The National College of Art and Design
Design Faculty, Department of Visual Communications

THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

The Film Michael Collins and the Question of Irish Identity

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The Film Michael Collins and the Question of Irish Identity

by
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Table of Contents

List Of Plates

Introduction

My interest in the area of Irish identity stems from the fact that I am from an Anglo-Irish background, born in England but having spent most of my life in Ireland, which made me aware of nationality from an early age. Growing up along the border with South Armagh added an extra dimension to issues relating to my own identity. While searching for a suitable thesis subject, I kept being confronted with articles about a film that was still months away from release - Michael Collins. (Jordan, 1996) Director Neil Jordan is known for his controversial explorations of Irishness.

The Michael Collins story is one which was pushed into the background for the last seventy years. The release of the film has allowed it to return and be assessed openly.The release of the film has prompted comparisons between political events in Collins' time and the situation in Northern Ireland today. The earlier events are seen as the beginning of the conflict and in them there is considered to be the key to a solution today. Of personal interest to me, and a little known fact, was that Michael Collins was the Dáil representative for Armagh.

It is difficult decipher the "real" Michael Collins from over seventy years of myth making and debate. I decided to concentrate on the significance that the film has for Irish people today. I found it was useful to attend a conference entitled Projecting the Nation: National Cinema in an International Frame. (Irish Film Centre, 15-17/11/1996) This luckily coincided with the film's release, when the media speculation was at its height. The fact that this speculation entered the arena of the conference was in itself indicative of the all pervasive nature of Michael Collins. It was also helpful that discussion on the film applied to most of the areas for debate in the conference, and this has given me the title of my first chapter "Projecting The Nation." The natural follow on from looking at the significance of the film for the nation, was to look at what, in fact, had returned. What does Michael Collins mean to us now? This is what I will be looking at in chapter two.

From the beginning it was clear that Michael Collins was never going to be judged on its merits as a film. Perceived political implications and the focus on sensitive aspects of Irish history would form much of the basis for discussion. I will begin my first chapter with a brief background to a complex story.

Towards the Big Screen; A Brief History of Events.

Michael Collins opens with scenes of fighting amid the rubble of the General Post Office in Dublin. It is 1916 and Ireland is still part of the British Empire. The small group of Irishmen who have occupied the GPO eventually surrender to British forces, among them twenty six year old Michael Collins, played by Liam Neeson.

As the insurgents were led away the crowd of onlookers jeered. Many of these ordinary Dublin folk had sons and brothers fighting for Britain in World War One, and so ignored the Proclamation of a Republic which was issued from within the GPO by the "Rebels." However, within months public opinion was to change. The leaders of the Easter Rising as it became known, were executed, a move which roused the nationalist sentiment in Ireland better than any rising. Sinn Féin, the party whose aim was a Republic of Ireland, overwhelmingly won the 1918 General Election in Ireland. The victors refused to take their seats at Westminster, and instead formed Ireland's first (illegal) parliament, known as Dáil Éireann, in 1919. Eamon de Valera, the Sinn Fein leader who took part in the Rising, but was spared execution by virtue of having been born in America, became the President of the unofficial Dáil.

Plate 1. Liam Neeson surrenders to British forces.

There followed almost two years of bloodshed. The War of Independence was characterised by guerilla attacks by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) headed by Michael Collins, and reprisals carried out on the Irish population by a force sent over especially from Britain known as the "Black and Tans." Eventually Britain declared a truce, and negotiations began in London between an experienced British team which included Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George, the Liberal Prime Minister, and an Irish delegation headed by Arthur Griffith, who had founded Sinn Fein. On December the sixth, 1922, a treaty was signed. Twenty six counties would become known as the Irish Free State, while the six counties, in Northern Ireland would remain as they were under the terms of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. In other words, the North was to be a separate jurisdiction. (Coogan, 1992, p.452)

When the delegation brought the Treaty to Ireland, a series of bitter Dáil debates followed. It was felt by Republican die-hards, led by Eamon de Valera, to be a betrayal of an Irish Republic, because the country was to remain part of the Commonwealth and allegiance had to be sworn to the Crown by members of the Free State parliament. The Treaty was ratified by the Dáil, by a narrow majority of sixty four to fifty seven. De Valera walked out in protest, taking the anti-Treaty deputies with him. Arthur Griffith became the Taoiseach of the Irish Free State. Michael Collins was made Commander in Chief of the new Irish Army, and in this role, led the government forces against former colleagues that he himself had trained - the anti-Treaty (Irregular) IRA in the civil war that followed.

Families were literally split, brother against brother, father against son. The Civil War is such a dark period of Ireland's past that even today few are willing to discuss it. It was a defining period for Irish identity, for example today's two main political parties in Ireland, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, grew out of the anti-Treaty and pro-Treaty sides respectively.

Upon signing the Treaty, Lord Birkenhead turned to a younger man, his counterpart on the Irish delegation, and said, "I may have signed my political death-warrant tonight." The young man answered in the prophetic words that every Irish school-child learns - "I may have signed my actual death warrant."(Coogan, 1992, p.276) Within a year of uttering this, thirty-one year old Collins was dead. He died at the height of the Civil War - the only victim of a fatal ambush at Béal na mBláth, (The Mouth of Flowers) just a few miles from where he grew up, in County Cork. The identity of his killer remains a mystery, fuelling conspiracy theories to this day. His name passed into a distant memory. He was at one time "the most wanted man in Ireland," yet he rode around Dublin on a bicycle, coordinating the War of Independence. With his impressive stature and jovial personality, he was for more ways than one known as "the Big Fella." By all accounts he charmed those he met with natural appeal. During the negotiations he became a darling of London society, and rumours persist that despite his engagement to Kitty Kiernan, he had affairs with notable high society women. All of this adds to the lure of a man who seventy-five years after his death is again captivating audiences - this time from the screen.

There have been four previous films which feature Michael Collins, however, in these he appears under a pseudonym, and Neil Jordan's is the first to name him as Collins.[1] (Rockett, 1995, p.7) That he was not named could be no greater example of how his existence and importance in the foundation of the state was ignored.

Don't mention the war

When Sean O' Casey's play The Plough and the Stars opened in the Abbey in 1926, it was greeted by jeers of protest. It seemed that the events it dealt with, just ten years before, had already been forgotten. Set in tenement Dublin, in the few days surrounding the Easter Rising, it chronicled the lives of ordinary people whose main concern was daily living. This collective amnesia is a feature of Irish identity. We are unwilling to face, or discuss, aspects of the past. Neil Jordan noted that in 1975, he was passing through the funeral of Eamon de Valera in Dublin and "his eye was drawn to the number of people who seemed to be watching it, not directly, but on the televisions in shop windows. This image of how difficult it can be for people to look their own history in the face, and how much easier it can be to see it on screen, haunted him." This led him to write his first novel The Past. (O'Toole, 1996) As it has been a feature of Irish history that through writing and performance thoughts on identity and the past have been expressed, so Michael Collins is brought to us by the late twentieth century cultural signifier, film. It seems that the medium has become the best way to educate not only foreign, but our own audiences as to events of Irish concern. Former writers, such as Jordan and Jim Sheridan are the most internationally successful.

1996 was the centenary of cinema in Ireland. To mark the occasion, the Irish Film Centre(IFC) held a conference entitled Projecting The Nation - National Cinema in an International Frame (15 - 17 November 1996) This was a series of lectures and debates about cinema's role in the nation today, the future of so-called national cinema and the historical relationships between cinema and the nation state. Interestingly, the history of cinema is older than that of the state, so we are in the rather rare position of being able to have the state's history captured on film, both dramatised and in documentary. How appropriate then, that the history of the nation should also come up for debate, both inside and outside the conference, with the release of Michael Collins, which has been described as Ireland's Birth of the Nation - a "tragic and moving account of the birth pangs of the state,"(Mac Conghail, 1996, p.20)

Ironically, it was Michael Collins who first saw the propaganda value of the relatively new medium of film, when in 1919 he ordered the filming of the funeral of Thomas Ashe[2], at which he stepped forward from the crowd and delivered his first powerful oration.(Bragg, South Bank Show, 1996).This gives us an insight into Collins' character, who is considered to be an astute observer of events, a forward thinker and resourceful revolutionary, as portrayed in Neil Jordan's "biopic." He also realised film's role as cultural signifier - "There is a certain irony in the fact that it was Michael Collins who first realised the importance of cinema for creating the self-images of the emergent Irish nation, arranging for popular demonstrations to be filmed as forms of mass mobilisation." (Gibbons, 1996, p.2)

In another of the ironies in the relationship between cinema and the state, Emmet Dalton, co-founder of the first National Film Studios, at Ardmore in 1958, accompanied Collins on his fatal trip to Béal Na mBláth, and even today the suspicion that he actually killed Collins hangs over him posthumously. Film also offers a further example of the complexity of Irish identity - it was a Fianna Fail government who grant - aided the studios. Seán Lemass the Taoiseach was a former IRA Volunteer (opposite Collins) and "heir apparent" to de Valera.(Rockett, 1987, p. 99)

Reassessment of the Statesman

Plate 2. Eamon de Valera, who dominated Irish society for most of the state's history

"It is my considered opinion that in the fullness of time, history will record the greatness of Michael Collins, and it will be at my expense." Eamon de Valera. president of Ireland, in1966. (Coogan, 1992, p.432) Jordan uses this quote to end Michael Collins. The contradictions of a national identity, present in the story of the nation itself, are now reflected in Michael Collins. Much of the commentary surrounding the film is to the effect that it "offers Ireland a unique opportunity to confront its past."(Lee, 3/11/1996) A way to explore this is to use the example of film-maker Neil Jordan, who represents "the Ireland that emerged from the de Valera/ Collins stand off - a chip on the shoulder society, embarrassed by its poverty, proud of its literary riches, repressed by its sexuality dominated by the Catholic Church."

Many people, including Paul Power, (Martin, 1996) see the portrayal of Eamon de Valera as more significant than that of Michael Collins in the film. What would surprise anyone who did not have a knowledge of Irish history, is that de Valera split with Sinn Féin and went on to found Fianna Fail in 1926 - the most successful Irish political party to date. In an astonishing turnabout, this party took their seats in the Free State Dáil, and de Valera went on to become the Taoiseach, following election victory in 1932. Ten years after the speeches about wading through the blood of Irish men rather than recognise the Free State, ten years after the death of Collins, he begins using the terms of the Treaty for what Collins had argued for - as a stepping stone to greater freedom. Effectively de Valera dismantled the Treaty from within, negotiating with Britain and most importantly, abolishing the oath of allegiance. He is acknowledged as achieving this through remarkable statesmanship.

Under him the constitution was drawn up in 1937. He continued with a rigorous system of censorship. The stifling of the arts can be compared to the supression of the Michael Collins story. He founded a national newspaper, the Irish Press aware of the lack of antidote to British tabloids, but which critics see as safeguarding his party's position in the eyes of the people. De Valera realised that the "myths he had spun around himself" would be jeopardised in future because of "critical re-appraisal." (Coogan, 1992, p.432)

The casting of Alan Rickman, an actor famed for his roles as "villainous" baddies, in the role of de Valera could be seen as this critical re-appraisal. Where Michael Collins is the hero, Eamon de Valera is the villain with blood on his hands. Suspicion surrounds his every action,which begin to appear to be an attempt to thwart Collins personally. De Valera goes to America when Collins needs him in Ireland. In sending Collins against his will to the Treaty negotiations, he is seen to sacrifice him. When Collins returns with the Treaty, de Valera is prepared to "wade through the blood of Irish men" in order to reject it. His motivations therefore are exposed as power and personal gain, and not in the national interests. There is disquiet that Harry Boland in the film expresses grief at the partition of Ireland. It has been pointed out (Lee, 1996, p.15) that the reason for the split on the Treaty was the oath of allegiance, and not the partition. In fact, Northern Ireland had been surrendered to Britain in 1920 as a pre-condition to negotiations. This is another example of how a popular but inaccurate assumption has been highlighted by discussions surrounding the film. "Homogeneous Ireland has elevated its common enemy (Britain) to paper over its own divisions." This was said by David Ervine, Progressive Unionist leader, when asked to give his view of Michael Collins. (South Bank Show, 1996)

Plate 3. Liam Neeson and Alan Rickman. The split between the Irish themselves is the greatest tragedy in Michael Collins.

Most controversial are the scenes leading up to Collins' death, which appear to implicate de Valera in the assassination. Collins returns to his native Cork, relatively happy that he is safe in his "homeland." The final scenes move swiftly along. A young Irregular messenger is deployed by de Valera to discuss a meeting with Collins. De Valera breaks down in tears, almost speechless when he overhears Collins' plea for an end to the war. The youth disappears with an obvious sinister intent. He later leads a band of young Irregulars to a position overlooking the route Collins will take, and takes pleasure in killing Collins. De Valera was involved in so far as he led the opposition to the Treaty which resulted in civil war. These scenes are open to interpretation. I believe that they show that once war had started, there could be no backing down from the positions adopted which were different perceptions of Irishness. Neil Jordan has gone on record as saying that he wanted to bring the two main protagonists in the film together before Collins died, and in doing so Collins' final thoughts would reach de Valera. (Jordan, 1996, South Bank Show) He admits that this is a symbolic interpretation. As with the omittance of the London negotiations, this shows Jordan's characters to come to their essential realisations between themselves. Collins and de Valera then, at the end, have come, I believe, not only to symbolise the Civil War divide, but the Ireland in the future that will be the consequence of the Civil War. The meaning I get from these final scenes is that the greatest tragedy not only of Michael Collins but of the Civil War itself is the divide between the Irish themselves.

Apart from Sfle de Valera TD's condemnation of the portrayal of her grandfather, (de Valera, 27/10/1996, p.32) Fianna Fáil have refrained from comment. Conor Cruise O' Brien has gone as far as to say that a party that does not defend its founder is "sick" and as Fianna Fáil is such a part of the nation, therefore the nation is "sick." (O'Brien, 30/11/1996) Even though there is no longer the same awareness of de Valera among the present young generation, (Hannon interview) it was not until the advent of Jordan's film, I believe, that a less than savoury background to the statesman was openly considered.

Liam Collins is Michael Collins nephew, and spokesperson for the Collins family. Neil Jordan consulted him at the planning stages of the film. I spoke to him by telephone to get his reaction to the film. (Martin, 6/2/97) He said that the last ten years had been significant for the change in attitude towards Michael Collins - "The Civil War thing has died down." Not only this, but the time had come for Ireland to bury its civil war differences. Ironically, the way this is being done is to unearth aspects of the past, respect them and face them. Liam Collins feels strongly about this; it was he who instigated the restoration of the family home at Woodfield, in order for it to be opened as a national memorial to Collins in 1990. He did this as "an attempt at a reconciliation ceremony." Not only should Collins get the recognition that he deserves, the remnants of the divisions of the Civil War have to go for the sake of the country. He described the opening of Woodfield was a "step forward." I wonder if Liam Collins noticed the irony of his words there. His uncle had wanted to see the Treaty as a stepping stone, and wanted Irish people to be united on it. Collins' values have become symbols for how the nation can and should confront differences and aid reconciliation. Sfle de Valera attended the opening of Woodfield at Collins' invitation, and in fact the Collins and de Valera families have remained friends to this day. In this way Collins "returned" in a reconciliatory capacity. This could be seen as an almost complete reversal of the situation over thirty years ago

when Eamon de Valera turned down the offer to be the patron of the Michael Collins Foundation. (Coogan, 1992, p.432)

Liam Collins sees the advent of various films as having brought about a much greater understanding of Michael Collins. He cited The Shadow of Beal na mBlath[3], a documentary examining the various theories about the death of Collins, The Treaty, which showed Collins as the central figure in the Irish delegation, and Michael Collins. While emphasising that Michael Collins is not a documentary, he said that the family are happy that it has "thrown a different light" on Collins himself, and their reaction to it is positive. This was because they feel that "very definitely," the history books have ignored him. In fact, he felt Tim Pat Coogan's biography was the important moment in the telling of the Michael Collins story; the various films followed it. Coogan's book was a positive account of a man who, in Coogan's words, made Ireland. It is notable for the fact that Coogan was the editor of the Irish Press for twenty years, yet contains observations of the contradictions and ambiguities of that newspaper's founder, Eamon de Valera.

"A most unfortunate speech" is how Liam Collins described de Valera's speech on the seventeenth of March 1921. This shows the depths of emotion this subject can bring. I had asked him for his emotional response to the film. I had thought he would answer in relation to the sight of someone on screen portraying Collins himself. However, he pointed to the Civil War as "the most saddening episode of the whole of Irish history." He was thinking of Northern Ireland today, and admits to a feeling of despair that things look to be getting worse, and has obviously given much thought to the subject. What could be more telling of the futility of violence and the despair felt in Northern Ireland than a man born at the time of the Civil War who still feels anguished that it has not been settled? Liam Collins, though admitting to personal bias, believes that had Collins lived, the situation would not be as it is today. He believes that the "time for action" was between 1920 and 1930, and that Collins' absence was significant. Had all sides accepted the Treaty, which Liam Collins believes they should, there would have been a unified approach to settling the Northern Ireland situation. "It wasn't a combined effort." It took "tremendous courage" on the parts of Arthur Griffith and Collins to sign the Treaty, and they should have been given the chance to make it work. This shows the saddening nature of the Civil War. "It is only since the 1990s that the subject (the effect of partition on the south) has been visited by Irish film-makers and even then only within the context of narratives which examine the continuing tension and bitterness which sours rural relationships." (Rockett, 1995 p.7)

This Other Eden

Michael Collins is the repressed part of Irish history. He therefore represents the repression of emotions to do with that history. His return, coinciding as it does with a reassessment of Civil War differences could be seen as therapy for the nation.

That the Michael Collins story can be used as "therapy" for the nations ills can be seen in a previous incarnation (of the Collins story.) This Other Eden (Muriel Box, 1959)looked at life in a

rural village thirty years after the death of "fictional" Commandant Jack Carberry, a native of the village who was in charge of the Irish in the War of Independence. His friend, who was with him in the car when he was shot, Devereaux, now runs the local newspaper. Old wounds reopen as plans to unveil a monument to Carberry divide the town. Into the fray steps an English reporter, named Brown, who later transpires to be the son of the British General Carberry and Devereaux had planned to meet. The generation-long held suspicion that General Brown planned Carberry's assassination is laid to rest as Brown describes the years of guilt endured by his recently dead father over the aborted meeting, and his genuine desire for a settlement. This film would not be as interesting were it not for the fact that it was produced by Emmet Dalton, the friend who was in the car with Collins, and who even today is suspected of involvement in Collins' death. When Neil Jordan was making Michael Collins he had a strange meeting with a journalist[3] who claimed to have access to Dalton's diaries - in them proof that he committed the murder. (Jordan, 1996, p.28) Apparently de Valera and Collins had wanted to meet to arrange a truce, but extremists on both sides wanted to keep the War going and arranged to have their respective leaders killed. Liam Lynch did not get the opportunity to kill de Valera. This claim was withdrawn in as strange a manner as it was made.[4] This highlights how intriguing and controversial Collins' death still is, bearing in mind that the characters and events were crucial to forming the nation. Devereaux runs the local newspaper, and so is in charge of "truth." The person in charge of truth in the country presents their own vision of Irishness. It can only be supposed that This Other Eden was a personal attempt to redress such allegations, since Devereaux also comes under the suspicion of having killed Carberry. It is worth noting that Jordan merged the characters of Dalton and O' Reilly into one, named O'Reilly, in order to keep the list of characters down. (Jordan, 1996, p.9) Whatever the reason, the result is that Dalton doesn't quite make it to the screen in this version either. This is ironic, given that Michael Collins is seen as at last allowing the real protagonists of the time to be portrayed. It is noteworthy that it is the War of Independence that is chosen, and not the Civil War.

Plate 4. Ian Hart plays Joe O'Reilly. This character merges O' Reilly with Emmet Dalton.

Plate 5. Emmet Dalton.

Confronting Today's Ireland

Jordan's previous Irish films have drawn heavily on symbolism. For example Angel (Jordan, 1982) features a young innocent deaf and mute girl who is the chance victim of brutal terrorism. The irony being that in Northern Ireland the protective value of keeping your mouth shut and turning a deaf ear is all too widely known. The resulting main character Danny's (Stephen Rea) spiral into (self) destruction is also symbolic of violence borne from violence. The Crying Game (Jordan, 1992) features a black, homosexual English soldier, his transsexual lover, an IRA man (Fergus, also played by Rea) who goes through a crisis of conscience, the ruthless hardliners of the IRA, (to name but a few) all played out in the setting of South Armagh and England - first and last resort for the Irish in trouble at home. The film explores themes of conflicting aspects of identity. "The blood of an unresolved national conflict flows through Angel, The Crying Game and now Michael Collins.(O'Toole,1996)Jordan has said that The War of Independence was not too far from a civil war - from a war about different concepts about what was to be Irish."(South Bank Show, 1996)

Probably because of Jordan's record of setting films in contemporary Northern Ireland, Michael Collins is being seen as "another" film about Northern Ireland. This is despite the fact that unlike the others, it is both non-fiction, (despite the accusations to the contrary!) historical, and set in Southern Ireland, as it was before partition. I will later be dealing with Collins as a political figure. However there are some other comparisons.

Both Angel and The Crying Game feature nationalist main characters who are caught up in violence. Though Danny in Angel isn't in the IRA, he is from South Armagh and embarks on a killing spree. As Jordan says

> (The Crying Game) refused to make *a priori* judgements on its central character. He was not presented as a psychopath or a cold-blooded terrorist, but as a rational human being. His actions, however dreadful in themselves, were not motivated by pathology but by a political point of view, which itself was amenable to change...I wanted to see where this central character, informed by a political perspective which is as old as the island itself, as the conflict itself, could go. (Jordan, 1996, p.5)

With this Jordan has summed up the reason for the controversy not only over The Crying Game, but Michael Collins as well. He has also, appropriately given us as clue as to how Michael Collins has been seen, and is still seen, by much of the Irish population today. By his supporters he is seen as a "mastermind" (Bragg, 1996, The South Bank Show) which places him above the position of psychopath. He is viewed as having played the British at their own game of dirty tricks and atrocity. Like Fergus in The Crying Game who "was confronted with the whole maelstrom of the contemporary wider world - issues of race, of gender, of a wider responsibility than the narrow confines of South Armagh,"(Jordan, 1996, p.6) Collins was a product of the West Cork of the early part of the twentieth century. "You can take the man out of West Cork but you can't take West Cork out of the man." (Jordan, 1996) South Armagh, otherwise known as "bandit country" has been described as the West Cork of today (MacSwiney, 1996, p.11) - the British presence largely unpopular with the nationalist population, the conflict between the two, the hostile landscape and the fear of ambush, and the reputation as a breeding ground for resistance to British rule. When the ceasefire broke down it was generally considered that the South Armagh IRA were responsible. Their present argument is that they are not terrorists but a legitimate army fighting an occupying

force. This has resonances in Collins' time. The term used for the Collins' led guerilla campaign of 1919 -1921 is The War of Independence. If the present turns out to also be a transitional time in Irish history, then there could be a reassessment of the IRA as revolutionaries. This could mean that in future Michael Collins could be seen as highly symbolic, and given even greater significance.

Plate 6. Stephen Rea (right) as the IRA man in The Crying Game, who, like Michael Collins earns the sympathy of the audience.

When Jordan first turned to film he said that here "at last was a medium which could tell a story without the burden of history on its shoulders." (OToole, 1996) Michael Collins has been described as Ireland's Braveheart. It deals epically with the beginnings of resistance to British rule, and the "terrorist" who becomes the national hero. Ireland experienced a taste of this, as Braveheart was largely shot here. It also utilised the acting talents of the masses, including that of the Irish Army, and so can be compared to an "event" also.

> One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename and reinhabit the land. And with that came a whole set of further assertions, recoveries, and identifications, all of them quite literally ground on this poetically projected base. The search for authenticity, for a more congenial origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths and religions - these too are made possible by a sense of the land reappropriated by its people. And along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonised identity, there always goes on almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language. (Said, 1996, p.273)

Fears were expressed that Braveheart also glorified (terrorist) violence, and elevated England to the status of "enemy." The present Scottish National party's proposals for devolution were very much in the minds of the critics. Likewise, there was concern that Michael Collins would foster support for Irish nationalism.

"Things lacking in a story like this: a funeral and a hunger-strike. Two things endemic to the mythology." Neil Jordan describing the making of Michael Collins. (Jordan,1996). A scene in Michael Collins has echoes of the 1980 -81 Hunger-strike, a bitter time in Anglo -Irish relations. Collins is electioneering for Sinn Fein candidate de Valera, who is in jail for his part in the Easter Rising. "The fact that the candidate you are being asked to vote for is at this moment rotting in an

English jail shouldn't put you off. I was in one myself until a week ago!" Bobby Sands became an IRA martyr in 1981 when he was elected an MP while on hunger-strike in jail, and died a few days later. In this way history repeated itself. There was generally no popular support for Sinn Fein in 1918 or 1981, until Britain was seen to be guilty of flagrant human rights transgressions. In 1918 it was the execution of many ill, young or crippled prisoners which created the conditions for an overwhelming Sinn Fein victory in the General Election. In 1981 it was "allowing" ten young men to starve to death in her prisons. The affair still rankles in Northern Ireland, particularly in nationalist areas such as South Armagh. Past misdeeds return to haunt Britain. Film is inextricably linked to this trend.

In the past ten years more films have been made here than in the previous ninety. High profile miscarriages of justice have raised the status of the Irish in Britain and focused global attention on Ireland. Britain meanwhile has faced international criticism over its handling of such cases. A film such as In The Name of the Father, (Sheridan, 1993) for example, challenged the dependability of the British judicial system, and highlighted such issues as high-level discrimination and anti-Irish rascism. Questions such as the validity of Britain's role in Northern Ireland are inevitably raised in context of an innocent Irish man from a nationalist background in an English jail. Michael Collins can be seen as another film in this genre. It raises the issue of our historical, and hence, present relationship with Britain. Central to this uncomfortable controversy are the divisions within Irish identities. Accusations such as "anti- British," and "IRA Propaganda" are levelled at film-makers who enter this territory.(Harris, 1996.) On the one hand, people such as Eoghan Harris are "West- Brits," a derogatory term for those who appear to stand for all things British at the expense of things Irish. At the opposite extreme are people whom Harris would see as merely being racist towards the British.

Before Michael Collins was released, another film about such events caused controversy in 1996. Some Mother's Son, (George, 1996) dealt with the relationship between two mothers of sons on Hunger-strike in prison. Though the characterisation was fictional, the Hunger-strike of 1981 which it was based on, were not. Real-life figures, such as Bobby Sands make fleeting appearances. The use of the two women, who were symbolic of the reaction to the Hunger-strike by the population at large, highlights a device used by film-makers - the use of inter-personal, often family, relationships to symbolise identity difference and the conflict within this identity. In the Name of the Father focused on the relationship between jailed father and son Gerry and Guiseppe Conlon, to explore the miscarriage of justice of the Guildford Four. However, the two were never in jail together. The use of this device, otherwise known as a grave misrepresentation of the facts, draws much criticism, as it does in Michael Collins.

A Tale of Revolution

> Stories...become the method colonised people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who won it back, and who now plans for its future - these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves are narration. (Said, 1994, p.)

Michael Collins focuses on a time when such issues were literally being fought over, and in reality decided at the negotiating table. Ireland emerged from this time. The success of a nationalist movement depended on the idea of there always having been a nation - to restore and go back to. The nineteenth century saw a growth of nationalist movements across Europe. Germany and Italy became nations, where once there were a collection of states and principalities. Common culture, language and religion were the unifying forces, but it has been shown that nationalism is borne out of perceived difference more than anything. For example, what united Germans was that they were *not* French, and not Catholic. In Ireland's case, her colonisation meant that Irish nationalism was dependent on, and the result of British Imperialism. The unifying factor was colonisation. This meant popular support for cultural, political and agrarian nationalistic movements. The reputation of Ireland as home of playwrights, poets and writers stems from this time. The success of a National Cinema depends on a strong theatrical tradition, usually in the capital city, because of the actors and writing and directing associated with it, as well as an audience familiar with the pastime of going to see native drama. (Jameson, IFC Centenary Conference) So in more ways than one Michael Collins is bound up in the narration of Ireland. It is a success story of the cinematic tradition that has followed on from the literary revival. It also tells the story of the background to the state.

Entwined with the Gaelic Revival was the principle aim of promoting the Irish language. It was inevitable that nationalists were drawn to such movements - Yeats perhaps best illustrates the complexity. He was in love with Maud Gonne, but could not reconcile this with her fervent nationalism, which is the subject of many of his poems. Michael Collins drew on, and was inspired by, the past, being well versed in tales and legend. "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, it's with O'Leary in the grave..." This line, from Yeats September 1913, sums up his disillusionment with nationalists who used violence without realising what they were really fighting for, which was, according to him, an ideal Ireland. The poetry of the period brings out the traditional depiction of Ireland as female. Kitty Kiernan in Michael Collins is the personification of Ireland. She represents for Collins something worth fighting for.

Cathleen "Kitty" Ní Houlihan

Plate 7. The love triangle of Collins, Boland (Aidan Quinn), and Kitty (Julia Roberts) which symbolises the tragedy of the Civil War.

" When women enter the male world of war and conflict, they are often represented as the passive or neurotic bystanders of the action."(Rockett, 1996, p.119) I will later suggest that Kitty Kiernan is a Maid Marian figure. She fits in quite comfortably with Collins' ideology - there is no conflict here between love for a woman and love for a country. In fact as Melvin Bragg pointed out to Neil Jordan, (South Bank Show, 1996) a one - woman man surely reinforces fidelity to a cause? Jordan saw Kitty as being the catalyst - the real love story was between Collins and Harry Boland. The real tragedy in Michael Collins then becomes the break-up of Boland and Collins. The break-up of the love triangle of Collins, Boland and Kitty, coinciding as it does with the IRA split is significant - from then on things go wrong, ending ultimately with the death of Collins. The two men symbolise the tragic ironies that are the nature of civil war. They sleep together as brothers, best friends committed to each other as well as the cause - in love with the same woman. The ideal is destiny, the ultimate ending, a marriage. But inevitably this means that hearts will be broken. Collins dies. How is the scale of the tragedy to Ireland represented for the audience? In the symbolism of a wedding day cancelled, a bride to be cruelly bereaved. Scenes of Kitty choosing bridal wear are intercut with scenes from Béal na mBláth. The plans for the wedding mirror the dreams that Collins (and us, as the audience) had for Ireland. "She moves through the fair" sung by Sinéad O'Connor, is used by the South Bank Show to link these scenes to scenes of present day Belfast, which means that it becomes symbolic of hopes for the future. In the film, Kitty sings this to Collins soon after they first meet. As yet he has not won her heart and can only aspire to winning it. In the same way he can only aspire to winning Irish freedom.

There is an alternative to Cathleen Ní Houlihan for Collins. In Beloved Enemy (Potter, 1936) Collins/Reardon's intended is Lady Helen Athleigh, who by being both British and the daughter of a

British negotiator, represents the opposite of Collins. Herein lies a conflict absent from Michael Collins but present in Irish cultural narration. Through her Reardon comes to realise the importance of negotiation and compromise, and their proposed union is the embodiment of inter-cultural harmony. Jordan wanted to show how Collins came to his essential realisations through his Irish relations -the Collins /de Valera relationship being the most important of these, representing as it did the contradictions of Irish identity. There is an aside to leaving out the treaty negotiations from Michael Collins. Collins' rumoured affairs, one with Lady Helen Lavery, society lady and wife of Irish painter John Lavery never materialise. Whatever the reasons for their omittance, the result is the strengthened heroism of Collins. In Beloved Enemy, Lady Helen is a "barely disguised" Hazel Lavery (Still Irish). Ironically, Lady Lavery appeared on Irish bank notes for years, and her husband John used her as the model for Cathleen Ní Houlihan in one of his most well known paintings. Kitty Kiernan, however, died in relative obscurity in the forties, having later married, and lived a life out of the public eye. This probably makes her a more natural choice for idealisation. Lady Lavery will always be known in Ireland for tuning up in widow's garb at Collins' funeral, and displaying a very public outpouring of grief. She does not seem to be a heroine worthy of Collins in Irish memory - a high society lady, notorious for her love affairs and apparently given to writing her own love-letters from Collins.

Plate 8.
Julia Roberts as Kitty

Plate 9.
Kitty Kiernan

Plate 10.
Beloved Enemy, 1936
contained a barely
disguised Hazel Lavery.

Plate 11.
Hazel Lavery
as Cathleen Ní Houlihan

The only other type of woman in Michael Collins is a prostitute. Prostitutes are seen outside Lincoln Jail - de Valera escapes disguised as one, which affords the audience a humourous moment. Such characters as Rosie, a messenger, are no more than versions of Kitty - passive devices for the male characters. As the female audience has no strong character to identify with, women are not made to feel part of the foundation of the state.

In place of the London negotiations are scenes of Kitty, who has finally come to realise she is in love with Collins. Again, this is a symbolic interpretation of important events. One particular sequence of scenes is controversial. Shots of Michael and Kitty in a hotel room are interspersed with the Cairo Gang assassinations Michael has ordered. Collins, through speaking of his love for Kitty, wrestles with his conscience over the violence that he is committed to. This is where the issue of our hero having blood on his hands is addressed, and has drawn criticism for the easy way in which the issue is resolved. "Jesus I hate you," Kitty tells Collins, who replies "me too." (Jackson, 10/11/1996) According to Jackson, the audience do not believe that any crisis of conscience occurs here. When a British agent is about to be killed we think that the violence is going to be questioned. The man wants to spare his wife "the spectacle," and so she is led from the room. However, the agent uses her as a shield, pulling out his gun to begin firing on the assassins. When he has been shot, the "wife" screams in a loud Dublin accent, "I'm not his bleeding wife!" The effect of this is a comic moment for the audience, and it lessens the brutality. Not only was the British agent prepared to risk an innocent woman's life, no-one is shown to be emotionally involved with Collins' victims.

Endnotes to Chapter 1.

[1]Michael Curtiz, The Key, USA 1934
HC Potter, Beloved Enemy, USA 1936
Muriel Box, This Other Eden, Ireland 1959
Michael Anderson, Shake Hands With The Devil, GB/USA 1959

[2]Ashe was the leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, precursor of the IRA, which Collins had joined in London. He died having been force-fed in prison. (Bragg, 1996, South Bank Show)

[3]The journalist was Kevin O' Connor. He and Michael Keating, the ex- Lord Mayor of Dublin, met Jordan and said that the diaries belonged to a solicitor who was now dying and wanted to know what to do with them.

[4]According to Jordan, when he pressed further he was told that the solicitor was no longer in fear of death, and did not feel the need to unburden himself of the diaries. (Jordan, 1996, p.28)

CHAPTER 2 • Who, or What has Returned?
Michael Collins as a Modern Hero/Role Model

Michael Collins has been given topicality because of the volume of media interest in the film. This has meant that his example has been applied to such current affairs as Northern Ireland, the Film Industry, and even the State of the Nation. What kind of a modern-day hero or role model is he? Jordan has been described as the recreator of Michael Collins.(Lee, 1996, p.14) Has a new, cinematic Collins been created, a new national hero as distinct from the myths that have always surrounded the actual Collins? Has the actual Collins returned - i.e. does he mean the same to audiences as he did to the population of his day?

A Folkloric Hero

Plate 12. Brian Aherne as Denis Reardon in Beloved Enemy 1936.

Jordan describes a biography of Collins as "written in the thirties, and in the alarmingly heroic mode of those times, it portrayed a figure in the mode of Cúchullain, who combined military prowess, political integrity, and an odd quality which we would now define as charisma." (Jordan, 1996, p.3) Beloved Enemy, made in 1936, certainly fits into this mode, indeed the manner in which Reardon/Collins is played (actor Brian Aherne) is very much like Errol Flynn's 1939 portrayal of Robin Hood - boyish, good -hearted irrepressible daredevil. I suggest that Neil Jordan has created a Michael Collins who on several levels is like Robin Hood.

Joe O'Reilly opens the film with an old-style narration that gives Collins (almost) mythical status:

> You've got to think of him the way he was. the way he fought the British without one ounce of hatred. The way he'd cycle around Dublin with ten thousand pounds on his head - why hide, Joe, he'd say, when that's what they expect? And he never did what anyone expected. Some people have greatness flowing through them. They're what the times demanded. And life with out them seems impossible. But he's dead. And life is possible. He made it possible.

It is not until the end of the film that we realise that in fact he is talking to Kitty.

There is the belief that Collins is bigger than death: None of his loyal followers believe that he can or will die. "Close one , eh, Mick? Thought they could get the Big Fella..." Joe O'Reilly, speaking following the fatal ambush, is here in the mould of Will Scarlet or Little John. Kitty Kiernan is then a Maid Marian figure, as Joe comforts her at the end - reminding her of "the risks he knew he was taking when he went down there...for us Kitty. For every gobshite in this country. No matter what side they were on. no regrets Kit, that's what he'd say." The mystery surrounding his killer continues. it doesn't matter who fired the fatal shot- the death of the hero means that the legend lives on. It is a symbolic death - before time, and in the way he lived.

The bow and arrow, made magical by Robin Hood, translate into Collins' almost supernatural brilliance at killing. Biographers, such as Coogan, historians, and now Jordan are always drawn to this side of him, by an incongruous mixture of fascination, admiration and horror. "Killing is what he was best at ." (Jordan, 1996, South Bank Show) The almost cocky confidence - knowing he is good at what he does, and playing the authorities at their own game, are Robin Hood's. Here lies the reason, for many, which separates Collins from a terrorist as we know one today - that Collins is seen to only do what is necessary (ordering the killings of top British agents, such as Soames) and therefore justifiable. In other words, robbing from the rich to pay the poor.

Collins has a price on his head, as did Robin Hood. The authorities have trained men and equipment at their disposal - and the threat of torture. Yet people remained loyal, actively shielding Collins and in doing so risking their lives. Collins is a man of the people and his normality is his strength: "They can't imagine a gunman in a pin-striped suit on a bicycle." There are the secret meetings, Collins assuring those gathered that resourcefulness and determination makes up for what they lack in man and fire-power. "We'll be an invisible army. Our uniform will be that of the man on the street, the peasant in the field. We'll come out of a crowd, strike the enemy, and vanish into the crowd again." He is planning the tactics for guerilla war, and handily summing up the nature of the War of Independence for the viewer. He could be Robin Hood, telling his band how they will use the cover of Sherwood Forest. The authorities do not know what he looks like - the frustration of British agent Commander Soames is the Sheriff of Nottingham's. "Doesn't he have a face this Collins? Doesn't he have corporeal form?" This gives the Upper Hand to Collins, and the audience is on his side. When Soames is handed a blurred photograph of Collins he asks "Is this the best you've got?" Ireland's ultimate outlaw will have to be dealt with.

Soon there will not be anyone left who remembers Collins, and even as soon as news reached Ireland of his death he was gradually becoming legend, as tales and myth surrounding him grew. How appropriate, given that he himself drew on, and was said to be inspired by the past and tales of Cúchullain. There is also a sense of Jordan having created a Christ -like figure, surrounded by his "apostles" whom he sends out to do his (dirty) work. Indeed, the term used for Collins' elite squad of

assassins is "The Twelve Apostles." (Coogan, 1992, p.104, 120) The significance of Collins as Robin Hood is that he is (then) a folk hero, a national hero, he has the power to fascinate. As Neil Jordan admits "A certain charisma, across decade and from beyond the the grave seems to draw all sorts of people towards him." All sorts of people - biographers, historians, film-makers and now cinema-goers - even the future population of Ireland, as never before? Collins as a national hero?

A National Hero

"For Neil Jordan's generation, de Valera, who was still president in 1973, became a decrepit symbol of an increasingly meaningless past. Collins, who died before the onset of post - revolutionary disillusionment could take the gloss off his myth, retained the eternal allure of the lost leader." (O'Toole, 1996)

Eamon de Valera dominated Irish life, both politically and in a real sense. He died aged ninety -two in 1975, having been president twice and Taoiseach three times. The constitution of 1937 is just one example of the policies he implemented that shaped the young state - which meant he still dominated it after his death. Stifling censorship laws, a constitutional ban on divorce and abortion, and the recognising of the "special" position of the Catholic Church in Ireland are down to de Valera. However recently Ireland has been opened up to radical change. Belonging to the European Community has meant increased industrialisation and enterprise, and dramatic social change in line with Western Nations. De Valera's values have been much eroded in the twenty-one years since his death - in 1995 divorce was brought in by popular majority in the Referendum, and various scandals involving church figures has meant that the Church's position of power was weakened in the minds of the Nation. If any further proof were needed, the success of British based irreverent situation comedy "Father Ted" in Ireland, following Radio Teiliffs Éireann's (RTE) initial refusal to make it, should be enough. Since Collins is the embodiment of youthful rebellion, and of ideas and expression thwarted, (by his early death) it could be that we need a national hero, to embody these changes - our hopes and disappointments, and the contradictions in our makeup.

Further to this, Collins is an icon. As we near the end of the twentieth century, the great cultural signifier is film. Collins was "young, sexy and self-consciously photogenic," (O'Toole, 1996) This could be a metaphor for Ireland, and the Irish Film Industry, as well as how she is represented on screen. Michael Collins has been described as "the journey's end," meaning the cinematic journey of the past one hundred years. (Jameson, 15/11/1996, IFC) Collins therefore becomes a cinematic symbol, and as the Irish film Industry is at a successful point in its history, an embodiment of the talent, enthusiasm and leadership of today's Ireland, it follows that Collins is a national hero in this sense also.

On a more cynical level, our interest in Michael Collins is like the Chiefs of Tahiti in the film The Bounty, who when presented with mirrors are "thrilled to see themselves on the flashing screen." (Harris, 1996) This actually accounts for the high critical praise Michael Collins has received in Ireland, in Harris' view. There is no doubt that a special relationship exists between Irish

audiences and the film. The film has met a more meaningful reception than merely the thrill of seeing ourselves on screen. Shéamus Smith, the Irish Film Censor issued an "unprecedented" press statement: "Because of the historical significance of this film, parents may wish to make their own decision as to whether or not their children should see it. For this reason the Film Censor has decide to grant a Parental Guidance (PG) certificate to the film Michael Collins." (Sheehy, 1996, p.13)

The "historical significance" could be the precedent the film in itself has set, but in fact refers to its educational value. It is not in the Film Censor's remit to comment on the quality of any film. That the Censor made such a move highlights the impact of Michael Collins on all areas of Irish life. It also makes startling presumptions- if the film is to be of use to history teachers, then it has given a guarantee that it is factual as far as the curriculum is concerned. Also, the presumption that it is above film status. The language and violent scenes that it contains would have earned it at least a 15 certificate, as it has in Britain. The Film Censor has felt able to overstep the mark. There is an irony to this. Philip Hannon (Martin, 1996)said that the main worry Fianna Fail would have about the portrayal of de Valera is the impression it leaves on school-children, who may not be aware of his contribution over the fifty years or so following the time in which the film is set. He felt that it was the responsibility of Fianna Fail to ensure that textbooks remained fair to de Valera. Collins is considered to have been unfairly treated by the history books, as a result of the victor having written them. As Neil Jordan pointed out, he was only vaguely aware of Collins as a "figure in a green khaki uniform," yet to Tim Pat Coogan he was "the man who made Ireland possible."

Plate 13. Michael Collins for Sale. Promotional prints for the film.

Michael Collins therefore holds a significance for Irish audiences as a release of pent-up history. A foreign audience could not grasp the effect of seeing Michael Collins' name in large letters above cinemas in the streets of Ireland. Particularly startling is the site of the Savoy cinema opposite the General Post Office, scene of the Easter Rising. It is as though Michael Collins has returned to the place where he first made an impression to ensure that he finally gets recognition.

This leads me to a further implication of the release of Michael Collins - the confusion between what is real and unreal, and who, or what, has returned. To add to the confusion is some of the promotional material to go along with the film. On sale at cinemas are prints of the actual Michael Collins, in one he is photographed with his legendary bicycle, from his War of Independence days when he was "the most wanted man in Dublin," a terrorist. In another, he is in his Free State Uniform, having earned his legitimacy as a military leader. Also, posters advertising a biography of Collins, by Ulick o'Connor, are displayed at the cinema. The effect of this is to give Collins' own stamp of approval to the film, blending his life with that of his screen character. Collins becomes a novelty consumer item. "The increasing number of films about the past are no longer historical; they are images, simulacra and pastiches of the past. They are effectively a way of satisfying a craving for historicity, using a product that substitutes for and blocks it." (Jameson, in O'Toole, 1996,)

Pieces - or images of Irish history for sale? As an over exuberant (inebriated) cinema - goer kept shouting at one showing -(I was there) - "Michael Collins sold out the country!" Has the country sold out Michael Collins? I believe that the use of Michael Collins' image commercially is so sudden and out of character for Ireland that it is not necessarily a sign that people are more aware of their history and ready to confront it. On the contrary, I feel that it masks the reality that some people do not know anything about this period other than what they have just seen on screen.

A Nationalist Hero

If Collins is seen as a precursor to Gerry Adams, then whether he is a man of peace or a hypocritical man of violence depends on your view of Gerry Adams. A recent South Bank Show documentary, by Tony Knox, looked at the present day political implications of Michael Collins. The question arose as to whether Michael Collins was Gerry Adams' fore-runner. (Bragg, 1996)

Collins was Commander in Chief of the IRA, and masterminded such high profile assassinations of British forces as the "Cairo Gang." He also took part in the 1916 Easter Rising, which is commemorated by today's Republicans in military style. "He invented modern, guerilla warfare."(Bragg, 1996) It is unsurprising, therefore, that when Hollywood make a mainstream film of his life, it has caused controversy in Ireland and Britain.

David Ervine, of the Progressive Unionist Party, has called for his members to boycott the film, because "The IRA are going to like it."(Lynch, 20/10/1996, p.3) The crowd scenes featured are stirring nationalist occasions, perhaps too close for comfort to Northern Ireland. Popular actor Liam

Neeson rouses his audiences with charismatic performance - and the speech of Collins. It is easy to see how to many Unionists, and critics of the film, it is popularising Republican nationalism. Given that these scenes were filmed only in 1995, with a large and enthusiastic Dublin crowd, it is easy to see why people fear the film. Suspicion about the Republic, and in particular Dublin's aspirations to Northern Ireland are central to Unionist ideology.(Curtin, 1984) When Collins/ Neeson asks "if they shut me up,who will take my place?" he is greeted by cheers and the raising of hurleys.(nationalist symbols) Who is answering - the people in Collins' time, Gerry Adams, the present IRA and the people coming after them, or the present day Dubliners? The shooting of these scenes has been described as an "event" (Jameson, 1996, IFC) There is also an awareness that the "they" referred to is the British, who are still in Northern Ireland. The film's release, coinciding as it did with the ending of the IRA ceasefire, and the uncertainty and fear there is once again in the North, has fuelled the controversy. Of course films thrive on controversy.

Plate 14. Arousing Nationalist Passions.

The glamour and excitement associated with film, the "occasion" of the shoot could mean that it takes on the vestiges of propaganda. It is interesting to note, bearing this in mind, that out of the six Irish film stars featured in Leading Hollywood,(O'Connor, 1996) because of the enormity of their romantic appeal, no fewer than three are in Michael Collins playing nationalists - Liam Neeson, Stephen Rea and Aidan Quinn. On the surface, accusations such as the film is glorifying and romanticising (violent) Republicanism would seem to be well founded. The Disabled Police Officer's Association of Northern Ireland has described the film as an insult to the memory of officers killed by terrorists. (Lynch, 1996) One scene depicting the car bombing of four Belfast policemen deemed particularly offensive.

Is, however, there some merit to the argument that it is "absolutely not (a big expensive ad for the semtex boys)"? (Jackson,10/11/1996)) I believe so. The second half of the film deals with the

split in the IRA itself. Collins is shown to see the futility of violence as resulting in unnecessary destruction of human life, and souring relations between not only Britain and Ireland, but within Ireland also. he is shown to be assassinated by a younger generation, more ruthless because they are a product of having only known violence. In other words "the true forefathers of today's IRA."(Jackson) This IRA do not see Collins as their ideological leader for the obvious reason that it was he who brought back the treaty which partitioned Ireland. They owe more to the anti-treaty Irregular IRA who followed de Valera.

Plate 15. Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams.

Plate 16. The breakdown in the IRA ceasefire

Interestingly, there is a belief that Gerry Adams is distancing himself from the IRA in order to follow more parliamentary means of getting a united Ireland. If, in future, this is what becomes clear, then whether he is following Michael Collins or Eamon de Valera is a matter for debate. Collins sat down at the negotiating table with British representatives, including the Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, whom Collins had apparently previously planning to assassinate, as a member of the cabinet. (Burns, 1/9/1996, p.3) - eventually earning the mutual respect and friendship of a particular Lord Birkenhead. Then he made the transition from terrorist and minister of an illegal parliament, The Dáil, to Chief of Staff of the Army, and Minister for Finance, of the Free State of Ireland. Some are talking about Adams in terms of being a future statesman, indeed Jordan has answered criticisms of Michael Collins with the phrase "yesterday's terrorist is today's statesman." (Molloy, 11/9/1996, p.3) To rule this out as unthinkable would be to ignore the historical precedent. Adams has been given a certain measure of acceptability in the eyes of the world by his reception by an American President - Bill Clinton - at the White House. Mary Robinson, the Irish President was criticised in 1992 when she shook hands with Adams at a function in Belfast. Adams has appeared twice on the Late Late Show. Jordan himself refers to the significance for a guest to appear on it in terms of recognition. (Jordan, 1996, p.17,) Central to Adams' acceptability is his relationship with John Hume who is credited with having initiated the Peace Process. The nationalism common to Sinn Féin and the SDLP has brought them together.

Philip Hannon believes that Adams has moved away from violence, and in doing so has moved closer to Fianna Fáil, which is no different "ideologically" from Sinn Féin. He likened Adams more

Plate 17. The Irish delegation to the Treaty talks. Collins is seated at centre and Arthur Griffith is far left.

Plate 18. Is Gerry Adams following in Collins' footsteps to the negotiating table? On left is SDLP leader, John Hume.

to de Valera, who was once president of Sinn Fein, but split to found Fianna Fail in 1926, and adopt parliamentary methods. Hannon said that Fianna Fáil were supportive of what they saw was Adams' genuine desire for peace, and pointed out that it was under a Fianna Fail government that the cease fire was achieved. I feel that it is significant that Fianna Fáil have embraced Gerry Adams like this. It is symptomatic of the "popularity" of various guises of Irish nationalism at various times during the century. In the 1930s, Eamon de Valera suppressed the IRA, his former colleagues, and Sinn Féin were marginalised. During the Troubles, Sinn Féin's link with the IRA further undermined their credibility as a political party. A turnabout in the way Sinn Féin are perceived in Ireland can be traced to the year or so preceding the IRA ceasefire in 1994. This shows that Sinn Féin are gaining a measure of the respect they had in Collins' time. A sign that the nation accepts them as a nationalist political party could be the fact that the Michael Collins is almost universally well received.

Conclusion

I believe that Michael Collins says more about 1990s Ireland than it does about the twenties. As Paul Power (Martin ,1996) has said, it is a direct metaphor for today's Northern Ireland - in so far as the events it deals with bear a direct resemblance to the situation today anyway. If we needed any reminding, the film should offer a sobering message of how Northern Ireland may not be so easily resolved. There has not been as much response as anticipated in Northern Ireland to the film. The pre-release anxiety proved to be unfounded.

I believe that in the nature of the discussions about the film, there are insights into the psyche of the nation. For example, I have described the Ireland of De Valera, and the enormous changes the nation has gone through since his death. I have shown how Neil Jordan is an example of how issues and crises of identity are confronted through writing and performance in Ireland. I have shown how the polar opposite but equally strong - felt reactions to the portrayal of De Valera, for example, Liam Collins' and Philip Hannon's, show that Ireland is still trying to come to terms with the bloody period that the state grew out of. Despite the fact that "civil war" politics has died out in Ireland the civil war is as divisive as ever. I have shown how, ironically given the criticism of Collins as a terrorist, and given that he only represents one side of the civil war, he is being used as a symbol (and force) of reconciliation. Not only does the film itself expose divisions between the Irish themselves, but so does the controversy surrounding it. In the exposing of the divisions that exist within Irish identity, "Ireland is offered a unique opportunity to confront its past." (Lee, 1996) I believe that if nothing else, the film will have encouraged people to take an active interest in history. From a personal point of view, news coverage of this years seventy-fifth anniversary in January of the change over of power to an Irish government, held more meaning for me as a result of Michael Collins.

It is in the Republic that the film has received the status it has. The film is much more than a film. It has made history in itself, merely for having set out to portray history. It has given Ireland not only a cinematic hero, but a national figure in the mode of Braveheart or Lawrence of Arabia. It has given the Republic a screen history, an epic, which it never before had. This has meant that a vague past, which we were not sure was a source of shame or just something not talked about, has returned and cannot be ignored. Michael Collins cannot have been avoided in the past few months. The aspects of ourselves as a nation, for so long repressed, have returned with Michael Collins.

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