Toronto International Film Festival 2010—Part 7

# Ken Loach's Route Irish: the Iraq war comes home

**David Walsh**
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*This is the seventh and final part of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 9-19). Part 1 was published on September 23, Part 2 on September 28, Part 3 on October 1, Part 4 on October 6, Part 5 on October 14, and Part 6 on October 18.*

British director Ken Loach has been a significant figure in filmmaking for more than 40 years. He first came to prominence in the late 1960s, directing television work such as *Cathy Come Home* (1966)—recently voted number two on a list of the "100 Greatest British Television Programmes"—and *The Big Flame* (1969) and films that included *Poor Cow* (1967) and, especially, *Kes* (1969).

Loach became identified with a sympathy for and interest in the condition of the working class, and the larger fate of socialism in our time. His films have addressed Stalinism past and present (the Spanish Civil War and East Germany), the British general strike of 1926, British oppression and provocation in Ireland, and, most often, the physical and mental state of the working population.

The association of the film director—in the company of many other directors, writers, actors, editors and producers—with the Trotskyist movement in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s provided an understanding of certain questions: that the working class was the vehicle of social change, that socialism was the opposite of Stalinism, that the socialist transformation was necessary to prevent society from descending into barbarism.

While the passing years and events have rounded off his views to a general leftism, which includes a continuing and unwarranted attachment to the trade unions, Loach has retained a definite feeling for the oppressed and the desire to represent their circumstances, thoughts and feelings. One needs to contrast his evolution forcefully with the spectacle represented by so many formerly "extreme left" filmmakers (Jean-Luc Godard and others) who, to borrow the words of André Breton, "radically change their opinions and renounce in a masochistic and exhibitionist manner their own testimony, becoming champions of a cause quite contrary to that which they began serving with great fanfare."

The British establishment recognizes Loach as a thorn in its side. In 2006, following the release of *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, an account of the Irish war of independence (1919-1921) and civil war (1922-1923), Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty came under ferocious attack. The film depicts in graphic detail the brutality of British repression against the Irish population, including scenes of massacres and torture.

The violent response of the media in 2006 was both an effort to conceal the bloody history of British imperialism and to defend its present neo-colonial operations in Iraq, to which the film clearly made implicit reference.

Michael Gove, the current education secretary in Britain's coalition government, wrote a venomous piece in the *Times* (a Rupert Murdoch publication) when *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* took the top prize at the Cannes film festival, denouncing Loach and others "who rubbish their own countries." Gove falsified history, claiming that films like Loach's "glamourise the IRA," a movement "which used murderous violence to achieve its ends, even though the democratic path was always open to it."

On the same occasion, the *Times*'s Tim Luckhurst went even further in excoriating "the committed Marxist director," suggesting that while pro-Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl merited a degree of understanding because she "did not fully understand the evil cause to which her work contributed…Ken Loach does not deserve such indulgence."

As the WSWS noted at the time, another Murdoch newspaper, the *Sun*, called *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* "pro-IRA." The *Daily Mail* termed the film "a travesty." Simon Heffer, in the *Telegraph*, denouncing the movie as "poisonous," acknowledged that he had not seen it and declared he did not need to "any more than I need to read *Mein Kampf* to know what a louse Hitler was."

On the other hand, I have regularly asked film directors over the past 17 years which contemporary figures in cinema they admired the most. As I told Ken Loach in our conversation in Toronto, the name that has come up most often among serious people (from France, Iran, Greece, Spain and elsewhere) has been his.

That being said, it is not necessary to agree with or admire everything about his filmmaking. I have been sharply critical of certain movies (*Bread and Roses*, *The Navigators*, for example) and, more generally, of the British neo-realist trend to which he belongs, for its national insularity and its difficulty in imagining and organizing truly enduring drama.

I stand by what I wrote in October 2005:

"One of the approaches in fiction film continues to be associated with the British school of neo-realism, or naturalism, or 'docu-drama.' After several decades, the name of Ken Loach still figures prominently. However one may feel about the latter's artistic limitations and political trajectory, there is little question but that his body of work is a serious, if considerably uneven, one.

"Provided a decent script, performers (professional or nonprofessional) with forceful personalities, locations in which he feels comfortable and permits himself a certain spontaneity, Loach remains capable of genuinely affecting moments, if not memorable dramas as a whole. Thus, the remarkable and authentic portions of *My Name Is Joe* and *Ae Fond Kiss*. On the other hand, at its weakest, in unfamiliar or uncongenial surroundings, his work tends toward the politically schematic or emotionally strained (*Bread and Roses*, *The Navigators*, *Sweet Sixteen*).

"At a time of almost universal renunciation of principles, Loach's ongoing commitment to scenes and problems of working class life, encouraged by his experience with the revolutionary socialist movement decades ago, endures as a pole of attraction to a significant layer of film

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artists. In interviews with sometimes unlikely filmmakers, one encounters admiration for Loach, because he 'hasn't sold out,' etc. For socially engaged French filmmakers, in particular…, finding themselves isolated in a sea of self-importance and pretentiousness, Loach represents something of an 'Other.' This should not be dismissed as a mere fluke or misunderstanding."

I think if you were to point out to Loach that there are other possible approaches to representing social reality in film, he would simply say, "Well, this is the way I do it, this is the only way I *can* do it." There is no charlatanry or artistic dishonesty about him. In the bleak cinematic landscape of the last 30 years, he has stood out.

**A new film**

Ken Loach was in Toronto this year for screenings of his new film, *Route Irish*, written by Paul Laverty. The film's title refers to the US military's nickname for the stretch of highway connecting the International Zone in Baghdad with the city's airport ("the most dangerous road in the world").

Set in 2007, the film centers on Fergus (Mark Womack), a former member of the British military's elite SAS and later a private contractor-mercenary in Iraq. Now back in Liverpool, he learns that his friend since childhood, Frankie (John Bishop), whom he persuaded to join his security team in Baghdad (at £10,000 a month, tax-free), has been killed on "Route Irish."

Fergus rejects the official explanation of Frankie's death and begins his own investigation, ultimately with the collaboration of his friend's widow, Rachel (Andrea Lowe). He uncovers war crimes committed against Iraqis and a conspiracy to cover up those crimes. When the apparent perpetrator of the atrocity returns to Britain, Fergus takes violent action. Haunted by the Iraq experience, guilt over Frankie's death, and the blood on his own hands, Fergus' options narrow down to one.

In his notes on the film, writer Paul Laverty explains something about the privatization of war. He writes that one commentator has "estimated that there were around 160,000 foreign contractors in Iraq at the height of the occupation, many of whom—perhaps as many as 50,000—were heavily armed security personnel.…

"Thanks to Paul Bremer, the US appointed head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, each and every one of those contractors was given immunity from Iraqi law in the shape of Order 17 which was imposed on the new Iraqi Parliament."

Laverty continues: "Nobody is interested in counting how many Iraqi civilians have been killed or injured by private contractors, but there is a vast body of evidence to suggest that there has been widespread abuse. Blackwater's massacre of 17 civilians in the middle of Baghdad was the most notorious incident, but there were many more that went unreported.…

" Order 17 may have been revoked in Iraq but its spirit still reigns supreme: the stink of impunity, the lies, the contempt for international law, the undermining of the Geneva conventions, the secret prisons, the torture, the murder…the hundreds of thousands of dead."

*Route Irish* is grim and dense and angry, and treats entirely legitimate subject matter. The terrible events in Iraq on which the drama hinges ring true. Laverty and Loach have chosen an unusual and artistically quite ambitious means of approaching the Iraq war and occupation, through focusing on a hardened mercenary, who has to come to terms in part with his own history.

In a number of his recent scripts, Laverty has centered his story on less than endearing figures—in *It's a Free World*, a working class woman who operates a firm that exploits desperate immigrants; in *Even the Rain*, a cynical film producer determined to complete a film at no matter whose expense. Correctly, I think, the screenwriter has determined that working through the destinies of such complex and initially unappealing characters may bring him and his audience closer to the objective social contradictions at work.

However, Fergus, a former SAS man, with extensive and well-paid service in Iraq, is a bird of another feather. Here is someone seriously damaged, who has inflicted serious damage on others. Is such a human being beyond reach? No, but Laverty and Loach have not dramatized the kind of internal revolution that would have to take place for such a figure to face honestly what he and others have done.

It's never entirely clear, as a matter of fact, what Fergus thinks of the war, of himself, of the mercenary profession. The filmmakers, perhaps in the name of psychological realism, have their central character enter into a conflict with his former employers without shedding his old skin. Is it likely that a mercenary would take on the contractor-military establishment simply out of devotion to a longtime friend? We don't see enough of their friendship, except a few glimpses, to be convinced. We're asked to take Fergus's change of heart on faith, and that is not enough to go on.

It is entirely possible for the spectator to shift his attitudes toward a film's protagonist, depending on the latter's behavior. But, in this case, we are never quite certain of the filmmakers' own attitude. And instead of sharply delineating the different sides of Fergus's character, toward which one could have various feelings, the film tends to present him in a dull, grey light, as though the spectator should infer from this the intensity of his internal conflict.

Where two seas meet, the water may be as calm as a mill pond—but shots of this mill pond alone would not help one grasp the countervailing force of the two bodies of water. In *Route Irish*, the result is a certain flatness, despite the mayhem.

In our interview with Loach, he seemed to be aware of this problem, referring a number of times to the challenges this particular film presented. He said at one point, "I think we always knew it was going to be a difficult film to make, a difficult film to pull off." Unhappily, I don't think the filmmakers did pull it off.

In any event, Loach and Laverty intend to continue their efforts to shed light on our modern reality, and we will follow their filmmaking with considerable interest. The cultural atmosphere is undoubtedly changing for the better, but they remain an unusual and admirable team.

[See accompanying interview with Ken Loach and Paul Laverty]

*Concluded*

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