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Review: The Wind that Shakes the Barley'

Andrew Flood

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Ken Loaches 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley' got its North American release this week. In many ways this film is similar to his earlier film 'Land and Freedom' in seeking to introduce the elements of class struggle in both events to a mainstream audience which would only be aware of them as interesting military conflicts.

In their disdainful review Time magazine describes the film as 'A left wing weepie', this misses the point of the films emotional impact. The main characters in Land and Freedom were driven by ideology to cross mountains in order to fight in Spain. In 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley' on the other hand it is not politics that initially motivates most of the characters but rather their experience of imperialist counter-insurgency.

The portrayal of the historical reality is presumably why the film got such a limited release in Britain, restricted to 41 screens in comparison to over 300 in France. The right wing British press hated it running headlines like "Why does this man loathe his country" and comparisons to Hitler's propagandist Leni Riefenstahl. Recently Loach replied that too much

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of British history had taken place outside of Britain and that “What the British right-wing press can’t tolerate was people knowing that the British state had behaved in a most barbaric way,” In his acceptance speech at Cannes Loach hoped “If we dare to tell the truth about the past, perhaps we shall dare tell the truth about the present”

The film opens with the main character, Damien, about to leave for London to become a medical student. It is only after witnessing the murder of a friend by British forces and the beating of a train driver by more British troops for refusing to drive the train while the troops are on board that he turns back. And here although it is done with a light touch one can see why the right wing US press would have problems with this film, the parallels with Iraq and the reaction to the US counter insurgency campaign are obvious enough.

The scene with the train driver is significant though for more than just being a point at which the plot turns. The conventional representation of the War of Independence is one in which the combatants were simply motivated by Irish nationalism and victory was down to a successful nationalist war. But even when I was in school this explanation seemed weak – the British army had just come through the first world war in which it was willing to squander millions of workers lives, why did the death of a few hundred soldiers in Ireland drive them out.

The train driver Dan, played by Liam Cunningham, is the character through which Loach puts the workers movement back into the picture. As the film moves on we will discover he was part of the syndicalist workers militia, the Irish Citizens Army, that took part in the Easter rising of 1916 alongside the nationalists. But the frustration of the British soldiers in the opening scene when they are forced to abandon the attempt to travel by train is historically accurate. In 1920 the railway and docks trade unions boycotted all military transport work which meant that despite the beatings and firings of many transport

workers the British military were unable to rely on the trains for the transport of soldiers or munitions.

This is part of alternative explanation for the nationalist victory in the war of independence. Here it is the wave of workers struggles that took place during the war which forced the British state into negotiating a settlement with the IRA leadership in order to preserve capitalist stability. As early as January 1919 the (London)Times wrote of a fear that the radicals would “push aside the middle class intelligentsia of Sinn Fein, just as Lenin and Trotsky pushed aside Kerensky and other speech makers”.

There were four ‘national’ general strikes and 18 local general strikes in the period with workers taking over factories, land and at times even the running of towns. At that of Killmallock in East Limerick it was described how in the town hall “At one table sat a school teacher dispensing bread permits, at another a trade union official controlling the flour supply – at a third a railwayman controlling coal, at a fourth a creamery clerk distributing butter tickets”

Loach’s film can be criticised for over simplifying history, but then the nature of movies makes this inevitable. It would for instance be possible to come away with the mistaken idea that the split over the treaty and the subsequent civil war was simply a split between the left and right of the nationalist movement when it was very much more complex. But otherwise the film does a good job at explaining the motivation of those who did the fighting and the way that the nationalists were willing to use the land courts to hand land back to the land lords and enforce the payments of debts.

It is also entertaining and well paced which is presumably why it won the prestigious Palme d’Or at Cannes. Its earlier Irish release was important raising awareness of the almost forgotten workers struggles of the war of independence. The meaning of that struggle is still contested. Last April while the Irish state commemorated the 90th anniversary of the rising

with a military parade through Dublin four anarchists were arrested for taking part in an attempted mass trespass at Bal-donnel, an Irish military base just outside Dublin also used for US military flights.