

Ford, John

by Patrick M. Geoghegan

Ford, John (1894–1973), film director, was born 1 February 1894 at Cape Elizabeth, Maine, USA, as John Martin Feeney, fourth son among five sons and six daughters of Seán Feeney, Roman Catholic farmer and saloon-keeper, and Barbara ‘Abby’ Feeney (née Curran); his father had emigrated to the United States from Spiddal, Co. Galway, and his mother from Kilronan, Inishmore, one of the Aran Islands. He always claimed to have been born Seán Aloysius O’Fearná in 1895 but this was part of his own mythmaking; he was anxious to appear as Irish as possible. From an early age he had an interest in painting and sailing, and in July 1914 moved to California, where his older brother, using the name ‘Francis Ford’, was an actor with a small film company. Adopting the name ‘Jack Ford’, he learned his trade as a filmmaker and acted in a number of silent pictures. Revelling in his Irish heritage, he made his director’s debut with *The tornado* (1917) and followed this with more than forty movies over the next six years. He married (1920) Mary McBryde Smith, a former officer in the army medical corps; they met at a party thrown by the director Rex Ingram (qv) and had one son and one daughter.

In 1921 Ford visited Ireland for the first time and later claimed to have travelled on the same boat that brought Michael Collins (qv) back from the treaty negotiations. He met his relatives at Spiddal, fell in love with the countryside, and became a fervent Irish nationalist. It was later claimed that he brought over funds for his cousin Martin Feeney, a member of an IRA flying column. Returning to Hollywood, he became friends with the retired marshal Wyatt Earp and made a number of commercially successful films, now as ‘John Ford’. In 1926 he directed *The shamrock handicap*, a horse-racing yarn partly set in Ireland and which prompted *Variety* to comment that ‘Ford . . . loves anything Irish’ (Eyman, 93). In 1928 he shot *Mother Machree*, a movie about Irish emigration; it starred Victor McLaglen, a regular collaborator. Ford liked using the same actors in all his films and McLaglen also starred in *Hangman’s house*, made the same year, the director’s first major movie about Ireland. Rich in Celtic imagery, and featuring Black and Tans and informers, the film contained a line that encapsulated Ford’s own views: ‘Ireland – such a little place to be so greatly loved’.

In 1934 Ford bought a luxury yacht which he named the *Araner* after the Aran Islands. He also began shooting *The informer*, a film set in Ireland during the war of independence, and based on a short novel by Liam O’Flaherty (qv). A ‘sleeper’ hit, the picture was a major box-office success and won four academy awards, including a best-director Oscar for Ford. O’Flaherty was so impressed with the film that he dedicated his next book, *Famine*, to Ford. In 1934 Ford visited Ireland for the second time, and approached Sean O’Casey (qv) about directing a version of *The plough and the stars*. Released in 1936, the film starred Barry Fitzgerald (qv) as Fluther, but

it was reedited by the studio, much to Ford's fury, and was a commercial and critical flop.

*Stagecoach*, shot in 1938, was one of Ford's masterpieces. It was a western starring his protégé John Wayne, and marked the beginning of his golden decade; in 1940 and 1941 he won best-director Oscars successively for *The grapes of wrath* and *How green was my valley*. With American entry into the second world war Ford served in the US navy, and made important documentaries such as *The battle of Midway* (1942). In 1952 he returned to Ireland to film *The quiet man*, starring Wayne, McLaglen, and Maureen O'Hara. Shot at Ashford Castle, Co. Mayo, the picture became one of the most popular Irish films of all time and has been described as 'an exile's dream of a land and people he had never known' (Eyman, 409). Ford was immensely proud of the work and was in tears leaving Ireland; he admitted that 'It seemed like the finish of an epoch in my somewhat troubled life . . . Galway is in my blood and the only place I have found peace' (Eyman, 410). The following year he made *Mogambo*, with Clarke Gable, Grace Kelly and a young English actor, Donald Sinden, who later recalled that Ford berated him personally for all the problems of Ireland from the time of William of Orange (qv). Ford's strong sense of Irishness was central to his character and is crucial for any understanding of his work. Once, when interviewed by BBC television, he was asked if the destruction of the native American Indians was a blot on American history. Irascible as ever, he responded with his own question: 'What do you think of the Black and Tans in Ireland? Would you consider that a blot on England?' (Eyman, 543). Opposed to the communist witch-hunts in Hollywood, he was none the less sceptical about the decision of director John Huston (qv) to 'seek refuge in our lovely Ireland', as 'he is not of the right wing' (Eyman, 425). Back in Ireland in 1956, Ford shot *The rising of the moon*, a portmanteau film for which he took no salary, starring Tyrone Power, Cyril Cusack (qv), and Noel Purcell (qv). A minor film, it made no impact at the box office.

Two of Ford's finest movies were made in his later years. *The searchers* (1956) was a powerful study of vengeance, while *The man who shot Liberty Valance* (1962) was an elegiac revisionist western which concluded with the famous line: 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend'. Struck with cancer in his final years, Ford died 31 August 1973 at his home at Palm Desert and was buried at Holy Cross cemetery, Hollywood; his will disinherited his son, Michael Patrick Roper ('Pat'), and left everything to his wife, daughter, and grandchildren.

When asked to name the finest American directors, Orson Welles replied simply, 'John Ford, John Ford, and John Ford'. An alcoholic, Ford was a difficult and often tyrannical director, but he made films of extraordinary power and vision. He ranks as one of the greatest film-makers of the twentieth century. As Frank Capra concluded, 'John is half-tyrant, half-revolutionary; half-saint, half-Satan; half-possible, half-impossible; half-genius, half-Irish'.

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*DAB* supp.; *International dictionary of films and filmmakers: directors* (1997); Jack Morgan, 'The Irish in John Ford's Seventh Cavalry trilogy: Victor McLaglen's stooge-Irish caricature', *MELUS: the journal of the society for the study of the multi-ethnic literature of the United States*, xxii, no. 2 (1997), 33–44; *ANB*; Michael Gray, *Stills, reels and rushes: Ireland and the Irish in twentieth century cinema* (1999); Scott Eyman, *Print the legend: the life and times of John Ford* (1999) (detailed filmography of all Ford's works); *New York Times*, 9 Jan. 2000; Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford: a life* (2001)

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