

Michael collins'

Politics



Between the white knuckle intensity, the bombastic array of explosions, the sinister factionalism and the multitude of conspiratorial machinations, director Neil Jordan's Michael Collins comes off like political history re-imagined in the vein of the gangster film. As an ambitious attempt to chronicle the life and times of one of the most important figures in Ireland's violent struggles for independence from the British Empire, it is intelligently well-made.

But it is also problematic, because it makes an obscure political struggle even more obscure by trivializing it in the way that much of historical cinema has trivialized history: emphasizing the emotional highs and lows of its protagonists at the expense of the events it uses as its foundation.

Considering that Michael Collins' epochal content is fundamentally tied to present day conflicts, namely the seemingly endless one in Northern Ireland, this is rather troubling.

Collins is credited with inventing guerilla warfare, and bringing world attention to the Irish cause by forcing the English to cede authority in certain parts of his native soil and initiating a movement for an independent Irish republic. Having seen many historical dramas before, I immediately assumed that Jordan was going to spend the entire length of the film demonstrating Collins' greatness. I was pleasantly surprised to see that while Jordan does question some of Collins' character attributes and decisions, he fashions a historical account that somehow absolves Collins of the present state of Ireland.

Jordan presents Collins, played with hearty vigor by Academy Award nominee Liam Neeson, glowing from the residual acclaim of *Schindler's List*, as a patriot whose dedication to the annihilation of British rule in Ireland was compromised by the people around him. The film opens with a terrible bombardment by the English upon Irish freedom fighters, which establishes the unforgiving demand of obedience that the English crown maintained without any pretense of subtlety.

Some years later, one of them named Collins is released from jail, whereupon he proceeds to give impassioned speeches as the self-dubbed Minister of Mayhem. Collins argues that the disastrous defeat in 1916 proves that a straightforward battle against the occupying British presence is an invitation to defeat. He proposes that they plant bombs to deliver unobstructed carnage to those who would oppose Irish independence.

The film plays this up as an action of last resort in which Collins and his men have been forced to use violence because of the unyielding nature of the anti-independents. Yet despite to airing this sentiment frequently to his best friend/confidant/rival Harry Boland (as played by Aidan Quinn), Collins has no qualms about using the intelligence offered by a sympathetic copper played by the downtrodden hangdog face of *The Crying Game's* Stephen Rea.

The escalating acts of violence put the British in the uncomfortable position of acceding to negotiations, and former Republic president Eamon de Valera, as portrayed with vague menace by versatile character actor Alan Rickman, delegates Collins as a representative on his behalf. Collins recognizes his

own shortcomings as a politico: the best he could negotiate was self-governance for South Ireland with allegiance to the Crown still in place.

It is this halfway point of reconciliation between Ireland and the Crown that Collins argues is the best attainable agreement of the time. De Valera proceeds to disassociate himself from Collins, while Collins has a falling out with Boland, and the upset leads to civil war. Eventually, Collins dies at the hands of an assassin, which Jordan implies to have been approved by De Valera.

Jordan's Collins ultimately comes off as a violent underdog who repackages himself as a liaison between his countrymen and the occupying forces, trading in the downtrodden charisma of a scruffy brown coat with the sharp glamour of a well pressed uniform, not unlike a German officer who approves of Hitler because of the blessings in his life under Nazism.

This isn't to say that Collins was some kind of fascist, but that his frequently celebrated talents for political expedience still fall short under the lens of critical examination. After all, his agitator's approach to moving the Irish cause forward still hasn't brought peace today.

In the meantime, conventional history writes De Valera off as a duplicitous sell out, and Jordan doesn't attempt to challenge that view, choosing instead to portray Collins as a heroic patriot. This strikes me as strange, since Collins is the man who initiated violence and then insisted that violence must stop, leaving us with a rather ambiguous and maybe ambivalent definition of what heroism and patriotism is.