

## The film *Michael Collins*

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### Troubles, ceasefires and peace?

The history of Anglo-Irish political conflict, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, remained a rich source of material for film in the 1990s. In this section we examine a selection of films that addressed the conflict, ceasefire and peace-making episodes of this decade. Most films dealt with contemporary history, but *Michael Collins* (1996) went into production (with Warner's \$25 million budget) during the longest period of paramilitary ceasefire (1994-96) in the present generation. Jordan's film elevated the events of the historical period 1916-23 to an epic scale, creating, according to one eminent reviewer, 'the most important film made in or about Ireland in the first century of film'.<sup>25</sup>

It was a phenomenal success in Ireland,<sup>26</sup> attracted vituperative criticism in much of the British press and a poor reception in the USA (in terms of box office and Oscars).<sup>27</sup> The epic dimensions of *Michael Collins* generate a tremendous narrative momentum as one's experience is keyed into the intense pace of events portrayed. Apart from the opening, closing and occasional graphic titles there are few concessions made to viewers who are unfamiliar with the period.<sup>28</sup> Jordan compressed the events and key figures of a remarkable seven year period into just over two hours, cutting out the sedentary Treaty negotiations. He conflated historical figures into single characters such as Ned Broy (Stephen Rea) and, to the horror of some historians, the film contains anachronisms (the IRA did not use car bombs in this period), elisions and creative licence (such as the 'Bloody Sunday' massacre). None of these are indefensible. Jordan was not bound by broadcasting's impartiality and balance strictures nor the objectivity claimed by some historians. But it is significant that, like the TV film, *The Treaty* (1991), Jordan provides only a brief, grimly comic moment for Ulster Protestantism (Ian McElhinney's Belfast detective character), indicating a reluctance or inability on the part of many film-makers from the Republic to engage with Unionism, past or present. *Michael Collins*, however, is not a film that glorifies violence as some Irish as well as many English – critics in the media inaccurately tried to imply.<sup>29</sup> True, Jordan shows that Collins (Liam Neeson) was driven to devise his terrorist methods as a logical strategy to counter the systematic violence of the British Crown forces in Ireland. Perhaps most important for audiences in the Republic was that Jordan took his film past the Treaty, beyond the immediate withdrawal of the British and into the more uncharted cinematic territory of the Irish Civil War that followed independence. Jordan's film probes the postcolonial psyche of the still relatively young state, whose emergence was still within the living memory and whose political configurations had largely followed those set down in the enmity of 1922-23. The scenes in which Collins' assassin (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers) talks with Collins and then Dev (Eamonn de Valera played by Alan Rickman), are suggestive of the young state torn between two versions of its postcolonial future. In an unprecedented, explanatory press statement, the Irish Film Censor, Seamus Smith noted that such was the historical significance of *Michael Collins* that he wished 'to make the film available to the widest possible Irish cinema audience' – despite the graphic violence portrayed – and issued the film with a PG (parental guidance) Certificate.<sup>30</sup> Jordan's film unquestionably favours Collins over de Valera and in the film's pre-credit coda, de Valera's own captioned words ('History will record the greatness of Collins ... at my expense'), the monochrome newsreel footage of Collins' funeral and Elliot Goldenthal's score bring the film to an impressive, elegiac conclusion.

*Michael Collins* is doubly significant because, as the centenary of world cinema was being celebrated in 1996, Jordan's film is a bravura essay on the nation's cinematic past too, pointing up Ireland's particular experience of that 'universal' history. Integral to the political history of violence, Jordan's screenplay engages with the history of US cinema's cultural domination of Ireland through the cinematic medium. Exemplifying the process of postcolonial mimicry out-lined earlier in this book, Jordan appropriates the epic bio-pic, film noir and the gangster movie – popular genres themselves reworked by the independent directors of the New Hollywood – for the present-day concerns of Irish audiences saturated in US cinema. The influence of *The Godfather* (1972) is clear in Jordan's film, most notably in the sequences showing the killings of the Cairo gang (British secret service men) by the Apostles (Collins' gang) and the Tans' reprisal killings at Croke Park, known as Bloody Sunday.<sup>31</sup> Jordan's intercutting of intimacy and violence, sanctity and savagery, imitates Coppola's masterpiece.<sup>32</sup> Visually, the desaturated colour palate and lighting by Chris Menges may be seen

to borrow from *The Godfather* and noir lighting, making silhouetted figures a 'signature for the film'.<sup>33</sup> There are also touches in the screenplay that suggest Jordan was consciously working in visual references to the Western genre, some of which made the final cut, like the Irregular ambush of Collins at Béal na mBláth, for example.<sup>34</sup> In an era of digital special effects, Jordan's film was old-fashioned in that the magnificent shelling of the Four Courts, Dublin, was achieved on location, in real time before the cameras.

The film was a massive logistical undertaking; the crew and cast working quickly in difficult locations. The whole process became a highly publicised and very public occasion in Irish cinema. Open calls for unpaid extras produced thousands eager to re-enact their country's past and the filming coincided with the 'Forum for Peace' meeting in Dublin Castle. The circumstances of the film's production, eventual release and reception could not have been more propitious. It marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the state, becoming a prism through which Northern Ireland was discussed.<sup>35</sup> *Michael Collins* demonstrated that film had become the pre-eminent medium through which Ireland both examines itself and projects its image to the wider world.

## Notes

- 25 Michael O'Dwyer, *The Irish Times* (31 August 1996), 1.
- 26 It made £3 million in Ireland alone where perhaps an average Irish film would make between £350,000-£500,000.
- 27 J. Dean, 'Michael Collins in America', *Film West*, 27 (February 1997), 16—17.
- 28 Jordan has conceded in interview that 'if the film has a fault, it may be difficult for American audiences to approach', S. McSwiney, *Cineaste*, 22:4 (1997), 20.
- 29 Ruth Dudley Edwards in *Daily Mail* (5 November 1996); Brenda Maddox, *The Times* (6 November 1996); and 'Editorial', *Daily Telegraph* (15 October 1996), which called for Warner Brothers to 'withdraw this inflammatory film from circulation - forthwith. Alexander Walker, film critic of the *London Evening Standard*, known for his belligerent attacks on so-called 'pro-Republican' films, defended Jordan's work: 'It isn't a film intended, or likely, to incite violence'. For further quotations from the British press, see *BFI Viewing Notes - Michael Collins* (London, BFI, 1997), compiled by the author.
- 30 This meant that children under twelve were required to be accompanied by an adult to see the movie. Seamus Smith, 'Film Censor: Press Statement' (20 September 1996).
- 31 N. Jordan, *Michael Collins: Film diary and screenplay* (London, Vintage, 1996), scenes 130—49.
- 32 L. Gibbons makes an astute point that Jordan's film unsettles what appears to be an absolute distinction between state violence and terrorist 'godfathers' favoured by a dominant political discourse, thus reminding the Irish state of its foundations in violence, 'Framing history: Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*', *History Ireland*, 5:1 (Spring 1997), 51.
- 33 Jordan, *Michael Collins*, 38.
- 34 Jordan, *Michael Collins*. Sc. 185: 'EXT. FOUR COURTS. NIGHT. Republican sentries stand on the Four Courts roof, like Indians out of a Western' (147). Sc. 239: 'EXT. BÉAL NA MBLÁTH ROADSIDE. DAY. O'Reilly's covering fire is ferocious. Collins pulls two pistols from his belt and stands, firing both simultaneously' (163). The ambush was filmed just outside Hollywood, County Wicklow.
- 35 *The Irish Times* (5 June 1998), 13, reported that Ken Loach was writing a screenplay about the 1916 Rising called, *Stolen Republic*, a title that suggests that the pure line of unreconstructed republicanism remains attractive to some on the British left.