

# 'An Acre of Seats in a Garden of Dreams'



## MARC ZIMMERMANN surveys books on Irish cinemas & cinema-going

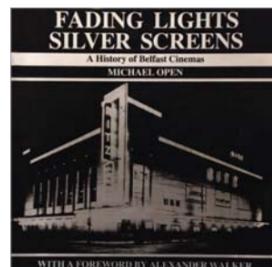
MANY OF OUR fond recollections of going to the movies are childhood memories. Whether it was a great date or that first kiss, sneaking into the auditorium undetected or gorging on long since discontinued sweets, falling in love with the star on screen or deciding to become a cowboy, anything could happen at the pictures. In this darkened auditorium we watched films the way they were meant to be enjoyed, as part of an enthralled audience, munching concession delicacies with friends or a date, in a venue that formed a crucial part of the overall experience. Whether it was a lavish city centre cinema palace, a crummy fleapit down the road, a gleaming multiplex at the edge of town, or the local community hall, the unique feel of cinemas – with their unmistakable, sweeping canopies and their theatrical interiors – has formed an indispensable part of enjoying movies since their inception in 1895.

Throughout the past decade our rekindled interest in cinemas and their history has been mirrored in the publication of an increasing number of articles and books investigating different aspects of the subject. This article collects all volumes on cinemas and cinema-going in the Republic and in Northern Ireland, presenting them chronologically.

For a key of abbreviations see the end of this article.

### *Fading Lights Silver Screens: A History of Belfast Cinemas*

By Michael Open  
Greystone Books: Antrim, 1985  
164 pp, 78 ill., 21x20cm, pb: UK £5.75  
55 venues in Belfast (Co. Antrim, NI)



The very first book on the subject of Irish cinemas, the aptly titled *Fading Lights* was written at a turning point in cinema history.

Attendances had reached their all-time low, mainly due to the strong competition from TV, resulting in sweeping closures throughout Ireland and the UK. Published on the eve of Britain's first multiplex opening in 1985 (in Milton Keynes), this book presents historic Belfast cinemas as well as chapters on films, the exhibition industry, cinema-going and censorship. As numerous demolitions have decimated the city's cinematic heritage, the book's importance as an historic document has grown over the past twenty-three years. Open is the Northern Editor of *Film Ireland* magazine.

### *Here's Looking At You, Kid! Ireland Goes to the Pictures*

By Stephanie McBride & Roddy Flynn (eds.)  
Wolfhound Press: Dublin, 1996  
152 pp, 30 ill., 16x24cm, pb: IE £9.99  
Dozens of venues around Ireland

This plethora of cinema-going reminiscences from days gone by includes contributions by actor Gabriel Byrne, writer Marian Keyes and the late

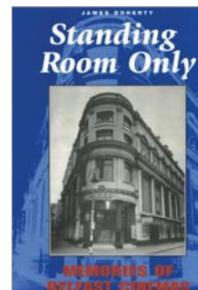
Albert Kelly (owner of Dublin's CLASSIC), among many others. Its often fascinating entries combine charming anecdotes with outrageous goings-on, be it secret 'necking', rowdy behaviour or even riots. Combining rural and urban, matinee and premiere, educational and C-movie,



the book is an assortment of nostalgic cinema-going memories from many individuals connected to the cinema industry. McBride and Flynn work in the field of communications and media at Dublin City University.

### *Standing Room Only: Memories of Belfast Cinemas*

By James Doherty (with Tom Thompson)  
Lagan Historical Society: Belfast, 1997  
160 pp, 181 ill., 21x30cm, pb: UK £6.95  
53 venues in Belfast (Co. Antrim, NI)

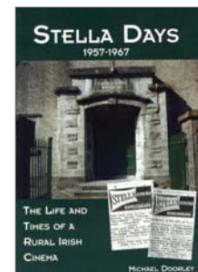


This second book on Belfast cinemas is an informative companion piece to Open's, presenting historic cinemas as well as cine-variety theatres and their fate during the first decade of multiplexes. This A4-sized publication is lovingly assembled; unfortunately some of the photographs suffer from poor reproduction. The histories of the venues (grouped by area) are interspersed with film and cinema-going nuggets, pieces on key figures in Belfast's cinema industry, and even some full-fledged home cinemas find mention. The book also

discusses plans for a dedicated Ulster film heritage centre or cinema museum, an institution that is sadly still lacking in both the Republic and Northern Ireland. Doherty and Thompson share a deep interest in local history.

### *Stella Days: The Life and Times of a Rural Irish Cinema*

By Michael Doorley  
Dubhairle: Nenagh, 2002  
140 pp, 27 ill. (incl. 1 col.), 15x21cm, pb: €5  
STELLA in Borrisokane (Co. Tipperary, ROI)

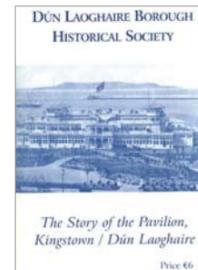


In this memoir of cinema-going days in 1950s and '60s rural Ireland, Doorley augments his reminiscences with a dash of fictional, composite characters. It offers a charming glimpse at a decade of cinema in the early days of television

and how it was embedded in small-town life, presenting locals and patrons as well as the big movie attractions. A film based on the book is currently in pre-production. To be shot mostly on location, it will be loosely based on the source, portraying the cinema and its patrons. Hollywood actor Martin Sheen, whose mother was born in Borrisokane, has been involved in the project and is likely to star in the role of the priest who turned the town's parish hall into the popular STELLA cinema.

### *The Story of the Pavilion, Kingstown/Dún Laoghaire*

By Michael McGovern & Tony McGuirk  
Dún Laoghaire Borough Historical Society: Dún Laoghaire, 2003  
56 pp, 48 ill., 15x21cm, bo: €6  
PAVILION in Dún Laoghaire (Co. Dublin, ROI)



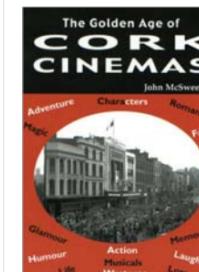
This booklet presents the history of the PAVILION (1903–84) in its several incarnations (ranging from wooden 'steamboat architecture' to a conventional brick-and-concrete structure) and many guises, including its use as a dance hall, cinema and theatre. Illustrated with many previously unseen historic photographs and putting an emphasis on human interest, the book offers a well-rounded document of this waterfront cinema by presenting its staff, films, patrons and building throughout a varied and occasionally troubled life.

The authors, who share a keen interest in the history of Dún Laoghaire, are members of the local historical society.

### *The Golden Age of Cork Cinemas*

By John McSweeney  
Rose Arch Publications: Cork, 2003  
146 pp, 56 ill., 15x20cm, pb: €10  
12 venues in Cork (Co. Cork, ROI)

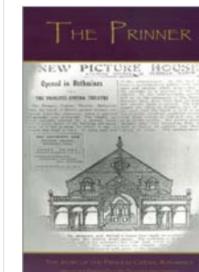
This publication lovingly presents the dozen historic picture houses that once entertained Cork audiences. The venues are presented in four categories: first- and second-run picture houses, fleapits and suburban cinemas. This interesting grouping reminds one of past cinema-going days, when it could take up to two years for the only print of a blockbuster in circulation to be handed down to the lowliest cinema at the bottom of the venues' hierarchy. McSweeney's numerous



interviews for the book form portraits of former cinema staff, allowing an insider's view of their venues' histories. While this volume concentrates on historic cinemas, the city's more recent venues – ranging from arthouse to multiplex – are also briefly mentioned.

### *The Prinner: The Story of the Princess Cinema, Rathmines*

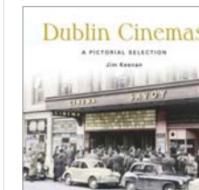
By George P. Kearns  
self-publ.: Dublin, 2005  
206 pp, 148 ill. (incl. 3 col.), 21x30cm, pb: €23  
17 venues in Dublin (Co. Dublin, ROI)



'The Prinner' (a nickname for the PRINCESS) charts the history of this now demolished cinema. It also covers sixteen further select venues around Dublin, thus serving as an introduction to the multitude of cinemas once in operation throughout the capital. This A4-sized publication – illustrated mostly with newspaper clippings – does not follow a set format but meanders between histories, anecdotes and miscellaneous items. Because of this, a read-through feels like listening to the intriguing but rambling reminiscences of an uncle. Kearns, who briefly worked at the PRINCESS, is the co-author of *The A-Z* (see below).

### *Dublin Cinemas: A Pictorial Selection*

By Jim Keenan  
Picture House Publications: Dublin, 2005  
128 pp, 167 ill. (incl. 2 col.), 27x25cm, hb: €25  
43 venues in Dublin (Co. Dublin, ROI)

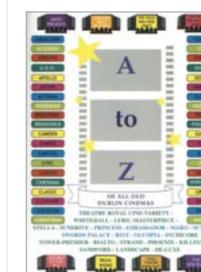


This insightful volume offers a selection of Dublin cinemas that opened between 1897 and 1955. It presents them chronologically, thus allowing for a better understanding of how the city's cinematic landscape developed throughout the first half of the 20th century. Beautifully illustrated with large, historic, high-resolution photographs, this is a quintessential coffee table book, presenting several

dozen venues around the capital. It features a number of absorbing anecdotes, evoking many fond cinema-going memories. Keenan is a cartographer at the National University of Ireland. (Reviewed in *Film Ireland*, issue 108.)

### *The A-Z of All Old Dublin Cinemas*

By George Kearns & Patrick Maguire  
self-publ.: Dublin, 2007  
584 pp, 662 ill., 22x31cm, hb: €45 & 16x21cm, pb: €25  
108 venues in Co. Dublin (ROI)



This self-published A-Z features (almost) all cinemas in the capital prior to 1975, as well as several venues outside the city. The book's extensive yet unfortunately cumbersome listings alphabetically mix venue histories with miscellaneous features. It includes numerous illustrations – mainly newspaper clippings. Doubtlessly laborious to write, the book's layout unfortunately also makes for a strenuous read. Even so, it features numerous venues most readers will have never heard of, offering an alternative presentation of Dublin cinemas. Kearns and Maguire are two retired Dubliners with a keen interest in local history.

### *The History of Dublin Cinemas*

By Marc Zimmermann  
Nonsuch Publishing: Dublin, 2007  
224 pp, 249 ill. (incl. 24 col.), 17x25cm, pb: €17.99  
140 venues in Dublin (Co. Dublin, ROI)



This third history of the capital's cinemas is the first comprehensive account of film venues from 1896 to 2007. An overview of the city's cinematic history is followed by descriptions of each venue, including historic cinema palaces, cine-variety theatres, fleapits, film venues, multiplexes and current projects. An appendix offers additional information on censorship, circuits and useful websites. The book examines the disappearance of historic Dublin cinemas in recent decades, stressing the need to protect our built cinematic heritage. The author is the Founding Chair of the Cinema Heritage Group. (Reviewed in *Film Ireland*, issue 117.)

KEY: pp=pages | ill.=illustrations | col.=colour | hb=hardback | pb=paperback | bo=booklet | title quote: '[A]n acre of seats in a garden of dreams.' by Ben M. Hall in *The Best Remaining Seats: The Golden Age of the Movie Palace*

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