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Gary D. Rhodes. *Emerald Illusions: The Irish in Early American Cinema*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012. 432 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7165-3143-2.

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Burns on Rhodes, *Emerald Illusions*

Since the rise of Irish diaspora studies, film scholars have widened the canon of Irish cinema by including representations of the American Irish. Film historian Gary D. Rhodes, however, believes that this has led to the invention of classifications that have little bearing on the actual historical contexts of the motion pictures under study. He questions Kevin Rockett's decision in *The Irish Filmography* (1996) to include within the category "Irish cinema" films made by Americans in Ireland or in the United States with Irish subjects. Likewise, he doubts Ruth Barton's choice to deem films with Irish American characters or Irish topics part of an "Irish-American cinema." [1]

Rhodes prefers the descriptive term "Irish-themed films" and commenced his study not with ethnic classifications but with an exhaustive analysis of primary sources related to films with Irish roles or concerns produced in the United States or by Americans in Ireland before 1915. In addition to existing moving pictures, he has located and examined magazines, non-Irish-themed films, newspapers, posters, advertisements, and production-company records, as well as sources such as pre-cinema theatrical scripts, vaudeville, and lantern slides. He concludes that Irish-themed films should be understood within the context of early American cinema and in relationship to popular American entertainments of the latter nineteenth century.

Emerald Illusions begins with connections between what nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American

audiences saw on stage or in lantern slides and Irish images presented in moving pictures. Much of this is new research. Rhodes broadens existing studies of depictions of the Irish in American theater from productions on the New York City stage to vaudeville, traveling variety shows, and plays by figures far less famous than Edward Harrigan and Dion Boucicault. Rhodes also makes the very interesting observation that during the early Nickelodeon era the number of Irish-themed lantern slides far exceeded that of Irish-themed films.

Through five case studies, Rhodes contends that Irish-themed shows and characters of the stage were in demand throughout the United States and that many of the same personas, motifs, and questions of authenticity found in the live performances surfaced in moving pictures. Audiences enjoyed Irish melodramas and stage Irish comedies as they did other American melodramas and ethnic farces. Repetition indicates that certain Irish types were especially well liked, such as Irish boxers who took a turn on the stage and Irish "romantic singing comedians." Their ilk also appeared in early films, as did the narrative styles of theatrical Irish-themed melodramas and comedies. The story lines and depictions of the Irish in moving pictures also had antecedents in Boucicault's enormously popular plays.

Lantern slides influenced the narrative structures and visual attributes of Irish-themed moving pictures as well. The scenario of Jewish-Irish romance so common in films originated with lantern slides. (Surprisingly, how-

ever, in lantern slides Irish figures more frequently interacted with Native American personalities.) Rhodes does not limit his analysis to works solely of the imagination. Ireland as it was exhibited in slides for travel lectures also influenced the island's portrayal in nonfictional films of the period. Audiences exposed to the "real Ireland" in lantern-slide presentations expected the same images to appear in fictional slides, although most of the models depicting Irish characters were not of Irish descent or origin. The story lines and aesthetic qualities of Irish-themed films grew out of fictional song slides. Irish-themed lantern slides, Rhodes contends, created an "'Irish' visual culture" (p. 129) that constituted "much of the content in early Irish-themed films" (p. 130).

In the third through fifth chapters, Rhodes examines nonfiction, comedy, and melodrama films. Irish-themed nonfictional films made between 1900 and 1915 resembled other true-to-life American moving pictures of the period in that they focused on ethnographic and expeditionary subjects, in addition to current events. Producers combined real images of Ireland with fake ones, and they were keen to advertise a picture's credibility to meet viewers' expectations. This was not to satisfy a clamoring for the *ould sod*; all sorts of people watched these films, often at venues with features not on Irish topics. Most Irish-themed nonfictional moving pictures of the Nickelodeon era and before focused on Irish, as opposed to Irish American, subjects. Current events films on Ireland predominated at the end of the early cinema period, but films within all of the three categories often blended fiction and nonfiction for the sake of keeping audiences amused. This was also true of non-Irish-themed films in the genre.

Irish-themed comedies drew from existing entertainments and functioned as a subset of comedic American moving pictures. They featured stage Irish characters and Irish names recognizable to fans of vaudeville. Audiences demanded a degree of accuracy in the form of Irish actors playing Irish parts even if the role furthered stereotypes, but they had similar expectations of comedies in general. Even recognizably Irish characters performed physical humor typical of American comedies. During the Nickelodeon period the use of stage Irish make-up declined considerably and continued thereafter, but that was in keeping with production changes across the board as filmmakers used more realistic make-up on actors. Furthermore, moving pictures in the post-Nickelodeon era that eschewed Irish stereotypes often looked very similar to other ethnic comedies. Irish-themed comedies were part and parcel of American cinema as a whole.

The same was true of melodramas. In keeping with larger trends in American moviemaking, Irish-themed melodramas told discrete, believable narratives and, therefore, did not have to rely on viewers' knowledge of stock Irish tropes to tell a story. They began to take shape in 1906 and echoed subjects found more broadly in American melodramas. For example, the 1908 film *Caught by Wireless* picked up the emphasis on plausibility in melodramas with its immigration story line. The title held the potential to draw viewers keen to see the already sought-after subject of technology and gave no indication that this was a uniquely Irish story. As it happens, Irish-themed melodramas filmed by Americans in Ireland also fulfilled the genre's prescription for realism, a reminder once again that a tighter drawing by scholars of the boundaries of film classifications in this instance helps clarify the intent of these films. Rhodes notes, for example, that Kevin Rockett included in the category "Irish cinema" films shot in Ireland by the Kalen Company, but it created moving pictures in several foreign countries for the sake of achieving verisimilitude in assorted ethnic or nation-specific story lines.

In the final two chapters Rhodes takes a detailed look at five common Irish characters and the composition of audiences. Cops, gangsters, boxers, priests, and "the hero" appeared in pre-cinema performances and made the transition to the screen. They often embodied Irish stereotypes, but sometimes their expressed ethnicity held no bearing on the plot or they were Irish in name only. All five, Rhodes contends, were popular characters of the American cinema with or without Irish coding. Producers were more concerned with authenticity than with telling an Irish story and branded a cop or a priest Irish for the sake of making the character seem realistic to expectant audiences. This begs the question of whether Rhodes can accurately judge how viewers perceived such characters. They might have assumed a priest was Irish just by virtue of his being a priest. Direct comparisons between Irish and Italian gangsters in cinema, for example, or more explicit analysis of films in which these types were not marked Irish would have been useful.

Yet Rhodes's study of audiences also places Irish-themed films squarely in American contexts. Assessing Irish Americans' attitudes is made difficult by a lack of sources, but what evidence exists leads Rhodes to conclude that they seemed most interested in nonfiction films on Irish matters. It is likely that Irish Americans reacted to the moving pictures as individuals rather than an ethnic block and, as true of most Americans, watched a variety of films. Quite tellingly, Irish-themed films were

not promoted to an Irish ethnic audience and appeared on the same bill as moving pictures and song slides on myriad topics. Film companies distributed their products all over the country and to as many types of people as possible in hopes of seeing the largest returns on their investments.

Emerald Illusions will be very valuable to scholars of history, film, Irish studies, and visual culture. The illustrations, especially those of the lantern slides, are extensive and handsome. Many of the films and materials from the early cinema period and before have not survived, making Rhodes's ability to find so many sources particularly impressive. The detail is extraordinary but also overwhelming. Too often the thesis gets lost in lists of moving pictures, although film scholars will be grateful to Rhodes for bringing to light forgotten films. Rhodes

takes issue with cultural theorists, but gender analysis need not have undermined his claims. Were other types of women also cast as "the hero" and did men in drag portray women who were not Irish? Exploring those contexts or comparing representations of Irish men to those of Jewish or Italian men might have proved fruitful. Nevertheless, *Emerald Illusions* poses a needed corrective to a tendency within Irish diaspora studies—not just works centered on film—to assume the existence of a common Irishness within and without Ireland.

Note

[1]. Kevin Rockett, *The Irish Filmography: Fiction Films 1896-1996* (Dublin: Red Mountain Media, 1996); and Ruth Barton, *Screening Irish-American: Representing Irish-America in Film and Television* (Dublin: Irish-American Press, 2009).

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