

JIMMY GRALTON, KEN LOACH AND THE GHOSTS OF HISTORY

Vincent Woods



■ Simone Kirby (Oonagh) and Barry Ward (Jimmy)

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HISTORY HAS a way of turning. A story too-long suppressed by official history will shine out of cinema screens around the world in 2013, and the landscapes of Leitrim will shine with that story. 'Jimmy's Hall' is the title of the forthcoming film by Ken Loach, one of the most respected film directors in modern British cinema: it focuses on a crucial year or two in the life of Jimmy Gralton from Effernagh who was

deported from Ireland as 'an undesirable alien' in August 1933.

Deported because he believed in justice and rights, because he was a socialist, because he believed the fight for an independent Irish state should not end with a mere shift of power to a new elite. The film was shot in Leitrim and Sligo in August and September of 2013 and is due for release in summer 2014. The screen-

play is by Paul Laverty who also wrote the script for Loach's 2006 Irish civil war film, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*. It produced by Rebecca O'Brien, and features Barry Ward as Gralton, Jim Norton as the priest who opposes him and features many local actors, musicians and dancers. The film was inspired by Donal O'Kelly's theatre show, *Jimmy Gralton's Dancehall* which was seen in several venues in the

north-west over the past few years and Donal also features in the film.

The story of Jimmy Gralton was told by Des Guckian in his fine book *Deported*, which was launched by John McGahern in McLoughlin's pub in Effernagh in April 1986. I was there on the night and heard McGahern praise the book and predict that Gralton's importance would yet turn out to be more than local. Those who had supported Jimmy Gralton and he 'served human liberty', said McGahern, and confessing that he had not heard of Gralton until a short time before, he said this fact pointed to 'the effectiveness of the conspiracy of silence and suppression around his name and life'.

The arrest and deportation of Jimmy Gralton was all but eradicated from official history (there is no record of the case in state papers) and Guckian's book, with Pat Feeley's RTÉ radio documentary *The Gralton Affair* helped to set the record straight. Incidentally, some of Pat Feeley's sources responded to a front-page piece by Michael Oates in the *Leitrim Observer* calling for information about Jimmy Gralton and his deportation.

I spent a few days on the set of *Jimmy's Hall* and was deeply moved by the recreation of lost lives and suppressed history. I watched scenes being filmed, and remembered Packie and Maggie Gralton from Drumsna, a wonderful couple, both cousins of Jimmy Gralton's and both determined to keep his memory and spirit alive. To see a replica of the Pearse-Connolly Hall and Jimmy Gralton's home place in the hills over Drumkeeran and Dromahair was a privilege and a challenge: a privilege to be witness to this act of memory, a challenge to accept that any



■ Francis Magee (Mossie), Barry Ward (Jimmy) and Ken Loach

feature film is a work of imagination and must find its own path through the complexities of character, competing truths or perceptions, location demands and the labyrinth of local politics and community tensions .

The glimpses of film I saw were impressive, the music and dancing in the hall were as good as it gets, the landscape of Leitrim looked magnificent. The team working on the film were deeply conscious of the significance and value of local involvement. Indeed Rebecca O'Brien told me that the production team hoped there would be potential for local cultural ownership of the film, and she believes the film ultimately belongs to the people of the area. I met Ken Loach in Drumsna on the September evening they finished filming and he told me the Jimmy Gralton story was heroic, and he hoped his film would do it justice. Loach, who is something of a hero to many

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observers of modern British cinema, said that local people had given the whole project a huge lift and buoyancy and it had been a real privilege to work with everyone. He praised the 'magnificent, beautiful countryside'

The revived interest in Jimmy Gralton (there was a *James Gralton School* in the 1980s, and a short-lived left-wing magazine *Gralton*) prompted me to write a song that had been shadowing around in my head for many years. Charlie McGettigan has set music to *The Ballad of Jim Gralton* and we hope it will enter the public arena next year:

*'Son of the loy and the plough
Child of oppression and poverty
Jim Gralton fought freedom's hard war
A believer in liberty
Undesirable alien, de Valera's decree
Undesirable alien, driven out of his country'*

Vincent Woods's Arts Tonight programme on the filming of 'Jimmy's Hall' can be heard as a podcast on the RTÉ website.