

Film and Northern Ireland

JOHN HILL

The peculiar status of Northern Ireland — geographically a part of the island of Ireland but politically a part of the UK — has meant that the history of film-making in Northern Ireland has been modest, confined to the margins of both the British and Irish film industries. Indigenous film-making in the north began with the appearance of Ireland's first sound film, *The Voice of Ireland* (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 of the rare opportunity they provided 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 on Royal Avenue in Belfast while *The Early Bird* opened one of Belfast's most famous cinemas, the Broadway cinema in the Falls Road (with a capacity of 1,500). Although there were plans to build on these successes, and even establish a film studio in Northern Ireland, these did not come to fruition.

As a result, there was virtually no feature film production in Northern Ireland in the period between the 1930s and the 1980s, although a few British films did make use of Northern Ireland locations. The most famous of these is undoubtedly *Odd Man Out* (1947), a gloomy film noir tracing the demise of James Mason's wounded IRA man. However, while 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. Ironically, given the current competitiveness among film commissions, an official at the NI Ministry of Commerce wrote prior to the start of the film's shooting that 'a film with Belfast as a background has no

commercial significance whatever, direct or indirect! This would hardly be true today.

REVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE 1980s AND 1990s

It was not until the 1980s that indigenous film production in Northern Ireland began to revive. Of particular significance, in this regard, 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 UK 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 via the Department of Independent Film and Video which was committed to funding less orthodox film and television material. This involved support for a number of film workshops and the first feature to be made under the workshop agreement was *Acceptable Levels* (1984), 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 conflict. Channel 4 subsequently funded Belfast Independent Video (which evolved out of the Northern Ireland section of the Independent Film, Video and Photography Association) as well as Derry Film and Video which was responsible for a further feature, *Hush-a-bye Baby* (1989). Along with Pat Murphy's *Maeve* (1981) which was partly shot in Belfast with British Film Institute (BFI) Production Board support, this was a key film in bringing feminist concerns to bear upon traditional perceptions of the 'Troubles' and represents something of a milestone for local film-making. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, the channel's Department of Independent Film and Video abandoned its separate budget for workshops and moved away from

the funding of low-budget features. Independent producers have continued to benefit from Channel 4 commissions for television material (such as the 'Violent Britain' series). However, the channel's contribution to feature production in Northern Ireland has been less significant than in the '80s and the main feature with which it has been involved is the romantic comedy *Old New Borrowed Blue* (2000) which was partly funded by FilmFour.

However, if the seeds of Northern Irish film production were sown in the 1980s, it was in the 1990s that a sustained growth of Northern Irish film-making occurred. Three main factors contributed to this development: the establishment of the Northern Ireland Film Council (later Commission), the growing involvement of BBC Northern Ireland in film production, and the use of Lottery funds to support film. During the 1980s, there was growing dissatisfaction with the lack of public support for film and video activities in Northern Ireland and the NI Independent Film, Video and Photography Association commissioned a report *Fast forward* (1988), which identified the disadvantaged position of the north in relation to the rest of Ireland and the UK and called for the establishment of a Media Council. The following year, the Northern Ireland Film Council was launched in order to encourage support for film and television production, distribution and exhibition as well as the promotion of media education and training and the preservation of Northern Ireland's film heritage. In 1991, the Council produced detailed strategy proposals in all these areas and, partly on the basis of this document, secured funding from the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) in 1992. In subsequent years, this grant was routed through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI). At this time, the only local source of production finance was the money provided by the Cultural Traditions Media Group (of the Community Relations Council) which supported film and television projects that contributed specifically to an understanding of cultural diversity within Northern Ireland. In 1993, the Council launched a new production fund (amounting to £100,000 in 1994) which provided development funding and production assistance to film and television projects of artistic and cultural relevance to Northern Ireland. One of the earliest and biggest awards was for John T. Davis' feature-length documentary, *The Uncle Jack* (1995), a fascinating semi-autobiographical work inspired by the film-maker's cinema architect uncle.

In 1994, the NIFC also launched, in collaboration with the BBC, a drama shorts scheme, 'Northern Lights', intended to develop the creative talents of Northern Irish film-makers. This scheme entered its fifth series in 1999 and has provided budgets of around £45-50,000 for three shorts per year, the first of which was writer John Forte's

directorial debut, the amusing *Skin Tight* (1994). Since then Forte has gone on to write *Old New Borrowed Blue* (2000) as well as write and direct *Mad about Mambo* (2000), a comedy dealing with teenage obsessions, which was partly shot in Northern Ireland in 1998. The second series of 'Northern Lights' also included the Oscar-nominated *Dance Lexie Dance* (1996), dealing with a young Protestant girl who, inspired by *Riverdance*, takes up Irish dancing with the bemused support of her widowed father. This was produced by the multimedia arts centre in Derry, the Nerve Centre, which has not only played a significant role in training but also in the development of animated work, such as the television series *Cuchulainn* (1994), animated and directed by John McCloskey. Also, at this time the sheer energy and determination of local young film-makers was becoming manifest in the emergence of a 'no-budget' ethic. It was this spirit that underlay the do-it-yourself philosophy of Enda Hughes whose feature-length schlock horror film, *The Eliminator* (1996) was made for only £8,000. It was also apparent in the 'Six-Pack' initiative, a loose collective of young film-makers responsible for an eclectic collection of shorts typified by experiment and innovation, made in 1996 for virtually nothing.

Responding to this growing level of activity, the Film Council, in 1997, set up a second shorts scheme, 'Premiere', in association with Ulster Television, Belfast City Council and the London-based British Screen (a state-funded private company with a responsibility for supporting British film-makers). Under this scheme three series of five films have so far been funded with budgets of around £18-23,000. Once again, the Nerve Centre was responsible for one of the most striking of these, *Surfing with William* (1998), an amusing look at a Derry girl's infatuation with Prince William and her attempts to contact him via the Internet, written by Lisa Burkitt and directed by Tracey Cullen. However, while the Film Council played a key role in stimulating low-budget production and assisting new talent in Northern Ireland, it was severely restricted in the scope of its activities by its low levels of public funding. A significant breakthrough occurred when the Council succeeded in securing funding (£1 million over a 30-month period) from the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation to establish a screen commission and development fund. Although the Film Council had been lobbying for a film commission for a number of years, it was only with the availability of EU (and matching Department of Economic Development) funding that it became economically viable. It was partly to signal this new role that the Council changed its name to the Northern Ireland Film Commission in 1997.

The NIFC continues, however, to be more than what is conventionally meant by a screen commission (which helps to attract film-makers to a country or region) and

has retained much of the Film Council's commitment to training and exhibition. In the case of training, for example, the NIFC was recognized by the Northern Ireland Training and Employment agency as the Sector Training Council in 1995 and has continued to work alongside Skillset (the UK training organization) in Northern Ireland since then (setting up a NVQ Skillset Assessment Centre in 1999). The establishment of the Northern Ireland Film Development Fund has also led to substantial sums of new money becoming available for film and television production in the north. The NIFC's policy in establishing a substantial development fund was designed to complement the production funding becoming available through the Lottery and, in line with its 'industrial' remit, to attract not just features but television series and serials with a potential for repeat business. Accordingly, the Fund offers production companies, rather than individuals, loans of up to fifty per cent of the estimated costs of developing projects — normally up to £40,000 for television series and £15,000 for feature films — that will be primarily produced in Northern Ireland. By the end of 1999, the NIFC had committed nearly half a million pounds to the development of around forty film features and television series to a mixture of companies based in Ireland, both north and south, as well as London and Canada. In 1999 the NIFC was also allocated a further £500,000 under the EU Special Support Programme to establish a one-off production for feature films. Following the expiry of EU funding, the Department of Economic Development (subsequently the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment) committed to an annual allocation of £250,000 while the new Department of Arts, Culture and Leisure has taken over from the Department of Education as the Commission's other key funder.

In addition to the NIFC, the BBC in Northern Ireland has been another key player on the local scene. 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 or produced by Danny Boyle). In line with BBC policy more generally, BBC NI 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* (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 and, in the case of the two features, financial support from the Irish Film Board. With the availability of Lottery funding in the north (and changes to the UK tax regime), there has now been a certain 'levelling of the playing field' between

north and south and, as a result, it has become much more financially attractive for BBC NI to film in the north. This is evident, for example, with *Divorcing Jack* which was supported by the Lottery, and has been BBC NI's highest profile feature to date. The Lottery has also, since the third series, cooperated with the BBC in funding the 'Northern Lights' scheme (as a replacement for the NIFC's share).

FUNDING

UK Lottery funding for film began in 1995 following agreement that film production could be regarded as capital expenditure. Lottery funds are administered by the Arts Councils of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and, in the case of Northern Ireland, there has been evidence of a desire to rectify the traditional underfunding of film and video production within Northern Ireland (such that in 1997–8, over 13% of total grants awarded went to film development and production). During the 1970s and early 1980s, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland did support small-scale film and video production, but it discontinued to do so on the grounds that it considered this to be more properly the responsibility of the London-based British Film Institute. Although Northern Irish film-makers could apply to the BFI Production Board (which at that time supported low-budget and experimental work), the BFI's charter did not extend to Northern Ireland and it was argued that it could not provide separate funding to the region. The BFI did change its charter in 1991 to include Northern Ireland, but no extra funding for NI production followed. The BFI maintained that, despite the extension of its charter, it had received no additional funding for Northern Ireland and that it was the job of local government agencies, such as DENI (whom the NIFC was lobbying), to support film production. During the early 1990s, therefore, the support of the Arts Council for film was, with the exception of the NIFC, largely confined to exhibition: the main NI arthouse, Queen's Film Theatre (opened in 1968), the Foyle Film Festival in Derry (established in 1987 with seed money from the University of Ulster), Cinemagic (the children's film festival set up by the NIFC in 1990), and the West Belfast Film Festival (launched in 1995). With the change in the NIFC's status in 1997, however, ACNI transferred its existing financial responsibilities for film to the Commission which became funded directly by DENI and the Department of Economic Development (the conduit for EU finances). Nevertheless, under Lottery legislation, the Arts Council continued to play a major role in film funding. While this has involved support for both buildings (such as the Orchard Cinema in Derry) and equipment (such as the grant of £370,274 to Derry's Inner City Trust for equipment for the Nerve Centre), the most substantial slice of expenditure in this area has

been on film and video production and development.

Under criteria developed in association with the NIFC, Lottery funding is available to film companies producing a film in Northern Ireland and intended for distribution or broadcast in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Funding includes development monies (up to a maximum of £20,000 or 75% of total development, whichever is less) and production grants up to £200,000 (and normally not more than 25% of the overall budget). Under these terms, the Arts Council had, by the end of 1998, allocated over £1.5 million to production — to eight feature films, ten short films, four animated works and three documentaries — as well as a further £120,000 on nine development awards (including seven features). Of the eight features receiving production awards, six had been completed by the end of 1998: Tommy Collins' *Bogwoman* (1997), following a young Donegal woman's experiences in Derry at the start of the 'Troubles'; the allegorical *Sunset Heights* (1998), set in a violent Derry of the future; a film adaptation of Mary Costello's semi-autobiographical novel of the 'Troubles', *Titanic Town* (1998), set in Belfast; a romantic historical drama, *All for Love* (originally *St Ives*) (1998); and two adaptations of novels by the local comedy thriller writer Colin Bateman, *Crossmaheart* (1998) and *Divorcing Jack* (1998). A seventh — *A Love Divided* (originally *Wild Horses*) (1999), a drama about a mixed marriage in 1950s Ireland — was in post-production. In terms of amount, the biggest awards went to *Divorcing Jack* and *Sunset Heights*, both of which received £200,000, while *Titanic Town*, *Crossmaheart* and *Bogwoman* were each awarded £150,000. In terms of percentages, however, these last two were actually the most substantial, amounting to 29% of *Crossmaheart's* budget and about 24% of *Bogwoman's* (compared with 7% of *Divorcing Jack's* budget and 4.6% of *Titanic Town's*).

A number of observations can be made about these awards. First, despite the involvement of the Northern Ireland Arts Council, these are 'Northern Irish' films to differing degrees. Although ACNI has been concerned to develop 'new, local talent', the basic requirement for funding is that a film is, at least partly, shot in Northern Ireland. This has meant that the amount of filming that occurs in the north has varied. So, while most of *Divorcing Jack* was shot in Northern Ireland, others have shot for comparatively short periods. *Titanic Town*, for example, filmed in Northern Ireland for two weeks, while the bulk of the film was shot in England. *Bogwoman*, *Sunset Heights*, and *A Love Divided* were all cross-border ('all-Irish') projects, involving substantial amounts of shooting in the south. And, although most of the films were actually set (at least partly) in Northern Ireland, *All for Love* simply used NI locations as a 'substitute' for elsewhere. The degree of involvement of NI personnel has also varied. Although NI people contributed to the

making of all of these films at different levels, only two (*Bogwoman* and *Sunset Heights*) of the six films were made by NI-based production companies and only three involved NI directors. In this respect, the strategy of the Lottery has been to reinforce the Commission's work in encouraging outside production companies to shoot in Northern Ireland and not just support what might be regarded as 'indigenous' production. This, however, is almost inevitable, given the relatively modest levels of funding at ACNI's disposal (particularly in comparison to the Arts Council of England which has awarded as much as £2 million to a single film) and the cross-national character of contemporary film financing and (co)production.

Another characteristic of the financing of these films is that, while one of the aims of the Lottery fund has been to 'encourage the production of commercially successful feature films', these are all films that have depended heavily upon public support. So, while the Lottery is not prepared to be the sole investor in projects and requires partnership funding before it makes awards, additional sources of finance have tended to come from other parts of the public sector in Ireland, UK or Europe. *Bogwoman* and *Sunset Heights* both received funding from the Irish Film Board, *Titanic Town* was funded by the Arts Council of England (ACE) and British Screen while *Divorcing Jack* was funded jointly by ACE and BBC NI, a public service broadcaster. *A Love Divided* received funding from two public service broadcasters — BBC Scotland and RTÉ — as well as from the Irish Film Board while *All for Love* was an elaborate European coproduction involving (state-supported or regulated) British, French and German TV companies as well as German public finance. It is, of course, the case that this is one of the strengths of the system: in a situation where sources of finance are limited, risks are spread across a number of agencies. However, it may also be a weakness insofar as films are then made through a combination of various forms of 'soft' public finance (rather than commercial investment). This issue is given added significance when the difficulties these films have faced in securing distribution and exhibition are taken into account.

DISTRIBUTION AND EXHIBITION

As in Ireland and the UK more generally, there has, in recent years, been a significant growth in the number of cinema and cinema screens in the north, especially in the Belfast area, as a result of the opening of multiplexes. Thus, there are now roughly 26 cinemas with 114 screens in Northern Ireland which, per head of the population, compares favourably with both the rest of Ireland and Britain. However, this expansion of exhibition outlets has tended to benefit Hollywood productions rather than local films which still find it difficult to secure a distribution deal and proper exhibition. So far only *Divorcing*

Jack has received widespread exhibition within Northern Ireland and elsewhere, with the result that Northern Ireland audiences have so far had few opportunities (outside of festivals and specialist cinemas in Belfast and Derry) to see the Lottery-supported films (long after they have been completed). *Bogwoman*, the first of the films to be finished, provides one of the most striking examples of this. Moreover, even *Divorcing Jack*, the most overtly 'commercial' and heavily marketed of these films, only did modest business at cinemas outside of the north.

The assessment of the performance of these films, however, is complex. Problems of distribution and exhibition are not, of course, restricted to NI films but extend to Irish and British (and indeed European) films more generally. Thus, according to a survey in *Screen Finance*, over 30% of British films made between 1991 and 1996 failed to secure a cinema release and many more were subject to delays. As a result, the Arts Council of England Lottery Film Department (shortly to become part of a new 'super-body', the UK Film Council) has seen very low returns on its loans and plans to use Lottery money to support distribution as well as production (as is already evident from its policy towards franchises). Similarly, it is likely that ACNI will have to consider how it can help support the exhibition and distribution of the films in which it invests as well. Given the massive domination of the distribution sector (in both film and video) in Ireland and Britain by subsidiaries of the Hollywood majors and the general decline in more specialist outlets for European films, there is, however, no simple solution to this problem.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to over-emphasize the significance of cinema exhibition (desirable though this must be). Given the importance of international television sales, the economic viability of film features does not necessarily depend on box-office performance, and local audiences will eventually get access to local films through television. Moreover, from the point of view of overall public policy, the economic benefits that accrue to Northern Ireland in terms of employment and spend will probably outweigh the lack of return on individual films. Furthermore, it is hard to underestimate the significance of recent levels of film production in Northern Ireland when there has been no sustained tradition of film-making and violent conflict has been a characteristic of social life for so long. In this respect, the economic costs of public support for film production must be weighed against the cultural value of nurturing creative talent and promoting new and challenging forms of cultural expression. As in Britain and Ireland more generally, there is inevitably a certain tension between industrial and cultural goals. From an economic point of view, the NIFC's recent emphasis upon television series and serials and attraction of 'offshore'

productions makes considerable sense. However, in relation to local 'indigenous' film production, there is a danger that an over-emphasis upon the industrial or commercial element will lead to work that simply falls between two stools: films that are still too modest in scale to compete effectively in the international marketplace (given Hollywood's huge economic advantages) yet which, in conforming to what are believed to be 'commercial' imperatives, fail to be of real artistic and cultural significance (or to serve, in the words of the Lottery requirement, a genuine public good).

CONCLUSION

For what is significant about much of the best work coming out of Northern Ireland is the evident determination to avoid some of 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 the way they represent the conflicts, many of the shorts in particular have sought to break out of the 'Troubles' paradigm, either by attending to other matters or rendering problematic the traditional binaries — British and Irish, Protestant and Catholic — that have historically governed perceptions of Northern Irish life. By attending to issues of age, gender and sexuality, such films have begun to question the traditional construction of identities in Northern Ireland and suggest how these are rarely 'pure' or unidimensional but multiple and hybrid. Although, quite rightly, much of the support for film in Northern Ireland by government has been predicated upon the economic benefits that television and film production brings (in the form of a commercially focused industry, jobs, tourism spin-offs and so on), it is ultimately this willingness to provide fresh ways of looking at one's own culture that will ensure the vitality of the current film-making revival.

Bibliography

- Hill, J., McLoone, M. and Hainsworth, P. (eds) 1994 *Border crossing: film in Northern Ireland*. London.
- Hill, J. and McLoone, M. (eds) 1996 *Big picture, small screens: the relations between film and television*. Luton.
- McLoone, M. (ed) (1996), *Broadcasting in a divided community: seventy years of the BBC in Northern Ireland*. Belfast.
- Moran, A. 1996 *Film policy: international and regional perspectives*. London.
- Rockett, K., Gibbons, L. and Hill, J. 1988, *Cinema and Ireland*, revised ed. London and New York.

THE HERITAGE *of* IRELAND

edited by
NEIL BUTTIMER • COLIN RYNNE • HELEN GUERIN



The Collins Press