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Author(s): David Archibald, Ken Loach and Paul Laverty

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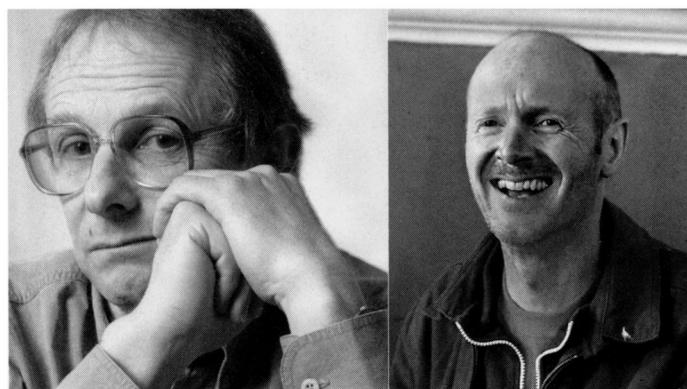


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Correcting Historical Lies: An Interview with Ken Loach and Paul Laverty

by David Archibald



Portrait of Ken Loach (left) by Robin Holland

When *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* director Ken Loach picked up the Palme d'Or at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, it provoked a furious response from the right-wing British press. The Sun described the Irish Civil War drama as "the most pro-IRA film ever." In *The Times* the Conservative Member of Parliament Michael Cove argued that "films like Loach's that glamorize the IRA give a retrospective justification to a movement which used murderous violence to achieve its ends." One pundit even compared Loach to the Nazi-apologist filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl.

The veteran director has incurred the wrath of the British media before, but it is his exploration of Britain's involvement in Ireland that really gets them going. The 1990 thriller, *Hidden Agenda*, which highlighted the connection between state forces and loyalist murder gangs in Northern Ireland, was dubbed the "IRA entry to Cannes" by Loach's critics. At the time such collusion was denied, yet in January a three-year official inquiry concluded that the police force in Northern Ireland assisted in the cover-up of over a dozen murders in the 1990's. It only represents the tip of the iceberg but vindicates the general thrust of the film.

The backlash to *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, however, has surpassed even that meted out to *Hidden Agenda*. The controversy highlights the inability of many British commentators to engage honestly with the country's problematic colonial past. It is indicative of a general tendency, exemplified by the exhortations of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, to celebrate "Britishness" and all that it supposedly stands for—"tolerance and liberty, fairness and fair play." The problem is not only that this flies in the face of current events in Afghanistan and Iraq, it also cannot be squared with Britain's notoriously brutal role in Ireland.

The Wind That Shakes the Barley takes its title from the traditional Irish rebel song by Robert Dwyer Joyce:

'Twas hard the woeful words to frame
To break the ties that bound us
But harder still to bear the shame
Of foreign chains around us
And so I said, "The mountain glen
I'll seek at morning early
And join the bold united men
While soft winds shake the barley"

But the film is not simply a misty-eyed tale of nationalist struggle; Paul Laverty's script weaves a fluid narrative through the complex politics of the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921), the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty (December 1921), and the ensuing Civil War (1922-23) that engulfed the Republican movement. The film follows the lives of two brothers, Damien (Cillian Murphy) and Teddy (Pádraic Delaney), who come to embody the opposing Republican positions on the Treaty. The social side of the conflict is ever-present and the character of Dan (Liam Cunningham) a Dublin trade-union activist, brings the ghost of

the Irish socialist leader James Connolly, executed after the failed 1916 Easter Rising, to the screen.

This is the sixth full-length feature from Loach and Laverty (previous films include *My Name is Joe* (1998) and *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), with *These Times*, a drama about migrant workers in England, set for release this year). It is certainly their most handsome film, with the green and brown landscape of the Cork countryside vividly captured by Loach's long-time cinematographer, Barry Ackroyd. Perhaps as a consequence of dealing with the complexities of an extended historical period, the characters at times become vehicles for political positions, and there is more than a tinge of melodrama mingled with Marxist analysis as the anticolonial struggle is played out amidst developing familial conflict. But this is a very powerful film, which does not shy away from the realities of the situation, either from a British or Irish perspective.

The Irish playwright Oscar Wilde argued that, "The one duty we owe history is to rewrite it." In challenging official British accounts, this film forms part of the tradition of history from below, from the

perspective of the defeated, the oppressed, and the marginalized. Loach's 1995 Spanish Civil War film, *Land and Freedom*, helped kick-start debate in Spain over why the country's democratically elected Republican government lost to Franco's fascist forces. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* is stimulating fresh discussion about the complexities of Ireland's own bloody Civil War on both sides of the Irish Sea—and beyond.

We spoke with Ken Loach and Paul Laverty in June 2006, shortly after the U.K. release of their film.—David Archibald

Cineaste: Why did you want to make a film about the Irish War of Independence and the subsequent Civil War?

Ken Loach: Paul and I have wanted to do this for ten years. It is a pivotal event in the shared history between England and Ireland, the point at which Ireland nearly gained full independence. We are still living with the legacy of what happened. But it is also a classic story of an imperial power trying to safeguard its interests while making a tactical retreat. How they divided and kept their interests intact, or tried to, we can see repeated again and again. It is a classic example of what happens when you put an army of occupation into a place where they are not wanted, so there are many reasons for wanting to tell the story.

Paul Laverty: I have always been fascinated about how empires tell lies about their history and there have been more lies told about Ireland, Britain's oldest and closest colony, than anywhere else. We were keen to place this story just after the critical 1918 election when Sinn Féin won 72 out of 105 seats with a complete mandate for independence. They set up the Irish parliament—it was banned by Lord French—the senior British military figure for the government. When the Irish complained, they were thrown in prison; when they wrote about it, the British banned their newspapers, and out of that



Damien (Cillian Murphy, right) and two other IRA members shoot British Auxiliary officers in the backroom of a pub in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*.

came the War of Independence. But there could have been a peaceful solution to this. In Britain no one talks about that and most people don't know it.

Cineaste: Paul, all of your previous scripts have been set in either the present or the recent past. How different was it writing a script set over eighty years ago?

Laverty: The further you get from the present, the harder it is to capture the spirit of the times. Apart from any imaginative response, you have to try to understand what was going on. You need some idea of the narrative sweep in terms of the history—and that is massively contested. Then you try to immerse yourself in the songs, the poems, the clothes they wore, the guns they used, the photographs, the letters, anything at all really. In terms of preparation, obviously I went over to Cork and went to the historical areas. I went to the places where there were ambushes, to get some sense of the geography, which is a very important part of the film. It was a guerrilla war so if you go to the countryside and climb the hills you get a sense of how cold it must have been, how much they must have depended on the civilian population to survive. I talked to children of members of the Flying Column, I went to museums, I read newspaper reports. You really have to immerse yourself in those times.

Cineaste: What are the differences from a director's perspective?

Loach: They are mainly technical. The research is more complex because you are dealing with big public events as well as private matters. So the research into the public events has to be really well done. The facts have to be the master. You cannot make up public events to fit what you want to happen. The other big question is trying to get a sense of the past on film. There are obviously things like the landscape, the locations, and clothes, etc.—which are a lot of work—but that is mainly visible. The other big question is language. This is really a compromise because we wanted to have some sense of the past in the language but not to make it quaint. Sometimes people spill over into language that is contemporary, particularly in the swearing, and I think that older people are more sensitive to that. It was something that we were aware of, but I didn't want to

stamp on it too hard because you lose the immediacy. You are trying to encourage people to really live the moment rather than do a kind of historical representation. Of all the things about films set in the past, the language is the hardest.

Cineaste: Do you feel it is necessary to engage with or respond to previous films, which have dealt with Irish history?

Laverty: No. It is hard enough getting hold of the narrative, trying to imagine three-dimensional characters, and plotting out a complicated period in Irish history right through from the War of Independence, the Treaty, and then the Civil War. It is an enormous challenge to try to cover that period without making it incredibly disjointed but I have never worried about references really—it is outside my control and there's enough to be getting on with without worrying about that.

Loach: No. We only went to the primary sources.

Cineaste: The film is set against a specific historical period but you don't use established historical characters. Why was that?

Loach: We didn't have factual characters in the foreground. We wanted fictional characters because then they can embody the conflict and follow the rules of dramatic conflict rather than follow what the factual characters would have done in real life.

Laverty: There's that revealing phrase by Henry Kissinger—highlighted by the wonderful historian Howard Zinn—that "History is the memory of states." It's a notion I reject. It denies history as the lived experience of ordinary people. I wanted the freedom to tap into the "lived experience" without being bogged down by the biographic detail of historical characters. But key scenes had real historical antecedents. For example, one of the Hales brothers actually had his fingernails pulled out like in the film.

Cineaste: Were the Hales brothers the inspiration for that part of the film?

Laverty: For the actual torture scene I tried to imagine the horror of what happened to Hales and many others. I was informed by those incidents. But the fictional character, Teddy, was not Hales. I wanted freedom to examine the essence of the dispute, and the soul of the man I had in my head. They are fictional characters, but in another way I hope that they are all true. For every character that



Teddy (Pádraic Delaney, right) leads the flying column onto the estate of an Anglo-Irish landowner they know has been acting as a spy for British troops in this scene from Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*.

appears in the film, I actually wrote out a personal history, which could all be traced back and rooted in the logic of those times.

Cineaste: Yet one specific event in the film bears striking similarities to the Kilmichael ambush, when seventeen British soldiers were killed by the Flying Column led by Tom Barry. By drawing on established events but sidestepping historical specificity, are you not then trying to have your cake and eat it, too?

Loach: By no means. We want to be accurate to the kind of ambush that happened, but at no stage do we use the word Kilmichael. By using one ambush as a model you want to make it representative of the way they worked, that's all. You can't just pluck it out of the air. You can't invent a whole scene that would not be representative of the way that they operated. So I don't want people to think of Kilmichael, I want people to think that this is the way that the Flying Columns operated, and it is.

Laverty: At the end of the day the detail about that particular ambush doesn't really matter. If we were doing the story of Tom Barry, we would have every anorak under the sun saying this was done on such and such a day, and so on. You could be so easily crucified on historical detail—the words that they said, the dates that they said them, who fought with who, what order was it in, did it happen there, or twenty miles away? All that detail becomes a burden and stops us becoming true to the spirit of the times.

Cineaste: Do you feel obligated to present more than one perspective on what are enormously contested historical events?

Laverty: A film is only two hours long, so point of view is critical. The drama actually comes out of deeply antagonistic political differences that clash with tragic results. It is embedded in the premise and wrapped around the frailties and contradictions of the different characters.

Loach: There are many different points of view within the Republican side. We wanted to relive the experience of the people who went through it and to examine why the British acted the way

that they did, which the character of Teddy understands better than anyone else. Teddy understands the *realpolitik* of why the Republicans are not going to get everything that they want in one go. That's why he argues that the British are never going to cede full independence.

Cineaste: But they are only different shades of Republican outlook.

Loach: Yes, that's the given of the group of men who are fighting for independence. The story is of a group in the Flying Column, how they fought for independence, how they won partial independence, and the legacy of what happened after the treaty. Every point of view is there within that.

Laverty: I would have enjoyed writing this story from the point of view of a young Tan. Let's not forget they were mostly demobbed soldiers, brutalized in the First World War and then left to rot unemployed in cities like Glasgow and Birmingham. But it's another film. Choosing to tell the story from the point of view of the Flying Column gave us the opportunity to examine the contradictions within a wider range of voices. Critically, not only what they were fighting against, but also what they were fighting for.

Cineaste: Critics might suggest that the film is not politically balanced.

Loach: It is very politically balanced between the different strands of people fighting for their independence; it's very balanced between democrats. It is politically balanced between those who are engaged in a battle for political independence. The arguments of the colonial power are indicated but this question would not be asked if we were making a film about the French Resistance. Do you have to be fair to the Nazis? Do you have to be fair to the oppressor? To quote Churchill, "Do you have to be fair between the fire brigade and the fire?" The idea of balance is wholly skewed—as it always is, because the British stood for opposition to democracy, for oppression of the people, for the brutal destruction of their homes in many cases and their lives. So I don't feel the need to be balanced between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Laverty: In general, I'm not sure what 'political balance' really means or how you can measure it. We reveal our politics, values, and way of seeing the world in a very deep sense by choice of premise, character, and point of view. It's like a historian who reveals himself by what he selects or doesn't, and how he interprets it. Objectivity is a very slippery notion. In the particulars of this film we have been criticized for not showing a 'good' British soldier. The sending in of the Tans was a systematic project to terrorize the civilian population, planned and implemented by the British Cabinet. Our main interest was how the local population reacted to that. I don't doubt there were young sensitive soldiers caught up in the middle of it all—in fact we have two, but that goes unnoticed by some critics. But they, too, do their work with their own set of values, politics, and ways of looking at the world. They, like filmmakers, are also revealed in their work. That's fine by me.

Cineaste: *The conflict in Ireland is usually discussed in terms of the national question, yet you chose to flag up the social divisions in the conflict. Why?*

Laverty: It was very easy for people to unite around that notion of independence—including the church, newspapers, trade unions, etc.—but of course once the Treaty had been signed the question was 'What kind of Ireland do we want?' That divided them.

For example, farm laborers had totally different interests from a farmer's sons, or landlords, or even from Arthur Griffith, who was head of Sinn Féin and who had supported the Dublin lockout in 1913. Dan had lived through the Dublin lockout so he remembered the Irish entrepreneurs screwing and starving the tram workers, so he is never going to be happy with just changing the flags or changing the accents.

"I have always been fascinated about how empires tell lies about their history and there have been more lies told about Ireland, Britain's oldest and closest colony, than anywhere else." —Paul Laverty

Cineaste: *Did you want the film to take a clear anti-Treaty position?*

Laverty: At those times most people thought that the gerrymandered border would just fade away, although eighty years later it still exists. One of the reasons for making the film is to see how the long shadow of the past impacts on the present. It was Major Montgomery, who went on to become Field Marshal Montgomery, who said, "We must give the Irish enough self-government so that they repress this rebellion themselves." And in a strange way that is exactly what they did. The British Cabinet said there would be "immediate and terrible war," that is a quote—and that is what Teddy says in the film.

Loach: By any reckoning the arrangement in the North of Ireland has not been successful. There have to be grievances, which people are still nursing—that's plain—and it all goes back to partition, so I don't think anybody should be upset by examining what happened then. That's what we tried to do. There are no loyalist hate figures in here and I hope people can examine it coolly.

Cineaste: *Teddy argues that the Treaty was the best deal on offer. How important was it that this position was reflected in the film?*

Laverty: It is the heart of the film. We were really keen to ensure that Teddy was not seen as a fall guy. We really wanted him to be a man of

principle who really believed that the Treaty was the best possibility, that it was, as Michael Collins argued, "The freedom to achieve freedom." He also knows that they only had 3500 rifles against the strongest, most powerful army in the world, and he feared a blood bath. But Damien realizes the detail of the Treaty. He tells his brother he dances to a puppet government, one "where John Bull has his hand around your bollocks but you pretend not to notice."



The IRA leads the kidnapped landlord, Sir John Hamilton (Roger Allam, center), into the countryside, where he will be shot by Damien (last in the column) as a spy, in this scene from Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*.

We argued the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty positions full throttle. Who knows what you would do in these violent and terrifying circumstances? It's very simple to judge from the safety of a library eighty years later, but we tried not to do that. It was a brilliant decision by the British Cabinet, both cynical and vicious, because what they did was to divide the Republican movement.

Cineaste: *Do you think the film will be comfortable viewing for mainstream Irish Republicans?*

Laverty: I hope not. We made great efforts to try to reflect the complexity of the situation. In any nationalist struggle there are tensions and that is the way it has always been. There are some really tough questions asked of the other side. Many would argue that the gombeen men [money-lenders], the business men, the opportunists took over the Free State in the South. And what about the landlord's fear that Ireland might become a "priest infested backwater"?

Loach: I hope everyone in Ireland and outside realizes that the film tries to be a fair account of what happened in Ireland in that time and that people fought to implement their democratic decision—that is really important. They were fighting in response to the British who opposed their own democratic decision, so their response was sparked by the violence of the people who opposed that democratic will.

Cineaste: *The film has stimulated considerable controversy in Britain. Did that surprise you?*

Loach: It is very predictable and extraordinary the way that the right wing has responded. It taps into Gordon Brown's recent speech that we must not apologize for the empire—it really smokes them out. Do they not realize that there was a peaceful democratic solution for the Irish because they voted democratically to be independent? The British crushed that, brutalized the people, and committed atrocity after atrocity.

Laverty: It is absolutely amazing that anyone can call this an anti-British film. It is so crude, bordering on stupidity really. It is anti-British Establishment; Churchill sent troops into Ireland to suppress the local population but he also sent troops in to suppress the Welsh miners.

Cineaste: *How do you respond to those British journalists who have described the film as pro-IRA? One journalist even put you in the same category as the Nazi filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl.*

Loach: These are the weasel journalists who apologize for every British brutality, but if these people were not writing that, then the film would be a failure. It is a mark of success that these distorters of the truth emerge; these are the whores of imperialism.

Cineaste: *But were you not surprised and taken aback by the ferocity of the response?*

Loach: We were kind of prepared, but you are always taken aback by the personal abuse, by the misuse of language, and by the snide comments. Yet no one has challenged a single fact in the film, not even the most vicious *Sun* or *Daily Mail* journalist. In a way you have to rub their noses in it—'There's the film, tell us what is wrong.' And not one has come up with anything—not even a minor detail.

Laverty: The European reviews in general have been fantastic, but right-wing critics generalize to the point of parody and make personal insults; what none of them has done is to engage with the ideas that underpin the work. It is much easier to smear than to analyze. In Spain the right-wing press is even more creative—one journalist wrote that our next project was on the ETA [the Basque separatist group], which is total fiction.

Cineaste: *Earlier in the interview you referred to the French Resistance. Is it legitimate to bracket them with the early IRA?*

Loach: Yes. It is an army of occupation, the agents for an oppressive foreign power, defying the will of the people. So why shouldn't they be compared? They are both resistance movements.

Cineaste: *Your critics suggest there is a link between support for the IRA in the Twenties and support for the IRA in more modern times.*

Loach: How could anybody be so stupid as to think that nothing has happened in the intervening period. There has been eighty years of trying to operate a Treaty that was a colossal mistake. But with hindsight we can see that it led to discrimination on the grounds of education, housing, and unemployment, where the Catholic nationalist population were at a disadvantage, a situation which led to the civil rights movement. Obviously they are operating under different circumstances and they are operating in different ways and I'm very prepared to have a long discussion about that—but it's not in the film.

Cineaste: *As with your previous films you employ a mixture of professional and nonprofessional actors. Is there any difference in how you deal with less experienced actors?*

Loach: There were a couple of weeks of preparation with an Irish Army sergeant to turn our lads into guerrilla fighters. Everybody came—whether it was a young lad like John Creen, who was still at school in Cork, or whether it was Cillian Murphy—they all came with the same good heart and open mind and enthusiasm. They all pitched in, they were all treated exactly the same, and they all responded brilliantly.

Cineaste: *There are obviously parallels to be drawn with the current situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. How conscious of that were you?*

Laverty: The historical detail may have changed but the psychology of occupation is still very similar. I don't want to draw a specious comparison with Ireland and Iraq, but if we knew what we had really done in Ireland it would be much harder to persuade the population that we are on a civilizing mission abroad. Deep down the notion that we are doing good elsewhere is deeply buried in our collective psyche and if we had more of an objective history I don't think that those bastards would get away with it in the same way. If we remembered British concentration camps, executions, mutilation, and torture on a grand scale in Kenya in the Fifties, we

might not be so gung ho.

Loach: It has parallels at every point in history where there is an army of occupation, where there is an empire trying to stamp out an independence movement—and certainly in Iraq with the army of occupation. This latest massacre, which has come to light in the last few days, is bound to happen. You put lads, armed to the teeth, in a foreign land where they are not wanted. What do they expect to happen? This idea that we go with medicine and Bibles is ludicrous. You wonder whether the people who write this are liars or fools because they have to be one or the other.

Cineaste: *I suppose one way of answering your critics was the critical response that the film received at Cannes. What does it mean to you to win the Palme d'Or?*

Loach: It is the top prize in world cinema so it obviously means a great deal. Cannes is a great festival of cinema from across the world. Unlike the Oscars it's not films from one country—albeit a big industrial cinema country—it is genuinely world cinema, so to pick up the premiere award in cinema is hugely important.

Laverty: It meant a lot of dead brain cells and some hangover. To be honest, I'm split. It's a bit daft for grown adults to be talking seriously about the lottery of a competition. On the other hand I felt like a teenager back on my football team again and celebrating a result with some of my closest mates. We enjoyed the moment. It has also meant incredible promotion of the film in a very unequal world. After it won, Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper wrote that *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* was a film people must not see. I enjoyed that as much as the *Palme d'Or*. Thanks, Rupert, you made my day. ■

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