

## 'Purely Sinn Fein Propaganda': the banning of *Ourselves Alone* (1936)

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In his history of the BBC in Northern Ireland, Rex Cathcart tells of the visit to Northern Ireland in 1936 by the BBC's Director of Regional Relations, Charles Siepmann. His 'critical and unflattering' report records the shock of a stranger from London:

The bitterness of religious antagonism between Protestants and Catholics invades the life of the community at every point ... An equivalent of a House of Commons and a House of Lords and of the British civil service system have been instituted in a province which could as well be administered by a couple of commissioners and the normal machinery of local government ... The government is in effect that of a loyalist dictatorship ... There is virtually no opposition. A civil authority special powers act makes possible the arrest and indefinite imprisonment of any citizen without trial at the discretion of the authorities [1].

What Siepmann discovered, of course, was the huge difference between broadcasting in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK as a result of the peculiar political arrangements that prevailed there following Irish partition and the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 which had laid down the constitutional framework for the creation of Northern Ireland. This peculiarity in dealings with the media was also evident in another event that occurred in 1936: the banning of the Irish War of Independence film *Ourselves Alone* (Brian Desmond Hurst, GB, 1936) at the hands of the very Unionist government and (Special Powers) legislation to which Siepmann had taken such exception. This incident provides what appears to be a unique case in the history of film censorship in Ireland and Britain and, in the discussion that follows, I set out to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the decision to ban the film as well as to provide some explanation of why it occurred. In doing so, I also seek to bring together a number of overlapping perspectives: focusing not simply on the act of censorship itself but also the context(s) in which the film was produced and received as well as the characteristics of the film itself.

The film was directed by Brian Desmond Hurst who was born in Belfast in 1895 and brought up a Protestant. His father worked in the shipyards and he left school at 13 to work in a linen factory. At the outbreak of war, he enlisted and subsequently saw action at Gallipoli. After the war, he studied art in Toronto and Paris before ending up in Hollywood where he worked as an art director and then as an assistant to John Ford. It was Hurst who introduced Ford to Liam O'Flaherty and also suggested that Ford film *The Informer* (USA, 1935). Indeed, much of the chiaroscuro lighting and mobile camera work (including a striking 360 degrees pan) that is evident in certain scenes in *Ourselves Alone* is reminiscent of *The Informer* and may be traced back to Ford's use of

similar stylistic features in *Hangman's House* (USA, 1928), a film in which Hurst briefly appears. In 1932, Hurst returned to England where he unsuccessfully sought work in the film industry. 'I had letters of recommendation from Irving Thalberg, then head of M.G.M., Jack Warner and John Ford', he recalls in his autobiography, 'but they were so glowing that nobody believed them' [2]. With money from a friend whom he had met in Hollywood, the wealthy eccentric Harry Clifton, he formed his own company, Clifton Hurst Productions, devoted to the production of films of an 'artistic' character. Two productions followed: an Edgar Allan Poe adaptation *The Tell-tale Heart* (GB, 1934) and the Irish medical drama *Irish Hearts* (aka *Norah O'Neale*) (GB, 1934) both of which were subsequently picked up for release as quota pictures (by Fox and MGM, respectively). Through another friend, the painter John Flanagan, Hurst also secured financial backing from Gracie Fields for a film version of *Riders to the Sea* (GB, 1936) which he then shot in the west of Ireland, using a number of actors from Dublin's Abbey Theatre.

*Riders* was seen by the Director of Production at BIP (British International Pictures), Walter Mycroft, who contacted Hurst. As Hurst recalls:

BIP had begun work on an Irish picture called 'Ourselves Alone' (a translation of 'Sinn Fein') and Mycroft asked me to take a look at what the other director had done. I watched what had been done and then I said, thinking I was talking myself out of a job, 'Nobody talks like that in Ireland. The dialogue is impossible'.

They asked me to read the script. I took it away and throughout the script opposite each shot I made a little sketch, perhaps 300 small drawings in all. When I brought this back, they looked at it and Mycroft asked: 'Could you direct this film?' I said airily: 'With my eyes blindfolded and my hands tied behind my back' [3].

Hurst then took over from the original director, Walter Summers, and brought in the Irish playwright, Denis Johnston, to work on Dudley Leslie and Marjorie Jeans' screenplay based on the play *The Trouble* by Dudley Sturrock and Noel Scott. Sturrock, an ex-major who had served in the British Army in Ireland, also acted as the film's 'technical adviser'. When the film was finished, Hurst was offered a contract with BIP for whom he directed a further three films in just over a year: *The Tenth Man* (GB, 1936), *Sensation* (GB, 1937) and *Glamorous Night* (GB, 1937). He did not return to an Irish theme, however, until 1942 when he directed a Ministry of Information wartime documentary, *A Letter from Ulster*, dealing with US troops stationed in Northern Ireland.

*Ourselves Alone* is set in the south of Ireland during the Irish War of Independence. The film begins with the rescue of two captured members of the IRA, Connolly (Clifford Evans) and Maloney (Tony Quinn), by a flying column under the command of the mysterious 'Mick O'Dea'. Attention subsequently switches to the RIC County Inspector Hannay (John Lodge) and the English Intelligence Officer Wiltshire (John Loder) and their attempts to recapture the men. 'Mick O'Dea' is revealed to be Terence Elliott (Niall MacGinnis), the brother of Hannay's fiancée Maureen (Antoinette Celner) (see Fig. 1). Following a raid by the police on an IRA hide-out, Terence is killed by Wiltshire. Realizing that Maureen is in love with Wiltshire, Hannay asks to be released from their engagement, by claiming he was responsible for the murder of her brother [4].



FIG. 1. Troubles on the screen: John Lodge (seated) as the Royal Irish Constabulary inspector and Niall MacGinnis (standing) as the mysterious IRA man 'Mick O'Dea' in Brian Desmond Hurst's *Ourselves Alone* (British International Pictures, 1936). Photo: British Film Institute, stills, posters and designs.

### British Film Censorship and Northern Ireland

The theme of the Irish 'troubles' was still an unusual one for British film making and BIP was responsible for the film's two main (and seemingly only) British precursors, both literary adaptations: *The Informer* (Arthur Robison, GB, 1929) and *Juno and the Paycock* (Alfred Hitchcock, GB, 1930). The reason for this small number was not only the likely lack of box-office appeal of such films but also the sensitivity of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) to films with a 'political' theme [5]. Thus, while the BBFCs' preoccupations were primarily moral, its political role was also clearly evident in the banning of Soviet films (such as *Mother* and *Battleship Potemkin*) as well as in its more general reinforcement of consensual social and political attitudes [6]. In such circumstances, the topic of Ireland, as James Robertson suggests, was potentially 'the greatest source of friction between the BBFC and American and British studios from 1919 to 1939' [7].

During the 1930s, the BBFC operated a system of script-vetting whereby they encouraged producers to submit scenarios prior to shooting. These were handled by the Vice-President of the BBFC, Colonel J.C. Hanna (who had himself served in Ireland), and, from April 1934, the daughter of the then President, Miss N. Shortt (later Mrs

Crouzet). As their reports reveal, they were keen to discourage films about Ireland which they considered anti-English or likely to lead to controversy. In 1933, the Board received a scenario based on an unproduced stage play, entitled *The Man with the Gun*, inspired, it seems, by the life and death of Michael Collins. Although Hanna misses the real-life parallel, he nonetheless complains that the story, set 'round the political troubles in Southern Ireland in 1921', is 'too recent history to be a suitable subject for a film'. 'It is a very controversial period', he continues, 'and I strongly urge that the sad and unpleasant memories which both sides to the conflict share, are best left alone and not raked up through the medium of the screen. No matter how the subject is treated, one side or the other will be angered and much harm might result' [8]. As the film does not appear to have been made, it is also likely that these objections contributed to a decision not to proceed to production. Similar fears were in evidence in the report on *The Plough and the Stars* (John Ford; USA, 1936), a film which was eventually made, but with cuts. Submitted in 1935, the reader's report argues that the Easter Rising of 1916 'evokes many sad and painful recollections' which 'will always prove highly controversial', before concluding that 'it is undesirable to rouse these feelings through the medium of the cinema' [9]. In 1939, Hanna also advised against the production of a scenario, set during the Irish civil war, *Irish Story*, which he regarded as dealing with a 'very unhappy page of Irish history' [10]. Once again, the film was not made.

Another reader, however, observed that the story was 'very similar to two or three other films dealing with the Irish troubles' which had already been exhibited [11]. It seems likely that this reference would have included not only *The Plough and the Stars* but also *Beloved Enemy* (H. C. Potter; USA, 1936) and *Ourselves Alone*. The scenarios for Hurst's previous films, *Irish Hearts* and *Riders to the Sea* had, in fact, been submitted to the BBFC. Although Miss Shortt had expressed some concern about a scene in *Riders* in which a cow falls into water, the story was considered entirely suitable for production [12]. *Irish Hearts* (submitted under the title *Norah O'Neale*) proved more problematic and the readers complained about a drunk doctor, evidence of 'improper relations' between a doctor and a nurse, and a scene showing a priest administering the Sacrament to a dying man [13]. However, despite the potentially more controversial subject matter of *Ourselves Alone*, no scenario appears to have been submitted to the Board and the film itself was passed—without cuts—for exhibition with an 'A' (i.e. adult) certificate. Some explanation of this may be provided by the experience of *Beloved Enemy*, the scenario for which was originally submitted in the same month (April 1936) as *Ourselves Alone* was passed. This was presented by United Artists under the title of *Love Your Enemy* and, like the earlier *The Man with the Gun*, was loosely based on the life of Michael Collins. Although the revised scenario was regarded as sufficiently sensitive for three readers, including the President Lord Tyrrell, to look at it, no objection to the film was made insofar as 'no details of conflict between the two forces are shown' and the 'love interest is the main theme' [14]. Although, in *Ourselves Alone*, there is a number of scenes involving armed conflict (including an IRA ambush at the film's start), the conflict is defined primarily in terms of a battle between the IRA and the Royal Irish Constabulary (rather than the British army) which would have undoubtedly made it more palatable to the BBFC. The publicity for the film also promotes the film as one in which the drama is 'perfectly balanced' and 'sides are never taken' and this was probably accepted to be the case by the Board [15]. Moreover, just as *Beloved Enemy* foregrounds a love affair across the political divide, so it is romantic intrigue, in the form of a love triangle, that is also central to *Ourselves Alone* (and, one of the film's catchlines, recommended by Wardour's publicity department, was 'love in

revolt, romance in rebellion') [16]. It, therefore, seems likely that *Ourselves Alone* made only a matter of months before *Beloved Enemy* (and also passed without cuts), would have been regarded in much the same light by the BBFC.

### Film Censorship and Northern Ireland

The UK censorship system is an unstable one, and subject to outbreaks of conflict. The BBFC was not a state body but a voluntary one set up by the industry. Moreover, although the BBFC sought to apply 'national' standards (and from 1923 the Home Office had recommended that local licensing authorities follow the Board's advice), the Board's decisions lacked legal authority and local authorities in the UK retained the right to accept or ignore the decisions of the Board. During the early 1930s, there were a number of local authorities in England taking independent action and Neville March Hunnings cites the example of Beckenham council which set up its own film censorship board in 1932 and proceeded to cut, ban and reclassify films which the Board had already certificated [17]. Similar local activity was also in evidence in Northern Ireland where Belfast Corporation (through its Police Committee) was subject to particular pressure from religious groups, such as the Film Committee of the Churches of Northern Ireland which campaigned for stricter measures to protect children and young people from 'the undesirable influence of unsuitable pictures' [18]. It was this committee which drew *Frankenstein* to the attention of the Police Committee in 1932 which then viewed and banned it, despite the film having been awarded a certificate by the BBFC. What, however, was distinctive—indeed unique—about the banning of *Ourselves Alone* was that it was not actually at the hands of a local authority but of regional government. The story of how this occurred is complicated.

According to papers deposited at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), the beginnings of the matter may be traced to a letter from the Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard to the Inspector General of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) on 2 May 1927 [19]. This refers to a warrant, issued by the British Secretary of State, authorizing the seizure of *Storm over Gothland*, a film which seems to have derived from Erwin Piscator's production in 1926 of Ehm Welk's play dealing with a proto-Communist community established in fourteenth-century Gotland. This letter was forwarded to the NI Ministry of Home Affairs which responded by issuing instructions that the RUC should seize the film if found in Northern Ireland. Over the following 2 years, Scotland Yard continued to contact the RUC about films and gramophone records—mainly Soviet works such as *Mother*, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, *The Fall of the Romanoff Dynasty* and *Storm Over Asia* and, in the case of records, speeches of Soviet leaders—for which warrants had been issued. The RUC, in turn, followed suit by issuing warrants for Northern Ireland. There appears, however, to have been little evidence of a desire to show these films in Northern Ireland until the RUC (alerted by a police informer) warned the Ministry of Home Affairs of the launch of a Workers' Film Guild (WFG) in Belfast [20].

The object of the WFG was 'to present to its members film productions of a definitely working class character, which, because of their nature are not accessible to the general public'. An inaugural meeting was held on 13 December 1929 when there was a screening of *Two Days* (a 1927 Ukrainian film directed by Georgi Stabovoi, dealing with the Russian Civil War, which had been shown by the London Workers' Film Society the previous month) and speeches by William McMullen (the former Labour MP for West Belfast) and Thomas Geehan (secretary of the local branch of the

Labour Defence League) about a recent trip to Russia. Plans to show both Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ten Days that Shook the World* (aka *October*) were also announced. Both these films were named in the Scotland Yard warrants that had been forwarded to the RUC (and Ivor Montagu reports that Scotland Yard officers had visited the offices of *Potemkin's* British distributor in February 1929 when ways of circumventing the BBFC's banning of the film were being sought) [21]. As a result, the NI Home Office indicated its approval for the seizure of the films should they reach Northern Ireland. Up until this point, the NI Home Office had presumed that warrants issued by the British Home Secretary could be automatically extended to Northern Ireland. However, once the exhibition of Soviet films in Northern Ireland seemed a possibility, the question of their validity was looked at more closely. The warrants, in fact, only referred to 'importation into England' and the NI Ministry of Home Affairs sought advice from London on the matter.

In reply, the Home Office in London informed the NI Ministry that the request by Scotland Yard for the RUC to seize films and gramophone records was the result of a 'misapprehension' and that the British Home Secretary did not have powers to deal with the exhibition of films in Northern Ireland [22]. The NI Ministry of Home Affairs responded quickly and wrote back to the Home Office in London indicating its intention to make an order under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act to prohibit the exhibition of 'such undesirable films' [23]. The civil servants in London sounded a note of caution, pointing out that the warrants had never been used 'to detain a film indefinitely' and that there was only one instance in which films had been detained: those which had been found in James Larkin's luggage on his entry into England in March 1928 and which had been returned to him following examination [24]. The NI Ministry of Home Affairs was not to be deterred, however, and proceeded to amend existing legislation as planned.

Not long after the founding of the Northern Ireland state in 1920, the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act had been enacted in 1922 in the wake of widespread civil unrest. This gave sweeping powers to the Minister of Home Affairs, a position occupied by the hardline Unionist Sir Richard Dawson Bates from 1921 to 1943, including the authority to intern and arrest without trial, interrogate, execute, flog, ban meetings and proscribe organizations. Originally intended to be temporary, the legislation was renewed each year until 1928, when it was renewed for a further 5 years, before becoming permanent (until its final repeal in 1973). Insofar as the legislation was primarily directed against nationalists, it also became a symbol of the repressive character of the Northern Ireland state. Under Regulation 26, the NI authorities already had powers to ban newspapers and it was this provision that was extended to include the prohibition of films and records under a new regulation—26A—which was issued on 2 May 1930. The NI Ministry of Home Affairs subsequently advised the Inspector General of the RUC on the implementation of the new regulation:

In the event of any film or record which may be prejudicial to the preservation of the peace or maintenance of order, coming under the notice of the police, an immediate report giving an outline of the subject should be furnished to this Ministry, together with your recommendation as to whether an Order of prohibition should be made or not [25].

Owing to the secrecy surrounding the matter, the publication of the new regulation at the end of May came as something of a surprise. The nationalist *Irish News* published the details of the new regulation under the headline 'Mysterious Home Office order'

and ran an editorial ('Another Dawson Bates scandal') attacking the NI Home Secretary [26]. Given the powers of the BBFC, the paper queried the need for the Order and assumed, perhaps not surprisingly, that it was likely to be directed towards expressions of nationalist culture. In considering the case of gramophone records, the paper speculated that:

Perhaps we are to have the spectacle of the unfortunate constable with ears cocked for the sound of 'The Soldier's Song' or 'The Boys of the County Cork'. When the first bars of such seditious music reach his beat, he must, perforce, shake off his ordinary limitations as an officer of the law and invade the home of a citizen armed with the authority of this extraordinary Order [27].

The government itself maintained publicly that the Regulation was necessary in order 'to prevent the introduction into this country ... any films or gramophone records that would be subversive of law and order or that would interfere with religion or morality' [28]. This position is further elaborated in a (seemingly unpublished) note accompanying the new Regulation which argued that 'the extreme Communist element throughout the World is endeavouring to use both the cinematograph film and the gramophone record for purposes of propaganda to further their doctrines'. 'Many of these films and gramophone records', it continues, 'are subversive not only of established law and order but also of religion and morality and calculated to be far more dangerous than any firearm or explosive substance' [29]. However, whether these powers were actually necessary to deal with the exhibition of such films is open to question. Only a matter of months later, in October 1930, the Atlas Film Company (the distribution arm of the Federation of Workers' Film Societies) applied to Belfast Corporation for permission to screen Pudovkin's *Mother*, one of the films that had originally been drawn to the attention of the RUC by Scotland Yard. Although the film had by now been shown in England, the Police Committee was mindful that the film had been banned by the BBFC and arranged a special screening after which they unanimously agreed to refuse the distributor permission to exhibit the film in Belfast [30]. According to a report in the *Belfast News Letter*, the committee felt the film placed 'mob rule on a pedestal' and 'would be subversive to discipline' [31]. Given these circumstances, it was perhaps to be expected that, when questioned about the Regulation by Harry Midgley (a Northern Ireland Labour Party MP and staunch opponent of film censorship) in October 1935, Dawson Bates confirmed that he had not yet issued an order under the Regulation. However, he still regarded the 'power to make such order' as 'valuable' and refused to consider revoking it [32].

When this power was finally invoked the following year, however, it was not along the lines that had been originally indicated. The note accompanying the Regulation, written in 1930, had confidently claimed that:

It is, of course, highly improbable that any film likely to form the subject of an Order under this Regulation would be exhibited at any reputable picture house, and I can assure the public that this regulation is not in the smallest degree going to interfere with their enjoyment of such entertainments.

Such films or gramophone records are only likely to be shown either in obscure halls or on private premises, and it is to deal with such hole and corner methods of exhibition or use that the wide powers of search and seizure under this Regulation are intended [33].

Despite these guidelines, the first and, it seems, only film to be banned under the Special Powers legislation was not, of course, a 'subversive' Soviet film but rather a British film on an Irish subject. This was also not a film intended for 'hole and corner' exhibition but rather a mainstream commercial film, distributed by Wardour Films, a subsidiary of the developing British major, Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC), and billed for exhibition (along with *The Three Wise Guys*, a Damon Runyan story about Broadway, starring Robert Young) at one of Belfast's leading cinemas, the Hippodrome, in Great Victoria Street. The decision to use the legislation, moreover, did not follow a recommendation from the RUC Inspector General, as set out in the procedures for the implementation of the Regulation, but resulted from a clearly political intervention.

### 'Sinn Fein Propaganda'

The immediate trigger for the use of the Special Powers legislation appears to have been the intervention of the Unionist MP (and subsequent Minister of Labour) William Grant in the NI House of Commons on 25 November 1936. Speaking of the need for the maintenance of 'law and order' in Northern Ireland, he reported that he had been invited to a private screening of *Ourselves Alone* that morning. (This seems to have been a press screening.) He continued:

I do not wish to be taken as an alarmist or anything of that kind, but I am of opinion that if that picture is shown in Belfast next week it may tend to create trouble in the city ... I know that the Belfast Corporation is the local authority responsible for dealing with the matter, but, at the same time, I think some steps should be taken by the Ministry of Home Affairs in conjunction with the local authority. They should attend a private view of this picture before it is exhibited to the public next week. If they are satisfied that the picture would not tend to create a disturbance in the city of Belfast, I am perfectly satisfied. I do not want to suggest for a moment there is anything wrong, but I do feel that this picture is purely Sinn Fein propaganda, and that some action should be taken [34].

In response, Dawson Bates, the NI Minister of Home Affairs, declared that he was not 'a picture fan' and had not seen the film but that if it is 'what is alleged' then he would not have 'the slightest hesitation in seeing that the picture is not exhibited in Belfast' [35]. He proved true to his word and 2 days later signed an order prohibiting the film.

Prior to this order, Bates had taken the view that the system of film censorship in Northern Ireland was working satisfactorily. In October 1930, he had been asked to introduce 'more stringent censorship of cinematograph productions' but had argued that the arrangements involving the BBFC and local authorities were 'in every way adequate' [36]. In November 1934, he also rejected the suggestion of a film censor for Northern Ireland, declaring it unnecessary so long as 'the Belfast Corporation did its duty' [37]. In March 1936, he once again resisted the idea of a NI film censor on the grounds that local authorities already possessed 'adequate powers' and that he could 'see no reason for any change in the existing arrangements' [38]. In all these cases, the Minister was responding to calls for tougher censorship arising from moral concerns, concerns which had been given momentum by the Annual Report of the BBFC in 1931 which highlighted the apparent growth of 'sex' films containing 'various phases of immorality, and incidents which tend to bring the Institution of Marriage into con-



tempt' [39]. Bates had previously claimed that the Special Powers legislation had 'no relation to the suitability or unsuitability of films from the moral point of view' and was exercisable only 'in the case of films which are considered subversive of law and order' [40]. It, therefore, appears to be on this basis that he defied the 'existing arrangements' for film censorship in the North and went against the decisions of both the BBFC and the local authority in relation to *Ourselves Alone*.

In the case of Belfast Corporation, the responsibility for film censorship devolved to the Police Committee. In the wake of Grant's allegation, the committee arranged a private screening of the film on 27 November and subsequently held a special meeting in City Hall at which they decided 'not to take exception to the public exhibition of the picture' [41]. At a subsequent meeting of Belfast Corporation, the chair of the committee, Councillor Lieut. Com. Harcourt, reported that, after 'due consideration', the committee had decided that 'the film did not offend public morality and that they would not prohibit its exhibition' [42]. The reactions of committee members were also recorded in the newspapers. One told the *Irish News*, 'I do not see how it could be held to support Sinn Fein, as it ends with the round-up of a whole flying column' while another told the *Belfast Telegraph* that it was a 'well-balanced picture, giving both sides a fair crack of the whip' [43]. While the papers assumed this was the end of the matter and that the film would now be shown, this was not the case.

For the day prior to the Police Committee screening, on 26 November, the Minister of Home Affairs, Sir Dawson Bates, along with his Parliamentary Secretary, G. B. Hanna, the Inspector General of the RUC, the Belfast City Commissioner and Home Office officials had also viewed the film. No statement was issued and it was generally thought that the matter would be left to Belfast Corporation. In reality, a Prohibition order, preventing the exhibition of the film anywhere in Northern Ireland, was prepared and signed the next day—the very day Belfast Corporation's Police Committee was deliberating on the film—and subsequently released to the press on 28 November. This outcome was not anticipated. The *Northern Whig* reported that the 'eleventh-hour ban' had taken 'the cinemagoers of the city and the cinema trade completely by surprise' while the *Irish News* described the decision as 'totally unexpected' and launched an attack on Bates in a strongly worded leader [44]. Arguing that it was the 'allegation of Sinn Fein tendencies' which had created the possibility of the film's exhibition leading to a breach of the peace, the paper declared the Minister had acted in a 'shameful' manner in capitulating to 'strong partisan views'. It also felt that the decision was 'stupid' insofar as it went against the verdict of the Police Committee and had led to the 'absurd' suspicion that 'the Committee has strong Sinn Fein sympathies' [45].

Members of Belfast Corporation also lamented the fact that the police had not informed the Police Committee of the impending ban and felt the authority of the Corporation had been undermined. In the committee's defence, Councillor Harcourt argued that it had decided that the film was all right from a 'a moral and spiritual aspect' but that the government had viewed it 'from the political aspect, which the committee did not consider' [46]. However, possibly chastened by the intervention of government in this case, the Police Committee viewed and banned *The Plough and the Stars* a few months later, presumably having taken the hint that it should now be more alert to the 'political aspect' of film screenings [47]. This decision was made despite the fact that the play had been successfully presented at Belfast's Opera House in 1929 and no doubt reflected a double standard, typical of much film censorship, concerning the social character of the audience for films rather than plays. The potential 'effects' of film on working-class audiences has been a recurring concern of film censorship and

probably assumes a particular significance in Northern Ireland where the authority of the Unionist state historically depended upon the continuing cultivation of 'a cross-class alliance of interests' [48].

The Ministry of Home Affairs was reluctant to be drawn into making public comment on the reasons for its action. Some insight into the government's position, however, is provided by the response to a letter from John Maxwell, the chairman and managing director of ABPC. In a letter to Dawson Bates, dated 9 December 1936, Maxwell complains that the banning of the film was likely to cost his company 'several thousands of pounds'. He continues:

The picture was produced in good faith and during production particular care was taken to avoid taking sides on the political issues between the North and South. It was with that object in mind that a Northerner was engaged to direct the film. That we have succeeded in being impartial is, I submit, proven ... by the fact that it has been shown in thousands of cinemas in the U.K. without any complaint, even in towns like Liverpool and Glasgow.

... It was our intention to show this picture at our own theatre in Belfast, the Hippodrome, and if I had any thought that *Ourselves Alone* would provoke a disturbance I would certainly not have risked doing such damage to the goodwill of our property. It is just my conviction that this is definitely the type of picture that is good entertainment and should be shown ...

The letter then concludes with an offer to remove 'any particular incidents which you consider are provocative or would offend' [49]. The matter was dealt with by Walter Magill, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs, who advised Bates that the letter might be interpreted as 'the initial step in the direction of making a claim for compensation' and recommended legal advice. He also drafted a response claiming that the showing of the film would 'give rise to disorder' and that the suggestion of cuts was 'impracticable' as the decision to ban the film was not based on an 'objection to particular incidents' but 'the effect which would be produced by the picture as a whole' [50]. The final version of the letter was sent to Maxwell on 15 December, signed by Magill on behalf of the Minister. In it he regrets the ban but argues that it was necessary:

You will readily understand that a film exhibited in Great Britain with reference to events in Northern Ireland might afford excellent entertainment to an audience without arousing any strong personal feelings among its members, while the exhibition of a similar film here—where the bitter memories engendered by the conditions which form the theme of the film are still fresh and where, in fact, many of the participants in the troubles are still alive—might easily produce a different result.

... [T]he minister feels sure that you will on consideration appreciate the serious danger of disorder which would have been incurred if the picture had been shown here at the present time [51].

On the same day, Brian Desmond Hurst telegraphed the Minister requesting a meeting. The request was not granted but a hand-written note records that Hurst met Magill on 21 December. Hurst had asked if it was possible 'to cut out any offending parts' of the film but had been told by Magill that this was 'impracticable' and that the problem of the film was that it could 'give rise to trouble'. Hurst himself was interviewed by the local press and expressed his disappointment that the film was not

being shown in his native city. He pointed out that the original story had been written by an British army officer and claimed that the film was 'pro-British'. 'I must admit that I had fears that *Ourselves Alone* might not satisfy the Free state authorities', he observed, 'but the Dublin censor passed the production without a single cut' [52].

In this respect, the rationale for prohibiting exhibition appears ultimately to have rested on the perceived threat of social disorder. This was not a fear entirely without substance. Belfast was prone to civil disturbances, particularly during the marching season, and only the year before there had been major rioting in the city, leading to a curfew and the early closing of cinemas [53]. The subsequent screening of *Beloved Enemy* (which the Police Committee had approved for exhibition following a special viewing) in September 1937 also gives some indication of how almost any film with a contemporary Irish dimension could arouse strong emotions. As the *Irish News* reported, police were summoned to the Hippodrome (the cinema which had planned to show *Ourselves Alone*) to restore order when 'a section of the crowd became unruly':

The film is based on the Anglo-Irish war, and when a scene showing Dublin children writing 'Up the Rebels' on the back of a British official's car appeared on the screen a section of the crowd in the gallery became noisy, sang 'Dolly's Brae', and shouted party remarks.

Another section in the gallery retaliated by shouting 'Up the Rebels' and also singing party songs.

Members of the audience stood up and sang 'God Save the King' while the others remained seated and sang the 'The Soldier's Song'.

The situation looked ugly, and a number of people rose from their seats and left the theatre. The lights were switched on and the police summoned [54].

The screening of *The Plough and the Stars*, which was banned in Belfast, also provoked disturbances in other towns where it was allowed to be shown. A stone was thrown at the screen in a cinema in Strabane while stink bombs were exploded, by Unionist youths, in a cinema in Omagh [55].

As the *Irish News* suggests, it was also the act of naming *Ourselves Alone* as 'propaganda' that partly created the perception of the film as controversial. In this respect, the arguments about the film in Northern Ireland inserted the film into a new discursive context in which the meanings attached to the film began to change. Accordingly, the political meaning of *Ourselves Alone* was not so much intrinsic to the film as constructed by the cultural and political discourses which surrounded it. Hence, in England, the film attracted little controversy and the film's publicists were concerned that audiences might not possess sufficient historical understanding to appreciate fully the film's story and title. Thus, publicity material for the film suggests how the film's title might be used as a 'teaser':

'Ourselves Alone' is the English translation of 'Sinn Feinn' [*sic*]. There seem to be some opportunities for teaser advertising in this. You could run some intriguing line like 'What is Sinn Feinn?' Everyone has heard of Sinn Feinn but few people know what it means ... [56].

The publicity material also lays out two main ways of promoting the film which partly succeeded in setting the agenda for subsequent critical comment. On the one hand, the publicity was keen to stress the authenticity and 'realism' of the project. It emphasizes

that the original story was written by a British army officer who served in Ireland and 'is founded on fact' and that a number of the men who appear in the film actually took part in the Irish War of Independence. On the other hand, the publicity is also keen to stress that the film is still 'a vigorous, straightforward melodrama' characterized by a 'gripping story, powerful human interest, big thrills, fine acting, feminine appeal and flawless atmosphere'. These two emphases are then intertwined in the proposed ad line, 'teeming with thrilling incident actually founded on fact'.

It is largely in these terms that many of the English reviews subsequently discussed the film. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* describes the film as simply a 'melodrama of "the Troubles"' which it commends for its 'atmosphere' while *The London Reporter* compares the film unfavourably with *The Informer* but praises its 'restraint and realism' [57]. *Film Weekly* combines these two discourses, but complains that the film is then 'a compromise'. As 'sheer melodrama', the review argues, the film 'would have been more thrilling' while as 'a reconstruction of history' it should have been 'more impressive' [58]. These reviews, however, do not get drawn on the film's politics and it is only when the film reaches Ireland that this issue becomes more pronounced, with reviews beginning to shift away from artistic concerns ('realism' and 'melodrama') towards more political ones. Thus, while a number of papers were content (in line with the publicity material) to praise the realism of the film and its use of Abbey Theatre players, others were not, especially the nationalist *Irish Press*, the paper founded by Eamon de Valera. While the anonymous reviewer acknowledges the undoubted popularity of the film with Irish audiences (the film enjoyed a 5-week run in Dublin), the film is nonetheless criticized for its 'inaccuracies', 'unreal' roles and events that 'could never have happened'. *Ourselves Alone*, the review concludes, is 'the sweetest piece of excitingly unhistoric history that has come our way' [59]. An earlier review of the film also criticizes the 'improbable' characterization of the IRA leader (an Anglo-Irish aristocrat) and the perceived implication that the IRA constituted a 'murder apparatus' [60]. Given such perceptions of the film in the South there was undoubtedly a degree of irony in the banning of the film in the North. As the *Northern Whig* observed at the time, 'the controversy over the film' was especially intriguing given that 'the Nationalist Press' in the South had 'condemned' the film as 'pro-British' while 'the I.R.A. element' had 'urged a boycott against it' [61].

By the time it was proposed to show the film in the North, the issue, as a result of the politicized context, was almost completely focused on the film's alleged political content. All three of the daily newspapers carried reviews on 26 November by which time Grant had already turned the film into a matter of controversy. The film correspondent of the *Irish News* argued, however, that *Ourselves Alone* should be regarded as 'pure entertainment' rather than 'a vehicle for propaganda'. Taking its cue from the publicity material, the review went on to stress that the film shows 'the point of view' of both the police and the 'Tans' and that there is 'absolutely no bias'. No 'stress' is laid on 'the rightness or otherwise of either side', the review continues, concluding that it is 'a film to which not the slightest objection can be taken on political or any other grounds' [62]. The *Northern Whig* picks up the theme of the film's 'realism' but also feels obliged to comment on the picture's political perspective. 'The case of the rebels is not idealised, neither is the rightness of the cause of either British or Irish raised', the review suggests. '[T]he film presents only an incident of the "troubles" with emphasis neither one way nor the other' [63]. The Unionist *Belfast News Letter* also acknowledges that an 'effort' had been made in the film 'to hold the scales as evenly as possible between the Republicans and the R.I.C. and Auxiliary forces' but noted, more

ominously, that 'there are elements in the picture which will not commend themselves to people of extreme views in this area' [64].

### *Ourselves Alone*

Many campaigns for censorship have involved films that the campaigners have not seen but are objecting to on the basis of hearsay. What is interesting, in this case, is that the politicians did go and look at the film before arriving at their decision. So, while *Ourselves Alone* was clearly read differently in different contexts, there is also evidence that there was something about the film itself which can be identified as having provoked Unionist political anxieties. This does not mean, of course, that it is possible to provide one 'correct' reading of the film. Nevertheless, *Ourselves Alone* does seem to be an unusual film in the way that it mobilizes (and then fails to close off) a variety of political and moral discourses. So, while it is possible to argue that the film probably privileges a 'British' perspective, there are nonetheless sufficient subordinate strands within the film to subject this dominant discourse to strain. In terms of narrative, the film is structured around, and invites our identification with, the predicaments of characters (played by the film's 'stars')—Hannay, Wiltshire and Maureen—who are on the side of the 'British'. The film solicits sympathy for the beleaguered lives of those fighting on the British side by emphasizing the constant risks to their safety (and their need to take precautions) and by reclaiming the meaning of the film's title for the British side. As Wiltshire comments bitterly in one scene: 'Sinn Fein. Do you know what that means? Ourselves alone. They're all watching you, whispering and spying, murdering and informing. Sinn Fein. That ought to be our motto, not theirs. We're the ones really alone.' The resolution of the narrative, moreover, rests upon a 'British' victory in which an IRA flying column is successfully captured; the IRA leader, Terence Elliott/Mick O'Dea, is killed; and the Intelligence Officer Wiltshire is rescued from execution.

However, if the narrative organization of the film favours the British characters, it is still sufficiently loose to permit time for events which subvert the film's main line. Unusually, the appearance of the film's three main leads is delayed for over 15 minutes and the introductory scenes initially suggest a different kind of film. The film begins with an ambush on an RIC lorry which is largely presented from the point of view of the IRA men. This is followed by a striking display of community solidarity (which is only sullied by the presence of an informer) when the Black and Tans aggressively search the local public house. Given the identification with the IRA-supporting villagers that this scene encourages, there is an effective reinforcement of the view, later expressed by Wiltshire, that the police and the army are, indeed, 'alone', and lacking in popular support. The script also includes strong expressions of anti-British sentiment ('Hell itself could be no worse than Ireland under English rule', declares the IRA commandant Connolly at one stage) and the RIC officers are seen to have respect for the courage of their enemy (at one point, Hannay shakes Connolly's hand, exclaiming, 'You're a dirty Sinner but by god you've got guts'). The casting, as an IRA leader, of an Anglo-Irish (and probably Protestant) aristocrat, who is also the female lead's brother, further complicates the delineation of who is 'good' and 'bad' (as well as 'British' and 'Irish') in the film. Finally, at the film's close, two of the IRA leaders (Connolly and Hogan) are permitted to escape (rather than being killed or recaptured), thus making the conclusion of the narrative more open-ended than it would have been otherwise.

There is also a certain bleakness about the way the film ends. Although there is a notional happy ending involving the romantic union of Maureen and Wiltshire, this is made possible by Hannay's lie about who actually killed Maureen's brother. Moreover, the film does not end with the couple but rather with Hannay, the heavy-hearted hero weighed down by the oppressiveness of the duties he is required to perform. The film shows the camera moving in on him as the smoke from his cigarette begins to obscure his features. Staring blankly at the camera, he comments, with bitterness evident in his voice, that 'a miracle' has occurred 'in Ireland'—'two out of three people ... are going to be happy'. This ending also suggests the terms on which the film seeks to 'resolve' the conflicts and competing discourses that it has put into play. In common with many other films about Ireland, there is an evident concern to convert social and political conflicts into humanist drama [65]. This is partly achieved in the way that romance is used to overcome political divisions (Maureen still loves Wiltshire irrespective of what he has done) but, more substantially, in the way the war is projected as a terrible human tragedy. As befits the film's main female character, Maureen performs the conventional function of giving voice to her weariness with killing. As she exclaims to Hannay: 'You're crazy for blood. All of you. That's all you think of. Killing. I hate it!' This theme is reprised in the scene between Hannay and Elliott/O'Dea when both men express their distaste for the deaths the conflict has caused. This is an important scene insofar as it bestows a degree of equivalence upon both men, both seen as believing in what they are doing yet quite unable to reach agreement. It also displays the element of fatalism running through the film, inherited in part from Ford, revealing how the men are locked into a pattern of events that they are ultimately powerless to control. A similar sense of melancholy informs the film's conclusion as the stoical Hannay is shown to have performed his 'duty' but in a way that has brought him only personal unhappiness.

So while the film pushes in the direction of a preferred reading, its concern to extend sympathy to both 'sides' of the conflict also makes it a text which was liable to diverse interpretations when circulated in an Irish context. To put it crudely, by striving for a degree of 'balance' (or equivalence) in its representation of characters and events, the film also provided everyone (in Ireland at any rate) with something to object to. In this way, the film's relative 'openness' partly facilitated the different readings which were subsequently to be generated from it.

What these events suggest is some of the contradictory ways in which censorship works. Annette Kuhn has argued against what she describes as a 'prohibitions/institutions' model of censorship which she regards as involving an overly deterministic and repressive conceptualization of power [66]. Drawing on the work of Foucault, she suggests how censorship may also be seen to be 'productive' in its effects and to act as an incitement to other discourses [67]. A simple but telling example of this 'productivity' may be seen in the example of Belfast Corporation's banning of *Frankenstein* in 1932, which encouraged a huge demand for the book in the city [68]. In the case of *Ourselves Alone* and *The Plough and the Stars*, it can also be seen how the demands for prohibition and subsequent bannings effectively 'set the agenda' for the ways in which these films were to be interpreted and led to politicized (and polarized) responses to them. In this respect, the defining of *Ourselves Alone* as 'purely Sinn Féin propaganda' by Grant in the NI Parliament effectively framed how the film was subsequently read in the North (irrespective of whether this involved agreement or not).

However, as this would suggest, such 'productivity' is also shaped by the social and political context in which censorship occurs. In a sense, despite the best efforts of the

censors, they are unable to circumscribe how films will be understood and have meaning bestowed upon them. As has been seen, the BBFC was particularly exercised by the case of *The Plough and the Stars* and was at pains to eliminate any controversial political content. While the BBFC may have succeeded in avoiding offence to British audiences, their efforts to neuter the film's political impact clearly failed in the highly charged atmosphere of Northern Ireland. The same could also be said of *Ourselves Alone*. For while the film provoked little controversy in England, it was still capable of being read politically in an Irish context. In this respect, the British censor was unable to anticipate all the meanings likely to attach to the film once it was set into circulation. Similarly, while the banning of *Ourselves Alone* by the NI Ministry of Home Affairs involved an attempt to reinforce the discursive authority of Unionism, the government's action also encouraged various protests (in parliament and the newspapers) which questioned that authority. In this respect, the banning of *Ourselves Alone* not only provides an exceptional case study in the history of British and Irish film censorship but also illuminates some of the ways in which censorship, and its effects, have to be understood in relation to changing social and political contexts.

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### NOTES

- [1] Charles Siepmann quoted in Rex Cathcart, *The Most Contrary Region: the BBC in Northern Ireland 1924-1984* (Belfast, 1984), pp. 78, 3.
- [2] Brian Desmond Hurst, *Autobiography*, unpublished, undated, p. 93, BFI library, London.
- [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107. For a discussion of BIP and Walter Mycroft's policy of 'cut-price window dressing', see Rachael Low, *Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London, 1985), esp. pp. 116-126.
- [4] Full credits and a detailed plot summary may be found in Kevin Rockett, *The Irish Filmography* (Dublin, 1996), p. 139.
- [5] According to the Board's President, Lord Tyrrell, in 1936, '[n]othing would be more calculated to arouse the passions of the British public than the introduction, on the screen, of subjects dealing with religious or political controversy', 'Film Censorship Today', paper read at the Summer Conference of the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 24 June 1936, p. 6.
- [6] For discussion of the BBFC in the 1930s, see Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society 1930-1939* (London, 1984).
- [7] James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: film censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (Beckenham, 1985), p. 86.
- [8] BBFC Scenario Reports, 1933, 128, BFI library.
- [9] BBFC Scenario Reports, 1935, 415.
- [10] BBFC Scenario Reports, 1939, 28.
- [11] BBFC Scenario Reports, 1939, 28b.
- [12] BBFC Scenario Reports, 1935, 427a.
- [13] BBFC Scenario Reports, 1934, 323.
- [14] BBFC Scenario Reports, 1936, 119.

- [15] These quotes are taken from publicity materials for the film, BFI library. There is, however, a haziness in evidence in this material which argues that 'the insurgents as well as the Black and Tans present their cases clearly'. In fact, the film is relatively unsympathetic to the Black and Tans, observed in an aggressive search of a public house, and they are differentiated from the more humane (and 'Irish') RIC.
- [16] Ibid. The main catchline adopted for advertising of the film in the USA (under the title *River of Unrest*)—'I don't care what he's done ... I love him!'—also reflects this emphasis upon romance.
- [17] Neville March Hunnings, *Film Censors and the Law* (London, 1967), p. 102.
- [18] Minutes of the Meeting of the Police Sub Committee, 28 October 1931. This was partly related to an apparent failure, on the part of Northern Ireland exhibitors, to prevent under-16s from attending films with an 'A' certificate.
- [19] PRONI HA/32/1/518. Gordon Gillespie makes use of some of this material in a short essay, *Celluloid controversies, Causeway*, 4 (1) (1997), pp. 27–31. He appears, however, not to have looked at all the relevant files.
- [20] Letter from Inspector General, Royal Ulster Constabulary to The Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, 17 December 1929, PRONI HA/32/1/569.
- [21] Ivor Montagu, *The Political Censorship of Films* (London, 1929), p. 12. Insofar as some doubt has been cast on Montagu's claims, it would appear that the existence of the Scotland Yard warrants is not generally known.
- [22] Letter from C. M. Martin-Jones to W. A. Magill, 29 March 1930, PRONI HA/32/1/569.
- [23] Letter from Geo. A. Harris to Martin-Jones, 2 April 1930, PRONI HA/32/1/569.
- [24] Letter from Home Office to G. A. Harris, 12 April 1930, PRONI HA/32/1/569.
- [25] Secret memo from Ministry of Home Affairs to Inspector General, RUC, 13 June 1930, PRONI HA/32/1/640.
- [26] *Irish News*, 24 May 1930, pp. 4, 5.
- [27] Ibid., p. 4.
- [28] George B. Hanna, Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs, 29 May 1930, Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Commons, Session 1930, vol. xii, col. 1630.
- [29] Note regarding the New Regulation under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act, PRONI HA/32/1/569.
- [30] Minutes of Special Meeting of the Police Committee, 13 October 1930.
- [31] *Belfast News Letter*, 14 October 1930, p. 6.
- [32] Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Commons, Session 1934–5, vol. xvii, col. 2635.
- [33] Note regarding the New Regulation under the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act, PRONI HA/32/1/569.
- [34] Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Commons, Session 1936–7, vol. xix, col. 62.
- [35] Ibid., col. 63.
- [36] Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Commons, Session 1930, vol. xii, col. 2192.
- [37] Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Commons, Session 1934–5, vol. xvii, col. 2634.
- [38] Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Commons, Session 1935–6, vol. xviii, col. 628.
- [39] British Board of Film Censors, *Report, Year Ended 31 December 1931* (London), p. 9.
- [40] Sir Dawson Bates, 17 October 1935, Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, House of Commons, Session 1934–5, vol. xvii, col. 2636.
- [41] Minutes of Special Meeting of the Police Committee, 27 November 1936.
- [42] *Irish News*, 2 December 1936, p. 3.
- [43] *Irish News*, 28 November 1936, p. 3; *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 November 1936, p. 21.
- [44] *Northern Whig*, 30 November 1936, p. 7; *Irish News*, 30 November 1936, p. 4.
- [45] *Irish News*, 30 November 1936, p. 4.
- [46] *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 January 1937, p. 4.
- [47] Minutes of Special Meeting of the Police Committee, 14 April 1937.
- [48] See Arthur Aughey, 'Unionism', in Arthur Aughey and Duncan Morrow, eds, *Northern Ireland Politics* (London, 1996), p. 33.



- [49] Letter from John Maxwell to Sir Dawson Bates, 9 December 1936, PRONI HA/32/1/640.
- [50] Memo from Magill to Dawson Bates, 11 December 1936, PRONI HA/32/1/640.
- [51] Letter from W. Magill to John Maxwell, 15 December 1936, PRONI HA/32/1/640.
- [52] *Belfast Telegraph*, 19 December 1936, p. 10.
- [53] See Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State*, 2nd edn (London, 1980), ch. 6, for the background to the 1935 riots. The closure of cinemas was reported in 'Riots force Belfast halls to close', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 25 July 1935, p. 19.
- [54] *Irish News*, 25 September 1937, p. 5.
- [55] *Irish News*, 29 October 1937, p. 8; *Irish News*, 6 October 1937, p. 5.
- [56] Quotes come from publicity materials for the film held in the BFI library. This material also suggests that, as a publicity stunt, it might be possible to borrow, or fake, an armoured car to drive around the streets, a suggestion hardly like to enamour itself to exhibitors in Belfast!
- [57] *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 30 May 1936, p. 82; *The London Reporter*, 29 April 1936, p. 3.
- [58] *Film Weekly*, 25 July 1936, p. 28.
- [59] *Irish Press*, 14 July 1936, p. 5.
- [60] *Irish Press*, 7 July 1936, p. 5.
- [61] *Northern Whig*, 30 November 1936, p. 7.
- [62] *Irish News*, 26 November 1936, p. 5. It is interesting to note that the review simply lifts the claim of the publicity that 'sides are never taken'.
- [63] *Northern Whig*, 26 November 1936, p. 7.
- [64] *Belfast News Letter*, 26 November 1936, p. 10.
- [65] For a fuller delineation of this argument in relation to British cinema, see John Hill, 'Images of violence', in Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London, 1988).
- [66] Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925* (London, 1988), pp. 2-4.
- [67] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [68] *Northern Whig*, 22 April 1932, p. 7.

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