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Jim Sheridan’s *The Field* and the Memory of Dispossessed Irishness

Katherina Dodou

Jim Sheridan’s 1990 film adaptation of John B. Keane’s popular play *The Field* (1965) addresses the centrality of the Irish Famine of 1845-48 and of emigration in Irish cultural memory and their significance for a construction of Irish national identity. The film’s evocation of these events points to pivotal aspects of a collective Irish memory of national dispossession and the historical traumas of colonisation – to events which have been subject to academic re-examination since the revisionist debates over Irish history in the 1960s and to issues which were, at the time leading up to the film’s release, especially resonant given the new waves of economically engendered Irish emigration in the 1980s. The present article examines Sheridan’s use in the filmic medium of cultural narratives of a traumatised Irish nation coalescing around the issues of colonial landholding policy and forced migration. Drawing on recent work in memory studies and the role of remediation, understood as the treatment of cultural narratives across different representational media, in the shaping and dissemination of cultural memory, the essay views *The Field* as an illuminating example of the uses of a collective memory of dispossession for Irish identity. The essay proposes that while Sheridan’s thematisation of the Famine and emigration suggests the continued impact of these events in disputes over the development of the country, it also problematises a nationalist definition of Irishness which rests on the remembering of a tragic national history and which views the bond to the land as a defining constituent of national identity.

Sheridan’s Ireland and the Remediation of Cultural Memory

Set in the village of Carraigtonmond in the south-west of Ireland in the 1930s, the film focuses on the tenant farmer and patriarchal figure Bull McCabe (played by Richard Harris) and his desire to procure the field he and his family have been renting and farming for generations. The film’s plot revolves around the event of the field’s sale and the question of who is its legitimate owner once it is put on public auction. Bull, who has taken
care of the land his entire life and has made numerous sacrifices for it, claims it belongs to him. Among his losses, Bull includes his mother, who died working on the field, and his firstborn son Seamy, who committed suicide at the age of thirteen upon realising that there is not enough land to sustain both him and his younger brother Tadgh (Sean Bean). While none of the villagers would bid against ‘the Bull’, a wealthy Irish descendant recently returned from America called Peter (Tom Berenger) outbids him in the auction. With increasing desperation, Bull and his son Tadgh try to convince Peter to withdraw his bidding. Their threats lead to violence, and Bull and Tadgh end up killing Peter, and so procure the field. Peter’s murder is concealed as Bull pretends to know nothing of his whereabouts and the villagers collude with him in silence, despite the attempts of the parish priest to convince them to step forward with information about the murder. It is only when Tadgh brags to the Tinker Woman he is smitten with about killing Peter that the truth comes out. Confronted with his disclosure, Tadgh admits that he never wanted the field and that he intends to leave the village with the Tinker Woman. Thinking that his son has ‘betrayed the land’, Bull is driven mad. In his despair, he believes that ‘It’s all gone. Tadgh is gone. Seamy is gone. The land is gone’; he smashes his house and drives his cattle to a cliff by the sea. Tadgh tries to stop him, but he is pushed off the cliff by the frightened cattle and killed. The film ends with Bull beating the sea and commanding it to ‘stay back’ in a futile attempt to protect the dead Tadgh.

The filmic adaptation of Keane’s play has been taken to task by literary and film scholars alike. The criticism against Sheridan’s film to some extent derives from a sense that it reduces the richness of Keane’s play, but the main objection rests on the political consequences of Sheridan’s apparently nostalgic vision of Ireland. Owing as much to the changes Sheridan made to Keane’s script as to the film’s dramaturgy, the film, it has been pointed out, portrays Ireland as ‘distinctly mythic and pre-modern’, a feature which Sean Ryder recognises as typical of film adaptations of Irish literary works for Hollywood-style cinema. Specifically, Sheridan’s adaptation pits a sentimentalised perception of Ireland in opposition to American modernity. Peter’s American-based capital and his plans to extract limestone from the field in order to build Irish highways represent a new global economic order that apparently threatens a predominantly nostalgic and nationalist construction of Irishness in 1930s Ireland. The fact that Bull’s aversion to Peter’s plans is shared by other characters in the film – and that Father Doran’s warning to Peter that ‘people don’t like change’ is dismissed by Peter as a tendency to ‘only see the past’ – certainly invites the definition of Ireland as
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(American) modernity’s Other. More than this, for Dermot Cavanagh, the film returns us to a standardized view of Irish identity ‘as enmeshed in an essentially tragic history’, by fetishizing Ireland’s ‘opulent pastoral world’ and the rigor of subsidence living that Bull represents. Even as the film’s use of nationalist myth accentuates this vision of Irishness, the Otherness of Sheridan’s Ireland is underscored by the overt and mythologising theatricality of the film, which Ruth Barton identifies in Richard Harris’s ‘histrionic and flamboyant’ declamatory style and his depiction of Bull as the ‘King Lear of the west of Ireland, a figure who dwarves his co-players as he rants and rages through a narrative of land dispossession and the encroachment of modernity’. Indeed, *The Field* ostensibly confirms the ‘nostalgic sense of tragic Irish identity’ that James Byrne identifies as a dominant vision of Ireland (in America) in the 1980s.

If the film’s tendency to typecast Ireland within a problematical romantic vision of nationhood has been duly criticised, less attention has been paid to the ways in which Sheridan’s film engages with attitudes toward the Irish past, and that it does so at a time when Ireland’s traumatic history of destitution and displacement is at the forefront of Irish consciousness. The stagnation of Ireland’s economy in the 1980s and the new wave of emigration prompted by it gave new prominence in the period to the collective national memory of economic devastation and migration – so much so, in fact, that an annual ‘Famine Walk’ was instituted in County Mayo in 1987 to commemorate what is known as the Doolough Tragedy of 30-31 March 1849. An approach to *The Field* with a view to its treatment of Ireland’s past discloses the film’s engagement with cultural memory: one which stems from Sheridan’s controversial changes to Keane’s play and which treats the collective remembrance of destitution and dispossession in modern Irish history. Bull’s repeated mentioning of the Famine is in this respect important as it indicates how collective memory informs an understanding of the present – within the film, and to some extent also within a global Irish community at the time of the film’s release. If what Astrid Erll has called the potential of the filmic medium to explore images of the past is considered, a central dimension of the film can be recognised: its exploration of a notion that has characterised much nationalist thought in Ireland, namely that the land and its people go together.

The film memorialises, through Bull, key elements of Irish national identity that focus on Irish suffering as a consequence of English colonial rule, especially as pertaining to land and dispossession. These are, of course, important issues also in Keane’s play, even if the history of Irish emigration and the emphasis on the link between national trauma and
colonial rule are further complicated in the film, partly given that Sheridan thematises Irish-American relations resulting from Irish nineteenth-century emigration to America. He does so by rendering his migrant figure a third-generation Irish-American, rather than the returnee Galway émigré in Keane’s play. On repeated occasions, Sheridan’s protagonist evokes historical traumas caused by the colonisation of the English and the ensuing deprivation of the Irish. Chief among these are the symbolic events of the Great Irish Famine – defined as a form of genocide engineered by the English – and the subsequent decimation of the Irish population due to starvation and emigration. When Bull finds out that ‘outsiders’ might bid on the field at the auction, his immediate reaction is to denounce the English: ‘Are these the same outsiders who took the corn from our mouths when the potatoes went rotten in the ditches?’ Bull’s response uses the collective memory of the Famine to warn against the consequences of Irish land being owned by ‘outsiders’; for Bull, such a future can only mean further destitution for the Irish. Even as Flanagan, the owner of the village pub, tells Bull that ‘The English are gone’, the upshot of English colonialism is still very much a presence in the cultural memory that Bull represents in the film. As Bull says, the matter of who owns the field ‘is deep. Very deep’ – as is the matter of emigration.

To use Erll’s term, the narratives of the Famine and mass emigration are remediated in the film; through the character of Bull the film refers to historical events that have been repeatedly represented over the better part of two centuries in different media, such as newspaper articles, films, literary works, and paintings, on both sides of the Atlantic, and beyond. The film thus refers not so much to the events themselves as to a ‘canon of existent medial constructions’ of the Famine and of emigration which has rendered these as powerful sites of memory. In this sense, Sheridan does not merely re-work Keane’s gloss on the matters of colonisation, land ownership, and migration, but also draws on already solidified cultural memories of the past. To use another of Erll’s terms, the film evokes representations of Ireland that have been premediated, that is, the already existing representations of these historical events have set the terms for their future representations. The Famine of 1845-48 is a good example from Irish history of premediation, of the dynamics of collective memory and forgetting (which Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney stress as central to understanding the ways in which cultural memory operates), and of the perpetuation of certain versions of history. This Famine has come to stand as an emblem of Irish suffering under English colonial rule, an idea which was outlined by Irish nationalists already in 1847 and which gained popular consent thereafter, being repeated in historical accounts of Ireland.
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throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1847 and 1957 (when the publication of *The Great Famine* complicated the view of this historical event), the perception that the Irish Famine resulted from English economic, agricultural, and landholding policy became an unchanged and ‘integral part of the nationalist interpretation of Irish history’, as Hugh Kearney has stressed. The remediation of the Famine has ensured its cementation in a collective Irish memory, while, as A.T.Q. Stewart has noted, it has also meant the forgetting of other famines, notably the famine of 1741 which, he observes, was the worst in Irish history. Likewise, the remediation of Famine-related emigration as exceptionally traumatic has persisted throughout modern Irish history, and, at the time of film’s production and release, the Famine continued to be remembered as the primal scene of Irish emigration. The film does not address the process of history and cultural memory making; yet, through its protagonist’s repeated references to the Famine and mass emigration, *The Field* addresses the ways in which versions of collective memory serve as a means of making the present intelligible. Focusing on how the past is remembered and used in Sheridan’s *The Field*, the following shows that, by reimagining the conflict at the heart of the play, the film critiques a (nationalist) conception of Irishness which rests upon the remembrance — indeed, the reliving — of a traumatic national history and which privileges the bond to the land as the criterion for national identity.

### The Field of Blood: Nationalism, Migration, and the Law of the Land

Land is the principal tenet in Bull’s view of identity and this is something he emphasises to his son in the first scenes of the film. The film begins with protracted silence: it shows Bull and Tadgh dragging a cart to a cliff and throwing a dead donkey into a lake to hide the violent act of its killing, an act which foreshadows the murder of the American Peter. Once they have disposed of the animal, father and son silently go about collecting seaweed by the shore and carrying it, with difficulty, up the hill to use as fertiliser for the field. In the first lines in the film, some minutes after the opening scenes, Bull stresses the importance of the land to Tadgh; blowing the seeds away from the head of a dandelion, he says ‘This is us without the land’. The blowing away of the seeds suggests an empty and scattered life. By contrast, for Bull rootedness in the land is tantamount to a generational continuity which grants the individual and his kin strength. Bull tells Tadgh: ‘Our father’s father’s father’s fathers dug that soil with their bare hands. Built those walls. Our souls are buried down there. Your son’s son’s son will take care of it. You get my meaning?’ The image Bull
portrays is of a profound bond between the land and its people: land grounds a person and gives his existence purpose. The people carry the responsibility to care for the land, just as the McCabe’s have turned their rented field from a stony patch of land to a ‘green grassy pasture’, overcoming great obstacles to see it prosper. The land, in turn, guarantees that the McCabe’s, and by extension the Irish people, ‘live forever’.

As critics have suggested, Bull acts as a representative of the Irish people in the film: his role is emblematic for ‘collective dilemmas and national struggles’. Sheridan is able to cast Bull in this role by reimagining Keane’s character. An important means for this in the film is to render Tadgh – not Bull, as is the case in Keane’s play – responsible for killing the donkey that grazed the family field, and to have Tadgh, at least to begin with, represent thoughtless violence. By substituting Bull’s violence for moral authority, Sheridan establishes his protagonist at the opening of his film as an honourable, if domineering, man who does right by others as he does by the land. In so doing, Sheridan invites the sympathetic understanding of Bull’s sense of entitlement to the Widow’s field, which in the film is based not, as in Keane’s play, on practical considerations (Keane’s Bull wants the passage to water that the widow’s field will grant him) or from social aspirations of rising to the status of ‘important people’. In Sheridan’s film, Bull’s sense of entitlement stems from sacrifice and dedication to ‘take[ing] care of the land’.

In reimagining Bull, Sheridan has the protagonist embody what Cavanagh calls a ““romantic-nationalist” conception of soil”, a conception integral to the film’s treatment of Irishness and the questions of entitlement and ownership regarding the field. Cavanagh builds on Seamus Deane’s definition of the term, according to which, Irish soil is identified with the nation, it is owned by the people, and it has ‘priority over administrative and commercial systems that transform it into land’. In Cavanagh’s reading, Bull understands the field as ‘an immemorial possession, and a painful responsibility, bequeathed by the dead generations’, and he sees his entitlement to it to be ‘founded on custom and generational struggle’. This view is underlined as the film juxtaposes different claims on the field. The question of ownership and tenancy that the Widow, Father Doran, and Peter present is countered by Bull’s dismissal of their arguments that he has no right to the field because it is ‘the Widow’s field’ and ‘he rents it’ or that the field belongs to the man with the greatest capital. Rather, Bull’s conviction, delivered with great passion in a key scene of the film, is that

It’s my field. It’s my child. I nursed it. I nourished it. I saw to its every want. I dug the rocks out of it with my bare hands and I made a living
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thing of it! My only want is that green grass, that lovely green grass, and you want to take it away from me, and in the sight of God I can’t let you do that!

Bull’s claim to the field is underpinned by the ‘law of the land’, a law which, in his view, is ‘stronger than the common law’ that the Widow, Father Doran, and Peter rely on. His sacrifices for the land, not least that he prioritised the reaping of the field over his mother’s soul when she lay dying, is in his eyes proof of the legitimacy of his claim. This claim is inseparable from the ‘romantic-nationalist’ conception that Cavanagh has identified. Characteristically, Bull says to the protesting Father Doran, who suggests that Bull relinquish his claim in favour of finding another field: ‘Another field? Jesus, you’re as foreign here as any Yank. Another field? Are you blind? Those hands, do you see those hands? Those rocks! It was a dead thing! Don’t you understand?’ For Bull, to not understand what the ‘law of the land’ means comes down to not understanding what it means to be Irish. In his view, the field, and by extension all Irish land, can come alive only in the capable hands of the hardworking Irish farmer. The reference to the field being ‘dead’ is significant, as it resounds with Peter’s plans to cement the field and build a hydroelectric power plant in the village – an intention Bull considers to be ‘a mortal sin’. In this regard, Peter’s corporate designs are not merely representative of the encroachments of modernity; they become emblematic of a view where the possession of Irish land by others than the Irish means that it will die. In the romanticised narrative of the relationship between the land and its people that Bull draws upon, the land is sacred and needs to be protected from ‘outsiders’. Alternative relationships to the land are not recognised as legitimate from the perspective of this narrative, whether such relationships are defined by the common law that Bull’s antagonists rely on, or by the rejection of land ownership that Tadgh ultimately opts for.

*The Field’s* thematisation of this ‘romantic-nationalist’ view of the land and Irishness, together with perceptions of the Famine, is central to its treatment of history and the ways in which collective memory informs the understanding of the present. Importantly, Bull is presented as a nationalist. The choice of setting a decade after the War of Independence (1919-21) implies Bull’s involvement in the struggle, as do Bull’s allusions to ‘all the wars we’ve fought here’ and his claim that the English are ‘Gone, because I drove ’em out: me and my kind’. Bull’s repeated mentioning of the Famine foregrounds the nationalist gloss on the Land Issue: that it was rooted in colonial policies and that a political upshot of the Famine was the fuelling of nationalist lobbying for Land reform, including peasant
The demand for such reforms in the latter part of the nineteenth century, by the Land League and the National League, for example, was accompanied by the understanding of the landlords ‘as a British garrison holding Ireland for the crown against the will of the people’. Bull stands as a reminder (mainly for an international audience) that the scarcity of land in Ireland was a major issue throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, that it led to continued mass emigration and that the nationalist demand for Land reform was therefore also closely linked to the call for Irish self-government. Bull’s own family illustrates how toward the end of the century the effects of colonial Land policies are still evident and why, as a result of this, Irish resentment against the English remained very much alive. In an attempt to convince Peter to withdraw his bid for the field, Bull tells Father Doran and Peter that his own siblings were forced to emigrate because there was not enough land for them all. As the eldest son and heir, Bull stayed in Ireland to help his parents take care of the field. The fact that Bull’s own son Seamy is the victim of the scarcity of land a generation later exacerbates his aggression toward the English and fuels his nationalist vision of Irishness and land ownership. Seamy’s suicide at the age of thirteen is apparently in response to Bull’s frustration over there not being enough land for both sons and the fear that Tadgh would have to emigrate as a consequence. Time is no healer of traumas in The Field. When asked, Bull can pinpoint with great precision Seamy’s age at the time he died eighteen years previously: ‘Thirteen years, six months, twenty-four days’. Just as the wound of Seamy’s death cannot heal for Bull, so the film suggests, the national traumas of the past remain present. As Bull says of the English, they are ‘Gone, but not forgotten’.

The continued presence of these past traumas, and Bull’s actively keeping their memory alive along with the indignation over their injustice, provides the organising principle of information and events in the film. This presence, the audience is meant to see, is what makes Bull so averse to Peter’s getting the field. From Bull’s viewpoint, Peter’s procuring the field would mean the dispossession of the Irish by a new form of colonialism. For him, the colonisation of the country by the English and their possession of the land are followed by the globalised corporate capitalism which Peter represents. No sooner is Irish independence won, it seems, than it is threatened by this new colonialism. In this light, when Bull tells the villagers that Peter is ‘a total stranger. An outsider’ who threatens to ‘bury my sweat and my blood [. . .] to shame me [. . .] This man is a robber and nothing less’, he does more than attempt to ensure the villagers’ silence regarding his and Tadgh’s assault, or assert his position of power in the
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village. The epithets ‘outsider’ and ‘robber’ place Peter’s purchase and plans for the field on par with the crimes of the English during the Famine and the effects of their policies in the form of Irish emigration. In Sheridan’s film, Bull sees himself as a victim of structures of power in place long before he was born, and as a defendant of the Irish nation and of the wishes of the land. According to this view, Peter is not recognized as an individual, but a representative of an oppressive neo-colonial system and he becomes a casualty in the continuing desire and struggle for self-determination and the reinstating of the legitimate owners of the land.

The phonetic similarity between ‘shame me’ and ‘Seamy’ in this instance, and in the murder scene, suggests Bull’s determination not to succumb to yet another colonialist venture. In his mind, he has already lost his siblings and his firstborn son Seamy in the upshot of English landholding policies and refuses to lose the land to foreign capital. Doing so would be tantamount to also losing Tadgh, since the loss of the land would mean that the younger son would be uprooted like the dandelion seeds of the opening scene and Bull’s progeny scattered from the village and the homeland. With the loss of the land, Bull’s dreams and desires would indeed all be ‘gone’. The film’s tackling the issue of the land and national identity, in other words, is not merely a lesson in Irish history or in the understanding of a nationalist viewpoint. *The Field* asks its international audience to consider the complexities of national identity and memory and to recognise that what may seem from a late twentieth century perspective as a straightforward case of capital and proprietorship is in fact subject to deep-seated perceptions of national identity, history and entitlement.

It is perhaps ironic that within years after the release of the film Ireland had ‘become an offshore powerhouse of the American technology boom’. From a contemporary perspective Sheridan’s invention of an Irish-American migrant for his film is suggestive of the significance of Ireland’s ability to establish itself as a major location for US investment into Europe in the late 1980s for the Irish economic boom in the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years 1995 to 2001. In such a view, Sheridan’s film seems to emphasise the retrograde impulse underlying Bull’s rejection of Peter’s corporate-based capital, which draws on the collective memory of the Famine and migration to keep at bay the influx of investments that could bring economic development to a stagnated Irish economy. This anachronistic view aside, given the state of 1980s Irish economy and the ensuing new waves of Irish emigration to America during that period, Sheridan’s introduction of the character of Peter seems to suggest a tension in Irish-American relations. The historically firm relations forged by waves...
of mainly nineteenth-century Irish emigration to America and the economic sponsorship of nationalist projects in Ireland by Irish-Americans from the late nineteenth-century onwards are marked in the film by an anxiety, at least on Bull’s part, that former Irish emigrants to America do not only possess newly-acquired capital unavailable to those who stayed in Ireland, but that the Irish who emigrated to America and their Irish-American descendants can come to displace the people who remained in Ireland. By implying this new form of existential and geographical exile into which the Irish may be forced by the country’s own emigrants, rather than by British colonisers, the film diverges from Keane’s examination of Ireland’s history with regard to Anglo-Irish migration and relations.

As this suggests, Sheridan’s invention of an Irish-American migrant is instrumental for the film’s thematisation of Irishness and its treatment of Ireland’s confrontation with its traumatic past and transatlantic migratory patterns. This change of the migrant figure in Sheridan’s adaptation of Keane’s play – the second change this essay addresses, the first being the reimagining of the characters of Bull and Tadgh – has been the subject of some criticism. The choice of a moneyed third generation immigrant from America who comes to Ireland ‘looking for his roots’, over Keane’s Galway émigré who returns to Ireland after some years in England ostensibly to help his wife recuperate from illness, has been viewed as a (cynical) flirt on Sheridan’s part with an American filmic audience. This may well be the case, as casting Berenger as the character of Peter surely led to greater international recognition for the film. However, the Irish-American migrant also allows Sheridan to widen the scope of Keane’s play when it comes to the treatment of Ireland’s colonial history and the fears of its being recolonized after Independence by the new global superpower, in the ways suggested above. Similarly, his re-imaging of the migrant figure affords Sheridan the opportunity to point to the wider (transatlantic) impact of Irish dispossession as well as to consider the status of Irish-American relations at a watershed moment of Irish history in the late twentieth century.

The tensions between the Irishman Bull and the Irish-American Peter allow for the exploration of a deeply ambivalent stance to migration, relating also to the New Irish emigration in the 1980s. On the one hand, in the film Bull defines Irish emigration in the early twentieth century as (continued) evidence of English colonial crimes and as a national tragedy: Bull describes Irish emigration in terms of the ‘coffin ships’ that ‘scattered us to the four corners of the earth’. In so doing, he articulates a nationalist view of emigration, understood as a form of exile resulting from colonial oppression. He suggests a kinship between the Irish who stayed in Ireland...
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and Irish emigrants at the same time as he highlights what has been called the ‘emotional legacy’ of the Famine for the Irish – which in the 1980s retained its force as the institution of a commemorative Famine walk indicates. Even as the film underscores the continuity of the emigrant narrative as traumatic and as a result of outsider interference and control over Irish land, through the character of Bull, it also implies that Famine migration has set the terms for how subsequent Irish emigration is seen.

On the other hand, in his confrontation with Peter, Bull offers a different definition of Irish national identity and its link to land ownership. Unlike his predecessor in John Ford’s The Quiet Man (1952), a film which has been described as shaping a stereotypical view of Ireland in cinema and with which Sheridan’s film is arguably in dialogue, the Irish-American in The Field is not a sympathetic and misunderstood hero who comes to win the hearts of a quaint rural community. Nor is he a benefactor whose investments solidify the special relationship between Ireland and America. For Bull, Peter is an unhomely usurper of the land. Bull says to him: ‘We stayed [. . .] You went away to America to make your few dollars. You think you can come back here with your few dollars and to buy the land that you deserted?’ Bull’s designation of the emigrant figure here clashes with the image of the ‘Irish emigrant-as-exile’ so important to the nationalist view to which he otherwise so fervently clings in the film. In this instance, the act of emigration is defined as a happy escape, as the easy way out, rather than as forced exile; it is an option that suggests the hunger for capital, rather than obligation and coercion. The apparent paradox in Bull’s stance toward migration is only partially accounted for by Peter’s claim for the field, and needs to be understood with regard to the film’s engagement with emotive discourses of Irish emigration, in particular, Bull’s sense that the relocation of Peter’s ancestors was a form of escape and an opportunity, and as such it constituted a betrayal of the nationalist narrative of exilic and discontented emigration. When the descendant of former emigrants comes to displace him, Bull’s recourse is to an exclusive definition of Irishness. For Bull, those who stayed and toiled showed loyalty, and, as they thereby embody the Irish spirit, they retain the legitimate claim to Irish land.

This exclusive designation of nationhood that Bull articulates alludes to century-old debates in Ireland over whether nationhood and citizenship should be understood as a matter of geography (where one was born) or defined as belonging to a specific ethnic and cultural group. Bull’s emphasis on the ‘law of the land’ and the insistence on having toiled the field for generations suggests that one needs to be born and to have remained on Irish soil to have a right to the land. For Bull, in leaving,
Peter’s ancestors relinquished any legitimate claim to it. In this version of national identity, Peter is not recognised as Irish but as an ‘outsider’: he is ‘the Yank’ who should ‘go home’. This stance seems to follow a civic definition of Irishness and an understanding of legitimacy that follows the so-called ‘law of the soil’ – rather than the ethno-cultural conception of nationhood by which ‘the law of blood’ is a determining criterion. In Sheridan’s adaptation of The Field, then, which compared to Keane’s play adds resonance to the question of migration in part by changing the migrant figure, a nationalist perception of nationhood and of the right to the land is inseparable from the memory and definition of migration. What is more, the film’s treatment of migration highlights a deeply ambivalent position to the legacy of Irish emigration to America and addresses the significance of a cultural memory of suffering, and of nationalist visions of Irish emigration, for the understanding of new waves of transatlantic migration and new forms of colonialism in the twentieth century.

Indeed, Sheridan’s treatment of Ireland’s traumatic past is suggestive of the ways in which a cultural memory of the Famine and emigration provides the prism through which Irish history is understood. The film traces a history of Irish dispossession by linking national crises involving emigration at different points in Ireland’s modern history, effectively from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. The familial experience that Bull recounts in the 1930s of his own siblings emigrating, and of his eldest son’s suicide in response to the probability of emigration, and indeed Peter’s status as a third-generation Irish emigrant to America, relate to the understanding of nineteenth-century emigration as a traumatic ‘strategy for family survival’. Additionally, Bull’s recounting resounds in the 1980s with the experiences of many Irish citizens, whose family members felt they had little option but to emigrate upon, what Jim Mac Laughlin calls, the ‘re-opening of emigrant trails’ to Britain and the United States. The predicament in which Bull’s family finds itself before Seamy’s suicide, through an impending forced exile of one of the sons, recalls the findings of the West of Ireland Survey, namely that a large percentage of New Wave emigrants in the 1980s were Irish teenagers. That the emigration of large numbers of young people is a demographic statistic characteristic of the emigration of the 1980s, rather than Famine or subsequent nineteenth-century emigration, suggests that the film purposefully taps into the frustration in the 1980s over renewed Irish degradation and emigration. The thematisation of the emotionally fraught topic of Irish destitution further recalls that, at the time of the film’s production and release, a traumatic Irish history was perceived as repeating itself.
At the same time, with regard to how the film engages with the keeping alive of a traumatic past, *The Field* repudiates the uses of collective remembrance to distort a sombre image of current problems. It is significant, here, that Sheridan has changed Keane’s plot, the latter of which ends with the covering up of the émigré’s murder and turns the audience’s attention away from Bull onto the auctioneer’s son Leamy and his sense of entrapment and moral collusion with the crimes of his elders. By turning, rather, to national history and the uses of memory, Sheridan’s film denounces the remembrance of the past which rationalises personal desires and obscures present offences. Its criticism of the uses of the past is evident in the episode where Bull refers to the Church’s collusion in the (re)colonisation of Ireland as a response to Father Doran’s public plea that Peter’s murderer be brought to justice. When Father Doran, after having chastised the congregation for its complicit silence in the murder, announces at Sunday service that he will close the doors of the Church until someone steps forward with information to catch the murderer, Bull accuses the Church of turning its back on the destitute Irish people. Recalling the narrative of the Famine and emigration that he has returned to throughout the film, he tells the priest: ‘Go on Father, go on. Lock the gates to God’s house. Sure they were locked at the time of the Famine too. No priest died at the time of the Famine: only poor people like us’. Bull suggests the Church’s absence from people’s lives at times of crisis and he implies, as he does in other instances in the film, that the religious authorities have sided with the colonizing power. For Bull, Father Doran’s defence of the Widow’s right to sell the field to the highest bidder and his socializing with Peter are signs of betrayal of Irish interests. Bull calls for a collective ‘we’ of the ‘poor’ Irish people that will unite in the face of national adversity and refuse to help those who betray the romantic-nationalist idea of the ‘law of the land’. He has already argued that the ‘law of the land’ is stronger and more valid than common law, and by drawing attention to the repetition of wrong-doings from the past, effectively, he attempts to deflect his own crime. By this episode toward the end of the film, of course, Bull’s claims on the field have lost their initial emotional appeal, given that Bull has murdered a man to secure it – ostensibly to teach him ‘the lesson of the land’. What is highlighted in the scene is a blindness in Bull, a refusal to recognize his own crimes. Bull’s justification is suggestive of a troubling distortion of memory which forgets his own wrongdoing but calls upon historical wrongs to legitimize his actions. Underlying this scene is a warning against an opportunistic use of the past that aims to authorize personal interests.
Next to the universalizing overtones of this counsel, it is tempting to see the film’s warning as an indirect comment on the politico-economic situation in 1980s Ireland and the residual resentment directed both against the perceived mismanagement by the Irish government of the country’s economy which led to a renewed wave of Irish emigration to America and against the consequences of colonial rule that underlie Anglo-Irish relations upon the film’s production and release. Even as the film apparently distances itself from the situation in the 1980s, or indeed in the 1960s (which is the setting of Keane’s play), by virtue of being set at an earlier time, Bull’s refusal to acknowledge his own crimes is suggestive of a larger problem pertaining to the selective remembrance of the past and of its uses. Given the prominent and shaping role that representations of the past in collective memory and through commemoration have played in Ireland in determining individual and collective actions, the film’s treatment of the ways in which Bull dominates collective remembrance in the village and keeps historical events alive for his own purposes suggests the potentially entropic force of historical memory.

In this light, the film and particularly its tragic ending stand as a warning against the consequences of reliving the troubles of the past as contemporary events. Indeed, the film gains its politico-ethical momentum by rooting the protagonist’s destruction not just in putting his faith into a damaging romantic-nationalist vision of Irishness, but also in using collective memory in ways which lock him in resentment over past wrongs and in an inability to see alternative ways of life – such as Tadgh imagines when he abandons the claim to the land for a life of mobility – and which defend violence through a sense of nationalist righteousness. By showing the nationalism that Bull represents to be violently exclusive, as emphasised by Peter’s murder and the rationalization of its concealment, The Field amplifies other criticisms of this version of Irish nationalism and emphasises the destructive consequences of its continuing influence.

Conclusion

Erll and Rigney have stressed that popular culture generally and, in particular, film constitutes a privileged representational form for its capacity to treat collective memory. Sheridan’s The Field, a film that has been given considerable attention in Ireland and abroad, offers a critical perspective into Irish history and identity, and into the uses of cultural memory. The Field treats the idea that Irishness is bound up in a history of dispossession and displacement, an idea which constitutes an integral part of an Irish national consciousness, and, as Barton notes, which has become
dominant in America and, through Hollywood productions, also elsewhere. The film’s remediation of Irish suffering through narratives of the Famine and emigration, in which the Irish are presented as the victims of antagonistic imperialists, shows the continued relevance in the late twentieth century of a history of dispossession for the understanding of Irish attitudes to migration as well as to nostalgic and nationalist constructions of identity. While the film criticises such views of Irishness, it also invites a consideration of the ways in which Ireland’s past is remembered, represented, and misrepresented, and by extension, with the role that collective memory plays in deciding perceptions of Irishness and the future of the country.

Notes and References


4 Ryder critiques the stereotyping of corporate Americanness and traditional farming Irishness in Sheridan’s film (124).

5 The sentimentalisation of a nostalgic Irishness is not merely accounted for by the film’s politics and aesthetics. There is also a historical dimension to this representation of 1930s Irishness. As Declan Kiberd has noted, the idealisation of rurality and the pristine as authentic Irishness was propagated in the early years of the Irish nation-state. Kiberd, Inventing Ireland (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) 486. On de Valera’s views on Irish history and identity, see Mary E. Daly, ‘De Valera’s Historical Memory’, Memory Ireland, Volume 1: History and Modernity, ed. Oona Frawley (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011) 142-56.


7 Cavanagh discusses nationalist myth in the visual tableaux of the film, for instance when Bull and Tadgh watch the islandmen as they launch the curragh at
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the opening of the film in a scene that recalls a painting by Paul Henry and, at the film’s end, when Bull fights the sea like the mythological figure of Cú Chulainn (96).


13 Erll 392.

14 Erll 392.


17 Kearney 273.

18 Stewart has suggested that the ‘famine of 1741 was the worst in Irish history’ and it led to more casualties than the Famine of 1845-48. However, the latter is the one that has been solidified in Irish cultural memory (106).

19 The significance of Famine emigration for an Irish understanding of its history as one of repeated traumatic displacement is underscored by Fintan O’Toole in the late 1980s, when he states that the Irish ‘still want to think of our emigrants in a continuous line with all those who have left since the Famine.’ O’Toole, ‘Some of Our Emigrants Are Happy to Go’, The Irish Times, 14 September 1989.

20 Cavanagh 95.


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23 Cavanagh 95.
24 Seamus Deane qtd in Cavanagh 95.
25 Cavanagh 95.
26 Cavanagh 96.
27 On the land issue in the nineteenth century, see, for example, Killeen 49.
28 Killeen 60-61.
29 Killeen 117.
30 Allen 26.
31 Killeen 59.
32 Ryder 124. Similarly David Haynes asserts that ‘we do not need the change of period’, from the mid-1960s in Keane’s play to the 1930s, nor ‘the American’ (97).
33 ‘New Irish’ is the term that was used to refer to the Irish emigrants to the United States during the 1980s and into the 1990s. Linda Dowling Almeida, *Irish Immigrants in New York City, 1945-1995* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 61.
34 On the definition of emigration as a political act perpetrated by the English against the Irish and of the Irish emigrant figure as a homesick exile, see Kerby A. Miller, ‘Emigrants and Exiles: Irish Cultures and Irish Emigration to North America, 1790-1922’, *Irish Historical Studies* 22.86 (September 1980): 97-125.
35 Kee 77.
38 On historical debates over the definition of Irish nationhood, see Kearney 59-73.
39 For a discussion of the ‘law of the soil’ and the ‘law of blood’ as theories of Irish nationhood, see Kearney 59-73.
41 Mac Laughlin 57.
According to Mac Laughlin, who underscores that Irish teenagers have been particularly affected by emigration since the 1980s, New Wave emigration in the 1980s amounted to ‘an annual average of 14,400 emigrants between 1981 and 1986, rising to 28,000 in 1986 and an average of 51,000 per annum between 1987 and 1988’ (49).

Mac Laughlin 49.


A tendency in Ireland to relive the past as contemporary events has been described as tantamount to lacking history. Richard Rose qtd in McBride 1-2.

Erlil and Rigney 1.

Barton 5-6.