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Abstract

John Ford's Hollywood film of the Easter Rising, *The Plough and the Stars* (1936), based on Sean O'Casey's play from ten years earlier, deserves more respect than it has generally been given. Its departures from O'Casey's text, giving a more positive view of the Rising, were openly debated with him, and can be seen as resulting less in betrayal than in creative dialogue. The film has a clear relation to other inter-war films about historic Revolutions — Russian (*Battleship Potemkin*, USSR 1925), French (*A Tale of Two Cities*, US 1935) and American (Ford's own *Drums Along the Mohawk* US 1939) — and can be viewed, in retrospect, as a pivotal film within Ford's career, inspiring him to a fuller and more consistent engagement with Irish themes and with American nation-building narratives, and the interaction between the two.

1916 and Other Risings: John Ford's *The Plough and the Stars* (1936)¹

Charles Barr

It is strange that John Ford's 1936 film of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* was not more visible in the course of the centenary year. When, in one of its most intense scenes, we see and hear Arthur Shields in the GPO speaking a condensed version of the Proclamation of Independence, we are being led back directly through history. As a young Abbey Theatre actor in 1916, Shields himself was among the rebels who occupied the building, and was then imprisoned for several months. In February 1926, in the first production of the play at the Abbey, he played the part of Lieutenant Langon, and functioned as Assistant Director. In 1936 in Hollywood, John Ford used him as Assistant Director on the film, and cast him in that key Pádraig Pearse role, as well as bringing several other experienced Abbey players over from Dublin.² So the continuity from 1916 is clear and strong.

Figure 1. Arthur Shields (left) and Moroni Olsen. The characters are not named, but clearly represent Pearse and Connolly.

¹ I am extremely grateful to Ned Comstock, Senior Assistant in the Cinematic Arts Library at the University of Southern California, for supplying a range of material on *The Plough and the Stars* from the library's archival holdings. For the chance to work more closely on Ford and O'Casey, separately and together, using Irish resources and expertise, I am indebted to the award in 2014 of a three-month Fellowship by the Trinity Long Room Hub Arts and Humanities Research Institute, Trinity College Dublin, and in 2015 of a one-month Fellowship by the Moore Institute at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

² Two recent books have belatedly given serious attention to Shields: Adrian Frazier, *Hollywood Irish: John Ford, Abbey Actors and the Irish Revival in Hollywood* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2011), and Fearghal McGarry, *The Abbey Rebels of 1916: A Lost Revolution* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2015). Both of them make use of the rich material held in the Arthur Shields Collection at the Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway, parts of which are accessible online: <http://archives.library.nuigalway.ie:8080/digi/exbos/T13>

Figure 2. A note that presumably accompanied some kind of gift. T13/A/189, Shields Family Archive, Hardiman Library, NUI Galway.

From mid-March 2016, a fine centenary production of the play attracted full houses at the Abbey, and then on tour as far away as Washington D.C.; it played in Galway in the very week (23rd May) of the conference 1916, Cinema and Revolution hosted by the Huston School of Film & Digital Media (NUI Galway). In contrast, no DVD company could be persuaded to exploit the centenary with an edition of the film. There is no trace of any VHS release, but neither is there evidence of contractual or other obstacles. A DVD launch would surely have created interest on both sides of the Atlantic — and could still do so — equally for the film itself and for the wealth of extras that might be incorporated: historical context, commentaries, alternative versions. One fringe DVD company, Vic Films, does, or did, offer the film, the copy of a copy deriving from some long-ago TV screening, so poor as to be almost unplayable. But serviceable prints do survive, one of them supplied by the Irish Film Archive and shown at the conference, and better versions may well remain to be discovered in the US or elsewhere.

One obvious reason for this neglect is the film's poor reputation. In contrast to Ford's previous studio-shot Dublin drama for RKO, *The Informer* (1935), it was a critical and commercial failure at the time and since. But this does not detract from its value for audiences today; indeed the failure, and the reasons for it, become an additional point of interest in a complex history.

Its low status results from two main factors:

(1) Studio interference. RKO insisted, against Ford's wishes, on casting Barbara Stanwyck and Preston Foster in the lead roles, and alienated him further, after the film wrapped, by having a contract director shoot gratuitous extra scenes with the two of them. Eventually, in the words of Ford's biographer Scott Eyman, 'RKO's final cut of *The Plough and the Stars* was a ridiculously brief seventy-eight minutes'.³ Even that is longer by several minutes than any version that circulates today. Possibly it included some of the non-Ford footage, subsequently excised. Possibly Eyman's 78-minute figure is a mistake; the print imported to Britain, reviewed by the *Monthly Film Bulletin* in December 1936, is timed at 67 minutes, and most documents, and surviving prints, support this timing. Altogether it was a frustrating experience for Ford and for the Abbey contingent, who saw it is a diminished, compromised outcome, a view widely echoed.

³ Scott Eyman, *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 162.

(2) The film's internal tensions. Ford's perspective on the Rising was undeniably much more positive and romantic than O'Casey's. For Ruth Barton, the film thus '*works against itself*' not only via its conflicting acting styles but also in terms of its message' [my italics]; again, this view, meant as a dismissive one, has been widely shared.⁴

Conflicting Messages

Film adaptations can stay close to the original, 'faithful to the letter'; more realistically, they can make changes appropriate to the switch of medium while remaining 'faithful to the spirit' of the original. Ford's film of O'Casey belongs to a third category, that of the adaptation which is faithful neither in letter nor in spirit but engages in dialogue with the original — not in a devious process of betrayal, but boldly and openly. The *Plough* film may indeed be seen as 'working against itself', but it does so in provocative ways, and it surely gains, at the very least, a strong historical value: we here get access to the encounter, only two decades after the events of 1916, between two major Irish artists of the 20th century, and to their different perspectives on those events. Moreover, letters survive in which they articulate their differences, ahead of the film's production.

I have called Ford 'Irish'; he was of course Irish-American, born and raised in Maine, but he identified more strongly with Ireland than did any other film-maker from Hollywood's extensive Irish-American community. In effect he and O'Casey took opposite journeys, respectively towards Ireland and away from it. O'Casey left in the late 1920s after breaking with the Abbey Theatre, settled in England, and sustained a prickly relationship ever afterwards with Ireland and its culture; Ford gravitated increasingly from America to Ireland, shooting three post-war films, in part or whole, on Irish locations, working with full commitment on plans for an indigenous Irish production sector, and even making a cameo appearance of his own on the Abbey stage in 1956, a move of strong symbolic import.⁵ In 1936 he was already moving in this direction, not yet filming in Ireland but bringing out Abbey actors to Hollywood.

Negotiating with O'Casey in advance of the filming, Ford had made much of his own Irish roots, and of his memory of visits to Ireland. In a letter of early 1936, on RKO-headed paper, he recalls:

I hurried from America to Galway during the trouble in '21. We had heard indirectly that our family in Spiddal were in economic and political difficulties. As the only one of the family who could travel at that time I went to that poor village and the first sight that greeted my amazed eyes was to see the thatched cottage of my cousin, Michael Thornton, in flames and

⁴ Ruth Barton, *Acting Irish in Hollywood: From Fitzgerald to Farrell* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 31.

⁵ The three postwar films are *The Quiet Man* (1952), *The Rising of the Moon* (1956) and *Young Cassidy* (1965), on which Jack Cardiff took over from Ford as director after a few weeks. The first and third were shot partly in Ireland, partly in the studios of Hollywood and Elstree respectively; *The Rising of the Moon* was shot entirely on Irish locations. It was intended by Ford and its producer, Michael Killanin, to help kick-start an indigenous Irish industry, but its commercial failure meant that their elaborate plans for this, centred on their company Four Provinces Films, did not succeed. It was during work on this film that Ford made his brief appearance on the stage of the Abbey Theatre, as reported (with a photograph) in *The Evening Press* of 8th May 1956 under the heading 'Mystery Abbey Extra was John Ford! — "Always Wanted to Act There"'.

his old mother and father in the roadway watching with stoic bitterness the departing lorries of the Auxiliaries.⁶

As often with Ford and Ireland, there is a strong rhetorical and sentimental flourish, but his account of the journey is far from being a romantic fantasy: the dates and details are scrupulously reconstructed in Joseph McBride's biography.⁷ Ford goes on in the same style in his letter to O'Casey, recounting a return visit in the early 1930s to Spiddal under the Free State, and to a new meeting with his cousin:

He was older and worn but much happier than I had ever seen him. He had achieved his place in the structure of things. What a difference in the children! Instead of poor, hungry boys and girls, barefooted and red-petticoated that I had known there, he was surrounded by red-cheeked, well-dressed, healthy children in suits of good homespun, proud little emblemed skull caps and all talking the lyrical and musical Irish of the West.⁸

These before-and-after memories clearly had a profound poetic meaning for Ford, and an enduring influence. In *The Quiet Man* (1952), the Irishman (John Wayne) returning from America to the West of Ireland is named Sean Thornton, combining the Irish version of Ford's own first name with the cousin's surname.⁹ *The Rising of the Moon* (1956), a three-episode film, takes its main title from the short play by Lady Gregory on which the third episode is based: first performed at the Abbey in 1907, it is updated to 1921, with the Auxiliaries (*aka* Black and Tans) as the enemy, and with the episode itself given that date as its on-screen title, *1921*.

In the 1936 correspondence, Ford invokes his memory of that year and its aftermath to argue for a more upbeat ending to the film than to the play, which ends with Clitheroe dead, asking O'Casey to approve the plan

... to bring Clitheroe back to go out with the coffin of Mollser at the close of the play [...] could we allow him, as the funeral cortege is moving up the street through the lines of patrolling swaddies [sic], to look back at the Plough and the Stars as it comes down over the blazing Four Courts and utter a prophetic speech to the effect that some day that flag will be hoisted again [...]?¹⁰

O'Casey replies courteously but firmly, making it clear that his view of the Free State is less enthusiastic than Ford's, and continuing:

⁶ The O'Casey/Ford correspondence is found in David Krause, ed., *The Letters of Sean O'Casey, Volume 1, 1910-41* (New York: Macmillan, 1975). This first letter (615-6) is dated 9th March 1936; the USC archive holds a fuller draft of the letter, dated 27th January but evidently not sent until weeks later. USC, Robert Sisk collection, Box 14 item 28.

⁷ Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford: a Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), 136-41.

⁸ Ford to O'Casey, 27th January 1936, Krause, *Letters*, 616.

⁹ Maureen O'Hara, who starred in four of Ford's post-war films, recalled that 'Pappy always loved calling himself by the Gaelic version of his birth name, Sean Aloysius Kilmartin O'Feeney'. See O'Hara, *'Tis Herself* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004), 4. The name of the character in the story by Maurice Walsh on which the film was loosely based is Paddy Bawn Enright.

¹⁰ Ford to O'Casey, 27th January 1936, Krause, *Letters*, 616.

How to get into the Film what you and I want to get in is the question and it is something of an awkward question to answer. I have pondered your suggestion, and I'm afraid that to carry it out would mean a big alteration on the whole theme of the play.¹¹

He makes some half-hearted counter-suggestions, well short of what Ford asked for, after which he writes to his friend, the New York theatre critic George Jean Nathan:

Thanks for sending me on the letters from Messrs Sisk [producer] & Ford of RKO. I have answered them as well as I could, & have sent suggestions for additions to Film that, I think, will take away the necessity to keep Clitheroe alive.¹²

In the context of Hollywood power dynamics, this is wishful thinking. Ford ends the film exactly as he had wanted to. Clitheroe, very much alive, looks up at the flag, and in heroic close-up swears that 'We'll live to see Ireland free and go on fighting until we do'.

The film contains much more in the same spirit that had not been run past O'Casey because it needed less in the way of structural change. In the play, we hear scraps of Pearse's Proclamation rhetoric, but only offstage in the course of a pub scene — this disrespect was one of the elements that many in the 1926 Abbey audience found offensive. In the film, the rhetoric is presented centre-screen, and with reverence: much compressed, and all the more effective for that, solemnly articulated by Shields, and heightened by the solemnity of the grouping and the lighting. This is consistent with the essentially heroic presentation, early on, of an elaborate republican parade.

Despite these differences from the play, it is notable that O'Casey seems to have felt little or no resentment of Ford, in contrast to his resentment of Alfred Hitchcock after he filmed *Juno and the Paycock* in 1929. Hitchcock was always extravagant in his praise of that play, and he adapted it very faithfully, but this earned him little gratitude; on a personal level, the two men and their wives fell out, and O'Casey may simply have perceived the adaptation, limited as it was by the crudity of early-sound technology, as too dull, with no extra spark or personal input from its adapter.¹³ In contrast, he could respect Ford as a passionate artist with a vigorous investment in Ireland and its history, even though with a different emphasis from his own. He was happy, late in life, to accept Ford as director of a biopic based on his Dublin years, and Ford was likewise very happy to take it on. Sadly, Ford's health did not allow him to shoot more than a few initial scenes, nor did O'Casey live to see the result, but *Young Cassidy* (1965) — billed as a John Ford Production, and based on O'Casey's autobiographies via a script by the English playwright John Whiting — stands as testimony to their continued mutual respect, a loose kind of sequel to the film of 1936. Jack Cardiff, who took over direction, is known to have stuck closely to Ford's original plan, including an energetic recreation of the chaotic first night of *The Plough and the Stars* itself, with full value given, in Michael Redgrave's performance, to Yeats's magisterial rebuke to the audience for insulting O'Casey's genius.

¹¹ O'Casey to Ford, 29th March 1936, Krause, *Letters*, 617.

¹² O'Casey to Nathan, 30th March 1936, Krause, *Letters*, 619

¹³ For more on the *Juno* film see Charles Barr, 'The Knock of Disapproval: *Juno and the Paycock* and its Irish Reception', *The Hitchcock Annual*, 17 (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2011), 63-94.

In that late project, Ford is affirming his respect for the play and its author, just as he had done in his long letter to O'Casey, quoted above, from March 1936. This is how he signed off:

I want to assure you that all of us concerned with the production will strive to make it as fine a picture as it is in the stage form. For myself I want you to know that I consider the opportunity of making this picture the greatest honor which has befallen me in twenty somewhat active years of picture making.¹⁴

There is no hypocrisy in this. Ford has told O'Casey, at careful length, that he wants to make changes, and why. At the same time he will retain and refine some of the play's subversive elements, notably those centred on Fluther Good (Barry Fitzgerald, from the original Abbey cast), and on Nora Clitheroe (Barbara Stanwyck, not from the Abbey).

In her authoritative essay on Fitzgerald, quoted above, Ruth Barton argues that 'with the Rising now rendered as heroic, its comic undermining is meaningless'.¹⁵ It is possible to claim the opposite: that through the starkness of the contrast the undermining becomes more provocative and meaningful, rather than less. The obvious reference point here is Sir John Falstaff. What made him, and still makes him, such an instantly captivating figure in the first of his Shakespearean roles, in *Henry IV Part One*, is the contrast between the nation-shaping heroics of the protagonists and his own bibulous but eloquent human cowardice, provoking laughter at his expense but also at the expense of the leaders — a complicated balance that every stage production has to negotiate afresh. Fitzgerald is fixed in his comparable film role as Fluther: like Falstaff, he made an instant hit, albeit in a film that was less than a hit, and it was on the strength of this film that he achieved a long Hollywood career. And like Falstaff, his Fluther speaks to later audiences, when they get a chance to see him: bibulous, human, cowardly, eloquent, interacting in a variety of ways with the heroes of the Rising. For one example, see figures 3 and 4. Arthur Shields, in the film's most solemn moment, reads from Pearse's Proclamation; Fluther downs a pint. While there is no direct cut between the images, the rhyming between the two bent right elbows, each placed at the left edge of the frame, is very suggestive — like a reworking of the play's juxtaposition of pub and proclamation, now within different spaces and within Ford's more positive view of the Rising, but still using Fluther pointedly and joyfully to subvert, or at least to offset, the heroism.

¹⁴ Ford to O'Casey, 27th January 1936, Krause, *Letters*, 616.

¹⁵ Barton, *Acting Irish*, 31.

Figure 3. Arthur Shields as Pearse

Figure 4. Barry Fitzgerald as Fluther

For more in this spirit on Ford and Fitzgerald and much else, see Adrian Frazier's book *Hollywood Irish*, as authoritative a book as Ruth Barton's *Acting Irish in Hollywood*, and with a more positive line on the *Plough* film.¹⁶ At the Huston School conference mentioned above, Adrian Frazier developed his account of the strong role of women in the film, and this is indeed another way in which Ford follows O'Casey even while in other ways he departs from him. The image of Clitheroe, at the end, looking up defiantly at the flag, marks a victory for Ford over O'Casey: 'We'll live to see Ireland free and go on fighting until we do'. But his close-up line is not the last word, which goes to Nora, in equally emphatic close-up: 'And we'll go on weeping'.

Figures 5 and 6. The final scene. Preston Foster as Jack Clitheroe, Barbara Stanwyck as Nora Clitheroe

One can see why Ford and others were dubious about the imposition of Foster and Stanwyck in these two leading roles, but it is hard, realistically, to see how Abbey actors could have been used. In virtually every Abbey performance, and there were many, up to the end of the 1930s, Jack was played by F.J. McCormick; Nora was played initially by Shelah Richards and then, from 1934, by Eileen Crowe. McCormick and Crowe are effective enough in supporting roles in the film, as Brennan and as Bessie Burgess, but it would have been a big risk to cast them in their stage roles: neither had any screen experience (apart from McCormick's role in a lost short film from 1916), though they did both go on after the war to play, successfully, a few further supporting parts; indeed McCormick made a major impact

¹⁶ Frazier: see note 1, above.

in the role of Shell in Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947), shortly before his premature death.¹⁷ In contrast, the casting of Stanwyck in particular meant a guarantee of screen technique and screen presence and, linked to this, popular appeal, and this does work to the film's benefit. At any rate, the two stars are there as a fixed part of the historical package, a document of its time and place, embodying another creative tension within the film, that between Hollywood and Ireland, like that between Ford and O'Casey. Ford's film is, inescapably and inevitably, a Hollywood studio film, Hollywood-Irish, Irish-American, just as his own sentimental view of the Rising and its aftermath is a common and continuing Irish-American one.

At least the casting of the American leads works better than that of the English actor Edward Chapman as Captain Boyle in Hitchcock's film of *Juno and the Paycock*, shot in England in 1929. He plays alongside Irish actors who are by then ex-Abbey players rather than current ones, with the exception of Barry Fitzgerald, who happened to be in London for the first production of O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*, and was enlisted to play a brief opening scene as The Orator. As noted above, that film is limited by a combination of creaky early-sound technology and excessive respect for the text, and Chapman's awkwardness aggravates this. In comparison, the boldness and ambition of Ford's film of *The Plough and the Stars*, unafraid to risk crudity, becomes positively refreshing.

Revolutionary Epics

Part of the film's energy surely derives from the way it belongs to an inter-war cycle of vigorous films about popular revolution. Here are four landmark titles:

Film title	Date/director	Historical event	Date
<i>Battleship Potemkin</i>	1925 / Sergei Eisenstein	Russian Revolution	1905/1917
<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>	1935 / Jack Conway	French Revolution	1789
<i>The Plough and the Stars</i>	1936 / John Ford	Easter Rising	1916
<i>Drums Along the Mohawk</i>	1939 / John Ford	American Revolution	1776

Eisenstein's *October* and Pudovkin's *The End of St Petersburg*, both 1927, deal directly with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution itself, but there is no doubt that *Potemkin* made the strongest international impact. Ford and his collaborators cannot have been unaware of *Potemkin*, which made a sensational impact at a private screening in Hollywood in 1926, nor of *A Tale of Two Cities*, a major Hollywood production of 1935, which shows the unmistakable influence of Soviet montage in its central action scene of the storming of the Bastille in 1789.¹⁸ *Potemkin* and the other Soviet films of revolution were seen as too

¹⁷ McCormick was director and star of the short comedy *Fun at a Finglas Fair* (1916), evidently destroyed soon after completion in the violence that followed the Rising. Apart from *The Plough and the Stars*, he made no further film until *Odd Man Out*; he died in the same year of 1947. Eileen Crowe, his wife, who lived till 1978, became more of a regular in post-war Irish-set films, including both *The Quiet Man* and the 1921 episode of *The Rising of the Moon*.

¹⁸ In *The Nation*, 15th September 1926, Ernestine Evans reported on a sensational private showing of *Potemkin* in California to 300 guests: 'Max Reinhardt and Douglas Fairbanks unite in saying that it is great art, the best motion picture either has ever seen. [...] Whether the public sees the picture or not, it will before long experience the influence of the new technique'. Reprinted in Stanley Kauffman, ed., *American Film Criticism* (New York: Liveright, 1972), 181-83. *A Tale of Two Cities* carries a credit: 'Revolutionary sequences staged by

dangerous to be screened freely in America, as also in Britain, and the French Revolution likewise was potentially dangerous material for dramatising to a mass audiences in the Depression years, but Selznick's film, faithful to Dickens, negotiates this by giving equal emphasis to the justification for revolt and to the brutal excesses that follow.

A key scene, ahead of the Bastille set-piece, has Sydney Carton (Ronald Colman) in London arguing with Stryver (Reginald Owen), a reactionary businessman, about the trouble brewing in Paris:

Stryver: The trouble is the aristocrats weren't firm enough. They should hang a few hoodlums, and that's all the revolution there will be.

Carton: That's the kind of talk that cost us the American colonies.

Stryver: We lost the colonies because they fell under the spell of that upstart Washington.

Carton: Well, the time may come when the upstart Washington is remembered as a better Englishman than George III.

Carton wins the argument, even before he is vindicated by what follows. There is no such explicit reference back to the American Revolution in the film of *The Plough*, but Ford was well aware of the parallels, as shown by his letter of reply to an unidentified critic of his plans for the film, in which he stated that 'The American Revolution itself could not be shown in any nobler light than we plan for the motion picture version of *Plough and Stars*'.¹⁹

Three years later Ford would turn to the American Revolution itself, in *Drums along the Mohawk*. It has unmistakable continuities with *The Plough and the Stars*: a justified struggle against British rule, with a young married couple at its centre, he (Henry Fonda) dedicated to the struggle, she (Claudette Colbert) anxious, focused on their home. During the GPO battle, Stanwyck ran impulsively into the Dublin street to look for her man; Colbert likewise goes from home to seek and find her man as he returns from a more remote battleground. And both films end with the same trope: surviving members of the nascent national community look upwards at the new flag.

Both these scenes echo, consciously or not, the Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin*, which opens with a crowd of citizens welcoming the mutineers of 1905 and gazing up joyfully at their symbol of revolt, the red flag that flies from the ship's mast; the red was important enough to be coloured in by hand on the early prints, and some modern prints reproduce this. A montage of looking-up images binds together citizens of different class,

Val Lewton and Jacques Tourneur'. The fast-cut set-piece seven-minute sequence centred on the storming of the Bastille was evidently delegated to these bright young film-makers who had come to America from Russia and France respectively; they would later work together on a celebrated series of low-budget horror films including *Cat People* (1942). For more on this sequence, and on the film, see Charles Barr, 'Two Cities, Two Films', *Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities and the French Revolution*, Colin Jones, Josephine McDonagh and Jon Mee, eds., (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 166-87.

¹⁹ From the draft of a lengthy and impassioned reply sent by Ford to a critical letter: no date or other details are given. USC, Robert Sisk collection, Box 14 item 28.

age and gender. Then the Cossack soldiers intervene murderously; the ship itself escapes, and the end is upbeat, but the full revolution will have to wait for another 12 years.

The Plough and the Stars puts its flag scene at the end, the scene which Ford worked so hard to install as the climax. The eponymous flag flutters down from the burning building, and men and women look upward; a wide shot of Mollser's pall-bearers, then Jack, then Nora. As in *Potemkin*, they will have to wait a few years for fulfilment, but again we know from hindsight that they succeed: 'We'll live to see Ireland free and go on fighting until we do'.

The end of *Drums along the Mohawk* is altogether sunnier, enhanced by the bright images of Ford's first film in colour. This is the decisive Revolution itself, not, as in Russia and Dublin, a precursor of it, nor, like the French Revolution of *Two Cities*, will it be followed by an ominous sequel, a Reign of Terror. The married couple look up at the new flag, but unlike in *The Plough* the tension between them — male/militant, female/domestic — has been resolved, and they can be seen united in the same shot, part of another upward-looking montage which boldly and movingly foregrounds both a Native American and an African-American woman servant.²⁰

Figures 7-8-9. Looking up at the flag: *Battleship Potemkin*, *The Plough and the Stars*, *Drums along the Mohawk*

The more one reflects on the place of *The Plough and the Stars* within Ford's career, the more important and pivotal it seems, quite apart from its own underestimated merits. It provides a form of template for *Drums along the Mohawk*, fulfilling Ford's comment about the affinity between the two revolutions. *Drums* was the first of his films to engage on a large scale with American history since *The Iron Horse* in 1924, which told the story of the construction of railways across the continent in fulfilment of Abraham Lincoln's vision. That film qualifies as a Western, but despite his famous association with the genre Ford made only one more Western (the less ambitious *Three Bad Men* in 1926), and no more films with a building-of-America dimension, until, dramatically, 1939, his *annus mirabilis*: *Stagecoach*, closely followed by *Young Mr Lincoln* and *Drums along the Mohawk*, and then *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). *The Plough and the Stars* can be seen as a form of stepping-stone towards these films, in two ways. First for tackling head-on the big national topic, albeit with ambivalent results, as the block of the four later films will so confidently do in terms of America. Second, for reconnecting with Ford's Irish roots, reinforcing the experience of *The*

²⁰ On the film, and on this final scene in particular, see Robin Wood, 'Drums along the Mohawk' in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds., *The Movie Book of the Western* (London: Studio Vista, 1996), 174–81.

Informer but in more thorough ways, with a story centred more on nation than on individual, and with actors brought direct from Dublin.

These two elements, national and Irish, will combine, after *The Plough*, in the form of sustained Irish input, both direct and indirect, into the American films. *The Iron Horse* had a significant Irish strand among the ethnic mix who built the railways. Returning to this pattern, *Drums along the Mohawk* makes much of the Irish heritage of the doyenne of the young community, Mrs McKlennar, memorably played by Edna May Oliver. She is no more Irish herself, in fact, than Barbara Stanwyck, unlike two other key members of the cast: Francis Ford — the director's own older brother — and Arthur Shields.²¹

We have seen how important Shields was to *The Plough and the Stars*, in revisiting 20 years later his activist role from 1916. In the wake of that film he relocated, like his brother Barry Fitzgerald [born Will Shields], to America, and remained there as a prolific character actor for Ford and others. When planning *Young Cassidy* in 1964, Ford entreated Shields to return to Ireland and function as dialogue director, but by then he had retired, in failing health, and had to decline; he would die at age 74 in 1970, in California. In *Drums along the Mohawk*, his first film since *The Plough*, he makes a big impression in the cheerful role of the parson who helps, from the pulpit, to bind the growing community together in spiritual and practical ways, and who is seriously active, when the crisis comes, in fighting to defend the fort — alongside Francis Ford.

Figure 10. Irishmen fighting for American independence: Francis Ford and Arthur Shields, with Henry Fonda (left) in *Drums along the Mohawk*

Like Shields, Francis Ford has history with his brother, and with Ireland. He does not feature in *The Plough and the Stars*, at least not in surviving prints, but he is prominent a year earlier in *The Informer* as the IRA commander who sits in judgment on Victor

²¹ For further on Francis Ford's recurring 'expressive Irish presence' in John Ford's film, see Charles Barr, 'Irish Brother Feeney: Francis Ford in John Ford's films', *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 55 (July 2010), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/irish-brother-feeney-francis-ford-in-john-fords-films/>

McLaglen's Gypo. He has key roles, minor but eloquent, in *Stagecoach* and *Young Mr Lincoln* and in many films thereafter; as I have argued elsewhere, he is always to be read as Irish, whether or not he is actually named as such, and as a form of surrogate for the director himself, creating fraternal cameos analogous to the more widely known personal cameos of Alfred Hitchcock, but rather more complex and meaningful.²²

To sum up, the film of *The Plough and the Stars* deserves rescuing from obscurity for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it reaches back through the decades to give us the most direct access possible to a range of important Abbey actors of the time — Shields and Fitzgerald, but also Eileen Crowe, May Craig, F.J. McCormick — and, through Shields, to the General Post Office events of Easter 1916. The film also enacts a clash or dialogue between the two major figures of Ford and O'Casey, and their different perspectives on a formative time in Irish history, while holding a significant place within a cycle of major films of the 1920s and 30s about popular risings. It can be viewed, in retrospect, as a pivotal film within Ford's career, inspiring him to a fuller and more consistent engagement with Irish themes and with American nation-building narratives, and the interaction between the two.

Epilogue: Two Versions

An alternative version of *The Plough and the Stars* has only recently resurfaced. Though longer running times are sometimes found in the records, for instance the 78 minutes claimed by Scott Eyman (see above), the standard version seems to be 67 minutes. That was the length of print reviewed in the (British) *Monthly Film Bulletin*, and elsewhere, of the original release, corresponding to the length of the prints that have occasionally been screened on TV in Britain and Ireland, and of the standard archive prints. In May 1980, however, the *MFB* contained a new review by John Pym, in its Retrospective section, of a 73-minute version, available for hire on 16mm, that includes 'documentary inserts'. The 16mm library in question no longer exists, but the British Film Institute turned out to have that version buried in its archive, as well as the more familiar 67-minute one. Alerted to this, the Irish Film Institute had this longer print copied, in time for it to be shown at the conference in Galway.

These inserts, with voice-over commentary, come at several points in the film: at the start and end, and in the middle, feeding us with information about the events and their context. There is no indication, visual or verbal, as to who made these insertions, when, why, and for what audience. The archives have no record of where the print came from, nor is any information easily discoverable in books or online. The authors of the three major critical biographies of Ford — Scott Eyman, Joseph McBride and Tag Gallagher — have no information either, and no leads to suggest; it is fair to say that none of them rates the film highly or has felt motivated to do much research on it.²³ All we have so far is the film itself, in this alternative version.

²² For more on Francis Ford, see Charles Barr, 'Irish Brother Feeney', 'Irish Brother Feeney', *Screening Irish-America*, Ruth Barton, ed., (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 91-112.

²³ The three major critical biographies are all by American scholars. Scott Eyman and Joseph McBride have already been quoted; the third book — less of a full biography than the other two — is Tag Gallagher's *John Ford, the Man and his Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). When contacted early in 2016,

The inserts are intrusive, and often crude and clumsy; but they could conceivably have been made, at whatever stage in the film's career, by Ford himself, or at least with his approval, trying to give a boost to a film that was not connecting with a mass audience. The viewpoint of the new material is certainly closer to Ford than to O'Casey.

Over a romantic pre-credits sequence of pastoral images, the commentary tells us about Ireland's 700-year history of 'bondage to Great Britain', leading up to the Easter Rising and to the work of 'the great Irish playwright and patriot Sean O'Casey'. The whole of the 67-minute version of the film is from this point intact, but is interrupted at five points by brief insertion of newsreel images with explanatory commentary. At one point only is commentary spoken over images from the film itself: the scene of looting from Dublin shops, one of the anti-heroic elements of the play for which O'Casey had been bitterly criticised. Over an image of Mrs Gogan (Una O'Connor) and Bessie Burgess (Eileen Crowe) returning home with a loaded pram, the commentary steps in to condone them: 'Riots and looting became part of the fury. Pent-up desires for things they never had, exploded as a token of their discontent'.

There are solecisms in commentary, for instance a reference to the 'governor of England', and, more seriously, in visuals: these often fail to fit the historical moment, notably when newsreel images from the Civil War of 1921-22 are used to represent the week of the Rising of 1916. The most blatant of many such anachronisms is the screen-filling slogan painted on a Dublin wall in support of Michael Collins, defender of the Treaty of 1921: *Collins Stood By Us. We'll Stand By Him*. However cavalier this may seem, it is consistent with Ford's persistent evasion of the fact of the Civil War that followed the signing of the Treaty. He may have been a famous expert on the American Civil War, but did not want to acknowledge the fact of the Irish one — and his recent film of *The Informer* had blithely moved the setting back from the Civil War period of Liam O'Flaherty's novel to the less problematic War of Independence. Ford could plausibly have sanctioned an indiscriminate piling-up of images, in the service of a single-minded narrative of Ireland against the oppressors, hoping that nobody, in those pre-video days, would look too closely.

After the end of the original, the burning flag and the final lines spoken by the two Clitheroes, we see, in this extended version, Eamon de Valera addressing a huge crowd, and hear some of his words: 'Ireland united, Ireland free, Ireland self-supporting and self-reliant, these are the ideals to which enthusiastic young Ireland is now devoting its energy'. To which the commentary adds: 'And so it came to pass that a few years after the Easter rebellion the state of Eire was born and the dream of the proud men of that country had become reality. They had not died in vain. And the stars shone upon the plough'. Whether or not he wrote those words, or caused them to be written, they certainly chime with what Ford had written to O'Casey in March 1936.

All of this simply adds to the wealth of material on the film, waiting to be assembled and fully explored in a scholarly DVD edition, now long overdue.

none of the three could provide any information about the provenance of the visual and verbal additions to the film, or about any other variant versions.

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