**The Subversive St. Patrick's Day Classic: How John Ford fought McCarthyism with 'The Quiet Man'** BY BEN SCHWARTZMarch 15, 2013 [Note: I added the subtitles]

On October 22, 1950, John Ford sat in an aisle seat in the Beverly Hills Hotel’s Crystal Room for a meeting of 300-plus members of the Screen Directors Guild. He had a lot on his mind. His new western would be out in a few weeks. By then, he’d be in Ireland on a location scout for his next film, a dream project 15 years in the making. Naturally, the studio was already nickel-and-diming him. There was also a trip to Korea planned for January, to film a navy documentary. And in his personal life, his volatile relationship with his adult son Pat was only getting worse.

**A Climate of Censorship in 1950s America, Especially in Hollywood**

Then there was the tediousness in front of him, another industry skirmish over blacklists, un-American activities, and McCarthyism. This one would last until 2 a.m. At issue: written loyalty oaths, and a recall vote of SDG president Joseph L. Mankiewicz, whom Cecil B. DeMille wanted ousted for refusing to institute oaths to guild members. Hollywood’s political climate was fearful and desperate. Ford himself, a Truman supporter, New Dealer, and U.S. Navy commander (legit, too, not a celebrity toss), now sat on the board of the right-wing Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals alongside conservative actors Ward Bond and John Wayne, both Ford protégés. The MPA’s pamphlets were written by Ayn Rand. Attack-dog gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, who was fed smear information by J. Edgar Hoover, was a member, too.

Ford regularly, and publicly, referred to Bond as an “oaf.” That Wayne had ducked military service during the war appalled him. Yet in times like this, a movement conservative like Bond, who threw parties at his house for Senator Joseph McCarthy, actually had the political say-so to make or break careers. The FBI had labeled Ford “long a fellow traveller” and possible Communist Party member for supporting the left in the Spanish Civil War, and cited Ford’s donations to what they determined to be Communist Party front groups, like the John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers. Even a John Ford needed a Ward Bond now.

DeMille revealed a sad side of himself that night. He veered into sheer bigotry. “DeMille said we should be governed by real Americans, that there were too many accents,” recalled director Rouben Mamoulian. DeMille then read his opponents' names, as if that would end the argument: “Billy Wilder, William Wyler, Fred Zinnemann.” He pronounced each name with an accent, “Vilder. Vyler. Tzinnemann.”

**Irish-American Ford Familiar with Suspicion of his Fellow Immigrants**

To an Irish-American of Ford’s age, this talk was nothing new. Born John Martin Feeney in 1895 in Portland, Maine, he had grown up Catholic when that alone put your loyalty in question. John F. Kennedy still had to address it in his 1960 presidential run. In the build-up to World War I, Ford heard Irish, German, and Jewish Americans harangued as “hyphenate Americans,” suspected of mixed loyalties, in that they, respectively, might not want to aid Britain, fight Germany, or aid the czar, because they weren’t real Americans.

Ford raised his hand to speak. “My name is John Ford,” he said. “I direct westerns.” It was an odd introduction, as he was known to every member, and more revered for his Oscar winners The Informer (1935) and The Grapes of Wrath (1940) than his westerns, seen then as the 1950 equivalent of the Die Hard franchise. But it was a night of loyalty oaths and accents. It was perhaps best to remind everyone about your John Wayne movies, not your Irish nationalist pictures or your agit-prop New Deal masterpiece. [. . . .]

***The Quiet Man*: Ford’s Sneaky Subversive Film**

Ford then ably dismantled DeMille’s argument, calling it what it was: a de facto blacklist of directors who refused to sign. Ford’s gravitas in the guild ended the loyalty debate. Now he could think about his trip to Ireland for his dream project, The Quiet Man (1952). It was not a western. Nor was it a movie that professed any loyalty to America whatsoever. In fact, it was one of the more subversive movies made during the blacklist era. It’s about a man who can’t stand America, leaves it, and hopes never to see it again. Ford being Ford, he even got John Wayne to play him.

It’s been 60 St. Patrick’s Days since the premiere of The Quiet Man, just re-released with a new print from Olive Films. But it's been much longer since John Ford first wanted to make the film. Ford had read Maurice Walsh’s “The Quiet Man,” a short story first published in the Saturday Evening Post in 1933 and later heavily revised by Walsh, who made his quiet man an Irish Republican Army veteran in the novel The Green Rushes (1936). Ford’s film merges elements of both versions. In the Post story, a retired featherweight boxer, Shawn Kelvin, returns home to Ireland from America, happy at last to be free of worries about money. From Shawn’s land, he sometimes sees an American ocean liner. “Then he would smile to himself—a pitying smile—thinking of the poor devils, with dreams of fortune luring them, going out to sweat in Ironville, or to bootleg bad whiskey down the hidden way, or to stand in a bread line. All these things were behind Shawn forever.” When he marries a local girl, complications with her dowry force him to fight her hulking older brother in a boxing match, a comic set piece in which the quiet little man, to the surprise of all, whips the arrogant bigger man.

**How Experience with War Changed the Director’s View of America**

That was 1936. It took 15 years to make the movie. By then, Ford had come home from World War II a veteran, profoundly changed in his views about war, violence, and American mythmaking. Now he had seen war, filmed horrific violence at the front in the Pacific (Battle of Midway) and Europe (D-Day), and saw it repackaged part and parcel into that mythmaking via heavily censored wartime documentaries and newsreels.

**The Director Takes to “Smuggling” Ideology into his Films**

He had changed, but the red-scare America he returned to resisted any questioning. It was a subtle business to make the pictures that he did. His Fort Apache (1948), about military disaster lionized as heroics, is shrouded in western genre action and stars like John Wayne and Henry Fonda. Martin Scorsese calls such filmmakers, who put across subversive ideas in studio system films, “smugglers,” and John Ford was an expert smuggler.

In 1950, Ford finally made his deal for The Quiet Man. Republic Studios owner Herbert Yates asked him to make a western with Wayne and Maureen O’Hara, Rio Grande (1950). Ford said he would—if Yates let him make The Quiet Man. Like every studio boss before him, Yates balked, calling it a “phony art house picture.” For all the ridicule Yates gets in Ford biographies, he was right about that. Still, a Ford western starring Wayne and O’Hara? That was a hard package to pass up in 1950, so Yates made the deal. Ford adapted The Quiet Man with writer Frank S. Nugent (among others), altering Walsh’s story into a tale of an ex-soldier-boxer, Sean “Trooper Thorn” Thornton (Wayne), whose success in the ring turns nightmare when an opponent dies during a fight. Ford dropped most of the IRA politics. Sean is not going back home to fight. His motivation is to lose his old life for a new one.

America likes immigrant stories. Chaplin’s The Immigrant (1916), The Godfather Part II (1974), Moscow on the Hudson (1984), Coming to America (1988), A Better Life (2011)—we see that moment, when anyone from anywhere else lands here, as the best day of the rest of their life. It’s where the American dream begins, no matter how it turns out. We don’t make too many movies about people who can’t wait to leave, whose first day somewhere else is the best day of the rest of their life. But that’s what The Quiet Man is.

**The Director *and* his Character Soured on the American Dream**

Ford began shooting June 6, 1951, in rural Cong, Ireland. In Searching For John Ford, Joseph McBride writes, “His personal and professional allegiances thrown into turmoil by the cold war, he had lived for the past four years under the shadow of ideological fratricide. Like John Wayne’s Sean Thornton, who leaves America in revulsion after killing a man in the ring, Ford was in flight from violence, material success, and the unexpected consequences of the American Dream.”

Ford changed the name of Walsh’s small town to fictional Inisfree, a literary allusion to W.B. Yeats’s poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” about a utopian Irish Shangri-La—an ironic hint as to what we’ll find there. In John Ford: The Man and His Films, Tag Gallagher writes, “Ford moves rapidly through an analysis of Inisfree society. We go from train station to countryside to town to church to pub, meeting trainmen, coachmen, priests, aristocrats, squires, the IRA, drinkers, field hands, Anglican clergy,” and then adds that the region "is a Third-world culture.”

Inisfree is indeed Third World, and Old World in its depiction of women. There is no electricity. It’s a rural, barely 20th century town. In America, Ford himself liked living such a life, getting away to Monument Valley, Arizona, where he shot many of his westerns. There, he lived in the desert and immersed himself in Native American culture, becoming an honorary member of the Navajo. His yacht, the Araner, provided similar escapes, allowing him to journey down the coast of Mexico, to Hawaii, or simply out at sea, away from troubles. Or sometimes, he’d just drink himself into oblivion until he could deal again.

We never see the U.S. in The Quiet Man, except for a single boxing flashback. But we learn that as boy in Pittsburgh, Sean was “living in a shack near the slag heaps.” He recalls the steel mills and their “pig iron furnaces so hot it makes a man forget his fear of hell,” and his late mother’s intense Irish nostalgia. His father died young. “Inisfree has become another word for heaven to me,” he tells the Widow Tillane (Margaret Natwick). Later, in flashback, we see the night his success as a boxer put blood on his hands when he accidentally killed an opponent in a rage.

That’s all we know of Sean’s American life—slag heaps, shacks, hellish heat, homesickness, blood money. For him, Ireland and America are literally heaven and hell. No one makes an anti-American speech. No one has to, Sean wants to be Irish. He wants an un-American life. It’s a subtle sort of screenwriting, this “smuggling,” one that marks Ford’s great films. This “smuggling” is exactly what the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals hoped to warn the nation about. In Ayn Rand’s pamphlet for them, she wrote:

“The purpose of the Communists in Hollywood is not the production of political movies openly advocating Communism. Their purpose is to corrupt our moral premises by corrupting non-political movies—by introducing small, casual bits of propaganda into innocent stories—thus making people absorb the basic principles of Collectivism by indirection and implication.”

There’s not much Collectivist talk in The Quiet Man, but it’s safe to say that Ward Bond, John Wayne, and John Ford do a pretty bad job of preserving American ideals.

**Stereotyping the Irish: The Director’s Fault or the Character’s?**

One of the consistent complaints about The Quiet Man is its use of Irish stereotypes. The Nation's Manny Farber wrote of its “tippling village cabby, the thick-headed, bellicose squire, and the jovial village priest who curses, jokes, and fishes from start to finish of the film.” True, but in that it’s Ford, a master ironist, there’s a little more to them. That “tippling village cabby,” the impish Micheleen Oge Flynn (Barry Fitzgerald), is a village IRA militant. “Well, it’s a nice soft night,” he sighs during an exit, “I think I’ll go join my comrades and talk a little treason.” The locals quickly disabuse Sean of the magical Ireland he imagines. “Inisfree is far from being heaven,” scoffs the Widow Tillane, who finds his sentimentality absurd. She sells him back his family cottage, which instantly makes him an enemy of the “bellicose” Squire Danaher (Victor McGlaglen), who also wants the land. Then Sean falls in love with Danaher’s sister Mary Kate (O’Hara) and he needs the squire’s permission to marry and … well, it’s complicated. Much more complicated, in fact, than Sean ever thought his dream would be, and soon his life is as bedeviled by money and fighting as it was in the U.S. The mistake is in assuming that low comedy indicates low ambition on Ford's part, any more than it does in Chaplin or Keaton.

At no point do the locals see Sean as one of them, no matter how Irish he fancies himself. He’s “the Yank,” “the American,” a wannabe. When Sean gives his house a new coat of paint, a local lady points out, “Only an American would have thought of emerald green.” Sean’s idyllic love-at-first-sight courtship with Mary Kate Danaher (harps actually play on O'Hara's entrance) turns into a complicated Gaelic ritual about dowry. It’s the money due her at her wedding, worth as much as his farm as estimated by some. In her mind, it means she comes to the marriage an economic equal, not a dependent. As she tells Sean on their wedding night, when she refuses to sleep with him, “Until I’ve got my dowry safe about me, I’m no married woman. I’m the servant I have always been, without anything of my own.”

Sean is the one who dreams of an Inisfree, not Ford, who knew Ireland. He knew it from his parents’ memories, studying history, and his visits beginning in 1921, when he brought money for his relatives in the IRA. He filmed Mother Machree (1928), The Informer (1935), The Plough and The Stars (1936). He populated his 19th century westerns with Irish-Americans, as privates and sergeants advancing from the bottom up. The Last Hurrah (1955) is about a 20th century Irish-American big city mayor, of Ford’s age, risen to the top yet full of scars and bitterness from a lifetime of discrimination, slights, and slurs. So why the lightweight comic types of The Quiet Man? Ford was making a movie about a man who finds American life lacking. Their charm sugarcoats it. He made them silly, broad, cartoonish at times, yet increasingly nuanced as the story develops, as Sean Thornton comes to see them as they are and becomes one of them.

Sean has to learn to live by rural Irish custom, and he does. In the end, his pacifism caves and he fights the Squire, a baptism by donnybrook. There’s no talk of taking Mary Kate back to the promised land of Pittsburgh. He’s doing all this because he knows he’s never going back. For all the people and movies Wayne called “un-American,” he never questioned this “phony art house film.” Ford most likely never discussed any of this with him. He was famously evasive about why he made his movies. “It’s no use asking me to talk about art,” he told journalist Lindsay Anderson while he visited the set. Ford denied even liking movies, telling him: “Christ, I hate pictures.” “I’ve worked with the best of them,” Wayne once said. “John Ford isn’t exactly a bum, is he? Yet he never gave me any manure about art. He just made movies and that's what I do.”

[. . . .]

**John Wayne: Rooting out “Commies” in Hollywood at High Noon**

Back home, John Wayne returned to his second career, rooting out subversives wherever he imagined them, like the July 1952 Republican National Convention. A supporter of far-right Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, Wayne was seen on the street shouting down an Eisenhower supporter with, "Why don't you get a red flag?" Later that month, Gary Cooper’s western High Noon, written by blacklisted writer Carl Foreman and directed by Fred “Tzinnemann,” was released. Hedda Hopper, pundit Westbrook Pegler, and Wayne denounced Foreman, who had moved to Europe. “I'll never regret having helped run Foreman out of this country!” Wayne said years later. Wayne regarded High Noon as “the most un-American thing I ever saw in my whole life.” In it, Cooper plays a sheriff turned down for help by a whole town when gunmen come to kill him. After Cooper kills off the gang, he tosses his badge in the dirt and quits. Wayne hated that ending, where an embittered tough guy turns his back on his community for good. Then again, you might say High Noon ends where The Quiet Man begins.

***The Quiet Man* Opens: a Misunderstood, Underestimated Hit Movie**

In August, The Quiet Man got a Los Angeles and New York release before going national in mid-September. Few critics took the movie seriously, not that Ford gave them any straight answers or manure about art. When The New York Times talked to him, he said his real name was “Sean Aloysius Feeney,” and the paper reported that he “admits that he has assiduously studied the Irish for forty years, that he doesn't know a thing about them and that he has ‘never met an Irishman’ with whom he could agree. All of which apparently doesn't make a bit of sense at all.” Rather than pursue it, the Times review simply raved about all the “fine bhoyos and colleens, a rollicking tale and the green, dewy countryside to come up with as darlin' a picture as we've seen this year.”

Ford’s high brow literary allusions and ironies simply went over their heads. “If am to believe what I saw in John Ford’s sentimental new film, The Quiet Man, practically everyone in Ireland is cute as a button,” Philip Hamburger wrote in The New Yorker. “The master who made The Informer appears to have fallen into a vat of treacle.” Farber saw “all the trusted hokums that are supposed to make the Irish so humorous-sympathetic.… But all of this padding of what is supposed to be an illusive, impressionistic study of a land and its people is disturbing because it becomes the underlying motive for the scenes, revealing the limited significance of every pub brawl, horse race, or pastoral event almost before the scene is underway.”

Well, yes, if a study of Ireland is the point, instead of a study of an unhappy American. When seen as a movie about Sean’s naturalization, these comic set pieces only grow in weight. Given the acid political climate, perhaps Ford was OK with the film not being written up as a movie about a man who can’t stand living in America. “Indeed, the film’s commercialism and intoxicating Technicolor tend to obscure its documentary and Brechtian aspects,” Tag Gallagher wrote.

**The 1950s: Beginning of the Civil Rights Movement?**

That September, the American public embraced Sean’s farewell to the U.S. For all the bitterness over what Americanism meant, the 1950s were also a period of Civil Rights advancement, free speech expansion, higher education. Quite a few people were redefining what America meant to them, and it had nothing to do with communism. As Ford prepped The Quiet Man in spring 1951, Jack Kerouac finished his manuscript for On The Road. After his 1950 return from Paris, Miles Davis recorded Blue Period (1951).

The Quiet Man emerged as a top box-office earner and garnered five Oscar nominations. Accounts of The Quiet Man hasten to point out that Sean was never a U.S. citizen in the first place, or mistake him as an IRA exile. They give his bitterness about American life a pass, as if he was never really one of us. That’s not how everyone saw such people. Their loyalties as “aliens” were heavily scrutinized, something Ford understood and saw happening as his movie opened that month.

In September 1952, Chaplin sailed on the Queen Elizabeth to premiere Limelight (1952) in London. Mid-voyage, Chaplin learned that the Truman Administration had revoked his visa. “I say, ‘good riddance to bad company,'” crowed Hedda Hopper. Then, on April 15, 1953, Chaplin made a decision that stoked outrage. He announced that he did not want to come back. [. . . .] Unlike Chaplin, however, who made his critiques of the U.S. well known, Ford hid his away after World War II. Evasive in interviews, colluding with the far right MPA, he rarely allowed moments like his Screen Directors Guild speech, saving it all for his films.

The Quiet Man won Ford a fourth Oscar for directing, and Winton C. Hoch a second for cinematography. At the March 25, 1953 ceremony in Los Angeles, John Wayne accepted Ford’s Oscar because the director was still out of the country. Wayne repeated the favor for Gary Cooper, also absent, who won Best Actor for his performance in High Noon. As much as Wayne despised High Noon, and worked to blacklist its writer, an Oscar moment was an Oscar moment and his career always came first, so he strode up to accept Cooper’s Oscar for his landmark work of apparently un-American acting. Wayne even joked, "I'm going to go back and find my business manager, and agent, producer, and three-name writer and find out why I didn’t get High Noon instead of Cooper.”

Well, maybe they figured Wayne had already made his un-American movie for that year. At a time of loyalty oaths, blacklists, and outright hate, John Ford finally managed to make his “phony art house picture” about escaping the American Dream. Instead of fodder for pundits, cranks, and FBI files, it became a holiday staple, everybody’s favorite St. Patrick’s Day rom-com.

<https://newrepublic.com/article/112666/john-fords-quiet-man-subversive-st-patricks-day-staple>