

Irish famine film *Black 47* wins over the critics

Filmmakers have long steered clear of the Irish famine, a trauma of starvation, poverty and suffering that remains a sacred national topic. It seemed too bleak, too depressing, too fraught – get a historical detail wrong and you risked accusations of insensitivity and exploitation.

Now, 170 years after a million people died and more than a million emigrated, comes *Black 47*, a big-screen blockbuster that uses the famine as a western-style revenge thriller. There are lots of muskets, explosions and horse chases, the lead actors are Australian, and many of the interiors were shot in Luxembourg.

And the Irish love it. Cinemagoers flocked to the film's opening weekend, making it the biggest grossing Irish film in Ireland this year with a box office of €444,000 (£395,000).

(...)

The \$10m Irish-Luxembourgian co-production is set for a North American premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival this week before opening in the UK and US on 28 September.

It stars James Frecheville as an Irish ranger who returns home in 1847 after fighting for the British army in Afghanistan and discovers that his mother has died of hunger, his brother has been hanged, and the rest of his family is inhabiting a wasteland of ruined crops and official callousness in Connemara on the Atlantic coast.

When the ranger launches a campaign of bloody vengeance against authority, the British draft one of his former comrades, played by Hugo Weaving, to track him down.

Jim Broadbent plays Lord Kilmichael, an aristocrat who exports grain despite corpses piling up in the countryside, and Stephen Rea plays a Gaelic / English translator. Freddie Fox, Barry Keoghan, Moe Dunford, and Sarah Greene also star.

“The famine is one of those essential Irish stories that we haven’t figured out a way to bring to the screen,” the director, Lance Daly, told *The Guardian* on Monday. “Doing it as a revenge thriller was a really smart way to smuggle the story of the great hunger to a wide audience which might not be first in line to watch a film about famine and suffering and the truly horrid history of the time.”

Daly, from Dublin, filmed the exteriors in Connemara and Wicklow and consulted historians on the details.

The famine, triggered by a blight¹ in potato crops, ravaged Ireland from 1845 to 1849, a humanitarian catastrophe that flummoxed the British government even as Quakers, Native American Choctaws, the Ottoman empire and others sent assistance.

“It’s not just some story,” said Daly. “It’s a story that belongs to everyone. I felt a great responsibility to get the history right, to get the language right, and that didn’t make the British characters out to be villains and the Irish as innocent victims. The deeper you go, the more complex it gets.” (...)

Roy Carrol, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com), September 17th, 2018

1. blight (n.) = illness