‘Pictures in Abeyance’: Irish Cinema and the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising.
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Izidore I. Bradlaw, the managing director of the Princess Cinema in the Dublin township of Rathmines, reported that on 24 April 1916, he was on his way to send a telegram from the General Post Office (GPO) in Sackville (now O’Connell) Street in the city centre when he was stopped by a man he knew, the city’s water bailiff, John MacBride.1 ‘Go back or I will shoot you’, MacBride warned Bradlaw. Bradlaw was taken aback. He had supported MacBride’s efforts to get a civilian job, after MacBride’s years of exile for leading an Irish Brigade in South Africa that fought against the British during the Boer War, for which he was widely known as Major John MacBride. However, seeing that MacBride was not in uniform or visibly brandishing a gun, Bradlaw responded jokingly, ‘Where do you bury your dead?’ MacBride was not joking, however, and more forcefully threatened Bradlaw who was renewing his efforts to enter the GPO: ‘Move another two inches and I’ll blow your brains out’. Bradlaw then realized that the GPO was at the centre of an incident involving the insurgent Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army with whom MacBride was associated. Bradlaw left MacBride, and had further adventures on his way home as he negotiated the city where the Easter Rising was beginning.2
This report on an encounter between a prominent revolutionary and a well-known cinema owner is revealing of aspects of cinema’s relationship to the Easter Rising. For a start, it places cinema – in the person of Bradlaw – in the thick of the action of the rebellion without being directly associated with it. Such a repositioning of cinema is useful because despite the fact that it was an important part of the streetscape and mediascape in which the Rising took place, cinema has been too little considered in relation to 1916. Picture houses – as the dedicated film-exhibition venues were most often called – were coming to be the dominant choice for those seeking popular entertainment and were far more numerous, were accessible to a larger segment of the population because of the relative cheapness of entry, were more geographically widespread and had collectively many more seats than Dublin’s theatres. Given the fact that no dedicated film venue had existed ten years previously, this was a remarkable development, and it followed a boom in picture-house construction in Ireland between 1910 and the beginning of World War I. Film historians often attribute cinema’s success to the emergence of the long fiction ‘feature’ film, but despite the release in 1915 of the three-and-a-half-hour The Birth of a Nation (US: Epoch, 1915) – a film that would not be seen in Ireland until September 1916, and then at the Gaiety Theatre rather than in a picture house – most people’s experience in the picture house was still of a one-and-a-half- to two-hour programme of between four and eight shorter films. Typically this consisted
of a two-to-three-reel (lasting 30-45 minutes) drama, often an adaptation of one kind of literature or another; two or three one-to-two-reel westerns and/or comedies; a non-fiction ‘interest’ film; and a five-minute newsreel of current events. Although the multireel drama was often the featured item on a picture-house programme and in advertising it, any film could be the focus of audience interest, as had the short comedies of Charlie Chaplin. These silent moving pictures – the recorded element of the performance – were accompanied by live music produced by either a single musician or a small orchestra. Cinema was Ireland’s fastest growing medium in 1916, with many people coming to the picture houses for entertainment and, increasingly, to gain a moving visual image of the world known otherwise mainly through written media and still images.

Therefore, Bradlaw’s story is suggestive of the relationship between cinema and the Rising, but it needs to be treated with caution because it may not be strictly accurate. Its most glaring inaccuracy is placing MacBride at the GPO. Although MacBride was a well-known insurgent nationalist, he had not been part of the Irish Republican Brotherhood’s military council that had planned the Rising, and he had not signed the Proclamation of the Republic that had been read by Patrick Pearse outside the GPO that morning. Other accounts tell a story different to Bradlaw’s. MacBride’s own statement at his court martial reveals that the course of his day had also been altered by a chance encounter with an old acquaintance. He had arrived in the city early on Easter Monday morning to have lunch with his brother, who was coming to Dublin to be married. In his witness statement to the Bureau of Military History (BMH), John MacDonagh relates how ‘well dressed in a blue suit, carrying a cane and smoking a cigar’, MacBride met a group of armed Volunteers led by Proclamation signatory Thomas MacDonagh on St. Stephen’s Green and joined them to become second-in-command at the Jacob’s Factory garrison on the other side of the city to the GPO. When the rebels surrendered on 29 April, MacBride was arrested, court-martialled as a leader of the Rising and executed on 5 May.

Bradlaw’s anecdote was published in the column ‘Picture in Ireland, by Paddy’ in the 18 May 1916 issue of the London-based cinema trade journal Bioscope, where its veracity was unlikely to have been challenged then or since. The Bioscope – and especially Paddy’s column – is the single most informative contemporary source on Irish cinema. Widely read within the Irish trade in the 1910s, the journal’s institutional framing suggests some of the reasons that Bradlaw’s story took the form it did. As the official organ of the Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association (CEA) of Great Britain and Ireland, the Bioscope defended the interests of picture-house proprietors, which necessitated presenting cinema as socially responsible and useful as well as entertaining. The Bioscope’s support for the war explains why Bradlaw was careful to stress his distance from what would widely be seen as treasonable acts even as he placed himself and his business at the centre of his Rising narrative. In this context, Bradlaw’s hairsbreadth escape fitted well among synopses of the latest cliff-hanger episode in such film serials as The Exploits of Elaine (US: Wharton, 1915) and among the chummy accounts of wartime professionalism, epitomized later in Paddy’s column by the ‘plucky proprietress’ of the Cinema in Florence Road, Bray, who stayed open right through the Rising despite rumours that ‘Volunteers were expected to march over the Wicklow Hills to the relief of their comrades in Dublin’.
Despite the fortitude displayed in Bray, the danger during the Rising and the destruction of the city centre in its wake made it impossible for business to continue as usual in Dublin. Like Bradlaw’s unsent telegram, Paddy’s communication with the Bioscope’s main London office had been disrupted by the Rising, and his usual weekly column had not appeared since 20 April. Martial law and the increased censorship imposed by the military and government as they attempted to control the meaning of the events of Easter week ensured that delays in communication continued long after the rebels had vacated the GPO, Jacob’s Factory and their other strongholds around the city. The columnist tells of receiving on 6 May an invitation to a Fox film company trade show in Dublin on 2 May, although the invitation had been posted in London on 26 April. ‘Letters coming from England addressed to individuals were all opened and censored’, he notes, adding with apparent insouciance, ‘and will constitute quite a memento of the rising’.7 Paddy began his column by observing that the ‘picture business in Dublin – particularly from the exhibiting side – is in a state of chaos. [...] Pictures are in abeyance’.8 But the pictures were not by any means alone in this. The Rising put all usual form of media, transport and communication in abeyance for Easter week and some time after it.

Destruction of their offices in Henry Street forced the Film Company of Ireland to relocate to Dame Street. Dublin Evening Mail, 12 May 1916, p. 7.

One of the mementos of the Rising – a photograph of the Sackville Picture House at 51 Lower O’Connell Street – perfectly illustrates what ‘pictures in abeyance’ meant. Less spectacular than many of the photographs of the city taken during and after the fighting, the photo of the Sackville depicts a portion of the southwest block of O’Connell Street that was not destroyed by bombardment or fire.9 By contrast, the blocks to the north of it between Abbey Street and the GPO, several blocks of Henry Street and the block opposite it on the east side of Lower O’Connell Street were almost totally destroyed. Some of these buildings were picture houses and other film businesses. The Film Company of Ireland (FCOI) – a firm founded in March 1916 by Irish-American lawyer and diplomat James Mark Sullivan and commission agent Henry Fitzgibbon – would suffer a setback when their offices at 16 Henry Street were completely destroyed, including some early footage they had shot. They quickly recovered, and on 29 June 1916 – two months after the rebels had surrendered – FCOI hosted a press show of its first completed film, O’Neil of the Glen. As well as the production sector
of the cinema industry, the exhibition sector was also directly affected. The Grand Cinema, which faced the Sackville on the east side of Lower O’Connell Street, was less fortunate. It never reopened following its destruction, which left only ‘the inner wall of the operating box and a smashed and badly burnt switchboard, also the twisted parts of what were once Gaumont projectors’.10

The Sackville Picture House, on the southwest side of Lower O’Connell Street survived the Rising relatively unscathed. © RTÉ Stills Library.

The ruined blocks on which these and other businesses stood were heavily photographed – and filmed – as the clearest examples of the destructiveness of the Rising, while the Sackville photograph has been reproduced mainly by those with an interest in early Irish cinema, for whom it is one of the oldest surviving photographs of a Dublin picture house. The block on which the Sackville stood suffered some damage, particularly near the river and at the corner of Abbey Street, but situated in the middle of the block, the Sackville itself was largely unscathed. The photograph shows a facade seemingly unmarked by bullet holes, and without these contextual hints, the photo’s date has generally been erroneously estimated at 1915 to match the year of release of The Christian (Britain: London Film, 1915), the film advertised prominently on the Sackville’s facade. However, The Christian was due to open at the Sackville on Monday, 24 April 1916, at 1pm, just after the insurgents had taken up their positions around the city.11 When the fighting began, theatre and picture houses that had planned bank holiday matinees closed their premises and did not open again until Saturday, 6 May. ‘I noticed two picture houses timidly trying their luck on Saturday’, observed Irish Independent columnist JHC on Monday, 8 May.12 These were Bradlaw’s
Princess in Rathmines and the Bohemian Picture Theatre in Phibsboro, both located in suburbs well outside the main areas of fighting. The existence of picture houses in the suburbs as well as the city centre was an aspect of cinema that differed from theatre and allowed the suburban picture houses in Dublin in 1916 – despite their primary commercial function – to provide not just entertainment but also an alternative meeting place within communities. Despite these signs of entertainments returning, JHC opined that the curfew imposed under martial law would ensure that there would not be any sign of such amusements resuming. Nightlife is killed for a good while to come. The scurry to get indoors by half-past eight – the newly extended limit – gives us a hunted air just at the time when we used to shake off the day’s cares.

Although JHC was correct that the strict curfew precluded late-evening entertainments, Monday, 8 May saw many of the city-centre picture houses reopen, as well as the large Theatre Royal, which offered orchestral music and light refreshments between 10am and 6pm. It is likely that the Sackville photograph was also taken during that week of 8-13 May. Although no advertisements or reviews appeared in the newspapers for the Sackville until 29 May, the Cork Examiner’s Dublin correspondent reported that on 8 May, ‘three shops and a picture palace in the ruined stretch of street from O’Connell Bridge to Nelson Pillar came through the cannonading and fires with little or no damage, and in these premises business was being carried on’. The Sackville was certainly open by 19 May, when manager Richard Bell was interviewed by the Irish Independent for his views of the impact of the newly introduced daylight-saving time on picture-house business; he and other managers foresaw no difficulty. In any case, one of the most striking features of the Sackville photograph is that the photographer clearly framed the shot to include a group of people gathered in front of the picture house, but they are not looking at the camera and they have their backs to the Sackville. Although The Christian had finally opened, for these potential patrons, the pictures remained in abeyance as they turn their attention elsewhere.

If the gazes of the people depicted are not enough to indicate that the rightful object of attention is not the picture house, the comments of many contemporary observers make clear that the ruined city itself more strongly commanded Dubliners’ attention. ‘Sackville Street – or rather the site of – was an appalling sight’, wrote Robert Cecil Le Cren, an insurance official who kept a diary of Easter week events while sequestered in the Kilworth House Hotel on Kildare Street. He finally managed to see other parts of the city on Monday, 1 May, where he noted ‘[l]arge hotels, churches, theatres, picture palaces, banks & printers’ offices also & nearly 200 shops (173 I see in the official estimate) entirely destroyed’. Le Cren’s diary is – like Bradlaw’s anecdote – one of hundreds of eye-witness accounts of the Rising. Many such accounts appeared in the newspapers, but as the offices of all the newspapers apart from the Irish Times were destroyed to one extent or another, the real flood of these awaited their return to publication. In the interim, the stark fact of the city’s ruins seemed to exert a fascination over the city’s inhabitants. With existing forms of media and communication largely absent, it appeared that established narratives – process of meaning making – had been shattered and many people graduated to the city centre to look on and try and work out individually and collectively what those ruins meant.

One of the most common frames of reference for the destruction was the First World War. Several commentators observed that Dublin had come to resemble the images –
photographs, illustrations and newsreel – that people had seen of the bombed cities of Belgium. ‘Those pictures of the devastation wrought at Ypres, Louvain, and Teramonde, showing mounds of smoking masonry, over which a wall or two tower’, observed the Cork Examiner’s Dublin correspondent, ‘are here materialised’. The Freeman’s Journal was more explicit in making that analogy legible, arguing that ‘[t]he great throughfare which the citizen of Dublin was accustomed to describe proudly as “the finest street in Europe” has been reduced to a smoking reproduction of the ruin wrought in Ypres by the mercilessness of the Hun’.

Although the newspapers tried to impose such existing narratives connected to the war or to nationalist or unionist politics, the number of compelling personal stories made it initially difficult for any one narrative to emerge. For some time, people appear to have avoided such recourse to established narratives, as the spectacle of the Rising exceeded the ability of narrative to explain it. Even such seemingly unalterable features of Irish life as the architecture of Dublin had been destroyed, and the old certainties were challenged by the shock and the possibilities opened up by blank spots in the streetscape. The picture houses had also, of course, been a source of narratives of many different kinds, but the ‘people are not too keen on pictures just at the moment’, Paddy noted:

There is a spirit of restlessness and excitement abroad in the city. Odd walls of ruined buildings are being pulled down in Sackville Street. This is principally done by means of steel cables attached to steam-rollers. The resulting crashes of falling buildings are terrific, and the streets are packed with people in dense masses, quite oblivious to the fact that some portion of the bricks and mortar may fall on them. Personally I have seen some cases of people being badly injured.
While the delay in publication of Paddy’s article makes it difficult to say when precisely he was discussing, other sources indicate that this behaviour continued for weeks after the Rising. When he finally attended his first post-Rising entertainment on 11 May, Joseph Holloway – architect of the Abbey Theatre, theatre-goer and obsessive diarist – came out to find in ‘Lower O’Connell Street crowds looking on at the pulling down of tall dangerous walls’. Despite his general preference for theatre, Holloway’s choice of entertainment on this occasion had been cinema. Although he had visited the Abbey on two previous occasions since the Rising, he had spent his time on the first occasion, in the green room and on the second occasion, talking with the attendants about the events of Easter week and the lack since then of an audience at the theatre. However, his own patronage on 11 May went to a programme of films at the Rotunda Pictures at the northern end of O’Connell Street, where he was most interested in The Wireless Telegraph, the thirtieth episode in the serial The Exploits of Elaine.

In choosing The Exploits of Elaine at the Rotunda, Holloway attended a programme very like many others before and after the Rising and rejected picture shows at the Theatre Royal and the Bohemian that seemed to be addressing the particular moment in Dublin. The Royal occasionally ran seasons of pictures, and in the context of the increased travel and accommodation difficulties faced by theatrical artistes in the wake of Rising, the management arranged a programme of war pictures for four days beginning on 10 May. The programme included two War Office films, the first of which – The Battlefield of Neuve Chapelle – had previously been exhibited in the city, but the second of which was new and had particular local resonance: With the Irish at the Front. ‘The pictures will be of special interest to all citizens’, observed the Irish Times, ‘but particularly to those whose relatives figure in the scenes from which the photographs have been taken’. The management of the Royal apparently aimed to demonstrate the loyalty of the Irish both on screen and in the auditorium to the British armed forces, and indeed, the ‘pictures were warmly applauded by the audience, among which were many soldiers’.

The Bohemian’s offering, Dublin Rising and Ruins of the City, was more ambiguous in its intent. It ran for the three days beginning 11 May, but no reviews or other records indicate the kind of audiences it received at a time when the aftermath of the Rising was still providing a live spectacle. Indeed, details of Dublin Rising and Ruins of the City itself are obscure as no other records of a film of this title survive. Given that it is the only film mentioned in the Bohemian advertisement and that none of the newsreel companies are named, it seems unlikely that it is one of the short items produced by Topical Budget, Pathé and Gaumont and shown in other picture houses in the first half of the week. Of those films, the Topical Budget’s Dublin Rebellion had a timely release on 6 May, but it ran for just four minutes. The reviewer at the Irish Times mentioned it first in his/her notice of the Carlton Cinema in Upper O’Connell Street, commenting that ‘the Topical Budget included “Dublin Ruins”, depicting the desolation of the Irish metropolis, consequent upon the insurrection’. Although a newsreel film of this length that had profound local interest might have been advertised as the highlight of a picture-house programme, it is more likely that a longer film was shown. Easter Rising, Dublin 1916, a film held at the Imperial War Museum, is another possibility. It has a running time of 14 minutes, which is the length that would be expected of a one-reel, 1,000-foot film, the standard unit length that the film industry dealt in.
The surviving film does not indicate who made it, but Norman Whitten was probably the first filmmaker on the Dublin streets after the Rising. Located on the relatively unscathed Great Brunswick (now Pearse) Street, Whitten’s General Film Supply (GFS) specialized in non-fiction filmmaking, particularly in ‘topicals’ – films of local newsworthy events – and advertising films, as well as acting as the Irish agency and distributor for certain equipment manufacturers and film producers. Renowned for the speed with which he could have films of events ready for showing the same evening, Whitten ‘was out very early with his camera, and secured practically 2,000 feet of exceptionally interesting views’.27 Given the chaos of the picture-house business in Dublin after the Rising and the international interest in events, he sold these to ‘Messrs. Jury’s Imperial Pictures, Limited, and Mr. Whitten crossed over to England with the negatives so as to make sure that they reached their destination’.28 The Bohemian may have secured a 1,000-foot cut of the GFS film.

In any case, the film juxtaposes life before and after the Rising, intercutting scenes that include Volunteers marching, British soldiers demonstrating a machine gun, and Dubliners spectating at the ruins or going about their business in the damaged city, and a final shot of executed Rising leader Thomas Clarke. Ciara Chambers argues that the film – in common with the Topical Budget item – shows a country ‘accepting of violence and willing to follow a path towards self-destruction in order to further political ideals’.29 Although this is a valid interpretation, the film remains ambiguous, not least because it contains none of the intertitles common to newsreels. As a result, its ideological intent is not clear, allowing the possibility that the choice and juxtaposition of scenes could be read differently in different contexts. If this is the film Bohemian audiences saw between 11 and 13 May, they would certainly bring a more elaborate frame of understanding than audiences in Britain or elsewhere.

The only other known features of the exhibition of Dublin Rising and Ruins of the City are the screening times and the aural component of the performance. By 8 May, the initial martial law restrictions that had closed all theatres and cinemas had been relaxed to allow shows until 7.45pm, ‘in order to give patrons time to cross the various bridges before the prescribed time’ of 8.30pm.30 These restrictions would be relaxed again from Sunday 14 May, when a curfew between midnight and 4am allowed for normal entertainment hours. However, for the three days that Dublin Rising showed at the Bohemian, no late-evening performance was permitted, a fact that would have restricted the numbers of people who could have seen it and its consequent profitability. Nevertheless, a maximum of just over 8,000 people could have seen the film in the 900-seat Bohemian, assuming that a one-and-a-half or two-hour show could only have run three times between 2pm and 7.45pm. However large or small its audience, the film was exhibited with an impressive musical accompaniment from the Bohemian orchestra under musical director Percy Carver and featuring the cello solos of Clyde Twelvetrees. A concert musician of considerable reputation, Twelvetrees had been recently engaged by the Bohemian management – his first performance was on the Sunday before the Rising – to reassert the superiority of that picture house’s musical attractions.31 Since opening on 8 June 1914, the Bohemian management had enhanced its orchestra in order to meet the challenges both of competition from the nearby and also newly opened Phibsboro Picture House and of its location on the edge of the city. By building the orchestra up to sixteen musicians – the largest of any Dublin picture house – and by adding a soloist of Twelvetree’s stature, it aimed to entice higher-paying middle-class
patrons to travel either out of the city or across it. The Bohemian was not alone in attracting patrons with its musical attractions; this was a further part of the development of cinema from a cheap, accessible, working-class entertainment into a respectable middle-class one. Although it is not recorded what the Bohemian musicians played, the audience would have watched the filmed ruins of their city while listening to skilfully rendered classical music.

Cinema in Dublin in 1916 was a highly developed entertainment business and widely accessible cultural medium. In the immediate aftermath of the Rising, picture houses were – with the ubiquitous public houses – the first to offer Dubliners a place in the city and suburbs to meet acquaintances and discuss the momentous events. As well as providing escapist entertainment, picture houses also screened images – coded in the language of the medium and presented with locally inflected musical accompaniment – addressing directly relevant events. These were among the reasons why cinema came more fully to dominate the cultural life of the city in the following years. Several of the most prominent gaps in Dublin’s streetscape created by bombardment and fire were filled in the early 1920s by large picture houses. When the building on the Metropole Hotel site adjacent to the GPO opened in 1922, it retained the Metropole name but had become a 1000-seat cinema. Behind the Metropole on Princes Street and also adjacent to the GPO, the large site that had formerly housed offices of the Freeman’s Journal and the printing works of Alex Thom became La Scala Theatre (1920), the largest cinema that had opened in Ireland to that time. On the southeast block of Lower O’Connell Street, the Grand was not rebuilt as a cinema, but the larger adjacent premises of the DBC (Dublin Bread Company) – its damaged but still-upright facade an iconic feature of many post-Rising photographs and films – became the Grand Central (1921). The site of destroyed buildings at 4-6 Eden Quay was filled by the 700-seat
Corinthian (1921). Altogether, after a brief period in abeyance, the Rising was a boon for cinema.

1 Dublin Corporation had been prevented in the 1880s by residents and traders from changing the name of Sackville Street to honour Catholic nationalist hero Daniel O’Connell, but most nationalists referred to it as O’Connell Street. Except when quoting contemporary sources, it will be referred to here as O’Connell Street.


3 On the GPO as the centre of the Rising, see Clair Wills, Dublin 1916: The Siege of the GPO (London: Profile, 2009), and Keith Jeffery, The GPO and the Easter Rising (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006).


6 Paddy, p. 845.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.


10 Paddy, p. 845.


16 ‘Journalists’ View of Devastated Area,’ Cork Examiner, 6 May 1916, p. 6.


18 Paddy, p. 845.


23 A collection of British Pathé newsreel relating to the Rising can be freely viewed at <www.britishpathe.com/workspaces/show/jhoyle/x8laPAel> [accessed 24 September 2015]. Topical Budget and Gaumont newsreel is indexed by the British Film and Video Council, and details can be viewed on their website <http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/> [accessed 24 September 2015].


26 This film is freely available at <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060022694> [accessed 24 September 2015].

27 Paddy, p. 845.

28 Ibid.


30 Paddy, p. 845.

31 He was a professor of cello at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, and the Feis Ceoil (music competition) cup for young Irish cellists is named in his honour.