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# “IS IT ANOTHER OF THEIR REBELLIONS?”: GAELIC GAMES AND THE FILMS OF JOHN FORD

Seán Crosson

Fun was in the air. Kilkee talent gave us songs and dances. Kevin Casey cleverly rattled off a sort of “Irish Calypso”, bringing in everybody’s name. Mike Duffy sang lovely songs and John Cowley started a dramatic recitation to be broken up by the entrance of Ford, Killanin, Potter and Trubshaw doing a very funny turn in the hurley boys’ jerseys. (Sharp-Bolster 7)

This description was given in the *Irish Independent* of Tuesday, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1957 of the wrap party for John Ford’s film *The Rising of the Moon* (1957). Unfortunately, no photographs survive of Ford outfitted in one of the ‘hurley boys’ jerseys’ though the depiction does invite speculation as to why the major Hollywood director of the day, along with others involved in the production, should enter the party so attired. In this essay I will examine the references to Gaelic games, and in particular hurling, in Ford’s films and contend that the description just provided offers a significant pointer to their role in his work.

Though sport could not be included among the most prominent themes found in his films, John Ford had a considerable personal interest in sport which was apparent at least from his high-school years. According to Ronald L. Davis in his biography of Ford, when John Feeney (Ford’s birth name) entered Portland High School in 1910, “His consuming interest was football” (25) by which Davis of course refers to the American variety rather than the sport played in Ireland. Apparently, Ford was a versatile and aggressive football player (see fig. 1), playing in halfback, fullback and defensive tackle and earning the nickname “Bull Feeney – the human battering ram” for his tendency to put “his head down and charge” while playing (Davis 25). As teammate Oscar Vanier remarked some years later “It didn’t matter if there was a stone wall there, he’d drive right for it” (Davis 26).



Fig. 1. Portland High School 1913 State Champion's football team of which Ford was the star fullback [pictured on the far right of the back row].(source: Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford* [St. Martin's Press, 2001]). Photo reprinted with the permission of Portland Public Schools, Portland Maine (USA))

Ford also played baseball and, as the fastest runner in his school, made the track team (Davis 26). However, American football was always his favourite sport. Ford's reputation on the football field may have appeared to affirm a prominent stereotype of the Irish in the period – what Joe McBride describes as “a battling lout” (McBride 61). However, sport simultaneously had an important role for the young aspiring Irish-American; as “a means”, in Davis' words, “for an Irish youth to win acceptance by the Yankee majority” (Davis 26). This essay contends that the references to hurling in Ford's films can be viewed comparably to the role football played for the young Irish-American. On one level Ford was certainly aware of the stereotypes and prejudices concerning the Irish, and the role that a sport such as hurling could play for some in their affirmation. However, as commentators such as Lee Lourdeaux and Martin McLoone have noted, Irish American filmmakers, such as Ford, were also engaged in a project of exploiting the performative potential of Irish stereotypes in film while contributing to the assimilation of Irish-America into mainstream American life (Lourdeaux 87-128; McLoone 44-59). McLoone remarks on the “role of ethnic filmmakers in both allaying the fears of the Anglo-American audience and in inducting this audience into the virtues of ethnic culture” (McLoone 48) and I would contend that this is also relevant to the references to hurling in Ford's films. Furthermore, in a feature noted by Luke Gibbons (200) and others, Ford's films also repeatedly, and cleverly, undermine such stereotypes (including in their references to hurling) – as part of a process whereby what might be called “functional performative violence” is employed to facilitate processes of social cohesion and assimilation.

From the 1930s onwards, Gaelic games began to feature occasionally in American cinema. Hurling in particular, by far the most common Gaelic game portrayed, or alluded to, in these productions, seems to have provided an authentic and ‘primitive’<sup>1</sup> contrast to the presumed modernity of American sports such as American football, while also apparently containing the violence so often associated with the Irish. As Rockett, Gibbons and Hill in *Cinema and Ireland*, have noted, “Whether it be rural backwardness or a marked proclivity for violence, the film-producing nations of the metropolitan centre have been able to find in Ireland a set of characteristics which stand in contrast to the assumed virtues of their own particular culture” (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill xii). Hurling’s association principally with rural Ireland, and the apparent violence of the game particularly to those unfamiliar with it, seemed to encapsulate both of these elements, providing a shorthand for a familiar Irish stereotype and it is these traits that are often to the fore in depictions, descriptions and references to the sport in American productions.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, in the first American productions to focus on hurling in the 1930s we find a recurring emphasis on the alleged violence associated with the game as evident in fig. 2, a poster for the 1936 MGM short *Hurling* in which hurling is described as Ireland’s “athletic assault and battery.”

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this view was encouraged by the Gaelic Athletic Association itself in asserting hurling’s antiquity.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is not suggesting that the game of hurling cannot involve occasions of violence. However, violence is no more a part of the sport than any other physical contact team game. Indeed, as Patrick McDevitt has noted right from the codification of Gaelic games in the 1880s, the GAA sought to encourage “scientific play” by reducing the number of players per team from 21 in the beginning to 15 by 1913 and working “to heighten the value of quickness and finesse and to lessen the worth of brute force” (McDevitt 276). Gaelic games commentators in the formative years of the GAA stressed the need for discipline in games, with one observer identifying “the creation of proper control as the first and most important task” of the GAA (Devlin 12). Furthermore, McDevitt argues that “Irish codes went further than other contact sports at the time in curbing violence”, by legislating for sending off players for retaliation and the replacement of injured players. In rugby, by contrast, players were expected to play ‘hard’ and to play on through the pain of injury. Gaelic games, he adds, “not only allowed but stressed compassion for others; men must play unafraid of injury but receive prompt and proper treatment if injuries occur” (McDevitt 276).

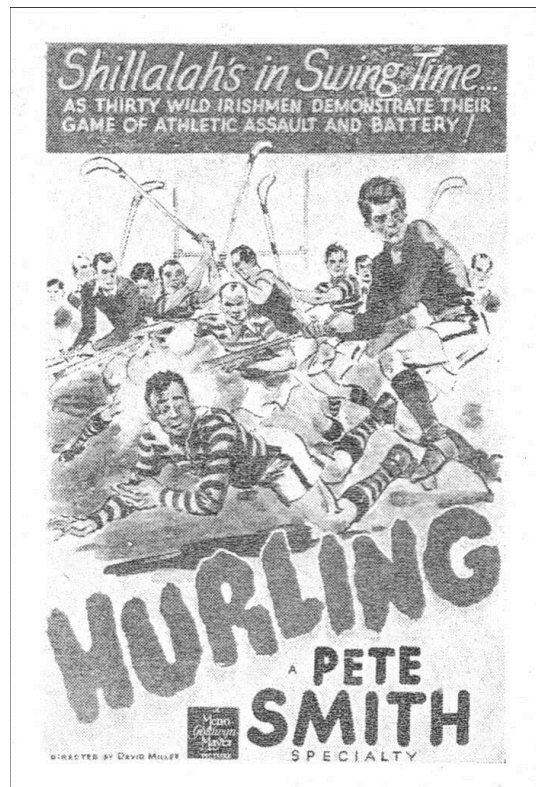


Figure 2. Poster for *Hurling* (MGM 1936)

American film more generally in this period often featured the recurring stereotype of the violent Irish. As Stephenie Rains observes of representations of the Irish-American male,

his overt masculinity was largely connected to lawlessness and violence, particularly during the 1930s era of gangster films. James Cagney, among other stars, was a vehicle for such representations of urban, modern Irish-American masculinity. (Rains 148)

However, these more threatening characters were offset and balanced by the equally ubiquitous figures of the Irish priest or policeman (associated in particular with actors like Pat O'Brien or Spenser Tracy) in this period. While representations in film of Irish America were undoubtedly building on established stereotypes, these stereotypes were evolving into more positive representations as the Irish American community moved from the margins to the centre of American life as the twentieth century progressed. In the process suspicion of, and the threat of violence associated with, the Irish was assuaged by balancing established stereotypes of 'the fighting Irish' with more positive characters or placing such violence in a non-threatening or comic context. Furthermore, sport as featured particularly in short films from the 1920s and up to the 1950s was frequently exploited primarily for its comic potential. Several prominent films from this period, including Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman* (1925), Buster Keaton's *College* (1927), Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931) and the Marx Brothers *Horse Feathers* (1932) all used sport, from American

football, to boxing and field sports, for primarily comic purposes. It is within this context that we find references to hurling appearing in John Ford's film.

When referred to in Ford's films, hurling always proceeds or suggests an occasion of violence, though placed within a comic rather than threatening context. While we don't actually witness a game of hurling in Ford's biggest commercial success *The Quiet Man* (1952), significantly the mere mention of the game, during a dispute between the engine driver, Costello (Eric Gorman), the train guard, Molouney (Joseph O'Dea) and the stationmaster, Hugh Bailey (Web Overlander), seems to inspire violence in those discussing it:

Costello (from the train engine): Well we're off.

Hugh Bailey (shaking a pocket watch): And might I suggest Mr. Costello, the train already being four and a half hours late ...

Costello: Is it my fault, Mr. Bailey, that there's a hurling match at Ballygar and that the champions of all-Ireland are playing ...

Molouney (pointing his flag in a threatening manner at Bailey): If you knew your country's history as well as you claim to know it, Mr. Bailey, you'd know that the Mayo hurlers haven't been beaten west of the Shannon for the last twenty-two years...

[May Craig, described in the credits as "Fishwoman with basket at station", interjects here and shouts "true for you Mr. Molouney" only to be cut off by Bailey]

Bailey: That's a lie, that's a lie Costello!

[At this point there is silence as Costello removes his hat, followed by Molouney, who also removes his glasses. Bailey responds by removing his hat, and begins to remove his jacket for the impending fight only for proceedings to be interrupted by the arrival of Sean Thornton to bring his wife Mary Kate from the train.]

I would contend that this scene is a great example of Ford's use of what might be called 'performative acting' in the Brechtian sense of a style that acknowledges the audience and "thus aims to deconstruct the fourth wall realism of both the Stanislavskian stage and Classical Hollywood film" (Zdriluk 2004). The actions and wind up to the almost fight here are an elaborate display that cues the audience for the following lengthy performative fight sequence between Sean Thornton (John Wayne) and Red Will Danaher (Victor McLaglen) that facilitates Thornton's eventual acceptance into the Inisfree community. Indeed, Irish audiences in particular are cued to this performance by the dialogue within the scene itself. The suggestion that the Mayo hurlers hadn't been beaten west of the Shannon for the previous 22 years would have been just as ludicrous to followers of Gaelic games in 1952 as it is today. In actual fact, Mayo has rarely won a senior hurling game west of the Shannon, with the exception of one senior victory over the Galway hurlers in 1909, a feat that has not been repeated subsequently. Furthermore, for the 22 years prior to *The Quiet Man's* release Galway hurlers were awarded the Connaught championship unopposed such was their dominance then – as now – in the province. The

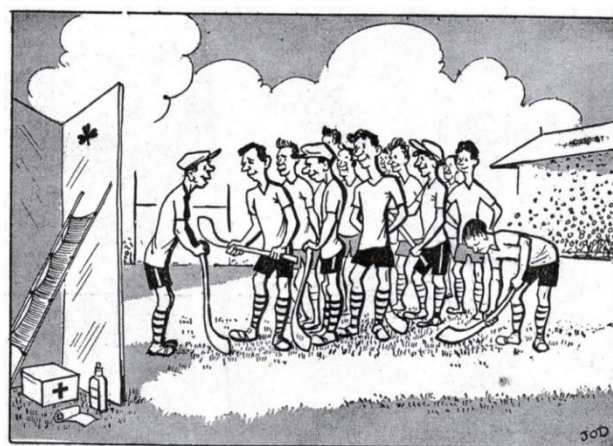
performative features apparent here would be all the more evident in Ford's subsequent Irish set film, *The Rising of the Moon*.

Though a commercial failure on release in 1957, *The Rising of the Moon* was important as part of Ford's ongoing attempts to promote the establishment of an Irish film industry that would partly encourage others to set up Ireland's first designated film studios at Ardmore (county Wicklow) the following year. In terms of representations of hurling, however, the film included one of the most controversial depictions that resulted in considerable press coverage during the film's production and a staunch defence of the film and Ford's work by *Irish Times* columnist Myles na Gopaleen.

This three part work called *Three Leaves of a Shamrock* during production and on release in the United States, included a central segment 'A Minute's Wait', filmed in Kilkee, Co. Clare, which featured shots of a victorious hurling team led by its piper's band arriving for the Ballyscran to Dunfaill train. On Tuesday May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1956, both *The Irish Press* and *Irish Independent* reported the shooting of this scene in which some players were filmed "on stretchers", after "an encounter which," the *Independent* correspondent related "from the appearance of the players, must have been bloody and very rough, and hardly played according to the rules of the Gaelic Athletic Association" ("Film makers continue ..."). Unsurprisingly, the GAA responded with some alarm to the reports the following day with a statement, published in both papers, from the General Secretary of the Association Pádraig Ó Caoimh declaring that he was "deeply concerned lest there should be any substance in this report." The statement went on to note that Ó Caoimh had been "in touch with Lord Killanin, one of the directors of Four Provinces Productions [the production company behind the film]. He has assured me that the report referred to is exaggerated and completely out of context; that there are no stretcher-carrying scenes, and that in fact there is nothing offensive to our national tradition in this film" ("Filming of hurlers ..."). The controversy rumbled on nonetheless and by Friday of that week it was on the front page of *The Irish Times*, where it was announced that the shooting of the scenes "resulted in an official deputation from the Clare County Board of the GAA making a strong protest yesterday in Kilkee to Lord Killanin." A statement was issued by the board which said it was a matter of "grave concern to the GAA that the national game of hurling should, or would, appear to be held up to ridicule [...] the matter of 15 players returning home all suffering injuries would be calculated to give the impression that instead of a national sporting game that they were casualties returning to a clearing station at a battlefield." While noting that such violent incidents and injuries were extremely rare in GAA games, chairman of the Clare county Board, Father John Corry "pointed out that the scene as depicted was completely derogatory to the Gaels of Ireland and to the hurlers in particular. The scene if placed on the screen as filmed would bring the association into disrepute and would be calculated to hold up the national game to ridicule both at home and abroad" ("G.A.A. Protests ...").

These final remarks were quoted at length by *Irish Times* columnist Myles na Gopaleen – better known today as acclaimed author Flann O’Brien – some weeks later while referring to what he called the “farcical drool emitted by the GAA.” Na Gopaleen, apparently at that time a regular reader of the provincial papers, “the only true mirrors” he observed “of Ireland as she is”, was quoting the Clare County Board’s statement not from *The Irish Times* but from *The Clare Champion*. He went on to note a report on the same page of the *Champion* of a local hurling game between Ruan and St. Josephs where the game was described as “probably one of the worst exhibitions of bad sportsmanship ever seen on a Gaelic field.” There was “literally a procession to the Co. hospital from the match” the report continued, while “One, a spectator from Ennis, had survived the war in Korea but he almost met his Waterloo in Cusack Park” (“GAATHLETES”). Na Gopaleen was dismissive of the GAA’s criticisms of the film and while extolling the virtues of Ford (apparently a close friend, the article suggests), remarked that “To many people, the possibility of vital injury is part of the attraction of hard games [...] The non-belligerent spectators regard absence of such occurrences as an attempt to defraud them. They have paid their two bobs to see melia murdher. Failure to present it is, they feel, low trickery” (“Ford-Proconsul”).

Whether or not one agrees with Na Gopaleen’s interpretation of supporters’ expectations at hurling matches, and despite Lord Killanin’s assurances, the scenes remained in the film, including images of several hurlers being carried on stretchers to the train after successfully winning their match. Indeed, it seems the reactions of the GAA were not taken seriously among those involved in the production. Records of correspondences with Lord Killanin held in the Lord Killanin Collection in the Irish Film Institute reveal that the film’s producers collected newspaper clippings and correspondences, both for and against the depiction, and would appear to have been more amused than alarmed by the response (see Figure 3).



“Go easy with the skullduggery, lads—Ford and Killanin may be on the sideline!”

Fig. 3. This cartoon was published in the June edition of *Dublin Opinion Magazine*, 1956, p.106. Included in the Lord Killanin Collection in the Irish Film Institute.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Charles Barr for bringing this collection to my attention and providing me with copies of materials from it, including this cartoon.



Ford also appeared in a small part in an Abbey Theatre Irish language play shortly after the film's production in which a "short passage of Gaelic dialogue was improvised for him." When asked if "he was going back to Spiddal" (the birthplace of his parents) he said he was not as he was "afraid of the GAA."

However, as with *The Quiet Man* these scenes of injured players are ultimately not primarily about hurling. It would appear that Na Gopaleen, a commentator whose own contributions to *The Irish Times* were often tour de force performances in themselves, including his celebrated *moniker*,<sup>4</sup> admired the performative elements within Ford's work while also being highly critical of the hypocrisy he sensed in the reactions of the GAA. Indeed, Na Gopaleen may also have recognised the "self-interrogation" Luke Gibbons has identified in Ford's *The Quiet Man* (200), within *The Rising of the Moon*, which seems more concerned with ridiculing the reactions, and lack of familiarity, of tourists to Ireland to the game of hurling than any particular critique of the potential for violence in the sport itself. As the wife of the recently wed English couple on the train remarks on seeing the hurlers pass her window, "Charles, is it another of their rebellions?", remarks that poke fun more at the tourist than the hurler.

John Ford co-directed one further film that features hurling players, *Young Cassidy* (1965), an adaptation of Seán O'Casey's autobiography. Though Ford was originally attached to direct, British Cinematographer Jack Cardiff eventually directed most of the film after Ford fell ill. However, among the few scenes that Ford did direct was one bar scene that features Cassidy meeting a group of hurlers (Gallagher 543). In this scene, Cassidy is heading out for a drink with his brothers Archie and Tom to celebrate Tom's recent return on leave from the British army when they meet in a bar with a local hurling team returning victorious after a game, an encounter that begins with some of the hurlers taking offence at Tom's uniform and ends in a fistfight with members of the Royal Irish Constabulary.

We have in this scene what might be regarded in Lewis Coser's terms as an example of "functional conflict" (Coser) – that is "conflict that takes place within the clearly defined parameters of traditional and populist community values and that ultimately works in the interest of social cohesion" (Hill 191-192). This form of conflict is found elsewhere in Ford's work including the lengthy fight sequence referred to above in *The Quiet Man*. In *Young Cassidy*, the hurlers quickly get over their argument with Cassidy and his brothers and support them in their subsequent fight with the Royal Irish Constabulary. In this regard, what may at first appear to be a stereotype regarding the reputed violence of hurling and hurlers functions, ultimately within the narrative brings hurlers, Cassidy, and his brothers together, heading off merrily as the scene closes on the back of a cart into the distance.

I began this chapter with a description by Anita Sharp-Bolster of the wrap party for John Ford's *The Rising of the Moon*. The description of Ford, along with others

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<sup>4</sup> The name Flann O'Brien was itself a pseudonym for the author, born Brian Ó Núalláin in 1911 in Tyrone.

involved in the production, “doing a very funny turn” in hurley jerseys offers a fascinating insight into the role of hurling in the great director’s work. Much as Sharp-Bolster clearly describes a performance by Ford and others, the Irish-American director exploited the performative potential of Irish stereotypes – including those concerning the Gaelic game of hurling – in his films to diffuse anxieties regarding the Irish while facilitating their assimilation and acceptance as a central part of American society and culture. Followers of hurling may rightfully question and reject the recurring suggestions of violence associated with their sport in Ford’s work and that of other American directors of his era. However, these depictions ultimately have less to do with either the sport of hurling or Irish life than with engaging with aspects of an emerging and evolving Irish American identity in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

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