

THE WINDS OF WAR:  
THE WIND SHAKES THE BARLEY

THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY, winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival, begins innocuously: a group of young men play field hockey, slapping each on the back after a good play. The familiar green hills of Ireland roll picturesquely in the background. Nothing in the opening scene portends the violence that will shape each of these young men into revolutionaries.

But this is 1920s Ireland, a place infested by violence, and before we have even had time to distinguish between the young men, one of them is already dead, killed by British soldiers in front of his grandmother, his mother and his sister for nothing more than refusing to say his name.

In a lesser film, that one act of violence would be enough to transform Damien (Cillian Murphy) from a young man about to become a doctor into a hardened revolutionary, hellbent on independence at any cost. But director Ken Loach is too smart for that; he knows that hardened revolutionaries are born in a moment only in the movies. In life, they are created by a series of events and actions.

Damien is shaken up by the murder, but he also blames his friend for being too arrogant to give into the soldier's demands. While trying to get on the train to accept a position at a hospital in London, he witnesses another act of violence, a train conductor being beaten up by British soldiers. His exit blocked (a sign saying "Way Out" hangs over the train), he turns around and joins the local IRA, led by his older brother Teddy. He becomes dedicated to the cause, but he seems softer than the other men, his wide blue eyes gazing at his older brother with an almost boyish admiration.

The young men train in the same hills where they once practiced field hockey. Training soon leads to action. Dressed in fedoras and long overcoats, the men (most of whom look like boys) begin to commit random acts of violence against British soldiers and the Irish who help them. Eventually, they are imprisoned for assassination, their arrest caused by the accidental treachery of one of their own. While in prison, Teddy is severely wounded, and Damien becomes the de facto leader. It is Damien who will decide to execute the young boy who put them in so much danger. It is Damien who will shoot him in the heart. It is Damien who will never be able to turn back.

Teddy recovers and negotiates a peace treaty with Britain. In exactly the type of scene that makes many political films unbearable, Damien and some of his fellow IRA members argue that the terms of the treaty are unconscionable, that only full independence can justify the amount of death and destruction they have both witnessed and reaped. These scenes work because the characters are fighting with each other, not lecturing the audience.

Teddy and his followers form an army; the oppressed become the oppressors. The prospect of peace seems not only distant but also impossible. Each act of violence

justifies another. Women like Sinead, Damien's girlfriend, are left on the sidelines, with nothing to do but weep for what they have come to understand as their inevitable losses.

THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY is an elegy for what Damien might have been: a doctor, a father, a husband. One gazes into Damien's clear and beautiful blue eyes clinging to the hope that he will find it within himself to accept a compromise and survive. A lesser director might flinch right along with his audience, but THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY is unrelentingly moral in its vision. Given recent history, we should all be thankful to Loach for being the type of filmmaker who forces his audience to look, to really look, at the consequences of oppression and violence.