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Paddy the Cope, Michael Powell and the story of the unmade film.

As a native of Donegal with some knowledge of Paddy the Cope's legendary status I find myself working in a University film department housed in the Powell Building, named after Michael Powell. The opportunity to bring Donegal and Powell's Canterbury back together again was too serendipitous to miss.

The story of Paddy the Cope was another of those films which only I would want to make and which I certainly should have made (Powell, 1986: 565).

Almost ten pages of the first volume of Michael Powell's (1905-90) autobiography is taken up with the trip to Ireland in 1946, the journey on horseback from Dublin to Dungloe to meet Paddy the Cope, at least near Dungloe, as by most accounts the horses were stabled at Inver and had to be returned to their owners in Dublin. Powell's sojourn through Ireland provided so much publicity and incident it is surprising the trek has not become the basis for some retelling in film, television, radio, prose or theatre. Powell's second wife was Frances (Frankie) Reidy, whose father was an Irish surgeon who worked in London, where Frankie was born. The Reidy family had strong associations with Ireland and when Michael and Frankie with their seven month old infant son Kevin visited Dublin in 1946 for Kevin's belated christening they stayed with Frankie's sister Eileen who was Kevin's godmother. It was during this visit to Dublin that Powell met with John Betjeman, who was in Dublin on behalf of the British Council, as Powell comments wryly "... to further his own ends as a poet and bon viveur" (Powell, 1986: 565). According to Powell's account it was Betjeman who put in his hands a copy of *My Story, Paddy the Cope* as told to Peadar O'Donnell, published by Jonathan Cape in London in 1939 and reprinted three times during the 1940s. Powell was fascinated by Paddy's story and "... nothing would satisfy me but I must go to Donegal where Paddy was King of Dungloe" (1986: 565).

The unlikely meeting of Powell, a quintessential Englishman, and Paddy The Cope, in a place on the margins of Europe, as far from Canterbury and London as one could imagine, was part of the great backstory surrounding the proposed development of a film adaptation of *My Story*.

With the help of Paddy Campbell, *Irish Times* columnist, also known as Lord Glenavy, Powell was able to secure horses, a pony and trap and groom to make the journey from Dublin to Dungloe. An *Irish Times* reporter accompanied them for at least some of the journey but the word was also spread through the radio and according to Powell's autobiography and reports in the *Irish Times* and *Derry Journal*, the trek created great publicity for the forthcoming film, Paddy Campbell, the *Irish Times* and the Co-operative Society in Dungloe.

What seemed like caprice to a lot of people in Dublin, became a compliment to all the towns through which we passed, or where we stopped. Everywhere they were watching us, everywhere we were made welcome. Whole villages and towns turned out to see us pass through and to wave and wish us Godspeed. Lonely farms and tiny hamlets had all the people standing on the road waiting for us to pass by, alerted by the radio (Powell, 1985: 567).

Michael Powell, born in Bekesbourne, near Canterbury in 1905, became one of the most influential filmmakers in cinema history. Together with his producing and writing partner Emeric Pressburger (1904-88) who formed the Archers Production Company, the legacy of their work is lauded by contemporary filmmakers. The influence of Powell & Pressburger films such as *The Life and Death of*

Colonel Blimp (1943), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), "*I Know Where I'm Going!*" (1945), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948) and Powell's most controversial film, *Peeping Tom* (1960), can be seen in the work of filmmakers from Scorsese to Lynch, Kubrick to Coppola, Baz Luhrmann to Damien Chazelle.

Unmade films

Powell, like many famous directors from Orson Welles to Martin Scorsese, Neil Jordan to Jim Sheridan has seen long cherished projects sit in the eternal waiting room of movie financing, the purgatory of the filmmaking world. Powell had quite a number of these never-mades, including *My Story*. According to Emma Love's article (2009):

After he made *The Red Shoes* in 1948 with Emeric Pressburger, which producers hated and most critics panned, he began to have problems getting other films made. Both *The Golden Years* in 1952, a proposed autobiography of the composer Richard Strauss, and later, *The Tempest* in the 1970s, are just two films from Powell's rather long list of "never-mades."

Ian Christie, a Powell scholar, in a presentation at a Festival of never-made films in Brighton in 2009, recounted in Love's article, focused a major part of his lecture on Michael Powell and his collaborative "never-mades" with Stravinsky, Dylan Thomas and the painter Graham Sutherland. Although *My Story* is not mentioned by Christie, it can be added to the list of Powell "never-mades", another example from his prolific career with producer Emeric Pressburger of "one that got away."

What type of film might *My Story* have become?

A script for the film adaptation of Paddy's book written by Tom Cox exists and is housed in the British Film Institute Special Collections as part of the Michael Powell archive. The script which is in draft form gives some indication of how the story might have been structured as it follows closely Paddy's autobiography which provides enough incident to create a series of dramatic cinematic scenes. After his visit in 1946 Powell agreed to pay Paddy £500 for a ten year option for the rights to his story and the possibility that the film would go in to production was relatively high. Unfortunately, it lingered in that moribund state for a full decade and after the rights lapsed the opportunity seemed to be lost. The correspondence between Paddy and Powell is illuminating, for as the years progress without the film starting a sense of frustration emerges and while the letters dating from August 21, 1947, to a handwritten note on 7 September 1959, remain cordial, Paddy's disappointment grows. It is clear from Powell's responses to Paddy's enquiries about when the film might go in to production that he was very keen to make it work. In a letter (14 November, 1946) to his agent, Christopher Mann, setting out his filming schedule for 1946 and 1947 Powell writes about the Paddy the Cope story: "The subject has become a must for me, and I must do it in March, April, May 1948." In the letter Powell states his preference for Irish playwright Dennis Johnston (1901-84) to write the screenplay but no further evidence of contact appears in the subsequent correspondence.

Powell hoped to shoot the film on location and he saw Spring as the best time to catch the light and landscape of Cleendra but each year that passed he was held back by other productions and by the time it gets to a letter dated Sept. 1, 1950, Powell declares: "If I directed the film myself it would not be until 1952." In a number of letters (Feb. 1, 1951, April 12, 1955, April 30, 1955) Paddy asks to buy back the film rights. What gives the possibility of production fresh impetus is the script by Tom Cox,

a chartered accountant from Long Island, whose father was Irish and who had come across Paddy's story via Peadar O'Donnell and was working on a stage adaptation. Cox contacted Powell in May 1956 and met with Powell in London in September 1956 and it was agreed Cox would travel to Cleendra to meet with Paddy. However, it is clear from correspondence (April 3, 1957) between Powell and Cox that Powell was not happy with the script and no further progress was made. In a letter (Sep. 15, 1957) from his agent, Christopher Mann, Powell is reminded that the rights to Paddy's story ends on Sep 22. "You can review at £250 a year for up to four years. Seems too risky, doesn't it?" In February 1958 Paddy writes to the Rank Organisation to ask them if they would be interested in filming his story but the letter is passed to Powell's agent.

It is not clear from any further correspondence who controlled the rights after they lapsed in 1957 or whether Powell did retain them. There is no mention of this in Powell's two volume autobiography or in the letters in the Powell Archive. There is some evidence in the Powell Archive that Paddy provided some script inserts himself, scenes that focus on his courting of Sally and 8 sheets of his trial by the Gombeen Men.

Tantalisingly, there is also a note in the archive with some comments about a script that may have been written by Vivian Connell (1905-81), an Irish born writer whose novel, *The Chinese Room* (1942), was a racy thriller that attracted lots of publicity and a certain notoriety at the time for the way it dealt with sex and marital infidelity. I could find no further evidence of the script in Powell Archive material but if the notes are written by Powell, it suggests he was very happy with VC's (we presume Vivian Connell, as the name appears in full later) script.

"Re: VC's very excellent first treatment of Paddy the Cope. Spirit of Errigal emerges too frequently ... have to be on guard against the pseudo-poetic." (Note fragment in Powell Archive, undated.)

It could be argued that despite the existence of Tom Cox's script, fragments of scripts sent by Paddy, scripts that might exist (written by VC, Vivian Connell), without Emeric Pressburger's involvement, Powell's writing and producing collaborator, the screen adaptation of Paddy the Cope's *My Story* was less likely to happen.

Paddy's own directive about the film is clear: asked if he had laid down any conditions for releasing the rights to Michael Powell, Paddy declares; "Only one: Positively there must be no stage Irish." (Boner, 2009: 533, quoting McKeon, R. SJ, *Irish Digest*, 1951).

Cyril Cusack, the Irish actor much admired by Powell, was lined up to play Paddy with Maureen O'Hara to play his wife Sarah, and later in the 1950s when the project looked like it might be revived, Siobhan McKenna was to be cast in the part of Paddy's wife. Cyril Cusack would go on to work in three Powell and Pressburger films, *The Small Back Room* (1949), *Gone to Earth* (1950) and *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1950).

As with another of Powell's films, *Edge of the World* (1938) the lead up to the film created as much publicity as the proposed film itself. *Edge of the World* did get made but Powell and his crew set up on the island of Foula to recreate St Kilda to tell the story of the depopulation of that island. Powell had come across the story in a newspaper article and thought it would make a great film story: man/woman against nature, a love triangle, and the magnificent coastal scenery of the Scottish Isles.

So, what might have attracted Powell to Paddy's story?

Landscape and sense of place

Powell's fascination with the ways landscape shapes the character and actions of his protagonists would have attracted him to Paddy's story. As with some of his key central characters in *IKWIG*, *A Canterbury Tale*, *Edge of the World*, it appears as if the characters arise out of the landscape and their attitudes and actions are shaped by the land, particularly its ancient monuments, old pathways, coastal and island stories. In *IKWIG* as Miss Webster (Wendy Hiller) travels to be with her fiancée from London to Kiloran, a remote island in Scotland. When she leaves from Edinburgh station the train takes us through countryside that could easily be Barnesmore Gap or the Poisoned Glen. It is recounted in Boner's book (2009:529) how John Seabourne who worked as location scout and editor on *IKWIG* accompanied Powell to Donegal. It is speculated that many shots were taken of the Donegal countryside and coast line. An *Irish Times* photographer also accompanied Powell on the trip and snapped a picture of Paddy with John Seabourne.

Perhaps we can take our best cues from *IKWIG* and Powell's earlier film *Edge of the World*. While *IKWIG* is often regarded as Powell's most naturalistic work Lazar (2003: xiv) comments: "Powell tempers this naturalism with ... a slightly surreal frame, hyper kinetic modernism at the beginning, Freudian gothic naturalism in the whirlpool at the end."

In his discussion of his work on *Edge of the World* and *IKWIG* Powell stated: "I had a tremendous love for the lore of the sea, and ships, the northern islands, western islands. During the war we were always getting involved in something that had to do with the coast or the sea (Lazar, 2003: 170)." Perhaps this is why Powell arrived in Dungloe wearing a kilt, much to the bemusement of Paddy and the locals.

Powell's wit and inventiveness as a filmmaker, his determination to avoid the clichés of the biopic might have produced some heated discussions with Paddy. It is noted in Boner's book (2009: 521-33) how Powell was taken on a trip around Dungloe that included some faery forts. Powell was known as a great lover of folklore and magical happenings. In *A Canterbury Tale*, the central female character Alison (Sheila Sim) in 1944 hears pilgrims from Chaucer's era pass by on the route to Canterbury. Powell shot these spectral happenings in a very matter of fact way using atmospheric sound and music to emphasize the co-existence of dimensions that incorporate the material and immaterial world, the past and the present.

The opportunity to call up the mystical, magical and spiritual nature of the landscape and seascape of the Rosses would have been irresistible. Paddy's belief in fairies, dotted throughout his biography, like the occasion when he is with his friend Donal working at a pit in California, Scotland (2006: 77) and their digging is so hard Donal thinks there must be a witch at work. Paddy remarks: "I did not then believe in witches, if he said fairy I would believe." An earlier story when he and Charlie are walking home at night and cross near the fairy's castle outside Cleendra they hear fiddle music and Charlie is so taken with it that he begins to dance and cannot stop himself until Paddy seeks help from Peggy (a wise woman living nearby) who tells him Charlie must say "Thank you fiddler", in order to stop the music (2006: 61). It can only be speculated but Powell's love of the magical would have drawn him to film some of these instances and it is likely that he would have been able to tread that fine line between the whimsy of a fairy story and the representation of stage Irishness. Of course Powell would go on to find a space for the sinister enchantment of dancing in his film *The Red Shoes*. And yet, Paddy tells these stories of fairies in his autobiography without any hint of

worldliness. Here is a man, like Powell, who is able to deal with the co-existence of elements that emerge in traditional beliefs and go beyond human understanding.

The airneal

In Paddy's biography (2006: 43) when he is working with his compatriots in Scotland, he describes the airneal to the boss's wife. When asked by the woman of the house, "... when you go back to Ireland in the winter do you have any fun?" Paddy responds: "... we have the best of fun; we would have airneals every night". When pressed to explain the airneal he states "... a gathering of all the people in the townland into one house, for dancing, singing and storytelling."

It is likely that the airneal would also have been a key set piece as Powell loved to include traditional song and dance in his films. Martin Scorsese gives an account of his love for *IKIG* by focusing on the dance scene in the film where the central character, Toquil Macneil, played by frequent Powell collaborator Roger Livesey, translates a verse of Scots Gaelic to Miss Webster who is pledged to marry another man but who is falling in love with her host. "You're the one for me", and as Scorsese notes in his reflections on this scene, "... the camera moves in quickly, the sound of the bagpipes comes up, and it is absolutely frightening ... frightening in the sense that you understood they were in love with each ... it was quite remarkable (Lazar, 2003: 118)."

Powell would have had plenty of opportunity to inflect the naturalism of Paddy's story with fantastical elements that would also have been in keeping with Paddy's adventures in Scotland, England and back home in Cleendra.

Moments of epiphany

The landscape of Donegal is fashioned out of monumental shifting of ice and seismic activity and its soil and sand imbued with spectral presences from ancient lore, the ravages of the Irish Famine and rural poverty. Paddy's biography also takes in the hiring fares, tattie hoking in Scotland, working the pits in Scotland and England and the return home to hear George Russell (AE) talk about setting up a co-operative bank followed by Paddy's moment of epiphany.

The role of George Russell (AE) in Paddy's story might have been given greater prominence by Powell (1986: 565) from the evidence of his autobiography:

One day, Jesus Christ arrived in Dungloe in the form of a young man with a wispy beard, a knickerbocker suit and a bicycle. This was George Russell, known to all literary people as A.E.

Russell's messianic qualities as conveyed by Powell are muted in the description from Paddy's story but also it is clear that AE and his message about setting up a Co-Operative Bank acted as a catalyst for Paddy.

As Paddy describes the scene of the meeting after Mass one Sunday:

We saw a man getting up on the rising ground. He looked a strange kind of man, with great big beard and a very pleasant face. There was something about him that immediately you saw him you were interested (2006: 105).

Powell's films often contain moments of epiphany, Alison, Sgt Peter Gibbs (Dennis Price) and US Sgt Bob Johnson (John Sweet), all latter day pilgrims, in *A Canterbury Tale*, have their slow-burning

revelations amidst the Kent countryside and Canterbury Cathedral as do Torquil and Miss Webster in *IKWIG*. It is likely the meeting of AE and Paddy might have been constructed with the same grace and mystical tone.

However, without underplaying the importance of AE's speech and his ongoing help, it is clear from Paddy's autobiography that he and his wife Sarah had experience of the Co-operative store in Scotland and came to recognise its merits as a site for purchase and saving. There was also a long road to travel after AE's visit to secure the Co-op as a viable organisation. The programme of misinformation that was spread about Paddy, his intentions with his neighbour's money and his brush with the law gives some indication of the opposition that existed to the Co-op's set up, particularly from local merchants, the bailiffs and gombeen men who controlled the prices and collected the debts.

The fight against materialism

A key feature of Powell's work is a thematic concern with how too much focus on material possessions, ownership and control, commerce and industrialisation, the quest for monetary reward at the expense of others has robbed the people and the landscape of its soul. Powell would have seen Paddy's triumph in galvanising his community against the materialism of the gombeen men as a great example to follow such characters as Culpepper in *A Canterbury Tale*, Torquil Macneil in *IKWIG* and Hazel Woodus (Jennifer Jones) in *Gone to Earth* (1950). The way Powell shoots Shropshire and Kent in *Gone to Earth* and *A Canterbury Tale* also give some clues to how he would have approached the Donegal landscape charged with so much symbolism and the struggle between leave-taking and remaining that set the pattern for many people's lives. What is made clear in Paddy's autobiography is that much of the exploitation of the farmers in his locality was visited upon them by other Irishmen. After Paddy becomes a Justice of the Peace he is falsely accused of inciting violence and ordered to pay bail, apologise and keep free of trouble but he refuses, and a warrant is issued for his arrest and delivery to Derry prison for a month.

Paddy's intention to "kill gombeenism in the Rosses" is reconstructed as an incitement to violence and Paddy's determination not to apologise sets up the drunken journey to Derry and on his release from Derry after three days, his return journey by rail marked by fires set by locals in a show of support and by the time he reaches Dungloe he is given a hero's welcome.

The court case, the journey to Derry prison and Paddy's return as recounted in Paddy's autobiography might have provided three powerful, amusing and cathartic cinematic scenes. Tom Cox's script includes these scenes but they come across as rather too episodic, however, one would have expected Powell's film to make them vibrant, celebratory and visually arresting.

There is not yet a conclusion

This is more an exhortation than a summing up. Surely among the Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple and Microsoft streaming services, RTE, Telefís na Gaeltachta, UTV, BBC Northern Ireland, some canny producer could resurrect the idea of Paddy's biopic. While Paddy the Cope did not need a film of his life to cement his place in the pantheon of Irish heroes, his dedication to the cause of the community is his greatest legacy and a marvellous lesson to us all that people working together can make a difference. However, his autobiography contains all those elements that film could heighten, make more intense and emotional. The ordinary man fighting against a corrupt system. A childhood of

work slavery and experience of the cycle of coming and going from your native place to eventually be able to settle in his beloved Cleendra and help many of his compatriots to do the same through the success of the Co-op. This story has a universal appeal that a film version would have made even more dramatic, more emotional, and more widely known. A celebration of Paddy's life and the achievements of the Co-op reflect a victory against a corrupt system that kept people in poverty, a revolutionary act that bettered people's lives and provided a template for other peoples across the world to rid themselves of gombeenism.

As Paddy recounts in his autobiography:

There is a great change in the Rosses since our Society was organised in 1906. In those days you had not the courage to ask how much you owed the business people unless you were able to pay all that was demanded from you ... Thank God the slave mind is gone. If it is in any other part of Ireland today, it is not in the Rosses (2006: 278).

Further research on the letters between Powell and Paddy and further investigation of the script fragments and the possibility of another full script could yield some more detailed information on what might have been, but in the absence of any clear sense of how such a film might have ended; here's my suggestion. Why not have an esteemed British director travel on horseback from Dublin to Dungloe to meet Paddy for the purpose of making a film about him. If that sounds a bit hard to imagine, just consult reality.

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