

moral teaching. As Kevin Rockett has shown, censorship of the cinema in Ireland was the most severe in Europe and was specifically directed at all representations of sex or transgressive social behaviour or to uphold Catholic moral teaching. The Irish censor operated the principle that all films must be available to a general audience and therefore they were cut to excise anything of an adult or morally dubious nature (Rockett, 2005). The films, in other words, were infantilised to conform to the infantilised conception of the Irish people that was promulgated by the Church. In such a hostile cultural climate it is hardly surprising that an indigenous cinema failed to emerge in Ireland.

In the absence of an indigenous cinema, most cinematic images of Ireland and the Irish were made either in Hollywood or by the British industry, right down to the 1970s. American cinema in particular tended to depict Ireland in a sentimental way, conjuring up a dream-like world of rural simplicity set against a romantic landscape. The Catholic Church (usually in the form of the parish priest) was depicted within this bucolic utopia as a central part of an organic community that was close to God and at one with itself and with nature. The cinema's greatest statement of this sentimental Irishness is John Ford's 1952 comedy *The Quiet Man*, even if some critics have argued that the film does exude a self-reflective awareness of its own romantic myth-making (McLoone, 2000; Gibbons, 2002). The film is narrated by the parish priest, Fr. Lonergan (Ward Bond) ('That's me there, that tall saintly man ...' is how he introduces himself in a voice-over). When Fr. Lonergan is introduced to the film's hero, returning Irish-American Sean Thornton (John Wayne), he and the Church are established as central aspects of the this organic community. Fr. Lonergan hears that Sean's mother died in America years earlier and he promises to remember her in the Mass the next day. 'You'll be there, of course, Sean. Seven o'clock', he assumes. 'Of course, I will', Sean confirms.

It's as if the question need not have been asked. Nothing could be more natural, more normal - more organic - than the priest at the centre of the community and in Sean's reassuringly firm response we can see the cinema's most definitive portrayal of 'cultural Catholicism'.

Hollywood cinema more generally has a long history of celebrating, in a mostly sentimental manner, the (Irish) Catholic priest in the community. The most famous and most successful depictions of the priest show him as the central figure in communities under stress, as in Spenser Tracy's Fr. Tim Mullin in *San Francisco* (1936) and his Oscar-winning role as Fr. Flanagan in *Boys Town* (1938). However, cinema's most enduring representation of the Irish priest stereotype is probably Bing Crosby's crooning Fr. Chuck O'Malley in Leo McCarey's *Going My Way* (1944), in which he co-starred with Barry Fitzgerald's irascible Fr. Fitzgibbon and *The Bells of St Mary's* (1945) in which he sparred with Ingrid Bergman's chaste and virtuous, if mildly flirtatious, Sr. Mary Benedict.

This history is interesting because the turn against the Church in Irish cinema was focused on the character of the Irish priest and it is in its treatment of the priest in the community that recent Irish cinema exudes the sense of a nation 'settling old scores'.

The Humiliation of the Priest

A recognisably indigenous cinema emerged tentatively in Ireland during the 1970s. It is hardly surprising that right from the beginning this new cinema should begin to explore aspects of Catholic Ireland. One of the earliest films to do so was Tommy McArdle's low-budget short from 1978, *The Kinkisha*. The film is notable for one extraordinary shot which considerably reconfigures the cinematic image of the priest in the community. The film deals with a young woman in rural Ireland who gets pregnant after having pre-marital sex and is forced into a loveless marriage as a result. In a flashback sequence, Margaret (Barbara McNamara) remembers the visit her parish priest made to her bedside in the maternity hospital after she gave birth. The priest pauses his conversation with Margaret to look around the hospital ward at the other new mothers with their babies. We see the women in a slow, silent point-of-view pan - a shot that suggests the

priest's great distance from, indeed his ignorance of, this world of women, sexuality and reproduction. The celibate priest could hardly be less qualified to offer advice or encouragement to Margaret and twenty five years after the Church precipitated the downfall of a government over the Mother and Child scheme, the cinema eloquently visualises the priest's irrelevance and inadequacy in this world of women. The film, in other words, marks Irish cinema's first attempt to undermine visually the great nineteenth century alliance of priest and mother which Inglis identifies as a crucial factor in building the Catholic 'moral monopoly'.



In *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1989) Margo Harkin's award-winning study of a teenage pregnancy, the priest's humiliation is at the hands of the adolescent schoolgirls he tries to talk to about the sanctity of marriage. As he blusters through his empty platitudes, the girls very consciously stare at his crotch and begin to giggle. The priest wriggles in embarrassment and shifts uncomfortably in his chair. Once again, the film draws attention to the absurdity of this celibate man talking to the girls about sexuality.

The priest is again humiliated in David Keating's *Last of the High Kings* (1996) this time by adolescent male, Frankie Griffin (Jared Leto). What is interesting about this film is that the Irish mother is also subjected to ridicule. It is a 'rites of passage' and generational conflict comedy set in the summer break between Frankie leaving school and going to university. Part of the process of his growing up is that he must leave behind the things of his childhood and enter the adult world. He must also confront the overbearing presence of his mother. The generational conflict is resolved when Frankie rejects her recidivist Catholic sectarianism (and the priest she brings in to bolster it). Again the alliance that Tom Inglis referred to - between the priest ➤