

The Quiet Man

By Scott Allen Nollen

During pre-production on his wartime tribute “They Were Expendable” (1945), John Ford learned that Maureen O’Hara was starring in the swashbuckler “The Spanish Main” at RKO. O’Hara knew that Ford had returned from military service in Europe to make a feature film, but had no idea why he wanted to see her at the studio. She soon learned that he wanted her to play the female lead in a film based on a Maurice Walsh story called “The Quiet Man,” to be shot on location in Ireland.

Ford previously had dropped hints about making “a picture in Ireland,” but O’Hara had considered the remarks wishful thinking. Now she knew the property, and her agreement to star in the film was sealed with a handshake.

Ford eventually hired “How Green Was My Valley” author Richard Llewellyn to expand “The Quiet Man” to novella length. Combined with the notes he had been compiling for the past 15 years, Ford was sure he’d have plenty of material from which a screenplay could be adapted. However, Walsh already had rewritten the short story as a chapter in his novel “Green Rushes,” wherein the story of Shawn Kelvin deals with aiding his family during “The Troubles” of 1922.

Llewellyn used the “Green Rushes” version as his source material. However, Ford already had made his powerful IRA film, “The Informer” (1935); and, as Maureen O’Hara explained, he “knew this would never play to Hollywood studio bosses or American audiences. Most of the work we did...involved removing the politics from the story and focusing it on romance and comedy.”

In March 1951, Ford, working with screenwriter Frank Nugent, began altering Llewellyn’s work, including changing the names of the major characters, plus adding three more for good measure. The name of the fictional village became Innisfree (borrowed from William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Isle of Innisfree”); Shawn Kelvin was changed to Sean Thornton (John Wayne); Ellen O’Grady became Mary Kate Danaher (O’Hara); Liam O’Grady became “Red” Will Danaher (Victor McLaglen); and the new sup-



Newlyweds Sean Thornton (John Wayne) and the former Mary Kate Danaher (Maureen O’Hara) in front of their cottage, White O’ Mornin.’ Courtesy Library of Congress

porting characters were Father Peter Lonergan (Ward Bond), Reverend Cyril Playfair (Arthur Shields) and Michaelleen Og Flynn (Barry Fitzgerald). Ford and Nugent also added a crucial plot element: Sean’s refusal to fight Will due to his guilt for having killed a fellow boxer in the ring, the impetus for abandoning America for the serenity he hopes to find back on the Auld Sod.

The “art-house” “Quiet Man,” budgeted at \$1.75 million, concerned Republic mogul Herb Yates as one of the most expensive pictures ever made by the studio (in Technicolor) and the first filmed outside the United States. When Yates asked Ford to reduce the budget, the director turned to John Wayne, who, out of undying loyalty to his “Coach,” waved his contractual profit percentage, accepting a flat fee of \$100,000.

The final draft of the screenplay was completed in April 1951; and Ford, accompanied by cinematographer Winton Hoch and Argosy production manager Lee Luthaker, flew to Ireland to join Maureen O’Hara’s brother, Charlie FitzSimons, in scouting locations around Galway Bay. In County Mayo, Ford chose the village of Cong as the primary location, and set up shop at nearby Ashford Castle on the shore of Lough Corrib, the second largest lake in Ireland.

On July 17, 1951, Ford wrapped the location work and returned to Los Angeles, to shoot the interiors and collab-

orate with longtime editor Jack Murray and composer Victor Young, who based his score on traditional Irish tunes, including “The Kerry Dancers” and “The Rakes of Mallow.”

Viewers who allow memories of later John Wayne formula pictures to cloud their perceptions of “The Quiet Man” as being “chauvinistic” need only recognize how Sean is constantly manipulated by Mary Kate throughout the film. Ford constantly challenged Wayne to confront his established screen persona, to alter certain types of “macho” behavior on which he usually relied. Sean Thornton attempts to live a life of peace, avoiding confrontations that may erupt into violence, but eventually he realizes the only way to resolve his dilemma is to fight Will Danaher. Hoping he will find serenity in Ireland, Sean, manipulated by nearly everyone around him, is confounded by unfamiliar social traditions and “civilization” in general. “The Quiet Man” offers a glimpse at a very different John Wayne; and, working with Ford, he proved he had the acting chops to pull it off.

The film is not only Ford’s Irish-American vision, but also a revealing expression of his Catholicism. While *The Fugitive* (1947) is a forced, allegorical profession of Ford’s faith (one that he described as a “calling”), the Catholic values of “The Quiet Man” develop organically, along with a myriad of other layers, in a very entertaining film. Planning this magnum opus over the course of two decades, Ford, surrounded by his “stock company,” finally achieved a “seamless” work of art.

Versatile character actor Ward Bond is at the center of both Catholic films, but his Father Lonergan in “The Quiet Man,” transformed from the enigmatic, Ford-like El Gringo of “The Fugitive,” is Ford, a casting choice suggesting much about the director’s admiration for the man he jokingly called a “big, ugly, stupid gorilla.” A half-century earlier, Ford’s mother had suggested that he enter the priesthood. It took this film, and Ward Bond, whose priest is a wee bit on the irreverent side, to get it done.

Victor McLaglen, pushing 65, demonstrated his legendary physical prowess while Ford shot his prolonged battle with the 44-year-old Wayne. McLaglen, having won the Best Actor Oscar as *The Informer*, would soon earn a Best Supporting Actor nomination for his film-stealing performance as another lumbering, but constitutionally converse, Irish giant.

Aspects of Ford’s life and personality imbue, not only Father Lonergan, but several other characters: Sean

Thornton’s name and his desire to return to Ireland; Michaelleen’s alcoholism and respect for cultural rites; his brother, Francis Ford, as Dan Tobin; and even Danaher’s attempts to bully desired behavior from others. One of the most personal, autobiographical commercial films ever made, “The Quiet Man” opened at Radio City Music Hall on February 28, 1952. Long lines formed for each showing, and filmgoers returned for several viewings, a response repeated in cities across the nation. Ford received his best reviews in a decade, and letters of copious praise arrived from many fellow filmmakers, including Frank Capra, Jack Warner and Darryl F. Zanuck. “The Quiet Man” is truly a transcendent film. What began as the sum of one man’s ideas was transformed through collective artistry into a gestalt experience that any viewer can enjoy.

Herb Yates, the mini-mogul who had protested too much about “The Quiet Man,” now couldn’t heap enough superlatives on the first Republic film to garner such business, acclaim, and even Hollywood buzz about Oscar nominations.

In February 1953, Ford was in London, shooting the interiors for MGM’s “Mogambo,” when he won his fourth Best Director Academy Award, although “The Quiet Man” was edged out by the grand spectacle of Cecil B. DeMille’s “The Greatest Show on Earth” (1952) for Best Picture. Ford’s Irish dream had been nominated for seven Oscars, and Winton Hoch and Archie Stout won for their color cinematography, but “Sean” Himself had no interest in being in Hollywood for the ceremony.

Yates had waged a monumental publicity campaign, while Ford, fed up after dealing with such a penny-pinching hypocrite, refused to grant interviews or participate in the ballyhoo.

After all, “The Quiet Man” speaks for Himself.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Educated in film and history at the University of Iowa, Scott Allen Nollen served as an archivist for the State Historical Society of Iowa and the National Archives and Records Administration. From a young age, he developed skills as a writer, filmmaker and musician, and published his first book in 1989. He has written and edited over 40 volumes on film, literature and popular music, and has been widely recognized for his work on Boris Karloff, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Frank Sinatra, Paul Robeson and John Ford. He has lectured extensively, and currently contributes to many online panels and the program “Sinatra: The Man and the Music” for Hawaii Public Radio.