

Those Fighting Irish and their good natured fights on film

By Steve Farrell

The Irish and the Irish-Americans have always have had a presence in Hollywood since the earliest talkie films like *Public Enemy* and *The Roaring Twenties*. The two main stereotypes of the Irish that were projected upon the silver screen were the gangster and the priest with James Cagney being the epitome of the former and Pat O'Brien representing the later. However, very early on during the Great Depression the Irish beat cop, along with the Irish prize fighter, were added to flesh out the representation of the Irish-American to their fellow Americans. With this paper, however, I shall not concern myself with the characterization of Irish-Americans as much as I will with a particular scene in every movie featuring Irish-Americans. I refer to this reoccurring theme as 'those fighting Irish and their good natured fights.' These fight scenes often time involved siblings and friends fighting for the heck of it. One of the hall-mark of these good natured is that nobody was killed or even seriously hurt. All of the participants got ion their fair share of licks before the brawl ended. Oftentimes the musical score in the background indicated that the combat was all in good fun and that all of the combatants were thoroughly enjoying the feel of fist upon flesh and flesh upon fist.

Dating back to the '*stage Irishman*' of the British theatrical tradition as well as 'Paddy the sentimental mischief maker' in American vaudeville the Irish and the Irish-Americans had a colorful list of stereotypical traits that Hollywood could select to represent the Irish-American to the rest of the country. Whereas the stereotypes used for African-Americans, Italian-Americans and Jewish-Americans were oftentimes cruel, hateful and belittling the stereotypes of the Irish were laced with humor and affection. It can be argued that a large percentage of Irish-Americans enjoyed the stereotypes as well

as did their best to live up to the attitudes and behaviors that many of their kind exhibited on film. The Irish-American was quick to anger and to resort to roughhouse to achieve justice or satisfaction. The Mick drank too much and the liquor made him prone to sing Irish songs and to reminisce about the auld sod. Whereas Paddy was a weeping drunk and a brawler, he was also loyal, kind-hearted and at the end of the day a good family man as well as a true blue patriot. For the purpose of this paper I have selected a 'good natured fight scene' from eight movies dating from 1940 to 1989. The films under discussion shall be *The Fighting 69th* (1940), *Gentleman Jim* (1942), *The Fighting Sullivans* (1944), *The Quiet Man* (1952), *The Miracle Worker* (1962), *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* (1966), *The Molly Maguires* (1970) and *My Left Foot: the Story of Christy Brown* (1989). I have selected these movies because they illustrated my point the best and they are all long-time favorites of mine.

The Fighting 69th was a film that set-out to re-tell the tale of New York's famous fighting brigade and Father Duffy, the priest who ministered to the spiritual life of those Irish-Americans who were sent over to France to assist the English against the Germans during the first world war. Machine guns, tanks, submarines, gas bombs and airplanes made the 14-18 war by far the bloodiest of all wars to date. The introduction of trench warfare ground the war to a gross slow motion pace where thousands died in the gaining, holding and losing of inches of muddy turf. The movie featured three of Irish-Americas leading representation of their ethnic group: James Cagney as Private Jerry Plunkett, Pat O'Brien as Father Duffy and Alan Hale as Sgt. Big Mike Wynn. Plunkett, the regiment's biggest slack, pop-off and big talker is taking a break from guard duty when Big Mike comes along to correct the situation. One word leads to another before Big Mike and Jerry are stripping off gear to engage in a slugfest. Several punches are thrown before Wild Bill Donovan (George Brent), commander of the outfit restores order. Big Mike is almost put on orders before Plunkett steps in to explain that the two

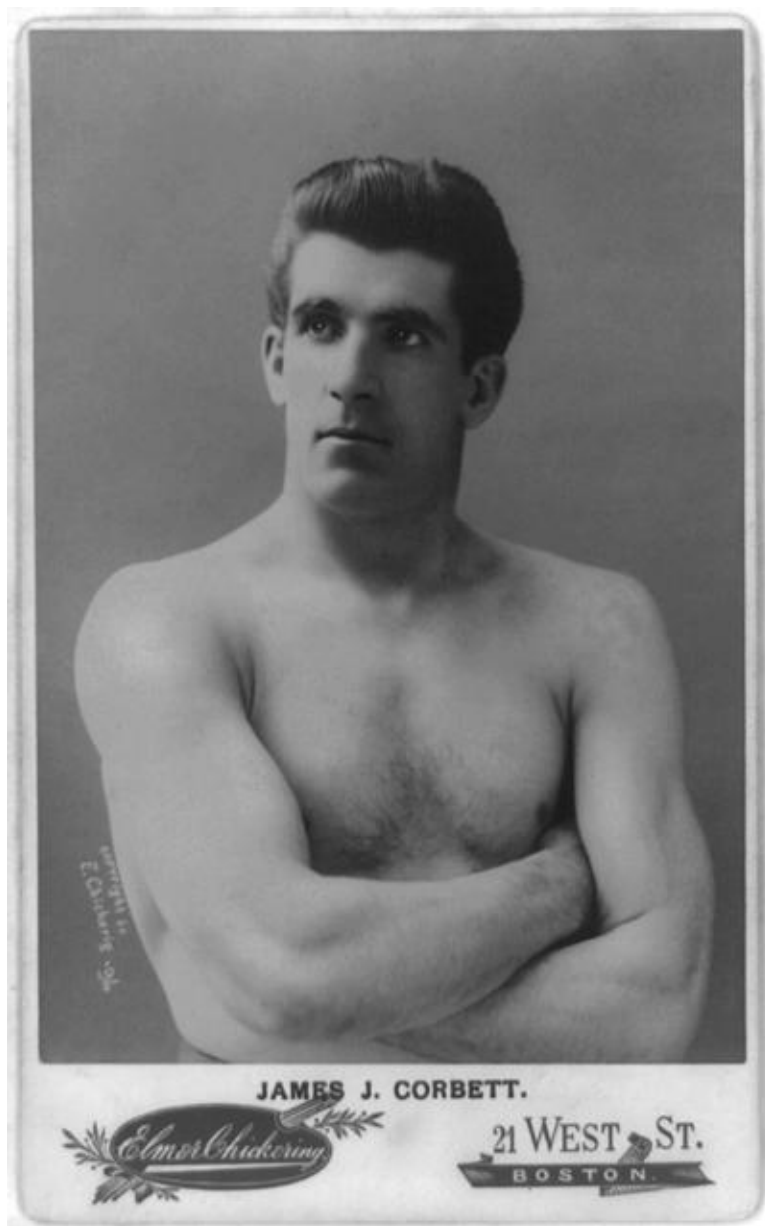
were just sparring for the amusement of the troops. Afterwards when Big Mike tries to shake his hand, Jerry refuses and spits out "nobody needs to do my fighting for me."



Cagney was always ready for a fight

Gentleman Jim was a biopic that revolved around the boxing career and devil-may-antics of James J. Corbett, heavyweight champion of the world during the 'gay' Nineties. Corbett's greatest victory in the ring came in 1892 when he dethroned John L. Sullivan, the Boston Strong Boy, in a late round knockout. Sullivan was America's first recognized heavyweight champion of the world while Corbett was the second. Both men were Irish-Americans whose parents were born in Ireland. In this movie Errol Flynn, an Australian with Irish roots and a noted swashbuckler of the Thirties, played the part of Gentleman Jim while the role of Sullivan was Ward Bond, who played John L with a tick, over-the-top Irish brogue. I have covered this epic bout scene in another paper. In this discussion I

am concerned with James J. quarrel with two brothers George (James Flavin) and Pat Flaherty (Harry) who start pulling off poor Jim's tie and cracking him in the ears with their fingers while the family is seated at the supper table with their guest Father Burke (Arthur Shields). The forever Irish Alan Hale, seated at the head of the table, plays the part of Pat Corbett, the father who is trying to control his brood of warrior sons. When James j. has had enough he challenges his brothers to step into the barn and Pat nominates himself as the referee of the match. As the clan, including Dorothy Vaughn as Ma Corbett, troop to the barn a neighbor starts to gather a crowd by shouting "the Corbetts are at it again."



James J. Corbett, the man who defeated John L. Sullivan



Errol Flynn as James J. Corbett

Al, Frank, George, Matt and Joe Sullivan were five Irish-American brothers from Waterloo, Iowa who went down together in a battleship during the World war Two rather than be parted. *The Fighting Sullivans* was made as a tool of propaganda to stir Yankee Doodle Dandy feelings during the war as well as to put a stop to brothers serving in the same unit. The Sullivan Law is even mentioned in *Saving Private Ryan*. A sole surviving son can't be in a combat situation because of the devastation the family. The brothers were played by Edward Ryan, John Cambell, James Cardwell, John Alvin and George Offerman as adults enlisting during the war. The highlight of the movie in my opinion is the depiction of the brothers when they were growing up during the Great Depression. Johnny Calkins (Joe), Billy Cummings (Matt), Marvin Davis (Frank), Bobby Driscoll (Al) and Buddy Swan (George) played a closely-knit collection of brothers who preferred to play and brawl amongst themselves than mingle with the other neighborhood children. In the scene I have selected 4 of the Sullivan brothers are sitting on the ground playing a knife pegging game. They are accompanied by a unkempt mutt that they have adopted as their own. The fifth and youngest brother, Joe, is actually in a nearby church making his first communion from Father Francis (Roy Roberts) when a gang of boys come along and insult the Sullivan brothers' dog before insulting the brothers themselves. A full scale donnybrook

ensues. Joe is forced to make a hasty sign of the cross before fleeing the church to respond to a whistle from one of his brothers. Some good punches are thrown and many shoves given before the adults put an end to the scuffle. Later on as the Sullivan lads march together down the street on their way to a nearby recruitment office the day after Pearl Harbor, accompanied to the background of Irish music, a local mother exclaims "now that's their fighting walk."

Without a doubt the greatest good-natured fight in Hollywood history was the one filmed between John Wayne's Sean Thornton and Victor McLaglen's Will Danaher John Ford in *The Quiet Man*. Ford, an Irish-American director best known for his cowboy epics that starred the Duke, made the film as homage to the native land of his forefather. *The Quiet Man* emphasized the natural beauty of the west of Ireland but it also played into, and re-established, the old stereotypes of the Irish being an old-fashioned rural race quick to drink, sing and to brawl. And what a brawl the film goer was treated to.

Sean Thornton, a retired prize-fighter, returns to the family traditional homestead in Innisfree (Cong, County Mayo) where he falls in love with beautiful but hot-headed Mary Kate Danaher (Maureen O'Hara). Sean and Mary Kate marry but their bliss is detoured because Will Danaher, Mary Kate's massive and bullying brother, refuses to pay-off the bride's dowry. Nobody is satisfied until the two behemoths, Thornton and Danaher, square off man to man. Once again, Arthur Shields (Reverend Cyril Parker) plays a man of the cloth; and he is the only one who knows Sean Thornton's secret: he had killed a man during the course of his last fight.



Poster for "The Quiet Man"

The Quiet Man is literally a who's who of film Irishmen and Irishwomen with old standbys like Ward Bond (Father Lonergan), Barry Fitzgerald (Michaleen Flynn) and Jack MacGowran (Ignatius Feeney) putting in appearances. The greatest performance in the movie is that of McLaglen as the busterling "Squire" Danaher. McLaglen, who was an Englishman and not Irish, had been a fair professional fighter in his prime who had once gone toe to toe with heavyweight champion Jack Johnson.



Ward Bond and John Wayne

The climax of the movie comes when Sean Thorton finally has had enough of the entire Danaher clan and returns Mary Kate back to her brother. Danaher is forced to hand over the dowry to Sean who promptly burns it. Danaher lands the first punch. The first is one of the longest one in film history and it was carried on from field to village and from pub to river. Everybody in entire county of Mayo is soon upon the scene and wagering upon the outcome. When some of the other men start throwing fists around they have to be reminded by Mickaleen that it is a "private fight." One old man on his death bed, Francis Ford, John's brother, makes a magical recovery just in time to witness the classic fight. The actual finish of the fight is never shown. Ford cut to a scene where Sean and Will are staggering home arm in arm and singing the *Wild Colonial Boy*. It is made quite clear to the audience

that neither one was seriously hurt and neither one was carrying a grudge. It had all been good fun.



The main fighter were the two large men in the middle

One of the rare exception to the good natured fights amongst the Irish took place in *The Miracle Worker* (1962). The story revolves around Anne Sullivan's struggle to find a way to reach and to teach Helen Keller, a deaf, sightless and speechless child. Helen, the daughter of a well-to-do couple in Alabama, had always been a spoiled and pampered southern belle; one who was stubborn and accustomed to getting her own way. She met her match when her parents hired Anne Sullivan, an Irish-Catholic school teacher from Massachusetts, who was every bit as ornery and willful as Helen and then some. Anne is convinced that tough love, discipline and repetition were needed to reach out to teach Helen how to communicate through touch and sound.



Patty Duke as Helen Keller and Anne Bancroft as Anne Sullivan

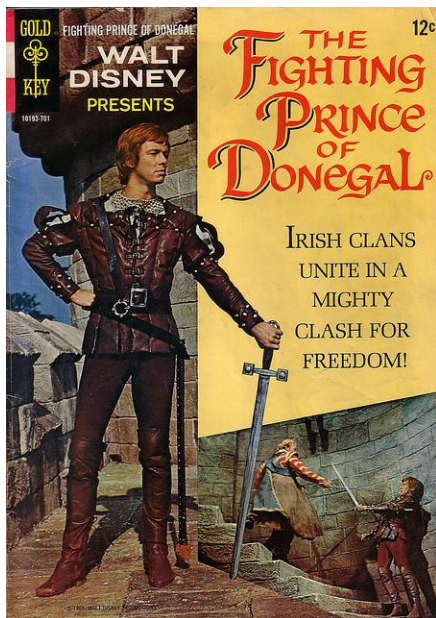


The Real Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan

The highlight of the film occurs when Helen decides to cause a ruckus at the supper table. Anne clears out the room and proceeds to try to get Helen to sit in her own chair, to use her own utensils and to eat like a civilized lady. All sorts of slaps, punches and wrestling moves are exchanged between the two before Anne emerges as the victor. The next step is to teach Helen how to identify water and to

say the word. Anne had been roughed up for her job by spending many years in a poor house and losing her beloved brother at an early age.

I wouldn't want to write a paper about the fighting Irish and leave out the Irish from Ireland or the Irish from past history, so I selected *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* (1966), a Disney production based on the life of "Red" Hugh O'Donnell, the Fighting Prince of Donegal. The historical O'Donnell, along with Hugh o'Niell, united the warring clans of Ireland against the hegemony of England at the close of the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1600). The two Hughs held their own for nine years before their forces were shattered at the Battle of Kinsale. O'Neill died as an exile in Italy while O'Donnell fled to Spain where he was probably poisoned by an English agent.



Disney even got into the act

The good-natured fight scene occurs early on in the film when the newly crowned O'Donnell (Peter McEnery) makes his way to the castle of the McSweeney to convince the Ulster clansmen to join to

together in a common cause of national liberation in which to rally the clans of the other three provinces of Ireland. Hugh demonstrates with an analogy by throwing knives at a shield strapped to the wall. One knife inflicts very little damage to the shield, but several knives leaves the shield dangling on the wall. At that point, Henry O'Neill (Tom Adams), a clansman of Hugh, steps in and defies Red Hugh. An O'Donnell has no business giving ordering to an O'Neill much less expect an O'Neill to put behind several hundred years of inter-tribal warfare. Red Hugh and Henry, to the merriment of the other guests as well as a doting Kathleen McSweeney (Susan Hampshire), slug it out right there in the great dining hall of McSweeney Castle. After a good drag out fight, Hugh emerges the winner. The good nature aspect of the fight seems to almost be dispelled when Henry pulls out a knife. Instead, Henry throws the knife at the dangling shield and cuts the final bit of rope holding it up on the wall. The clans of the north have finally come together with this symbolic act.

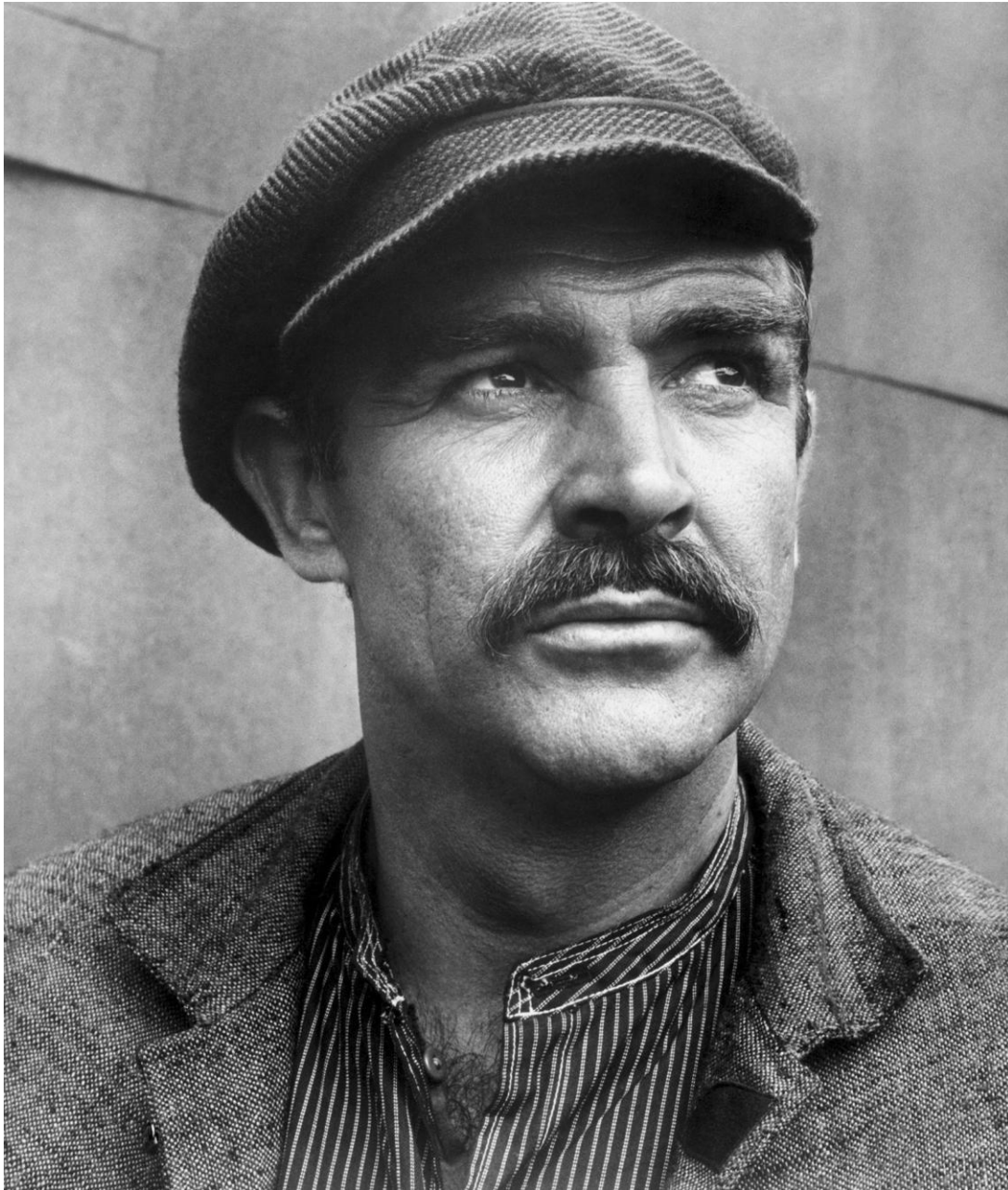


You can get any more fighting Irish than this poster

I'd like to return back to the USA and the Irish-Americans and their good-natured fights on film,

and this time I'd like to include the Welsh, a Celtic cousin of the Irish. *The Molly Maguires* (1970) deals with the serious and often tense relationships between coal companies and their miners in the time period shortly after the Civil War. The coal miners, many who are recent arrivals from Ireland, work long, hard hours under dangerous conditions with low pay as well as numerous and unreasonable fees charged to them by the company store. The Molly Maguires, part union and part terrorist organization, is formed to fight back against the owners by blowing up company buildings and killing informers and boot licks. Blackjack Kehoe, played by Irish-Scotsman Sean Connery, is the tough as nails mastermind of the Mollies, and he works down in the shafts and lives in company housing with his comrades. In reality, Jack Kehoe was the relatively prosperous owner of a thriving tavern in the coal-mining country, circa 1870, whose guilt is still debated by his family and several scholars of the epoch.

James McParlan, played by Richard Harris, a native of Ireland, who plays an undercover Pinkerton agent sent in to become a mole inside of the Molly Maguires and to collect evidence against the movement's leaders. Early on, McParlan is goaded into a fight in a tavern by one of the Molly Maguires and his victory begins his accepting process into the organization. In the end, the Irish Judas hands over enough evidence to send Blackjack to the gallows.



Sean Connery as a Molly

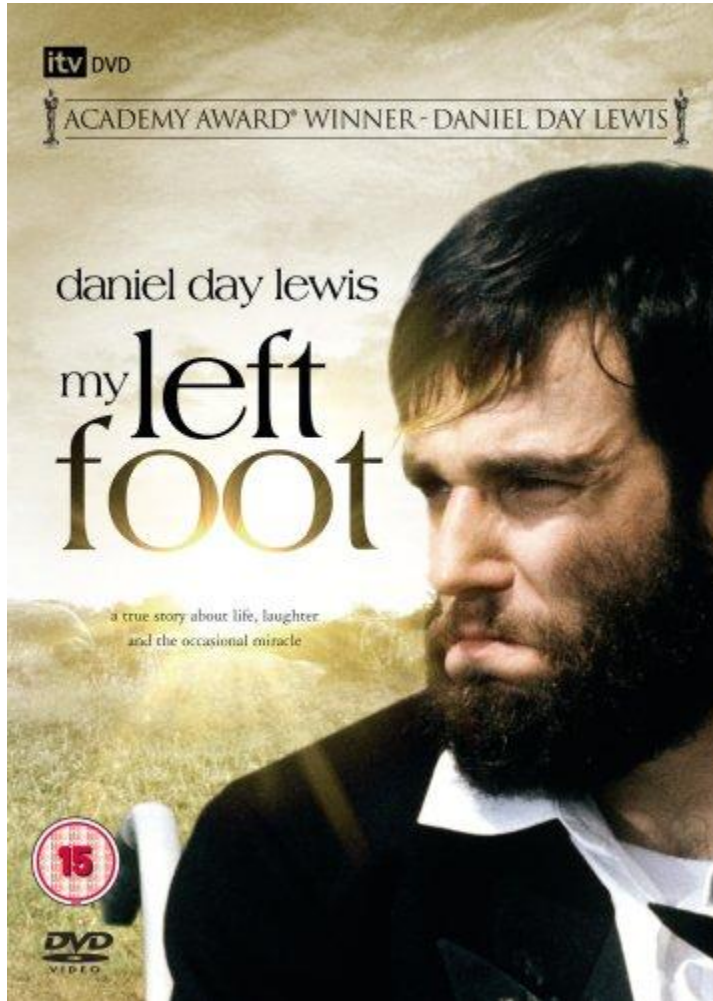
In spite of the overall seriousness of *The Molly Maguires*, there is one good-nature fight scene that occurs early on in the film. The Irish, lead by Kehoe and McFarlan, take the Welsh head on in a rugby game. The script has it that the Irish supported the union movement while the Welsh were stolid

company men. The feud from the workplace is transferred to the playing field where the game becomes progressively more violent. There's a delightful scene of Connery's Kehoe punching a Welshman in the ribs during a scrum. Seconds later, Harris' MacParlan crashes into a Welshman kicking the ball away. The Irish win the match and are accepting a trophy presented by the company when one thing leads to another and soon both sides are trading punches. One Irishman even takes the trophy and uses it as club. The policemen, who are primarily Welsh themselves, must restore order by applying clubs to the heads of the rampaging Irishmen.



Richard Harris as a company rate

For my final entry, I shall return to the shores of Ireland and take one parting look at those fighting Irish and their good-natured fights on film with the movie *My Left Foot: the story of Christy Brown* (1970).



Daniel Day Lewis as Christy Brown

Christy Brown, a native of working-class Dublin, won critical acclaim the Seventies for her art work as well as his autobiography *Down All the Days*. What made Brown exceptional was that all of his painting and writing had to be done with his left foot as he was confined to a wheelchair due to maladies he had

to struggle with from birth. Daniel Day-Lewis' Christy Brown is a brilliant artist and intellectual locked inside of a sickly body and confined with an uneducated family of boozing bricklayers

Christy's father, played by Ray McAnally, is in particular prone to drunken rages and violent outbursts. However, even this depressing if uplifting story is brighten with a scene that occurs in a pub after the burial of father of the Brown clan. The Browns and their friends have gathered at the boozier for drink and song. However, when Christy starts to sing he is ordered by a cranky customer and outsider to shut his gob. The Brown faction quickly takes offense. Christy appears to be the voice of reason by trying to restore order and by shouting "for Da!" Cooler heads begin to prevail when Christy takes that moment to use his wheel chair as a battering ram to lead the charge against the man who had told him to shut up. A good old-fashion donnybrook ensues.

In this paper, I have selected eight motion pictures dating from 1940 to 1989 that have used presented the Irish and the Irish-American in a stereotypical good-natured fight scene. The fight scene coupled with the other stereotypes of the Irish such as drinking and drinking have long been part of the American and British film history. Many ethnic, racial and disadvantaged groups go up in arms when they feel that the film industry has crossed a line once too often when it comes to presenting stereotypical behaviors of their own group or category. In the case of the Irish-Americans it almost seems that they welcomed these stereotypical scenes as a reminder of their own ethnic identity.

In the future, it is my hope that I'll have an opportunity to do a more exhaustive study about the fighting Irish and their good-natured fight scenes on film. I have only skimmed the surface of this fascinating topic.

