



Ian Hart plays David in *Land and Freedom*

# Land and freedom

Clive Bradley reviews  
*Land and Freedom*, the  
 new film by Ken Loach

*LAND and Freedom* could not have been made by any other film maker. It is a film about the Spanish civil war which is unmistakably socialist, which shows the Spanish revolution as a great movement of the workers and peasants that was stifled and crushed not only by Franco's fascists but by the Spanish Communist Party. Its powerful emotional effect comes not only from the tragedy that engulfs individuals, but from the tragedy of masses of people — "the masses"; the tragedy of a squandered and defeated revolution. It is an uncompromising socialist film which gives nothing to fashionable post-modernist post-Marxist pessimism. It boldly asserts that working-class socialism is possible. And this in itself is an extraordinary achievement.

The film follows David, a young Communist Party member from Liverpool who goes to Spain to fight for the Republic against the fascist uprising. In Spain, he is sent to fight with a detachment of the militia of the POUM (the Party of Marxist Workers Unity), a quasi-Trotskyist organisation. The film shows how the Spanish Stalinists gradually whittled down the spontaneous revolutionary energy of the workers and peasants, starved the POUM and the anarchists of weapons, and eventually drowned them in blood.

In Barcelona to convalesce after an injury in May 1937 David witnesses the Communist Party's decisive military turn against the POUM and the anarchists. He tears up his

Party card. Returning to the front, he is there when the Stalinist-run official army arrives to force the militia to disarm, branding the POUM Trotskyist and therefore "counter-revolutionary". Bewildered, the militia are shot at, and David's lover is killed.

The story is told through letters that David's granddaughter finds after his death in present-day Liverpool. We are reminded of the contemporary relevance of the fight against the Spanish fascists. More than that, the cutting between past and present gives a powerful sense of the war as "lived history". That these were real people rather

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than creatures of a historian's imagination, and that this real past has something vital to teach us, something which must not be lost.

In this it is like Loach's other work with the screenwriter, Jim Allen, in particular the marvellous 1970s TV serial, *Days of Hope*, about the British General Strike of 1926.

Loach is a completely distinctive director. It is hard to think of any living filmmaker who tackles such directly political subject matter, never mind one whose outlook is so coherently socialist. Technically too, Loach makes his mark. He films in sequence. The different sections of the film which take

place at the front were not filmed all at the same time — the normal film-making method — but in their dramatic order. Loach only gave the actors that part of the script which they were filming that day. Through this, and by partial improvisation, he achieves an almost-documentary realism.

In one scene, the foreign militia participate in a discussion about whether to collectivise the land in a village they have liberated from the fascists. To an extraordinary extent, we feel we are watching a real debate, not a scripted propaganda piece.

The film's subject would be familiar territory to anyone who has read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. The big question is to what extent it makes sense to someone who knows absolutely nothing about the Spanish civil war.

The weakest section is the middle part, in Barcelona, where David's disillusionment with the Communist Party reaches its climax. This must have been the hardest part to stage. It's one thing to reconstruct the front in the middle of deserted countryside, quite another fighting in the streets of a major city. The result is a little confusing suggesting more an effect of typical left-wing fractiousness than of Stalinist agents of the Russian totalitarian state shooting workers in Spanish streets in defence of the Spanish bourgeoisie.

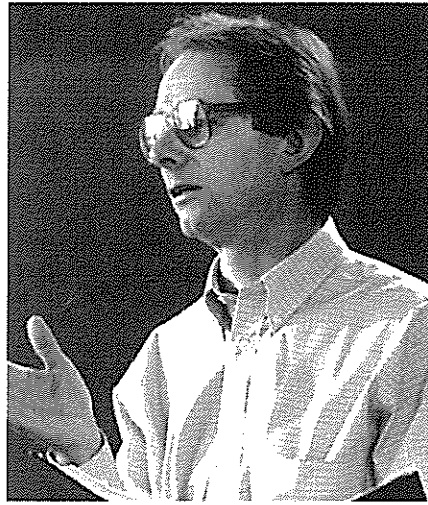
The anti-Stalinists never have the ideological coherence of the main Stalinist character, the American, Lawrence. Where he speaks persuasively and articulately, the POUM people tend to speak in general revolutionary slogans. No doubt it reflects some truth about the POUM, although the film understandably doesn't try to examine the POUM critically (an almost impossible task to achieve without making the plot utterly

confusing). Nevertheless, the film leaves itself open to attack from its ideological enemies: "Okay, what would they have done?" It allows room for an interpretation that revolutionary socialism is a splendid idea, but doomed to failure in the face of hard-nosed real-politik. Was this meant by Loach and Allen to be so, or is it an unintended reflection of their own political condition?

But this is a drama, not a pamphlet. It brings to life an important episode in working-class history, and rescues it from the mythology of the Popular Front. The Spanish actors involved have said that they themselves didn't know this history. If it makes anyone want to find out more about the Spanish revolution and its betrayal, it has performed a great service.

As drama, it has its moments of weakness. The love story is too thin to have much impact, and one wonders what David was doing writing to his fiancée about it. Sometimes it feels that too great an expanse of time is forced into too short a length of film, and events seem episodic and slightly disconnected.

But who else is making films like this, if indeed anyone has ever made them apart



Ken Loach

from Russian film makers in the 1920s? The only comparable recent film I can think of (apart from Loach's own) is John Sayles' *Matewan*, about a strike in America in the 1920s. *Land and Freedom* is an important, excellent film, which deserves as wide an audience as possible. ■

# Mel Christ, superstar

## Paddy Dollard reviews

### *Braveheart*

THE Scottish National Party is mounting a recruitment campaign around *Braveheart*, and well they might. This is an odd concoction, a cultural hybrid which has a raw note of sincerity to it and is therefore strangely moving.

Its hero is William Wallace who in the 13th century led a popular movement for Scotland's independence from the English, until, betrayed to the English king by the high Scottish nobility, he was hanged in London, disembowelled alive and then chopped in pieces. This is the Wallace of one of the best political songs ever written, Robert Burns' "Scots wha hae wi Wallace bled..." [Scots who have with Wallace bled].

As history it is risible in parts. Wallace has an affair with Isabella, the French wife of the future King Edward II — the homosexual king who was dethroned by Isabella and her lover Mortimer and then murdered by having a red hot poker thrust up his anus into his bowels — and leaves her pregnant with the future Edward III...

Nevertheless, it works. It is a tale of how a people, scorning its own traitorous nobility, rise up, and start a stubborn struggle to win their independence — their "freedom". Their leader, Wallace, is Robin Hood, William Tell, Davy Crockett and Jesus Christ all in one.

Mel Gibson, the American-Australian star

and director of *Braveheart* is a fundamentalist Catholic and this film is full of the Christian symbols of sacrifice, martyrdom and popular redemption through the shedding of the martyr's blood. Gibson's images merge his version of the story of William Wallace, Scotland's saviour, into the gospel story of Jesus Christ, the saviour of human kind. The symbols become fused and interchangeable. Even the table on which Wallace is made to lie down to be butchered is shaped like a cross.

This film tries to do for Wallace and Scottish nationalism what Patrick Pearse did for Irish nationalism. Pearse's mystical Catholic nationalist poetry and his all too real martyrdom after the 1916 Easter Rising fused Irish nationalism with Christian mythology. Pearse died, and Gibson is raking in the big bucks, but the emotional power of such things should not be underestimated, even in an era like ours when Christianity is not what it used to be.

A mythology bestowed on the SNP as an unexpected gift from Hollywood could not have the power of the real "blood sacrifice" of Pearse. It can have a cumulative effect. The SNP's use of this film must inevitably strengthen the raw, racial, right wing element in its own political physiognomy.

At some point Nationalism such as it is in Scotland now, fermenting and bubbling, must if continuously frustrated, undergo a sea change into something far more malignant.

The sooner a Scottish assembly convenes, the better! ■

## New Year in Spain

The road ran downhill into Spain,  
The wind blew fresh on bamboo grasses,  
The white plane trees were bone naked  
and the issues plain:

We have come to a place in space where  
shortly

All of us may be forced to camp in time:  
The slender searchlights climb,  
Our sins will find us out, even our sins of  
omission.

When I reached the town it was dark,  
No lights in the streets but two and a half  
millions of people  
Of people in circulation  
Condemned like the beasts in the ark  
With nothing but water around them:  
Will there ever be a green tree or a rock that  
is dry?

The shops are empty and in Barceloneta the  
eye

Sockets of the houses are empty.  
But still they manage to laugh  
Though they have no eggs, no milk, no fish,  
no fruit, no tobacco, no butter  
Though they live upon lentils and sleep in the  
Metro,

Though the old order is gone and the  
golden calf  
Of Catalan industry shattered;  
The human values remain purged in the fire  
And it appears that every man's desire  
Is life rather than victuals.

Life being more, it seems, than merely the  
bare  
Permission to keep alive and receive orders,  
Humanity being more than a mechanism  
To be oiled and greased and for ever unaware  
Of the work it is turning out, of why the  
wheels keep turning;  
Here at last the soul has found its voice  
Though not indeed by choice;  
The cost was heavy.

They breathe the air of war and yet the  
tension  
Admits, beside the slogans it evokes,  
An interest in philately or pelota  
Or private jokes.  
And the sirens cry in the dark morning  
And the lights go out and the town is still  
And the sky is pregnant with ill will  
And the bombs come foxing the fated victim.  
As pretty as a Guy Fawkes show  
Silver sprays and tracer bullets  
And in the pauses of destruction  
The cocks in the centre of the town crow.  
The cocks crow in Barcelona  
Where clocks are few to strike the hour:  
Is it heart's reveille or the sour  
Reproach of Simon Peter?

The year has come to an end,  
Time for resolutions, for stock taking;  
Felice Nuevo Año!  
May God, if there is one, send  
As much courage again and greater vision  
And resolve the antinomies in which we live  
Where a man must be either safe because he  
is negative  
Or free on the edge of a razor.  
Give those who are gentle strength,  
Give those who are strong a generous  
imagination,  
And make their halftruth true and let the  
crooked  
Footpath find its parent road at length.

Louis MacNeice, 1938