

Limelight on the Colleen Bawn: Resisting Autoexoticism in Provincial Irish Picture Houses in the Early 1910s

»The Sid Olcott International Feature Film Players have their studio this season on the main road from Killarney to the famous Gap of Dunloe and the Lakes of Killarney,« revealed Fred Gunning in the *Moving Picture World* at the beginning of August 1914.

In front of the studio hangs a big American flag, and since about every party of tourists who pass has at least one American, that cry [»Hurrah for Old Glory!«] rings out many times a day. Almost every party of the hundreds who come their way each day stop and spend hours with the company, watching Mr. Olcott direct his players. They go away fast friends of all and enthusiastic boosters for the gentlemanly director.¹

It is appropriate that Sidney Olcott and his production unit should have become a tourist attraction in the most famously picturesque part of Co. Kerry, Ireland, in the mid-1910s. Olcott and his collaborators had been returning to this part of Ireland every summer since their initial sojourn there in 1910 and had become – or so it seems – almost a part of the landscape. Rumours circulated that Olcott was planning to set up a permanent base in the village of Beaufort, but Europe's inexorable mobilization for total war at the time of Gunning's report would have halted any such plans. Gunning's focus on US visitors to Olcott's studio is also fitting not only because the films he made there were intended primarily for American rather than local audiences but also because the real Kerry »peasants« so often depicted by Olcott were not always enthusiastic about his representation of them on screen and had their own view on the cinema in general and its

¹ F. C. Gunning, "American Players Celebrate, Hold a Regular Jollification on July 4 Near the Lakes of Killarney," *Moving Picture World*, 1 August 1914, p. 688.

place in their lives. In December 1913, local newspaper columnist Joseph Reidy described seeing »the limelight on the Colleen Bawn and the other plays acted and photographed at Beaufort,« specifically referencing *The Colleen Bawn* (Kalem, 1911), which – along with Olcott other films offering iconic images of the successful emigrant returning, peasants toiling in the fields, and the rebel on the run in a picturesque landscape – provided »a misrepresentation of the ancient and modern life and customs of the Irish people.«²

By basing themselves near the famed sights of Co. Kerry’s Killarney resort, Olcott and his collaborators – most notably, scenarist and lead actress Gene Gauntier – had chosen a place where the misrepresentation of Ireland and the Irish had been pursued as a commercial strategy for more than a century. Lying on Ireland’s southwestern Atlantic seaboard, Kerry is located on the extreme western edge of Europe, making it geographically remote both from the east-coast cities of Dublin and Belfast – which were in the early twentieth century, respectively, the country’s administrative and industrial centres – and from London, the seat of the imperial parliament and fashionable culture. Killarney’s peripherality paradoxically helped make it a centre of aesthetic experience from the late eighteenth century. In contrast to the tamed pastoralism of much of southern England, Killarney’s wild landscape of island-strewn lakes, craggy peaks and ruined abbeys offered sublime vistas capable of producing an overwhelming emotional experience in the sufficiently sensitive Romantic soul. Killarney’s relative inaccessibility on the Celtic fringes of the British Isles added to the exoticism that attracted elite tourists in the early nineteenth century. Landscape painters and printmakers, travel writers and poets provided visual and literary images of Killarney that travelled around the world,

² Joseph Reidy, “Eye-Openers: The Cinematograph,” *Killarney Echo*, 6 December 1913, p. 1.

including the set of engravings and copy of Gerald Griffin's 1829 novel *The Collegians* that Dublin-born playwright Dion Boucicault found in New York and used as the inspiration for his 1860 Broadway and West End hit *The Colleen Bawn*.³ In the sensation scene of this melodrama, Eily O'Connor, the eponymous Colleen Bawn or fair-haired girl, was thrown into a Killarney lake spectacularly recreated on stage. After its London opening in September 1860, Queen Victoria not only saw the play three times but also visited Killarney in August 1861 to see the authentic sights for herself. The visit made it desirable for respectable Victorian tourists to travel to Killarney, a journey by this time facilitated by travel companies providing boat-train tickets through Dublin or the Irish port of Queenstown – renamed in honour of Victoria's 1849 visit – from where they could travel on the Royal Route to Killarney. Once there, they could see not only Victoria Rock but also the Colleen Bawn Rock, an outcrop on the lakes designated as the actual spot where the unfortunate woman had been drowned. In fact, although Griffin based his novel on a real crime, he transposed the events from the more northerly Co. Limerick to Killarney, and Boucicault employed further poetic licence in associating particularly scenes with Killarney's scenic spots. So, when an intertitle introducing the sensation scene in the Olcott's version of *The Colleen Bawn* reads »Eily keeps her tryst, little thinking of the harm about to befall her. Showing the exact location, including the real Colleen Bawn Rock and Cave,« Reidy was right to comment that it misrepresented Irish life, but it did so merely as the latest manifestation of a venerable tradition of misrepresentations. Furthermore, the Kalem Company could boast about the superiority of its adaptation to both the stage production and the two other film versions made in

³ "Dion Boucicault: Obituary," *The World*, 19 September 1890.

1911 on the basis of the authenticity of the Killarney landscape portrayed.⁴ It did so not only in publicity material but also, as this example shows, in the film's intertitles.

In thinking about the production and reception of such images, the term "autoexoticism" may be preferable to "misrepresentation," which perhaps concedes too much to Reidy's implication that more truthful representations of the Irish existed elsewhere. Although Killarney was privileged as a site of representation – both in the sense that literary and visual image makers travelled there to see it and in the sense that it was consequently more frequently represented than other Irish places – the implied reader or viewer of these images was still elsewhere. Nineteenth-century Irish novelists wrote with a readership associated with literary London in mind, and the primary audiences for the work of internationally renowned dramatist Boucicault were in New York and London. Irish authors, therefore, created a recognizable Irish *mise en scène* that characterized the people of Ireland as essentially different from the English in being rural, Catholic – with the widespread influence of folk belief – and prone to flights of fancy expressed in a characteristic brogue and moments of alcohol-fuelled revelry. This cultural work was autoexoticist not only by reproducing the stereotypical »stage Irishman« that make the exotic pleurably assimilable but also in the often explicit presence of a non-Irish character as a focalizer to whom local ways must be explained, thereby providing the audience with necessary contextual information.⁵ Even when this focalizer was absent, the narration showed that Ireland was a very different place, England's Other, and that England and its ways were the normal state of affairs.

⁴ The other 1911 versions of *The Colleen Bawn* were by the Australian Life Biograph Company and by Yankee, a US-based production company.

⁵ Joep Leerssen, , *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork UP/Field Day, 1996), pp. 35–8.

This focus on Irish exceptionalism by Irish authors was not reproduced in films shot in Ireland, however, because Irish producers did not make a significant number of fiction films until 1916. In relation to film production in Ireland, cinema was certainly international before it was national, and autoexoticism was initially experienced somewhat differently in the new medium.⁶ Olcott and Gauntier's audiences were first and foremost in US nickelodeons. Marketed as exotic to their primary audiences, these representations of Ireland became autoexoticism when Irish audiences viewed their image on screen as others saw them. Indeed, the authentic landscapes for which US filmmakers travelled to Ireland could exacerbate the experience of autoexoticism for Irish audiences. When Theobald Walsh visited Ireland in 1912 to film the *Life of Patrick: From the Cradle to the Grave* for the New York-based Photo-Historic Film Company, he provided his audience with a virtual tour of Ireland's best-known sights, narratively justified on the unlikely premise that the fifth-century saint finished his ministry by taking in the country's scenery. A review of the film in the *Killarney Echo* in November 1913 praised the exhibition of the film at the Town Hall, Killarney, but ironically exposed its inaccuracies:

St. Patrick did most assuredly visit Killarney, and in accordance with the custom of the place, he had his photograph taken as he gazed enraptured out over the placid waters of Loch Lein from Reen Point. And one felt the centuries melt away into nothingness, and the dim past telescoped, as it were, into the present, when one saw

⁶ Tom Gunning, "Early Cinema as Global Cinema: The Encyclopedic Ambition," in Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini and Rob King (eds.), *Early Cinema and the "National"* (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2008), p. 11.

the old white-haired saintly Patrick gazing with wistful interest at the ruins of Ross Castle with the Union Jack fluttering from the white Flag-staff of its ivied summit.⁷

For Walsh, the inclusion of a virtual tour of well known tourist sights may have seemed an obvious way of emphasizing the authenticity of the landscape that the filmmakers travelled to Ireland to capture. For a spectator with local knowledge, however, the film's anachronisms undermined cinema's claims to be an educative medium. Indeed, this reviewer argued that the film's obvious untruths exposed the limitations of a scientific knowledge based on such axioms as the camera does not lie and demonstrated the epistemological superiority of history, tradition and patriotism. Autoexoticist films had been made in Ireland from at least the turn of the century, but the full effect of cinematic autoexoticism would await the advent of dedicated film venues in Ireland.

For its first daily picture show, Kerry would wait until 1913 and the efforts of Dublin-based exhibitor James T. Jameson, Ireland's leading moving-picture entrepreneur. Although Jameson had interests in all sectors of the film trade, he was primarily a distributor and exhibitor of films produced by foreign production companies. With the coming in 1908 of rival exhibitors, Jameson initially adhered to his business strategy of playing seasons at Dublin's prestigious Rotunda – a venue for itinerant entertainments that helped to fund the city's maternity hospital – and touring his film-and-variety Irish Animated Picture Company (IAPC) to provincial towns between these engagements. Jameson's long-term success had been ensured by his association with such venues as the Rotunda, by courting the elite and middle class of all political persuasions in Irish society, and by his choice of film and variety acts that not only did not offend against

⁷ "Facts, Fakes and Films," *Killarney Echo*, 15 November 1913, p. 1.

respectability but could also be promoted as educational. Once or twice a year, the IAPC visited Kerry's large towns of Killarney (with population in 1911 of 5,7960) and Tralee (population 10,300), the seat of the county council and base of the regional press. With the arrival of the major British firm Provincial Cinematograph Theatres in 1910, however, Jameson sought long-term leases on some established halls, basing a manager and support staff in the towns and touring the films and variety acts on the circuit thus created. He chose Tralee as his dedicated venue in Kerry, successfully persuading the urban district council to lease him the publicly owned, 800-seat Theatre Royal on a quarterly basis. Although his preference for existing halls over purpose-built or -adapted premises created as many problems as it solved, the guaranteed £600 a year that the council received as rent proved decisive in Jameson retaining control of the theatre over the following years. »The pictures at the Theatre Royal, the only place of genuine entertainment we have in this town, are [...] well deserving of the favour and appreciation granted to them by the people of Tralee,« enthused correspondent Timothy B.Cronin as Jameson's lease neared the end of its first quarter. »We sorely need nourishment for the intellect in our remote country town. In the pictures at the Theatre Royal, inspired as they are by the soft strains of Miss Queenie D'Arcy's Orchestra, we have at present such nourishment. And more of it will do us no harm.«⁸

In some respects, the arrival of the cinema in Tralee resembled its arrival in other places around the world. Like the displacement of leisure from »rum shop to Rialto« in some parts of the United States, for example, the arrival of a regular picture show

⁸ T.B.C, "The Animated Pictures," *Kerry Evening Star*, 13 March 1913, p. 3.

occasioned attempts by Tralee publicans to retain their monopoly on leisure provision.⁹ Just a year after a nightly show had first radically altered the kinds of entertainment available to townspeople, Cronin repudiated publicans' arguments against the cinema. »It would be impossible to estimate in hard cash the great boon conferred on the community by the Pictures,« wrote Cronin – himself the son of a Tralee publican – in January 1914; »and the community, by its cordial appreciation, seems to realise that fact to the full. You may regard pigs and cattle in terms of pounds, shillings and pence, but you cannot set a money-value on education and mental culture.«¹⁰ Cronin neglects neither financial nor cultural issues as he dismisses the arguments made by publicans designed to convince Tralee councillors to rid the Theatre Royal of the IAPC. For him, however, the audience's reaction to a recent exhibition of Cines' *Quo Vadis?* epitomized the cinema's ability to attenuate disparities of wealth and education and to redistribute cultural capital. After an opening night's performance attended by all classes of the town, he reports that »I heard what I never expected to hear in my native town – groups of urchins excitedly discussing classic drama! In my opinion, the Pictures are directly responsible for the remarkable raising of the popular standard.«

Although Cronin seems to have maintained his enthusiasm for what he presents here as the ordinary Tralee resident's »elementary course in the drama,« other observers viewed the first year or so of the Tralee cinema's operation in a more critical light.¹¹ By opting to lease the Theatre Royal, Jameson not only secured a prestige venue and avoided the costs of building a cinema but also occupied Tralee's main entertainment space on

⁹ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), pp. 191–221.

¹⁰ T. B. Cronin, "The Pictures," *Kerry News*, 5 January 1914, p. 6.

¹¹ Joseph Medill Patterson, "The Nickelodeons: The Poor Man's Elementary Course in the Drama," *Saturday Evening Post*, 23 November 1907, pp. 10, 11, 38.

terms that allowed him mount shows every day of the year. He therefore controlled which travelling companies could visit the town and could prevent another impresario from mounting shows of any kind. »Since the Theatre was leased to Messrs. Jameson,« complained “Towney” in a letter to the *Killarney Echo*, »we are forgetting all about operatic, dramatic, and other equally elevating and artistic entertainments that have been so popular with Tralee audiences, because the leasee will not allow any entertainment to be produced, which would be likely to supersede his pictures.«¹² Indeed, some commentators suggested that the few companies that did appear were deliberately sabotaged by only being allowed the theatre when business was particularly slow. When the Elster Grime Opera Company’s visit in October 1913 was poorly attended because it coincided with a retreat at the adjacent Holy Cross church, the writer of the *Kerryman*’s “Kerryisms” column acknowledged that »Mr Jameson is most popular, and deservedly so, in Tralee; but a little catering for the wishes of theatre-goers would do no harm, and a little intelligent discretion in arranging engagements would do less.«¹³ The writer further claimed that »many people in Tralee are complaining that they are, so to speak, being ›picturised‹ ad nauseum« and that »there is a feeling amongst a large section of the community against granting a monopoly of the Hall to any one person.«¹⁴ Developing this argument, “Izod” remarked »that those who regularly frequent the Theatre are getting a bit tired of the usual series of Wild West cowboy adventures, insipid love stories and ridiculously comic escapades, not to mention the films depicting ›current‹ events which happened two weeks previously.«¹⁵ This writer was not for evicting Jameson’s company

¹² “The U.D.C. and the Theatre Royal,” *Killarney Echo*, 17 January 1914, p. 10.

¹³ *Kerryman*, 18 October 1913, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Tralee Picture Company,” *Kerryman*, 15 November 1913, p. 1.

from the theatre but suggested that it show *Quo Vadis?* and »numerous other splendid cinema productions such as “The Colleen Bawn” and “The Life of St Patrick.”« As seen above, when these last two films were exhibited, they were criticized for their autoexoticist portrayals of the Irish. Nevertheless, other correspondents agreed with Izod, comparing the IAPC shows unfavourably with the regular film shows that had recently begun at the Town Hall in Killarney, »a town much smaller than Tralee and not 30 miles distant, [where] such splendid pictures as “The Life of St. Patrick” and “A Tale of Two Cities”« had been shown.¹⁶ These writers also criticized the outmoded variety acts and the replacement of Queenie D’Arcy’s string orchestra with the Connelly trio.

While these complaints might be said to be of an operational nature and, given the longevity of the show, to have been dealt with satisfactorily by Jameson or his manager, national political issues impinged on the reception of certain films and even the acceptability of the cinema as a legitimate cultural form in Ireland. Irish culture was particularly bound up with politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Irish political campaign against British rule stalled in the 1890s, and the task of inventing an Irish nation largely devolved to such important cultural-nationalist organizations as the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) who revived the Irish language and Gaelic games, while writers of the literary revival – most notably the poet and cofounder of the Abbey Theatre W. B. Yeats – immersed themselves in Irish myth and folklore as a way of forging a new literary aesthetic. With so much cultural production absorbed in realizing the prevailing notion of retrieving Gaelic culture as the key to an autonomous future, it is not surprising that that cinema, with its basis in the technological modernity associated with the imperial metropolis, should be belated in

¹⁶ Picture Lover, “The Theatre Royal,” *Kerryman*, 22 November 1913, p. 1.

some respects – particularly in the area of film production – or that it should attract criticism. It is perhaps more surprising that it attracted so little criticism and that the cinema emerged as a cultural institution that many people visited regularly, so much so that a dedicated cinema, the Picturedrome, opened in Tralee at the end of February 1914 to compete with Jameson’s shows, albeit that this competition amounted to providing very similar programmes. By early 1914, then, the people of Tralee had not only daily entertainment throughout the year – something that had never existed before – but also their choice of venues at which to enjoy it.

The vast majority of films shown in Tralee before the war had no Irish content, but those that did attracted both the most positive and negative responses in the press. Jameson had been successfully negotiating the currents of Irish popular opinion for more than ten years in 1914, when he became involved in a potentially damaging controversy over the exhibition of the US film *The Banshee* (Kay-Bee, 1913). Directed in the States by Raymond B. West, this »beautiful typical Irish story« about »the female ghost of Irish and Scotch legends« offered »an exciting plot, full of picturesque scenery, both humour and sentiment depicted. So characteristic of the Irish peasantry.«¹⁷ It was exhibited at the Theatre Royal in early February 1914 and attracted the anger of the local branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), a Catholic nationalist benevolent society. The Tralee AOH took inspiration from sister organizations in the United States who »had hunted the stage Irishman and everything anti-Irish from the Theatres and halls.«¹⁸ The AOH sent an open letter to Jameson, objecting strongly to »the anti-Irish type of film recently shown in the Tralee Theatre, in which the Irish character is caricatured and held

¹⁷ Supplement to the *Bioscope*, 18 September 1913, pp. xlvi–ii.

¹⁸ “The Stage Irishman: Action of Tralee Division A.O.H.,” *Killarney Echo*, 14 February 1914, p. 5.

up to ridicule, and the Irish priesthood depicted as superstitious, vulgar and uncultured, and we trust such objectionable pictures will not be shown in future.«¹⁹

The editorial writer of the *Kerry Post* claimed to have received a number of letters of complaint, and the paper published one from a correspondent using the pseudonym “Eireanac,” or Irish person. This letter argued that although *The Banshee* was »a low and crude attempt at burlesque and caricature of the Irishman,« it could not be merely dismissed on account of »the false impression which such a picture would create in the mind of an outsider, ignorant of the character and customs of our people.«²⁰ The letter writer proceeded to specify that the significant minds in which such a false impression might be implanted were English:

One would think, judging from the picture last night, that we were a race living in the height of squalor and misery, and steeped in the lowest form of superstition and not far removed in civilisation from the condition of the lowest Hottentot. Yet such is the type of picture, flaunted in the eyes of the English public year after year, and from such pictures they get their notions of what the Irishman must be.²¹

This concern that the English not be given a negative impression of Ireland is a good example of autoexoticism. For Eireanac, however, the issue at stake was not that an unfavourable representation of the country might drive away English tourists but that the English control the means of representing the Irish and that they portray the Irish as unfit for nationhood. »How long will we suffer ourselves to be maligned by our enemy across

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “Eireanac”, “Insults to Ireland” (Letter), *Kerry News*, 9 February 1914, p. 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*

the water and continue to be the laughing stock for other nations to point the finger of scorn at?« the writer concludes. Although the film was actually of American origin, the fact that it offered what the writer and others saw as a degrading view of the Irish, bringing them down to the level of the Hottentots – here representing the acme of barbarism – made it automatically »English« in viewpoint.

Given the predominant nationalist sympathies of Jameson’s audiences, the lengthy reply to the AOH that he sent to the newspapers sought to distance his company from the film but also to downplay its offence, to the obvious annoyance of the AOH. The letter – addressed from the company rather than Jameson personally – revealed that »[w]e took the film in the ordinary marketable way through our London representative (who occasionally recommends the selection of these things to us) as an Irish picture only, and no member of our firm had personally an opportunity of seeing it until after the film was delivered to us in the ordinary course of business.«²² The company largely agreed with the AOH that the film misrepresented the Irish and undertook not to show it again, as much for its own policy of avoiding films that portrayed the clergy as for the arguments of the AOH. Indeed, the letter implied that it was only the Tralee division of the AOH who had objected to *The Banshee* and revealed that Jameson himself »did not think that it transgressed in any particular the border line of reasonableness, considering usual liberties taken in foreign staging of such films.«²³ These concessions were not enough for the AOH, which issued a rejoinder insisting that the film had been hissed in Tralee and arguing that »because foreigners caricature, ridicule and misrepresent the Irish character

²² “Stage Irishman: Picture Objected To By Tralee A.O.H. (I.A.A.): Messrs. Jameson’s Explanation,” *Kerry News*, 27 February 1914, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*

that is not a reason why Irishmen should permit this anti-Irish work by showing pictures of this type.«²⁴

Charges of promoting anti-Irishness could be detrimental to Jameson's business, but he had credibility in both mainstream and revolutionary nationalist circles that the AOH did not have sufficient clout to negate. He had won particular praise among nationalists in Kerry in mid-1913 for his sports film *Kerry v. Louth: 1913 Gaelic Football Final*. In fact, this film garnered the highest level of positive newspaper coverage of any film exhibited in Kerry in the pre-war period. »Large audiences attended this week at the Theatre Royal, Tralee, and there was unbounded enthusiasm when the pictures of the Kerry and Louth match was [sic] thrown on the screen,« revealed an article in the *Killarney Echo*, confirming that the film of the victory of Kerry over Louth in the GAA's 1913 football final of the Dr. Croke Memorial Championship attracted crowd houses in Tralee. »For three nights the place was packed with enthusiastic people who showed their appreciation of the enterprise of the management in having this splendid picture shown so soon after the contest.«²⁵ The film had travelled on the IAPC circuit from the Opera House in Cork, where it topped the bill, with a supporting programme of films and variety acts assembled around it. Kerry papers reproduced the preview of the show from the *Cork Examiner*, which emphasized the speed with which the film had been produced and pointed out the advantages of the cinematic image over the written word:

²⁴ "Tralee A.O.H. and Anti-Irish Films," *Kerry Sentinel*, 11 March 1914, p. 3.

²⁵ *Killarney Echo*, 12 July 1913, p. 5.

Gaels were enthused by the mere descriptions of the game, and its presentation through the cinema should attract very large houses to the Opera House for the remainder of the week. It was a great game, and should be well worth seeing. The enterprise of the management of the Opera House in securing the films must be highly commended. Other pictures of interest are “Bird’s Eye View of Paris,” and a splendid Western drama entitled “Arizona Bill,” a film in two parts. The Topical Budget includes many events of interest. “The Four Mexicans” and Mr. J. A. Condon supply very pleasing turns.²⁶

During the run in Tralee, the team members were driven in a cavalcade through the town to watch the film, where they were hailed by »a large and representative gathering, and songs, recitations and toasts were given.«²⁷ Although no Irish production company made a fiction feature before 1915, they did make these sports films that were exhibited in the feature slot.

Rather than to foreign-produced images of a rural Irish peasantry that was inevitably comic, even when it was portrayed by such sympathetic filmmakers as Olcott and Gauntier, the people of Kerry responded most favourably to locally produced films that linked them to the new forms of nationalist culture. Local observers pointed out that the unprecedented success of the football match – attended by 50,000 spectators in Dublin – was significant because it demonstrated »the increasing interest that is being taken in the Irish-Ireland movement.«²⁸ The cultural-nationalist nature of the GAA meant that this represented a political demonstration as well as a sporting occasion. The

²⁶ “Cork Opera House: Kerry v. Louth,” *Killarney Echo*, 5 July 1913, p. 3.

²⁷ “The Team at Theatre Royal, Tralee,” *Kerryman*, 5 July 1913, p. 1.

²⁸ *Killarney Echo*, 12 July 1913, p. 5.

significance of the film – and the Gaelic-games films that followed its success – was initially to provide a particularly pleasurable means by which that demonstration could be reenacted at picture houses around the country by allowing others to see both the match and the attendance at the ground, thereby feeling part of a large national movement. If autoexoticist images of Killarney made at least parts of Kerry recognizable around the world, the victory of Kerry over Louth and its reproduction on film, not only made the county central to the expression of new kinds of Irish culture but also proved that cinema had a crucial role to play in realizing an autonomous Ireland.