



Nationalisms: Visions and Revisions

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A conference held at the Irish Film Centre, 13, 14, 15 Nov 1998.

Whenever practicable, politicians should be invited to conferences. While the promise of an appearance from notable intellectuals will always provide its own attraction, the chance to hear and quiz politicians at a particular gathering adds something of a *frisson* and gives a very grounded feel to proceedings that are sometimes suspected of being 'merely academic'. Much was made throughout the weekend of this conference of the specifically political aptness of the occasion: it was the week of a new official Irish attitude to World War I; we are at the end of perhaps the most important century in Irish history; this year is the bicentenary of 1798; this is the year of the Good Friday Agreement. Not only did two of the North's politicians, Gerry Kelly of Sinn Féin and David Ervine of the PUP, deliver papers, but an Taoiseach himself launched the event on the evening of the thirteenth, giving the whole thing the imprimatur. Bertie was in upbeat mood and gave a somewhat peremptory speech which largely formulated a series of resounding questions he hoped would be answered over the following two days: Do we give enough credit now to those who founded the state? Was Lemass over-enthusiastic in dismantling protectionism? Did Labour have to wait? Did the Troubles have to last so long? Is there such a thing as Nationalism and do we have it now? After brightly refusing to suggest any answers himself, he was away, and we were away into Seán Ó Riada's Wagnerian crescendos in 'Mise Éire' (1959), a film which most had seen before but which, as the most famous of Irish nationalistic documentaries, was the most suitable opening.

While everybody was exceedingly polite to each other throughout this conference, and no real clash of ideologies developed, this is not necessarily such a bad thing. We all like a sparky personality clash now and then, but conferences can often become too much a matter of competing egos at the expense of audience participation. Things moved along expeditiously here however. Other than in the final panel discussion, there was only one speaker per session and things progressed through an ideal format: once the chairperson had suitably introduced the particular speaker, chosen footage excerpts, usually lasting about fifteen minutes, were shown after which the talk was given. The papers were generally kept short and, since discussion related specifically to the images shown, and everybody got the opportunity to make points or ask questions, there was never a hint of restlessness in the audiences.

The film pieces, which covered Irish history more or less chronologically, came from a variety of sources: the Irish Film Archive itself, RTÉ, Gael Linn, and private collections. Some of the material was familiar but it was a decided thrill for the viewers to see many newsreel and documentary pictures that they had never even heard of previously. The conference proper began on the Saturday morning with Gerry Kelly's talk (he replaced, at short notice, Seamus Deane) which related to film recorded between 1914 and 1922, mainly by the 'Topical Budget' newsagency. Some of the images here, such as those of the 1916 Rising, the Civil War and Michael Collins' funeral were immediately recognisable, but other pieces covering Sir Edward Carson's Orange Day speech in 1914 and the British Evacuation of 1922 were unfamiliar. Kelly gave a very personalised talk on the significance of the events of this time for the ideology of the Republican movement as he experienced it as a young man. In some ways, his discussion was one of the more practical in that he spoke of how Sinn Féin had to learn to use and understand the media after the lifting of Section 31. He also made the resonant point that, in the wake of revisionism, many people are 'afraid of their history'. We were into the talkies with Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh who gave the second paper relating to the thirties and the forties and which offered a commentary on de Valera that refused the dismissiveness of the standard view of him as a retrogressive leader. Here, we saw again the pictures of the 1932 Eucharistic Congress and the New York Football Final of 1947, as well as 'Movietone News' reports (these tended to demonise de Valera) on the inauguration of the

1937 Constitution and the 1949 declaration of the Republic. The two afternoon papers were given by Paul Bew, Professor of Politics at Queens in Belfast, who talked about 'the Golden Age of Unionism' and used such footage as an American interview with Seán MacBride (1949) and a documentary made on housing discrimination in Tyrone (1953), and by Margaret McCurtain who shared with listeners many personal recollections of social developments in the sixties. Using some RTÉ pictures of student unrest in UCD in 1969 (it was interesting, here, to see Kevin Myers fomenting rebellion from a student platform) and an RTÉ interview with the intelligently cheeky Bernadette Devlin (1969), McCurtain's talk was somewhat self-congratulatory regarding the sixties generation, until Hugh Linehan of 'The Irish Times' suggested, in the light of the post-sixties fallout, that more self-examination might be in order.

In terms of specific information regarding an individual film, the most revealing talk was given on the Saturday evening by Rob Savage, Associate Director of Irish Studies at Boston College, who was the only speaker to give his talk *before* his piece, in this case 'The Tear and the Smile', an hour-long, two-episode documentary on 'the new Ireland' made for an American viewership in the same year that 'Mise Éire' was depicting Ireland's past for its audiences. This film, the viewing highlight of the weekend, was part of a series on 'The Twentieth Century' sponsored by an American insurance company and narrated by Walter Cronkyte. Advertised as being about 'everyday Ireland', it was made at a time when Lemass was striving to project an image of Ireland as no longer the place of drinkers, talkers and people living in nice thatched cottages, but a vibrant nation open to modernisation. Savage outlined the wrangling that went on between Lemass' office and the producers, who still inclined, it seems, to the cosy image of the country portrayed in 'The Quiet Man' seven years previously. There was, it seems, much debate over what constituted negative and positive images of the country. The end result was more or less a propaganda film and the focus was almost exclusively on a modern Dublin and an industrialised Shannon, with little attention, other than through an interview with James Connolly's daughter, given to social issues or to lifestyles in other parts of the country. There were some frames included of a young west-of-Ireland island-boy fishing from a curragh with his father: 'He doesn't have a word of English', reported Walter and that was the end of the fisherboy. It was, for some reason, deemed necessary at the time to include an interview with the Women's correspondent for 'The Irish Times', and whether or not hers was a representative voice might be decided by her declaration that she wished every Irish woman could spend all their days in ball gowns. The film's many other misnomers and gross misrepresentations provoked great hilarity in the audience, though the shots of the families saying goodbye to emigrants at the end of episode one brought down a silence that was slow to dispel.

The final day began with an astute paper from the media-conscious Mary Holland. Following on some pictures of the Troubles from the seventies and eighties, she gave an account of her various experiences as a journalist in Ireland and England and discussed the effects of official and unofficial censorship. While an effort to give him a standing ovation quickly petered out, it seemed that for many the highlight of the weekend was David Ervine's talk, theoretically the final one of the conference. As unapologetic of his paramilitary past as Gerry Kelly, Ervine proved once again that he is, without any prompt notes, an impressive orator. Using images of Bloody Friday (1972), the Dublin Bombings of 1974, and some news coverage from the nineties, he, like Kelly, gave some personal reminiscences of how he became involved in violence and politics. He was eager to emphasise his base in socialist politics and was very critical of the way in which working-class protestants have continually been duped by the elitism of the Unionist Party and Paisley's paranoiac rhetoric. He received by far the loudest applause of the weekend. The entertaining closing address was given before lunch by Luke Gibbons who examined the ways in which actuality/documentary footage has been used in fictional settings such as Jordan's 'Michael

Collins'. Thus was the history of film and nationalism in Ireland brought up to date.

A final afternoon panel discussion, consisting of J. J. Lee, Anne Crilly, film researcher at the Nerve Centre in Derry, Kevin Whelan, and Mary Cullen from the TCD Centre for Women's Studies, was an excellent way of rounding off the proceedings as it summarised the subjects already covered and offered the opportunity for further questioning and the raising of sundry issues. While one of J. J. Lee's many pragmatic points was that the conference generally provided little in the way of international comparisons regarding film and nationalism, I think that the papers and all the thoughts offered from the floor over the course of the weekend did well enough to provoke some local concerns.

It is a commonplace to say that television is the overwhelmingly dominant mass media of our time, and at once the most useful and the most damaging, yet it is the one we are singularly most complacent towards. Neither adults nor children are sufficiently visually literate in Ireland, particularly in comparison with England, where Communications, Media and Film courses have been on school curricula for years. While, due to our famed primary obsession with the written word here, journalism is to some degree received critically, we are generally not well-equipped to critique certain kinds of moving pictures. The predominant focus in the burgeoning academic film criticism area tends to be on the cinema, on what is conventionally accepted as 'creative' work, while it is implicitly assumed that the camera in operation in news coverage and in documentaries is automatically more factual, more disinterested. Though, to a large degree, seeing a film, at least a new one, is still experienced as an event, the living-room TV and its continuous recording and broadcasting of 'non-fictional' work is all too easily encountered as part of unexamined everyday life. In short, there is not enough attention paid here to the who, why, when and where of cameras and scripts.

There is something grippingly elegiac about the kind of documentary footage shown at this conference, particularly the older material. Along with the delight of seeing the notable dead walking around in their contemporaneous world, one can find oneself focusing on particular anonymous individuals at political rallies, at funerals, or just walking along a street, and, realising that those that were young on screen then are now dead, wondering what their lives were like. There is a particular history of our century contained in the way subjects have changed the way they behave in front of the cameras. While, as the years have progressed, we have learned how to appear natural in front of the lens, it is intriguing to see earlier people so selfconscious and curious as they stare towards the man behind the strange whirring machine. There is something supplicatory in the full frontal way those people's eyes stare out at us, and we can only oblige them by using their record to learn about their time.

At a time, now, when intellectuals regularly complain that interest in our history is waning in Irish schools, it is curious that a more concerted effort is not being made to provide funding for circulation of this kind of material. The Film Centre has an education officer, and in the final discussion he made the point that history is still taught as a textually based discipline and suggested it is high time that film be incorporated as primary source material. While the conference was a great advertisement for the resources at the Film Centre, it should be remembered that only a handful of people get to such a gathering and also that not everybody can get to Dublin to investigate the occasional screenings of the material. A series of videos of selected archival pieces, issued both to schools and to shops in a format where footage and films are introduced by such experts in the field as were at the conference, would promote critical interest in history through a medium many find more impactful than books while simultaneously raising awareness of the fidelities and foibles of the medium itself. Some revenue might also be generated in the process.

The importance of such an initiative was clearly demonstrated by Rob Savage's talk which not only introduced us to an important filmic document regarding Irish-American interaction in the fifties that most had not seen before, but also taught us, beforehand, how to receive it.

While this was the third such conference organised by the Film Institute of Ireland (in 1993 there was one on 'Ireland and Imagination', and in 1996 there was one titled 'Projecting the Nation: Ireland in an International Context'), film studies are at such an infant stage here that any such conference will involve a sense of novelty and occasion. All the speakers who are professional film students seemed concerned to convey that their chosen area of expertise needs kind attention and careful nurturing. Importantly for such events, the conference as a whole was well nurtured by the convivial atmosphere of the Film Centre, particularly by the reasonably priced and reasonably voluminous plates served up by the restaurant. Even for those uninitiated in the history of film, it was all well worth the £25 registration fee, since things were kept largely jargon-free and accessible. A line from Einstein that Kevin Whelan used towards the close summed it all up for me: 'as simple as possible, but no simpler'.

John Kenny.