

# Filming in the North

by John Hill

The peculiar status of Northern Ireland—geographically a part of the island of Ireland but politically a part of the U.K.—has meant that the history of filmmaking in Northern Ireland has been a modest one, confined to the periphery of both the British and Irish film industries. One of the most significant periods of filmmaking activity began with the appearance of Ireland's first sound film, *The Voice of Ireland*, in 1932. The film starred Northern Ireland singer and actor, Richard Hayward—the first man “to use the Ulster dialect on the screen” according to the publicity at the time—and a number of features involving Hayward and the Belfast Repertory Players followed—*The Luck of the Irish* (1935), *The Early Bird* (1936), *Irish and Proud of It* (1936), and *Devil's Rock* (1938). While these were all relatively unambitious, low-budget musical comedies they proved immensely popular with local audiences, not least because they provided such a rare opportunity to see Northern Ireland locations (mainly the Glens of Antrim) on the big screen. Audiences queued to see *The Luck of the Irish* in the Picture House in Royal Avenue in Belfast while *The Early Bird* opened Belfast's famous Broadway cinema in the Falls Road (which had a capacity of 1500).

Also working in the cinema at this time was the director, Brian Desmond Hurst. Born in Castlereagh in 1900, Hurst went to Hollywood in the 1920s where he worked with John Ford. He returned to Britain in the 1930s and directed a number of films of Irish interest. These include *Riders to the Sea* (1935), which was privately financed by the British comic actress and singer Gracie Fields, and *Ourselves Alone* (U.S. title: *River of Unrest*) (1936), one of the first films to deal with the Irish War of Independence. Although the film itself shows more interest in the romantic intrigues of its characters than the politics of the period, it still proved sufficiently contentious to merit an unprecedented banning, under the Special Powers Act, by the N.I. Home Secretary. Hurst subsequently directed a wartime documentary, *A Letter from Ulster* (1943), dealing with the experiences of American troops stationed in Northern Ireland, which was produced by another Belfast man, William MacQuitty. MacQuitty went on to enjoy a lengthy career in the British film industry, including the producer's job on *A Night to Remember* (1958) dealing with the sinking of the Titanic, the famous ocean liner built in Belfast, which has once again become a source of worldwide interest following the success of James Cameron's blockbuster.

Probably the best-known film to have been set in Northern Ireland in this period, however, is *Odd Man Out* (1947), a gloomy *film noir* tracing the demise of James Mason's wounded IRA man. Although set in Belfast, most of the film was actually shot in England where the interior of the Crown Bar was faithfully reproduced in the studio at Denham. *Odd Man Out* was also the first film to deal with the “Troubles” since partition and remains something of a milestone, clearly exerting a significant influence upon later films such as Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982) and *The Crying Game* (1992). While films such as *Odd Man Out*, and later *The Gentle Gunman* (1952) and *Jacqueline* (1956), made occasional use of N.I. settings, no indigenous Northern Ireland feature was made in the period between the 1930s and the 1980s.

The 1980s, however, did see the beginnings of small-scale low-budget film production in Northern Ireland. Of particular significance, in this respect, was the role played by television, especially Channel 4. Channel 4 was launched in 1982 and had a particular remit to complement the other three U.K. channels and encourage “innovation and experiment.” A distinctive feature of the Channel's activities was its financing of film production, mainly through the

Drama Department (and ‘Film on Four’) but also the Department of Independent Film and Video which supported a number of film workshops, including some in Northern Ireland. The first feature to be made under this arrangement was *Acceptable Levels* (1984), which was shot mainly in Belfast by Belfast Film Workshop (in collaboration with London-based Frontroom Productions). Dealing with an English television crew filming a documentary in Belfast, it also proved a challenging reflection upon the ways in which the—primarily British—media had covered the political conflicts. Derry Film and Video was also a beneficiary of Channel 4 support and their feature *Hush-a-Bye-Baby* (1989) was not only a landmark in Northern Irish filmmaking but also, along with Pat Murphy's earlier film *Maeve* (1981), a key film in bringing feminist concerns to bear upon conventional perceptions of the ‘troubles.’

The 1980s also saw important work by the documentary filmmaker John T. Davis who followed his wry look at the Northern Ireland punk scene, *Shellshock Rock* (1978), with probing documentaries into local religion in *Power in the Blood* (1989) and *Dust on the Bible* (1990). Former BBC director and editor, Bill Miskelly, also set up Aisling Films in this period and two children's films, *The Schooner* (1983) and *The End of the World Man* (1985), set in Belfast, won him deserved acclaim.

These developments were built upon in the 1990s when a period of sustained growth for Northern Irish filmmaking occurred. Three main factors contributed to this development: the establishment of the Northern Ireland Film Council (later Commission), the use of lottery funds to support film, and the growing involvement of BBC Northern Ireland in film production. The Northern Ireland Film Council was launched in 1989 to encourage support for film and television production as well as opportunities to see films, the promotion of media education and training, and the preservation of Northern Ireland's film heritage. In terms of support for production, the Council established a production fund designed to provide support for locally-made film and television and also launched, in collaboration with the BBC, a drama shorts scheme, “Northern Lights,” designed to encourage new talent. This scheme has provided support for three shorts per year, including, in the second series, the Oscar-nominated *Dance Lexie Dance* (1996), made by the enterprising Nerve Centre in Derry. The Film Council also set up a similar arrangement with Ulster Television which



Tim Loane's short, *Dance Lexie Dance*, was nominated for an Academy Award in 1998.

led to a second shorts scheme, "Premiere," which has now run to two series of five films. The Nerve Centre was also responsible for one of the most striking of these, *Surfing with William* (1998), a witty look at a Derry girl's infatuation with Prince William and her attempts to contact him via the Internet. The Film Council also succeeded in securing EU funding for a development fund and screen commission and changed its name in 1997 in order to signal this new role. Since then the NIFC has committed nearly half a million pounds to the development of over thirty feature films and TV series as well as encouraging a number of features to shoot in Northern Ireland.

The NIFC's policy of support for film production received a considerable boost following the announcement of U.K. lottery funding for film in 1995. Lottery funds are administered by the Arts Councils of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland and, during the period 1995-98, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has allocated over one and a half million pounds to production (to eight feature films, ten short films, four animated works, and three documentaries). Five of the features supported by the lottery have now been completed—*Bogwoman* (1997), *Crossmaheart* (1998), *Titanic Town* (1998), *Sunset Heights* (1998), and *Divorcing Jack* (1998). Although not all of these could be regarded as indigenous productions, they were all, at least partly, shot in Northern Ireland and represent the most sustained burst of feature production in the North since the 1930s. So far, however, only *Divorcing Jack*, a black comedy-thriller based on Colin Bateman's popular novel, has received widespread distribution, and as a result Northern Ireland audiences have so far had few opportunities (outside of festivals in Belfast and Derry) to see them. Distribution of low-budget films is, of course, a more general European problem and the U.K. government now intends to use the lottery to support distribution as well as production.

The other key player on the Northern Ireland scene has been the BBC. During the

1980s, the BBC Drama Department in Northern Ireland produced a number of one-off dramas, often shot on film but shown only on TV (including, in the late 1980s, a number of pieces directed by Danny Boyle). In line with BBC policy more generally, BBC N.I. began, in the 1990s, to move more in the direction of drama series (most notably the hugely successful *Ballykissangel*) and films with theatrical potential. This policy was initiated with Barry Devlin's *All Things Bright and Beautiful*

and is destined to remain of crucial importance in ensuring the continuation of N.I. film production.

Although the BBC, the NIFC, and the Arts Council (which administers the lottery) have provided the institutional infrastructure for the current outbreak of filmmaking activity in the north, the sheer energy and determination of the filmmakers themselves, who have refused to leave Northern Ireland in order to make films, should also be

acknowledged. A do-it-yourself ethic was apparent, for example, in the work of Enda Hughes, whose feature-length shock horror film, *The Eliminator* (1996), was made for only £8,000 (around \$11,000)! It was also apparent in the 'Six-Pack' initiative, a loose collective of young filmmakers responsible for an eclectic collection of shorts characterized by experiment and innovation, made in 1996 on a minimal budget.

What is also significant about this kind of work has been its concern to avoid the conventional signifiers of the 'Troubles' and explore new ways of representing the North. While a number of the features have continued to be 'Troubles' dramas, displaying varying degrees of originality in their representation of the conflicts, many of the shorts have sought to break out of the 'Troubles' paradigm, either by attending to other matters or seeking to render problematic the traditional binaries—British and Irish, Protestant and Catholic—that have conventionally structured perceptions of Northern Ireland life. Issues of age, gender, and sexuality have increasingly

been pushed to the foreground in a way that suggests how identities in Northern Ireland are rarely 'pure' but characteristically multiple and hybrid. Although much of the support for film in Northern Ireland by government has been predicated upon the economic benefits that filmmaking brings (in the form of jobs, tourism spin-offs, and so on), it is ultimately this willingness to provide fresh ways of looking at the north that will ensure the cultural vitality of the current filmmaking revival. ■



Top: Julie Walters in Roger Michell's *Titanic Town* (photo by Milly Donaghy).  
Bottom: Barry Wallace as 'Stone' in Enda Hughes's *The Eliminator*.

(1994) and the Devlin-scripted *A Man of No Importance* (1995), both of which opened in cinemas. Like *Ballykissangel*, both of these features were shot mostly in the south in order to take advantage of Section 35 tax benefits. With the availability of lottery funding in the North (and changes to the U.K. tax regime), BBC N.I. is now more firmly committed to filming in the north and *Divorcing Jack* has been its highest profile feature to date. As in the U.K. more generally, the viability of film production is inti-

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