

None but Devils

HOW THEY SAW IT



'NONE BUT DEVILS' was screened by RTE Television in July, 1981. It was a feature on Co. Leitrim directed by Welshman, Colin Thomas. It aroused immediate reaction. Many Leitrim people saw it as the usual clichéd approach to the county from the media, the falling population, the migration, the county of the elderly, the vacant houses, the rushes, etc. All that while there is so much that is new and progressive in the county, so many people who find it a good place to live in.

Joint Editor, Eamonn Daly, took pen in hand and wrote to Colin Thomas asking him to justify his approach. Mr. Thomas has kindly done so.

Mr. Colin Thomas
62, York Road,
Bristol.

Drumshanbo,
Co. Leitrim.
3rd October, 1981.

Dear Mr. Thomas,

Your programme "None but Devils"—shown by R.T.E. last July—aroused a lot of adverse comment in Co. Leitrim. Only a few people bothered to express their criticisms in the letters columns of some newspapers, but this scarcity of letter-writers did not reflect a scarcity of criticism within the county. While no one can deny the existence of what was shown, many have voiced their displeasure with the balance of your programme. The abiding memory was one of graveyards, derelict houses, derelict churches, a broken down dance-hall ('The Ivy Leaf'); scenes of damp desolation and the county's youth leaving en masse for Dublin. One could paint a similar picture of most counties in the West and Midlands.

And unfortunately you did paint a picture of Leitrim—an unfair picture which was obviously the product of a jaundiced attitude towards the county. You mulishly accepted the traditional view of Leitrim as a God-forsaken area and you filmed and scripted your programme to support that view.

A more balanced approach might have considered the following:—The blight of derelict

houses is more than countered by the extraordinary number of new houses in the county; the decline of 'The Ivy Leaf' ballroom hardly indicates that all the youth have fled the county leaving behind 27,000 geriatrics who are unable to patronise what seemed to be the county's only ballroom. There are at least six other thriving ballrooms throughout the county in addition to the many community centres which provide dancing and other entertainment facilities. Using Fr. Gallogly's commentary, the programme posed the question "Was anyone meant to live here?" "No"! was the obvious answer because the parts of Leitrim filmed were so mountainous and desolate that only a Henry Stanley or an Edmund Hillary would dare explore such a terrain. "No" would have been the answer if the same question had been posed about living in the Wicklow mountains or the Kerry mountains or any mountainous area in wet forbidding conditions. In the interests of balance you could have shown some areas of the county where a viable living from agriculture is a reality.

The young people shown leaving Ballinamore by bus for Dublin at the end of the Festival can also be seen leaving from the same place on any Sunday evening throughout the year. It begs the question "Why do they come home every weekend?" Their eagerness or willingness to return home so frequently is as much an indication of some satisfaction with the social facilities in the county as it is an indictment of both the quality of life and the lack of social facilities in their urban work environment. Could it be that some of the county's phantom dance-halls and

community centres are catering for these young people at week-ends?

Again, using Fr. Gallogly's commentary, we were told that "The only hope is small industry to keep people at home". Immediately, the film cut to another excerpt from *The Bard of Breffni Competition*. Would it not have been more relevant if you had pursued the small industry theory to see if there were many small industries in Leitrim? Your efforts to find an answer would have been easy. Leitrim has many small industries and some of them were on your doorstep in Ballinamore.

Your programme was described by the R.T.E. continuity announcer in her introduction as a profile of County Leitrim. Apart from a fleeting glimpse of Arigna, and a few minutes in Co. Cavan, the programme dealt entirely with the Ballinamore Parish area and so was more correctly a 'profile' of Ballinamore rather than a 'profile' of Leitrim. One of the four people featured in the programme was Dolores Fitzpatrick, who lives and works in Co. Cavan. I accept the argument that her job and lifestyle parallels that of many girls living in Co. Leitrim, but your inability to find a Leitrim girl to fill the desired role was another indication of your careless handling of your subject—Co. Leitrim.

As a profile of Ballinamore it conveyed the impression that the only employed person in the area was Jimmy Joe McKiernan, Monumental Sculptor, for whom—to quote your narrator—"There will always be work". Hubert Murray (miner and farmer) was portrayed as devoting all of his farm-life to cutting rushes. We weren't given a glimpse of any other aspect of his farming nor was there any attempt to probe his view that he had a much better social life in Kiltubrid than he had had in London. As for the other 'natives' of the area, they seem to have come out of their mysterious, doleful hibernation for one week in the year to sample the heady delights of "The Bard of Breffni". When the week was over, the bunting fluttered downwards, the young people boarded the Dublin bound bus, the abandoned natives carried on with the business of growing older and dying, and Jimmy Joe McKiernan continued to look after their post-life 'needs'. County Leitrim's death-rattle sounded throughout the programme. In a few years time, no doubt, you will return to film the funeral.

Again, the continuity announcer told us that your programme was a profile of Co. Leitrim "as seen through the eyes of four very different people". Indeed Dolores Fitzpatrick was very different to the others in that she came from Co. Cavan. No harm in that, you might say, since her life-style parallels that of many girls living in Co. Leitrim, but your inability to find a Leitrim girl to fill the desired role was another indication of your careless handling of your subject—Co. Leitrim. Was the programme about Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim, West Cavan?

I trust you will see, if not accept, my reason for thinking that you painted a picture in keeping with your conception of the county as an impoverished area. Whilst your programme lacked balance, Fr. Gallogly obviously paid the penalty of giving a balanced commentary on the county because you chose through skilfully distorted editing to emphasise his more critical comments by both visual and verbal means.

Now I come to the main purpose of my letter. We publish a magazine every year in Leitrim called "The Leitrim Guardian". I enclose a copy of last year's edition. Having voiced my own criticism and that of others about your treatment of the county, I would like—as Joint-Editor of 'The Leitrim Guardian'—to invite you to contribute an article to the magazine. The article could deal with your own views on Co. Leitrim and your views on "None but Devils".

Thanking you, Yours sincerely,

Eamonn Daly,
Joint Editor, 'The Leitrim Guardian'.

62 York Road,
Bristol.
(Bristol 551582)
Nov. 1st, 1981.

Dear Mr. Daly,

Sorry for the untidiness of the enclosed but I wrote it at some speed to meet your deadline. The pressure of time also meant that I was unable to check all my facts, e.g. Father Dan's surname (spelling), the name of the power station (Arigna?), the name of the mountains (Glenade?) and the phrase "Kingdom of Breffni". Could you please check these?

I would be grateful for a copy of the **Leitrim Guardian** when it appears. If I do come back I hope we can meet.

Best wishes for a successful **Leitrim Guardian**. I found back nos. very helpful (e.g. *The Ivy Ballroom* sequence!) during filming.

Yours sincerely,
Colin Thomas.

"None but Devils" : An Apologia

"None but Devils" was not a film about Leitrim and did not set out to be. I was sorry to hear that the film had been introduced by the continuity announcer as "a profile of County Leitrim", for as far as I was concerned, it was an attempt to provide an impression of a larger area (roughly defined by the old Kingdom of Breffni) through the focus of one town's festival (that of Ballinamore and its main event, 'The Bard of Breffni' contest).

I took to the area from the moment I first visited it. At the time, I was working for R.T.E.'s main current affairs programme and had been filming all over Ireland. The Leitrim and Cavan area did not have the immediate dramatic impact of the West Coast but to my eyes had a gentle beauty all of its own. My family and I were also very impressed by the wit, hospitality and friendliness that we encountered when we first stayed in Ballinamore.

But when R.T.E. agreed to my suggestion of a documentary on the area and I began researching, it became obvious that this part of Ireland has acute problems, especially Leitrim itself. "...poor impermeable land dominates the county...", wrote Dr. Gardiner, Project Leader of the Leitrim Resource Survey, a view substantiated by the Leitrim

Observer's summary of local development plans (April 5th 1980)—"84% of the total area of the County consists of badly drained soils while a further 6% consists of lakes and rivers".

Even more disturbing was the information about the trend of population. Dr. Gardiner referred to "...the persistently high rate of outmigration over the years", and the Leitrim Observer's summary points out that "between 1926 and 1971 Leitrim's population declined by 49.3% while that of the State actually increased by 0.25%". The Leitrim Observer's summary pointed to a clear explanation—"low income has long been identified as the cause of the persistent emigration from the county. In 1973 the per capita income was £584—the lowest in the State". Dr. Gardiner gave a stark warning, "if present trends continue, the total population of the County (28,000) will have declined to 16,000 by the turn of the century".

I felt that I could not ignore this evidence in the film I was to make. But I now faced a problem very similar to the one I had encountered when directing a documentary ten years ago in St. Paul's, the inner city area of Bristol in which I now live. If "Celebrate What?", as I called the Bristol film, was only a series of awful warnings it would be tedious to watch and, more important, would not do justice to the spirit of the people of the area.

The solution I decided on, whilst researching in and around Leitrim last year, was to centre the film, not in the North of Leitrim but in a town where there had been a limited success in stopping the decline of population—Ballinamore. And by building the documentary, as I had in Bristol, around a Festival, it would include plenty of cheerfulness and vitality and would not become merely a catalogue of grim statistics recited against bleak pictures of the Sliabh an Iarainn and Arigna Mountains.

I was very pleased too that, during my preparatory research, I had come across Hubert Murray, a Leitrim man who had lived and worked in London but had come back home and could speak eloquently of what he felt he had gained by the move. In spite of his farming problems he said in the film, "People want to get back to their roots, I think, more than anything else. I'm relaxed here.... I have peace of mind".

The fact that Hubert worked in a local coal mine also conveyed the point that investment projects like the Arigna Power Station (which, as the film said, uses crow coal from the area) help to provide jobs for those who wish to return home.

This was also reinforced by the very positive points Father Dan Gallogly made in the film about Ballinamore, "Ballinamore is certainly an example of a community that refused to die. It almost died in the 1950s with the going of the Cavan and Leitrim narrow gauge railway. But with community effort, with a determination to get up and get going again, with small industry introduced in the 1960s, it came to life again". Any documentary necessitates a process of selection and the fact that Father Dan's guided tour lasted all day inevitably meant that a lot of what he said (much of it as I recall relating to historical points that were difficult to illustrate) was left out of the film.

But I strongly resent the suggestion that I am guilty of "skilfully distorted editing". During his tour, Father Dan recorded serious warnings about the gravity of the crisis facing Leitrim. I decided that, whatever else had to go in bringing the film down to half an hour, these should not and I have no regrets about giving space to his powerful plea for his own county. "Leitrim people want to stay at home. They love their county. They are prepared to work. They want to stay at home, they have a right to stay at home but they can only be kept at home if they have work". When I was employed by the B.B.C. I worked as a film director in the city of Derry and subsequently saw a part of the film critical of the British Army removed by the B.B.C. management, an intervention which provoked my resignation from the B.B.C. R.T.E. I am glad to say, did not at any time during the nine months I was working for them attempt to force me to remove the strongly critical statements that appear in a number of the films I directed.

Had I removed such statements from "None but Devils" and made instead a cosy travelogue, I would have ignored the stark reality. Dolores Fitzpatrick, included in the film because she was part of the winning team in the Bard of Breffni contest, is a cheerful extrovert girl, but the situation she described in her own town of Belturbet is surely all too characteristic of the area. "I would say the vast majority of girls I was in class with are working in Dublin or even, some of them, in England or abroad.... There's so few young people around". In 1971 the number of females to males in Leitrim was the lowest of any county in the State and was particularly marked in the 20-40 age group.

I think that Jim Joe McKiernan also made a delightful contribution to "None but Devils" but I wanted the film to make the point that what Leitrim desperately needs, unless only monumental masons are to thrive, is "an investment programme on a scale adequate to revolutionise the existing migration trends and lead to a major influx of people to the county" (Leitrim Observer's summary April 5th, 1980).

When I directed "Celebrate What?" in Bristol I concluded it with a sequence suggesting that unless something was done very soon there would be riots in the area: I did so not in order to encourage them to happen but in order to try (unsuccessfully) to prevent them. No, I don't want to come back to film Leitrim's funeral Mr. Daly: one of the reasons I made "None but Devils" was, by alerting opinion elsewhere in Ireland, to prevent that funeral from happening.

May I add a footnote. In your letter to me which provoked this article there is no reference to the fact that I am not an Irishman, not a hint of "how-dare-a-Brit-come-over-here-and-criticise-us". Nor did I ever encounter such an attitude all the time I was in Leitrim, in spite of my accent (I am in fact Welsh) and in spite of the problems that the ridiculous Border creates for the county.

That lack of narrow chauvinism—I'll never forget the friendly reception I got in McGirl's Bar in Ballinamore after the Easter Commemoration Parade—is one of the reasons I love Leitrim and love Ireland. I'd like to come back again—if you'll let me.

Colin Thomas.