

I Know Where I'm Going!

In the last few years, *I Know Where I'm Going* (known to followers of The Archers' films as IKWIG, the exclamation mark isn't always used) has gradually been moving up the list of the best and most loved of all films by Powell and Pressburger. Why might this be? It may be the fact that it is in black & white and that its subject is not as 'weighty' as films like *Black Narcissus* (1947), which it in some ways resembles. But now its brilliance is becoming more apparent as a delightful romantic comedy drama. When Emeric Pressburger later visited Paramount in Hollywood he was told that his script was being used to train writers at the studio because it was so skilfully constructed.

IKWIG was conceived in 1944 on the rebound from the unexpected failure of *A Canterbury Tale* at the box office and the postponement of *A Matter of Life and Death* when it became clear that no Technicolor filmstock would be available for at least a year. What should The Archers do in the meantime as part of their deal with J. Arthur Rank? Pressburger had always wanted to make a film about a young woman who travels to an island but then finds she can't complete her journey: what happens next changes her life. Five days later Pressburger finished the story which had the working title 'Mystery Island'. Soon Powell was beginning to scout possible locations. At one point

Bardsey Island off the Welsh coast was under consideration but gradually the search moved

north and eventually Powell and his wife Frankie Reidy ended up in the Inner Hebrides and Mull was chosen as the main location. Frankie provided the title from a song she remembered from her Irish childhood.

Powell always tried to cast Deborah Kerr at this time but she was unavailable and so Wendy Hiller who had been considered for earlier Archers' films was chosen. She might have played opposite James Mason but a misunderstanding ruled him out and instead Roger Livesey was chosen to play the male lead – the man who Hiller's 'Joan Webster' meets when she fails to get to her wedding because of bad weather. But Livesey never went to Mull. He was starring in the West End so a body double was used for all the location shots and Livesey worked on studio sets at Denham.

Freed of the need to fulfil a government propaganda brief (the basis for their other wartime films), Powell and Pressburger enjoyed themselves greatly making the film. The story was Emeric's but Michael indulged himself with fabulous expressionist montages as Joan, convinced of her wish to marry 'Sir Robert Bellinger' of Imperial Chemicals, has some troubled dreams as her train hurtles through the night from Manchester to Glasgow and later when the winds prevent her crossing to the fictional island of 'Kiloran'. Powell remembered his collaborators from *The Edge of the World*, so John Laurie, Finlay Currie and Kitty Kirwan all appear in the cast and the Glasgow Orpheus Choir and its soloist Boyd Stephen sing at the ceilidh. Also in the cast are Pamela Brown, another of Powell's loves, and a young Petula Clark, who was then a singer on the radio. This was her fourth film.



Torquil (Roger Livesey) and Joan (Wendy Hiller).

What kind of film is IKWIG? The comedy comes from undermining the certainty with which the confident and rather arrogant middle-class Joan, daughter of a bank manager, believes marrying an industry tycoon will make her happy. We all know that she'll fall for the impecunious Laird of Kiloran, Torquil MacNeil (Roger Livesey) who is on leave from his Royal Navy service. Powell in his autobiography tells us that Pressburger summed up the film as proving "Kindness rules the world. Not money." Viewed this way, IKWIG is perfect as the last film of The Archers' wartime work. It was released in the UK in the Autumn of 1945.

But what makes the romance work? MacNeil wants to get to his island as well. It has been leased to Bellinger for the duration of the war. Pressburger added the presence of a terrible curse on MacNeil that puts him in danger for the dramatic finale. He borrowed the idea from Walter Scott "who always included a curse". Meanwhile Powell indulged his romantic fantasies about the islands. The music by Allan Gray, the winds, Erwin Hillier's expressionist cinematography, the singing and the dancing all contribute to the power of the landscape and the traditions of Gaelic culture which disturb Joan's self-confidence. Just like Deborah Kerr's Sister Clodagh in Black Narcissus, Joan finds herself struggling to overcome the emotions she experiences.

There is also a dialogue about the values of island life versus those of the urban world whence came Joan. Powell and Pressburger have been seen as film artists related to 'neo-romanticism'. Powell himself was considered a 'high Tory', not in the party political sense but more as a supporter of tradition and the passion of the natural world against the more managed world of modern society. Ironically life on Mull comes across as collectivist despite the land ownership of MacNeil and Catriona MacLaine. In The Edge of the World, Powell recognised that the passion of Foula/St Kilda couldn't keep the island from decline. But at the end of the war Powell, with Pressburger, suggests the values of the Western Isles can sustain Mull and 'Kiloran' - whereas in July 1945 the Labour Party won by a landslide in the UK's first post-war general election. All of The Archers' later films were set in the past (albeit often the recent past) or in other 'worlds' of the imagination. Is there also a sense that the Mull of IKWIG is perhaps a rather wonderful fictitious world?

Sources

Ian Christie (2020) 'Powell & Pressburger's Island Stories', film lecture available on YouTube
Michael Powell (1986) *A Life in Movies*, Heinemann

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