

# Representations of Irish history in fiction films made prior to the 1916 rising

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If representations of reality have been historically and culturally problematic, the representation of history, compounded by the vagaries of human memory, is no less so. History as it is practised today, Robert Rosenstone remarks, is no more than a series of conventions 'by which we make meaning from the remains of the past'. In this regard, writing is just 'one way of doing history'.<sup>1</sup> That said, most traditional historians distrust and largely discard the film image – actuality or newsreel material as well as fiction – in favour of the written word, even though it is, like film, subject to manipulation and ideological loading. Unfortunately, there seems to be little awareness or acknowledgement of how film material, beyond its status as background illustration for events or personalities, can be used to 'do' history. Though it is clear that no document, visual or otherwise, can objectively embody history, exploration of historical omissions, distortions and reception(s) can facilitate a way back into a particular historical conjuncture. However, as many historians are not trained in media analysis there is rarely a sophisticated engagement with film – a questioning of the procedures of film production, the signifying systems, or the nature of narrative (especially in non-fiction films). Yet, it is the very logic of cinema and its edited construction of a reality that should interest historians, as it can shed light on the presentation and perception of events at particular times, thereby paralleling the selective nature of the historian's own task. In short, using film is not an alternative to the academic project, but is simply another tool with which to view history.

Moving pictures were introduced to Ireland two years before the centenary of the 1798 rising. In the early years of film exhibition and film production in the country most films were actualities, or what later would be called newsreels and documentaries. While local events, especially the activities of the lord lieutenant and his entourage, and the visit to Ireland in 1901 of Queen Victoria, were filmed, Irish events were largely confined to the everyday – street scenes, sporting events, and religious ceremonies. Research has not yet uncovered any record of the filming (in Ireland or America) of any commemorative events concerning the centenaries of the 1798 rising or the 1803 rebellion. Prior to 1916, by which time imported fiction films – some dealing with Irish history – had become dominant, there is a paucity of references to actuality material recording the progress of the

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone (ed.), *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, 1995), p. 4.

various strands of Irish nationalism, or even Irish political events. Exceptions include the filming of the 1902 National Convention in Dublin; a meeting, in the same year, of the Irish Parliamentary Party at City Hall, Dublin; the 1913 Wolfe Tone commemoration at Bodenstown; and, early in the following year, the Irish Volunteers marching.<sup>2</sup> Despite this situation, cinemas themselves were often sites of nationalist sentiment with periodic reporting of disturbances during screenings of films about the Boer War, and later World War One. One such disruption was organised by Inghinidhe na hEireann and The Fianna, under the direction of Countess Markievicz, who objected to the showing of British army recruitment films at the Grafton St Cinema, Dublin.<sup>3</sup>

American cinema from 1908 to 1917 represents a transition period from what is sometimes called a 'Primitive' cinema of non-narrative integration towards the establishment of a linear cause-effect, or 'Classical' cinema which continued largely unchanged until the late 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Fundamental to this transition phase was the denial or concealment of the processes and mechanisms of enunciation – the making invisible of its constructed nature and status as artifice. This was achieved through such devices as invisible editing, not (directly) looking at the camera, or drawing attention to the landscape, a feature of a number of fiction films made in Ireland during 1910–12. Another characteristic was the development and heightening of narrative tension through the psychological investment in the male hero (and his sweetheart), often aided by 'parallel editing' or 'crosscutting', the cinematic shorthand for the literary device of 'meanwhile', used to best effect in the last-minute rescue.<sup>5</sup> This was part of the process of individualising the spectator,

2 In January/February 1902, the Theatre Royal, Limerick screened items on 'The Return of the Irish Delegates from America', 'Reception of Mr John Redmond in Cork', 'The National Convention in Dublin', and 'The Meeting of the Irish Parliamentary Party at the City Hall, Dublin', as well as various foreign travel items and 'The Munster Horse Fair'. This list of Irish political items, which was taken from the *Limerick Chronicle* and the *Limerick Leader* by Francis Scallan, seems to be exceptional for the period, at least as regards newspaper records. See Francis Scallan, 'Shadows in the Present: A History of Exhibition of Film in Limerick City 1897–1914' (MA thesis, University College Dublin, 1998), pp. 29, 64. Thomas J. Clarke, who was executed for his role in the 1916 rising, seems to have been one of the organisers of the filming of the Tone Commemoration at Bodenstown which was undertaken by cameraman and film exhibitor James T. Jameson. See Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London, 1987), p. 33, for further details on this film.

3 The screening at Dublin's Rotunda at the end of December 1900 of film of British military leaders Lords Roberts and Kitchener, as well as the Boers' General Kruger, 'gave rise,' the *Irish Times* reported (1 January 1901, p. 6), 'to mixed demonstrations of approval and disapproval on the part of the audience'. That such responses were not confined to Dublin audiences is confirmed by the experience in Limerick when Boer War films were shown. (Scallan, *Shadows in the Present*, pp. 28, 40). For details of the attack on the Grafton St Cinema see Rockett et al., *Cinema and Ireland*, pp. 32–3. 4 David Bordwell, 'Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures' in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York, 1986), pp. 17–34. 5 For an overview of early cinema scholarship, see

isolating the viewer in relation to the screen. During this period cinema became organised along mass-production, industrial lines and needed a new type of (narrative) cinema for commercial reasons. As a result, history on film has tended to centre on individual action rather than on broader historical events. The triangular love story in *Michael Collins* (1996), for example, often takes precedence over the independence struggle, while Collins is represented as the lone hero fighting both the British and the 'traitor' within, de Valera.

The investment in cinema was fuelled by a huge expansion in the numbers paying to see films from around 1904. This did not occur in Ireland until five years later when the first full-time Irish cinema opened in December 1909. By 1914 Dublin Corporation was issuing twenty-five cinema licences annually. Despite the rapid expansion of film exhibition in Ireland in the years before World War One, it was not until March 1916, a month before the rising, that the systematic production of indigenous Irish fiction films began, following the establishment of the Film Company of Ireland.<sup>6</sup> As a result, representations of Irish history and culture within early cinema were left to foreign film producers, mostly Americans, some of whom were of Irish extraction. American producers realised that the range of dramatic subjects in Irish history would appeal not just to the Irish in the USA, but that these topics would also draw other ethnic groups to the cinema. The approach to Irish stories as films, therefore, was not undertaken because of some sentimental attachment to the Emerald Isle (though on occasion that was evident), but as part of American cinema's attempts, in this and later periods, to seek out subjects that would be of interest to American cinema audiences in the first instance.

#### *Fiction Films 1908-1916*

Most of the Irish historical films were set between 1798-1803.<sup>7</sup> This was the last time before the 1916 rising that there was widespread military action, or conflict, in Ireland that could serve as the basis not just for the developing narrative cinema, but could utilise one of early cinema's key genres – the chase film. Arguably, the 1848 and Fenian risings did not have the same historical cachet because their objectives were deemed too radical in the context of late-nineteenth-century Catholic nationalist revisionism of 1798. Also, the events at Ballinacorney, Co. Tipperary, in 1848 were too feeble dramatically to warrant a film producer's interest. (Only in the 1930s was a script for such a film even contemplated, but the film

Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker (eds), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London, 1990.) <sup>6</sup> A detailed account of the activities of the Film Company of Ireland can be found in Rockett et al., *Cinema and Ireland*, pp. 16-32. <sup>7</sup> More extended narrative outlines of the films discussed here, plus references, notes, and information on the films which survive, may be found in Kevin Rockett, *The Irish Filmography: Fiction Films 1896-1996* (Dublin, 1996.) The chapter, 'Irish History and Politics', in Kevin Rockett and Eugene Finn, *Still Irish: A Century of the Irish in Film* (Dublin, 1995), includes stills from some of the films discussed here.

was never made.)<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, one of the few films of the later period – the 1860s – was the British made *A Bit of Oulde Ireland* (1910). In this (comic) film from an undetermined play by Dion Boucicault, a betrayed Fenian is sheltered by a priest, escapes from jail, and in a familiar narrative trope, poses as a corpse at a wake.<sup>9</sup> The other exceptions were adaptations of Boucicault's 'Fenian' play, *The Shaughraun*, the first of which was made as *The Shaughraun, an Irish Romance* in 1907.<sup>10</sup> Two versions were released in 1912, one in Australia as *Conn, the Shaughraun*,<sup>11</sup> and one, *The Shaughraun*, which was made by the Kalem Company during their extended stay in Ireland in the previous year. While the Kalem film appears to have been faithful to Boucicault's original play, the emphases in the other films are not known, though the politics of the period appear to have been largely absent from all three films.<sup>12</sup>

If the Fenian period was perceived as being too radical politically for early cinema, then the Cromwellian era was treated with even greater caution, perhaps being seen as a subject that could release volatile responses in Catholics and nationalists, though two Kalem films, both released in 1913, were set in the seventeenth century. *Lady Peggy's Escape*, with the incendiary working title of *When Cromwell Came to Ireland*, concerns Lady Peggy Fitzgerald (Gene Gauntier), whose family castle is taken over by Cromwellians. They insist on her remaining behind after her family leaves, but when she escapes, the soldiers, by now drunk, lay siege to the family's hideout. Peggy arrives with help and overcomes the soldiers after killing their leader in a duel.<sup>13</sup> *The Wives of Jamestown*, which was shot in Ireland and America, is set during and after the Cromwellian wars and concerns another titled lady, Geraldine (Gene Gauntier), who is transported to Virginia for the wife-slave market after her castle has been besieged. In America she resumes her relationship with an Irish lad of humble birth who has done well in the colony.<sup>14</sup> In general, the romantic intertwining of the hero and heroine taking precedence over the exploration of broader historical events is also true of the much larger number of films set between 1798–1803. Indeed, this is evident in *The Wearing of the Green* (1910), one of the few British films set in Ireland during the reign of George III in

8 A script entitled *The Rising* by Myrtle Johnson on the 1848 and 1867 rebellions was submitted to the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) in 1938 for approval prior to production, a standard procedure at the time with subjects deemed controversial. 9 *Bioscope*, 3 March 1910, p. 31; Denis Gifford, *The British Film Catalogue 1895-1970* (Newton Abbot, 1973), No. 02560. 10 *Moving Picture World*, 18 January 1908, p. 50; *New York Clipper*, 18 January 1908, p. 1319. 11 For details of *Conn, The Shaughraun*, see *Referee* (Sydney), 20 March 1912, p. 1; Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977* (Oxford, 1980), No. 73. 12 W. Stephen Bush, writing in *Moving Picture World* (14 December 1912, p. 1065), enthused about the Irish scenery and the use of Boucicault's dialogue in the intertitles, but there is little reference in any of these accounts to the central element of the play, the framing of Robert Ffolliott as a Fenian and his subsequent exile from Ireland. 13 *Kalem Kalender*, 15 January 1913, p. 13. 14 *Australian Kinematograph Journal*, 27 March 1913, p. 6; *Bioscope*, 6 March 1913, p. xv; *Moving Picture World*, 30 December 1912, p. 1316.

which history and politics are reduced to the broad strokes of good and evil. Political activist Andy and peasant girl Norah are in love, but, to her distress, an (evil) English Major has romantic designs on her. However his scheme to place firearms in Andy's cottage – the holding and concealing of which was a capital offence at the time – and have him arrested and imprisoned fails. He is finally outfoxed when Norah and Andy get married.<sup>15</sup>

One of the first fiction films to deal with any aspect of Ireland's past was *The Irish Blacksmith*, released in the USA in January 1908, in which the eponymous hero defends his sister's virtue by assaulting the polished (read: English) 'gentleman' who had earlier molested her. Resenting his beating, he vows revenge and after ordering his nefarious gang, with whom he secretly makes poteen, to plant weapons at the blacksmith's forge, he informs the local military officer. His plan is completed when a company of soldiers arrive at the forge, and with the help of an informer, find the guns and arrest the blacksmith, who is later sentenced to death. However, his sister devises a means by which he can escape when she and her mother visit him in jail. A disguise is smuggled into the jail and a soldier, who is in love with the girl, arranges to be on sentry duty on the night the blacksmith escapes. The blacksmith goes to the cave where the gang are hiding and overhears them boasting about what they have done. He then goes to the judge who convicted him and persuades him to visit the cave where the gang and their leader, the 'gentleman,' are caught red-handed.<sup>16</sup> This early film has some of the characteristics that recur in later films: the close-knit family of mother, sister and brother, the latter usually a rebel rather than an industrious worker; a relatively benign criminal justice system with understanding and sympathetic military officers and judges; and the vicious and bitter (Irish) informer.

*Shamus O'Brien* (1908), an adaptation of the Sheridan Le Fanu poem (with additional lines by Samuel Lover), was released by the same company, Selig Polyscope, a couple of months later, shortly before St Patrick's Day, the favourite time of year for Irish film releases. Other versions of this popular poem were made in 1912, and, as *The Cry of Erin*, in 1916. In the 1908 version of the story, Shamus O'Brien, the Bold Boy of Glengall, is leader of a secret society during the 1798 rising. Pursuing him, English soldiers raid his family home and show his mother posters offering a reward for his capture, to the delight of one officer who is attracted to Shamus' sweetheart, Mary. Meanwhile, Shamus hides in a cave where, overheard by an informer, he consults with his followers. However, they are alert to the informer's presence and by the time the soldiers arrive the men have left and the annoyed officer strikes the informer. The patriots then go to the informer's home where they too assault him, but he is saved when, in an act of altruism, the noble Shamus arrives, disguised as a British soldier. Following a number of encounters with Mary, the informer, and the soldiers, he is eventually captured and imprisoned where he is visited by his mother and a priest, another character who recurs

in these films. The informer also visits the cell, but, when he denies the allegations against him, Shamus attacks him. On his way to his hanging, a friend frees his hands, but he continues to the gallows where he shoves aside the executioner and escapes. But his mother, according to the production company's synopsis, 'recalls Shamus, and wilfully he returns to the gallows'. Meanwhile, Mary secures a pardon for Shamus after pleading for his life, and arrives just in time to save him from execution.<sup>17</sup>

It was not until two years later, in 1910, when Sidney Olcott brought a small group from the American company Kalem to Ireland to make the first fiction film shot in the country, *The Lad from Old Ireland*, that a sustained period of film production began in Ireland.<sup>18</sup> When this film of Irish migration to the USA proved popular with American audiences, Kalem sent Olcott back to Ireland with a larger cast and crew in the following year. The first film they made was an adaptation of Boucicault's popular melodrama, *The Colleen Baum*, which was followed by *Rory O'More*. Notwithstanding that Sir Rory O'Moore had been a leader of the 1641 rising, the period covered by the film is loosely marked as 1798-1803. The title is, of course, also that of Samuel Lover's book (1836), dramatised in 1837, and the film was said to be an adaptation of Lover's ballad and book. In the film, a dashing rebel, Rory, evades capture by English soldiers with the aid of his sweetheart, Kathleen. When he is eventually captured, he is freed from the gallows by a priest and is spirited away to America with his mother and sweetheart. This is echoed a year later in the 1912 version of *Shamus O'Brien*, and again in another Olcott version of *Rory O'More*, the 1914 film, *For Ireland's Sake*, which, with its use of pikes, also suggests 1798. In this film, the priest helps the rebel, Marty, escape from jail, but shortly afterwards he throws away the gun that Marty has taken from an English soldier, indicating that in America such guns will not be required. Indeed, as the trio leave for America, the final title announces, 'To the West/ To the West/ To The Land of the Free'. In a development of this escape scenario, *Eileen of Erin* (1913) sees rebel, mother, sweetheart, and priest escape to a ship after the rebel is freed from the scaffold.<sup>19</sup>

As is clear from these films, the priest becomes an increasingly important character who displaces the rebel from his position as community leader and attractive hero. The priest, in mediating the rebel's departure from Ireland, succeeds in reinforcing the status quo at home while ensuring that his rival for leadership leaves the country. This version of 1798 is, of course, readily recognisable in broader revisionist terms of the Catholic version of the rising constructed from the 1870s onwards, with many Irish people reading the priest as Fr Murphy of Boolavogue. Perhaps this displacement also served the Irish-American Catholic Church's control over their constituency, as well as the cinema's ideological project at this time of

17 *Moving Picture World*, 21 March 1908, p. 246. 18 An account of Kalem's activities in Ireland may be found in Rockett et al., *Cinema and Ireland*, pp. 7-12. 19 *Moving Picture World*, 27 December 1913, p. 1594.

promoting the peaceful assimilation of emigrants into American society. It reminded Irish-Americans that they were in the new country in part through the action of the Church, and that their fight for, and loyalty to, Ireland was, in America at least, to be without physical violence, notwithstanding the Fenian 'invasion' of Canada and the ceaseless efforts to incite revolt at home by Irish activists in the USA. Lest there be any concern on the moral side that the unmarried rebel and sweetheart may get up to no good while together, in *For Ireland's Sake*, the priest marries them before their departure from the country.

There is, however, another side to the cinematic love affair, the love triangle, a form of popular narrative that was objected to, at this and later periods, by anti-cinema Irish Catholic campaigners. Set before and during the 1798 rising, *The Heart of Kathleen* (1913) concerns the relationships between Kathleen, her boyfriend Dennis – the local leader of the rebels – and Strathcone, a smooth-talking Englishman and son of a lord, who arrives in their midst following a shipwreck and to whom Kathleen becomes attracted. Annoyed, Dennis remonstrates with her, but she returns her engagement ring to him. Kathleen and Strathcone secretly marry and live together in the village but he soon tires of her and returns home. Stunned by the news, Kathleen commits suicide by throwing herself from a cliff where she is found by Dennis. Strathcone joins a regiment going to Ireland to quell the rebellion and is posted to Dennis's district. In a fight, Dennis kills Strathcone, but he is later captured by Lord Strathcone's men in Fr Maloney's cottage. In a speech from the scaffold, Dennis asserts the right to kill Strathcone for his treatment of Kathleen, and his work to free Ireland from the English. His speech is interrupted by the crowd which storms the scaffold and frees him. Spirited away, he is taken to a ship bound for America.<sup>20</sup>

The anti-radical reading of Irish history in these films is reinforced by representations of the informer, who is invariably depicted as a slinky, hunchbacked and wizened Irishman, a parody of an evil leprechaun dressed in black. Such an appearance is a physical signifier of his mental and emotional state. That he is Irish, and is the film's most reprehensible character, allows for the focus to be shifted away from the English and onto the Irish themselves, which, for the purposes of Irish emigrant assimilation in the USA, would dissolve to some extent Irish-English tensions, and allow the Irish to see themselves as determining their own colonial status. Such a displacement can also be read as serving the Catholic Church in maintaining its position as community leader over or against secret societies. By helping the rebel leader to escape, the Church could have it both ways. It could be seen as sympathising with the Irish cause and, by sending the hero to America, negating the potential liberating force, already informed on by what ironically could be called the Church's dark angel. Furthermore, it could be argued that the films' producers – whether Anglo-Saxon or from other ethnic groups, such as Jews,

<sup>20</sup> *Moving Picture Stories*, 14 November 1931, pp. 14–18; *Moving Picture World*, 18 October 1913, p. 306.

who attained a degree of economic independence in Hollywood never achieved by the Irish – were unlikely to produce films that would be directly critical of Anglo-Saxon attitudes, whether in Ireland or in America, towards the Irish.<sup>21</sup>

Some films sought to anchor the informer's motivation in a warped sexuality by highlighting thwarted love or sexual frustration. In *The Informer* (1914), Michael turns informer when Barney, his rival in love for Nora, tricks him. Out of revenge, he tells the authorities that Barney is leader of the rebels. When the English burn his mother's cottage, Barney and his friends drive Michael insane. Meanwhile, a rebel dispatch bearer with papers for the rebels is wounded and takes refuge in Nora's cottage. Barney's mother agrees to look after the papers but she is discovered with them and is charged with treason. The colonel tells Barney that if he gives himself up he will save his mother's life. Barney agrees, and is hanged as a consequence.<sup>22</sup> This narrative pursues to its rare conclusion the mother/son relationship seen in the 1908 version of *Shamus O'Brien*. The sweetheart does not get her man back in this case and he is sacrificed for the rebel cause, which, it seems, is the only cinematic alternative to emigration. Usually, though, the rebel hero 'chooses life', as a later sound film puts it, over the inevitability of death for those who continued with the armed struggle. This humanist ideology permeates almost all, but most especially British, sound films about Ireland made right into the present, whether dealing with Ireland in the nineteenth century, or the conflict in Northern Ireland since partition. In these films, parliamentarianism underpinned by English rationalism is contrasted with the reckless anarchism and fecklessness of the Irish. This racist legacy, of course, predates cinema by many centuries.<sup>23</sup> Another version of the jilted lover turned informer is found in *The Ulster Lass* (1915) in which the lover, Teddy, is falsely reported as being the leader of the Whiteboys, a secret society, by the real leader of the gang, Phadrig (sic), who is jealous of the relationship. In this case, Phadrig is fatally wounded and before his death redeems himself by clearing Teddy, who is then reunited with his sweetheart.<sup>24</sup> A film made during Olcott's last visit to Ireland, *All for Old Ireland* (1915), depicts the informer, Fagin, framing Eileen's boyfriend, Myles, on a charge of plotting against the Crown, when she rejects him. In this instance, Myles is freed from jail by Eileen and Fr O'Flynn and is spirited away to France on a ship that has landed arms for the rebels.<sup>25</sup> What is interesting in these films is that they refuse the stereotypical

**21** For a broader discussion of the representation of the Irish in American cinema for this and later periods, see Kevin Rockett, 'The Irish Migrant and Film' in Patrick O'Sullivan (ed.), *The Creative Migrant* (Leicester/London/New York, 1994), pp. 170–191. **22** *Moving Picture World*, 22 January 1914, p. 600; *Bioscope*, 30 April 1914, p. xxxiv. **23** See John Hill, 'Images of Violence' in Rockett et al., *Cinema and Ireland*. **24** *Moving Picture World*, 10 July 1915, p. 128. **25** *Moving Picture World*, 10 July 1915, p. 37. *Variety* (16 July 1915) commented that while it had 'a weak finale' and was a 'rather poorly constructed tale', 'the beautiful natural scenery . . . will hold this feature up alone'. It added that 'views of Ireland seem to possess a certain interest for everyone and particularly for the Irish themselves', many of whom were 'listed in the directory of picture fans'.



dichotomy of informer-villain to rebel leader-hero in favour of a more complex personal and ultimately tragic narrative that overwhelms the political context. Consequently, these fiction films allowed for and indeed demanded an engagement with history, yet decontextualised (and misrepresented) the colonial struggle. While distorted and limited representations of those fighting to emancipate Ireland from English rule permeated both American and British cinema, some films, by focusing on the community as being at one with the rebels, transcend and undercut the central roles of the sweetheart and priest. This can be seen most pointedly in the 1912 version of *Shamus O'Brien*, in which the crowd attacks the informer at the gallows and later in *For Ireland's Sake*, when the community helps the rebel to escape and then assaults the informer.

English soldiers are occasionally depicted as brutal (in *Ireland a Nation*, [1914], for example), but in some films, such as *Rory O'More*, they are sympathetically portrayed. In this film, a drowning soldier is saved by Rory, but the informer, Black William, demands that Rory is put on trial so that he can claim the reward. At the trial, the officer pleads unsuccessfully on Rory's behalf. It is the priest who devises a plan to free him and in the mythical tradition of Fr Murphy, he 'sacrifices' himself, as the inter-title has it, for the rebel cause. Indeed, in *True Irish Hearts* (1914), the priest is executed after helping the rebel and his sweetheart to escape to America.<sup>26</sup> Another 1798 film made by Olcott in 1911 was an adaptation of Boucicault's *Arrah-na-Pogue*. Beamish McCaul returns to Ireland, having spent four years in exile in France after escaping from prison following the 1798 rising. He robs Feeney, a government official, and, after a series of narrative twists, secures a pardon for his foster-sister's husband, Shaun; receives a pardon himself (thus securing the return of his lands confiscated after the rising); and is reunited with his sweetheart.<sup>27</sup> Though Kalem did not have a monopoly on Irish historical subjects at this time, they were the most prolific and innovative producers.<sup>28</sup> In *The O'Neill* (1912), Kalem gave the rebel-on-the-run a new twist by recasting him as an Irish Robin Hood, when, on seeing the abject poverty of the peasants, he becomes a highwayman. However, he falls in love with one of his first victims, Elinor, daughter of a gentleman. Wishing to see her again, he goes to a masked ball but she cries for help when she recognises him. Jumping through a window, he escapes, but on the following day he sees her again on the highway. Promising to meet him later, she arranges for a group of men to capture him. But, by this time, Elinor has fallen in love with The O'Neill and she frees him. At the coast the pair are married and they take a boat to France.<sup>29</sup> Another film, *Brennan of the Moor* (1913), was advertised with the slogan, 'He Stole from the Rich to Give to the

<sup>26</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 10 January 1914, p. 220. <sup>27</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 2 December 1911, p. 748. <sup>28</sup> Yankee, another American company, made a rebel-against-the-English story, *For the Wearing of the Green* (1911) (*Moving Picture World*, 23 September 1911, p. 914.) Interestingly, this film was released on 25 September 1911, three weeks after *Rory O'More's* release on 4 September, which indicates that the story was probably copied from Kalem's film. <sup>29</sup> *Kalem Kalender*, 22 December 1912, p. 9.

Poor'. In this film, a nobleman-bandit, Brennan O'Malley, is freed by Lady Lorrequer, whom he had earlier rescued and with whom he has fallen in love. They, too, escape by ship. *Brennon o' the Moor* (1916) is a somewhat similar story in which the final destination is America.<sup>30</sup>

In its sweep of Irish history from the late eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century, *Ireland a Nation* included sections on 1798 and 1803, but the historical errors in the film led one contemporary Irish reviewer to complain that

*Ireland a Nation* was marred by anachronisms and inaccuracies. Some of these, in fact, were too patently ridiculous for serious criticism. The film opened with the passing of the Act of Union, in which an excellent reconstruction of the scene of the old Anglo-Irish House of Commons was spoiled by the delineations of Grattan and Castlereagh – the former depicted as heavy and opulent, and the latter – probably to please the gallery – as the very acme of masculine ugliness. A messenger from Dublin was shown bringing the news of the passing of the Act of Union in 1800 to Father Murphy (who was killed in 1798) as he was addressing his parishioners after Mass, and straight away the priest (then two years dead) converted his congregation into an insurrectionary band and placed himself at their head. At the same time a deputation of Anti-Unionist M.P.s burst in on the studies of Robert Emmet, told him the Union was passed, and asked him to go to Napoleon for armed aid which, according to the film, Emmet immediately did. Fr Murphy with Emmet in Marshalea Lane Depot, Emmet taking the oath, giving evidence, and defending himself – in typical Yankee fashion – at his own trial, and Michael Dwyer apparently marrying Anne Devlin, and certainly taking off with her to Australia, were amongst other outstanding anachronisms and inaccuracies.<sup>31</sup>

In the film's defence, it should be noted that at least it tried, no matter how skewed, to represent 'real' historical events. This was because the main force behind the film was Waterford-born Walter MacNamara, and the film was partly shot in Ireland. There was much less chance that non-Irish film-makers producing versions of Irish history in America, where Tyrolese costume was sometimes worn by 'Irish' peasants, would concern themselves with the niceties of Irish historical accuracy.

As noted, a number of films straddle the 1798-1803 period. One of these was the 1912 British film *Michael Dwyer, The Irish Outlaw*, which is set during the five year period when Dwyer and his men were on the run in Wicklow following the 1798 rising. This film and the 1914 American-made *For the Wearing of the Green* (in which the rebel is called Paddy Dwyer), as well as *Ireland a Nation*, highlight the incident when Dwyer and his men evade capture through the selfless action of the

30 *Moving Picture World*, 26 August 1916, p. 1440. 31 *Irish Limelight*, February 1917, p. 5.

wounded Sam McAllister, who stayed behind at their hideout to hold off attacking English soldiers.<sup>32</sup>

Depictions of the 1803 rebellion allowed for the emergence of a clearly identifiable screen persona in Robert Emmet. The first such portrayal which I have identified is the film *Robert Emmet* made in the USA by the company Thanouser in 1911.<sup>33</sup> This film has the familiar love affair between Emmet and Sarah Curran at its centre; there is no Anne Devlin here.<sup>34</sup> Emmet's attempt to see Sarah after the rebellion results in his capture, though for dramatic effect the film places the arrest at her home rather than at Harold's Cross where it actually happened. While in prison, as the company's synopsis has it, 'he shielded Sarah from the prying authorities, and offered to plead guilty if she was not subject to official annoyance'. Olcott also made an Emmet story, *Bold Emmet, Ireland's Martyr* (1915), that has Emmet in a disguise that makes him look like an old woman. The film's main focus, though, is not on Emmet but on the relationship between a United Irishman, Con, and his sweetheart, Norah. When Con is captured and is about to be hanged, a United Irishman, under Emmet's orders, fires a shot which breaks the rope. Another rope is procured, but a messenger arrives with a pardon, which Norah's mother has secured. Norah and Con are reunited and the innkeeper later offers a toast to Emmet. In Emmet's real life, no such last minute rescue was possible, which might explain why the film shifted the focus from the real-life doomed hero to the fictional romance and happy ending of Norah and Con.<sup>35</sup>

### *Reception of Irish historical films*

Evidence as to how these films were received in Ireland is unfortunately very slight. It was well into the 1910s before there was regular commentary on films in

**32** *Bioscope*, 2 January 1913, p. xxxiii; *Moving Picture World*, 7 March 1914, p. 1302. Domino Film Co., which produced *For the Wearing of the Green*, was reported by *Bioscope* (2 July 1914, p. 30) as specialising in Irish subjects, and, indeed, during 1913-14 it made at least nine Irish-theme films: *Eileen Of Erin*, *The Heart of Kathleen*, *The Informer*, and *True Irish Hearts*, all discussed above; *The Harp of Tara* (1914), which is a land eviction story of an undetermined period; two films featuring sailors or fishermen, *A Romance of Erin*, and *Widow Maloney's Faith*, both 1913; and *The Filly* (1913), a horse-racing story. **33** *Moving Picture World*, 18 March 1911, p. 608; *Bioscope*, 30 January 1911, p. iii. **34** It was not until Pat Murphy's 1984 film *Anne Devlin* that this hidden history was brought to the screen, though, as noted, she features briefly as a character in *Ireland a Nation*. **35** It can be noted that the death of Michael Collins provided similar difficulties for American film-makers. In the case of a barely-disguised film about Collins, the 1936 film *Beloved Enemy*, the producers made two versions of the film. In one, Collins dies in the conventional way; in the other, he appears to live on to continue his relationship with Lady Helen, a character based on Lady Lavery. The producers were sensible enough to confine the distribution of the second version of the film to the USA.

Irish newspapers, and it was not until 1917 that the first publication devoted to the cinema, the film trade monthly *Irish Limelight*, was launched. With the publication of *Moving Picture World* (*MPW*) in 1908, the American film trade had come of age almost a decade earlier.

When *The Irish Blacksmith* was released, *MPW* commented that the 'outdoor scenery' was 'well photographed' (even though it was made in America), and added that it showed that America 'can well compete with the European productions'.<sup>36</sup> This perceived inferiority vis-à-vis European, especially the dominant French, cinema during this period was soon discarded with the huge expansion in American productions and their successful export to Europe by 1910. When *Robert Emmet* was released for St Patrick's Day 1911, *MPW* found it 'an interesting sketch of the famous Irish patriot', but was keen to signal that the film was essentially a love story and would appeal beyond the Irish community in the USA.

Robert Emmet and his misfortunes appeal to every patriot and whether a man be an Irishman or not this picture will arouse the best impulses of his nature. That he was captured because he went to see his sweetheart adds another romantic element which will make the picture even more attractive. The film gives a fair resume of the principle events of his dramatic life.<sup>37</sup>

*Moving Picture World*, as the main voice of the film trade at this time, was keen to ensure that all films had wide social, ethnic, and gender appeal. It also sought to reinforce the message that cinema was primarily an entertainment, not a political, medium, even when films dealt with 'real' historical events. Thus, while *Irish Hearts* (1911) was 'a strongly dramatic recital of some stirring events in Ireland between British soldiers and their greed on one side, and loyal Irish hearts on the other', Ireland was also

the land of romance, of pretty colleens, of loving and of fighting, of merry-making and of sorrow. Where in spite of persecution, there is always a wealth of sunshine and gladness, for the son of old Erin is always hoping for better things to come and is not easily discouraged.<sup>38</sup>

This flowery prose is not unusual in film promotional material but it serves to shift the focus of a film from the historical context towards the melodramatic elements of romance and tragedy. *MPW* also asserted that American producers 'are capable of handling this type of picture wonderfully well'.<sup>39</sup>

*Rory O'More* is one of the few Irish historical films from this period for which

<sup>36</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 1 February 1908, p. 71. <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 April 1911, p. 720. <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 February 1911, p. 318; *ibid.*, 21 January 1911, p. 153. <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 January 1911, p. 153.

there is contemporaneous Irish commentary. Following the film's Irish release, the *Irish Times* noted supportively that 'it is splendidly acted', and recorded that 'the enthusiasm of the "gallery" over the phases of the story is irrepressible', a comment that can be interpreted as reflecting the nationalist response of the working class patrons to Rory's escape and his outfoxing of the English.<sup>40</sup> It was also an observation that would have made the unionist paper's readers uneasy. *MPW* reported on the emphasis Kalem had placed on its 'claim to realism', by noting that the film had been shot at the 'authentic locations' described in the book. Nevertheless, it was the 'unique scene' of Rory being jailed, one that achieved 'a weird photographic effect', that drew the writer's praise.<sup>41</sup> When re-released in 1914, *MPW* stated that 'Kalem's famous story of the Irish patriot . . . created a sensation' on its initial release, indicating that it had proved influential in encouraging the making of other Irish historical films.<sup>42</sup> Yet, earlier in the year, *MPW*, no doubt reflecting exhibitors' views, was tiring of the formulaic Irish historical narrative. *The Informer* was 'another tale of the Irish rebellion, with several of the familiar devices for catching interest'.<sup>43</sup> 'Many of the plot ingredients are familiar', the reviewer of *The Ulster Lass* commented in the following year, but for 'old themes to be successful [they] must have [a greater] directness and force than [are] found in this' film.<sup>44</sup> *Cry of Erin* (1916) was 'a typical Irish story' in which the hero, played by Francis Ford, brother of director John, escaped the gallows assisted by his sweetheart and the priest. Though 'familiar in plot', it was 'strong in action and atmosphere'.<sup>45</sup>

Despite reviewers calling for longer and more sophisticated narratives, in the main, their response to Irish-theme films was favourable. In the case of *Brennan of the Moor*, one commentator, reporting on how the eponymous 'witty Irish outlaw' was driven to this kind of life as a result of 'persecutions of the English', suggested that Brennan was sure to command the 'warm sympathy' of audiences.<sup>46</sup> While this understanding of the Irish colonial conflict was not uncommon, the identification in both films and reviews of the particular Irish landscape in which a film was shot frequently shifted the emphasis from issues of historical authenticity to the film's status as scenery. There are frequent references in the Kalem films to the locations where the films were shot: the Lakes of Killarney, the Gap of Dunloe, South Kerry's rocky shores, Blackrock Castle, Cork, and in *The Colleen Bawn*, the Colleen Bawn Rock. These punctuations through inter-titles in such films as *Rory O'More*, 'only succeed,' as Luke Gibbons comments, 'in throwing the action off course to the point of ruling out any possibility of developing a coherent, realist narrative'.<sup>47</sup> By 1916, though, such interruptions in fiction films had largely disappeared as the seamless narratives of classical cinema began to assert their primacy. Also, of course,

40 *Irish Times*, 31 October 1911, p. 7. 41 *Moving Picture World*, 19 August 1911, pp. 445-46.

42 *Ibid.*, 10 November 1914, p. 188. 43 *Ibid.*, 24 January 1914, p. 414. 44 *Ibid.*, 10 July

1915, p. 310. 45 *Ibid.*, 18 March 1916, p. 1854. 46 *Ibid.*, 6 September 1913, p. 1070.

47 Luke Gibbons, 'Romanticism, Realism and Irish Cinema,' in Rockett et al., *Cinema and Ireland*, p. 223.

Irish subject films were not unique in receiving the 'tourist' treatment in fiction films. Yet, the message at the popular level that was conveyed by films dealing with Irish history was one where the rebel-on-the-run was fighting a just cause against oppression, even if there was a romantic resolution to the film and the status quo remained intact in Ireland.

### Conclusion

With the storm clouds of war gathering in 1914, the British film industry was never again to take a benign attitude to Irish rebellion. Indeed, the one contemporary fiction film made by British film-makers was the World War One story, *It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary* (1914), in which an Irish nationalist gives his life to save a rival, an Ulster Volunteer.<sup>48</sup> The film's ideological thrust – the unproblematic comradeship of Orange and Green – was blatant two years before the rising, the event that marked all subsequent representations of Irish history. After 1916, American companies tended to shy away from Irish rebel stories and it was not until the 1930s, when the War of Independence, especially the Black and Tan war, became a popular subject for Irish, British and American film-makers, that there was a return to Irish history by the film industry.<sup>49</sup> However, Kalem, the company most associated with such stories, released *The Irish Rebel* on 12 May 1916, four days after the last of the 1916 leaders was executed. This was probably a retitled version of the 1912 film, *The O'Neill*, and was no doubt re-released to capitalise on the topicality of the rising. Alert to the momentous events that had just occurred, *MPW* commented that it was 'of the time when Ireland first started to rebel against her English rulers'.<sup>50</sup>

By the end of 1916, military censors were closely scrutinising any cinematic representations of Ireland's past, knowing only too well that after the rising the past was very much alive in the present. The American company Vitagraph released a film with the title *Whom the Gods Destroy* in December 1916. It was a story of two men's rivalry for a girl set against the background of World War One and the rising. As *Variety* put it, one of the men was 'an Irish patriot, the other an English naval officer, bosom friends, each true to his particular country, both in love with the same girl'.<sup>51</sup> Though denied by the producers, it was a barely disguised film about Roger Casement, who had been executed in August, a view shared by *Variety*. The film was banned in Britain and Ireland, a fate that was to befall *Ireland a Nation* a few weeks later when Dublin audiences sang rebel songs during its screening at the Rotunda and cheered the killing of English soldiers. The military censor banned

48 *Bioscope*, 19 November 1911, p. 801. 49 The one major exception is the 1926 Irish film, *Irish Destiny*, which was set during the War of Independence. 50 *Moving Picture World*, 3 June 1916, p. 1712. 51 *Variety*, 8 December 1916, p. 29.

the film forthwith, even though it had been issued with a certificate for such screenings.<sup>52</sup> The popular response to even this crude version of Irish history was deemed too pointed for the British authorities as it began to realise that its days in military occupation of at least part of Ireland were numbered.

<sup>52</sup> For an extended account of the controversy see Rockett et al, *Cinema and Ireland*, pp. 12–16.