

## *THE PIPE*

### Review by Seán Byers

“Be moderate”, the trimmers cry,  
Who dread the tyrants’ thunder.  
“You ask too much and people By  
From you aghast in wonder”.  
'Tis passing strange, for I declare  
Such statements give me mirth,  
For our demands most moderate are,  
We only want the earth. (James Connolly, ‘We only want the Earth’, 1907).

In issue 13 of *Policy and Practice*, Andy Storey briefly highlighted the parallels between the plight of the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta and that of the Rosspoint locals, county Mayo. He noted how shared experiences between the global North and South – ‘state and corporate abuse’ of vulnerable people in this instance – can and should lay the foundations for a more widespread critique of the socio-economic status quo in Ireland (2011: 80-81). Indeed if development education (DE) at home is to succeed in meeting its objectives in adverse ideological and financial conditions, then its proponents need to find effective and accessible resources to employ in relaying their message to students, activists and practitioners. *The Pipe* is one such resource; documenting one local chapter of what is very much a global story of social mobilisation against a financially superior transnational corporation (TNC) attempting to impose its will on a small community.

The opening scene of this powerful film pans across what is a picturesque and tranquil landscape, and this footage is interrupted by images of Gardai (Irish police) clashing with residents of the village for dramatic effect. We are then introduced to Monica Müller and Willie Corduff, both farmers, and Pat ‘The Chief’ O’Donnell, a fisherman, who are in consensus about the problem they face: the proposed laying by the oil corporation Shell of an inland pipeline taking gas from the sea, through their village and to a nearby refinery at Ballinaboy. The main objections of the residents relate to environmental sustainability, safety concerns, and a clear lack of consultation in general. These three locals explain that they have been making a sufficient living off the land for decades; but the high-yielding, yet short-term Shell project threatens to destroy that very way of life by disrupting the natural world in which they work. They are also adamant that a comprehensive health and safety assessment has

not been carried out, fearing that the project could have serious ramifications for future generations. Lastly, as Willie Corduff laments, '[t]hat's what they did at the beginning – they came telling us what they were going to do. They never asked us at any stage for permission'.

The sentiments of this isolated community, abandoned by its government (the phrase 'out of sight, out of mind' is apt here), are expressed through a series of protests. A sit-down demonstration which aims to block the path of a Shell convoy, for example, is physically removed by Gardaí, whose occupation of the Rossport in large numbers is one of the more bizarre aspects of the film. Violent confrontations with baton-wielding officers are commonplace in the adolescent stage of local resistance and Willie Corduff is arrested on at least two occasions. The most striking and disconcerting feature of this fraught relationship, though, is that the locals are often dealing with Gardaí whom they know in a personal capacity. This creates discord in the local community despite faint traces of humanity and compassion in the conciliatory approach of some individual officers. This is evident in how the Gardaí deal with local activist Pat O'Donnell when he tries to take on the huge Shell vessel *Solitaire* with his fishing boat – but these instances are more the exception than the rule.

While it would appear on the surface that *The Pipe* is an account of insolent antiquity resisting a natural process of modernisation, it soon becomes clear that the *Shell to Sea* campaign – the name initially adopted by the residents for their collective action – is much more complex in two main ways. First, though their resources to challenge Shell pale in comparison to the energy giant, a number of Rossport residents have familiarised themselves with more sophisticated measures of resistance. These have included brushing up on the legislation, taking out injunctions, lobbying the European Parliament on social and environmental grounds, and engaging in non-violent forms of civil disobedience. Second, and a direct consequence of these developments, a bitter division has materialised in the *Shell to Sea* camp, between the pragmatists and the hardliners. The first group, the pragmatic majority, are concerned with making the project a sustainable development and are quite happy for an energy market to develop in Mayo, so long as the pipeline is diverted to an uninhabited area. The hardline group – hostile to any negotiations – is led by schoolteacher Maura Harrington, who is clearly very passionate, but whose obstinance seems to stand in the way of progress.

A small community like that in Rossport cannot afford such divisions when confronting a corporate power with the resources of Shell. Through coercion (the use of unnamed private security guards, supported by dozens of Gardai), legal manoeuvring, financial incentives (compensation for fishermen who agree to relinquish their territory, for example) and sheer audacity, Shell have begun to lay an alternative pipeline and have effectively taken control of local waters. The detrimental effects of this process are, as initially feared, quite extensive, and the camera catches several instances of environmental degradation. The most damning indictment of Shell's behaviour and the Irish government's inclination towards clientelism, however, is the treatment of fishermen who refuse to accept limited compensation in return for their livelihoods. Pat O'Donnell and his son Jonathan, who hopes to inherit his father's vocation, are cases in point. But, without giving too much away, their defiance seems to bring with it a great convergence of ideas and solidarity in action with which to conclude the documentary.

The people of Rossport have become accustomed to the vilification they have suffered at the hands of the 'mainstream' media, a theme not addressed in the documentary but highlighted elsewhere (Cotton, 2009). This misrepresentation has given way to a pervasive silence as the global economic crisis takes centre stage. Yet there is still hope that their voice will be heard. While the community has been excluded from the democratic decision-making process concerning the laying of the pipeline, it has found a source of empowerment elsewhere. The *Shell to Sea* campaign has spawned both a Solidarity Camp in nearby Aughoose (see [www.rossportsolidaritycamp.org](http://www.rossportsolidaritycamp.org)) and a support group in Dublin ([www.dublins2s.com](http://www.dublins2s.com)). Moreover, it has successfully weaved its communal campaign into the fabric of an increasingly passionate national debate on the future ownership of Ireland's natural resources (see *Irish Times*, 16 August; 18 August; 19 August; 23 August 2011). If this debate progresses with the same vigour that it has thus far, then the residents of Rossport can count on having further opportunities to attach their relatively small social movement to a more widespread political agenda.

As an educational resource, *The Pipe* is a great example of how awareness of global development issues can be heightened by initially focusing attention on analogous cases at home. The central subjects addressed by the film – sustainable development; the absence of popular participation; state complicity in the morally and economically questionable actions of a powerful corporation; and the economic system that propels growth in Ireland and other liberal democracies – all point towards a better understanding of global

interdependence. Just as events in the Niger Delta have informed those in Rosspoint, *The Pipe* can be used by development educators to provoke and subsequently build on interest in the aforementioned issues at home. The content of the film lends itself to an adult and community audience and, indeed, *Shell to Sea* encourages educational practitioners at a community level to organise screenings and invite members of the campaign to address meetings. This is the very essence of development education: education and activism at a local level on an issue with global resonance.

## References

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*The Pipe* (2010) [Film], O'Domhnaill, R; Scannáin Inbhear; Underground Films; Riverside Television, 80 mins, available for purchase at [www.thepipethefilm.com](http://www.thepipethefilm.com)

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