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Anticipating a Post-Nationalist Ireland: Representing Gaelic Games in *Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968) and *Clash of the Ash* (1987).¹

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In October 2001, Ireland's first gay glossy magazine, *GI*, launched itself onto an unsuspecting public through a selection of billboard advertisements depicting a series of county hurlers and Gaelic footballers locked in passionate embraces with players from opposing counties. The images reflected the changing representation of gaelic games in the popular media that has developed particularly since the late 1960s, and that contrasts considerably with the initial concerns of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), when set up in 1884. Indeed, in his letter of acceptance that year to Michael Cusack to become the first patron of the association Cusack founded, Archbishop Thomas Croke of Cashel remarked:

if we continue travelling for the next score of years in the same direction that we have been going in for some time past, con[d]emning the sports that were practised by our forefathers, effacing our national features as though we were ashamed of them, and putting on, with England's stuffs and broadcloths, her habits and such other effeminate follies as she may recommend, we had better at once, and publicly, adjure our nationality, clap hands for joy at sight of the Union Jack, and place 'England's bloody red' exultingly above 'the green' (T. W. Croke: 1884).

Croke's position and remarks reflected essential beliefs of the GAA in its founding

¹ I want to acknowledge the support of NUI, Galway's Millennium Minor Project fund in carrying out the research required for this paper. Short extracts from this paper have appeared previously in Seán Crosson, "*The Given Note*", *Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

years that would remain guiding principles for much of the twentieth century: nationality and masculinity. Despite attempts by leaders of the association to avoid the GAA being politicized, the emergence of many of the leading figures, and still more of the active Republican volunteers, in the years leading up to and including the war of independence, from the ranks of the GAA affirmed that association's nationalist credentials. These credentials were further underlined when leading members of the organisation were arrested following the 1916 Rising and the GAA itself was included among the organisations banned by the British administration on July 3rd, 1918 (Cronin, 1999: 87). The foundation of the GAA also reflected not just concerns over the decline of native sports but also the emasculation of the Irish male as a result of the 'effeminate follies' imported from England. Indeed Cusack himself made a clear association between hurling and manhood, and conversely the 'effeminate' sport soccer, in 1887, arguing that 'as the courage and honesty and spirit of manhood grow, the hurling steadily advances on the domains of football [soccer]'.² The fact that the GAA was entirely concerned with male sports was significant, such that the game of camogie itself was devised by female members of the Gaelic league (de Burca, 1980: 93) (not the GAA, as there were none) and, as Patrick F. McDevitt has noted 'the efforts of these nationalistic women who took to the playing fields with *camans* in hand were not warmly received by the sporting community, and were largely ignored by the press and the GAA' (McDevitt, 1997: 273).

By 2001, how far at least some of the representatives of the GAA had moved with regard to these initial concerns was apparent in reactions to the *GI* billboards. As the *Irish Independent* reported at the time of the campaign, while referring to the continuing ban on members of the British army and RUC from participating in gaelic games:

² *Celtic Times*, 26 February, 1887. Quoted in Patrick F. McDevitt, 'Muscular Catholicism: Nationalism, Masculinity and Gaelic Team Sports, 1884-1916', *Gender & History* 9.2 (August 1997): 273.

the GAA might be stuck in their ways when it comes to Rule 21, [but] a number of officials in county camps were more than liberal when it came to the notion that at least some of their players might be batting for the other team. Both Dublin and Meath County Board officials found nothing offensive about the idea. “I’m sure there are GAA players who are gay as well,” said one official (Felle, 2001).

I want to chart in this paper the movement towards what might be called, following from Richard Kearney’s 1995 book, a post-nationalist approach to representing gaelic games, particularly since the late 1960s by an examination of two films, *Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968) and *Clash of the Ash* (1987), released respectively in 1968 and 1987. However much gaelic games were part of the construction of Irish identity before and immediately after independence, the depiction of these games in films such as *Rocky Road* and *Clash of the Ash*, films which reflected the emergence of a critically engaged indigenous cinema in Ireland since the late 1960s, would also be part of the deconstruction of such an identity and critique of the failures of the state. Significantly, both these films use gaelic games as a means to interrogate and critically engage with certain mythologised and narrow-minded understandings of Irishness associated with the promotion of these games, including the issues of nationalism and masculinity.

The appointment of Seán Lemass as Taoiseach in 1959 heralded a new era of economic expansion and cultural change in Ireland, inspired by the economic plans of the secretary of the Department of Finance, T.K. Whitaker. This change of focus, moving away from the economic nationalism associated with Éamon de Valera, would also accelerate the transformation of Ireland from a primarily rural society to an increasingly urban one while opening the country to new economic, political and cultural influences. Telefís Éireann, Ireland’s first indigenous television channel, began broadcasting on 31st December, 1961. In

1965 Ireland applied for the first time for membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) and would finally be admitted in 1973. In 1967, the Minister for Education, Donagh O'Malley, introduced free secondary education for all. In the same year, Ireland's strict Censorship of Publications Act was amended significantly so that books which had been banned as 'indecent or obscene' could now only be banned for twelve years without being resubmitted for reconsideration. A similar amendment was made to the Censorship of Films act in 1970, permitting the resubmission of films which had been banned over seven years previously (Rockett, 1980: 12).

While Lemass's policies brought economic success in the 1960s, Terence Brown has documented the 'much concerned, even heated, discussion' which the rapid changes in Irish society prompted. Central to this debate was the issue of national identity, 'in circumstances', as Brown suggests, 'where many of the traditional essentialist definitions – language, tradition, culture and distinctive ideology – were widely felt to fly in the face of social reality' (Brown, 2004: 255). Furthermore, the change from a primarily rural to an increasingly urban society 'threatened the continuity of the Irish language and of rural traditions important to Ireland's national identity' (Johnston, 1997: 39).

To some degree, these questions anticipated concerns that have increasingly marked contemporary Ireland over the past twenty years so that Richard Kearney has called for a postnationalist approach to the country that would reassess nationalism in light of postmodernity. Kearney in *Postnationalist Ireland* examines the development of the postmodern critique of the centre, established power, whether totalitarianism, colonialism or nationalism (Kearney, 1996: 61). Drawing from Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, he argues that:

The postmodern turn seeks to deconstruct the Official story (which presents itself as Official History) into the open plurality of stories that make it up. Modern imperialism

and modern nationalism are two sides of the Official Story. Genuine internationalism (working at a global level) and critical regionalism (working at a local level) represent the two sides of a postmodern alternative (Ibid.).

Kearney takes this idea of ‘critical regionalism’ from the work of Kenneth Frampton who argues for it, Kearney surmises, as ‘the most appropriate response to our contemporary predicament’ (Ibid.). While for Frampton critical regionalism is ‘an attempt to mediate the impact of universalised civilisation with elements derived from the peculiarities of a particular place’ (Kearney, 1996: 64), it can also provide a bulwark against the more universalising tendencies of nationalism within the national context itself, offering a critique and commentary on the excesses to which a narrow and insular nationalism, and notion of communal identity, may lead. As Kearney continues, quoting from Frampton:

Whereas modernism, in architecture at least, tended to represent the ‘victory of universal culture over locally inflected culture’, the postmodern paradigm of critical regionalism opposes ‘the cultural domination of hegemonic power’ – a domination which seeks to sacrifice local concerns to abstract ones (ibid.).³

In one of the most important studies of contemporary Irish cinema, Martin McLoone also borrowed from Frampton this notion of critical regionalism to describe the films of Irish directors who emerged in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s including Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford, Kieran Hickey and Pat Murphy (McLoone, 2000). I want to add to this list Fergus Tighe’s 1987 drama *Clash of the Ash*. For McLoone these directors for the first time in indigenous cinema drew on the established forms of narrative cinema to cast a critical eye on Irish

³ Kearney is quoting from Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance”, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Edited by Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983), p. 21.

society. However, the work of these directors was anticipated in the late 1960s by a documentary that has in recent years been re-released to wide critical acclaim. Peter Lennon's *Rocky Road to Dublin*, in its highly critical approach to the Irish state on the cusp of huge change in the late 1960s, anticipated the work of the fiction filmmakers McLoone identifies. Indeed, Lennon's decision to make the film itself was partly inspired, he has acknowledged, by a concern with the lack of a film culture in Ireland. He remarked in Paul Duane's documentary on the making of *Rocky Road to Dublin* on his 'wild idea as an Irishman that although we were great film fans we had no film culture' (Duane, 2004) – the importance of which was also emphasised by the seminal Irish-American director John Huston in *Rocky Road to Dublin* itself when he asserts, when interviewed by Lennon on the Ardmore studios⁴ set of his 1969 film *Sinful Davey*, that:

a film made by Ireland and Irishmen would be of infinitely greater importance to the country than this foreign film that we are making [...] its true that its ploughing some million dollars into the economy of the country but in the long run that wouldn't mean half as much as a native film made by Irishmen.

Incidentally, the visit of Taoiseach Jack Lynch to the same set shortly after would lead to the appointment of Huston to chair a Film Industry Committee, the report of which would recommend, and eventually contribute to, the establishment of the Irish Film Board in 1981, a central institution in encouraging and funding filmmaking in Ireland, including Fergus Tighe's *Clash of the Ash*.

While *Rocky Road to Dublin* would seem to precede the postnationalist moment in Irish culture, I want to argue that such a moment did not just develop in recent times but

⁴ Ardmore studios were Ireland's first designated film studios when opened in Ardmore, county Wicklow, in 1958 and still operating today.

rather was anticipated from much earlier. In his 1998 essay 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', Fredric Jameson noted that rather than postmodernism being a movement or an impulse emerging in the recent past and characteristic of contemporary society, aspects of what might today be described as the postmodern were manifest at a much earlier period and apparent within modernism itself. For Jameson:

radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuring of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary [...] My point is that until the present day those things have been secondary or minor features of modernist art, marginal rather than central, and that we have something new when they become the central features of cultural production (Jameson, 1998: 18).

One of the issues that a film such as *Rocky Road to Dublin* reveals is that the postnationalist impulse similarly, while more characteristic of Irish society in the contemporary era, has existed as a 'secondary element' in periods in which nationalism continued as a dominant force in Irish life. Indeed, within *Rocky Road to Dublin* itself both impulses are apparent. Lennon's film from the beginning, when he reflects on the noble ideals of the 1916 revolutionaries and the failure of the state to live up to them, would seem, as Luke Gibbons has noted, to be 'a requiem for a revolution [...] it is not the hopes and energies of the revolutionaries that are mocked, but the traducing of these ideals through the alliance of church and state in the new independent Ireland' (Gibbons, 2006: 48). Yet Lennon's critique of this new state seeks an alternative arrangement, never clearly articulated, but one that may lie in a postnationalist Ireland, in which the complexities of identity are no longer

predetermined or delimited according to strict parameters but open to the possibilities of cultural encounter.

Given the extent of its criticism of Irish society, Lennon himself insisted on sitting in with the then deputy censor, Gabriel Fallon, when the film was being censored as he was concerned the documentary might be banned before any Irish people could see it. In the end, Fallon allowed the film without cuts making the memorable remark that 'Since there is no sex in the film Peter, there is nothing I can do against you'.⁵ Despite getting the clearance of the censor, Lennon still faced considerable obstacles in trying to get the film screened in Ireland. Even the Cork Film Festival refused to screen it in competition, allegedly because it had already been screened to eighteen people in Dublin, mostly journalists, prior to the festival.⁶ However, the film was accepted at the Cannes Film Festival in 1968, and featured in the prestigious Critics' Week. Indeed, the film was the last screened at Cannes that year before the festival was cancelled in solidarity with the protesting students on the streets of Paris. *Rocky Road's* central question 'What do you do with your revolution once you've got it?' would appear to have struck a chord with the protesting groups and was screened many times over the summer of 1968, while receiving rave reviews in the international press, including the seminal French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which described the film as 'One of the most beautiful documentaries the cinema has given us'.⁷ Cork eventually relented but screened the film at lunchtime on the same day as all the media were invited out of town to a free oyster and Guinness reception.⁸ Lennon also had great difficulty getting what he has described as priest-fearing cinema managers⁹ in Ireland to accept the film, and it was eventually only screened by one cinema, the International Film Theatre, at Earlsfort Terrace

⁵ Lennon made this comment in Paul Duane's *The Making of Rocky Road to Dublin* (Loopline Films, 2004)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quoted on the website of First Run Icarus Films, <http://www.frif.com/new2005/dub.html> (accessed 16 October 2007).

⁸ Lennon made this comment in Paul Duane's *The Making of Rocky Road to Dublin* (Loopline Films, 2004)

⁹ According to Lennon, 'No cinema manager in Ireland wanted to offend the parish priest'. Peter Lennon, 'Portrait of a brainwashed society', *The Guardian*, 11 April 2004, p. 15.

in Dublin, where it ran for seven weeks to strong audiences (Molloy, 2005: 8).

The criticisms of the film included the suggestion that it was made with communist money on the popular RTE chat-show 'The Late Late Show' (Lennon, 2004: 15). The film was actually funded by the American millionaire friend of Lennon in Paris, Victor Herbert, who agreed to fund the film when Lennon promised he could get the legendary *Nouvelle Vague* cameraman Roual Coutard – the French cameraman whose work with Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut had established him as one of the preeminent cameramen in the world – to shoot it.

The reactions to Lennon's film are to some degree understandable given the prevailing depiction of Irish nationalism, and the GAA, in Irish film prior to *Rocky Road to Dublin*. Indeed, unlike in Lennon's film, the position of nationalism in Irish life had been reaffirmed just two years previous in several works commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising. Unsurprisingly, given the centrality of the GAA to the nationalist movement that culminated in this Rising, gaelic games featured prominently. Louis Marcus's 1916 commemorative documentary, *An Tine Beo*, for example, includes a central piece on the GAA in which emphasis is placed in a non-questioning manner, on the GAA's role in providing volunteers for the war.

However, within two years Lennon would provide the first critical engagement with the association. His film reveals the influence of the counter-establishment and almost voyeuristic new wave aesthetic to which Lennon was exposed while living in Paris as a reporter for the *Guardian* newspaper. However he received little support in his enterprise from fellow Irish people with even his friend in Paris, Samuel Beckett, 'declaring, somewhat grandly, that it would never work because the Irish "were not a serious people"' (Browne, 1996: 34). The film was completed in 1968, and featured, as Lennon has said, 'Irish society condemn[ing] itself out of its own mouth' (Lennon, 2004: 14). Though shot in colour, the film

was printed in black-and-white, which contributes further to the bleak tone of the work. As Carol Murphy has noted, the film raises ‘a collection of questions about the state of a repressed and religiously indoctrinated Ireland in the late sixties’ (Murphy, 2007). Structurally, *Rocky Road to Dublin* is built around interviews with well known figures in Irish life including Sean Ó Faoláin, Conor Cruise O’Brien, John Huston, theatre director Jim Fitzgerald and Professor Liam O’Briain, a member of the Censorship of Publications Appeal Board, while Lennon also followed the trendy young priest, Michael Cleary, around for a day in one of the film’s most revelatory sequences. Indeed, the film chose as the main target in its critical engagement the central institutions in Irish life, primarily the church, but the GAA was also featured. Its spokesman, Brendan Mac Lua,¹⁰ (Fig. 1), then executive Officer of the association, provided a stout defence of the association’s continuing ban on members attending or participating in English games, such as soccer, rugby, cricket or hockey. The year previous to the release of *Rocky Road*, Mac Lua had developed these ideas when his history of the GAA ban, entitled *The Steadfast Rule*, was published, in which he defended the ban, asserting that ‘it is almost entirely to the Ban that the GAA owes what is truly significant in its past’. Furthermore, Mac Lua made a clear link between the ban, nationalism and indeed, masculinity, remarking:

The Ban, nationalism and G.A.A. prosperity have [...] gone hand in hand, constantly complementing each other. The Ban has been the symbol of nationalism-the ensign aloft which declared aloud that the Association was still committed to the objective of a decisive victory over all that was alien. It was an open declaration of patriotism which attracted into its ranks young men who sought in it a means of national service and it has been these same young men of nationalistic motivation who have led and developed the G.A.A. down the years. Without them and their sense of commitment to a cause, the

¹⁰ I want to acknowledge the assistance of Dónal McAnallen in identifying Mac Lua who is uncredited in Lennon’s film.

G.A.A. could not have reached its present proportions (Mac Lua, 1967: 106).

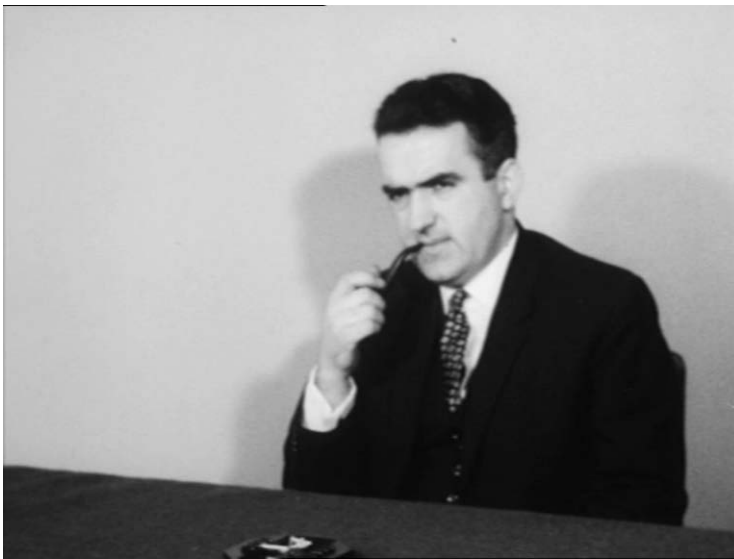


Fig. 1. *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (Peter Lennon, 1968)

Indeed when Mac Lua asserts that the ban had ‘attracted the best of Irish manhood’ (Ibid.,: 107), he was but reiterating long-held beliefs within the association at that time, beliefs apparent in Croke’s letter of 1884. In *Rocky Road to Dublin*, Mac Lua restates these beliefs describing the GAA as central to the rise of the Irish nationalism and ‘the reservoir of Irish manhood’, remarks complemented, if in an ironic manner, by Lennon’s intercutting of these comments with images of a hurling game in Croke park. His choice of moments from the game, including tussles between a number of players (Fig. 2), and the ominously shot walled and barbed-wire surroundings, offers a bleak depiction and little of the excitement one associates with games in Croke Park today. Indeed, Lennon’s emphasis in this sequence is almost as much on the small attendance, including the foreboding presence of the clergy, as the game itself, a relatively unimportant encounter between two unidentified teams. One could justifiably criticise Lennon for failing to acknowledge in this section the sophistication of the game of hurling, or the important role the GAA played then, as now, in Irish life, particularly at the local level. However, the director was seeking a metaphor for a larger

critique throughout the film as a whole of Irish society and its continuing oppression by church and a narrow-minded conformist nationalist thought that had seen the work of most major writers banned (many listed elsewhere in the documentary) and opportunities for free debate and critical engagement – as was apparent in the response to Lennon’s film by the media – limited. Though Lennon’s own narration is minimal in this section, it is clear from the sequence the director’s critical engagement with the ideas expressed, and his representation of them, marked a ground-breaking moment in the reevaluation of the GAA and what it represented.



Fig. 2. *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (Peter Lennon, 1968)

While the 1960s was a tumultuous period for Irish society, the 1980s were no less so if for different reasons. Ireland in the mid-1980s was experiencing considerable change which resulted in a deeply divided society with contrasting positions on how Irish society should move forward. This was reflected in successive referenda on abortion and divorce and the continuing debate surrounding the escalating conflict in Northern Ireland. Unemployment and emigration also reached levels not seen since the 1950s. ‘Ireland was confronting’, as Cheryl Herr has noted, ‘not only economic turmoil and the onslaught of modernization but also widespread civil rights agitation, paramilitary violence, the oil crisis, increasing

unemployment, feminist activism and a growing understanding of postcolonial trauma' (Herr, 2000: 53).

Much as had occurred in the 1960s, the significant changes and subsequent challenges that Irish society was experiencing prompted considerable cultural debate about Irishness itself in this period, much of which became focused around the journal *The Crane Bag*, edited by Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney. Herr has summarised some of the issues central to the debate in this period and notes that:

[i]n response to cataclysmic changes, Irish intellectuals engaged in extensive cultural debate about evolving aspects of Irishness [...] Psychohistorical hypotheses surfaced as part of the musings on cultural identity of writers as different as Estyn Evans, Joseph Lee, Vincent Kenny, Fintan O'Toole and Richard Kearney. According to this allegorical reading, during the 1980s the Irish suffered traumas from historical disfranchisements: the loss of the land, the loss of language, the disruptions of the Famine and of subsequent migrations (Ibid.,: 53).

Indeed, one of the journal's frequent contributors, Desmond Fennell, contended in a 1983 article that Ireland lacked in the 1980s a 'serviceable national image' (Fennell, 1983) arguing that:

Our first self-definition as a nation began to crumble in the '50s, was assaulted throughout the '60s, and faded away in the '70s. All that is left in its place, as a public image of Irish identity, is the factual 26-county state, without any cultural or ideological overtones other than 'democratic.' We haven't chosen it as our national image: we would prefer to have no image, to be quite invisible to ourselves and others (Fennell, 1983)

Irish filmmakers would bring their own critical faculties to bear on Irish society in this period with directors like Joe Comerford, Cathal Black and Pat Murphy examining themes such as nationalism, religion, and women's place within established understandings of Irishness. One of the most important directors in this period was Bob Quinn, both a fiction and documentary film maker. While Quinn's fictional work, including *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* (1975) and *Poitín* (1978, but re-released in 2007), problematised previous constructions and representation of Irishness and Ireland, his seminal three part documentary series *Atlantean* (1983) would raise questions about the established narrative concerning the history of the Irish people. For Quinn, the received notion that the Irish were of Celtic origin was too simplistic for a people, particularly on the west coast, long dependent on maritime trade and cultural exchange. Within his reappraisal of the development of culture in Ireland, Quinn also raised other possibilities for the origin of what had long been regarded as the most ancient and authentic of Irish sports, hurling. In one sequence, in the second episode of the series, the suggestion is made that there may be a connection between a sport played by Berber tribes of North Africa and hurling through the shared Atlantic heritage of both cultures.

Gaelic games would provide a still more important prism through which Fergus Tighe would explore contemporary Irish society in his drama *Clash of the Ash*. Indeed, if there is one indigenous narrative film that deserves the title of GAA 'sports film', it is Tighe's partly autobiographical debut work filmed in his home town of Fermoy, Co Cork in August 1986. The film was over four years in production and shot on a shoestring budget of £112,000 – funded by R.T.E., the Arts Council and Bord Scannán na Éireann/The Irish Film Board. Indeed, *Clash of the Ash* was one of the final films to receive funding from the Board before it was deconstituted in the round of cutbacks that followed the return of Fianna Fáil to

government in February 1987. Furthermore, the film became the subject of the debate that followed the Board's demise in the Seanad where Senator David Norris called for the Government to reverse their decision in the interests of the Irish film industry. Norris picked out *Clash of the Ash* in particular as an example of the finest work funded by the board and drew attention to a letter from Tighe published in the *Irish Press* on July 3, 1987 where the director remarked that the film was only made 'because the crew worked for nothing, the equipment was mostly borrowed and I went into debt of £700'.¹¹ Indeed, the demise of the first Board was to be catastrophic for Tighe who has yet to make a further fiction film. By 1991, according to an interview with Gina Moxley (who plays Mary in the 1987 film) he was working in 'a pub in the States'. '[A]t least in New York' she continued 'people are willing to believe you're really a film maker working as a bar man' (McAnailly Burke, 1991: 8).

Some commentators have suggested that the Board was shut down because of the unflattering depictions the films it funded gave of Ireland in the 1980s. While the editors of *Cinema and Ireland* have suggested that 'many of the films financially aided by the Board were perceived as undermining the image of contemporary Ireland which the state itself wished to project' (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill, 1988: 274) Anthony O'Neil 'became convinced that government antipathy to indigenous films was due to what they saw as the disturbing image of Ireland coming through' (O'Neill, 1999: 16). Indeed when the board was reactivated filmmakers who continued to work from the first incarnation revealed a concern not to make as critically engaged work that might undermine the Board's continuing existence. Director Cathal Black in 1996 noted a sense among board members and filmmakers to 'let's try and make something feel good so that we won't be accused of the kinds of things that caused the shutting down of the first Film Board' (Black, 1996: 22).

Clash of the Ash has been described as 'one of the key Irish films of the 1980s'

¹¹ Seanad Éireann - Volume 116 - 14 July, 1987, Adjournment Matter. - Irish Film Board. <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/S/0116/S.0116.198707140008.html> (accessed 15 September 2007)

(Anonymous, 2000: 17). ‘This 50-minute drama’ the *Irish Times* reviewer continued ‘offers a portrait of a still largely uncharted part of contemporary Irish society - small town life and the struggle of the young to resist its stifling conformity’ (Ibid.). Tighe had initially hoped to make the film feature length but ‘surrendered to the Film Board’s demand that it should be reduced to a “television hour”’ (Woodworth, 1987: 1). Nonetheless, the film was well received and won several awards including the Starting Out category Award at the Eighth Celtic Film and Television Festival, the fiction prize at the Interceltic festival (MacBride, 1987: 9) in 1987, and The Gus Healy Award for Best Irish Short at the Cork Film Festival in the same year. It was also the first film work of cinematographer Declan Quinn, who subsequently went on to become one of the world’s leading cameramen, with his credits including Mike Figgis’s *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), Jim Sheridan’s *In America* (2003) and Neil Jordan’s *Breakfast on Pluto* (2006). Indeed, as regards Quinn’s work on *Clash of the Ash*, as noted by Kevin Rockett:

while the themes of emigration and personal angst are common to generations of young Irish people, it is the visual treatment which these themes receive in *Clash of the Ash* which makes the film distinctive. Using a self-conscious ‘art’ form and photographic style, the film succeeds in evoking an atmosphere which contrasts sharply with the way in which so much realist writing has traditionally dealt with the Irish Provincial town (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill, 1988: 268).

While the GAA played an important role, as noted, in the articulation and promotion of a singular nationalist identity in the formative years of the Irish state, the locally based nature of the association also meant that there were, and continues to be, what Kearney calls a ‘plurality of stories’ (Kearney, 1996: 64) that make up the association. Indeed, it is often

commented upon by the association itself, as well as commentators without, that the strength of the GAA lies not in the inter-county game but rather in the parish based model, where communities are built and revolve around their local club.¹² Tighe's focus on one such club, in Fermoy, Co. Cork, allowed for the distinctive specifics of region, accent and local culture, features a simplistic nationalist reading of Irish identity elided, to be brought to the fore.

Described by Eamon Sweeney as one of the few films with a 'real feel for the GAA',¹³ it is not so surprising when one considers Tighe's own background as a hurler, winning an All-Ireland senior Colleges hurling medal with St. Colman's in Fermoy. Indeed, the violent climax to the film's final hurling game reenacts an event Tighe has recalled from his own playing days (Woodworth, 1987: 1). As Lennon did in *Rocky Road to Dublin*, Tighe used his depiction of gaelic games to draw attention to his own concerns regarding the state of the nation in the mid 1980s. Phil Kelly is the star player with the Fermoy hurling team and is tipped to make the county minors, but his application leaves something to be desired, at least in the eyes of the team's foul-mouthed and two-faced trainer, Mick Barry. His mother meanwhile is more concerned with Kelly's lack of application to his leaving cert studies, but Kelly's interests lie further afield than the modest plans his parents have for him in the local garage, particularly after he meets the glamorous Mary returned from London. While the GAA had promoted for much of the century an ideal notion of Ireland as Irish – Irish speaking if possible – ancient and celebrated the bravery, masculinity and high ideals of its members, Tighe's film reveals its central protagonist, Phil Kelly, the star of the local team to be a poor student, temperamental, violent and prone to binge drinking and drug abuse. This includes a scene of Kelly and Mary smoking a joint brazenly in the local coffee shop, where Kelly

¹² At the 2003 GAA annual congress, for example, the then president of the GAA, Seán Kelly, remarked on 'the importance of the local GAA club to the Association. The GAA club is the cornerstone of the Association and the needs of the GAA Club must be addressed'. See GAA website, 'Club Planning and Development' http://www.gaa.ie/page/club_planning_and_development.html (accessed 27 October 2007)

¹³ Eamon Sweeney, *Breaking Ball* (Motive Television for RTE, 2000-2006), script kindly provided to the author by Cormac Hardagan, producer of the RTE series.

boosts of smoking joints ‘all the time’.

Indeed, such is its depiction of Ireland in the mid 1980s that the film was lucky to be made at all, when the local bishop got his hands on the script. Advised by the president of St. Colman’s college, where Tighe, as former student, had hoped to make the film, the script was condemned as blasphemous and resulted in a call to the local GAA club in Fermoy by the bishop asking that they would have nothing to do with the production.¹⁴ In a sign of changing times in Ireland, the local club declined the bishop’s advice and continued to facilitate the production while the local technical school provided teams and permitted Tighe to use its grounds for the film. Colman’s president and the local bishop may have been partly concerned for the reputation of a school whose first president was Archbishop Croke, a cleric with a particular concern for Irish culture and its representation as evinced by the quote already discussed.¹⁵ The bishop’s ire was no doubt further inflamed by aspects of the script which may have offended religious sensibilities but absent from the finished film, including a shot early on, shot 17, described as ‘THE FACE OF CHRIST, crucified on a hilltop shrine, the RAIN TEEMING down as a DROP OF BIRDSHIT splatters on his forehead,’ (Tighe, 1986: 3) and a scene also left out of the young protagonist playacting outside a church and choosing to head for a pint rather than go to mass (Ibid.,: 31).

Overall, in both script and film, we are presented with a town characterized by unemployment, drug abuse and emigration, where hurling offers one of the few outlets for youths to unleash the frustrations and disappointments of their everyday life. Unsurprisingly, these frustrations spill over into violence on the field of play, in the film’s climactic encounter in the county final between Fermoy and Mitchelstown. When Kelly is hit over the head with a hurley by an opposing player, he retaliates in a similar fashion, while running from the pitch, with his trainer’s shouts of ‘there’ll be no job in the bank for you’ ringing in his ears (Fig. 3).

¹⁴ These details and those that follow are from a personal interview by the author with Tighe on 20 August 2007.

¹⁵ This information is available on the website of St. Colman’s College, Fermoy, <http://www.stcolmanscollege.com/history.htm>, (accessed 20 November 2007)



Fig. 3. *Clash of the Ash* (Fergus Tighe, 1987)

Representations of gaelic games have been transformed since the foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884. While the association's founding fathers were concerned with the celebration of native pastimes, Irish nationality and preserving and promoting Irish manhood, contemporary representations often reflect changing conceptions of all of these elements. A pioneering text in this respect was Peter Lennon's *Rocky Road to Dublin*, a work that in its interrogation of Irish nationalism anticipated the emergence of a critically engaged Irish cinema in the 1970s. For Lennon, gaelic games, and particularly their promotion, provided an important metaphor for narrower essentialist notions of Irishness that resisted and feared foreign cultural influence, apparent in the continuing ban in 1967 on members of the GAA attending or participating in 'foreign' games such as soccer, rugby or cricket. In this respect Lennon's film also anticipates a postnationalist approach to gaelic games and Irish society that would continue to develop in subsequent work such as Bob Quinn's *Atlantean* and Fergus Tighe's *Clash of the Ash*, a work that focuses significantly on the local GAA context, while providing an important critique of Ireland in the mid 1980s. Its depiction of

gaelic games and its practitioners continued the demythologizing of the sport which Lennon's film had begun. Each of these films problematise previous narrow conceptions of Irishness and celebrate the potential of cultural encounter and new possibilities.

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