They commit worse atrocities in the rest of the film, setting a fifteen-year-old boy alight, shooting Catholics in the street and traitors in the knees, torturing innocent hero Liam, and being indirectly responsible for the death of Liam's little girl.

It can by no means be said, however, that there is blanket condemnation of British people and adulatory sympathy for the IRA in any of these films, even if some of the redressing of the balance—by showing IRA atrocities—occasionally looks like tokenism. The two main “good” characters in *The Crying Game*, besides Fergus, are British, as is Emma Thompson's lawyer-as-unlikely-angel who uncovers British corruption in *Father*—it is she who says, after meeting with Dixon, “they ought to take the word ‘compassion’ out of the English dictionary”.

There are also criticisms of the IRA, most notably, again, in Jordan's *The Crying Game*. Fergus' comrades, Peter and Jude, are highly committed, ruthless terrorists who do not display any compassion or human feelings, looking at the people they kill as "legitimate" military targets. Peter is shown burning Fergus' hand with his cigarette, while Jude undergoes a radical transformation in the second act, becoming dehumanised and psychotic, threatening Fergus to force him to take part in their violence (she will be further explored in the section on women and the Troubles). The committed republican bomber that is Joe McAndrews has already been discussed, while the central character in *Some Mother's Son*, Kathleen, represents a viewpoint that condemns killing and dissociates herself from the IRA (at least initially).

Irish criticism of the IRA is also expressed in a theme which recurs in many recent films about the Troubles, that of the difficulty of attempting to get out of the IRA (Dean, 1995, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)). This usually takes the form of a story dealing with more personal issues revolving around an ordinary Catholic individual who has had enough of the sectarian violence (possibly been personally affected by it) and tries either to escape it completely or help to put an end to it. The message is that Irish nationalists, once connected with the IRA, can never escape their roots, and that the IRA has a lifelong and physically threatening hold on them. However, there are some exceptions which leave space for hope.

The most obvious example is *The Crying Game*. Fergus, sickened by his compatriots' activities after watching the death of the soldier he befriended, flees to

London, where Ireland and its ideologies adopt a different, distant hue. He attempts to purge his guilt and start a new life with Dil, when he is rudely interrupted in his flat by demonised Jude, who has tracked him down to help her and Peter assassinate a London judge. She rudely chastises him for running away from them when they needed help, and when he refuses to take part in the violence, asserting that he is “out” (of the IRA), she threatens him that “you’re never out” and that he will never be free of them. On the day when Fergus is supposed to help in the plot (for which he was made to practise), he is kept from leaving by Dil, and Jude comes to kill him after the murder has gone awry. Fortunately, however, both Peter and Jude end up dead, and although Fergus goes to jail, he is free to start a new life with Dil.

The hero of *Nothing Personal* is not so fortunate. Although Catholic, and concerned about the Protestants living at the end of his street threatening his children, Liam is non-violent and shown helping injured people during a sectarian riot. He is picked up by loyalist Kenny and his cronies and tortured for IRA information. The more he insists he is not part of the IRA—he believes that all bombers are “frippin’ madmen”—the more they badger him until Kenny lets him go. His associations do, however, incur the wrath of loose cannon Ginger, who in turn provokes young Michael to point a gun at him, resulting in Liam’s daughter’s death.

In *This Is The Sea*, Padhar and Malachy McAliskey are constantly shadowed by questionable IRA man Rohan (Gabriel Byrne), who always wants them to do “jobs” for him in a “Big Brother is watching you” fashion. Padhar repeatedly asserts that

his association with the IRA is over—"I'm finished with you"—but Rohan implies that he owes him a debt and makes subtle threats about the brothers' prized sports car. Even the police do not believe that Padhar is not with the IRA and press him for information (again provoking threats from Rohan). Rohan is concerned that Malachy should be initiated into the organisation, as he has "no allegiance", but the "job" he plans for Malachy to take part in results in Padhar's death because of the mix-up of vehicles.

Finally, *The Boxer* focuses on a Belfast man, Danny Flynn, who returns home after twelve years in prison for IRA activities. He is, however, now reformed and completely opposed to the violence he sees all around him, preferring to stick to the fair rules of boxing. He is inspired by his trainer, Ike, who is disgusted with his past involvement with the IRA: "Fuck your IRA! Put your gun down, Danny Flynn, and fight me like a man!" Danny is shown disposing of explosives which he finds hidden, but he is violently threatened by the hard-liners led by Harry, as he is when he attempts to establish a non-sectarian boxing club and is accused of selling out. After this fails and ends in violence, Danny is almost killed by Harry, but the (perhaps too) optimistic ending has him riding into the future with his lover, free of the dark elements of his past.

## WAR-TORN BELFAST: LIVING WITH VIOLENCE; LIVING WITH HOPE

Loyalist paramilitary: "We're all on the same side here, sir"

Loyalist leader: "Christ, son, you've no idea how nervous that makes me."

--*Nothing Personal*

"...if you don't have a vision that includes [both Protestants and Catholics], you're never going to win."

--Jim Sheridan (quoted in Webster, 101)

Political leanings aside, what the best films about the Troubles in Northern Ireland do is to offer an insight into the personal lives of the ordinary people who have to live with the threat of violence and military presence in their daily lives. With the exception of *The Crying Game*, these films take place largely in contemporary Belfast, which is of course the centre of the strife. The importance of place in Ireland which I mentioned before is paramount here, as Northern cities have a distinctiveness like no other, physically reflecting the political sectarianism. Added to this is the idea that Northern Ireland has always been seen as a "place apart" from Western Europe and especially Britain, mostly on account of its violence (Boyce, 15), as well as a "border country" which tends to categorise it as a ghetto (Hughes, 3). As with all ghettos, the people of the North, particularly, Belfast, live in a climate of fear.

The setting of films such as *In The Name of The Father*, *The Boxer* and *Some Mother's Son* (and even *The Devil's Own*), which I label as "war-torn Belfast", has a distinct look which is instantly recognisable. The urban streets are grey, wet and

dirty and filled with identical rows of council-type houses (used to chilling effect in O'Sullivan's *Nothing Personal*, which uses shots of these streets at night, completely devoid of any life, as everyone is locked away inside). These houses and alleyways often act as escape networks for IRA criminals running from soldiers, as neighbours will protect and let them pass through their homes, using a message system of banging bin lids against walls and streets—best seen in the opening scene of *In The Name of The Father*. Many walls, most vividly those around Danny Boyle's place in *Some Mother's Son*, are covered with brightly painted sectarian murals both Catholic and Protestant, depicting IRA martyrs, Irish and British flags, William of Orange or gunmen from either side, as well as graffiti which speak volumes, such as "Brits Out", and "IRA rule". Many Belfast neighbourhoods are divided by startling so-called "peace walls" which are erected by the Army right across the middle of some streets which have Catholics living at one end and Protestants at the other. We are given a helicopter-eye view of one of these metal erections in *The Boxer* when Danny finds he has to pass through the gate in one to get home. We are shown that the ground immediately to the Catholic side of the wall is painted with an Irish flag, while the other side is graced with the Union Jack. It is the crossing of the boundary of a peace wall to "the other side" that causes all the drama which happens to Liam in *Nothing Personal*. *The Boxer* also depicts the everyday occurrence of wire mesh grilles which are placed over entrances to buildings like the gym and Danny's apartment block for protection against violence.

Violence is of course a standard feature of war-torn Belfast. In the first instance this takes the form of the bombing of “innocent” civilians (not counting the blowing up or shooting of British soldiers and police). Two films graphically illustrate the aftermath of such bombs. *Nothing Personal* opens with the planting of a bomb in a Protestant bar, and then depicts an absolutely shocking scene of John Lynch surveying the devastation, as the camera slowly pans across a Holocaust-like pile of dead bodies and burning rubble, while policemen help the injured and cries and moans are heard in the background. *The Boxer* contains a more understated yet equally surreal scene in which a little boy on a bike stops to have a look at the massive damage done by a bomb in the centre of the town. One shot—no doubt the boy’s point of view—depicts a bloodied, wounded man trying to crawl out of the chaotic rubble and car wreckage, with absolutely no one else in sight.

A second frequent occurrence is the urban riot, usually initiated by Catholics. This will involve scenes in which the filmmaker gets to show off his techniques of “gritty realism” in depicting the chaotic experience of war. Although there is not usually any shooting, there is much running, shouting, stone-throwing, tear gas (if the riot police with their imposing plastic shields are involved), and small fires caused by homemade Molotov cocktails. This activity is not limited to one faction; while it takes the form of Catholics against the British military in *In The Name of The Father* and in *Some Mother’s Son* (after the vigil for Bobby Sands), it is evenly balanced between enraged Catholics and Protestants in both *The Boxer* and *Nothing Personal*. The surprising thing to note is that women and/or children are always involved (see the next section), and the most striking scene in *Father*

shows a man with one leg making straight for the British tanks at great speed on his crutches.

Another significant feature is the presence of the British army in daily life, which may appear incongruous to outsiders. Tanks and snipers are on the lookout everywhere; the soldiers in *Father's* opening scene prowl terrified of the local populace; a tank stops in front of the schoolgirls crossing a road in *Some Mother's Son* and reveals an officer who yells at one girl to "get off the fucking road". The daily fear this entails is apparent in a scene in the same film in which, after seeing Annie Higgins cycle round the corner at the same time as an army truck rides past and hearing a pop, Kathleen immediately fears that Annie has been shot. The more violent side of the army is shown in the typical nighttime house arrests of suspected IRA terrorists, during which the soldiers will burst into a house and violently disrupt a family, usually engaged in a peaceful and loving activity such as sharing a meal, wrapping Christmas presents or sleeping. This is seen in *The Devil's Own*, *Some Mother's Son* (twice) and in *Father*. The soldiers will always be rough, noisy and very rude to the innocent family as they search for the suspect, while there will be a lot of frantic screaming from the womenfolk.

Some of the more recent films, however, show how the nature of the political violence has changed, becoming less ideologically based and more abstract, for its own sake, within communities. This will be seen in *Nothing Personal*, which is described as being "not about the political problems of the North at all, it is about the nature of violence" ("*Nothing Personal*" entry at [www.iftn.ie/archive](http://www.iftn.ie/archive)). This is

partly due to the increase of loyalist atrocities in the 1990s, which tend to be more random (and directed at anyone who is Catholic) than those of the IRA, whose aim has always been to frighten the British out of Northern Ireland (Ardagh, 363).

Because in the North there are really only two groups, Protestant and Catholic, their only real difference being that of religion, the situation has moved closer to one of full-scale civil war (Caul, 45-46). Brian Caul in his book Towards a Federal Ireland explains how political conflict (of ideas) has become confused with political violence, and how extremists in both the loyalist and nationalist camps become obsessed with the “beauty of violence” which provides a kind of exhilaration and is felt to be justified by (misplaced) ideals. He also mentions how on both sides there may exist “loose cannons” (Caul, 35) who commit psychopathic acts of cruelty outside of the authority of the more sensible leaders of their organisations.

*The Boxer* and *Nothing Personal* both portray the control that these organisations exert over their communities. In the recent relative absence of news-making bloodshed, the “punishment beatings” such as a bullet through the knee, which both loyalist and republican paramilitaries undertake within their own communities have only perpetuated the climate of fear the people live in (Taylor, 21). These two films focus on the threat that the “loose cannons” or breakaway extremists also present to the cessation of violence and the peace process. The villainous individual in *The Boxer* is IRA paramilitary Harry, who is vehemently opposed to the local IRA boss beginning to make overtures towards the British by calling a ceasefire—Harry believes this is selling out, and continues to hoard arms. When Danny starts up the non-sectarian boxing, Harry threatens him (firing at his

apartment), and then blowing up an RUC official after Danny accepts equipment from the police, thereby destroying all the good work Danny has done.

A similar character operates on the other side of the tracks, in the loyalist group in *Nothing Personal*. While Liam's friend Kenny has merciful qualities, his sidekick Ginger has a psychotic love for violence, which ranges from a kneecapping of one of his own to the setting alight of a Catholic boy. When Kenny censures Ginger for his unnecessarily violent tendencies in a riot, Ginger replies, "Sure I love it. I never had so much friggin' fun in all my life!" He also explains his intent when it comes to killing Catholics: "we have to make life so friggin' miserable for them that they...crawl across the fucking border! In my book that makes one Catholic as good as another!" Ginger shows no remorse after Liam's daughter is killed, proclaiming, "well, at least that's another one of 'em where the fucking vermin belong!"

Fortunately, these two films suggest that there is some hope for the future in the form of decent, rational people on both sides of the divide, who are working towards ending the violence. If the IRA and loyalist groups are depicted very much as rival but similar gangs (particularly in *Nothing Personal*), then their leaders are depicted as mafia bosses who command absolute loyalty over (while being protective of) their "families". They are always shown as very sensible, honourable and trustworthy—see Joe in *Boxer*, Danny Boyle in *Some Mother's Son* and both leaders in *Nothing Personal*. Joe not only works to initiate a ceasefire on the part of his men, but brings Harry under control because of his damaging effect on the

IRA's image—it is implied that it is he who orders Harry to be killed by his own colleagues (thereby saving innocent Danny). Earlier in the film, Joe lectures Harry, about his spreading dissent, explaining, "you know we're going to have to live with them sometime...the Protestants, Harry, the other half of the population". Similarly, the loyalist leader in *Nothing Personal* orders Kenny to bring "that nauseating shite" Ginger under control, as he will not accept such barbaric behaviour. Kenny shoots Ginger at the end of the film even though he is his friend, and even though it means his own death.

Hope exists in other areas of the filmic war-torn Belfast. The most obvious example of this is *The Boxer's* Danny attempting to bring both sides of the community together in peace by starting his non-sectarian boxing club. Although it ends in violence as a result of Harry's actions, it is initially very successful. One night he invites the parents of boys who were killed in the violence to a match, and these include a Protestant couple, who are equally supported. The night of the big match sees supporters of both sides attending peacefully together, united in the fair rules of the game and in a poignant moment when everybody (whether their cheeks are painted with Irish or British flags) sings "Danny Boy" together. Unfortunately this good work is undone that night, but the end of the film is very optimistic as Danny intends to pursue his goal, and Harry, who caused all the trouble, has been disposed of. This optimism is symbolised by his new start with his girlfriend Maggie.

Finally, it is love that conquers all in the movies, and across-the-divide love stories, however clichéd, may be the most pertinent symbols of hope for the future, as this generation looks beyond the old differences. The most obvious and happy example of this is in *This Is the Sea*, discussed below, but is also found in *Nothing Personal*, when Liam coincidentally stumbles into the home of Protestant Kenny's wife, and they find they have much in common, with just a hint of love which is extended at the end of the film when they embrace in the cemetery where they are each attending funerals for loved ones. This love also takes the form of friendship across boundaries, for when Liam is picked up and interrogated by the Protestants, Kenny recognises Liam as a childhood friend, and he lets him go, even as they share a joke, Liam saying, "I never had the good sense to keep to my own side". When Ginger expresses anger at Kenny's actions, Kenny replies, "he's not a Fenian, he's an old friend".

"...a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous...with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age."

--idyllic vision of Eamon De Valera, President of Ireland, 1937 (quoted in Levy, 102)

### **3.THE CHANGING ROLES OF WOMEN, SEX, CHURCH AND FAMILY IN IRELAND**

Women in Ireland (both North and South) have long experienced chauvinism in a male-dominated society, aggravated by a patriarchal Church. Yet they have always had an important role to play in the eyes of the "priest, poet and patriot" (Murphy, 31) whom they nurture. Women have taken on many incarnations in "Mother Ireland", and Tom Herron lists a few of those that have been celebrated by poets in particular:

woman has been metaphorized as land, as nation, as nature, as degraded place, as colonized, ravished Other of imperially male Britain, as desirous territorial unity, as rallying call for the national struggle, as Mother Ireland, as...the Old Woman, as Kathleen Ni Houlihan..., as sky woman, dream woman..., as Dark Rosaleen, as muse, as earth goddess, as kitchen dweller (Herron, 193).

Many of these stereotypes and tributes are to be found in Irish films.

Chauvinism has meant that female filmmakers have been excluded until now from

the film industry, a notable exception in the 1980s being Pat Murphy (see next section). The only woman director I encountered in this study was Mary McGuckian with her film *This is the Sea* (1996). Fortunately this situation is in the process of changing, as a glance at the latest newsletters from the Irish Film and Television Net reveals: they give news of a new wave of films such as Kirsten Sheridan's *Honour Bright* about a legendary Dublin prostitute, Audrey O'Reilly's *In Lovina Memory* about the relationship of the Irish to the Church in the 1960s, and Colette Cullen's *The Insider*, about a lesbian detective (IFTN Newsletter 12, c/o [www.iftn.ie](http://www.iftn.ie)).

At the same time, women's lives are being given more serious and realistic treatment, as in the upcoming *Angela's Ashes*, which records the suffering of a mother coping with poverty and domestic abuse and alcoholism (similar to Mrs Brown in *My Left Foot*) subjects which have often been ignored. Brian Friel's *Dancing At Lughnasa* approaches women as its primary focus, showing the lives of five sisters, with very distinct personalities, coping with the constraints on their individuality in the 1930s.

Unfortunately, some of the foreign stereotypes of Irish women are upheld in films which cater for an American market and are controlled by Hollywood casting decisions. One of these stereotypical figures, again described by Patricia Levy in *Culture Shock! Ireland*, is the virago. She is the "flaming red head" who is fiercely protective of her men and loyal to the Catholic Church all her life, a tower of strength (and occasionally a nag) for her family in the home (Levy, 15). While Irish-

American films like *The Run of the Country* and *Far and Away* are seemingly peopled with red-haired women only, the virago finds an eccentric embodiment in the matriarch of *The Last of the High Kings*. American actress Catherine O'Hara plays a fiery red-head called Kathleen (what else?). She is passionate about many things, and a force to be reckoned with, but even stronger than her protectiveness of her family is her old-fashioned patriotism. She constantly speaks of how her children are descended from the high kings of Ireland, and frequently fights with her Protestant neighbours, telling them that her kids "can walk their Celtic wall any time day or night" because "we're a free people now". She is an activist for the traditionalist Fianna Fail party, and finally, is furious with her son for consorting with a Protestant girl, referred to as a "devious little Proddy bitch". Fortunately, however, change is in the air, and this film, as representative of many others in the 1990s, will show how the younger generation rejects the old conservative and nationalistic values of their parents.

### **CONSERVATIVE TRADITION, NEWFOUND FREEDOM AND THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY**

"The civilisation of Irish society depends not just on giving more power to the Catholic Church but on the transformation of Irish women into good mothers."

--Parliamentary Commission Report (quoted in  
McWilliams, 85).

"I'm frightened—everything's changing."

--Protestant Ma Stokes in *This is the Sea*.

The statement by De Valera which opened this chapter is taken from the Constitution of Ireland which was formulated in 1937 and remains in force to this day. This vision sees women as merely the mothers and housewives of loyal Catholic patriots. In that same year, the Catholic Church was entrenched in the constitution with special powers, and the Irish Republic was established as a Catholic state (Levy, 83). De Valera's vision always in mind, Women and the Church have been deeply intertwined, not only because it is women who are responsible for bringing up their children in the Catholic faith and because they still attend mass more religiously than men (Walter, 87), but because the Church has great control over many areas of Irish society, from education to health care.

It is largely fundamentalist religion, Protestant as well as Catholic, that has ensured that both parts of Ireland have remained highly conservative in the arena of women's rights. Indeed, Monica McWilliams argues, "both Church and State have combined together in ensuring that the prime role of women is as mothers and housewives" (McWilliams, 81). It follows that the family is of prime importance in the Ireland of De Valera's vision, with women's place in the home, and Catholic women as a result of their faith having a higher pregnancy rate (although this is changing). Many measures were brought in by the early Irish governments—in collusion with the Church—to reduce the control a woman had over her body, including the banning of abortion, contraceptives (until the 1980s) and divorce (until 1995). This is tied to a sense of national duty, and the serving of Irish men; McWilliams claims that "The traditional link between nationalism (both Orange and Green) and their respective Churches, has ensured that the ultra-conservative

view of women as both the property of, and inferior to, men remains strongly entrenched in Irish society" (McWilliams, 84).

The control over the woman's body extends into the dogma of the Catholic religion itself.<sup>14</sup> This takes the very visible form of the cult of the Virgin Mary, whereby girls and women are encouraged to model themselves on the image of Mary, who is not only the idealised—passive—mother, but a figure of purity, chastity and virginity (McWilliams, 85). Thus the prevalence of nuns and convent schools in the Irish visual consciousness. One image of this cult which recurs is that of demure little girls in identical white confirmation outfits, dressed like miniature brides. They are part of the furniture on Alfred's bus in *A Man of No Importance*, a sweet childhood remembrance in *Circle of Friends* and a symbol of irony in *The Butcher Boy*, in the scene where the town awaits the arrival of the Virgin, with every possible item of Catholic worship on hand.

These last three films are of the group which, for the most part, are set in the 1950s or 1960s in order to highlight that most conservative (and relatively apolitical) era in Ireland. The task of these filmmakers in the 1990s, however, is to portray how these conservative attitudes adversely affected women and their

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<sup>14</sup> Ireland remains the strongest bastion of Catholicism in Europe next to Poland, with 95% of people in the Republic baptised Catholic (Ardagh, 12). Many films set in Ireland portray, at least in the background, some evidence of this religion in people's everyday lives. Most often this includes, besides church attendance, shrines and pictures of Mary or Jesus on house walls, and the little grottoes or even glass cases containing statues of Mary in public places.

families (a position only available in hindsight), and also how the old ways of thinking began to be challenged by the new.

Pat O'Connor's *Circle of Friends* (1995) remains moralistic in its thinking, displaying what one reviewer calls "Victorian values" ("Circle of Friends" entry, [www.iftn.ie/archive](http://www.iftn.ie/archive)). It concerns the lives of three girlfriends after they graduate from a small town convent in 1957. Narrating a flashback, the heroine, Benny, tells us how the nuns had taught them that "the Irish had been ruled for a thousand years by heathen invaders" and that "it was faith in the Church that gave us strength to survive". After this conservative upbringing, the three girls go to Trinity College Dublin, where they discover a whole new world of sex and boys, encouraged by a lecturer who teaches them about a happy group of South Sea islanders who are allowed complete sexual freedom. The presence of American actor Chris O'Donnell adds to the elements which make this film resemble countless other coming-of-age dramas set in American colleges.

However, both the class structure and ways of thinking are distinctively Irish, if stereotypically so. The heroine, Benny, is kept at home in her village by her parents, who want her to marry her father's villainous employee—although she protests, it seems she is destined to have little choice in the matter. Benny falls for Jack, but after being lectured in church on the sin of fornication and the responsibility of the woman not to fall pregnant, she refuses to go through with sex, previously having gone to confess that she has "impure thoughts". However, Jack says that he can get some "French letters" in England (of course banned under the

Catholic Church). After a few hiccups in their relationship, Benny is rewarded for her virtue and chastity at the end of the film when we see her enter the cottage with Jack and hear her gleeful yet oh-so-blasphemous voiceover, "bless me Father, for I have sinned".

Benny's friend Nan, however, is not so fortunate, as she is cast as the "bad girl" in the film. She attracts Simon Westwood, the frightfully English local Protestant landlord. Like the good Catholic, she waits for the right day in her cycle to have sex, but falls pregnant nonetheless. Simon then will have nothing to do with her and offers her money to have an abortion, which is against all her beliefs. In the end, poor Nan must go off to England to have her baby to avoid the scandal, and is never heard of again.

Although Nan keeps her baby, it was and still is usual for girls with unwanted pregnancies to go to England to have an abortion. It is an indication of the hypocrisy in the Irish establishment that abortion has become quite acceptable as long as it takes place on foreign soil (Byrne, 30). This issue is addressed in Peter Yates' *The Run of the Country* (1995), a film of dubious value from a creative point of view. Although set in the present day, one would not be able to tell this of the pastoral setting were it not for the presence of a bungee jump and IRA guerrillas at a funeral. Hero Danny is curious about sex but hesitates to do it with a girl he picks up at a bar, who shouts after him, "all I wanted was a fuck". His conservative, old-fashioned widower father is furious when he finds a condom in Danny's pocket, saying, "we didn't believe in those". Another thing he vehemently

does not believe in is abortion. When Danny makes his girlfriend Annagh pregnant (they have no qualms about sex before marriage), and tells his Da that they need money to allow Annagh to go to England for an abortion, Da's reply is "Sacred Heart of Jesus", and tells him there is nothing for it but to stay and get married and find a job, obviously the same situation that he found himself in. Fortunately Annagh, who does not want to be tied down to marriage, has a miscarriage, but unfortunately, she is still considered a "bad girl" by her family and is sent off to England. The men of this fiercely protective family also exact their own punishment on the boy who has ruined their Annagh—they attack Danny and humiliate him with what seems like a very old-fashioned bit of tarring and feathering.

While on the subject of sin and sexuality, it is worth discussing Suri Krishnamma's *A Man of No Importance* (1995), as it is the only Irish film to date that I have come across that deals with homosexuality, albeit in a very gentle and understated way (perhaps this was only possible under the direction of a foreigner). Set in "Dublin 1963", it tells the story of Alfred (played by the ubiquitous Albert Finney), a simple bus conductor with a passion for the life and works of Oscar Wilde, Ireland's one famous homosexual. It is made clear to us—although to none of the other characters—that Alfred is in love with his driver, whom he calls Bosie, but his first attempt to find expression for his feelings, in a pub populated with what look like "rent boys", ends in fear and feelings of guilt in church. After the service, Alfred walks with his sister and their friend Mr Carney, and listens to them talk about British people involved in sex scandals. This leads Mr Carney to remark that there is only one thing worse than adultery: "the unspeakable sin" of "homo-opathy" (this word

indicates their ignorance of and refusal to talk about it). Alfred is disappointed to discover that his "Bosie" is not gay, instead believing that "that's why God made man and woman". Finally, Alfred seeks relief with the young men in the pub, deciding to flaunt his sexuality in make up and flamboyant clothes. However, the boys' main intent turns out to be to rob him, after which they beat him up, commenting "he's queer".

At the same time, Alfred is directing a production of Wilde's Salome with some of the locals, the "salacious" subject matter of which causes great consternation (although mostly confined to the sister and Mr Carney), and the use of the church hall for rehearsals is only given on the condition that there will be no "immodest dancing". Alfred defies those traditionalists who see nothing but sex and sin where he sees a celebration of "art" which enriches his very dull, invisible life, and it is this feeling he gets across to those loyal friends of his who perform in the play.

The other character at the centre of scandal is Adèle, a mysterious and beautiful young woman whom Alfred feels is perfect to play Salome. He is unaware of how apt she is for the role, as beneath her virginal appearance (including a cross around her neck), Adèle is more like the whore figure in the eyes of society, hiding the secret of her unwed pregnancy. After discovering her in the throes of passionate sex with her lover, Alfred is initially shocked, but comes to a special understanding with her because of his own forbidden love. It is this that prompts him to go looking for love in the undisguised manner, taking Wilde's own advice which is the opposite to that of the Catholic Church: "the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it". The

film ends on a positive note, however, as not only has Adèle found an accepting friend, but the bus driver comes back to re-establish his friendship with Alfred after having been absent out of fear. This new coming to terms with homosexuality (and indeed the very existence of the film is a challenge to the old ways) is only possible now since the lifting of the ban on homosexuality in Ireland in 1993.

The 1990s, characterised by the election of Mary Robinson, has also seen much change and improvement in terms of women's rights—such as contraception and divorce, as mentioned before, as well as economic opportunities. Many films show the new generation of young people acting in defiance of their parents and the Church, and engaging in more sexual freedom. The most typical of these include *The Last of the High Kings*, *Moondance* and *The Run of the Country*. The last film has already been discussed, detailing the way the hero develops an openly sexual relationship with his girlfriend, to the horror of his father who is opposed to any idea of contraception or abortion. The mother in *High Kings* adopts a similar position. Frankie, the protagonist, is a very modern and fairly rebellious teenager (signalled by the high-octane rock music on the soundtrack when he and his friends run from school and madly throw off their uniforms). Frankie has his first sex with Jane—the “Proddy bitch”—for whom it is obviously nothing new. Frankie's mother is furious with Frankie, more because it was a Protestant he had sex with than anything else. She voices another concern: “Did you use contraceptives to violate the holy tabernacle of a woman's body?” She eventually gives in to Frankie's force of reason, and accepts the new world of change—as will be seen.

Dagmar Hirtz's *Moondance* (1994) is another frankly forgettable coming-of-age drama, although in this case the protagonists have complete freedom. Patrick and Dominic are two brothers whose father has left them and whose mother is away in Africa, so they live like wild things in their country home. When a lovely German girl, Anya, rather inexplicably arrives on the scene, they all cavort together freely, dancing by the firelight like the pagans they claim to be, and Patrick and Anya soon develop a sexual relationship. Even when their mother does come home, she is very different to any of the conservative, constrained figures we have encountered before. The fact that she is played by folk singer Marianne Faithfull already indicates that she is a kind of Earth Mother/Mother Ireland figure, a travelling hippie with worldly wisdom and a very open mind—she even adopts African customs when washing their clothes in the river. Although she is a stable and loving person, who is shown to have a very close relationship with her sons, the boys are allowed to go off to Dublin, where they enjoy further independence, and eventually to sea.

*This is the Sea* also shows challenges to the Church's traditional values, although in this case it is the Protestant Church. Hazel has been brought up in the "Plymouth Brethren", whose rituals of baptism and church service are shown in their austere simplicity as being quite different to Catholicism—although they also issue warnings about fornication. On the Stokes country farm, Hazel has led a very sheltered existence, never having seen the sea, and helping with the farmwork—although her mother tells her that tending cattle is "men's work" and she'd be better off tending the house. Thus Hazel knows nothing about sex, and when Malachy

tries to kiss her at the beach, she backs off, thinking it has made her promiscuous. That is exactly what Ma Stokes thinks when she finds Hazel putting on make-up, calling her a whore, but Hazel defies her and continues to go to Belfast to see Mal.

The new sexual mores include the desire of unwed mothers to keep their babies in the face of public scandal. The strongest example of this is Gillies MacKinnon's *The Playboys* (1992), again unfortunately peopled with American and British actors. Tara (Robin Wright) is an unwed mother who lives with her baby in a small village in the 1950s. She is fiercely independent, not paying attention to the gossip. In an early scene her water breaks during a church service, symbolising the fact that "as an unwed mother—but most especially an unrepentant one—Tara represents a challenge to the authority of the Church (Byrne, 137). She falls in love with a travelling player, whom she has sex with in a rocking caravan. Although it transpires that the burly old policeman (Albert Finney) is the baby's father, she refuses to marry him, but chooses a life of freedom rather than patriarchy as she drives off on the back of the actor's motorbike.

Moving into the present day, writer Roddy Doyle deals with the plight of single mothers in contemporary working-class Dublin in *The Snapper*, filmed in 1993 by Stephen Frears. Although Barrytown is full of gossips, the Curley family has more liberal attitudes than those of their predecessors in these "changin'" times, and stand by their daughter. When Sharon breaks the news about her pregnancy (not telling anyone that it was the result of one drunken bout of sex with her friend's father George Borges), her parents do not know quite what to do, asking if she will

get married or wants to have an abortion. Her mother wonders whether she should tell her other daughters that it's better to be married before you're pregnant and worries about what the neighbours think, while Dad's solution—after asking, “did she never hear of contraception”—is to go and have a drink at the pub. This is the same reaction that Sharon's friends, coarse, unemployed drunken girls, have when they get over their shock.

Sharon is also worried about what the neighbours will think, and is plagued by dreams of old Irish grandparents standing over her and saying things like “shocking dirty bitch” and “serves her right”. Once the father's identity is out, the neighbours stand on the pavement and gossip, and one scene cleverly illustrates this mindset. In a supermarket, the camera pans across shoppers and shop assistants as they pass the gossip on from one ear to the next until even a shoplifter stops to shout at Sharon, “hey slut!” Yet the Curley family encourages Sharon to stay, and her father lovingly helps her through the pregnancy (even learning how to be more caring towards his wife in bed), and it is concluded that “nowadays” the husbands are with the wives during birth, which is “much better”.

Many women in Ireland have not had it so good. Irish films and books are full of devoted housewives who are a tower of strength and resourcefulness for their families—see *My Left Foot*, *Angela's Ashes*, *The Field* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*—while often enduring spousal abuse, desertion, death of loved ones and poverty. The most strikingly original film in recent years to look at the lot of the Irish

housewife and the dysfunctional state of the Irish family must surely be Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997), a faithful adaptation of Patrick McCabe's novel.

This film chronicles the descent into madness of young, precocious Francie Brady as his world falls apart around him. The instability and tragedy of his family is made all the more poignant by the narration of the adult Francie of the child's point of view, as he provides his own humorous and ironic interpretation of events. The first tragedy Francie has to deal with is that of his mother. She is typical of any Western housewife of the early 1960s, trapped in her situation in a small town which women's liberation could never reach. She is also trapped in a bad marriage to a man who can barely say a coherent word, as he is always so drunk, and is prone to beating both his son and his wife. Feeling pressure to always do the cooking and cleaning, Mrs Brady takes Valiums for her nerves (apparently a staple supplement for Irish women), tries to hang herself, and goes to be "fixed" after a breakdown. While she is away, Francie takes over her housewife job as he has seen her do it, wearing an apron and sweeping. When she gets back she seems hysterically happy, and turns into what Francie calls a "bunwoman", frantically baking piles of cream buns and pastries until the house is filled with them. While Francie is away, Mrs Brady eventually dies.

Francie also discovers that the alien Mrs Nugent is herself a bunwoman, or in fact a cakewoman, and he exacts his revenge upon her, which lands him in a reform school, thus continuing his father's legacy. It is this school, run by priests, that affords Jordan his first satirical jab at the Catholic Church. Francie finds he is the

favourite of a lascivious old priest who becomes aroused as he dresses Francie in girls' clothes. The hypocrisy of the priesthood is shown in the way Francie is let out on condition that he not tell anyone about his experience.

Back home, Francie resumes his housewife role until his father dies, in a horrifyingly macabre series of scenes including flies on the corpse, in his chair. Francie now understandably feels that everyone he cares about has "gone on me", and there follows his pyromaniacal and murderous activities which send him to a mental institution. When he emerges, he is, tellingly, the image of his father, with perhaps a ray of hope for the future in the difference of his hair colour and his final lesson that God loves him and that "the beautiful things are still there".

This introduces the most fascinating and contradictory female figure in *Butcher Boy*, that of "Our Lady", or the Virgin Mary herself. Jordan plays havoc with the Catholic tradition in Ireland of the faithful seeing visions and other miracles like moving statues of Mary. This kind of occurrence is made fun of in the scene where Francie returns to town for the last time, to find that the residents are busy preparing for a visitation by Mary (fake crucifixes and loudspeakers blaring religious "muzak" being part of the scenery), who told someone that she would appear in front of the church "on the dot of six" to deliver a message about the end of the world. Francie first sees Our Lady in a peat field, although she is quite likely to be a product of his imagination, and he continues to be paid visits by her in his times of need, as when his father dies, and she is a constant source of comfort and advice right until the last, uplifting moment of the film. The great irony inherent in

Jordan's depiction of Mary is that she is played by singer Sinéad O'Connor, who, besides being very Irish (as "Our Lady" must surely be), is most famous for ripping up a picture of the Pope onstage, to demonstrate her feelings about the Catholic Church. This Mary is certainly unconventional in the way she speaks to Francie in his own dialect, including the use of swear words.

Dysfunction in Irish families is frequently due, as in *Butcher Boy*, to the immaturity of Irish men and their inability to express themselves—this has been a part of the traditional stereotype of Irish men as "mummy's boys" (Ardagh, 5), although this perception too is changing. The inability to express one's feelings eloquently is characteristic of the father (played by Gabriel Byrne) in *The Last of the High Kings*. He is an actor who manages to make his job keep him in New York and far away from his family for long stretches of time. When he comes home he showers the family with presents and speaks in a flamboyant theatrical manner, unable to give Frankie a real piece of advice, even though he tries. The policeman characters played by Albert Finney in both *The Playboys* and *Run of the Country* (both written by Shane Connaughton) are even more reticent, but also very gruff and prone to outbursts of violence. In the latter film, Danny's father takes the death of his wife and the running of the household in her place very hard, while Danny blames him for his mother's death, and this causes tension between him and his son, with whom he struggles to relate—the scene that relays this information to us involves Da throwing a plate of food that Danny has cooked across the kitchen floor. This also involves the classic conflict of the generations, with teenage Danny trying to explore his freedom and his father trying to control them. Da's main concern is

that, as in *The Butcher Boy*, Danny will end up like his father, trapped in a marriage in a small town and going nowhere, at an early age. Danny already shows signs of his father's genes when he angrily beats on Annagh's door when she will not let him sleep with her, as his father did with his mother. Fortunately the situation is resolved, and father and son are shown united in a loving embrace at the end of the film, before Danny walks off to his freedom.

Ultimately, the family and the bond of love and loyalty between its members form a very strong theme throughout films about Ireland, possibly a result of the highly religious and largely rural nature of the country. Even where the family is dysfunctional or at least eccentric, emphasis is placed on the love and common bond that it shares. This is nowhere more obvious than the series of films based on Roddy Doyle's "Barrytown Trilogy": *The Commitments* (1991), *The Snapper* (1993) and *The Van* (1996). The families in these three films (the books all deal with the same Rabbitte family) are of the Dublin working class—many of their members being unemployed—and have to deal with the economic and social hardships which this brings. However, these large Catholic families are all full of energy, vitality, humour and an enthusiasm for life; their most prized gift, embodied in their father (played in all three cases by Colm Meaney), being the ability to "make a plan".

The members of the Curley family in *The Snapper*, particularly the children, all have their own idiosyncracies. The teenage son sports a mohawk hairstyle, the middle sister an outfit modelled on Madonna, while the younger daughter listens to traditional Irish ditties while dressed as a drum majorette. They are always fighting

and shouting violently at each other, but are bonded together in love, as shown in their welcoming home of their soldier brother and in their excited visit to wayward Sharon after she has had the baby.

*The Commitments* depicts the teeming family life of the Dublin slums in the very first scene, as Jimmy Rabbitte wanders through happy hordes of children and others at a local market. A subsequent scene demonstrates the importance of family at a wedding reception, where director Alan Parker focuses on faces in the crowd, such as children playing around an old grandfather. Jimmy himself comes from a noisy, big family headed by the talkative father who helps his son with his resourceful plans and loves to sing Elvis songs. The family in *The Last of the High Kings* is very much like the Barrytown families, headed by the eccentrically patriotic mother and theatrical wandering father and including a little boy who writes Western novels and a dog named after patriot Parnell.

The bond of the Irish family is typically demonstrated by the obligatory meal scene in many of these films, showing families seated around the kitchen table sharing jokes, stories or news (occasionally being interrupted by British soldiers). In the films dealing with the rural idyll, this will take place in a simple stone cottage next to a fireplace and include a loaf of Irish soda bread—as in *The Field*, *The Secret of Roan Inish* and *Moondance*, but also occurs in the Barrytown films as well as those dealing with Northern Ireland.

An interesting point is made with a pair of meal scenes in *This is the Sea*. First we are shown the breakfast table at the Catholic McAliskey home, which is bright, cheery and colourful (aided by a yellow teapot), and full of warm affection and vitality as the brothers joke and throw things at each other and Padhar's baby cries in the background. Then the film cuts to a parallel breakfast scene in the staunchly Protestant Sloane home, which is dull, silent and grey, with undertones of bad feelings within the family. This provides a great contrast in order to show the repressed and repressive environment of the Protestants. For here in the North, family takes on a different meaning as it is exposed to enormous pressures.

### **THE EFFECT OF THE TROUBLES ON WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES**

Women in Northern Ireland face tremendous additional hardships, as they have to find a way to cope with the daily violence in their lives. Director Pat Murphy in particular focuses on the fact that women are victims in the North. In her film *Maeve*, she shows how women in the nationalist Catholic community are the victims of their own social group (Byrne, 69), and this is a theme which is returned to later.

While all of these films show how "innocent" women are negatively affected by the sectarian violence, only one shows a woman physically participating in it. This woman is "Jude" in *The Crying Game*, a figure much maligned for her stereotypical representation of the woman as evil temptress bound by her sexuality. She is the only truly horrible character in the film, particularly after she arrives at Fergus's

London flat in her vampish armour-like clothing, literally “dressed to kill”. She has already, at the beginning of the film when she traps Jody, used her body to further the IRA cause about which she is so fanatical; in Jack Boozer’s words, “Jude chooses to sacrifice herself for the IRA cause, placing Irish nationalism not only above her sexual orientation but above her own humanity” (Boozer, 173). She is completely devoid of humanity or sympathy, not particularly caring when Peter is killed and intent only on getting her revenge on Fergus.

This departure from my main theme serves to illustrate the one thoroughly negative portrayal of a woman in any Irish film that I have studied. Those dealing with the Troubles are generally very sympathetic and sensitive towards the lives of the women involved on all sides of the sectarianism. Pat Murphy’s aforementioned theme of women in the North being victims of their own communities, most dramatically in terms of their experiencing the death of loved ones, is addressed in both *The Boxer* and *Nothing Personal*, although each deals with a different faction.

*The Boxer*, a film which focuses on the personal (families) behind the political, deals with several women’s issues within the nationalist community. The first is that of the wives of IRA prisoners. An early scene in the film shows women joyously celebrating a wedding which has just taken place in prison. In town the local IRA community, headed by kindly Joe, holds the reception in the absence of the groom. It becomes evident that the wives of IRA prisoners who “stand by their men” are highly respected in their community and held up as model women. These women are fiercely protected by the paramilitaries, who punish, often by

kneecapping, any man who tries his luck with one of them, as shown in a scene at the party where a boy dancing with a wife is given a stern talking to. At the end of the reception, Joe gives a toast to the prisoner's wives, telling us that the bride "remained faithful to the cause" and stood by her man like his own dead wife, and he assures them that when the prisoners finally come home, "you women... will be remembered as the bravest of the district."

It can already be seen that life is a double bind for these women. Maggie (Emily Watson), the "heroine" of the film, is a prisoner's wife herself. She appears guilty during her father's speech, as it becomes clear that she married more for comfort than love after her true love, the protagonist Danny, was sent to jail fourteen years previously. Danny cannot keep away from Maggie, even though Harry has stated that Danny knows "he'd get a fuckin' bullet in the head" for consorting with the boss's daughter. Maggie and Danny must travel to the Protestant side of Belfast when they want to spend time together, as they cannot be seen together by Harry and the other band of gunmen.

Maggie soon comes to blows with her father, who tells her that she must be seen to be "above reproach" to keep up community loyalty, and that if she does not stop seeing Danny, he will be killed. Here Maggie retorts with the central concern of women in this position, "I'm the prisoner here. You and your politics have made sure of that". She adds that her mother lived her whole life "worried to death" about Joe and the violence. However, there is an ambiguously optimistic ending for

Maggie, as the main troublemaker, Harry, is killed, and she is confident enough to tell a soldier at a roadblock that she is going "home" with Danny in the open.

Not so lucky is Harry's wife, who is a more radical supporter of the cause, probably, as in *Some Mother's Son*, because her young son was killed in the strife. She speaks to the photo of her dead son, asking, "did you die just so Joe Hamill can sell us out?" She sides with Harry against Joe's conciliatory policies, but must endure a second loss. After Harry is killed by his colleagues, there is a shot of his wife cradling his body and weeping as a helicopter hovers nearby.

The wife of Protestant Kenny in *Nothing Personal* endures a similar fate. She and Kenny do not have a good relationship because of his involvement in urban terrorism. When he comes to see his two children, there is hardly any communication between them, in contrast to Liam and his children, who are seen to cope with love, humour and mutual support after the death of their mother. The parallels of these stories meet when Liam stumbles into the wife, and they find that, across the divide, they have many things in common, but most importantly, their overriding love for their children. At the end of the film (some reviewers think a bit too dramatically), Kenny is killed by the British, and Liam's daughter is accidentally shot when she tries to stop her friend Michael from shooting at the loyalists. The film ends with Liam and Kenny's wife sharing their losses and a hug at their respective funerals.

*This is the Sea* also shows the losses that women on both sides of the divide endure, aggravated by blame and betrayal. Hazel's involvement with Malachy leads to the death by car bomb of Mal's brother Padhar, which affects two women besides Hazel. Padhar's girlfriend and mother of his child, Cathy, is out of her mind with grief (we can tell this by the way she drunkenly sings in a deserted bar) and cries at Mal that the bomb was meant for him because he was "hanging out with that Proddy [Protestant] girl". Mrs McAliskey is also made terribly upset at Padhar's funeral by the sight of the IRA guerrillas paying tribute to him, as she cannot stand to be reminded of the violence that killed him. The Stokes family have to deal with the fact that their son is a murderer, and see him arrested. Hazel suffers what looks like a nervous breakdown in the rain after she discovers that her good friend Jacobs had a hand in it and betrayed her.

The differences between the Protestant and Catholic matriarchs have already been demonstrated, but the contrast is most strong when it comes to their attitudes about the opposite side. Ma Stokes speaks of Padhar's funeral and insists that "we'll not be going" as he was "not one of ours". Mrs McAliskey is more open, telling Mal that she supports his love for Hazel as there is already too much bitterness between people, and that "I've no prejudice against Protestants."

The difference of opinion between two mothers personally involved in the Troubles, although they are both Catholic, is the theme of *Some Mother's Son*. This film deals with the ambivalent role of not only mothers but also of the Catholic Church in the IRA struggle. Director Terry George used the idea of the two

mothers as a way of depicting the events around the Hunger Strike in as balanced a way as possible, as they hold (at least initially) opposing points of view. He has said that they are representative of two strands of women in Northern Ireland's Catholic community, "mothers whose families are involved politically and support the various strands of the republican movement as opposed to women who, because of the negative aspects of politics in Northern Ireland, have no interest and a deep aversion to politics and try to keep their family away from it" (quoted in McSwiney, 1996a, [ireland.iol.ie/galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/galfilm/filmwest)).

The two women are shown as leading separate lives even before they meet, except for the fact that they both have loving families that they raise on their own. Kathleen Quigley (Helen Mirren) is a schoolteacher who tires of having to deal with evidence of the Troubles every day, such as roadblocks and nearby explosions which disrupt classes. Kathleen is opposed to the violence on principle and is uninvolved in politics. She is blissfully unaware that her son Gerry is the one who caused the explosion, and that he is involved in the IRA. We are shown how much she loves him and worries about him, particularly in a scene where she dances with him at a Christmas party.

Annie Higgins (Fionnula O'Flanagan) is shown as much more hardened, and leading a tougher existence. In one scene she is shown driving cattle with her daughter, and being stopped by a British roadblock. She is on a first-name basis with the policeman, who tells her the roadblock is to catch her son. "My son would never run from you!" she retorts proudly, and her daughter also stands up to the

army when she stops in front of a tank when the schoolgirls are crossing a road. Annie's son Frankie is a committed IRA activist, and she not only knows but supports him. She is dedicated to the cause because the British killed her younger son, for whom she still lights a candle and sets a place at the dinner table. She is also shown as having a loving family, as Gerry brings Frankie to visit her for Christmas, and they share a meal almost frantically, as they do not know how much time they might have before Frankie has to go on the run again.

Kathleen is appalled when she finds out about her son's activities. When she visits Gerry in custody, she immediately takes a personal view opposed to his political one, lecturing him, "Gerard, a man was shot". Gerry replies, "but he was a soldier", to which Kathleen says, "he was somebody's son, like you're mine". Kathleen wants no part of the struggle and does not understand it, refusing local Sinn Fein leader Boyle's help. In a telling image, Kathleen rises when the judge enters the courtroom, while Annie does not, in solidarity with the prisoners.

Kathleen is furious when Gerry, on a prison visit, passes a message for Boyle into her mouth (shocking shades of Oedipal desire), and even more so when she finds out that Annie knew about the plan, saying, "I will not be used as a stooge for violence". After sharing a drink with Annie and finding out about her political convictions, she confronts her, "the day the bloody Brits go home is all you can think about. Well, my life won't change either way". Annie replies that their lives are two different things, and tells her about the death of her son.

After this news, Kathleen comes to be more on Annie's side, as they share a common bond in their imprisoned sons, and in one scene they are shown celebrating news of a deal by drinking and dancing hysterically together.

Thereafter, Kathleen agrees to help Annie's "help the Hunger Strikers" campaign to get Bobby Sands elected to parliament, when she is shown, hesitantly at first, joining Annie's side to shout "vote for Bobby Sands". From then on she is in complete solidarity with her, especially once both their sons go on the strike and they share their tears.

It is through personal involvement and love for her son that Kathleen becomes committed to the cause, although her convictions about the IRA ideology do not change. She is only worried about concrete action on the part of Boyle, the church and other officials to put an end to the strike, rather than any political ideology. She and Annie eventually go to the British Houses of Parliament to plead for their sons' lives by asking the government to give the prisoners some concessions. Here they are told, "these men are terrorists" and convicted murderers, but again we are brought back to the personal theme which has us in sympathy with the women and their sons throughout the film: "my son is not a terrorist".

Towards the end of the film we are shown the pain of the mothers in the prison hospital as the strikers begin dying, always from Kathleen's point of view. The climax of the film occurs in a scene where Kathleen realises that the talks for concessions have failed, and as Boyle and the priest argue, their voices fade into silence as the camera focuses on Kathleen's face and then pans around the room

to show her view of all the grieving mothers in the room. She comes to the realisation that the time for talk is over, that these spokespeople for Church and politics are irrelevant, and that her son's life is more important than anything else, so she calmly goes to sign him off the strike. Emerging from his room she finds that Annie has suffered the loss of a second son, and Annie tells her bitterly, "you're lucky you had the choice".

Kathleen and Annie are repeatedly shown to be representative of many women who are related to the prisoners and form the backbone of support for the activism which aims to help save their men. The first indication of this is in the courtroom scene, where young women shout their protest and stand up to reveal T-shirts proclaiming "Support the Prisoners of War". The waiting room at the prison is shown to be filled with children and women like Annie and Kathleen, in the same way that they head a throng of women who bring bags containing their men's own clothing, in a very personal touch. Kathleen finds Annie in the street taking part in a more confrontational protest, as she and other women are dressed in blankets like the prisoners and stand on the street in makeshift cages in solidarity, shouting "don't let them die". Again it is women who lead the prayer vigil for Bobby Sands, walking peacefully through the streets as Kathleen leads the "Hail Marvs"

This brings in the connection of the Catholic Church with the events around the Hunger Strike, the Church being very closely bound up with Irish society and women and their families in particular. The Church is shown to have a necessarily ambivalent relationship with the affair, being culturally allied to the nationalists but

ultimately opposed to violence. The first sign that the prisoners' actions have the support of Catholicism (at least in its popular form) is in the public's appropriation of religious symbols, namely the mural depicting a Christ-like IRA martyr. Although not shown in the film, there are also murals in Belfast which depict long-suffering Mother Ireland as Mary cradling the body of her son in a similar manner (McWilliams, 86). The prisoners, looking like a collection of Christ figures, are also given the special privilege of having the cardinal of the Catholic Church in Ireland say mass to them, seemingly giving them his blessing (although he is seen at one point turning away and covering his nose from the smell). Later the cardinal appears on television giving his support to the strikers, proclaiming that he has never seen such human dignity in all his life, and that "one would not allow an animal to live in such conditions". Thus the very visible support of the Church lends public sympathy to the Hunger Strikers.

However, the Church cannot allow itself to be unequivocally aligned to the republican movement, as it is morally opposed to violence. In a crucial scene at one of the striker's funerals, the camera focuses on the priest who begins, "But we must also mourn the death of two prison officers"<sup>15</sup> and pleads, "Please don't let anyone else die!" Annie and Danny Boyle hurl abuse at the priest, asking "Who paid you?" and walk out of the church in defiance of his words, feeling that he is "selling out".

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<sup>15</sup> An earlier scene attempts to redress the balance, as a British official is shot outside his home by IRA hitmen and we see his wife and child running to him in anguish.

This at first confusing scene is of crucial importance to the filmmakers' intentions as regards the film as a whole. While indeed trying to give as balanced a view as possible of the Hunger Strike by means of the technique of using two mothers, the film ultimately favours, in that it focuses more on, Kathleen, and her unchanging stance against political violence (This may or may not be due to the fact that actress Helen Mirren is one of the film's producers). From the start, slightly more detail is provided about her life and her children, so that we empathise with her and her natural reaction to terrorism. As shown above, the camera frequently adopts her point of view, especially at the hospital and in the last shot of the film, the accompanying sentiment being that nothing is as important as the protection of any human life. Less detail is provided for the slightly less sympathetic Annie, and even less so for the Sinn Fein leader Danny Boyle, who comes across as an ineffectual and often unsympathetic radical voice. Therefore the viewer feels uncomfortable when Annie and Danny protest the priest's very reasonable plea to stop the violence, as if it is people like them who are hampering the peace process.

Ultimately, the film is a tribute to the suffering and strength of all the women of the North whose families are directly affected by the violence. In the film's final endnote, we are told that the Hunger Strike ended and the British gave in "after several mothers intervened for their sons", George's message all the way through being to show what a significant effect the personal has on the political, and, indeed, the political has on the personal.

The Troubles do not, of course, affect only women, and the most striking way in which the violence is brought home to foreign viewers in films dealing with Northern Ireland is in the depiction of the involvement of children. Growing up amidst the strife in war-torn Belfast, children cannot but begin to emulate their parents' actions and be initiated into their various ideologies. Most commonly, children are shown in the middle of the aforementioned sectarian riots (the camera often picking them out as poignant symbols), hiding behind barrels and throwing rocks and even Molotov cocktails themselves, as seen in *The Boxer*, *Nothing Personal*, *Some Mother's Son* and *In the Name of the Father*.

Sometimes filmmakers devote more time to showing how children are indoctrinated into the violent way of life. In *The Boxer*, Maggie's young son Liam becomes politicised because of his IRA father's imprisonment, and after Danny receives equipment from the police, he sulks, "I don't take well to cops 'cause they won't let my Da out of prison". He is later prompted, after the riot, to set the equipment alight, which accidentally burns down the whole gym (and also provides Liam himself with something of a change of heart over his actions).

The involvement of children is most strikingly realised in *Nothing Personal*. This film parallels the lives of two young boys, one Catholic, one Protestant, who become initiated into their respective communities' fundamentalist ideology. The script focuses largely on Tommy, a seventeen-year-old Protestant who is keen to be involved in Kenny's activities involving the "protection" of the neighbourhood, as it gives him a sense of belonging. He participates in the riot, although appearing

frightened when the Catholic boy is killed in front of his eyes. Later Kenny inducts him into the group by telling him that they demand absolute loyalty to each other, and that the Catholics "deserve killing". Tommy is with them when they abduct Liam, and Ginger cruelly makes him hold the gun to Liam's head, which upsets him enough to run away. After this, Kenny consoles him, telling him that this business is nasty but "has to be done, for the country's sake".

On the other side of the equation is the even younger Michael, friend of non-violent Liam's daughter Kathleen. He is enraged by the death of the boy in the riot, and tells Kathleen, "we'll get them back", possibly out of a misplaced sense of protectiveness of her. Seeing Liam having been beaten up in the hands of the loyalists pushes Michael over the edge, and in the climax of the film, as Liam returns to Kathleen and the two groups face each other across the peace wall, Ginger threatens to shoot Liam. This prompts Michael to point his stolen gun at Ginger, crying, "You Protestant bastard!" and in her attempt to wrestle the gun away from him to prevent violence at all costs, Kathleen is shot dead with Michael's gun, the most extreme example of the devastating effect of the Troubles (indeed, any violence) on a child.

#### 4. PAST AND PRESENT, COUNTRY AND CITY: THE COMPLEXITIES OF MODERN IRELAND

##### INTRODUCTION: OPENING UP TO THE NEW WORLD

“I’m a modern girl and I’m going to a modern country”

--Shannon (Nicole Kidman) in *Far and Away*

Writers and others in the 1980s began to reject the oppression of the past and “the rural orientation in official Irish culture” which had been instigated by Yeats and then De Valera (Richards, 103; dealt with in the following subsection). Instead they turned to Joyce as the authentic model of Irish culture, as he looked outwards to modern Europe and its urban reality. Many of the recent Irish films depict this new looking towards or contact with the modern world—and even the urban world within Ireland, realised in the flight from the countryside to cosmopolitan Dublin.

Much of this new contact with the outside involves American influences. Ireland and the United States have a very close and long relationship as a result of the massive emigration to the New World that took place after the Great Famine. This part of Ireland’s history, or at least an Irish-American’s nostalgic vision of it, is the subject of *Far and Away*, unfortunately a film that does not warrant much academic discussion. The plot is driven not only by the hero Joseph’s (Tom Cruise) need for revenge and land, but by the heroine Shannon’s aspirations beyond her station. We are encouraged to believe that despite her luxurious existence she is very repressed by the conservatism of her parents, as she is forced to wear restrictive

clothing and marry a boring gentleman. Her free-thinking, open-minded attitude is signalled by her “rebellious” act of playing the “latest” music-hall tunes from America. She also reveals her desire to go to the pioneering “modern” country of Oklahoma, which inspires the above quote and the addition of Joseph and Shannon to the long list of emigrants.

Director Ron Howard does provide a lively visual account of the conditions of the Irish quarter in *turn-of-the-century* Boston, including leaky slum apartments populated by rats, alcoholics and prostitutes. He also makes an attempt to show how difficult life was for the Irish immigrants, relegated to low-paying, sweaty jobs such as plucking chickens, or, if one was really lucky, doing what the Irish do best in foreign portrayals—boxing. However, the primitive ways of “Olde Ireland” are soon left far behind, after Joseph, Shannon and eventually her family make their way to Oklahoma and proudly claim their land. As in *Patriot Games*, although in a different context, one cannot help but feel that the final message is that America and its “modern” ways, which glorify the individual, are best, and that Ireland is best left as a distant memory no longer relevant in this new world.

At the same time, Ireland has opened its doors to incoming foreigners, the new breed of tourist, particularly Irish-Americans keen to uncover their distant heritage. The family in *Last of the High Kings* plays host to “two young ladies of Irish descent” from New York for a summer holiday. These two, Erin and Rainbow, are representative of the rather unfortunate consequences of the Irish not wanting to stay at home, for they are brash and arrogant; even the fairly decent Erin (Christina

Ricci) utters the cringe-inducing line, "I feel like it's my spiritual home!", while popping gum in a Dublin cabbie's ear.

When Americans are not visiting, they are imposing their culture on the naïve Irish populace. This most frequently takes the form of westerns, the pioneering "Wild West" motif having symbolic resonances in films such as *Into The West*, which are largely set in Ireland's own wild west. In this film, young boys Ossie and Tito watch westerns such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* on television in their flat in the Dublin slums. As they set out on their flight west on their magical horse with a can of baked beans and rolling countryside, they resemble this famous duo, and constantly make references to western movies, speaking lines from them in American accents. These often coincide with events that befall them; when about to be chased by the riders of a hunt, Tito cries that it is not the "cavalry" but the dangerous "posse" that is making for them. Ruadhri Conroy, who plays Tito, also appears in *Moondance*, where his Dominic watches westerns with his brother, and the two of them re-enact a dramatic shoot-out, dialogue and gunshots included, in their living room.

*The Butcher Boy* also contains such American cultural references, starting with the extreme close-ups of comic book figures (including all-American superheroes, cowboys and soldiers) which underlie the opening credits. These comic books are an important form of currency between the boys of this small Irish town, and treasured possessions which influence their way of life. Francie and Joe watch *The Fugitive* on television through some one else's window, and play at cowboys and

Indians, becoming real bloodbrothers. This is something Francie takes very seriously; when he is in solitary confinement and thinks of how Joe has abandoned him, he sighs, "So long Tonto, this is your old pal the Lone Ranger". Francie is also influenced by American science fiction films like the one he watches in Dublin, which makes him imagine villainous Mrs Nugent as a horrible alien. Francie borrows another bit of American culture when he disciplines his band of "bogmen" at the reform school by teaching them the ways of Al Capone, adopting his accent.

The more deeply-felt effects of the link with the New World in *The Butcher Boy* stem from radio and television broadcasts about the international threat of nuclear war around the time of the Cuban missile crisis in the early 1960s. Concerned Irish citizens are shown listening to their distant cousin John Kennedy's speeches and worry about the communists, as a sure sign that their world is changing and under threat from outside forces beyond their control. When Francie discusses the possibility of the end of the world with some scarved old ladies to whom he sells meat, one of them seriously mourns, "it'll be a bitter day for this town if the world comes to an end", while her friend assures her that "Our Lady wouldn't let it". For Francie, the "Communists" become just one embodiment of all the problems he has to face, and he echoes one adult's wish to "knock seven kinds of shite out of that Kruschev". Significant dramatic events in his career are often punctuated by shots of a nuclear bomb explosion, culminating in his surreal dream after all the people in his life have left him, when he and Joe see the bomb explode over their very own Irish lake, and they wander through the burned-out town hearing the voices of its dead (pigs).

The more obvious influence of the Western world on modern Ireland is in its young people's interest in "sex, drugs and rock and roll"<sup>16</sup>. This is indicated in the use of American or British pop music on the soundtrack; for example, the opening scenes of *Last of the High Kings* show Frankie and his school mates running out of school and throwing themselves around on a field with rock music on the soundtrack, indicating that this is 1977 and that these children are as modern as any others in their upmarket Dublin suburb. The seventies are brought home to Belfast in *In the Name of the Father*, when Gerry returns from London cutting a colourful figure in his high camp glam rock outfit, as The Kinks' song "Dedicated Follower of Fashion" plays. One American musician who recurs is Elvis. He is an important unseen figure in *High Kings*, as one of Frankie's friends wishes The King would come to Ireland, and his death symbolises the end of the summer and childhood. Elvis is literally considered a saint on a level with God by Mr Rabbitte in *The Commitments*. The father not only sings his songs, but we are carefully shown a portrait of Elvis on the family's kitchen wall placed above that of the Pope.

*The Commitments* is of course all about American music, following Jimmy Rabbitte's attempt to bring soul music to the streets of Northside Dublin. He rationalises this incongruous quest to his band by describing the Irish as "the blacks of Europe", and he makes the members repeat the black consciousness mantra, "say it once, say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud!" Other indications of the inclusion of Ireland in global pop culture include the avid watching of the National

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<sup>16</sup> These become more important than the old Irish authenticities of "religion, nationalism and land" (Richards, 104).

Lottery on television in *Waking Ned*, and the frenzied support for Ireland's first ever successes in the 1990 soccer World Cup in *The Van*.

*The Playboys*, set in a small Irish village in the 1950s, is significant in its depiction of an authoritarian and inward-looking Ireland "on the cusp of greater change" and emergence into mainstream culture (Byrne, 136). This film depicts the threat to the existence of a group of travelling players posed by the cinema and also the advent of television—a gadget which at first only Tara recognises as a "wireless with pictures", and which the villagers gaze at at the bar. The "playboys" attempt to keep up with the changes by performing a haphazard ad-libbed version of *Gone With the Wind*. However, it is clear that they are a part of the past that is over by the end of the film, when their tent is destroyed and they disband. The new order is also heralded in Tara's decision to reject the old policeman and she is last seen leaving the town on the back of a motorbike with the actor.

For contact with the outside world also means a change in perspective and a liberalisation of old attitudes in young people, particularly with regards to sexuality in all its difficulty, as shown in the previous section. However, this also includes a growing disillusionment with the Catholic Church and the old nationalist ideals, evidenced in a distancing from the Troubles and the desire for a united Ireland (McGuire, 22). This is best illustrated in *The Last of the High Kings*, in Frankie's rebelliousness against his mother's ideals, as in his growing interest in the Labour Party (mostly because of a pretty girl) rather than Fianna Fail, and displayed in his looks of great irritation and embarrassment every time his fanatical mother refers

to her children's royal Irish blood. Her anger at his sleeping with a Protestant girl brings out many issues over which they clash, and their final argument goes Frankie's way, as far as the audience is concerned. I feel that a lengthy quote from the film is needed here, as it brings out important themes of modern Ireland:

*Frankie:* "There's nothing wrong with the Labour Party, or the British, or contraceptives, or even Protestants—they're no better or worse than anyone else."

*Kathleen:* "Have you forgotten about the Famine? Or how the Brits starved millions of our innocent people just so that they could make cakes for that fat bitch queen across the water? what about 1916? They shot down thousands of Irish revolutionaries! Think of Parnell and Wolfe Tone... You've become a Proddy lover!"

*Frankie:* "Most of the Irish revolutionaries were Protestant. Emmett, Tone, Parnell. Half of the so-called heroes, who you think of as having noble blood, were Protestant."

(Frankie's mother is silenced. Eventually Frankie says that he is going to go out with whomever he wants, and continues:)

"...Protestant, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist... I hope I get bewitched by them all."

## THE CHANGING LAND—*THE FIELD* AND THE RURAL IDYLL

“This land is mine! Mine by destiny!”

--Joseph (Tom Cruise) in last shot of *Far and Away*

The first thing that most foreigners associate with Ireland is, in all likelihood, its landscape. This is because it is the most distinctive feature of almost all Irish films (even some of those set in Belfast), and serves as an evocative backdrop for both indigenous and Hollywood-type films. While I can personally attest to the fact that Ireland has as much natural beauty and clichéd charm as the travel brochures would have one believe, it is perhaps limiting that most people receive their impressions of Ireland exclusively through these filmic images.

It is true that, historically, Ireland has been a predominantly rural and agricultural country, but this has given rise to some extremely enduring stereotypes of the kind encouraged by Yeats and De Valera; “the myth of the Irish timeless peasantry in its pastoral setting” (Caul, 89). De Valera’s Free State government instituted a policy in which the rural West of Ireland was held up as a model, “the symbol of pure, Catholic, native Ireland” (quoted in Richards, 101), embodied in the constitution which was quoted from in the previous section. This imagery was borrowed from the Gaelic Revival headed by Yeats, who extolled the Irish natural landscape and its “noble” peasantry, echoed in patriot Patrick Pearse’s dictum that “the Gael is the high priest of nature” (quoted in Richards, 100). This has brought with it perceptions of the Irish as a backward, unsophisticated and simply contented race.

Despite massive changes both in society and in the local film industry, most films about Ireland that are released continue to rely heavily on the pastoral or at least small-town setting, which Harlan Kennedy refers to as a genre labelled “idyll” as opposed to as “ideology”. Kennedy maintains that the best films approach both of these closely interlinked themes. Indeed, the “rural idyll” (a phrase I have adopted for convenience) often serves as a backdrop for more serious political themes, as in *This is the Sea*, although the purely picturesque persists.

There are certain features which recur without fail in the rural idyll category, which, to provide a visual touchstone, includes *Moondance*, *Circle of Friends*, *Widow's Peak*, *The Playboys*, *The Run of the Country*, *The Secret of Roan Inish*, *Into the West*, *Far and Away* and the recent *Waking Ned*. The first most pervasive image is that of brilliant rolling green fields<sup>17</sup>, either neatly divided by low stone walls, or wild, untamed and rocky, but the landscape is never flat or boring. There may be some mist when it is necessary to show workers labouring in peat bogs in *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy*, but curiously it is usually sunny in the rural Ireland of the movies, unlike in real life. The green fields will be sparsely dotted with small, neat stone and thatch cottages which appear not to have been changed in several centuries (which they probably haven't, as in *Roan Inish*, which provides a child's guide to the traditional art of renovating a thatched cottage). Interior shots will

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<sup>17</sup> Eamonn Hughes (5) mentions specifically the importance of the field in Northern Irish culture, including the way in which nationalists see the four provinces of the island of Ireland as the four fields, one of which is unnaturally separated.

show the stone cottage's simple kitchen and simpler meal, with no electricity but a nearby fireplace. Farm animals, especially pigs, are commonplace, even significant to the plot—pigs are the running theme of *The Butcher Boy*, being unfairly compared to most humans, and pigs are the reason why the single mother in *Waking Ned* refuses to commit to her malodorous boyfriend.

Being an island, the sea is naturally of great significance to Ireland, and careful observation will reveal the startling fact that virtually every one of the films I watched contains at least one shot of the sea and its rugged coastline, even if it is only a reference to the docks of Dublin and Belfast and ships bound for foreign adventure, as in *Moondance* and *In the Name of the Father*. In *The Secret of Roan Inish* the sea is of prime importance, as it not only provides the age-old means of survival for the island-dwelling Keneally family, but is central to the legend of the half-woman, half-seal "selkie".

It is also significant how women are associated with the land: "the Irishwoman is often represented as a figure in a landscape, alienated from or identified with her island's rugged coastal beauty or softer curves of green inland hills" (Murphy, 32). Hazel in *This is the Sea* is both; in the opening shots we see her standing looking out at the surrounding green hills and the river of "the Glens" and at the end of the film, after she has in some ways lost her innocence and been introduced to the sea by Mal, she is seen sitting on the rocks of the Giant's Causeway, looking out at the wild waves. Thus the words of *The Waterboys*, whose title song is repeated on the soundtrack, are realised: "that was the river, this is the sea" (Music is crucial to the

rural idyll as with all Irish films; in the former case it is always of the traditional variety, involving very Irish-sounding jolly fiddles, whistles and uilleann pipes, with occasional folkly vocals by Irish crooners like Van Morrison, Marianne Faithfull, Brian Kennedy and the Waterboys).

Villages are an important part of the rural idyll, and we know we are not in Dublin when we see people cycling through winding streets of multi-hued houses and quaint stone general stores and post offices. The priest is without exception the most visible citizen, whether he is respected or caricatured; church services a regular pastime and one indication that the rural idyll is often set in the conservative 1950s-era—but not always. The most important aspect of the village is the closeness of its community, as in *Waking Ned*, *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy*, where everybody knows each other by name, gossip is rife and pints of Guinness are shared in the local (as they are in every Irish film). *Waking Ned* is the prime example of how the villagers will band together in times of trouble against outsiders, a point which is given historical significance in *The Field*.

Land has always been at the heart of Ireland's history and political issues, and is therefore able to conjure up much emotion. The control of Ireland has always been connected with control and ownership of the land, particularly with regards to the colonisation of Ireland by the British, starting in the sixteenth century, when huge tracts of land were taken away from Irish Catholics and given as "plantations" to English and Scottish settlers. Laws were passed and fought against over the centuries which entrenched this discrimination against Catholics and widened the

divide between the landed gentry and the peasantry. Emotion reached fever pitch over the issue of the Great Famine of 1845-1848. The implications of this tragedy which killed at least a million, are still hotly debated today, with the pro-Irish/nationalist faction arguing that the famine, brought on by the failure of the over-relied-upon potato crop, was deliberately exacerbated by the British, who controlled the land and exported all the other food to their own country in order to subdue the peasantry.

The most significant consequence of the famine was undoubtedly the massive emigration, particularly to the New World, as previously discussed. Yet, for the migrants of *Far and Away*, land never loses its importance. Joseph is driven by his dying father's advice (after being cruelly treated by the Protestant landlord): "without land, a man has nothing". Fortunately, in wondrous America, land is free, according to the leaflet that Shannon uses as her ticket to a new life. After many struggles, Joseph's finest hour comes when he is able to stake his claim in the Oklahoma Land Rush and continue his Irish legacy on foreign shores.

All of these issues are dealt with in Jim Sheridan's operatic film *The Field* (1990), which opens the debate with the past, dealing with the conflicts between old and new, rural and urban and Irish and outsiders. It is set in the years before the Second World War, as Ireland is beginning to emerge from its self-imposed isolation (Byrne, 119). The Lear-like centre of the film is "Bull" McCabe (Richard Harris), who is fiercely protective of the plot of land he has made fertile by years of hard work and seaweed. Although he never seriously considers it, he does not

actually own the land that he works, but rents it from a widow. Hence his anger when he finds out that she plans to put it up for auction, and that there might be “outsiders” bidding for it. This causes Bull to wax lyrical about the inherited bitterness he feels about the Famine, revealing his closed-mindedness about the concept of foreigners: “Are these the same outsiders who took the corn from our mouths when the potatoes went rotten?... who drove us to the coffin ships and scattered us to the four corners of the earth?” When a friend points out that the British have gone from the country, he sternly replies, “gone because I drove them out. Me and my kind... No outsider will bid for my land!”

The outsider, it turns out, is, paradoxically, a product of the British “scattering” effect, as he is an Irish-American looking for his roots. He is already marked as different by the sophisticated modern clothes he wears and the car he drives onto McCabe’s field. Bull (like certain of the other villagers) mistrusts him from the start. Essentially, Bull has a deep emotional bond of loyalty with the land—“Our fathers’ fathers’ fathers’ fathers dug that soil with their bare hands”—while the “Yank” sees it as a business opportunity, wanting to buy it to build a highway over it. In this respect he represents the negative, destructive aspect of modern progress, as he has no contact with the beautiful land but only sees enough limestone in the hills to build highways over Ireland, which he looks down on, adding, “and from what I’ve seen, you could use them”.

Although the local priest warns the Yank (Tom Berenger) that “people don’t like change”, he and Bull inevitably come to blows. Bull reveals yet another bitterness

still harboured in the old Ireland, as he accuses the Yank of the fact that when the going got tough, his family ran away to America, but “we stayed”, and now “you think you can come back with your few dollars and buy back the land you deserted?” In a ghastly climax, Bull murders the Yank after only intending to threaten him, out of passionate protectiveness for his land and, in this scene, his son (Sean Bean).

This leads to the involvement of the Church in these historical issues, another major theme in the film. The Church is identified here as being in collusion with the powers of the State, and the villagers show their solidarity against outsiders by siding with Bull and not revealing his guilt when the priest urges them to—having already told them that “hunger for land is evil”. The priest is so angered at this that he chases everyone out of the church, closing the gates behind them. This provides yet another opportunity for Bull to stand up and address historical grievances, telling the priest that the church gates were “locked in the time of the Famine” and that no priest died in the Famine but only the poor.

One of the last scenes of the film shows a giant construction crane moving into the village, making a very incongruous picture of the new taking over from the old ways. The reactions of the villagers to the sight of this strange machine are complex and telling; children play on it while some adults shout angrily and throw stones at it.

## MOVING TO DUBLIN

"The 'Dublin 4' animal was polished and cosmopolitan... It wanted no truck with the dark, irrational, priest-ridden place it called 'rural Ireland'. For 'Dublin 4', this place was just a bad dream,... a darkness on the edge of town. It wanted an end to all this fanciful talk about an attachment to the land. It wanted Ireland to see itself as a modern, urban, industrialized democracy."

--John Waters, *Jiving At the Crossroads* (quoted in Ardagh, 62-3).

There have long been a clash and great differences between the country and the city in Ireland, with the inhabitants of each regarding the other with suspicion and arrogance. I came across two examples of this on film. One is in *Waking Ned*, when Ned Devine's winning of the lottery means that "they're sending the man from Dublin" from the lottery company to investigate the validity of the winner's claim. This gives cause for the villagers to band together and "try to outsmart" him so that they can claim the dead Ned's prize. The man is not entirely welcomed in the town, while his aversion to and fish-out-of-water appearance in the rural idyll is signalled in his hayfeverish sneezing fits, which happen "every time I come to the country". Harsher realism is suggested in the Northern Ireland of *This is the Sea*, as when the policemen from Belfast come to investigate Padhar's murder in The Glens, and they see the distraught Hazel standing in the rain, one of them mutters disparagingly, "Godforsaken dear country these parts. Stuck in a time warp."

At the same time, while remaining a largely rural country (aided by the influx of foreigners settling in the West), Ireland has seen a massive exodus from the country to the city, namely Dublin (Ireland's next biggest cities, Cork and Limerick, cannot even begin to compare to the size and importance of the Dublin metropolis). In many films, Dublin is looked at by young people as an escape route from the repressiveness and isolation of the past, as a way into a future full of possibilities, and as a link to the modern pleasures of the outside world. Several films depict the move from the country to Dublin as an aim in itself, and as a means of gaining independence from parental figures.

This is the case in three films in particular. *Circle of Friends* sees three village friends going to Dublin to attend cosmopolitan and worldly Trinity College (even though they have to return home at night). Here they are exposed to new ways of thinking and new experiences such as boys, away from the interference of their parents and religious figures—giving the city a decadent, adult edge. As already discussed, Dublin also provides a means of total independence for the brothers in *Moondance* after they drive away from their childhood in the West, and it is in the city that they will mature and learn the lessons of life. We do not see Dublin in *The Run of the Country*, but it is the chosen destination of the hero Danny at the end of the film, as we see him walking past his village crossroads. His father is also overjoyed at Danny's decision, as it means he will have a chance at a promising future, by escaping the trap of early marriage and lifelong service in the village that the father himself has had to endure. (Da makes a very ironic statement earlier in the film, when he is trying to encourage Danny to leave Annagh and go to New

York—as they are walking down a country lane, Da gestures at the overwhelmingly beautiful pastoral setting and says disparagingly, “how can this place compare to New York City?”).

Some films, such as *A Man of No Importance* and part of *Moondance*, are already set in Dublin, and like war-torn Belfast and the rural idyll, this modern city too has its distinguishing features. The first sign that one is in Dublin is usually the appearance of double-decker green buses (much as red ones represent London), which are given a whole film to feature in in *No Importance*. Secondly, besides shots of the docklands and lovely green parks, all shots of Dublin are of famous sights/sites. These include the former Customs House (under siege in *Michael Collins*' second half), the Ha'penny Bridge over the river Liffey, and, of course, the Post Office (under siege in the first half of *Michael Collins*). Sometimes these shots occur at night, particularly in films about young boys like *Moondance* and *High Kings*, which show the lights of Dublin, giving it an even more cosmopolitan, modern and vibrant appearance.

One reviewer sees the beautifully reconstructed 1920s Dublin of *Michael Collins* as a vital and commendable part of the film, as it shows the Irish people, out of their usual rural setting, as modern and progressive, conveying wit and style, visually realised in their elegant and very contemporary fashions—like Kitty's (Dean, 1997, [ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest](http://ireland.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest)). Dean explains that, “no mere provincial outpost, Dublin is lovingly seen as a modern metropolis of splendid parks and gorgeous urban landscapes” (ibid.) with realistic touches like the atmospheric lamplight at

night, and many vehicles. Joan Dean continues that “Jordan avoids the cinematic clichés associated with Ireland. Gone are the predictable images of the rugged old sod, of the quaint Irish peasantry, of a materially impoverished but spiritually rich people”, and as a result the revolutionary movement is given more credibility as it is shown as very modern and sophisticated (ibid.).

The other side of Dublin seen in recent films is less attractive but realistically portrayed—one part of the new urban realism in Irish writing which breaks the old agrarian stereotype. This is the working-class Northside of Dublin, detailed by Roddy Doyle in his Barrytown trilogy and most strikingly realised as the slum housing estates in *The Commitments* and *Into the West*. Visually, the settings indicate the difficulty of the lives of the people who live there and face high rates of unemployment. The two films are located around a council estate containing several very ugly, grey, dirty and graffiti-ridden apartment blocks. They appear surreal, as they rise up, seemingly, in the middle of nowhere, out of green fields. People have markets and children play on these open spaces between the blocks, often with the horses which the travelling people own. It is interesting to note that in both of these films we see, surreally, a horse that takes a ride in the lift inside the apartment block.

It is easy to see how *The Commitments* breaks the stereotypes of Irishness to depict the harsh urban reality. One scene which illustrates this has Jimmy investigating why Bernie missed a rehearsal, and finds her in her mother's flat, snowed under by looking after her crying baby siblings and ironing (while she is

trying to fend off unemployment <sup>with</sup> her chip van). She tells Jimmy that the band is the one thing she has to look forward to in life, and the ultimate message in the film is that, even though Jimmy failed to keep the band together, he at least “raised their expectations of life and broadened their horizons”.

Like the other Barrytown films, *The Commitments* is very optimistic. Despite their surroundings, the Northsiders are shown as energetic, enthusiastic and humorous (for example, the eccentric Rabbitte family), and the whole housing estate area is shown in Parker’s film as absolutely teeming with life and moving bodies, particularly young ones. Indeed, although stereotypes are broken, some critics believe that this film sentimentalises the situation, and one describes happy Barrytown as a “version of pastoral” (George O’Brien quoted in Richards, 110).

*Into the West* shows the same slums, but going right inside the apartments, which are full of noisy, violent people who cheat on their welfare claims, and which are literally falling apart. Director Mike Newell and writer Jim Sheridan delve further into the problematic realities of modern Ireland by depicting the lives of the travellers, or “tinkers” as they used to be known. They are shown undergoing hardships like alcoholism (Papa Riley’s), unemployment and great prejudice. At the same time, although on the city estate they are settled, even stagnant, they are shown as still keeping in touch with their old culture, living amongst horses and telling ancient stories around the fire.

## THE RETURN TO MYTH IN THE EVERYDAY

From the time that Yeats and De Valera instigated their pastoral vision of Ireland it was vehemently criticised for its archaicising tendencies. In the 1980s there was a widespread call amongst Irish intellectuals to reject the past and “the rural orientation in official Irish culture” (Richards, 103). Declan Kiberd for one described the traditional De Valerean vision as an oppression which denied “the heroism of urban life” (ibid.). There followed a tendency to celebrate <sup>the latter</sup> in a wave of urban literature, until, Shaun Richards argues, the 1992 film *Into the West* signalled a new era.

Not only does this film deal with the traditional folklore of ancient Ireland, but it stands in opposition to the twentieth-century movement from the old rural West to the east and Dublin. For it is structured as a flight from the decaying urban east back to the west which is “revalidated” and shown as a harmonious integration of lost values (Richards, 106). Writer Des Bell has argued that in the 1990s Ireland is witnessing “a provincial flight into nostalgia” (quoted in Richards, 107). It represents the new need to combine the old dichotomies of past and present and country and city. As theorist Seamus Deane summed up in the 1980s: Ireland needed to “move beyond positions predicated on the mystique of authenticity and, by implication, the binary oppositions of rural and urban” (Richards, 107). Current writers and filmmakers are conscious of the ambivalence inherent in combining the oppositions such as tradition and modernity, but for Declan Kiberd, this

ambivalence becomes “a means of accessing the creative possibility of a future promised in the past” (quoted in Richards, 108).

Hence the recent exploration of themes of the return to the past and the folkloric tradition in the films *Into The West* and John Sayles' *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994). Both of these films deal with mythical Celtic legends (or at least are in the spirit thereof) from the point of view of a child, and interestingly, both of them have received considerable commercial success abroad. Myth and storytelling have of course always been a crucial part of Irish culture, albeit often cause for stereotyped images of leprechauns and banshees, and are here rediscovered as something which brings meaning and magic back into everyday life in the modern world.

*Into the West* has been described as a “fabulous return to source” (Richards, 105), but this phrase is equally applicable to *The Secret of Roan Inish*. *Roan Inish* centres on a little girl, Fiona, who is sent from the city to live in the country near the sea and the island of the title, with her typically Irish grandparents, after she loses her parents in the Second World War. From the start the country is celebrated as naturally good, pure and restorative, while the city is “nothing but lies and dirt”. Little happens in the way of plot, but it follows the journey Fiona makes into discovering the past and her family's history (liberally sprinkled with myth). It deals with the clash of the old culture with the new, as it shows how, years before, Fiona's parents and other family had to leave the island and its isolated old ways for the mainland, but the film “comes down clearly on the side of the old” (Byrne, 183), as Fiona persuades her grandparents to move back to the island.

The setting is almost timeless; apart from the obligatory “rural idyll” scenes of the family snugly ensconced in their stone cottage by the fire, most of the shots are of boats on the water and unsophisticated people on the beach, even their rough clothes (or lack of them) denoting an age old practical connection with the land and sea. This aids the exploration of myth and storytelling.

Fiona has her first clue to her ancestry as her pipesmoking grandfather, in good Irish tradition, tells her of his “fathers’ fathers’ father” Sean, who was a classical rebel. Here the film medium changes, and we know we are witnessing an historical flashback as the screen footage takes on a sepia hue as in old photographs, “authentic” documents of the past. Sean, we are told, was punished for refusing to speak the coloniser’s English at school, and he is shown proudly shouting Irish at a teacher. Sean later nearly drowns but fights bravely, to be rescued by mussel-collecting women (and the cows with whom they live so closely) on Roan Inish and thus start Fiona’s line. Sean is also later jailed for “smuggling arms to the Fenians”.

Fiona’s enigmatic cousin (played by the obviously very hard-working John Lynch) however, tells her a very different side to the family history, that involving the “dark ones” in the family. Again in sepia flashback we witness the tale of another founding father called Liam who came to the island when there was still only Irish spoken there (and thus untouched by the outside world) and met a “selkie”. This is the shape-shifting legend of the woman who is half-seal. Liam captures her seal skin, which means that she is obliged to stay on shore and “marry him”, although, as the many shots of wild-haired actress Susan Lynch staring out at the sea attest,

as the many shots of wild-haired actress Susan Lynch staring out at the sea attest, she is never happy until she returns to the sea. Nonetheless, she has already borne children for Liam, ensuring that the Keneally family, especially the dark ones, always have a touch of magic, a bond with the sea and ancient Ireland in them (the selkie as Mother Ireland figure speaks only an ancient dialect).

However, the changing nature of the world means that the Keneallys leave the island when Fiona is small, on the day on which her little brother Jimmy is carried out to sea. As they leave the island, it appears that they also leave behind their connection with that ancient magic and legend, as Fiona's grandparents dismiss the stories she hears of the selkie and of her brother being reared by seals on Roan Inish as mere superstition. It takes the child's imagination, as well as her discovery of the wild, naked little nature boy, to convince her grandparents of the existence of these myths (in a scene where the seals amazingly urge Jimmy to stay with his family) and bring them back to the island and the past.

The theme of the child's helping the adult to rediscover the mythical past is equally potent in Mike Newell's *Into The West* (1992). The film focuses on the contemporary lives of the "travellers", Ireland's nomadic people, who traditionally live closely with the natural landscape and the old ways of Celtic legend, magic and a kind of pre-Christian spirituality. The travellers, like Europe's gypsies, have always faced prejudice (an example being the short scene in *A Man of No Importance* when the inspector upbraids Alfred for letting a "tinker" woman and her baby on the bus), but they face added pressures in modern Ireland.

This is where *Into the West* begins, showing us how Papa Riley (Gabriel Byrne), once king of his band of travellers, turned his back on his old life after his wife died, and now lives with the “settled” community in the slum housing estate of Ballymun, in the same kind of tower as pictured in *The Commitments*. Here Papa lives daily with unemployment, a drinking problem, and rough treatment by the police, and he is shrouded in depression.

However, the film makes it clear that the old spirit of the travellers is kept alive here, in the way we constantly see children playing with horses on the wasteland between the towers, and mostly in the form of Grandpa, Papa’s old father-in-law, who still travels in a caravan, and tells the community old Celtic legends around the fire. It is he who urges Papa that “we’re travellers, We don’t belong here with the settled people” and that he should move back West to the old life. It is Grandpa who also encourages Papa’s children, Ossie and Tito, to believe in magic surrounding a white horse that followed him home from the sea, and whom he calls “Tir Na Nog” after one of the old legends—as if it embodies the spirit of the lost Olde Ireland (the audience is helped to believe by means of clever shots which make the horse appear to have human qualities).

Through a series of adventures the boys journey on the horse back towards the West, where the horse seems to want to go, and during a final showdown the horse rides into the sea at its final destination, Ossie on its back. Beneath the waves we see a blonde-haired figure in white stretching out a hand to rescue

Ossie, while the horse is seen no more, leading us to believe that it was really the spirit of the boys' mother, another example of the woman as shape-shifter.

The crucial point is that, in trying to find his sons, Papa Riley has renewed his ties with the travellers' way of life, enlisting the help of two (very unlikely) old friends and journeying on horseback. In an early scene which demonstrated his re-initiation into the "tribe" he is shown joining in a wild fireside dance with a traveller community at their campsite. After regaining his sons (and becoming suddenly sober) he promises never to go back to the Ballymun towers of Dublin, implying that he has returned to the warmth and freedom of the travellers' life. It is for this reason that the film has been described as a healing and restorative flight into nostalgia (represented by the rural West), although it is sometimes criticised for being solely a "conservative critique of the present" (Richards, 113). Nonetheless, what the film most memorably achieves is the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the fantastic in the complex contemporary Irish culture, as in the shots of the beautiful white horse filling the dark Ballymun flat.

## 5. CONCLUSION: INTO THE FUTURE

“...crateloads of wistful comedies and political deadpans

[...] creak out of Ireland each month”

---Ian Nathan, review of *The General*, 40.

Since the Northern Ireland ceasefire of 1994 and the beginnings of talks which include all parties, the whole island of Ireland has been experiencing a time of “uncertain hope” (Caul, 11) for a future which will bring peace and equality to all its citizens. In these years, there has been evidence on both sides of the border of a great disillusionment with political strife and above all a wish to end the violence, and it is this sentiment that is expressed in indigenous Irish films that deal with the Troubles (and arguably in those that maintain an escapist point of view).

At the same time, this period has been characterised by a great deal of reflection and debate about the nature and history of Irishness, which inevitably opens old wounds. Irish filmmakers are at the forefront of conveying this new atmosphere to the world, determined to challenge outsiders’ traditionally misinformed perceptions of the Irish; a task which, in these rapidly changing times, is fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity—as I hope I have revealed in this essay.

One aspect of this “ambivalence” was touched on in the last section, being for Declan Kiberd a distinctly positive means of “accessing the creative possibility of a future promised in the past”, using a “nostalgia conscious of itself” (Richards, 108-109). The new trend in the Irish arts appears to be the combining of past and

present influences as a way of coping with the future; for poet Seamus Heaney and the Belfast-based Field Day Theatre Company to which he belongs have defined their objective as “looking back to a ramification of roots and associations and forwards to a clarification of sense and meaning” (Heaney quoted in Cairns and Richards, 146). For this reason, *Into the West* can be seen as a useful film with which to have concluded this study.

The abovementioned “nostalgia” can also be seen as part of a process of reclaiming one’s history and sense of national identity in the face of increasing globalisation of Anglo-American influences. One of the intentions of Irish filmmakers has been to destroy the stereotypes that foreigners have created about them; however, as has been discussed, not only are new myths and stereotypes created, but many of the traditional ones are perpetuated in films whose production still lies in foreign hands and whose content is aimed at an international audience. One indication of this is the very existence of a film in the process of being made in England called *Leprechauns* (for which my props-making uncle had to build a giant toadstool and a fairy door). For much of the world (at least the American one), sadly, the green-clad leprechaun remains the defining symbol of Ireland.

These magical creatures do, however, reflect one Irish characteristic which is a positive aspect of contemporary Irish films, and that is the gift of storytelling. It may be noted that, although setting and place are very important for creating the visual atmosphere, Irish films are for the most part not noted for visual experimentation, in the surreal or metaphoric sense of such British, European and even American

“arthouse” directors as David Lynch or Peter Greenaway<sup>18</sup>. This may be because Irish film originates from a culture based in the oral storytelling tradition, where the spoken word in all its inflections is of prime importance, as evidenced by the great number of poets and playwrights produced by Ireland. Terry Byrne explains that the origin of Irish filmmaking in the old oral culture is reflected in the reliance on dialogue and narrative to carry the story along (Byrne, 203)—but if the Irish can be complimented for one thing, it is telling a good story, as their films attest. Director Jim Sheridan expresses this mindset in his beliefs about the process of filmmaking:

In essence, I don't think film is a predominately visual medium. It's just a storytelling medium with different aspects; one is visual, one is sound, one is music. The visual tends to predominate because it is the most powerful, but it's not necessarily the most true.

(quoted in Byrne, 140).

It is in the search for the “truth” that is Irishness that filmmakers such as Sheridan and Jordan employ these strong narrative techniques to explore issues and get to the heart of their stories. Despite the ambiguity that often arises from this undertaking, the one thing common to the explosion of Irish films that have emerged, and continue to emerge in greater numbers in the 1990s, is the

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<sup>18</sup> A notable exception is Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy*, which manages to bring the child Francie's imagination to life on screen, using surreal images like the appearance of an alien where a doctor should be, the dreamlike bombed-out village, and postmodern methods of montage where the image of the nuclear bomb is concerned.

celebratory desire to engage with what it means to be Irish, and from an Irish point of view.

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**PERSONAL COMMUNICATION**

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