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The Cut and Thrust

The Power of Political Debate in the Films of Ken Loach

by Graham Fuller

Ken Loach's new film, *Jimmy's Hall*, is a footnote to history: the story of the selfless attempt of the communist agitator James Gralton (1886–1945) and his fellow County Leitrim villagers to run a dance hall and community center in the face of anti-red paranoia and the puritanical oppression of the Catholic Church in the Irish Free State of 1932. This eleventh full-length collaboration between Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty is a peacetime movie and so naturally less bloody than *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2007), their tragic evocation of the Irish War of Independence, from which the Free State emerged under Éamon de Valera's conservative Fianna Fáil government after the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. Though spasmodically violent, the elegantly low-key drama about a fight for the right to convene, socialize, and be educated outside church and state control, is as memorable for Jimmy's chaste romance with his long-married former sweetheart, Republican villagers' irate sorties to restore tenants evicted from landed estates, and especially the group summits that ratchet up the tension.

Such conversations, in which politically or socially opposed groups, or factions within the same group, argue their standpoints, or self-organizing working-class people vigorously debate issues essential to their or others' welfare and survival, have become the signature trope of Loach's dramatic films. Since making a Marxist analysis as a young man, the British realist director, who in 1980 told Leonard Quart he "was close to a Trotskyist position, and remain to this day an anti-Stalinist socialist" (see "A Fidelity to the Real: An Interview with Ken Loach and Tony Garnett," *Cineaste*, Vol. X, No. 4), has worked primarily with the writers Jim Allen (the fiercely anti-Stalinist former labor organizer who died in 1999), Barry Hines, and Laverty to embed the class struggle in wars of words and ensuing collective actions such as strikes and protests, though the depiction of armed

resistance—most notably in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* and the Allen-scripted Spanish Civil War film *Land and Freedom* (2005)—has proved unavoidable. In contradistinction to the hyperbolic sequences of glorified mayhem and murder synonymous with Hollywood cinema, talk is action in Loach's films.

As the director announces his retirement, we look back at how his collaborations with different screenwriters shaped the ideological viewpoint that runs from *The Big Flame* to *Jimmy's Hall*.

Although these heated conversations generally avoid off-putting sociopolitical jargon, the speakers often represent nuanced political positions they may not fully understand or be able to articulate. In *Days of Hope* (1975), the four-part television period epic written by Allen, Ben Matthews (Paul Copley), a young Yorkshireman who has deserted from the British Army, is gradually politicized by his experiences as a participant in the army's ruthless oppression of the Irish Republican community following the 1916 Easter Rising, and as the guest of a strike organizer, Joel Barnett (Gary Roberts), and his family in the Durham Coalfield in 1921. A literate and shrewd but meagerly educated man, Joel admits to the empathetic Ben how daunted

he was by the language of the communist books and leaflets a militant guest had sent him. When the aristocratic pit owner John Pritchard (Edward Underdown) calls in troops to harass the miners and their families into submission, however, Joel and Ben find their own language is adequate to express during an emergency meeting their radical yet pragmatic ideas about how to force Pritchard to back down. The session transforms Ben from a sympathetic bystander to an embryonic militant himself, one who will soon join the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

In *Land and Freedom*, the naive Liverpool communist David Carr (Ian Hart) joins an internationalist Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM) militia unit to fight for the Republicans against Franco. Following the unit's liberation of a rural village from the fascists, the locals vociferously debate if they should form an agrarian collective. Among those present are POUM members with anarcho-syndicalist (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo) or anarchist leanings and orthodox Marxists. The villager Teresa urges collectivization from an unspecified political viewpoint because of the urgent need to provide food for the people and the men at the front.

Pepe, the tenant farmer beside her, agrees they should collectivize the captured estate where they're talking but stipulates that he wants to continue to farm, as an "individualist," his "own bit" of land. Elderly Miguel argues that working all the land collectively will keep the revolution going. A French volunteer in POUM says that all "owned" land must be relinquished; a villager chimes in that it should be forcibly taken. A POUM German, regretting the failure of revolutionary socialism in his homeland, urges the rapid consolidation of the Spanish revolution. A POUM Scot (played by Laverty) agrees that the energy of Spain's two million landless peasants should be harnessed for the revolution immediately.



Army deserter Ben Matthews (Paul Copley, left) mobilizes Durham miners like Billy Shepherd (Alun Armstrong) on their 1921 strike in *Days of Hope*.

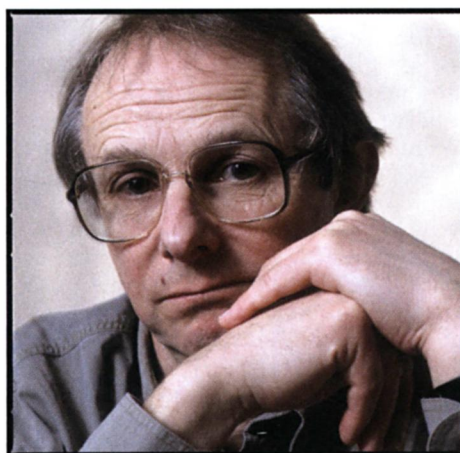


In *Jimmy's Hall*, committee members, led by James Gralton (Barry Ward, center left, hand raised), meet to discuss how best to respond to the Catholic Church's condemnation of their cultural and educational activities.

Loach's orchestration of these and other opinions is so seamless that viewers may be unaware that Gene Lawrence (Tom Gilroy), a POUM American, sounds more dissonant notes than the individualist farmer; certainly, his comrades do not pick up on the treachery inherent in his advice. After advising immediate collectivization of the captured land, Lawrence warns that radical socialist slogans should be toned down lest they scare away foreign capitalist money necessary to provide arms for Franco's defeat, which must be accomplished, he says, before the revolution proceeds. Speaking clumsily, Carr agrees with Lawrence, not realizing he is buying into a Stalinist line that will subsequently divert him to fight senselessly as an International Brigade recruit against antifascist anarchists during the 1937 May Days in Barcelona. Following that debacle, he angrily tears up his CPGB card and rejoins his POUM unit, whereupon Lawrence shows up with the Comintern-armed Popular Front force that disarms it. Its commander kills David's anarchist lover, Bianca (Rosana Pastor). This sequence of events shows how the debate, beyond its victory for those keen to collectivize, determines David's trajectory and brings him to a realization that Stalin was exploiting the Republicans' war against Franco.

When David, writing to his girlfriend at home, describes POUM as "socialism in action," he is referring to its cooperative ethos and nonhierarchical structure, but the phrase also describes the democratic nature of the debates among leftists in Loach's

films, and, additionally, the debates' function as narrative engines. They are not, of course, the sole domain of workers, union organizers, and poor people who would benefit from socialist initiatives such as collectivization, which was also put into practice by striking Liverpool dockers in *The Big Flame* (1969) and discussed by Irish Republican villagers in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. Frequently, they involve their reactionary antagonists (landowners and industrialists, as well as managers and union leaders who are often "lapsed" socialists seduced by power) or, more rarely, are conducted by those who collude in exploiting the working class.



Ken Loach: Is he really retiring from filmmaking? (photo by Robin Holland).

These debates—the organization and filming of which demonstrates the cooperativeness and community spirit among members of different film trades—became integral to Loach's films after he began his twenty-seven-year collaboration with Allen on *The Big Flame*. Over the years, he has devised directorial strategies to maximize the conversations' appearance of reality. For *Land and Freedom*'s collectivization debate, he asked the actors, professionals and nonprofessionals alike, to "unlearn" their lines so that their comments would seem spontaneous. The long, gripping sequence benefits from overlapping dialogue, the clash of regional dialects that are not always easily understood, which was also the case with the construction workers' talk in the Bill Jesse-scripted *Riff-Raff* (1991)—Loach preferring to add subtitles rather than insist on the verbal clarity of classic Hollywood cinema—and lines spoken hesitantly by one nervous participant.

Halting speech is occasionally noticeable in the discussions in *The Big Flame*, the first of Loach and Allen's two single docudramas about industrial workers organizing, the political leverage of strike action, and the selling out of the rank and file by trade-union leaders—the latter issue central to the idea, consistently emphasized by Loach, that revolutions are betrayed from within. Written in 1967, a year before a prolonged U.K. dock strike, it is a story of striking Liverpool dockers who are led by Jack Regan (Godfrey Quigley), a militant previously sacked by his bosses and thrown out of his union, into taking over and efficiently running their



British communist David Carr (Ian Hart) and fellow members of a POUM militia unit are disarmed by Stalinist-controlled Popular Front forces in Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

workplace. Regan is an Allen-like Trotskyist; the dockers' short-lived occupation of the port and boosting of productivity was Allen's "political fantasy," in microcosm, of a successful workers' state.

Shot on 16mm for the BBC *Wednesday Play* anthology series, *The Big Flame* begins with Garfield, a Ministry of Labor representative, arriving at the docks on the eve of ten thousand dockers downing their tools. He has been brought in by Logan, a union bigwig more concerned with keeping the management happy than supporting the rank and file, to attend an emergency meeting with the strike committee. Ignoring Garfield's glib assurances that no workers will be made redundant, Danny Fowler (Norman Rossington), the informed secretary of the committee, rejects the terms of the 1965 Devlin Report, which proposed the "decasualization" of dock labor, a measure threatening job losses across the board, and expresses his fears that the containerization of deep-sea cargoes will lead to further unemployment. As the meeting becomes combative, Fowler's increasing anger is balanced by the reasonable tone of his fellow committee member Peter Connor (Peter Kerrigan), who patiently—if glumly—explains why the strike must go ahead, there being no offer of a wage increase and no guarantees of job security.

Though not politically balanced, this discussion is important in Loach's early work for establishing the theme of the left being betrayed by the left. There are four men in the room who have apparently lost sight of their working-class roots or supposed socialist sympathies: Garfield, who is middle class but holds office in Harold Wilson's Labour government; the ineffective trades union official Steve Fowler, Danny's white-collar brother, who, like Logan, toadies to the management; and the pigheaded docks manager Bruno, a working class-man, likely a former docker himself, who is first seen calling the dockers "yobbos," and during the meeting is drawn into a name-calling spat with Joe Ryan, a comically belligerent strike committee member.

As a barely civil gathering, the unsuccessful meeting is parodied by the following street-corner ruckus in which a couple of dockers bate an unemployed former colleague, Freddie Grierson (Ken Jones), a self-described "revolutionist" who has become a strident Moral Re-Armament evangelist. He is so desperate to get his job back that he is later arrested by the police when trying to break into the docks. A management plant feeds him a tale about a clandestine party of labor leaders who, he claims, want to confer with the dock strike leaders with the goal of

bringing out one hundred thousand workers nationwide. Allowed to go free, the hapless Freddie relays this fiction to the strike committee. Though some members are suspicious, the vote to meet the mythical delegates is carried in a debate less convincing than the film's other meetings, a decision that leads to Regan, Fowler, Connor, and Ryan being arrested and the collapse of the dock occupation.

The Big Flame highlighted the problem of political representation by characters in Loach's films. Although Quigley gave a solid performance as the calmly authoritative Regan, he was unable to render naturalistically some of Allen's explicatory dialogue. When Regan talks to Danny and Connor in a pub about the need to make the strike "political" rather than "economic," his Trotskyist rhetoric reduces the broadly built Irishman to a mouthpiece. The film is thus weakened by the same kind of didacticism that marred, according to Allen himself, *The Rank and File*, his and Loach's hurriedly written 1971 BBC docudrama about the wildcat strike by eleven thousand workers at the Pilkington Glass factory in St. Helens, Lancashire, the result of trade union executives' long-term fraternization with management and the government. Despite Loach and Allen's partiality in the sympathetic

characterization of the workers and the Rank and File Strike Committee members (who show their ability to organize from scratch) and the cardboard corruptness of the discredited union leaders, Loach achieved a new level of documentary ultra-realism in his direction of the meetings.

Some otherwise positive reviews of *Land and Freedom* also tarred it with the “didactic” brush. “The film has its shortcomings—notably the didactic discussions on, for example, the ideology of collectivism,” wrote Geoff Andrew in London’s *Time Out*. “David and his colleagues are too often mouthpieces for Mr. Loach’s own educational enterprise,” observed Caryn James in *The New York Times*. This is not only a matter of individual critical opinion but a problem skewed by the way the debate interrupts, almost like a Brechtian interpolation, the POUM militia unit’s grueling mission.

It is not in itself a non-naturalistic episode, however, but a well-acted, plausibly iterated, passionate exchange of ideas made gripping by cinematographer Barry Ackroyd’s short panning shots and unobtrusive cuts by the editor Jonathan Morris. The scene’s energy alone makes it a vibrant analogue to its poetic equivalent—shot outdoors amid a crowd of villagers against the backdrop of kulak antagonism to collectivization and mechanization—in Alexander Dovzhenko’s 1930 silent, *Earth*.

When I asked Loach, in an interview for *The New York Times* article on *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, if the “didactic” accusation annoyed him, he replied: “Profoundly—because the people who say it are also saying that a clash of ideas is not suitable for a film. I was brought up on Shakespeare’s history plays, which are full of debates about kingship, divine right and the rights of the subject. I’m not making any other comparisons, but I think those scenes are intensely dramatic.”

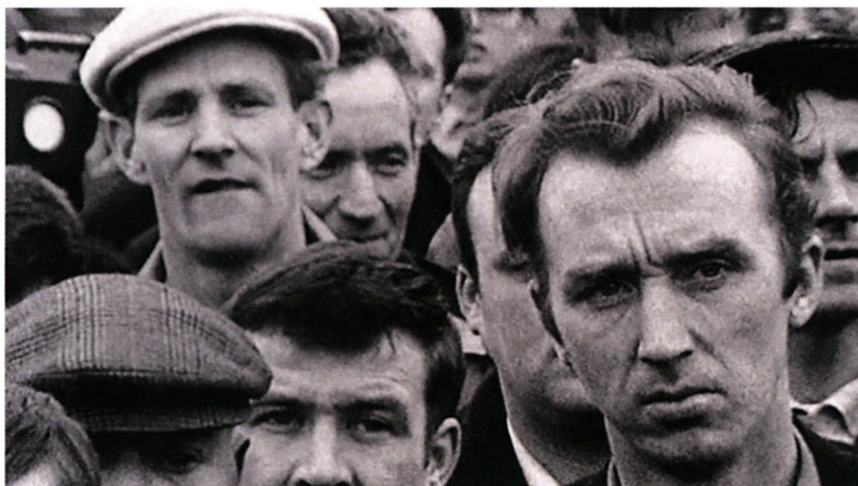
Critics are not obliged, of course, to acknowledge the difficulties faced by directors in calibrating dramaturgically complex scenes requiring an ensemble: a chase, a battle, a musical number, or a debate works or doesn’t work for each audience member. It ought to be stated, however, that realizing a naturalistic representation of a focused discourse involving a polyphony of voices representing different attitudes and positions—one that does not sound like it was written and that

avoids rhetoric—is a feat of performance, staging, camerawork, and editing that demands a special mastery of television and cinema’s moving parts. Loach is possibly unrivaled as a world-renowned filmmaker who has returned to such frays again and again, his humanistic enjoyment of people’s capacity for remonstrating, reasoning, rationalizing, cajoling, and bickering being as important as his socialist agenda.

It is seldom remarked how much humor contributes to the meetings written by Allen, as well as Jesse (a naturally comic writer whose sole script, written from personal experience of laboring on unsafe building sites, was *Riff-Raff*), and Hines. In *The Big*

Realizing a naturalistic representation of a focused discourse involving a polyphony of voices representing different attitudes and positions is a feat of performance, staging, camerawork, and editing.

Flame, a docker who has been caught stealing bottles of whiskey during the occupation is ignominiously sentenced in the subsequent Strike Committee meeting to cleaning the port’s toilets. In *Days of Hope*, a meeting between the miners’ strike leaders and the mine owner Pritchard—who tries to butter up the working men by offering them beer and sandwiches, a reference to Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s similar ruse in the 1960s and 1970s—peters out when one of the pit men sucks in too much smoke from the cigar he’s just accepted. In the first episode of Hines’s two-part BBC drama *The Price of Coal* (1977), the incongruous royalism demonstrated by Yorkshire pit managers (presumably ex-miners) meeting to vote on what arrangements should be made to greet a propagandistic visit by Prince Charles is undercut by miners’ representative Sid (Bobby Knutt), who deadpans that he’d like to vote for the prince not to come at all.



The rank and file: striking Liverpool dockers in Ken Loach’s *The Big Flame* (1969).

Beginning with 1996’s *Carla’s Song*, Lavery became Loach’s regular writing partner and an inheritor of the tradition of incorporating debates in their films. If the most inspiring meeting he has written is the after-hours locker room discussion about unionization by minimally paid Los Angeles janitors in *Bread and Roses* (2000), the most politically serpentine is a Republican court hearing in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. After witnessing violent acts by the British Black and Tans (Churchill’s brutal Royal Irish Constabulary reservists) in 1920 County Cork, Damien O’Donovan (Cillian Murphy), a doctor who was about to leave for London, joins and fights with the IRA flying squad led by his brother Teddy (Pádraic Delaney).

The later court hearing, held to resolve a dispute between a merchant and an old woman over unpaid grocery bills, evolves into a wider discussion about social injustice. Teddy backs the merchant, a usurer who helps arm the IRA. Damien backs Dan (Liam Cunningham), his socialist mentor, who excoriates the IRA for supporting local dignitaries at the expense of the poor. A subsequent debate following the Anglo-Irish Treaty further divides the brothers as Damien is radicalized as a Republican fighter and Teddy, now a pro-Treaty supporter, joins the Irish Free State’s army. This tragic divergence—which prophesizes the 1922–23 Irish Civil War—echoes that of *Days of Hope*’s politicized Ben and his brother-in-law Philip (Nikolas Simmonds), who, as a Labour MP, rejects the early Christian Socialist principles that led to his being tortured by the British Army for conscientiously objecting during the Great War.

Jimmy’s Hall, which is possibly the last Loach–Lavery collaboration since the director has announced it will be his final dramatic film, contains two of the most persuasive informal conferences that Lavery has written—and one that overreaches.

Having emigrated to the United States in 1909, Gralton had returned to fight in the Irish War of Independence and originally opened the Hall, named for the fallen socialist Republican leaders Pádraic Pearse and James Connolly, on his parents’ Effrinagh farmland. His land agitation and holding of Republican arbitration courts in the Hall led to the provisional government demanding his arrest; he escaped to America in 1922.



After numerous arguments, Teddy (Pádraic Delaney, right) realizes that he and his brother Damien (Cillian Murphy) hold irreconcilably opposed political viewpoints toward the new Irish Free State in Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*.

The movie concentrates on the reopening of the Hall by Jimmy (charismatically played by the handsome Barry Ward) after he has returned to live with his ageing mother, Alice (Aileen Henry), and work her land. His continued land agitation—combined with his labor activism as a member of the Revolutionary Workers Group (forerunner of the Communist Party of Ireland), unmentioned in the film—this time prompts the newly elected (and deradicalized) Fianna Fáil to collude with the Church in ridding Ireland of his potentially subversive influence. The Hall was burned down, probably at the instruction of a Father O'Dowd—reimagined as the film's conniving Father Sheridan (Jim Norton), who grudgingly respects Jimmy's principled stand—on Christmas Eve 1932. (Six months on the run, Gralton was arrested and deported to America in August 1933. He lived out his life in New York as an organizer of unions and the communist-backed Irish Workers' Clubs, which promoted left-wing causes in Ireland.)

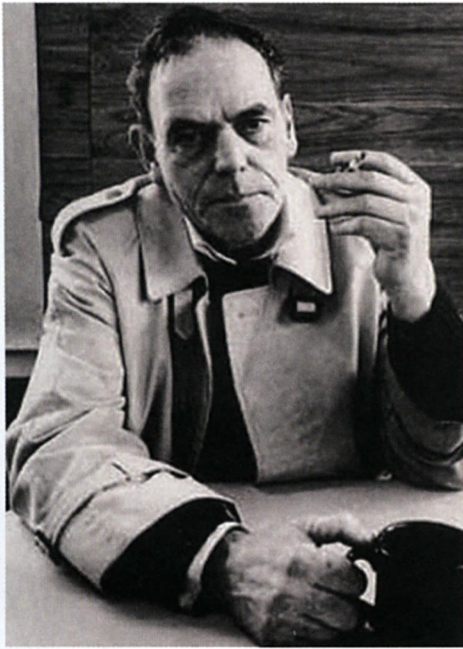
The aforementioned violence includes an abortive British Army raid on the Hall during its early days and a land dispute showdown at which guns are drawn but not fired (both scenes shown in flashbacks), a 1932 land dispute resolved by Jimmy's supporters trouncing the owner's vicious agent and his men, a

horsewhipping of a teenage girl, and a nocturnal firing on the packed Hall by unseen IRA men. Yet, it is one of Loach's gentlest and most romantic films: the newly returned Jimmy and his old flame Oonagh (Simone Kirby), the Hall's dance teacher, acknowledge their undiminished love for each other without consummating it (a strand of the film Loach and Lavery invented). It is also one of the strongest examples of a Loach movie in which the clash between left and right, though always present, is rarely couched in overt political terms. Though Jimmy is vilified as a communist by Sheridan and Commander O'Keefe (Brian F. O'Byrne), a fascist IRA veteran who's become a kind of village squire, he never speaks as an ideologue, but embodies, through his community hosting and driving of cattle onto landed estates when restoring evicted tenants to their homes, the spirit of human-rights activism. Modest, an appreciator of the pleasure working people take in music and dancing (as was the director of 1965's *Up the Junction*), and a gentleman, he is less aggressive than the real James Gralton may have been, but a good deal like the real Ken Loach.

The first of the three charged group conversations occurs at an emergency meeting held by Jimmy and other Hall committee members and teachers, including Oonagh, Alice, Mossie (Francis Magee), Seán (Karl

Geary), Dessie (Martin Lucey), Molly (Sorcha Fox), Tess (Denise Gough), and Tommy (Mikel Murfi), after young Marie O'Keefe (Aisling Franciosi), who had implored Jimmy to reopen the Hall, turns up with a bloodied back. She has been whipped by her father, who was enraged to learn from the vindictive Sheridan during a church-service denunciation that she attends the Hall dances. Unnerved because the Hall volunteers are being called "anti-Christ's," Tess discloses that she can no longer teach there; Sheridan has threatened to order a boycott of her and her husband's shop if she continues. Sean reveals that Sheridan and O'Keefe are conspiring to destroy the Hall. Panic gives way to cautious optimism when Jimmy suggests they should neutralize Sheridan without him losing face with fellow clerics and the wider Catholic community—and Oonagh ventures they invite him onto the board. The scene is a paradigm of a persecuted community using reason to concoct a plan of action, though Alice, given the last line, warns the others of the danger of inviting their more powerful enemy into the Hall—an oblique reference, perhaps, to appeasement in the pre-Nazi era.

When Roscommon IRA men representing a family evicted from an estate appeal to Jimmy to deliver a speech demanding its reinstatement by the heavily guarded Anglo-



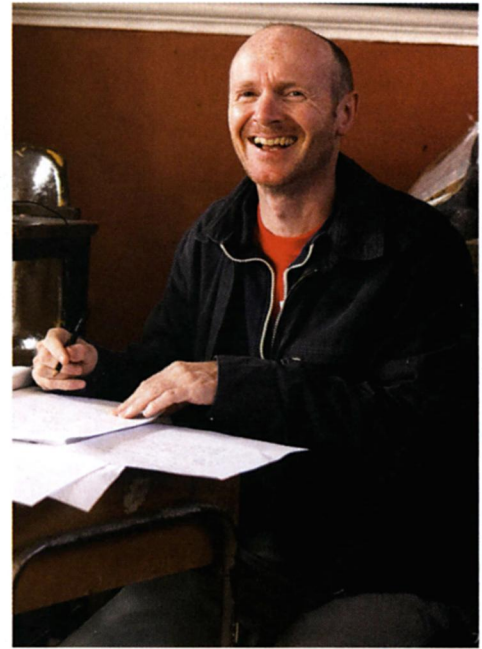
Socialist playwright and screenwriter James "Jim" Allen (1926–1999).

Irish landowner, they trigger a political discussion by the assembled Hall members that is the film's equivalent of *Land and Freedom's* collectivization debate. Mossie and Dessie express fears that journalists would spread Jimmy's words, putting landowners on alert across the country and likely causing the authorities to arrest him and close the Hall. Encouraging them to be more optimistic, Sean asks rhetorically who has the right to the landowner's thousands of acres, which he "inherited from a foreign invasion." Tommy remarks that the American Depression is preventing Irish immigrants from supporting Republican communities financially. Molly says the Hall should be careful not to invoke the wrath of "the Bishops" following the Church's reinvigoration at June 1932's massively supported Eucharistic Conference in Dublin (a display of might captured in a newsreel shown in an earlier cinema scene wherein far-right Army Comrades Association veterans, "the Blueshirts," in the audience barrack Jimmy and his friends).

The breathless discussion eventually swings back to the subject of whether the Hall should support the homeless and landless or safeguard itself as a social haven for the local youths, before Jimmy invites the silent Oonagh to speak up, which she cannot. As the debate proves overwhelming to her, so it may prove for the *Jimmy's Hall* viewer. In touching on the situation in America, the "property is theft" concept introduced by the French anarchist Pierre-

Joseph Proudhon in 1840, and Catholic power plays, it contextualizes the value of the Hall as a bastion of freedom in a Europe on the precipice. Yet, the scene unfortunately comes across as a smorgasbord of collectivist anxieties, some of Lavery's lines are stilted (like Regan's in Allen's *The Big Flame*), and some of the actors' line readings are mannered (unlike those in *Land and Freedom's* collectivization debate).

The final group meeting in *Jimmy's Hall* is uncharacteristic of Loach's films since it takes place in the heart of the enemy and skillfully exposes its fears and doubts. Following the burning of the Hall, Sheridan, O'Keefe, and two of their supporters meet, along with Sheridan's liberal-minded young curate Father Seamus (Andrew Scott), in O'Keefe's home. They're there to discuss what to do next about Jimmy, but the curate, apoplectic about the arson attack, which he describes as "Ku Klux Klan tactics," scorns O'Keefe as the man who ordered it. Attempting to justify his actions, O'Keefe attributes the current crisis in Belfast to communists like Jimmy: workers have been challenging trade union leaders as sellouts; unemployment riots have—to O'Keefe's chagrin—united working-class Catholics and Protestants; one hundred thousand protesters are on the streets. When one of O'Keefe's cronies anxiously mentions the presence in Belfast of Tom Mann—the iconic English socialist and union organizer who would be deported during the riots—it becomes clear what will happen to Jimmy. The short scene is crucial because it indicates that Sheridan's campaign against the Hall owed as much to the previous Irish government's enlisting of the Church to promote a Red Scare (as Marnie Holborow has noted in *Irish Marxist Review*) as it did to his disgust at the



Screenwriter Paul Lavery on the set of *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*.

prospect of his parishioners dancing licentiously to Jimmy's jazz records.

No survey of the debates and meetings presented by Loach and his collaborators can ignore the fourth and final part of the Thatcher-era documentary series *Questions of Leadership* (1983), which Channel 4 controversially refused to air. The fifty-minute film comprises an edited version of a day-long discussion at Warwick University, in which shop stewards and convenors discuss the thorny issues of union democracy—specifically officials' frequently compromised representation of rank-and-file interests—with apologists toeing the Labour Party line. Cerebral though this conference is, it simmers with resentments and includes several flare-ups, including the humiliation of the engineering workers' union official Ken Cure by the steel industry shop steward Bernard Connolly. "It was very funny," Loach said, "and it had the kind of crackle that politics on television ought to have: real confrontation and argument and passion that's not mediated by some bloody TV anchorman." A genuine slice of combative political life, it also serves to demonstrate, since they do not suffer in comparison, how close to actuality are the majority of the vital, combustible fictional debates Ken Loach has mounted and filmed. ■



Jimmy Gralton (Barry Ward) is arrested and will be deported back to America in the concluding scene of Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall*.

Jimmy's Hall is distributed in the United States by Sony Pictures Classics, www.sonyclassics.com.