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Why are all the Troubles' films about republicans?

By David McKittrick
Thursday, 30 October 2008

Why oh why — Ulster Protestants and Unionists lament when a movie such as Hunger appears — why can our cause not be depicted sympathetically up there on the screen? Why is it that the IRA gets all the attention? What about us?

Hunger sets out to show how and why IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands deliberately went to his death to advance his cause. It is the latest in a long line of feature films focusing on aspects of Irish republicanism. In some of the scores of Troubles movies the IRA is presented as freedom fighters; in some it is shown as evil; in some its members are depicted as conflicted individuals, often trying to leave violence behind.

Unionists and Protestants in Northern Ireland have two problems with this. The first is that there is so much concentration on republicanism. The second is that their community is, in movie terms, practically invisible.

One far-fetched loyalist view, voiced this week, was that Hunger was part of "a carefully coordinated revisioning of the Irish republican movement". Belfast Protestant playwright Gary Mitchell added: "If you judged Northern Ireland purely on the basis of films you would think there are no Protestants here."

Although many movie-makers are clearly anti-IRA and anti-violence, many of them simultaneously display a fascination with the organisation and the republican cause. Even those who deem it evil, nonetheless find it interesting.

But few writers or producers — inside or outside Northern Ireland — find the Protestant community interesting, few identify with it and few have sought to champion it or even express its concerns. As a result republicans have basically had the big screen pretty much to themselves.

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Hunger sets out to provide an examination of the personal and political motivations of Bobby Sands. Yet there is no Protestant equivalent to it: the republican tradition is regarded as a rich source of cinematic material, but not the Protestant perspective.

Proposals for movies told from a Unionist point of view are rare, according to Richard Williams, CEO of Northern Ireland Screen, the Belfast agency which helped finance Hunger.

"There isn't a pile of projects in our office that we're somehow rejecting," he said. "That sort of material is rarely written — we receive more material that has a broad nationalist slant to it.

"Interestingly, writers from a Protestant background have a tendency to just shift away from here and ply their trade elsewhere. But even when they do stay here, they've a tendency not to write about this sort of thing."

One very obvious exception to the trend of Protestant writers either leaving or opting for non-troubles themes, is the talented playwright Gary Mitchell, who comes from a working-class background and has written a number of well-received works. His work has been hailed as an unflinching warts-and-all portrait of ordinary loyalists, including members of paramilitary groups. With the emergence of Mitchell working-class Protestants at last seemed to have found a dramatic voice.

He once described just how distrustful loyalists are about the arts. "I believe that there is a deep-rooted ignorance of the arts within loyalist communities," he said.

"This is the reality I have always come across within loyalist areas — that they do not trust drama. They will tell you coldly that drama belongs to the Catholics — drama belongs to the nationalists."

Mitchell was apparently destined to write for the screen, but his career was interrupted when unwanted drama entered his own life. The paramilitaries he wrote about did not like his work, and expressed their displeasure in traditional backstreet fashion. They attacked his home in a loyalist part of north Belfast, forcing him and his family out. He has been living at a secret address ever since. There could hardly be a starker illustration of just how alienated from the arts many on the Protestant side are. And this is only one facet of Protestants' problematic relations with the outside world.

For example, journalists who visit Northern Ireland often speak admiringly of the presentational skills of Sinn Fein, while saying they find loyalists shockingly poor at the business of winning friends and influencing people. One Unionist writer, Ruth Dudley Edwards, has spoken of "the Ulster Protestant's fantastic ineptitude in public relations". Another sympathetic commentator, Bruce Anderson, wrote: "In one competition the Ulster Protestants invariably win — year after year, they always retain the Pulitzer Prize for anti-public relations."

Unionism's difficulties with cinema are in other words just part of a deeper problem centring on relations with the outside world.

In movie terms everyone knows the IRA, but many in Hollywood and elsewhere know little or nothing about loyalism. Outsiders who take the trouble to research the Protestant paramilitary undergrowth generally recoil from what they find.

They quickly discover that loyalists killed over a thousand people, the majority of them uninvolved Catholic civilians, often in sectarian assassinations. This is, to say the least, unpromising territory for a feature film.

On the Protestant political side meanwhile there are not a lot of figures who strike a positive international chord. There was talk at one stage of a biopic of the Rev Ian Paisley but, unsurprisingly, it has not emerged. The underlying reality is that the world finds much of interest in the republican story. There is violence, intriguing personalities, a sense of the underdog pitted against the might of Britain. Add in some swirling Celtic music by the Chieftains or Enya, and a movie can easily take shape.

The perceived Protestant narrative, however, is one of a reactionary frontier community grimly holding on and opposing change. That may be something of a parody, but it is enough to make film-makers shudder and turn their attentions elsewhere: they find the republicans intriguing but the Protestants problematic.

There are several ironies here. One is that for decades scores of non-Irish movies have featured songs by Van Morrison, who is an east Belfast Protestant, though a non-political one.

Another is that movies are today regularly made in Belfast, many of them in the absolutely huge paint hall which still stands on the spot of the now-defunct shipyard.

The yard was once a great symbol of Ulster Unionism, but the film-makers now use it for themes such as horror movies and science fiction. Rarely if ever do they shoot anything to do with today's Protestant predicament.

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These half-wits who ignorantly go on about how right it is that Ireland should be reunited or give 'Ireland back to the Irish' etc, all they really do is embarrass themselves. "Give America back to the native indians" or "Give Oz back to the Abbos". Deary me.

Ireland IS in the hands of the Irish: Northern Irish & Southern Irish. Get it?

Ireland will never be "reunited" however while republicans refuse to accept that a sizeable proportion of people on the island of Ireland are not Irish Republicans ie (diddley-diddley-dee music, rebel songs, GAA, Irish tricolours, Irish dancing etc etc).

The more this "Ireland of Equals" gets exposed for what it is, the better.....

Posted by mickey | 31.10.08, 10:01 GMT

The largest group of caucasian descendents in the US are actually of German origin, followed by the english. The Irish are about 7th on the list. There is a growing recognition for the Scots Irish as being a distinct group separate from purely Irish. As someone who by no control of mine was born into a N.I household, I really don't care what international opinion is about N.I. I have my opinions. I have witnessed much and learned a lot. I also have my opinions about the U.S and wish that Irish Americans would apologise for their involvement in the slave trade, Vietnam, conspiring with various terrorist groups from Honduras to Nicaragua to Belfast, Chile, Cuba, supporting groups who torture women before murdering them and putting them in unmarked graves in Ireland, Iraq etc etc.

Posted by Paulo | 31.10.08, 08:51 GMT

The Ulster Scots also left Northern Ireland with bad memories. Many were driven off their land, which they received via the plantation, then emigrated to the colonies. Read up about Andrew Jackson, an Ulster Scot who developed a great hatred for all things British and became U.S. President. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Andrew-Jackson-disobeys-British-officer-1780.png>

Posted by BigLake | 31.10.08, 01:39 GMT

So.What would a Loyalist movie depict.No screen pulling interest of a mass dirty protest(which Loyalist prisoners ultimately benefitted from)And the death of ten men.Collins comes from a different era.In the Name of the Father is about a miscarriage of justice,not Republicanism.

Posted by danny | 30.10.08, 22:09 GMT

I have lived IN Germany 14 years, Italy 10 Years, US 25 years and N. Ireland 20 years. The world simply believes that the Republican cause is right, does not understand why England still controls a quarter of Ireland and has accepted the rightness of a unified and independent Ireland.

Posted by Chris Mooney | 30.10.08, 22:03 GMT

Would like to ask Mary, is she including the Ulster Scot in her 40 million. If not, how many million, are they, and how many Presidents were of Ulster Scot decent. When they left our shores, long before the 1840s, they did not look back, to mother Ireland, but made America their home. The Ulster Scot built America from the beginning, but do not call themselves Irish Americans, just Americans.

Posted by UNIONCRUISER | 30.10.08, 21:42 GMT

Soarer hate to disagree with you however I am a Irish American thats how America is a country of immigrants.....and yes at least 40 million of us proudly display our Irish Heritage.....

Posted by Mary | 30.10.08, 20:28 GMT

Having been born in Belfast, now living in Canada - can I just say it's remarkable that films like this even get made. There are so many talented writers, actors and directors who struggle to have films brought to the screen which don't often follow the Hollywood formula. I know of a number of people who are looking forward to seeing this film when it arrives in our city. Kudos to the talented group of people who were even able to actually overcome many obstacles and make this film.

Posted by Anne | 30.10.08, 19:27 GMT

Its nice to see the Americans have come to save us! Maurice said Britannia no longer rules, true, but who replaced them... some a lot worse. American imperialism.

Need I remind our friends stateside that they have no right to real evenhanded say in this, especially after how they treated the first Irish immigrants when we arrived, how the enslaved the African-Americans, massacred the Native-Americans in their millions, aided oppressive dictatorships in Latin America during the Cold War and conducted illegal wars in Iraq and Afganistan IN CAHOOTS WITH BRITAIN!

Posted by Dave | 30.10.08, 19:12 GMT

to bannside i believe you have got ur facts wrong. the uvf were formed in september 1912, round about the same time the Irish volunteer force was formed. the uvf known as 36th Ulster Division was set up to fight against home rule, Sir Edward

carson irish protestant from dublin. the IRA formerly known as the irish republicain brotherhood (IRB) formed in the late 1800's. I'm proud to be an irish protestant. oh and the first protestants on this island (1500 years ago)

Posted by *stephen* | 30.10.08, 19:08 GMT

I was being ironic phat Tony. Its the line in a famous film, and it suits that truth you referred about catholic oppression in one of your sentences. What truth is that? How can you know everything about the situation? You're as ignorant as almost everyone else on this message board. You obviously haven't travelled well or you just can't be bothered finding out the true facts of Irish history, from both perspectives.

Only here could people turn a reasoned debate about a film into a hate venomous slagging match. We as Irish people should not be proud...we should hang our heads as fools for our inability to get over what are in actual fact petty differences, when you look at other countries.

Posted by *Dave* | 30.10.08, 19:03 GMT

Mary, we are all born with a code to make us human. where we are born is where we come from and our nationality. I expect your parents were born in America and you were too. You are American. You live in an American culture, probably pay American taxes. You are as about as Irish as Vladimir Putin. Just because America has a rather shallow general culture doesnt mean you and 'the 40%' should try and hijack others. You are American. Live with it. If you feel such an infinity then get on a plane and live there.

Posted by *soarer* | 30.10.08, 19:00 GMT

Earl.....thank you for your comments and I do hope all young Irish people can stay home and work and make there country what it should be beautiful, with liberty and justice for all.....the movie cant wait to see will be frist in line and then the dvd it will become part of my irish heritage.....a very proud Irish American.

Posted by *Mary* | 30.10.08, 18:57 GMT

Mary... This time, I disagree with you, although you may have a point. The misconception of most North Americans is that we left because of subjugation by the British. That may be true of what happened 1 to 3 hundred years ago. Then Irish were forced out, famine, persecution, not to mention penal servitude, but not today. We were leaving Ireland decades ago because of unemployment, bad living conditions, fear for our lives from terrorism on both sides and just the fact of having a better living in another more prosperous country.

Earl. Canada

Posted by *Earl* | 30.10.08, 18:39 GMT

Thank you Maurice just another wonderful American whom is so proud of there roots and tells it like it is.....you sum it up well buddy lets line up at the movies and hopefully this will be oscar worthy-----another proud Irish American.

Posted by *JoJo* | 30.10.08, 18:35 GMT

The majority of us don't give a toss about religion. It is only the pathetic losers with too much time on there hands, allowing them to post a million comments on here, that are interested in this sectarian nonsense. The rest of us have real issues to worry about. And this are article is just sh*t stirring rubbish. I'm all up for political debate based on real politics but these sectarian 'arguments' being dishd out here are based on stupidity. Really are boring. You idiots need to realise the world is a big place and nobody really cares about your squabbling. Take away your hatred and you'd have nothing left. I suspect your whole lives are built upon sectarianism. What are you hobbies? Painting kerb stones, supporting Glasgow football teams, supporting illegal activities and gangsters, marching/protesting for 'your side'...I could go on. Is anything in your lives not based on sectarian lines? Wake up you muppets. I'm sick of it and the pathetic Stormont politicians who represent you.

Posted by *FedUpwithyoulot* | 30.10.08, 18:30 GMT

Have none of you heard of the 'blarney'? Too many of the population are naive enough to believe in it whereas others have the ability to think for themselves!

Posted by *robbo* | 30.10.08, 18:17 GMT

its simple...Irish (catholics) are liked (nobody has any beef with them) around the world. Especially in the US where movies really make \$\$ the Irish Amerian population (40 mil approx) are seen as kindred spirits because just like the founders of the United States the Irish revolutionary leaders fought the imperial British...

Not alone did they fight, but when faced with overwhelming odds, were willing to die of hunger for what they believed...and world governments supported their efforts...there is no glory in international bullying-something the Brits have been good at over time...thankfully is no more rule for Bratannia...now all you got is a old, stale royal family and Beckham - who doesnt even want to live there anymore...

In the final analysis the British are simply unliked around the world. There is a price to be paid for being unpopular...this can be seen in movie scripts.

Posted by *Maurice O'Byrne, San Jose* | 30.10.08, 18:17 GMT

Tom really have you read your history books, most Irish people had to leave there land because of the Brits thats why we are all over the worldWalk down a street in the USA ask anyone here most of us have Irish in us

Posted by *Mary* | 30.10.08, 18:11 GMT

Who cares about Protestants and Roman Catholics? Why should the non believers have to put up with this c**p?

Posted by *william campbell* | 30.10.08, 18:09 GMT

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