

Review: Ken Loach, *Jimmy's Hall*

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Barry Ward as Jimmy Gralton in Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall*

Jimmy's Hall tells the story of Jimmy Gralton who returns home to Leitrim during the 1930's and decides to re-open the local community hall which has been left derelict since the war of independence. The hall becomes a beacon for everything not obtainable and not allowed in the dark years of 1930's Ireland. Singing lessons, dance, jazz, poetry appreciation sessions, boxing classes, and debates about workers' rights were all held there. But for the Catholic Church and the new Irish state, the hall and the man who built it represented something dangerous and subversive and they set out to crush him.

The director, Ken Loach, has captured both a personal story and a political moment in post-independence Ireland with wonderful poignancy. The lead actors, Barry Ward, who plays Jimmy Gralton and Simone Kirby who plays Oonagh, have said that one of the most important things of the film was to bring the story of Jimmy Gralton, and what he stood for, to people's attention because they never learnt about him in school. Gralton did not fit into the mainstream nationalist narrative and because he was on one side of an Ireland divided by class; he is Ireland's hidden history. Loach has opened up this story that,

set against the social and political forces at play in the Depression of the 1930's, draws uncanny parallels with today.

1932, the year that Jimmy Gralton, native of Effernagh, near Carrick-on-Shannon, and the son of a small farmer, returns to Ireland is significant. It marks the beginning of a period of mass struggle and social unrest. In the economic crisis, employers are sacking workers and forcing down their pay. Evictions were taking place across the estates, now sometimes at the behest of Catholic landlords. The Revolutionary Workers Groups, formed in 1929 by Communist Party members, are beginning to coordinate the struggles of the workers farmers and the unemployed North and South of the border. But, in response to the rising struggles, the Army Comrades Association, formed in opposition to the Fianna Fáil Government and with the support of Cumann na nGaedheal are taking on fascist slogans and whipping up anti-communism. So when Jimmy Gralton responded to local pressure to open up again a community hall and use it as a true people's community centre, he was hurling a pitchfork at formidable forces - the Catholic Church and the Blueshirts.

But March 1932 is also the month that Fianna Fáil came to power, defeating the pro-treaty government of Cumann na nGaedheal. It marked a turning point in republican politics as Fianna Fáil was now within the constitutional fold, after years of being outside it. The party had been elected with the support of workers, tenants and small holders, and gave verbal support to their demands. But now Fianna Fáil also needed to distance itself from its radical roots and prove its creden-

tials as the custodians of law and order in the new Irish state. In real life, Jimmy Gralton lived out this republican tension: he briefly joined Fianna Fáil in 1932 but it was the Fianna Fáil government that deported him less than a year later.

So who was Jimmy Gralton? Born at Effernagh, near Gowel, in Leitrim on April 17, 1886, James Gralton grew up the son of a poor farmer. He was encouraged to read by his mother, who operated a mobile library, but left school at 14. Like many others, Gralton emigrated to Britain at the turn of the twentieth century and joined the British Army but, refusing to serve in India, he deserted.

He worked on the Liverpool docks and in the Welsh coalfields, then took a job as a ship's stoker and in 1909 settled in New York, where he worked at a variety of jobs. Following the 1916 Rising, and after reading the writings of James Connolly, he established the James Connolly Club in New York. He took out US citizenship.

The first time he returned to Leitrim, in 1921, Ireland was ablaze with social revolt. In May of that year, ITGWU members had occupied two pits owned by the Arigna Mining company, in Co. Limerick, resisting the closure of the mine. He threw himself into the local Leitrim Direct Action Committee which organised land seizures for tenants who had been evicted. It was so effective in re-allocating land that it had one of its settlements upheld by a Free State court.

Gralton set about rebuilding, on his father's plot of land near Gowel, the local parish hall which had been burnt down by the Black and Tans. Gralton called it the Pearse-Connolly Hall and it became not only used as a land court, but also and as a local meeting place for social enjoyment and political study. It also became the base for the Direct Action Committee, a local movement which organised the driving

of cattle on to the property of large estate-owners to re-settle former tenants on the land. The frequent cattle drives, the Arbitration Courts held in the hall and the land takeovers gave the district the name of the Gowel Soviet. Gralton's activism on behalf of evicted families and landless labourers made him many enemies among conservatives and the propertied interests. The new Provisional Government sought to arrest him but he evaded National Army troops and returned to the United States.

When, in 1932, he returned again to Leitrim to look after his elderly parents and the family farm following the death of his brother, the hall stood derelict. (The film shows only his feisty, strong mother but actually both of Gralton's parents were alive at the time. His father would die the day before Gralton's deportation order was issued). The hope now was that with Fianna Fáil in power would open up new opportunities for further agitation. Gralton joined the Revolutionary Workers Group and spoke at numerous anti-eviction meetings and at meetings of the National Unemployed Movement. He addressed Leitrim County Council on the issue of road workers and along with his cousin, Packie Gralton, and others, he reopened the Pearse-Connolly Hall, which became, again as it had in the twenties, the venue for meetings as well as dances. A combined anti-communist and puritanical witch hunt, in which the parish priest called for the closing of the hall as a 'den of iniquity', resulted in shots being fired into the hall and an unsuccessful attempt at blowing it up. On Christmas Eve, 1932, it was, for a second time, burnt to the ground.

The de Valera government gave in to the pressure from the Catholic Church, and in February 1933 ordered Gralton to be deported. Gralton went on the run. The Revolutionary Workers' Group organ-

ised a defence campaign, but its meetings were attacked and Gralton was eventually deported in August 1933—the only Irish person ever deported from their own country. His parting words on the way to Cobh, from where he was deported, was ‘So long, boys. I’ll return to Ireland when we have a workers republic!’

Gralton was never allowed to return again. He spent the remaining days of his life active in the American Labour Movement. He was a candidate for the Communist Party in the Borough elections in Manhattan. He again became involved in the Irish Workers Clubs in New York, reprinted Connolly’s pamphlets, raised funds for the International Brigades in Spain. He died in New York on December 29th 1945 and was buried in Woodlawn cemetery in the Bronx.

The film opens with black and white scenes of New York and the Wall Street crash before Jimmy Gralton, played by Barry Ward, appears on a horse and cart on a road in the lush green landscape of North Leitrim making his way home after being in America for over ten years. The connection between the economic crash and what is happening in Ireland is plainly made.

Soon after he arrives back, we see the local IRA, who knew of his charismatic appeal, ask Gralton to come and lead a struggle to reinstate an evicted tenant at the gate lodge of a landed estate at Kilronan, North Roscommon. One of the most memorable scenes of the film is how the community is mobilised to resist the local landlord, how they march with sticks and carts across the fields to break down the barred up house, and restore the ten-

ant to his home. In his speech made standing on a cart outside the repossessed house, Jimmy Gralton urged people to resist what the system was doing to them. He describes the experience in America after the crash and how he saw that it was ‘a system steeped in illusion, exploitation and avarice’ and needed to be overthrown. Gralton and his movement were striking at the heart of the all-class consensus that the new Irish state was attempting to consolidate. As the paper of the RWG, *Workers’ Voice* put it at the time: ‘Gralton was the very essence of the battle now raging between the worker and farmer masses and the capitalists of whom the Fianna Fáil government is the representative’.¹

The film’s portrayal of the hall and its activities shows how people have a thirst for a different world, one where they can, as Jimmy says, ‘be themselves’. The hall is used for everything - for meetings, for teaching the children, for reading poetry, for music and for dancing. One of the small holders who was involved in its activities, would later describe the hall as ‘a safe space where we could think, talk learn listen laugh and dance which brings out the best in us. It is not just a building, it’s what we are’.² When Jimmy gets out the gramophone that he has brought from the US, and puts on jazz music people start to give expression to their defiance, dancing to the jazz strains and challenging the rigid norms prescribed by the church.

It is difficult for us to imagine today just how radical jazz was in those days. A Catholic newspaper of the times, *The Catholic Pictorial*, described jazz as an ‘African word’ whose ‘abominable rhythm was borrowed from Central Africa by a

¹Luke Gibbons, 1989, ‘Labour and Local History: the case of Jim Gralton 1936-1945’, *Saothair Journal of the Irish Labour History Society* 14 p. 91 <http://www.irishlabourhistorysociety.com/pdf/Saothair%2014.pdf>

²See RTE, ‘The Gralton Affair’, 1977. Available at <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/radio-documentary-jim-gralton-communist.html>

gang of wealthy Bolsheviks in the USA, to strike at Church civilisation throughout the world'. These words were written by Father Peter Conefrey, the local priest in Leitrim who led the offensive against dance-halls and jazz seeing them as a smokescreen against international communism.³ In the film, it is Father Sheridan, (played by Jim Norton) who cooks up the plot to shut down the hall. Dances are picketed, classes disrupted, fire-and-brimstone sermons preached. 'What is this craze for pleasure?' roars the priest, 'The Los-Angelisation of our culture? Our community faces a choice. Is it Christ, or is it Gralton?' This was the same Catholic Church whose leaders would line up again against communism on an international stage, and three years later send volunteers to Spain to fight for Franco.

In contrast to this, the hall stands for the coming together of political agitation and personal freedom. Jimmy Gralton and his longstanding sweetheart Oonagh, now married with children since they last met, experience together this fusion. The scenes where they dance together alone one night in the dark hall capture wonderfully the fragility of the world that they are trying to create.

The position of the church was entrenched: it stood behind the men of property-and the men of property stood behind the church. The local political establishment of Cumann na nGael and Fianna Fáil colluded with the local gombeen men and the clergy to whip up another campaign of opposition to Gralton. On one night, a dozen shots were fired into the hall when everyone was there dancing. Gralton told the people to throw themselves on the floor, and there were no injuries. The band kept playing. But finally (on Christmas Eve, 1932), the hall was burned in an ar-

son attack. Jimmy Gralton sees the red flames stretching high into the sky and realises what he is up against.

As Luke Gibbons points out in his account of the Gralton Affair, it was the IRA in South Leitrim who fired shots into the Pearse Connolly Hall and were probably responsible for burning the hall to the ground in December 1932. Also it was a committed republican, Maire McSweeney who contributed most to undermining support for Gralton, using the columns of the Irish Independent to attack soviet infiltration of the IRA.⁴

The film shows how a mammoth red scare gripped Ireland. Loach captures the bullying and the harassment in a way that recalls, on a smaller scale, Bertolucci's account of the rural roots of Italian fascism in his film 1900. We catch glimpses, through the local experience of Leitrim, of the social dynamic of the rise of the left and the right. 1932 is also the year of the unemployment riots in Belfast, which crossed the sectarian divisions and Revolutionary Workers Groups were active there too. In the film, at the gathering at the priest's house to discuss what to do about Gralton, Father Sheridan mentions how the British Government, in a move that would be repeated against Gralton, feared social unrest and had the British socialist Tom Mann deported from the North.

The film's portrayal of the political front role played by Catholic Church is accurate. In 1931, fearing the political effects of this social rising, the Cumann na nGaedheal government had sought to enlist the support of the Catholic Church in promoting a red scare. They portrayed Fianna Fáil as a Trojan horse for communism and de Valera as an Irish Kerensky who would be swept aside by more radical elements within the republican move-

³Gibbons, p.89.

⁴Gibbons, p.91.

ment who sought to create an Irish soviet government. Ironically, the Fianna Fáil government too, was to fall back on the Catholic Church to help consolidate and centralise its power. Communism and anti-Catholicism merged to become the one charge, and they issued the deportation order ordering Gralton - classified as 'an undesirable alien' - to leave Ireland before March 5th.

After the deportation order was signed, Gralton managed to evade capture for six months. It is only briefly alluded to in the film but his case became a popular cause. An anti-deportation campaign and Defence Committees were formed and support was voiced from some trade unions, the Labour Party and even some Fianna Fáil branches. As the film shows, Jimmy Gralton managed to escape the police for several weeks because his comrades provided safe houses for him. People who were involved at the time, interviewed in an RTE radio programme, stress how much Gralton's criticism of landlordism and capitalism had won widespread support.⁵ Peadar O'Donnell, the republican socialist activist, went to the village of Drumsna to organise a church gate meeting after mass but was attacked by a mob led by the local parish priest. Significantly, however, the IRA was split on the issue and despite some statements in Gralton's defence, did nothing and the deportation order stood.

Critics of the film have said that *Jimmy's Hall* compares unfavourably with *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, in that it lacks the same dramatic focus. But Loach is clear that the politics of Jimmy's Hall fits with the period he is dealing with. In making the film, he wanted to expose 'the great lie is that we are all one' when 'the

reality is we are riven by class and class interests. We thought it would be interesting to see what happened to the dreams of independence, 10 years later. And as what often happens, the hopes people had aren't realised - because of splits, and the old imperial power still trying to rule. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* was a big epic film; *Jimmy's Hall* is just a microcosm.'⁶

The reality of class division in 1930's Ireland, Loach has unquestionably managed to achieve with *Jimmy's Hall*. He has also subtly portrayed how the Catholic Church itself was riven by class. The younger priest in the film condemns the Gralton witch hunt and sees that Gralton is the voice of the people whereas the Catholic hierarchy stand, mostly unwaveringly, on the side of the landlords. He has also allowed local actors (and non-actors) to contribute in a natural, unstar-like way that makes them authentic and genuinely 'of the people'. Eileen Henry, a first-time actress, plays Jimmy's mother and her stoic courage is unforgettable.

One weak spot of the film is its reluctance to refer openly to the political organisations involved. Gralton is referred to as a communist but there is no mention or description of the RWG which was the backbone of Gralton's determined fight and of many of the struggles of the time. Perhaps Loach felt that he wanted the politics to seep through the film without any forced labelling. But not to make reference, specially in the political discussions that do take place in the film, to the political organisation that was so instrumental in the movements of resistance is a strange omission and leaves the impression that the Gralton affair was just a flash in the pan.

But *Jimmy's Hall* is a film for our times

⁵See RTE, 1977

⁶*The Irish Post*, June 3rd 2014. <http://www.irishpost.co.uk/entertainment/the-true-story-behind-ken-loachs-new-movie-jimmys-hall>

in many ways. The tensions between left and right against the backcloth of a deep economic crisis rings true for us today. The vicious attacks that the Free State Army used against the ordinary people of Lietric in the 1930s as they tried to take back what was theirs is the same fight that we see played out many times over today. People's hopes that Fianna Fáil would give voice to their anger only to find that it

had a stronger loyalty to building a capitalist state than to them carries more than a few lessons for Ireland in 2014. But it also shows that the struggle for free ideas, 'the struggle for a place' as Loach says, 'where you can learn to dance and practise sport and where you can exchange ideas and develop a political perspective' can strengthen political activism.