



Independence days: who shot the best movie?

Revolutionary-period films are a mixed reel, says **Paul Whittington**

In the decades immediately following liberation from the British empire, Irish cinema was more or less silent on the subject of revolution and the struggle for independence for the simple fact that there was no film industry here to speak of. Instead, we were mainly reliant on American and, to a lesser extent, English film-makers to tell our stories for us. Their efforts rarely bore much relation to the truth.

Tall tales of heroic republicans, flame-haired cailins and perfidious Brits were the order of the day until the late 1960s, when the arrival of the northern Troubles swept films about 20th century Irish history off the agenda altogether. In fact, the first time an Irish film-maker seriously addressed our War of Independence was in 1996, when Neil Jordan released *Michael Collins*. It remains the cornerstone of Irish historical movie-making, a flawed but impressive monolith against which all other films about our struggle for freedom are compared.

The fact that Jordan succeeded in making it at all is miraculous. He did so on the back of his own star power, having made hit films including *The Company of Wolves*, *Mona Lisa*, *The Crying Game* and *Interview with the Vampire* in the 1980s and early 90s. He had been planning the film for years, and he and Liam Neeson had made a pact that the Ballymena man would star as Collins. Neeson's high profile after *Schindler's List* made *Michael Collins* an easier sell to Warner Brothers.

It was quite a thing to sit in the Savoy Cinema in O'Connell Street and watch Jordan's epic recreation of the battle for the GPO. Inside the gutted shell hide Michael Collins and his old friend Harry Boland (Aidan Quinn), who vow to fight on. "We won't play by their rules Harry," Collins vows darkly, "we'll invent our own." The film then documents Collins' brilliant and ruthless guerrilla campaign, the Treaty negotiations, the fall out with Éamon de Valera and Collins' death at Béal na mBláth.

When I spoke to Neil Jordan on the film's 20th anniversary, he told me ruefully that rows about the movie's politics began before it had even started shooting. "The minute it was announced that I was going into production on it," he said, "everybody began arguing, and even before I'd finished the final draft there were items on TV and historians were commenting, and so it was almost like I'd been commissioned to make a national monument or something."

Most of the flak that came Jordan's way in Ireland after the film's release centred on its portrayal of Éamon de Valera

(brilliantly played by Alan Rickman) as a perfidious sneak, and the suggestion that he may have had a hand in Collins' death. Jordan defended his stance robustly, and in fairness it would not be possible to create an account of the Civil War that would please everyone. "Like most Irish people of my generation," Jordan explained to me, "I didn't really appreciate the Ireland that de Valera had created, so he became the villain of the piece almost without me wanting him to. But in a way de Valera was the villain, definitely of the Civil War period."

Irish critics also moaned about Julia Roberts' wobbly accent, and the film's colourful account of the love triangle between Kitty Kiernan, Collins and Harry Boland. But without Roberts, there might not have been a film at all, and the movie's stirring recreations of the War of Independence remain a huge achievement, an honest attempt to depict the turbulent formation of this state.

Doing so, however, has never been a simple matter. In 1926, just two years after the guns had fallen silent, a Dublin doctor and cinema enthusiast called Isaac Eppel pulled together a five-reel melodrama called *Irish Destiny*, in which Paddy Dunne Cullinan played Denis O'Hara, a heroic IRA man who is wounded by the British, evades capture and returns home to rescue his love from an unscrupulous poitin maker. Thought lost for 60 years, it's now in the archives of the Irish Film Institute (*poster below*).

Irish Destiny offered a rare domestic perspective on our own wars, which for many decades thereafter would be refracted

lushly from foreign shores. Ireland's biggest friend in Hollywood for many years was John Ford, the proud son of first generation immigrants who would later give Irish tourism a huge shot in the arm by filming *The Quiet Man* in Mayo and Connemara.

In 1935, Ford filmed a stirring adaptation of Liam O'Flaherty's novel *The Informer*. A British version had appeared in 1929, but seemed rather bloodless next to Ford's action-packed melodrama, which starred big Victor McLaglen as Gypo Nolan, a boozy Dubliner who is kicked out of the IRA for refusing to shoot a Black and Tan. At a loose end, and looking to raise enough cash to escape to America with his sex worker girlfriend Katie, Gypo turns informer for a £20 reward that will bring happiness to no one.

Set-bound, and stagey in parts ("War — its terror and its glory blast the human heart!" proclaimed the trailer), *The Informer* nevertheless gave American audiences an idea of what our founding war might have been like, and illustrated the moral quandaries all conflicts throw up. Graham Greene, toiling at the time as a lowly film critic with *The Spectator*, gave the movie a glowing review.

'COMPLETELY RUINED'

Two years later, John Ford again stepped into the breach for the old country, making an adaptation of Seán O'Casey's *Plough and the Stars*. Ford had wanted to import wholesale the entire cast of an acclaimed Abbey production, but RKO insisted on casting known stars Barbra Stanwyck and Preston Foster as the leads. Nevertheless supporting roles were largely filled by Irish actors like Barry Fitzgerald and Denis O'Dea. While Ford angrily claimed that RKO had "completely ruined the damned thing," his adaptation had its moments.

Daftness abounded in the 1936 British film *Ourselves Alone*, in which the flighty sister of an IRA commander falls in love with a visiting British policeman and prevents him from walking into a republican trap. While a critic for the (at that point) distinctly pro-British *Irish Times* found merit in the film, Graham Greene demurred. *Ourselves Alone* was "one of the silliest pictures which even a British studio has yet managed to turn out".

The same year, an enterprising Killarney garage owner called Tom Cooper used a cast of amateurs to make *The Dawn*, a drama set in 1919 and in which the descendent of a man wrongly accused of treachery in the Fenian uprising makes amends by joining the IRA. "In spite of various crudities," wrote *The Irish Times*, *The Dawn* was "as thrilling a show as I would ever want to witness." But the reviewer then warns that sensitive union-

Artistic licence: Irish critics moaned about the colourful account of the love triangle between Kitty Kiernan (Julia Roberts), Michael Collins (Liam Neeson) and Harry Boland (Aidan Quinn) in *Michael Collins*

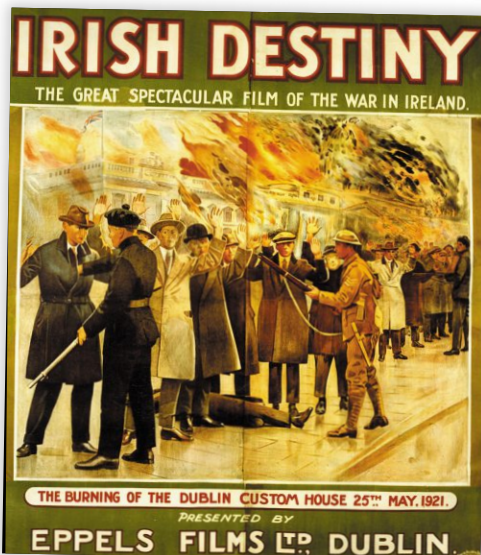


ists might be offended by the film's depiction of Black and Tans as "too scoundrelly for words". And we wouldn't want that, would we?

The War of Independence was lent a touch of glamour in *Beloved Enemy* (1936), which starred Hollywood beauty Merle Oberon as Helen Drummond, an English aristocrat who faces all manner of unpleasantness after falling in love with dashing IRA leader Dennis Reardon (Brian Aherne). The film originally finished with Reardon being shot and killed, but was so unpopular with moviegoers that a new ending in which he survived was hastily tacked on.

In 1941, a German film-maker made an unlikely contribution to the historical fray. Nazi propagandists, who would have dearly loved establishing a presence at Britain's backdoor, worked hard to undermine fragile historical allegiances in films like *My Life for Ireland*, which covered two generations of an Irish family fighting to remove the yoke of British oppression. It fooled nobody.

In the 1950s, as relations with Britain slowly improved and the conflict receded safely into history, film-makers felt freer to explore the War of Independence in all its complexity. In 1958, James Cagney came to Dublin to film *Shake Hands with the Devil*, a Michael Anderson film based on a novel by former RIC man Rearden Conner: in it, a young medical student (Don Murray) is drawn reluctantly into the IRA's battle with the Black and Tans. Cagney, throwing the kitchen sink at it, was Lenihan, a medical professor and IRA leader who is outraged when he hears about the proposed Treaty with the British, and vows to fight on. Premiered in Dublin in 1959, *Shakes Hands*





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with the *Devil* delved deeper into the War of Independence than most films.

In 1965, the life of Seán O'Casey and its attendant republicanism were hammily dramatised in *Young Cassidy*, and in the late 1960s David Lean spent many damp months camped on the Dingle peninsula waiting for the right storm (and a cast sober enough) to conclude *Ryan's Daughter* (1969). In that film, the flaws and merits of which have been argued over bitterly ever since, we got a glimpse into the roots of the war, as IRA gun-runners battled with informers and various other imperial running dogs for possession of a coastal community's soul.

NEW CONFLICT

But by the time *Ryan's Daughter* was released a new conflict was coming, an even dirtier and more confusing one that would make the entire subject of Irish history problematic for decades to come.

Jordan's *Michael Collins* was only made once an IRA ceasefire and nascent peace process were safely in place, and through the 80s and 90s most films that dealt with Irish history at all tended for obvious reasons to focus on the Northern Irish Troubles. In 1991, however, RTÉ marked the 70th anniversary of the Treaty signing with *The Treaty*, with a well cast Brendan Glee-

son playing Collins, Barry McGuovern as de Valera and Ian Bannan as the wily, shifty David Lloyd George. It's comprehensive, and worth a look.

Based on a novel by Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (1999) starred a young Keeley Hawes as Lois Farquar, a flighty Anglo-Irish filly who causes much trouble on the family estate as the storm of war looms. It was a bit stiff, to be honest.

Ken Loach made a bracing contribution to the War of Independence cannon in 2006, with *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, which starred Cillian Murphy and Padraic Delaney as Cork brothers who join a rural flying column to battle the Black and Tans. A moving polemic against the wider ills of colonialism, it mined the old 'brother-against-brother' line that had become synonymous with our Civil War, in which the siblings tragically end up on opposing sides. The *Daily Mail* was outraged (always a good sign), and loudly accused Loach of anti-Britishness.

Undaunted, the director and his writing partner Paul Laverty would explore the imperfect, priest-ridden society that emerged post-war in their 2014 film *Jimmy's Hall*. The same year, *A Nightingale Falling* altogether less convincingly told the story of a pair of Anglo-Irish sisters who shelter a wounded Black and Tan in their stately pile. Not a wise plan.

Colin Teevan's TV mini-series *Resistance* (2019) would treat the War of Independence and its connection to 1916 with admirable thoroughness, but there are many more stories to be told about Ireland in the early 1920s, if anyone is ever given the money to film them.



THE INFORMER 1935



SHAKE HANDS WITH THE DEVIL 1958



RYAN'S DAUGHTER 1969



THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY 2006