Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall*: An honest artistic effort, or something else?

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Directed by Ken Loach; written by Paul Laverty; based on a play by Donal O'Kelly

Veteran British filmmaker Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall*, which he insists will be his last fiction feature, tells the story of James Gralton, who belonged to the predecessor of the modern Communist Party of Ireland in the early 1930s and was the only Irishman ever deported from that country.

In part, the film is Loach's follow-up to *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), an artistically and historically uneven account of the Irish war of independence (1919-1921) and the ensuing civil war (1922-1923).

Loach told reporters, "The two films do sit side by side … We thought it would be interesting to see what happened to the dreams of [Irish] independence, 10 years later. And as what often happens, the hopes people had aren't realised—because of splits, and the old imperial power still trying to rule."

The film opens in March 1932. After spending a decade in America, Gralton (Barry Ward) returns to his home village, Effrinagh in County Leitrim: his brother has just died and his aging mother (Aileen Henry) needs help running the family's small farm.

The movie's first scenes, black-and-white archive footage of 1930s New York, recap Jimmy's experience as an Irish immigrant: the magnificence of soaring Manhattan skyscrapers, the swarming energy of the city, but also the unemployment and poverty of the Great Depression, "the misery in the land of plenty."

Equipped with a wind-up gramophone and a number of jazz records from America, Jimmy reopens a community hall (named after two executed leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly). Ten years earlier he had organized the building of the hall on a brief visit to Ireland, but the Catholic Church hierarchy and landowners objected to the political and social activities that took place there.

Once again, the hall becomes a venue for classes in art, poetry and "unholy" dancing, political debates and a rallying point for poor tenant farmers facing eviction.

Jimmy soon gets in trouble with the local priest, Father Sheridan (Jim Norton), who accuses Gralton of stirring up an anti-religious craze for pleasure among the common people and the "Los Angelisation" of Irish culture. The British estate-owners, still in control of their lands, but now backed up by the army and police of the Free State government, personified in the figure of Irish Republican Army (IRA) man Dennis O'Keeffe (Brian F. O'Byrne), detest his anti-eviction activities and want him removed.

Shots are fired into the building during a dance performance and, on Christmas Eve 1932, the hall is burned to the ground. Gralton is eventually deported after going on the run from the forces he was once allied to. The film shows that not much changed for the mass of the Irish population after independence.

It has been virtually impossible to write about Loach as simply an artistic figure. That is his own doing. His political trajectory to the right, which began some decades ago, has led him to become the figurehead of Left Unity in Britain. The latter is modeled on "broad left" organizations in Europe such as the pro-capitalist Syriza in Greece. Left Unity is an amalgam of ex-Stalinists, pseudo-lefts and others—hence, Loach's reference to "splits"—whose aim is to block the development of an independent movement of the working class that goes beyond the control of the unions and the Labour Party.

Loach's long association with unprincipled political forces has had a harmful impact on his artistry for many years. However, his unabashed transformation into a respectable "left" politician, obliged to justify his policies and actions in and through his filmmaking, has brought the process to a head.

Whereas a film like *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* could still be viewed as an honest, if limited, effort by

Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty to examine Irish history and its lessons for the present, one is obliged to treat the new film with a good deal of skepticism and even mistrust, especially when its subject, a long-time member of the Irish Stalinist organization, is taken into account. Is this a serious artistic effort, or is the film to a considerable extent driven by Loach's attempt to justify his present "everyone on the left is welcome and all past sins are forgiven" political stance?

The artistic weaknesses of *Jimmy's Hall* incline one all the more to the second alternative. Loach avoids any in-depth examination of Gralton's life and political career and ends up with a shallow, unconvincing portrait. All we know about Jimmy is that he is a well-meaning sort of Communist, reads Marx, helps the community's poor and supports farmers' co-operatives. We know that political discussions are held at the hall, but we have no idea what Gralton's program is or what lies behind his zigzags between socialism and nationalism. The film is insipid for the most part and unconvincing.

The historical Gralton joined the British Army then deserted, becoming a docker and miner, before emigrating to the US following the crushing of the 1916 Easter Uprising and joining the American Communist Party. He returned to Ireland in 1921, helping to train Irish Republican Army militiamen and construct the Pearse–Connolly hall.

Following the 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty that split Sinn Féin and led to civil war, Gralton was briefly imprisoned for his anti-eviction activities by the new national army, after which he returned to the US. In 1932, Gralton returned again to Ireland joining the Revolutionary Workers' Groups (RWG), forerunner of the second Communist Party of Ireland established in 1933 and selling the *Irish Worker ' s Voice*. The first issues of the paper after its launch in 1930 criticized nationalism. However, when the anti-Treaty Fianna Fáil party, led by Eamonn de Valera, one of the leading parties of the Irish ruling elite, won the general election in 1932, the RWG gave it conditional support.

Gralton joined Fianna Fáil, but his illusions that it represented a progressive alternative were soon dashed. He was expelled for his radical activities and then deported by the de Valera government in 1933 as an "undesirable alien," although he was born in Ireland.

Back in New York, Gralton continued his involvement in Irish politics and remained an active member of the CPUSA, one of the most slavish of the Stalinist parties, until his death in 1945.

Gralton was not a major figure, but a major problem dominated his life, national versus international socialism. With whatever hesitations and doubts, he chose the national-opportunism of Stalinism. Loach and Laverty choose to obscure this critical issue, for their present political reasons.

A pivotal scene in the film suggests the filmmakers' approach to principled questions: Let's avoid them, and carry out "practical" work, on which "we can all agree." Father Sheridan and Jimmy are talking:

Jimmy: "Love thy neighbor" is revered in my book too. In our hall, we respect freedom of religion and conscience.

Father Sheridan: Tell that to the Soviets who have murdered Christians in their thousands. And don't get me started on Joseph Stalin's secret prisons, and that famine that's on the horizon.

Jimmy: Don't get me started either, Father. That is a long debate to be had. But today, can we talk about the hall and just listen to what we have to say?

This is pretty poor stuff, both as film dialogue and political philosophy. Loach briefly belonged to the Trotskyist movement in the early 1970s and this had an impact on his ability to tackle some of the big problems of the 20th century. He was able to reflect, in certain sequences and certain films, the life and times of the working class with some degree of sensitivity and insight. As a result, he developed a following and was widely admired by audiences and filmmakers alike.

Loach's last two films, *The Spirit of '45* (2013) and *Jimmy's Hall*, in particular openly and dishonestly promote political forces, in the unions and on the ex-left, who would politically suffocate the working class. While it has taken a longer time or more contradictory form in his case, the almost universal fate of "the generation of '68" a return to the establishment fold, has overtaken the filmmaker.