

Behind the Michael Collins controversy

NEIL Jordan's film *Michael Collins* has aroused great controversy even before we have had a chance to see it. A film about a man killed by the old IRA, it has been widely denounced as Provisional IRA propaganda. Any film that shows Ireland's war of independence, so the argument goes, must help the Provisionals. Is this so?

Michael Collins was a son of a small farmer who spent nine of his 31 years working as a counter clerk in London, returning to Ireland for the 1916 Rising. He led the armed forces of Catholic Ireland to victory in the war (1919-21) against the British occupation forces; but for half a century most nationalists saw him as a traitor, and many still do today.

In its form Collins' victory was less than the independent republic declared by a minority in 1916 and endorsed by the representatives of the Irish Catholic-Nationalist majority in 1919. Ireland was partitioned, much against Collins' will, and Britain granted Ireland only the right to set up a self-governing state within the British Empire with the British king as its king. There could be no "Republic".

But if the form was less than "the republic", the substance was not far from it. As Collins said, the Treaty gave Ireland the freedom to win freedom. By the '30s, the state Collins set up had evolved so far that Eamonn De Valera could truly describe it as a republic within the Commonwealth. It remained neutral when Britain went to war in 1939: by any standards that was a fully independent state.

This was more Collins' achievement than that of any other single person. But in 1921 Sinn Fein had split over the Treaty. A narrow minority of the Dail deputies backed Collins. The capitalists, the big farmers, the "stake in the country people", and the Church rallied to the Collins wing of Sinn Fein; most of the poor in the countryside, especially in the south and west, went the other way. They had seen "the Republic" as a possible great transformation of their lives; and they saw the surrender of it as the betrayal of their hopes.

Civil war, in which the issues and the options were very confused, erupted in June 1922, when Collins obeyed a British ultimatum to try to disarm his



Liam Neeson (centre) plays Michael Collins

opponents. Collins was killed in an ambush soon afterwards. His side won the civil war; but inside a decade, those who lost it won power legally, in January 1932, and put their stamp on orthodox nationalist history. Collins died at 31; his rival Eamonn De Valera lived to be 94, was Taoiseach for 21 years and President for his last 14 years, dying much honoured. De Valera built on Collins' achievement of 1921, and could do as little as Collins to win Irish unity.

This founder of the Catholic Irish bourgeois state and his section of Sinn Fein represented rational bourgeois politics. Acknowledging that does not for socialists make him "ours". The poor people who fought and died for "the Republic" against the forces Collins organised, and all those who refused to opt for "the fleshpots of Empire" — those, confused though they surely were, were our people. The tragedy is that the hard-headed realists were on the side of the big bourgeoisie and that the mystics and unreality-mongers were dominant on ours.

How, Neil Jordan has asked, can a film about Collins, help the Provisional IRA? It is surely a disingenuous question.

By all accounts, *Michael Collins* is a dramatically heightened and simplified account of Ireland's war of independence. British rule is presented as an everyday tyranny it never really was. Britain's real savagery, for example, state forces shooting indiscriminately into a crowd in a sports ground, is made worse even than it really was. Of course this

must be a help to the Provisional IRA! Their paper *An Phoblacht*, which is one of the most skilfully dishonest publications on the face of the earth, is making hay with Jordan's film.

It can be argued that they don't have a right to. Collins' IRA represented a conclusive majority in what is now the 26-county state — and in two of the six counties of Northern Ireland as well. The Provisional IRA represents a minority even within the Catholic minority in Ireland's minority state: in all-Ireland terms, the equivalent of what the Provisional IRA is trying to do in the Six Counties would be the Irish Protestant minority trying to bomb the whole of Ireland back into the UK. But reason, fact and argument are weak tools against the power of movie images.

Yet by all accounts, the story Neil Jordan's film tells is true in its essentials — the story of the erection of an independent Irish state in a heroic war against a mighty opponent. Collins led an often ragged band of guerrillas to something like victory over the greatest empire the world had ever seen. Should that story not be told? You don't have to be an Irish nationalist, or Irish, to glory in it — it has inspired people in many countries across the globe.

The way to deprive the Provisional IRA of the chance of misusing this story is to promote real discussion of real history and the present real Ireland. The public debate triggered by Neil Jordan's film may help us speed that urgent work.

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