Irish Horror Cinema

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Even setting aside the myriad film versions of *Dracula*, which range from purportedly faithful versions of Bram Stoker's novel to wild tangents like *Billy the Kid Versus Dracula* (1966) and *Dracula Sucks* (1979), Irish creative talents have had a significant role in the history of the horror film. *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, Stoker's other major horror novel, has been officially filmed several times (*Blood From the Mummy's Tomb*, 1971, *The Awakening*, 1980, *Legend of the Mummy*, 1997), unofficially several times more (*La Cabeza Viviente/The Living Head*, 1963) and is a source for almost all 'mummy' movies. J. Sheridan LeFanu's vampire tale 'Carmilla' and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and 'The Canterville Ghost' have inspired multiple film and television adaptations. Like Dorothy Macardle's novel *Uneasy Freehold*, filmed as *The Uninvited* (1944), these oft-told stories are notably not set in Ireland, though Stoker and LeFanu frequently wrote about their native land, drawing on Irish legends and folk-tales for their ghost stories. We still await a film of the greatest of all horror novels to use an Irish location, William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland*.

Away from the homeland, Irish ex-patriates have done important work in horror: directors Rex Ingram (*The Magician*, 1926), Roy William Neill (*Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*, 1943) and Neil Jordan (*Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles*, 1992) and actors Arthur Shields (a werewolf in *Daughter of Dr Jekyll*, 1957), Jack MacGowran (*Dance of the Vampires*, 1967), Gabriel Byrne (a Nazi in *The Keep*, 1983, the Devil in *End of Days*, 1999), Stuart Townsend (the Vampire Lestat in *Queen of the Damned*, 2002, Dorian Gray in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, 2003), Michael Gambon (a werewolf in *The Beast Must Die*, 1974), Liam Cunningham (a werewolf in *Dog Soldiers*, 2002), Brendan Gleeson (*Lake Placid*, 1999, *28 days later …*, 2002), Stephen Rea (*The Doctor and the Devils*, 1985, *FeardotCom*, 2002, *The I Inside*, 2003) and Patrick Bergin (who has played Frankenstein, Dracula and the Devil). Patrick Magee, famed on stage as a great interpreter of the works of Samuel Beckett even counts as a minor horror star: with eye-rolling, beetle-browed, dialogue-savouring performances in the likes of Roger Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), Freddie Francis's *The Skull* (1965), *Die, Monster, Die!* (1965), *Marat/Sade* (as DeSade, 1967),*The Fiend* (1971), Roy Ward Baker's *Asylum* (1972), Peter Sykes's *Demons of the Mind* (1972), *… And Now the Screaming Starts!* (1973), *The Monster Club* (1980), Lucio Fulci's *Gatto Nero/The Black Cat* (1981) and Walerian Borowczyk's *Docteur Jekyll et les Femmes* (1981). Yet, for all this suitable talent, there's a distinct shortage of Irish horror films, and little which might be counted as an Irish horror – or even fantastical – tradition in the cinema.

Most treatments of Irish folklore in the cinema have been benign enough to overdose a sugar addict, usually buried under Hollywood's idea of 'Oirishness'. Walt Disney's production of *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* (1959) has (like most Disney fantasies) one genuinely nightmarish sequence, in

which the young hero is pursued by the Great Banshee. Otherwise, precious few chills can be found in the likes of *Finian's Rainbow* (1968), *Leapin' Leprechauns* (1995), *Spellbreaker: Secret of the Leprechauns* (1996), *The Last Leprechaun* (1998) and *The Magical Legend of the Leprechauns* (1999). Screen leprechauns tend to be cute, horribly-accented little fellows. Perversely, the minor Leprechaun horror franchise puts a nasty spin on this image rather than mining the many more sinister stories of the Little People. With Warwick Davis – who plays it cute in *A Very Unlucky Leprechaun* (1998) – under the snarling make-up and dressed like a demented Lucky Charms mascot with buckled shoes and big hat, *Leprechaun* (1993) has the title character loose in Los Angeles, inflicting horrible fates and worse wisecracks upon those ill-advised enough to steal his pot o' gold. Despite featuring a young Jennifer Aniston, it's a totally undistinguished effort – which didn't stop Trimark pictures from making a slew of sequels: *Leprechaun 2*(1994, aka *One Wedding and Lots of Funerals*), *Leprechaun 3* (1995), *Leprechaun: In Space* (1997), *Leprechaun in the Hood* (2000) and *Leprechaun: Back 2 tha Hood*(2003). In desperation, the films come up with their own rules, similar to the lore which affects screen vampires, so Davis's cackling fiend is repelled by a four-leaf clover as Dracula would be by garlic. Outside of the *Leprechaun* series, which reached its nadir in a brace of films set in 'tha Hood' with Davis as a rapping monster taking on tas like Ice-T, Irish myth has figured in few horror films. *Cry of the Banshee* (1970) is misleadingly-titled: it's set in England, and its howling monster is a male werewolf type rather than the Irish wailing woman. *Banshee* (2006) is a contemporary American action film about a figurative banshee – a vengeful, whining woman. Occasional television episodes have been more to the point, though rarely with distinction: 'Banshee' (*Ray Bradbury Theater*, 1986) offers Peter O'Toole spoofing John Huston in an elementary terror-by-spook episode, while the occasional historical flashbacks which explored the title character's Dublin origins on *Angel* (1999-2004) mostly to expose cruelly David Boreanaz's inability to do an accent. John Sayles's *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994) is delicately touched with fantasy, though not in the explicit *Darby O'Gill* manner and deals with a selkie, either a human raised by seals or a shapeshifter. Roan Inish is ambiguous about its selkie, but John Gray's TV movie *The Seventh Stream* (2001), with fisherman Scott Glenn netting wereseal Saffron Burrows, is more explicit. *Roan Inish* and *The Seventh Stream*, essentially American productions, but use Irish locations and mostly Irish supporting casts. This pattern turns up over and over in the few pre-2000 works that might count as Irish horror.

In 1963, Francis Ford Coppola persuaded Roger Corman – for whom he was working as a minion on a European-shot film called *The Young Racers* – to finance a quickie horror film that he might direct using some of the leftover *Young Racers* cast and crew. Always eager to squeeze an extra film out of a budget, Corman let the junior auteur have his head and the result was the Irish-shot *Dementia 13* (aka *The Haunted and the Hunted*) – a Psycho knock-off about axe murders on the estate of the Haloran Family, one of whom is a homicidal maniac. Coppola, who would return to the genre with a vastly bigger budget on *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), works fast and creative in *Dementia 13*, making shocking little sequences out of the killings and the implied haunting, using his locations well and highlighting unexpected eeriness like a transistor radio burbling distorted pop music as it sinks into a lake along with a just-murdered corpse. It takes place in Ireland for convenience – if Corman

had been shooting a Western instead of a European race track film, Coppola would have set the film in Texas – but Coppola uses the location well, and was among the first to discover the horror potential of Patrick Magee (who would work for Corman on other projects). Cast as the red herring local doctor, Magee is nicely self-deprecating, even delivering a speech about how his 'one-sided smile' makes him seem too sinister to be confided in. Ireland was and is occasionally used by British films to play other countries: Hammer never shot a horror film in Ireland, but did use its green, wet fields – less blighted, apparently by electricity pylons and passing lorries than their English equivalents - for a couple of their pocket-sized swashbucklers (*Sword of Sherwood Forest*, 1960, *The Viking Queen*, 1967). Cyril Frankel's *The Very Edge* (1962), a little-known, interesting early entry in the psycho/stalker cycle, has maniacal Jeremy Brett persecuting ex-model/housewife Anne Heywood (with Magee down in the cast list); it unusually uses a nondescript modern Dublin suburb to represent a housing development in a non-specific English 'New Town'. Don Sharp's *The Face of Fu Manchu* (1965) effectively uses locations in Dublin and the surrounding countryside to represent London in the 1930s and the wilds of Tibet and China. Robert Altman's psycho-charade *Images* (1972) and John Boorman's science fiction film *Zardoz* (1974) get a great deal of value out of misty widescreen vistas of the countryside, without confirming (or denying) that their stories are set in Ireland. This tradition is continued in *Reign of Fire* (2002), in which Ireland plays a post-end-of-the-world England ruled by fire-breathing dragons, and the slasher film *Wilderness* (2006), set on an offshore island but shot in Northern Ireland.

Until the mid-1990s, homegrown (or even transplanted) Irish horror cinema consisted mostly of footnotes. Hilton Edwards, the Dublin stage director, made a short film *Return to Glennascaul* (1951) with Orson Welles, playing himself, being told an elementary ghost story (the one about the disappearing inn). It's an interesting footnote to Welles's career, and – were it not for the mildness of its scary elements - might count as Ireland's first horror film. The Swedish director Calvin Floyd made two interesting Irish-Swedish gothic horrors: *Victor Frankenstein* (1977), a low-key relatively faithful version of the Mary Shelley novel (the chapters which involve the near-creation of the Monster's Mate are set in Ireland), and *The Sleep of Death* (1981), based on LeFanu's 'The Room at the Dragon Volant' (which had already been done on television as 'The Inn of the Flying Dragon', 1960, and 'The Flying Dragon', 1966, episodes of the American Dow Hour of Great Mysteries and the British Mystery and Imagination series). Though set in France, *Sleep of Death* is a unique Irish-based adaptation of a story by one of Ireland's major horror writers, and furthermore features and Patrick Magee as a sinister Marquis. Floyd's films are seriously-intended, though they incline towards Merchant-Ivory respectability in adapting their sources rather than taking off on cinematic flights of fancy.

Interesting rather than frightening, Floyd's films are still a cut above *The Fantasist* (1986), a Dublin-set serial killer mystery which was Robin Hardy's disappointing, tardy follow-up to *The Wicker Man* (1973), and George Pavlou's below-average monster romp *Rawhead Rex* (1986). Based on a Clive Barker story which is set in rural England, *Rawhead* was relocated to Ireland for budget reasons -- though the plot revolves around an Anglican church and awkward lines had to be tipped in

when someone remembered there were no Roman ruins in Ireland. The novelist and director Neil Jordan usually brings a fantastical touch to his films, and gets closer to genre horror in his adaptations of Angela Carter (*The Company of Wolves*, 1983), Anne Rice and Bari Wood (*In Dreams*, 1999). However, the comical ghost romp *High Spirits (*1988), which is set in Ireland, is among his least-satisfying films, an effects-heavy pudding which ought to be a breezy comic fantasy but devolves into failed farce. *The Butcher Boy* (1997), based on Pat McCabe's novel, is closer to horror, entering the mind of a junior psychopath (Eamonn Owens) who has visions of the Virgin Mary (Sinead O'Connor) and takes great delight in murdering a neighbour (Fiona Shaw) he holds responsible for all the troubles visited upon his family. Like *The Fantasist*, *The Butcher Boy* plays up the specific Irish milieu, addressing the not-always-benign influence of the Church on all things: Hardy works on the rural Catholic upbringing of his imperilled, resilient heroine (Moira Harris), but Jordan and McCabe fill out the 1960s world of young Francie, influenced by American popular culture but also his father's repeated yarns and invented myths.

Three decades on from *Dementia 13*, Roger Corman set up his own unit in Ireland and backed a clutch of genre movies to feed the hungry maw of his *Roger Corman Presents* series of made-for-cable movies, with an eye on ancillary video (later, DVD) rental and sales business. In rapid succession, Corman produced Scott P. Levy's *House of the Damned* (aka *Escape to Nowhere*, 1996), starring Alexandra Paul and Greg Evigan; Howard McCain's *The Unspeakable* (1996), scripted by Christopher Wood (who once wrote the 'Confessions' books and films as Timothy Lea and a few Roger Moore Bond movies), starring Athena Massey, David Chokachi, Timothy Busfield and Cyril O'Reilly; Mitch Marcus's *The Haunting of Hell House* (1999), starring Michael York and Claudia Christian, and purportedly based on a story by Henry James; Marcus's*Knocking on Death's Door* (1999), starring Brian Bloom, Kimberly Rowe, John Doe and David Carradine; Michael B. Druxman's *The Doorway*(2000), starring Roy Scheider, Lauren Woodland and Christian Harmony; and Marcus's *Wolfhound* (2002), which the director signed with the pseudonym 'Donovan Kelly', from a script by novelist Scott Bradfield, with Allen Scotti, Jennifer Courtney and Playboy Playmate Julie Cialini. Corman also backed a couple of anonymous action-thrillers in Ireland (*Bloodfist VIII*: *Trained to Kill*, 1996, *Dangerous Curves*, 2000) using the same set-up.

These films rely on lower-case American writers, directors and lead actors, but use Irish supporting players – frequently dubbed in an attempt to pass off Ireland as Maine or Massachusetts. Recurring presences include Brendan Murray, Mike O'Nolan, John McHugh, Colm O'Maonlai, Brian Glanney and a surprising number of veterans of the Irish language TV soap *Ros na Run*. Only *House of the Damned* and *Wolfhound* are set in Ireland: both are about American (or Irish-American) couples who unwisely settle in hostile communities, to be pestered by spooks in one case and a pack of shapeshifters in the other. *Wolfhound*, despite silly lesbian werebabe scenes, is probably the pick of the litter, thanks to a few good lines from Bradfield and local actor Brian Monahan's imposing performance as an alpha male werewolf. Not one of these films, but easy to lump in with them (a few actors recur) is John Hough's *Bad Karma* aka *Hell's Gate* (2002), from a novel by Douglas Clegg, starring Patsy Kensit, Patrick Muldon and Amy Locane. This also passes off Irish locations

as New England, but it's a little nastier than the television-backed Corman movies, involving sado-masochist murders and the reincarnation of Jack the Ripper.

The American Michael Almereyda first tackled Bram Stoker in the unusual, low-budget, black and white New York vampire movie *Nadja* (1994), in which he cast Irish actor Karl Geary as Renfield, the fly-eating minion of Dracula. Almereyda's slightly more conventional second horror film is *Eternal* (1998) aka *Trance* or *The Eternal: Kiss of the Mummy*. This uniquely connects Stoker with his homeland, trotting out yet another variant on Bram Stoker's oft-filmed *Jewel of Seven Stars* but with the novel's Egyptology background stripped away in favour of more unusual Irish Drudiry. It works on atmosphere and character, developing its plot in surprising lurches, and gets away with its old-hat story of a heroine under threat of possession by a distant or recent ancestor by dint of oblique storytelling, unusually convincing performances, a whole-hearted embrace of gothic blarney and sheer mystic vagueness. Nora (Alison Elliott) and Jim (Jared Harris), an alcoholic New York couple with a young son (Jeffrey Goldschrafe), return to Nora's childhood home in Ireland, where her blind academic uncle (Christopher Walken) and bedridden grandmother (Lois Smith), assisted by a little girl (Rachel O'Rourke) who shares narrating chores with Jim Jr, preside over a house haunted by the spirit of a two-thousand-year-old Druid priestess, whose bog-preserved corpse is kept in the cellar and who manifests herself looking either like Nora's mother (Sinead Dolan) or Nora herself. The uncle is killed at the half-way point by the revived mummy and the old lady calls in Nora's ex-boyfriend (Geary) and some semi-terrorist gunmen to deal with the revenant, which is worming its way into Nora's family almost by accident.

In the end, mother love and a bottle of Irish whiskey get through and the priestess recreates her original drowning, leaving the smashed family to reform. Elliott and Harris are an unusual hero and heroine for a horror film, troubled by booze and simmering family resentments and yet still credibly a couple, and the actors imbue the roles with unusual but unshowy depth -- Harris, while lampooning the resident mad professor, even does a credible impersonation of Walken, whose Irish accent is wobbly but livens up the exposition. Almereyda is rare among modern horror directors in neglecting straight action, though a confrontation between the dazed, resilient mummy and the gunmen is interesting, but works hard on an air of disorienting (here, slightly boozy or druggy) menace. Like *Nadja*, *Eternal* uses home movie-like snippets to fill in the never-quite-defined idylls and horrors of the protagonist's childhood. Far more than the Corman implants, Almereyda uses the Irish setting and locations in an interesting way, with the bog-tanned princess an intriguing, culture-specific alternative to the usual wrapped Egyptian mummy.

Meanwhile, Irish filmmakers began to make their own horror films – mostly outside the mainstream of the small Irish film industry, whose tentative approach to genre yielded only odd, arty, whimsical items like Steve Barron's *Rat* (2000), Robert Quinn's *Dead Bodies* (2003) and John Simpson's *Freeze Frame (*2004). In Northern Ireland, Enda Hughes directed, wrote, edited and photographed *The Eliminator* (1996), a hand-to-mouth movie in the spirit of Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste* (1987), similarly put together over a lengthy shoot by enthusiastic and irreverent young film-makers. While

Jackson's movie has a pace and confidence which bely its origins, *The Eliminator* capitalises on its ramshackle feel, sometimes staging stunt or action sequences with a deliberate clumsiness that dovetails seamlessly in with budget-enforced choppiness (£8,000). It opens portentously with a quotation from an ancient Irish necromantic text that suggests this, like seemingly every other film ever made in Northern Ireland, will be a serious film about 'the troubles'. 'The Organisation' - presumably the IRA - is concerned because the British security services have kidnapped O'Brien (Michael Hughes), a student rebel who has on disc the plans to a super-vehicle 'the Viper'. The eye-patched, claw-handed, limping, geek-bearded, overacting Hawk (Mik Duffy) sends his one-time friend Stone (Barry Wallace), a supercool superspy in a snappy hat, to rescue O'Brien and bring back the plans. However, because of bad blood between Hawk and Stone, Stone is set up to fail in his mission, having been given a map of Vietnam rather than Cornwall.

O'Brien is tortured in a disused cardboard box factory by cackling Brits who have built the Viper - a tank-like effort resembling a carnival float version of the Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle from *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* - and need the codeword to make the on-board computer work. Stone frees O'Brien and the Brits get wiped out in a knockabout battle, during which O'Brien commandeers the Viper and drives it around a factory site, ploughing through strategically placed piles of cardboard boxes. After some gore, Stone defeats the Brits - the chief nasty, Scorpio, is burned up in a *Mad Max*-ish car smash - but is killed by Hawk when he complains about being sent into action without back-up. Then the spy/s-f/action plot winds down and the horror movie kicks in, as Stone returns from the dead with a white curly wig and a *Darkman* hat-and-mask arrangement, picking up some firepower from an arms dump and heading off to 'the Irish Rebel Warrior Graveyard' to invoke a curse from the Celtic Book of the Dead and raise the zombified remains of Ireland's heroes to see off the Organisation's balaclava-helmeted goons. There's 'a bitching zombie fight' in the graveyard, complete with sneezed-out eyeballs, Fulci-like facial maggots, plenty of stumbling around, and a lot of amiably silly gore. In the finale, O'Brien tries to settle things by summoning up disappointing Irish heroes - Cuchullain, who turns out to be a spotty youth, and the giant Finn MacCool, who has shrunk into a prancing leprechaun - and then St Patrick himself to sort out the squabble. St Pat delivers a speech about how Irishmen should turn to the ways of peace and everyone seems cowed, but the zombie Stone condemns everyone present as 'hypocritical bastards' and pulls the pin out of a grenade. The last line has St Patrick muttering 'oh shit'; then it's a rousing chorus of 'Alternative Ulster' over the (long) end credits.

One-man band Hughes may not have been able to get audible dialogue recordings - much of Hawk's manic yattering is white noise - but he still manages something distinctive. The most Jackson-like aspect (cf: *Meet The Feebles*, 1989) is the jokey Vietnam flashback - set up by a hilariously a-historical speech that gets all the dates wrong - with yellow-tinted frolics and gore in the jungle. The two major set-pieces are the Viper/car chase and the zombie battle, both of which are packed with gags but go on too long. It's very rough-hewn, but Hughes cannily gets laughs from things like mistimed punches or obvious stunt dummies. The cast mostly mug outrageously - Duffy is probably too broad even for this - but Wallace and Michael Hughes deliver surprisingly decent work. It may

be obscure, and its North-of-the-Border origins marginalize it even within a marginalized filmography – when the producers of *Dead Meat* (2004) and *Boy Eats Girl* (2005) were arguing over who could claim the title of 'Ireland's first zombie movie', they either didn't remember or didn't count *The Eliminator*, which undeniably got there first.

Though obviously a low-budget effort, writer-director Conor McMahon's *Dead Meat* feels far more like a 'proper film' than *The Eliminator*, with funding from the Irish Film Board. It has a rural setting (including an impressive ruined castle location) and makes vague topical references to the mad cow disease and foot and mouth outbreaks, and characters who don't try to disguise their accents, but still feels like a run-of-the-mill zombie film, a simple imitation of George Romero's work which dwells on disembowelling extras and staging zombie chase sequences without tackling the sub-textural material which makes Romero's films more than just bloody exploitation. It opens eerily with a farmer attacked by a mad zombie cow on a near-derelict farm (a setting which recurs in the slender Irish horror filmography) and the living dead disease jumps the species barrier from cattle to people, which turns loose the usual bloodthirsty, gut-munching ghouls on the countryside. Helena (Marian Araujo) and Martin (David Ryan) knock down a shambling derelict (Ned Dennehy) on a rural road, and assume they've killed him – only for Martin to sustain a bite and turn into a mindless, hungry zombie. Helena becomes the heroine-survivor, seeing off her dead boyfriend with a vacuum cleaner, and joining up with spade-wielding gravedigger Desmond (David Muyllaert) to struggle across country towards the supposed safety of a rescue centre, picking up a few more stragglers (dead meat, in plot terms) to get bitten, transformed or killed. Eoin Whelan, veteran of McMahon's hurling-themed horror short *The Braineater* (2001), plays the liveliest character: Cathal, an obnoxious local with a tweed cap, a thick accent and a tendency to rambling non sequitur. The finale is cynical and downbeat, as Helena makes it through but is instantly penned in trucks with other civilians, but it seems more like a straight lift from Romero's *The Crazies* (1974) than anything felt. Stephen Bradley's *Boy Eats Girl*, scripted by Derek Landy, is an even more derivative zombie comedy (essentially a remake of Bob Balaban's *My Boyfriend's Back*, 1993). A lengthy series of contrivances to do with nervous schoolboy hero Nathan (David Leon) and his attempt to tell a longtime friend (Samantha Mumba) he is in love with her lead to the teenager semi-accidentally hanging himself, whereupon his devoted mother (Deirdre O'Kane) uses a forbidden book of voodoo spells which happens to be stashed in the basement of the local church to bring him back to life. Thanks to a missing page, a crucial ingredient is left out of the spell, and Nathan revives as a potential cannibal. Without a pulse or blood pressure (this is perhaps the first film to deal with the problem of erectile dysfunction among the undead), Nathan attends the school disco, where he is overcome by zombie instincts and bites the rugby-playing bully (Mark Huberman), who proceeds to spread the usual plague of flesh-eating zombiedom among the locals. It contrasts poorly with Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) which wholly embraces its Britishness for contrast with the American conventions of the zombie genre. A stumbling imitation of lesser films, to the extent of casting thirtyish teenagers and presenting a view of school life which is a cartoon idea of American teendom not remotely credible as Irish, *Boy Eats Girl* loses the cultural specificity (it was even mostly shot on the Isle of Man) that even *Dead Meat* takes pride in. It gets gruesome in the home

stretch, with a combine harvester massacre rather like the one in Jake West's *Evil Aliens* (2005) and gore all over the floor – but a handy snake, whose presence in famously snake-free Ireland is never explained, provides the final ingredient and restores the hero to normal life.

Picking up on elements hinted at in *Dead Meat*, two films finally advanced the cause of a specifically Irish mode of horror movie, albeit within familiar sub-genres. Director-writer Patrick Kenny's *Winter's End* (2005) is an entry in the 'captivity' cycle of psycho-thriller (cf: *The Collector*, 1965, *Misery*, 1990, *Calvaire*, 2003). Slacker photographer Jack Davis (Adam Goodwin) attends an open-air concert the film can't afford to depict, gets completely drunk, has a brief argument with his more responsible married best friend Ben (Donie Ryan) and returns to the field to find his car has been stolen. Farmer Henry Rose (Michael Crowley) lures him down a country road so he can use the phone and knocks him out, then chains him up in the barn. Gradually, it emerges that the cracked villain's plan is to have the victim impregnate Amy (Jillian Bradbury), his half-sister, so that his family's 150 year-long tenancy of the failing farm can continue. Henry says he'll let the lad go with a cash pay-out, but Jack is smart enough to realise from the outset that the farmer has to kill him to have a hope of getting away with it. The set-up at the farm is interesting, with Henry given a bit of range and depth in his crazy schemes, and an uneasy balance between the meek, dependant girl and her other brother Sean (Paul Whyte), a simpleton Henry keeps threatening to have put in an institution. Jack has to tell the girl, who has been cut off from TV and newspapers, that Ireland doesn't have 'institutions' in that sense any more, and hasn't for years. All stories like this follow a similar pattern – with the victim going from disbelief to pleading to desperate trying to escape via bogus cooperation and the captor trying to hold together a scheme which keeps stumbling over the human element – but *Winter's End* is well-enough written and acted to get past familiarity. There's a clever surprise late in the day, as the captive cannily gets the farmer to send out for an especially poncey Italian meal as a last supper – which turns out to be a signal to his best friend, the chef in the restaurant. The climax is protracted, with running about and hiding behind hedges plus shotgun-waving and an obvious casualty – but the coda, which finds captive and 'wife' together four years later, with a young daughter, is surprisingly affecting with a minor undertone of creepin.

Writer-director Billy O'Brien's *Isolation* (2006) offers another desperate, lonely farmer out to preserve his doomed business, but segues from rural misery and suspense to monster attacks. The strength of O'Brien's something-nasty-on-the-farm film is that it has enough confidence in the effectiveness of its special effects to avoid the knockabout slapstick found in *The Eliminator* or *Dead Meat* (and UK-shot efforts like *The Revenge of Billy the Kid*, 1991, or *Evil Aliens*) and treats its potentially ridiculous, *Alien*-variant story with the utmost seriousness. In grimly-realistic, Irish rural mode, farmer Dan (John Lynch) is clearly close to cracking up and troubled by the difficulty his pregnant cows are having in coming to term. Dan tries to shoo off a traveller (Sean Harris, of *Creep*, 2004) and his runaway girlfriend (Ruth Negga, of *Breakfast on Pluto*, 2005), but in a crisis calls the kids in to help him haul a calf out of its mother with a winch and rope. The local vet (Essie Davis) and a lone scientist (Marcel Iures) are also around the farm, and it turns out that the cows are being used in fringe unethical experiments that have a nasty side-effect. The calves are born pregnant with

inside-out little freak foetuses which get loose after an autopsy and grow rapidly into voracious monsters. The film offers a long, atmospheric build-up, full of pregnant pauses, withheld explanations and desperate characters who never quite explain their awful situations – but the last half-hour is a high quality monster runabout, with the well-realised creatures darting out of the shadows to inflict horrible damage on the dwindling human cast.

O'Brien follows examples like *28 days later ...* and *Wild Country* (2005), telling a familiar story in an unusual manner, with a lot of work on the nuanced but unfussy performances (Lynch, in particular, does something with almost no scripted material to go on) and a sense of real characters in a crisis to ground the basic monster movie business in mucky credibility. The effects by veteran Bob Keen are fine, and sparingly-used – with one nice moment as the biggest of the monsters has a sudden full reveal, and stays on screen a few seconds longer than expected without losing its shock value. Without overstressing its origins, *Isolation* also offers a specific Irish take on its story – the motor of the plot, as in *Winter's End*, is the economic plight of traditional farm folk left behind by the 'Celtic Tiger' boom and clinging to the land with all the tenacity of Richard Harris in *The Field* (1990); and there's uncomfortable truth in the treatment of the traveller couple, jovially advised with menaces to move on by the Garda and instantly suspected of any crime or horror.

There are still too-few Irish horror films to perceive a tradition, though theof rural agricultural miserablism as opposed to, say, Dublin-set urban ghost stories, is striking. Pegarty Long's *The Irish Vampire Goes West* (2006), the first Irish vampire film, is forthcoming, and may take another direction. And there are still a great many Irish or Irish-set horror stories, and a wealth of sinister folklore, which could profitably be brought to the screen. Finally, this survey would not be complete without mention of the most purely frightening ten minutes in Irish cinema, writer-director Brendan Muldowney's *The Ten Steps* (2004) – which combines ancient (a house where the Devil was once seen) and modern (a mobile phone-call) with psychology (fear of the dark, sibling tensions) and the supernatural (a hell-dimension in the basement). Here, at last, is the true Celtic Chiller.**Irish**