



## "Pointing a Topical Moral at the Present": Watching *Knocknagow* in 1918

 Denis Condon

[Click here to view \*Knocknagow\* \(1918\)](#)

### Introduction

In his seminal account of Irish silent cinema, Kevin Rockett locates the Film Company of Ireland's *Knocknagow* in relation to the politics of Irish nationalism in the period between the Easter Rising of 1916 and the War of Independence (Rockett, 18–23). Indicating the political logic behind the filmmakers' choice of elements in their adaptation of Charles J. Kickham's novel *Knocknagow, or The Homes of Tipperary* (1873), Rockett contends that in an increasingly fraught political situation, "the release of a film such as *Knocknagow* was certain to be interpreted in the light of current events" (Rockett, 21). Despite the plausibility of such an argument, and his suggestive juxtaposition of narrative details and political occurrences in 1917–18, Rockett offers little evidence that contemporary audiences did actually consider the film in some way relevant to the momentous events unfolding around them. Part of the reason for this omission may be that Rockett focuses on the screening of the film in Dublin in late April, by which point it had already been exhibited in many other towns and cities in Ireland. My own discussion of *Knocknagow*'s audiences in *Early Irish Cinema, 1895–1921* (2008) focuses in particular on articles in Ireland's first cinema periodical, *Irish Limelight* (Condon 2008, 243–53). Although it to some extent considers popular audiences in relation to the film's premiere in Clonmel, my concern there was mainly with audiences involved in the film business in Ireland. Yet *Knocknagow* was in fact shown not merely to these elite viewers but to large audiences across an extensive and growing network of venues that showed films either mainly or exclusively. In the following essay, I would therefore like to continue the task I set myself in that earlier work by putting the audience back into discussions of *Knocknagow*.

The essay is in two parts. The first part offers a methodological consideration of the task of using local and regional newspapers as an archive of historical cinema audiences. The second examines the reception of *Knocknagow* in the first four months of its release, between January and April 1918.

### Local Newspapers: A Film Archive ?

On 13 April 1918, Dublin's *Evening Herald* published an interview with FCOI producer James Mark Sullivan, written by the newspaper's drama critic "Jacques" (John J. Ryce), in its "Music and Drama" column. With an eye to *Knocknagow*'s Dublin release, Sullivan discussed the film's ongoing success around Ireland and outlined his hopes for this and other films which he was about to bring to the United States.<sup>[1]</sup> Although his thoughts on *Knocknagow* would seem particularly relevant to an understanding of the film's domestic reception, Sullivan's comments on his expectations for the American business trip are in some ways more revealing of how the company saw *Knocknagow* in relation to the rest of its catalogue. Sullivan implied that the outcome of his excursion would be especially interesting to Irish readers because of cinema's appeal to audiences beyond Ireland. "[F]rom the cinema very direct impressions of a country in all its aspects can be given to the world at large," he argued, expressing a desire "to be worthy of properly representing Ireland to the other nations" (*Evening Herald*, 13 April 1918). Specifically, the FCOI aimed to challenge the stage Irish figures of popular culture by offering representations of the real Ireland:

"We desire," he says, "to show Ireland sympathetically; to get away from the clay pipe and the knee breeches; to show Ireland's rural life, with pride in the same; to show Ireland's metropolitan life intelligently, depicting the men and women of the 20th century—in short, Ireland at its best in every walk of human endeavour." (*Evening Herald*, 13 April 1918)

Announcing itself as *the* Film Company of Ireland, the FCOI presented itself less as a commercial company than as a national cultural institution whose role in cinema paralleled that of the Abbey Theatre in stage drama, an equivalence apparently justified

by the presence of Abbey personnel in the FCOI (*Irish Limelight*, January 1917, 3). The films it produced would promote forms of Irishness which the company believed were more acceptable to Irish audiences, not only abroad but also in Ireland, where the cinema was increasingly dominating entertainment in even the smallest towns.

Sullivan's trip to America was a requisite part of the economics of making films in Ireland, and the necessity of addressing several audiences at once explains some of the contradictions of his statements relating to *Knocknagow*. An 8,700-foot adaptation of the most popular Irish novel of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, *Knocknagow* was the FCOI's most ambitious work to date by far. The choice of novel seems, on the one hand, an overtly nationalist statement: its author was a former president of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and one of the best known Irish revolutionaries of the latter half of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the nature of Kickham's novel—rich in detail of Irish country life in the 1840s but also sprawling and sentimental rather than overtly political—was such that it could be adapted without courting political controversy. Certainly, with an opening title declaring its intention to "turn back the pages of time to the Ireland of '48" (Intertitle 3) and rural characters costumed in knee breeches and tail coats (see fig. 1), the FCOI's *Knocknagow* did not obviously contribute to the kind of modernizing project being proposed by Sullivan.

Sullivan's comments to "Jacques" about the film's popularity in Ireland were clearly strategic and intended to create a favourable impression of *Knocknagow*'s commercial potential on the eve of his departure; more accurate information on the film must be sought elsewhere. Claiming that the film was being received "like no other picture was ever received in Ireland or out of Ireland before," he contended: If the film challenged established stage-Irish conventions and encouraged pride in Ireland's rural traditions, it did so by adopting the familiar and, crucially, popular *mise en scène* of the Irish melodrama. This balance between familiar and novel elements was sought by all producers aiming for a mass audience, which for Irish filmmakers, much more so than for Irish theatre producers, lay overseas. Run by a prominent Irish-American lawyer, the FCOI always intended to release its films in the United States; indeed, the economics of the film business meant that even a phenomenal box-office success in Ireland would be insufficient for the company to cover its production costs. While the FCOI had made several films with contemporary Irish settings by 1918, their potential for unsettling audiences had likely been neutralized by their tried-and-tested romance and comedy plots. The challenges posed by *Knocknagow* to American audiences of non-Irish ancestry seem to have less to do with images of Ireland and more to do with the ambitious length of a film which lacked star actors and plentiful sensational incidents.

From every place where it has once been shown we are receiving return bookings—a remarkable thing in the case of a picture, though very ordinary in that of a play or opera. For instance, the city of Limerick gave us four bookings, and I question if any other picture every received over two. The same is true of Waterford, Clonmel, Cork, Carlow, and other towns. This week we are breaking all records in Waterford. I mention these facts to indicate that there is prospect of promise and permanency in our enterprise. (*Evening Herald*, 13 April 1918)

Sullivan's claim that *Knocknagow*'s extraordinary reception clearly indicated the success of the FCOI is not supported by the available evidence of advertisements, notes, and reviews in local newspapers. The film did not receive multiple bookings in those cities and towns where it was exhibited, with the possible exception of Carlow, for which no cinema advertisements or reviews survive for 1918. However, Sullivan's veracity is not at issue here because his statements should not be taken literally. As a producer, Sullivan was expected to exaggerate the merits of the work he was promoting. Not just an impresario's showmanship, his comments evince the ambiguity required of a filmmaker seeking a mass audience even as he presents the core of that audience—the Irish and diasporic Irish—with material that could be considered nationalist. To establish how *Knocknagow* was actually regarded by contemporary commentators, it is therefore necessary to return to the extant accounts in local and regional newspapers.

These considerations remind us of the need to approach newspapers as a cinematic archive with caution because of their shaping by material and ideological factors. Historians of early cinema, for whom few other surviving sources exist, have long used newspapers as a primary archival resource. A sophisticated recent example of such scholarship is Paul Moore's "The Social Biograph: Newspapers as Archives of the Regional Mass Market for Movies," which offers a detailed statistical analysis of newspaper reports of the arrival of cinemas in towns and villages in southern Ontario, Canada. Combining empirical and theoretical discussion, Moore explores the several ways in which the press and cinema interacted, arguing that cinema's modernity is precisely located in the way it constituted "a mass practice that connected all places in a region, not to each other so much as to the mass market" (Moore, 264), a function previously fulfilled by newspapers. For Moore, "[e]arly twentieth-century newspapers are an archive of cinema's reorganization of social life" (Moore, 263). Examining this archive, Moore develops a useful model for classifying the interest shown by newspapers in the opening of a cinema based on whether the event was considered "adworthy" (announced by a paid advertisement), "noteworthy" (discussed as a short item in a column with titbits of news), or "newsworthy" (covered in an article with its own heading) (Moore, 271–2). Plotting these different kinds of coverage in relation to whether the population of an urban area was sufficiently large to support a weekly newspaper, a daily, or multiple dailies, he claims to be able to predict the likelihood and the nature of corresponding coverage in areas with a similar profile.

Many of Moore's findings are applicable to the interactions between the press and the nascent cinema in Ireland, but if they are to be applied to the Irish reception of *Knocknagow*, the distinctions he draws must be modified to take account of differences in

period, political factors, and analytical focus. To take the first and third of these points: rather than the reception of a single film in 1918, Moore is examining the arrival of the first picture houses in urban areas in southern Ontario in the early 1910s. As such, he is writing cinema history rather than film history. In his introduction to the book in which Moore's essay appears, Richard Maltby makes clear the differences between the two forms of analysis, arguing strongly for a cinema history that is not defined by methodological approaches to filmic texts (Maltby 2011; see also Maltby 2007). Among the approaches that focus on films rather than cinema, Maltby includes reception studies, which may not engage in textual analysis but are generally focused, as here, on case studies in the reception of particular films. In focusing on *Knocknagow*, a film that has not received the attention warranted by its place in Irish film history, the present essay is therefore primarily film rather than cinema history, its aim being to illuminate aspects of the Irish cinema. Nevertheless, the emphasis in this essay falls less on illuminating how the tendrils of a capitalist market brought a common experience of urban modernity to otherwise remote places, and more on how *Knocknagow* might have resonated with Irish audiences in a time of dramatic political change.

Certainly, the focus on one film, rather than on the regional emergence of cinema, in many ways makes for a more manageable project. Yet local and regional Irish newspapers are problematic when considered as an archive of cinema, and even more so as an archive for particular films. *Knocknagow* premiered in late January 1918, and was shown throughout the year and, with decreasing frequency and in ever smaller towns, into 1919 and beyond. Its exhibition period is therefore reasonably delimited. However, because it is unclear where and when the film was shown, establishing even these basic details requires considerable research on a large number of local and regional Irish papers, which were in a process of rapid transformation. The late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century was a boom period for Irish newspapers with almost 300 titles being published between 1885 and 1910, half of them new (Morash, 116). Few of them are indexed or available in a searchable digitized format. Research of the kind advocated by Moore still involves much time-consuming page turning and scanning of microfilms.

After 1910, the Irish newspaper industry underwent a period of considerable volatility as a result of wartime taxation, paper shortages, censorship, and political developments in Ireland that included unionist resistance to Home Rule (limited legislative independence) and the rise of militant popular nationalism and an Irish labour movement. Because many newspapers were founded in response to political developments, they frequently show little interest in the rise of the cinema, which had no apparent relevance to such matters. Indeed, on occasion the cinema appears to have been treated as unwelcome. Cinema met with open resistance from the isolationist Irish-Ireland movement, which saw it as an agent of British imperialism, not only because it propagated insulting stereotypes of the Irish but also because its technological sophistication and mass appeal evinced an unwelcome modernity. For mainstream nationalist politicians, who were eager to be seen as supportive of local industries, cinema was a competitor which harmed the trade of other local leisure providers, such as publicans, or which displaced live theatrical and musical entertainments (for which many journalists had embedded cultural preferences) (Condon 2010).

Indeed, culture and politics in Ireland in the late 1910s were so thoroughly imbricated that one's choice of newspaper was largely determined by one's political sympathies. The nationalist and unionist editorial line followed by the most popular national papers, Dublin's *Irish Times* and *Freeman's Journal*, reflected the main operative political division in Irish society between those who sought Irish self-government in one form or another and those who advocated Ireland's continued inclusion in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Although local newspapers exhibited considerable editorial variation, the most popular local papers—with the exception of the predominantly unionist north-eastern part of the province of Ulster—typically supported the constitutional policy pursued by parliamentarians of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster.

By 1918, a noticeable shift to the more militant nationalism of Sinn Féin was well underway. The close identification of individual newspapers with political sympathies is illustrated by an incident that occurred in the town of Navan, County Meath, during a protest against the introduction of conscription to Ireland proposed by the Military Service Acts Amendments Bill, commonly known as the Manpower Bill, then being debated by Parliament. The *Drogheda Independent* reported on 20 April 1918 that an address by a local priest named Father Cooney had culminated in the burning of the *Irish Times* and the *Dublin Evening Mail* because of their support for the proposed legislation. "If they were going to prevent the Government trying to put in this Bill," Cooney was reported as saying,

what better way could they convey to the Ministers of the English Parliament the determination of the Irish people to resist Conscription than by letting them see that a paper that breathed a word in favour of Conscription would be burned as the "Irish Times" and the "Evening Mail" would be burned by them that night (applause). (*Drogheda Independent*, 20 April 1918)

Such incidents remind us that reviews in newspapers should not be read as neutral appraisals.

Opposition to Irish conscription by the British army served to unite all varieties of an often fractious nationalist opinion by mid-1918, helping to ensure Sinn Féin's overwhelming victory in the general election of December that year. Sinn Féin's electoral triumph would later be seen as strong endorsement by the Irish electorate of the party's policy of refusing to take up seats in the House of Commons, and in January 1919 Sinn Féin founded an alternative parliament, the Dáil, in Dublin. Early in 1918, however, Sinn Féin's remarkable successes in recent by-elections received a check in the form of a series of victories for

Parliamentary Party candidates, most notably in Waterford, where William Redmond, a decorated World War I veteran, won the seat vacated by the death of his father John Redmond, the Parliamentary Party leader. Developments elsewhere were less promising for the parliamentarians. In mid-April, the Irish Convention, a body composed of nationalist and unionist representatives which Prime Minister David Lloyd George had convened in order to resolve the fraught political situation, issued a report without having reached unanimous agreement among its members and—fatally—without having secured the participation of Sinn Féin. With the failure of the Convention and the introduction of conscription, Irish nationalist opinion moved towards the more radical separatism being advocated by Sinn Féin. It was in this highly charged political climate that *Knocknagow* was released in January 1918.

### Touring the Country

Although all of the FCOI's previous productions had premiered in Dublin, *Knocknagow* was exhibited in several towns and cities before opening in the capital in April 1918. To emphasize its fidelity to Kickham's novel and generate positive publicity, the company gave the film's first public showing at Magner's Theatre, Clonmel, County Tipperary, where it ran from Wednesday, 30 January, to Saturday, 2 February 1918. The filmmakers had based themselves in Clonmel during production, shooting in the town and in nearby districts such as the mountain of Slievenamon and the village of Mullinahone, Kickham's home (*Irish Limelight*, July 1917, 14). As the largest town in Tipperary, with a population of 10,209 according to the 1911 census, and enjoying good rail connections to Dublin, Clonmel was the obvious choice for a premiere in this area.

The uniqueness of the event made it highly newsworthy. The *Clonmel Chronicle* and *Nationalist*—the town's twice-weekly nationalist newspapers—carried advertisements, notes, and substantial reviews. Anticipating a high degree of interest, Magner's Theatre shortened its usual programme for the first part of the week—featuring *Under Two Flags* (USA 1916, dir. J. Gordon Edwards), an imperial romance starring Theda Bara, and the popular crime serial *The Grey Ghost* (USA 1917, dir. Stuart Paton)—from three days to two in order to allow *Knocknagow* a four-day run of nine performances (fig. 2). The evening shows were advertised in the *Chronicle* and *Nationalist* of 26 January 1918 as starting at 8pm, with matinees at 4pm, and an earlier matinee at 1pm on Saturday. Its advertisement also warned patrons, "from the country especially," to book seats in advance or attend the matinee.<sup>[2]</sup> While accompaniment was provided by two local musicians, Madge Magner on piano and Bridie Roynane on violin, the Clonmel screenings appear to have lacked the folk songs that were to be a prominent feature of screenings elsewhere (*Nationalist*, 2 February 1918; O'Donnell, 144–5).

Nevertheless, both Clonmel papers largely avoided critique, discussing the film in terms that adhered closely to FCOI's own publicity. The *Chronicle* characterized the FCOI as producing "genuine Irish films depicting the Irish people, their homes, and their daily life as we know them to be, and not the travesties that we read of in alleged Irish novels and see too often on the stages" (2 February 1918). Despite the historical setting of Kickham's novel, the reviewer implied that the film version offered an authentic representation of the Irish people. The *Chronicle* concluded that the FCOI was "to be congratulated on having preserved the correct atmosphere, showing perfect sympathy with the original conception throughout." *Knocknagow*, it declared, "has satisfied everyone to the fullest extent, and having received the hallmark of complete approval in the 'Homes of Tipperary' ... is bound to be a big success wherever it is shown," particularly among "the exiled Irish in England as well as in America and Australia". In February 1918, *Irish Limelight* devoted a full page to the reproduction of a telegram from Magner's to FCOI: "Knocknagow a terrific success. All records smashed. Packed solid before advertised hour. Waiting crowds necessitated police supervision. Heartiest congratulations on film which is a credit to yourselves and to Ireland" (3). Although the *Nationalist* reported "crowded audiences" that the *Chronicle* described as "enthusiastic and delighted," neither newspaper indicates any need for police supervision of the crowd. Indeed, the *Chronicle*'s review of the film begins on a cautionary note: "'Knocknagow' occupies a cherished place in every home in Tipperary, and in selecting Clonmel for the first exhibition of the film the Company were submitting it to a severe test before very exacting critics" (2 February 1918).

For its part, the *Nationalist* praised the film's attention to period detail in the set design and wardrobe. Like the *Chronicle*, it commended the sympathetic adaptation and superior acting, and offered its only implicit criticism by remarking that much of the material shot in Clonmel had ended up on the cutting-room floor:

The Film Co. took a great many pictures, especially in Clonmel, but when the time came to bring the film within the limits of a single evening's show a large proportion of them had to be cut out, and only sufficient to carry on the story in its visualised presentation was retained. (2 February 1918)

Yet the *Nationalist* also introduced a political note by emphasizing that the film was set during "a sad epoch of Irish history":

Strangers who see it will be helped to a better understanding of Irish questions, while our own people, viewing it, will feel greater pride in the traditions of their forebears, who suffered so intensely, who bore their trials with such fortitude and patience, and whose bitter sacrifices helped to win for oncoming generations the advantages presently enjoyed, and the still more substantial advantages nearing fruition. (2 February 1918)

The film prompted the *Nationalist's* reviewer to argue that the Irish people's capacity to endure hardship had brought the country to its current position, a position that, presumably if they adhered to these same qualities of forbearance, would soon be elevated still further—although in what way the reviewer remained silent.

Only after this special run in Clonmel did the film receive its trade showing to exhibitors and the press, at Dublin's Sackville Picture House on Wednesday, 6 February, at 11 am.<sup>[3]</sup> Those present included several cast members and two journalists, "Jacques" (John J. Ryce) and J.A.P. (Joseph A. Power), who wrote substantial reviews for the *Evening Telegraph* and the *Evening Herald*, respectively. Although this had been a screening for the trade, the reviews in these popular dailies (also both moderately nationalist) imaginatively placed their readers in the auditorium. This was particularly apparent in J.A.P.'s review for the *Evening Telegraph*, which began by describing his sense of privilege at being in the presence of the actors as they watched

their counterfeit presentments on the screen for two hours and a quarter. Occasionally I fancied I heard a half-suppressed groan as the film revealed to somebody the bitter truth that he wasn't as good as he thought he was in some particular scene. . . . On the whole, however, they have no reason to reproach themselves for what we saw yesterday. (7 February 1918)

J.A.P. stressed the necessity for professional critics to remain detached, less from the images on the screen than from the possibly exaggerated applause of the audience. Despite praising many of the performers, particularly actor-director Fred O'Donovan, he criticized the script heavily and offered suggestions for clarifying the narrative and improving the editing.

In contrast to J.A.P.'s measured and at times critical assessment, the *Evening Herald's* reviewer, "Jacques," conjured up a rather different audience and relationship to the images by recalling the distressing scene of a real eviction:

Many years ago, in the black days of the battering ram and the barrel of pitch, I was witness to evictions on an estate in the County Cork. I saw the cabin doors broken and the furniture flung out, and the poor half-dressed occupants lying on the roadside amid the wreckage of their home. I have seen all these horrors again yesterday on the screen. They occurred in "Knocknagow." (7 February 1918)

"Jacques" presented himself as a fascinated spectator, one who had seen not actors but the embodiment of Kickham's characters, and who had been given a fully realized narrative based on the novel: "In short, we were back again in Knocknagow, and not a man, woman, or child or us wanted to leave it until we had the story complete." Far from being industry professionals, the viewers evoked by "Jacques" are Irish men and women experiencing their own history and literature on the screen for the very first time. And, like the commentators in Clonmel before him and many subsequent reviewers, "Jacques" anticipates that Tipperary's natural beauty would have its greatest impact on expatriate Irish audiences in America.

Although *Knocknagow* played in smaller towns in the interim, its next screening in a large town or city was in Cork, Ireland's third largest city with a population of 76,673 in 1911, where it played at the prestigious Opera House during the week of 18–23 March. Playing at the Opera House rather than one of the city's cinemas allowed the film to benefit from the newspapers' longstanding practice of reviewing all entertainment hosted by this venue. This engagement not only fell directly after St. Patrick's Day (17 March) but also in the politically charged interval between John Redmond's funeral and the by-election for his seat in Waterford. As well as receiving extensive newspaper coverage, Redmond's funeral was the subject of newsreel footage shown at Cork's Imperial Cinema and Assembly Rooms Picturedrome in the week before *Knocknagow* began its run. Adverts for the Assembly Rooms described it as the "only complete Film taken, covering every important incident from the arrival at Kingstown to the stirring scenes at the graveside" (*Evening Echo*, 15 March 1918).

In its advance notice of *Knocknagow*, the *Cork Constitution*, a unionist daily, observed that the film treated "Irish life as it really was in the middle of the nineteenth century" (14 March 1918). That the film is set around the time of the Great Famine, the most calamitous event in Irish history, during which two million people died or emigrated, could easily have given nationalists a pretext for condemning British misrule in Ireland. However, the *Cork Constitution* stressed that because of "the impartial manner in which the subject is treated" unionist audiences need fear no discomforting moments (14 March 1918). Other brief advance notices of the film in the nationalist *Cork Examiner* and another Cork newspaper, the *Evening Echo*, also focused on its fidelity to Kickham's novel. "The one thing above all others that should appeal to patrons," declared the *Examiner*, "is that the film . . . is not a condensed dramatised version photographed on the stage, but the whole of Kickham's novel produced amidst natural surroundings in Tipperary" (16 March 1918). The *Echo* made a similar point, suggesting that because of its fidelity to Kickham, the film should attract "all those who take an interest in the economic and social development which has taken place in this country during the past two generations, as well as those who can enjoy really good cinema work" (14 March 1918).

According to the *Cork Constitution* of 19 March 1918, "large and appreciative audiences" greeted *Knocknagow* at both houses on its opening night. The film screened twice a night for its six-day run, with matinees on Monday and Saturday. Substantial reviews in the *Constitution* and *Evening Echo* show little divergence of opinion that can be attributed to unionist or nationalist editorial policy. While the *Echo* specifically mentioned the eviction scene and the villainous role of the agent for the absentee landlord, it

did not seek to emphasize the relevance of these historical details for the present; the *Constitution* merely commended the film's impartial treatment of a "troublesome period". Both reviews praised the film for the accuracy of its period details, the beauty of the Tipperary landscape, and its crucial faithfulness to Kickham, concluding once again by indicating the audiences' enjoyment.

The final significant detail relating to the film's screenings in Cork lies in an advertisement on the Friday, 22 March issue of the *Cork Examiner* announcing that vocalist Betty Byrne would sing a "popular Irish selection" during the final performances on Saturday. It is difficult to assess the degree to which musical accompaniment, which varied from place to place, was an attraction for audiences or even determined in ways specific to the venue how local audiences interpreted images on the screen. Reviews only occasionally mentioned the accompaniment provided by musicians such as Magner and Roynane in Clonmel, and restricted their remarks to approval of its suitability. However, the FCOI appears to have judged rightly that vocal accompaniment of the screenings would boost publicity and provide further incentives for audiences to attend: live entertainments of any type seemed to receive substantially more press coverage than films.

Interestingly, *Knocknagow* was often accompanied, not by a singer who, like Byrne, had been engaged specially for the screening, but by members of the cast. Brian Magowan, the film's main star, appeared on several occasions, often with another prominent cast member, Breffni O'Rourke. This was not Magowan's first vocal accompaniment of a FCOI film; he had sung at the premiere of the company's first film, *O'Neill of the Glen* (Ireland 1916, dir. J.M. Kerrigan), at the Bohemian Picture Theatre in Phibsboro, Dublin. In the case of *Knocknagow*, however, the FCOI gave this feature special prominence by having Magowan and O'Rourke, dressed in character, sing folk songs connected with the film. Even so, they did not appear at every venue where the film was shown and seem to have changed their performance to suit the location. Their earliest appearance may have been in Cavan in late February. "An interesting feature of the entertainment," reported the *Anglo-Celt*, "was that Mr. J. McGowan, who, as 'Mat the Thrasher' was the hero on the film, appeared each evening in the flesh and sang some old Irish ballads in very charming voice, while Mr. Breffni O'Rourke ('Bill Heffenan' [*sic*] in the play) gave some traditional Irish lays and witty stories" (2 March 1918).

Magowan appeared alone when *Knocknagow* opened to good attendances in Waterford over Easter 1918 in the week beginning 1 April (*Waterford Evening Star*, 1 April 1918). This opening was favourably timed during a holiday period when entertainments were invariably well patronized. With a population of 27,464 according to the 1911 census, the south-eastern port of Waterford was, after Cork and Limerick, the third most populous city in the province of Munster. *Knocknagow* played at the thousand-seat Coliseum, the larger of the city's two full-time cinemas in 1918. As well as being publicized with an unusually large advertisement in the *Waterford Evening Star* (fig. 3), one of the city's six newspapers, it received two notices in *Munster Express*'s "'Express' Items" column of short pieces of local interest and another in the *Waterford Evening Star*'s "Waifs and Strays Round Waterford" column, a humorous commentary on current affairs. "'Knocknagow; or, the Homes of Tipperary,' is being shown this week at the Coliseum," the *Evening Star*'s writer announced,

and I'd pawn my pocketbook, full or empty, if no other means were available, to have the opportunity of facing the proscenium. To see "Mat the Thrasher" on the screen, and in reality . . . makes a remembrance for life. He is no stage sore, like the smutty comedian. (3 April 1918)

Following a run at the Opera House in Derry from 8 to 13 April (fig. 4), *Knocknagow* opened in Limerick and Belfast on Monday, 15 April. Despite James Mark Sullivan's claim to have received four bookings, the film was only screened for the standard three days and at a relatively anonymous venue, the Shannon Cinema, on what appears to have been its first run in Limerick.<sup>[4]</sup> Although these screenings were advertised in two of the city's newspapers, none of the surviving papers carry a note or review that confirms any special interest in the film by Limerick audiences. Where the programmes of Limerick's Shannon Cinema had received little notice in the local press, *Knocknagow*'s screening in Belfast's Empire, as with its screening at the Empire circuit's Dublin theatre and the Cork Opera House, benefitted from a reciprocal arrangement between theatre managements and the newspapers whereby all theatrical entertainments were advertised in the press and, in turn, received notices and reviews. For all Sullivan's personal connections with Limerick, the film's financial success was far more dependent upon its run in Belfast, Ireland's largest city with ten times the population of Limerick. The reviewer continues in this vein, implicitly contrasting *Knocknagow* favourably with the smut and brazenness of "imported" comedians and comedienues. Whether the *Waterford Evening Star*'s writer had actually seen the film is unclear, however, because no further details of the screenings are given. The reference to seeing Mat the Thrasher "in reality" clearly refers to the fact that Magowan was appearing in person at screenings. The *Munster Express*'s first notice, published on the Saturday prior to *Knocknagow*'s opening, merely notes that the coming week would see the arrival of a film "described as the biggest picture-play ever made in Europe." Its second notice, published on the Saturday following the film's run in Waterford (6 April 1918), states that performances were well attended and describes how Magowan's performance of songs during the film's exhibition at Waterford was greeted with calls for an encore.

The situation was very different in Galway, where *Knocknagow* was screened at the Town Hall for the first three days of the week beginning Monday, 22 April, during a series of massive protests against conscription, the most important of which took place on 21 April. "Not since the days of the Land League has there been anything like the immense gathering in the open space at Eyre Square on Sunday," reported the *Galway Pilot* on 27 April: "There certainly could not have been less than ten or twelve thousand

people assembled [and] the pledge to resist Conscription was publicly taken by the citizens of all classes and sexes." Even allowing for exaggeration for political effect, any gathering of thousands of protesters in a city of barely 13,000 inhabitants must be treated as impressive. As the demonstrations made a common reference point of the Land League's campaign for the rights of tenant farmers in the 1880s, the political relevance of *Knocknagow* suddenly became clear to at least one Galway journalist. Despite the tangible importance of political events for the local press, none of the Belfast papers sought to extract an overt political message from *Knocknagow*. In the week before the film's run in the city, military authorities had suspended the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* for publishing details of the Irish Convention's report. Other papers were permitted to publish reports on the Saturday before the opening: the unionist *Northern Whig* declared that no consensus had emerged from the report; and the nationalist *Irish News* observed that a "Substantial Majority Declare for All-Ireland Parliament" (*Irish News*, 13 April 1918). On the same day as reviews of *Knocknagow* appeared in Belfast newspapers, the British cabinet met to draw up proposals for Irish Home Rule in hopes of placating Irish nationalist MPs who had spoken strongly against enactment of the Manpower Bill. In a city where unionism dominated public discourse, the introduction of conscription was less alarming than the prospect of Home Rule. For this reason, the FCOI sent Magowan and Breffni O'Rourke to Belfast rather than Limerick to sing folk songs at intervals during the film (fig. 5). The Empire's house orchestra, under the conductorship of W. L. Richard, played "suitable" but unspecified music (*Northern Whig*, 16 April 1918). Readers of the *Irish News* were particularly encouraged to look out for O'Rourke, "whose intensely dramatic portrayal of Billy Heffernan (the tall turfman) has aroused such widespread attention" (12 April 1918). The *Belfast Newsletter*, meanwhile, drew attention to Fred O'Donovan, "who has done so much to build up the fame of the Abbey Theatre Company" (16 April 1918). For the rest, the previews of the run are almost identical and clearly derived from the FCOI's own publicity materials. Apart from names of cast and characters, these materials evidently used statistics to stress the film's extraordinary length and production costs—the phrase "[t]he film is 8,700 feet in length, every inch Irish, and cost £9,000 to produce" appears in both the *Northern Whig* and the *Irish News*—in a deliberate strategy to emphasize the film's Irishness and to draw parallels with other lavish productions, such as *The Birth of a Nation* (USA 1915, dir. D.W. Griffith), which had been advertised in similar fashion.

While all four Galway papers reported in detail on the anti-conscription demonstrations, only the *Galway Express*, a supporter of Sinn Féin, covered *Knocknagow*. After a substantial synopsis by way of preview on 20 April 1918, the Saturday prior to the film's opening, the *Express* tellingly waited until the film had just a Saturday matinee left to run before publishing its full review. Clearly interested in the cinema as an artistic medium, the reviewer was equivocal in assessing what he or she regarded as an important Irish film. "The best Irish films exact a good deal of charity from the public," the review begins, "because, for some reason or another, they are rarely up to the mechanical perfection of the pictures turned out by the big companies whose names are now on every bill. This does not apply to 'Knocknagow'" (*Galway Express*, 27 April 1918). Acknowledging that the "lighting was not as good as in the American films," the writer nonetheless attributed *Knocknagow*'s overall artistic success to the fact that here on the curtain we had not only "The homes of Tipperary" down to the "hob," but the subtle atmosphere of the people and of the times, and the Irish scenery, so homely, do virginal, so peculiarly sui generis, so unlike anything but itself, that one immediately recognises and softens to it, even in a picture. (*Galway Express*, 27 April 1918)

Although *Knocknagow* deserved patronage for these aesthetic qualities and for its beautiful love stories, it also pointed a topical moral at the present time. We saw the evictions, the crowbar brigades, the burnings, the landlord oppression of 70 years ago, the attempt to wipe out a race. Such memories—only of the other day—as it revived scarcely accommodated the mind of the beholder to the nation of conscription. (*Galway Express*, 27 April 1918)

## Conclusion

Writers such as "Jacques" had indicated the historical importance and emotive power of the eviction scenes, but the *Galway Express*'s reviewer seems to have been the first to connect *Knocknagow* to the immediate political situation. As a popular cultural text, *Knocknagow* entered into a wide variety of local contexts in which audiences discovered in the film a multiplicity of pleasures. In adapting the most popular Irish novel of the period, FCOI gained the advantage of audience recognition but perhaps also the inevitable disadvantage—if it should be seen as such—that the film would be judged primarily on the basis of its fidelity to the novel. Indeed, many reviewers focused almost exclusively on this aspect of the film, with many others finding pleasure in the representations of Irish landscape and in the Irishness of the FCOI cast and crew. The vocal performances of Brian Magowan, Breffni O'Rourke, and others were clearly distinct pleasures for early audiences of the film. Mediated as they are through newspapers shaped by institutional dynamics and ideologies, and by the journalists who wrote notes and articles, the audience for early Irish films such as *Knocknagow* remains elusive yet nonetheless discernable in the press archives of silent cinema.

## Images



Figure 1. "Mat the Thrasher" gets his new coat." FCOI publicity still. Courtesy of The Irish Film Archive and the family of James Joseph Smyth and Mary Ellen Smyth.

**The Clonmel Theatre (Magner's) Programme for Week Commencing Jan. 28, 1918.**

Monday and Tuesday Evenings at 8.  
Tuesday—Matinee at 4.

1. **The Topical Budget.**
2. William Fox presents Theda Bara as "Cigarette" in **UNDER TWO FLAGS.** 6 Reels.
3. Eddie Polo in **THE GREY GHOST.** Episode 5. "Plunder." 2 Reels.

**Theda Bara.**—To the critics who know something of the ethics of dramatic art, it is universally acknowledged by them that Theda Bara acts with her head as well as her heart. She is clever as well as appealing. Mlle. Bara is full of surprises and seems to be equally at home in the character of an unscrupulous woman of the world, a sweet winsome girl, such as the part of the immortal Juliet demands, or the wild, half-tamed vivandière, Cigarette, of Ouida's world-famous drama. To be versatile in the true sense of the word is a gift from the gods, and Mlle. Theda Bara can always be relied upon to surprise us with something new and justify our greatest expectations, always aroused, when this famous Fox Star appears on the screen.

**USUAL ADMISSION PRICES.**

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday Evenings at 8.  
Thursday and Friday—Matinees at 4. Saturday—Matinees at 1 and 4.

THE FIRST PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF IRELAND'S PREMIER PICTURE PRESENTATION:

CHARLES J. KICKHAM'S  
**KNOCK-NA-GOW**  
PRODUCED BY THE FILM CO. OF IRELAND.

Admission (including Tax)—Box, 10s. 6d. each; Circle, 2s. 4d.; Balcony, 1s. 10d.; Stalls, 1s.; Pit, 8d.

Boxes and Circle Booking Now.

**A WARNING.**—In order that every Patron will have an opportunity of witnessing this mighty presentation in its entirety, without inconvenience, no admission will, under any circumstances, be allowed beyond the correct seating capacity of the Theatre. Intending Patrons from the country especially should make particular note of this fact, and either secure their seats now by booking same or make a special effort to come to the Matinees.

Figure 2. *Nationalist* (Clonmel), 26 January 1918.



**THE COLISEUM.**

MONDAY, APRIL 1st, AND  
DURING THE WEEK.

The Film Co. of Ireland  
PRESENTS  
IRELAND'S GREAT SUPER  
FILM,  
**KNOCKNAGOW,**  
OR THE  
**HOMES OF TIPPERARY**

Adapted from  
Charles Kickham's World-  
Famous Novel.

Depicted by Ireland's Premier  
Actors.

A Triumph for Irish Industry  
and Enterprise.

**MR. BRIAN M'GOWAN,**  
WHO TAKES THE PART  
OF  
**MAT THE THRASHER IN**  
THIS FILM,  
will sing appropriate Songs  
with the Picture, including the  
fine old Melody 'Slievenamon.'

As BRIAN M'GOWAN, aside  
from being a great Film Actor,  
is one of the Leading Baritone-  
Tenors of Ireland, it should  
add to the success of the Film.

**MATINEE MONDAY AT 3 O'C.**

**CHILDREN'S MATINEE,  
SATURDAY, 3 O'C.**

Figure 3. *Waterford Evening Star*, 1 April 1918.

**OPERA HOUSE**

*TO-NIGHT* and during the Week :

The Magnificent Irish Film Version of  
Kieckhafer's Famous Novel,

**Knock-na-Gow,**

*Taken by the Film Company of Ireland,*

FEATURING

Fred O'Donovan,	Valentine Roberts,
Brian Magowan,	Kathleen Murphy.
Arthur Shields,	Nora Clancy,
J. M. S. Carr,	Moira Breffni,
Breffni O'Rorke.	

**Cost £9,000 to Produce.**

Usual Prices of Admission (including Tax).  
Box Office open 11 to 4. Phone 244.

**7 — TWICE NIGHTLY — 9**

Figure 4. *Derry Standard*, 8 April 1918.

**E M P I R E**  
6.50.....TWICE NIGHTLY.....9  
**MAGNIFICENT FILM VERSION**  
**OF THE FAMOUS NOVEL**  
**“KNOCK-NA-GOW.”**  
**BRIAN MAGOWAN and BREFFNI**  
**O’ROBKE**  
(Who Play Important Parts in the Picture)  
**WILL SING IRISH AND FOLK SONGS**  
During the Exhibition of the Film.  
Prices as Usual (including Tax), 4d to 1s 3d.

Figure 5. *Northern Whig* (Belfast), 15 April 1918.

Works Cited

Newspapers:

*Anglo-Celt* (Cavan).

*Belfast Newsletter*.

*Belfast Evening Telegraph*.

*Clonmel Chronicle*.

*Cork Constitution*.

*Cork Examiner*.

*Derry Standard*.

*Drogheda Independent*.

*Dublin Evening Mail*.

*Evening Echo* (Cork).

*Evening Herald* (Dublin).

*Evening Telegraph* (Dublin).

*Freeman's Journal* (Dublin).

*Galway Express*.

*Galway Pilot*.

*Irish Independent* (Dublin).

*Irish Limelight* (Dublin).

*Irish News* (Belfast).

*Irish Times* (Dublin).

*Limerick Chronicle*.

*Limerick Leader*.

*Munster Express* (Waterford).

*Nationalist* (Clonmel).

*Northern Whig* (Belfast).

*Waterford Evening Star*.

Books and articles:

Condon, Denis. 2008. *Early Irish Cinema, 1895–1921*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press.

—. 2010. "Limelight on the Colleen Bawn": Resisting Autoexoticism in Provincial Irish Picture Houses in the Early 1910s. In *Peripheral Early Cinema: Domitor 2008*, ed. François Amy de la Bretèque, 245–55. Perpignan: Presses Universitaires de Perpignan.

Felter, Maryanne, and Daniel Schultz. 2004. James Mark Sullivan and the Film Company of Ireland. *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 8, no. 2 (Summer / Samhradh): 24–40.

Maltby, Richard. 2007. How Can Cinema History Matter More? *Screening the Past*, 22 (23 December), <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/22/board-richard-maltby.html>. Accessed 1 December 2011.

—. 2011. New Cinema Histories. In *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, 3–40. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Moore, Paul S. 2011. The Social Biograph: Newspapers as Archives of the Regional Mass Market for Movies. In *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, 263–79. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Morash, Christopher. 2010. *A History of the Media in Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Donnell, Seán. n.d. *Clonmel 1900–1932: A History*. Clonmel: Marfield.

Rockett, Kevin. 1987. The Silent Period. In *Cinema and Ireland*, ed. Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, 16–32. London: Croom Helm.

---

[1] On Sullivan's business for FCOI in the United States, see Felter and Schultz 2004.

[2] Advertisements, *Clonmel Chronicle* and *Nationalist*, 26 January 1918.

[3] *Irish Limelight*, February 1918, 10–11. The date on this advertisement (Wednesday, 18 February 1918) is clearly an error since 18 February was a Monday; other sources confirm that the film received its trade showing on 6 February.

[4] See advertisements in *Limerick Leader*, 12 April 1918, 15 April 1918, 17 April 1918; *Limerick Chronicle*, 13 April, 1918, 16 April 1918.

## About the Author

### Denis Condon

Denis Condon is a Lecturer in the School of English, Theatre, and Media Studies, National University of Ireland, Maynooth. He is the author of *Early Irish Cinema, 1895–1921* (Irish Academic Press, 2008) and numerous essays on Irish film.