

A century of ‘cinematographing Ireland’

Published in History Ireland [20th-century / Contemporary History](#), [Features](#), [Issue 6](#) (Nov/Dec 2010), [Volume 18](#), [World War I](#)
<http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/a-century-of-cinematographing-ireland/>



In the Kalem Company's Colleen Bawn (1911), Danny (Sidney Olcott), tormented with guilt after having attempted to drown the Colleen Bawn, is restrained by Father Tom (Arthur Donaldson). An intertitle states that 'the bed used in this scene belonged to Daniel O'Connell and was occupied by him'. (Muckross House, Killarney)

One hundred years ago, on the night of Saturday 13 August 1910, three passengers travelling from New York disembarked from the White Star Line's steamer Baltic at what was then called Queenstown, now Cobh, with a device that was revolutionising how people viewed the world: the cinematograph or cine-camera. This device had existed for fifteen years by 1910, and had been used to record events and film short fiction subjects. At this point, film-makers were perfecting the techniques that would allow them to produce long fiction films for mass audiences and consequently make the cinema the twentieth century's dominant medium. The arrival of the three-person film crew marked the beginning of the first serious effort to make Ireland not only a part of the international market for such films but also the location for their production.

Kalem

Sidney Olcott, Gene Gauntier and George Hollister were employees of the New York-based Kalem Company, a small film production company that made the most of its lack of studios by specialising in fiction films admired for the realism of their outdoor settings. Cinema audiences were becoming more discerning and were increasingly choosing films in which the action unfolded in convincing locations. Between 1910 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, these film-makers would return each summer to shoot films in Ireland, favouring the south-west corner of the country, particularly the area around [Killarney](#). The popularity of their films made Killarney—rural and picturesque—the authentic filmic image of Ireland that circulated to mass audiences around the world, including the growing cinema audiences in Ireland itself.

Olcott was the company's main film director as well as an actor; Gauntier was both a scriptwriter and actress; and Hollister was a cameraman, the company's 'leading expert', in the Cork Examiner's phrase, in the operation of the cinematograph. The Examiner carried a brief report on the film-makers on the Thursday after their arrival. 'Representatives of the Kalem Motion Picture Company, New York, are at present engaged in a tour of Ireland for

the purpose of securing a series of “motion” pictures for exhibition before American audiences’. It revealed:

‘Already they have secured a number of excellent views in and around Cork. Harvesting operations yesterday formed the object of their attention. Scenes at Blarney Castle, Queenstown, and other places of interest were also taken. Of course, places like Killarney and Glengarriffe will come in for special attention. The pictures in addition to being full of interest for the American audiences will at the same time contribute a splendid advertising medium for the tourist resorts of this country.’

This short anonymous article gives a good indication of what film-making meant for observers in Ireland at the time. Its title, ‘Cinematographing Ireland: “Motion” Pictures for America’, nicely conveys the sense in which scenic views of Ireland were to be captured for consumption by US cinema audiences. The benefits of this process for Ireland appear here to be purely secondary: the films will advertise Irish tourist resorts and encourage Americans to voyage across the Atlantic to visit those resorts and consume the authentic views themselves. Indeed, film’s potential as a promoter of Irish tourism had been recognised by 1900 and continues to influence government support for foreign film-making in the country to the present. Nevertheless, the article acknowledges neither that most of these picturesque images would be seen as part of a fictional narrative that would influence how audiences were likely to interpret them nor that Irish audiences would also see these images on the growing number of screens all over Ireland.

Travel



Local people look on as Sidney Olcott directs Jack Clark and Gene Gauntier in For Ireland’s Sake, in Olcott’s final production season in Killarney in 1914. (Muckross House, Killarney)

Travel not only formed the context of how the Kalem film-makers made their movies but also the spine of virtually all the stories they created. They wasted no time in achieving their primary goal of making best use of the real locations that they visited to produce fiction films that would appeal to the large cinema audiences in the United States, among them Irish Americans and more recent Irish immigrants. On their voyage to Queenstown, they began filming the shipboard scenes of *The lad from old Ireland*, the first surviving fiction film shot substantially in Ireland. This film shows how Terry (Olcott), unhappy with his lot in rural Rathpacon, emigrates to New York, where after ten years he has worked himself up from navy to mayor. Learning of the desperate plight of Aileen (Gauntier), his half-forgotten sweetheart, Terry returns to Ireland to save her from eviction and marry her. Although only one-reel—c. 17 minutes—long, this film encapsulates a myth of Irish success in America on a scale that allows the immigrant to return to remedy Ireland’s economic and political ills. This film most directly addressed and flattered those Americans of recent Irish heritage, but the story was one that would find easy resonances with immigrants from other parts of the world. Filmed not far from Cork city, *The lad from old Ireland* features an unspectacular pastoral landscape of whitewashed thatched cottages and fields divided by dry stone walls. Olcott and Gauntier left Kalem at the end of 1912, but they returned to Ireland in 1913 with their own company, the Gene Gauntier Feature Players, and Olcott brought his Sid

Olcott International Feature Players to Killarney for a final production season in 1914. Rumours circulated that Olcott was planning to set up a permanent studio in the village of Beaufort, near the Gap of Dunloe, but Europe's inexorable mobilisation for total war put paid to any such plans. Nevertheless, the quality of the films that they made in Ireland and their commitment to scenic realism set a high standard for those who would represent Ireland on screen. HI

Denis Condon lectures in Irish cinema at NUI Maynooth.

Further reading:

D. Condon, *Early Irish cinema, 1895–1921* (Dublin, 2008).