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Discussing the Historical Accuracy of *Black '47*

Director Lance Daly's *Black '47* is by no means for the faint of heart. The film covers a number of gruesome and heart wrenching thematic elements that could lead many a viewer—myself included—to look away from the screen more than once. It revolves around British army veteran Martin Feeney's search for revenge after returning home to Ireland to discover that his family has been evicted from their cottage and are now living in a state of desperation. However, despite the darkness of its tale, *Black '47* does an incredible job of encapsulating the horrors of the Irish potato famine in a way that actually does it justice. While it does not provide a "forensic investigation" (Mark-FitzGerald) into the politics and economic history behind the famine, one can quickly conclude by examining multiple outside sources and reviews of the film that *Black '47* masterfully captures the extensive destitution and sorrow it brought about while barely straying from historical accuracy.

While discussing *Black '47's* alignment with historical facts, it is important to start with its depiction of the famine's devastating effect on the Irish poor. The story begins with its protagonist, Martin Feeney, arriving at his old family home, only to find it in ruins amongst its surrounding barren landscape. Upon reaching the cottage, he encounters a caretaker, Beartla O'Naughton, who breaks the news of the tragic fate of Martin's mother and brother. He timidly explains how Martin's mother "died a year ago...sick with the fever," and that his brother was hanged after he "stabbed the bailiff when they came to tumble the house." Both of their grievous ends are very historically accurate. Hundreds of thousands of Irish peasants died after the consumption of rotten produce or malnutrition led to cholera and typhus (Interpreting the Irish Famine), and displacement by landowners and overseers was also extremely common. Several policies instituted by the British government during the famine forced landowners to take matters into their own hands, "clearing their troublesome and destitute tenants from their estates and replacing them with more lucrative livestock and crops, thus forcing the dispossessed to choose between living in workhouses or emigrating abroad" (Gray). Martin himself attempts to convince his sister and her two children who are still struggling to survive in the shambled cottage to leave for America with him, now that their homeland can bring nothing but hunger and poverty. These causes, along with starvation, decreased Ireland's population by more than 25%, another fact the film includes in one of its earliest monologues by Feeney as he crosses the bitter Irish landscape on horseback: "Within a few short years, one in four of our people would be gone forever..." Dreadfully, Martin's sister and her children die of starvation and hypothermia, seen frozen to death in the cold after huddling together in the ruins of their old home. This in itself connects to the famine's historical context, considering that the winter of 1847 was recorded as incredibly harsh and "remembered in infamy in Ireland as Black 47" (Gray). While the demise of Martin's remaining family takes place only within the first 30 minutes of the film, it provides a large

amount of accurate historical insight into the true horrors experienced by Irish peasantry, much of which many believe could have been subsidized by the British government.

While *Black '47* does not directly try to capture the political situation between Ireland and Britain during the famine, it does provide some understanding of their relationship. Martin's search for revenge and whom it is directed towards showcases a large amount of animosity between Britain and Ireland, especially by painting the British government as being extremely neglectful towards the suffering of the Irish during their most difficult times. While we are not given the full picture, it is historically true that Britain took a very hands off approach in assisting the Irish economy during the famine, which Michael Gray describes in his Cineaste review of the film:

“Sir Robert Peel, the British Prime Minister and Conservative Party leader in the 1840s, and his opposite number, Sir John Russell of the Whigs, were united in their belief that a laissez-faire approach to economic matters was appropriate, and thus the government should not interfere, even if the economy in Ireland was facing complete collapse.”

This can be attributed to the fact that much of the British parliament in London was very wealthy and disconnected from any interaction with the poor, even in their own country, and thus “did not regard the fate of the lower classes as being the state's responsibility” (Gray). *Black '47*, though not directly, does a fair job of pointing this out by introducing British characters who show no regard for the starving Irish peasants, some even wishing they didn't exist to be dealt with in the first place. One of the most poignant examples of this is landlord Lord Kilmichael who states how he one day hopes that “a Celt in Ireland is as rare as a red Indian in Manhattan.” This leads to the final area of discussion when analyzing *Black '47*'s historical accuracy: food exports.

During the climax of *Black '47*, we see Martin Feeney amongst a landowner and his workers who are supposedly shipping tons of grain off to England instead of using them to feed their starving tenants. While “anachronisms and inaccuracies in *Black '47* are few and minor” (Gray), this might be its one area for improvement. Even though the film's “condemnation of grain exports from a starving nation” (Mark-FitzGerald) paints a vivid portrait of the British government's cruelty and the tragedies of colonial oppression, it was actually much more complicated and not all-together one sided. In the first years of the famine, there were calls from several corporations along the Irish coast to be closed in order to keep food in the country. At the same time, “local and central governments throughout Europe were responding to food shortages in their own countries by closing their ports as a short-term expedient”(Kinealy). This would have made the situation a much more complicated one for Britain since it depended on its neighbors for large amounts of several different goods and natural resources, Ireland included. The British government depended on Ireland for a “wide range of foodstuffs” (Kinealy), not just grain, and thus the continued exportation of some goods from Ireland to Britain was based mostly on necessity rather than a desire to bleed the Irish dry. Furthermore, a significant amount of records detailing the import/export relationship between the two countries during the time of the famine is flawed (Kinealy), and thus cannot be relied upon to make a completely accurate conclusion regarding the data they discuss. However, there is still a lot of historical information

that supports the idea that a significant amount of food was still being transported from Ireland during its famine years. According to Kinealy's article on food exports during the time period, almost "4,000 vessels carried food from Ireland to the major ports of Britain" in 1847 alone. Thus, *Black '47*'s depiction of large amounts of food leaving Ireland, unable to be consumed by any of its hungry population, is not completely inaccurate.

Black '47's compelling tale of revenge and heartbreak from the perspective of a worn out soldier gives a new perspective on the tragedy brought about by the potato famine that brought Ireland to its knees. With few historical inaccuracies, it pays tribute to what the Irish endured while at the same time providing an emotive film with capability of impacting a wide range of audiences. While the famine is often studied, its portrayal by Lacy addressed its grave nature in a way that many have not considered, myself included; *Black '47* makes one feel the pain of the Irish people in a manner impossible to be experienced in any other way.

Food Exports

“The debate has tended to juxtapose John Mitchel’s emotive assertion regarding ships laden with food leaving Ireland against Austin-Bourke’s pioneering and frequently cited tabulation of the Irish grain trade in the 1840s. Whilst the former is impressionistic and anecdotal, Bourke’s statistics are based on contemporary government returns. The latter is used as evidence of the net inflow of grain in 1847 and thereby dismisses Mitchell’s claims. More recently, Jim Donnelly amongst others has refined this argument, suggesting that grain imports only really became significant after the spring of 1847 (HI 1.3, Autumn 1993). In the months prior to this there had been a shortfall in food imports which contributed to a ‘starvation gap’ in Ireland.”

“Significant amounts of food were leaving Ireland during the Famine years. In 1847 alone, the worst year of the Famine, almost 4,000 vessels carried food from Ireland to the major ports of Britain, that is, Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and London. “

“Grain was not the only major food export to Britain: the data suggests that at the time of the Famine the population of Britain depended heavily on Ireland for a wide range of foodstuffs, and not just grain. At the same time, large quantities of other merchandise were exported from Ireland. In the twelve month period following the second failure of the potato crop, exports from Ireland included horses and ponies (over 4,000), bones, lard, animal skins, honey, tongues, rags, shoes, soap, glue and seed. This vast export trade suggests the diversity of the Irish economy during these years and how disease and starvation existed side-by-side with a substantial commercial sector.”

“In 1845 and 1846 there were calls from the corporations of Belfast, Cork, Derry, Dublin and Limerick for the ports to be closed in an effort to keep food in the country. At the same time, local and central governments throughout Europe were responding to food shortages in their own countries by closing their ports as a short-term expedient.”

Interpreting The Irish Famine, 1846-1850

“The Famine also spurred new waves of immigration, thus shaping the histories of the United States and Britain as well.”