CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The newly independent Irish Free State set itself on a course of isolationism and protectionism in the 1920s. These policies were reinforced by the government of Eamon de Valera and his party, Fianna Fáil, from 1932 onwards. Roy Foster points out that 'the Fianna Fáil Ireland was a nation set apart, by Catholicism and nationality: the interlocking relationships of Church and politics helping to define a unique, God-given way of life. Economic ideals of self-sufficiency could obviously be related to this [...]. And "protectionism" could be cultural, too: a fierce suspicion of cosmopolitanism and what it stood for is evident in many Fianna Fáil manifestos'.[1] The de Valera era in Irish politics ended in 1959 giving way to a modernisation process: protectionist policies were substituted with an outward-looking, international orientation in Irish society and culture. This meant, among other things, inviting international business to invest in Ireland, a process which gradually integrated Ireland into the international economy. These processes were slow and uneven with serious setbacks until the late 1980s, but in the 1990s Ireland experienced an era of affluence and prosperity with its economic growth rate surpassing those of the other EU countries thanks to commercial investment from the US, Japan and Europe, as well as EU development funds.[2] The term 'Celtic Tiger' was coined in 1994, comparing Ireland to the so-called 'Tiger' economies of South-East Asia. Inevitably,

1 Foster 1989, 547.

2 According to Professor John FitzGerald of the Economic and Social Research Institute, the EU single market has been the most important factor contributing to the huge economic growth in Ireland. When American and Japanese corporations wanted to guarantee their access to the EU market, English-speaking Ireland was an ideal country for business investments, since corporate taxation was low and the workforce well educated. Various EU subsidies have also been an important factor:

the flourishing economy brought about social and political changes in Ireland from the diminishing authority of the Catholic Church to the election of Ireland's first woman president, Mary Robinson (1990–1997) and the decreasing power of the Fianna Fáil. Ireland's economic success was accompanied by the critical acclaim and increasing popularity of all kinds of Irish culture – music, dance, literature, film – in the 1990s. U2 and the Corrs, Seamus Heaney and Jim Sheridan, among others, kept up international interest in Irish arts and culture. Irish dance and cinema took their places alongside Irish music and literature in the international cultural arena after their breakthroughs with the interval act of Riverdance at the Eurovision Song Contest in Dublin in 1994 and the successes of Jim Sheridan's Oscar-winning film *My Left Foot* (1989) and Alan Parker's *The Commitments* (1991).

The economic, social and political changes brought about by the rise of the Celtic Tiger together with the unprecedented international success of Irish culture further fuelled the process of reimagining Irishness which had been part of the modernisation and change in Ireland since the early 1960s. On one hand this reimagining meant examining traditional and older ways of understanding Irishness, while on the other hand it also marked the broadening of the definition of Irishness to include both the extensive Irish diaspora and the new Irish in Ireland, as the country was now receiving great numbers of immigrants. National questioning and exploring Irish identity in the changed circumstances of the 1990s were among the central themes of the burgeoning film industry. Until the 1990s the great majority of the films about the Irish had been made outside Ireland, especially in the key countries of the Irish diaspora: the United States, Britain and Australia. *The Irish Filmography*, published in 1996, which documents 'as completely as possible all fiction films made in Ireland and about Ireland and the Irish produced world-wide during the first hundred years of cinema', contains almost 2,000 entries of which not much more than one-tenth were made

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between 1989 and 2002 Ireland received €14 billion worth of subsidies. See Sipilä, 'Irlanti on sijoittanut taitavasti EU:lta saamansa tukiaiset', D1.

in Ireland.[3] The Irish film industry started to grow in the late 1980s and by the mid-1990s Ireland was producing more films than ever. Indigenous Irish cinema enjoyed wider visibility and therefore also had a greater impact on the cinematic images of Ireland and the Irish after decades of outsider representations.

Probably the most talked-about Irish film of the 1990s was Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*, which was described in the *Irish Times* as 'the most important film made in or about Ireland in the first century of cinema'.[4] *Michael Collins* did not prove to be a commercial success in the important US market, but it broke all box office records in Ireland only a week after its premiere in November 1996. It also went to the top of the British film charts.[5] In 2000, *Michael Collins* was second only to James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) in the all-time box office list in Ireland,[6] and had earned IR£4 million ($5.6 million), which was considerably more than any other Irish film earned in the 1990s.[7] The interest in the film in Ireland was to be expected since this was a big Hollywood-backed production about a controversial Irish historical figure, exploring themes that were still current. Michael Collins's eventful life (1890–1922), his achievements and his death at the young age of 31 lent themselves well to a cinematic treatment as well as to written accounts. His life story has all the makings of a legend and Collins has attracted quite a number of biographers. In an article published in autumn 1995, John Regan counted nine full-length Collins

3 Rockett 1996a, i.

4 Michael O'Dwyer, *The Irish Times*, 31 August 1996, 1.

5 During its opening weekend, *Michael Collins* earned IR£442,867 in the Republic of Ireland. Hollywood blockbuster *Independence Day*, a huge hit worldwide including Ireland, earned IR£404,850 that summer. Hopper 1997, 3. In the UK, *Michael Collins* took the third place at the box office with £2.8 million in the period 18 October – 17 November having been on release for only two weeks. 'UK box office top 10: October 18 – November 17', 14.

6 McLoone 2000, 217.

7 Pettitt 2000, 286. The second most profitable film, Jim Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father* (1993), earned IR£2.4 million ($3.3 million) and only five other Irish films produced more than IR£1 million in the 1990s.

biographies and seven other books on aspects of his life and death.[8] Since then, the number has doubled, partly, or maybe even largely, thanks to Neil Jordan's film; the popular success of *Michael Collins* was echoed in its reception in the media and academia. The film gave rise to a major debate in mid-1990s Ireland about the personalities, events and interpretation of the 1916 to 1923 period in Irish history. Journalists, film critics, politicians and academics as well as the wider public took part in the discussions and debates in newspapers and other forums. The film and its reception also inspired and encouraged new research on the period.

According to Gabriel Doherty and Dermot Keogh, editors of a collection of articles prompted by the interest in the film and published under the title *Michael Collins and the Making of the Irish State* (1998), the debate showed how the 1919 to 1923 period had remained relatively little studied until then. Many prominent members of the revolutionary generation had been neglected as subjects for research – Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera seemed to be the only exceptions.[9] Furthermore, it seems that the divisions of the Civil War have to some measure continued on the pages of history books. Michael Hopkinson pointed out in 1993 that

> the considerable majority of books written on the period from 1910 to 1923 have been either biographies or narrative-based accounts which placed a heavy stress on the contribution of so-called great men, and often revealed a bias towards one or other of them. [...] Too often the writing has appeared to be a continuation of the animosities of the Irish Civil War. In particular, debate over the treaty split has frequently become dominated by the attribution of responsibility and blame, especially to Collins and Eamon de Valera.[10]

Doherty and Keogh noted that 'the contemporary debate tend[ed] to revolve around the personalities of De Valera and Michael Collins', which they saw as 'a mark of the underdeveloped nature of the writing of the his-

8 Regan 1995, 17–18.

9 Doherty & Keogh 1998, 12. Interestingly, despite the fact that Collins's public career lasted only a few years and de Valera's about 60, Collins has probably been the more popular subject of research.

10 Hopkinson 1993, 310.

tory of twentieth-century Ireland'.[11] Neil Jordan's film is very much in line with the earlier and contemporary biographies and historical accounts: many of the historical questions boil down to the opposition of the personalities and politics of Collins and de Valera in *Michael Collins*. Mick and Dev are the men who make and shape Ireland's history in Jordan's film; it is the leaders' view on the conflict and their personal attributes, ambitions and rivalries that matter. Jordan's Collins conforms to written accounts of the Big Fella also in that the emphasis is on the romantic revolutionary rather than on his administrative skills or his role as a minister. The romantic and militarist portrayal of Collins has remained the dominant and popular myth as Collins's 'biographers have elected to tell what is not alone a seductive story but one which conforms to readily identifiable established literary genres and resonates deep within the Irish psyche.'[12] Jordan has reworked this story on the cinema screen adding layers and contemporary concerns about Ireland and Irishness. This book explores how national history is examined and Irishness reimagined in *Michael Collins* through the personalities of Collins and de Valera.

Hannu Salmi, among others, has pointed out that a film is always a collective, polyphonic work and that it is important to distinguish who is talking in a film.[13] Although my intention is not to follow in the footsteps of the *auteur*-theorists, *Michael Collins* is understood in this study as first and foremost a Neil Jordan film. He is the writer and director of the film and the fact that *Michael Collins* was seen as a Neil Jordan film is evident in all the writings about it. It is also confirmed by the film's producer, Stephen Woolley: 'What's in this film is what Neil Jordan finds interesting in Collins's life. It's not what Alan Parker or Oliver Stone or Conor Cruise O'Brien would necessarily choose.'[14] For this reason he and his interviews and comments are given quite a lot of space in the book. In addition to the film itself, my primary sources include Jordan's *Film Diary & Screenplay*

11 Doherty & Keogh 1998, 11.
12 Regan 1995, 17–19.
13 Salmi 1993, 129.
14 Woolley, 'When is a film not a film? When British journalists don't see it', 39.

(1996), the film's production notes and Jordan's interviews.[15] Yet the starting point of this study is the view that films 'do not simply represent or express the stable features of a national culture, but are themselves one of the loci of the debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage and history', as Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie put it.[16] Therefore I have analysed and discussed the film through the numerous reviews, comments, articles and other writings about *Michael Collins* in newspapers, magazines and periodicals that I have deemed central to this study. Robert A. Rosenstone has argued that 'the rules to evaluate historical film cannot come solely from written history. They must come from the medium itself – from its common practices, and how they intersect with notions of the past.'[17] This has been one of the guidelines of the book. Notwithstanding the fun of spotting historical inaccuracies in a film, it is more fruitful to examine the ends these inaccuracies serve and the broader claims historical films make. So even though I have approached *Michael Collins* as an historical film that takes part in the historical discourse, the aim has not been to spot and point out inaccuracies but to examine the interpretations, omissions and biases of the film, and their purposes and effects.

15 The chapter numbers of the *Michael Collins* DVD are used in the footnotes (e.g. *Michael Collins* (17)) when referring to specific scenes of the film in the text.

16 Hjort and MacKenzie 2000, 4.

17 Rosenstone 1995a, 15.