

Michael Collins (Neil Jordan, 1996, US)

Neil Jordan's film traces the career of Irish Republican hero Michael Collins, from the Easter Rising to his death in 1922. Michael Collins was one of the founders of what was eventually to become the Republic of Ireland and the film tells the story of a man whose belief in violence is finally transformed by the horrors of civil war into a desire for peace.

Neil Jordan, writer and director of the film:

'I have never lost more sleep over the making of a film than I have over Michael Collins...but I'll never make a more important one. In the life of one person you can tell the events that formed the north and south of Ireland as they are today.

This story is more about history than any political statement...I wanted to make this story as accurate as possible without killing it dramatically and I think I have. It is a very true film...

The film spares neither the Irish nor the British in its depiction of the savagery of the time. How often has independence been achieved without bloodshed? Very rarely. But allied to Collins' capacity for violence was the ability to see when it had to stop, when political means and negotiations would be the only way forward. He died in his attempt to replace warfare with ordinary democratic politics. Although many people have celebrated Michael Collins the Irish Warrior, I believe this movie tells the story of Michael the Irish patriot, statesman and, ultimately, man of peace.

Even before Michael Collins was made, there were quotes from historians saying it was a despicable distortion.

I wanted to make it as objectively as I could because it is a period of history that needs to be seen. It's part of my past, it's part of our past as Irish people, it's part of what we are, and for me to examine that is an important thing. I really made it because I thought it would make a good movie.

The argument between him and De Valera was over that: do you keep on fighting until you get absolutely everything, or do you compromise and agree to use political means to achieve what everybody wants?'

- Having seen the film, how would you judge Michael Collins as a piece of historical evidence? What problems, if any, might it pose as historical evidence?
- How would you judge it as a feature film?
- Does it fit into any typical Hollywood genre?

Values

What are the values which we seem to be asked to admire in the film and which are we being asked to reject?

See if you agree or disagree with these comments on Michael Collins:

- the Irish are always portrayed as the 'good guys'
- Michael Collins is simply shown as a terrorist
- there was no reason to include a love interest in the film
- the film teaches us about the importance of making compromises
- the film is about friendship, not politics
- it is not important to know the background to the film. It is just a good story

Points of View

It is generally agreed that a historian has an obligation to present all the evidence that he has researched even if it is contradictory to the view he wants to put across. The historian has to present as many views of a particular subject or event as possible before coming to judgements.

- Can a film maker present many points of view?
- Do we see everything through the eyes of Michael Collins?
- What other points of view do we see?
- How does this affect our understanding of the story?

Usually in a film we are asked to sympathise with one character – the 'good guy'.

- Does Michael Collins fit into our normal idea of the good guy?
- If so, is it all the way through the film?

Constructing the Character of Michael Collins

Neil Jordan, the director of the film, describes the character of Michael Collins as follows:

'Collins wasn't a proponent of terrorism. He developed techniques of guerilla warfare later copied by independence movements around the world, from Mao Tse Tung in China to Yitzak Shamir in Israel. He fought the British Empire in Ireland with the only army available to him – the Irish Volunteers – bands of poorly armed peasants and working-class youths. The current IRA is a totally different organisation. Collins would never be a proponent of contemporary

terrorism as practised today. He was a soldier and a statesman and, over time, a man of peace.

Even though Collins lived only about 75 years ago, much of the information we have about him is as mysterious as the existence he maintained. I have made choices about certain events based on my own extensive research into his letters and reported speeches. I wanted to make this story as accurate as possible without killing it dramatically and I think I have. It is a very true film.

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If this is the way that Jordan sees the character of the real Michael Collins, then how does he go about portraying him in the film?

- How are we first introduced to Collins in the film?
- What are the key moments in the early part of the film that give us information about Michael Collins' character?
- If something changes Collins what is it and how is this shown to us in the film?
- What are the most important parts of the film which give us information about Collins?
- Does the film explore the character of Collins without giving us any answers? Do we know why, for example, after the signing of the Treaty, Collins supports the Government and not his old colleagues in the IRA?
- What are the conflicts that face Collins? Are they related?

To Think About

Read the six statements below and think about what each one says. Decide whether you agree or disagree with each statement and give reasons for your answers:

1. When we watch a film we know that it is only a film. We do not believe that we can do what is shown on the screen.
2. Film is responsible for the violence in our society.
3. Films cannot change anything, they can only reflect what is happening in the world.
4. There is nothing wrong with the ways in which films show the world.
5. Films can teach us how to live our lives properly.
1. We only watch films for entertainment.