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Us Boys

An Igloo Film, in assoc. with Bord Scannán na hÉireann, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, The Cultural Traditions Group, RTÉ, and Kroma Productions.

Dir: Lionel Mill

Prod: Brian Willis

52 mins.

Specific to the Glens of Antrim is a dialect spoken by people commonly known as the Scots-Irish. The subjects of this documentary, Glenarm bachelor brothers Ernie and Stewart Morrow, scupper any anthropological urgings we may have to just poke and prod the way of life practised by some speakers of this dialect: 'We're what they call,' say Ernie, 'the Scots Irish, or something ...' That 'or something' evinces a delightful disdain for categorisation and signals early in the film that these brothers will be no mere guinea pigs for the camera.

The makers of the film were motivated by the fact that media attention has focused overwhelmingly on the political situation in Northern Ireland, on the abnormalities of its society, at the expense of detailed attention to the humdrum everyday, to the lives of ordinary citizens, the proverbial man on the street, or, in this case, the man on the farm. The work quotient involved in this effort to right the balance is remarkable. It is difficult to fund a lengthy, unspectacular project like a verité film, and there is a lot of tedium involved, both on the pitching soapboxes and in terms of the sheer time dedicated to capturing a true sense of the movements of lives over time. It took, in all, a four year period to complete *Us Boys*. Shot mainly on 'Old Church Farm', it starts in 'Winter 1995', opening with the elemental shot of Ernie lighting up ('I'm the only man in Northern Ireland alight with gas'); moving into 'Spring 1996' and Stewart's move to a nursing home; into 'Summer 1996' and Ernie's loneliness for his brother; into 'Christmas 1996' and stoicism ('I won't be getting excited. I've seen a ween of Christmases'); into 'Spring 1997' and the seventy-nine year old Ernie chasing after lambs; into 'Summer 1997'; and finishing in 1998 after Stewart's death, Ernie's eightieth birthday, and the birth of his nephew Adrian's son, christened 'Stewart' despite Ernie's insistence that 'there aren't many Ernies about either'.

A large part of the interest of the film lies in the dialect of the two brothers, mainly spoken by the gregarious Ernie and sounding mellifluous in the opening song, 'Mourne Maggie-O' from Hughie McAlindon. While it is recognisably English, the dialect necessitates the use of subtitles, and, though these are occasionally awry, missing some things and misrepresenting others, they are indispensable in pinning down the words behind the throaty timbre of this speech. The sound of Ernie's voice makes some of the things he says ring in the ears long after viewing: 'Between poultry and sheep it's a wild tussle'/'You have to be hard up here. You have to be tough to stick her'. Quoting some scripture and singing along the way, there is a wry humour to everything he says, as he obstinately refuses 'the 'lectric', shows suspicion of women and money-spending, and remains largely unimpressed with the TV he eventually acquires: looking at it at one stage he points out, 'Them's the mad men.' A younger Morrow brother and a nephew provide an extra perspective on the brothers and through them one is made aware of the loneliness that might lie behind Ernie's bravado.

There are only small potential complaints. In the production notes for the film the brothers' life is described as 'a rural idyll free from the fuss and intrusions of modern life ... The Morrows were not only colourful people to the outsider, they were also a touchstone and emblem of a kind of truthfulness for the people of the Glen who live around them.' While this is not to be denied as such, one can't help feeling that, since this was such a personal film for those involved, there is a little too much effort made to protect the idyll. While the rounds of certain aspects of isolated rural life are well captured (the feeding of fowl and sheep, the arrival of the travelling shop), and while, in essence, things are far from romanticised, one gets the impression that the tractor and machinery seen in the background at the farm are never shown in action so that modernity won't be seen to raise its noisy head. Also, while politics does enter the frame for one brief while, affirming that the Morrows are at least aware of what's going on (they do, after all, depend a lot on the radio for company), something might have been included on whether religion plays any part in their lives.

These niggles aside, this is an impressive and captivating piece of film, both in terms of its chosen subject and some of the aesthetics brought to bear on it. There are, particularly, some beautiful nocturnal shots from outside the house picking Ernie up mooching about inside. The daytime shots of the Antrim countryside, and the identification of the normalcy being acted out in it, might do more to entice visitors than any number of cool tourist board ads.

John Kenny