



Film

Andy Barr

Jimmy's Hall

Director Ken Loach



KEN Loach (above), the 77-year-old legendary director of such classics as *Poor Cow*, *Kes* and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, has done it again. His film *Jimmy's Hall* is a moving and inspirational portrait of Irish communist and activist Jimmy Gralton. It was selected for competition at the 2014 Cannes film festival.

Jimmy (right) was born in County Leitrim in 1886 and, after doing a series of jobs in the mines and docks, he joined the British Army as a young man, but deserted after refusing to serve in India and settled in New York in 1909. Following the 1916 Easter rising and after reading the writings of James Connolly, he established the James Connolly Club in New York.

He returned briefly to Ireland in 1922 and, after the Parish hall in his home town was burnt down by the British Army, he organised the building of a new hall and named it the Pearse-Connolly Hall. It was then taken over by the Free State Army and closed down.

During the civil war he returned to New York, but again returned to Ireland in 1932 to work on his mother's small holding. He was persuaded by the local people to reopen the hall, and that is the storyline of *Jimmy's Hall*.

Working with Paul Laverty, his regular screenwriter, Loach has adapted a play called *Jimmy Gralton's Dancehall* by Donal O'Kelly, who has a small role in the film as a Roscommon IRA activist involved in resisting evictions. Loach has that great ability to combine anger at injustice with eloquence and common sense and he shows how the Catholic Church and local landowners made Jimmy Gralton, played by Barry Ward, public enemy number 1.

Jimmy's crime was to build a hall which served the local people. Community dances, boxing lessons, poetry appreciation classes, singing lessons and debates on worker's rights were held there. To the authorities this was dangerous stuff. Loach had previously tackled the Irish independence struggle in *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*; now he takes on clerical power in the Irish Free State. As the *Guardian* puts it, for the Church, the hall and the man who built it represent something dangerous and subversive – the fact that the people were beginning to think and act for themselves.

Jimmy then becomes involved in the struggle against landowners evicting their tenants. One of the highlights of the film occurs when he stands aloft on a hay cart loaded with the furniture of a tenant farmer who has been evicted by a ruthless landlord. He delivers a rousing address to the assembled hordes, drawing on his own experiences in America, witnessing the vast chasm between rich and poor in the run-up to the aftermath of the great depression. "I saw the wild speculation and greed...I saw the bubble burst". It is a speech that is rather pertinent in the current economic climate.

Of course the whole thing ends in tragedy and Jimmy Gralton remains the only Irishman to be deported from his native land, deemed to be 'an undesirable alien'. Back in New York, Gralton became a trade union organiser and member of the Irish workers club. He reprinted James Connolly's pamphlets, raised funds for the International Brigades in Spain and for the remainder of his life was an active member of the Communist Party of the USA. He

died in New York in 1945.

Ken Loach will have you cheering and clapping at the finish. □

