Rex Ingram, Hollywood’s visionary director of the 1920s, grew up in the Midlands of Ireland.

In 1921 one of the greatest ever World War One films was released. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* made a star of its young male lead, an Italian known only as Valentino. Its director was to become equally famous, celebrated in Hollywood and around the world for his visionary filmmaking. His name was Rex Ingram. His childhood was spent in the Midlands.

Reginald Ingram Montgomery Hitchcock was born at 58 Grosvenor Square in the prosperous suburb of Rathmines. He was the first child of 25-year-old Francis Ryan Montgomery Hitchcock, and Kathleen (née Ingram), who was two years younger than her husband. On 15 March 1896, Rex, or Reggie as he was known to his family, was joined by a younger brother, Francis Clere. By now the family had moved to 11 Rathdown Road, off North Circular Road in the Parish of St Mary’s, where the children’s newly ordained Church of Ireland father had his first appointment. Reverend Hitchcock was a robust man, who held strong opinions on most topics; his wife Kathleen was quiet, artistic and musical. She also suffered from poor health and when Rex was five years old, the doctor advised the Hitchcocks that a move to the country would be the best for Kathleen. In October 1898 the Bishop of Killaloe appointed Reverend Hitchcock to the curacy of Nenagh in County Tipperary. Their home was at 1 Pound Road in Nenagh West Urban.

The two little boys were suddenly plunged into Irish village life. Rex’s first recollection of Nenagh was the day Cleary’s Circus came to town. Posters announced in addition to the usual performing elephants, bears and horses, the inclusion of a Cinematographe. It would show the latest attraction – living, moving, life-sized pictures. Rex consulted with his new friends, Harry Lewis and Georgie Cooper, sons of the managers of the National and the Provincial Banks. Could such a thing exist? The boys were unsure. They took their places. ‘I saw a flickering “rainy” cinematograph, very black and white, with men running a hurdle race at twice normal speed, and a train coming into a station and then
scenes of Mr. Somebody in his record breaking though topheavy motorcar, which moved without them, but would, I thought, have looked better with horses,’ Rex later remembered. So impressed was he that he decided then and there to make a motion picture. The subject, Richard Cœur-de-lion cutting off a Saracen’s head, was inspired by Michaud’s History of the Crusades once given to him by his father. The result was a little too jerky to be considered truly great, a consequence of a discrepancy in the size of the drawings and some uneven stitching of the finished result. Still, it is enough to claim that Rex Ingram made his first film in Nenagh.

Even though he was only a small child, he remembered Nenagh vividly:

‘Fair Day. Since dawn, a deafening clamour of sheep, pigs, horses and cattle, and shouting drovers and the town reeking with the pungent healthy smell of steaming cowdung and sheep crowded together. Everywhere little groups of bargaining men, their breath smelling of porter or potcheen and their homespuns and corduroys of cabbage and bacon, peat fires and stale urine. Smooth persuasive voices, voices gradually increasing in volume as bargaining becomes heated, bargaining that keeps the Mother of God working overtime, called upon incessantly to witness that every preposterous claim is “Thrue as the Thrue Cross”. The public houses doing a lively trade, the thirsty crowded at the doors awaiting their turns.’

Holidays were spent with his mother and brother at the spa at Lisdoonvarna, where they were often joined by his cousin, Harry Lambert, whom Rex was sure was soft on the pretty Kathleen. Sometimes they would get up early and journey from Ennis to Lahinch, to visit their cousins, the Costelloes, who had a farm there. Or they travelled on Harry Lambert’s sidecar to the Lamberts’ family home, Aggart Hall, in Galway.

Borrisokane

In 1901 the Hitchcocks moved again, this time to Borrisokane, where Reverend Hitchcock was appointed rector. It was a step up for the family. Now,
they lived in a rectory, a fine house with five acres of land running down through trees to a river: ‘we had a big garden that was more like an orchard, with all the apple, pear and plum trees in it; and there was a lawn with flower beds, bordered on the south by an avenue of pines and cypresses and on the north by copper beeches and chestnut trees. A gate under the trees led into a little grove hedged in with yew and box, and at the end of the grove stood an old thatched house that had once been the school, but for years had been used for laying out the apples in straw. On wet days my brother and I played in the house, and we had it to ourselves for nobody ever came there.’

There, Rex and Frank became friendly with Captain Saunders at Killavalla

[Image: http://landedestates.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/image-show.jsp?id=3085]

Captain Saunders had been in the Lancers in India: ‘He had elephants’ tusks and skins of wild animals and a snake in a glass jar and a stuffed eagle and a pelican.’ Captain Saunders had two sons, Owen and Cecil. Rex’s favourite was Cecil, who was tattooed all over except his back. Cecil invited a Japanese artist over from London to tattoo the devil on his back. This was to join the octopus, the Chinese dragon, the tiger and the boa constrictor. They were not just tattooed in blue as was common then, but in two or three colours – ‘even my mother, who did not like the idea of anyone being tattooed, had to admire the scaled dragon on his arm.’ Captain Saunders promised Rex that if anything should happen to Cecil he would have him stuffed so that the work on the tattoos did not go to waste. Cecil had fair hair that was parted in the middle, and made his money from a traction engine with a threshing machine that he always drove wearing his monocle.

In Borrisokane, Rex’s time was taken up spearing eels in the millpond with a kitchen fork tied on the end of a pole and looking for birds’ nests. Apart from the Saunders, and the miller, his greatest friend was the local parish priest, Father Meagher. “Father Maher [sic] would take the cork out of the barrel of his muzzle-loading shot gun, and, after he had got his tall hat, we would go out in the big haggard between the river and the chapel where there were rooks’ nests in the lime trees. I held his hat while he fired. He always took a deep breath first,
and looked to see if there were any stones on the ground near him because the
gun had a kick to it. I would pick out a crow and then he would fire and then all
the crows would fly up in the air, but come right back, as they were used to it.
Then, we would load up again, which took a long time. But we never had much
luck. It may have been because Father Maher had a habit of shutting both eyes
before firing.'

Life in Borrisokane was colourful. There was the mysterious murder of a
woman in a remote cottage out on the edge of the bog. An escaped convict was
believed to be the perpetrator and ‘wanted’ posters appeared offering £100 for
his capture. At the same time, Bessie, the Hitchcock boys’ donkey wandered into
a field and ate some yew berries. Her stomach swelled up and Rex found her
lying on her back with her enormous belly and her four legs sticking stiffly up in
the air. Captain Saunders had given Rex an ornate saddle to ride Bessie and was
sorry to hear that the donkey had died. He took Rex out to his stables where he
kept a little chestnut pony and gave her to the boy: ‘When I got on that pony, I
knew I would never want to get off her. She was rangy and had a long mane and
tail and was high in the withers so the saddle did not slip forward like it did on
the donkey, and needed no crupper to hold it in place. She had a way of her own
too, of stepping out and tossing her head, and looked like a little racehorse, not
like the potbellied Shetland ponies you saw other people with, and her name was
Lady.’

Rex observed the local boys trapping birds with cribs made of hazel or
ash, though he never much cared to participate in the killing of starlings and
blackbirds. His airgun he kept to apprehend the convict who had murdered the
old woman up in the bog. Indeed, although one local resident, Mrs Kinsella, later
remembered them as friendly children, she also remembered that Rex and Frank
were not allowed to mix with the villagers.

The only blot on the horizon of this happy childhood were lessons with
Rev. Hitchcock. They took place in the morning from nine till twelve, and in the
afternoons from two till five, with Wednesday and Saturday afternoons free: ‘He
did his best to teach me a lot of Latin and Greek, and not quite so much history
and geography, and even less arithmetic, algebra and Euclid which he was not
good at himself, and did not consider important anyway, believing that only
classical scholarship really counted in fitting you for the battle of life. The fly-
leaves and margins of all my lesson books were covered with drawings of horses
and friends. My attention never stayed long on the text before me, and if my
father was not there at my elbow, my pencil seemed to draw of its own accord;
and though he would make me stay in after study hours rubbing these drawings
out, in due time others took their place.’

In 1903, when Rex was ten, his parents’ thoughts turned to schooling. The
living at Borrisokane was not enough to send a boy to boarding school, and there
was no suitable Protestant secondary school in the area. Kathleen Hitchcock
accompanied her husband to the Synod in Dublin to make sure he requested a
move to a better-paid parish. They returned home with the news that the family
would be relocating to Kinnitty, where the living was worth £150 a year. Just
before they left, Captain Saunders’ stable boy put Lady to a fence without
checking what was on the other side, and she landed in marsh, breaking her leg.
The beloved pony had to be shot.

Kinnitty

On arrival in Kinnitty, the Hitchcocks soon learned that the town’s
Protestant gentry was divided into two factions, the Frenches and the Biddulphs.
The origins of the war between the two lay in an accusation concerning a
Biddulph foxhound eating some French pheasants; neither family had spoken to
the other since. Assheton-Biddulph (Biddy) was Master of the Fox Hounds: ‘He was
a kind, irascible man with a high blood pressure complexion and a white scrub of
mustache and mutton-bone whiskers on his face. He wore white spats in church, and
when he carried round the collection plate at morning service he made a noise
breathing that put you in mind of a horse with a tube in. He was a generous man, and
once, when a cow of ours caught the milk fever and died, sent us another cow as a
present. His wife was a small chirrupy woman with black hair brushed straight back
and fixed in a knot. Along with her children – four girls and a boy – she followed the
hounds, so there were always people at the meets outside of the master and the
whips.’

Captain French, like Captain Saunders, had served in India and greeted the
new rector’s children warmly. He had a fine black mare, he told Rex, that Mrs French
used to ride before she put on weight, and if he wanted to ride all he had to do was
bring along his saddle. There was a river at Castle Bernard (Kinnitty Castle),
teaming with trout and Rex was also welcome to fish any time.

The other big Protestant family were the Droughts of Lettybrook: ‘Captain
Drought walked with his toes turned in and read the lessons in church. Everyone
spoke of him as “Tommy A”. He had a beard and always wore the same suit of
clothes. His wife had blond hair and varicose veins, and did not seem to like him
very much. Because she knew it gave Tommy A. a lot of pleasure to read the
lessons in church she tried to get my father to put a stop to it.’

Although boarding school was imminent, Rex was still too young to
attend. In a small room above the rectory porch, he pursued his studies, even if
his mind soon wandered, and he found himself drawing pictures of football
players and boxers. For his first two years in Kinnitty, once the torture of lessons
in the Classics was over, he was free to roam the Irish countryside. His mother
gave him a curly-haired chocolate Irish water spaniel whom he named Towser,
and boy and dog escaped the rectory classroom as soon as they could to run wild
in the fields together. In summer, he and Frank, as Francis Clere was called by
the family, swam at the Brosna river near Kinnitty and Rex and Towser would
dive from the bank at Drumcullen Bridge. Reverend Hitchcock fixed himself up a
punch bag in the coach house, and in the evening, after a day’s writing and the
torture of trying to teach his older son, he would go out and practice on it long
into the night. Meanwhile, the parishioners of Kinnitty were to grow accustomed
to seeing the massive figure of their new rector jogging along the footpath to the
village post office as part of his fitness regime.

One of the families with which the Hitchcock boys were particularly
friendly were the Darbys at Leap Castle, Roscrea. Leap Castle had long been
known to be haunted. Above the main hall stood the room where ‘one-eyed’
Teige O'Carroll slew his brother and where guests reported seeing strange lights glow at night. It was the blood-stained bedchamber that particularly fascinated Rex and he loved to stand in the room, lingering over its gory traces. Mildred Darby wrote articles for the journal, *Occult Review*, about the ghosts at Leap. She followed this with the popular tale of the Irish famine of the 1840s, *The Hunger*, published in 1909 under her nom-de-plume, Andrew Merry. That she spun a good yarn was brought home to Rex when he discovered to his fury that she had painted the bedchamber red as a joke.

In 1905, Rex started his formal schooling at St Columba's College, Rathfarnham. School soon turned out to be a nightmare. A dreamy, obstinate boy, he quickly fell foul of authority, both of the masters and the prefects. He only shone at art classes and, rather surprisingly, rugby. Returning home to Kinnitty for holidays, he begged his father to move him to another school. Reverend Hitchcock was not impressed with his son's lack of application and refused. Still, he may have listened, as Frank was not sent to St Columba's but Chesterfield School, near Birr.

After a few days back in Kinnitty, Rex began to cheer up. He rode Mrs French's pony every day and practiced his boxing with a neighbouring farmer's son, Paddy Carry. As the rector's wife, it fell to Kathleen Hitchcock to make the parish rounds. The two boys liked accompanying her and together they visited the rich and the poor of Kinnitty. The poor, Rex remembered, always treated them with particular hospitality, and always tried to give them something to eat, often a floury potato dipped in salt and eaten off a sack with a mound of salt on it. At night before bed, the boys said their prayers and every night too Rex read from the small Testament his mother had given him. He was particularly taken with a line that promised, 'Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son'. Sustained applications for justice to be meted on those who were tormenting him at St Columba's, however, fell on deaf ears.

In the autumn term of 1908, he returned to school as reluctantly as ever. Not long after the start of term, he heard that Kathleen was to have an operation.
The surgeons were hopeful. But on 8 October 1908, Rex’s adored mother passed away.

In Kinnitty, Rex fell into the company of Fr. Slattery’s new curate, a returned emigrant who went by the name of the Reverend J. ‘Mezzim’ O’Sullivan. With his jaunty derby and Corona Corona cigars, he cut a smart figure around the village. He and Tom Redmond, another returned emigrant, and brother of the widow Hart, who ran the village shop, sat on the bench outside the shop, under the square windows with their jars of peggysleg and peppermint bullseyes and barley sugar sticks. There they were joined by young Connolly in his Stetson and cowpuncher boots back from Green River, Wyoming to find himself an Irish wife. Another companion on the wooden bench was Mr Foley, just returned from South America, where he had been teaching the Argentinians how to build railroads and bridges and roads through the Pampas. Sitting with these men, listening to their tales of Brooklyn and Coney Island, of the Boca in Buenos Aires, of the white slave trade and Chinatown, the first seeds of an idea entered young Rex’s mind. The loss of his mother had been a devastating blow; why not make a change, why not travel?

For the year following his mother’s death, Rex had strange dreams in which a mysterious fair-haired young woman appeared to him. He found himself drawn back over and again to the pyramid at Kinnitty Castle, which he tells us had been raised in 1872 by Colonel Barnard over the casket containing his severed hand. At the Castle Bernard rath, he performed magical rites. He would find himself pushing through the overgrown bushes to the tomb. Once there, he would walk around it three times and knock seven times on the door, or walk seven times around it and knock three times on the door.

Further afield, Rex was friendly with the O’Mearas at Drumbawn in Birr. From Sophie Rosa, the O’Meara daughter who had married a son of Carl Rosa of the Carl Rosa Opera Company, Rex first heard stories of North Africa. Sophie let him read the book she herself had been reading, Robert Hichens’ novel, *The Garden of Allah*. The story of a Trappist Monk and his forbidden love brought the sights and sounds of Africa alive, and there and then the young man promised
himself that he would visit that far off country. Little could he have imagined that, many years later, he would meet Hichens in the very place, Staouli, where the Trappist monastery described in the book was located, or that the reason for the encounter was that he, Rex, was directing his own version of *The Garden of Allah.*

Now aged 16, Rex sat the entrance exams for Trinity College Dublin. Everything went well until it came to Mathematics. He failed. Reverend Hitchcock attempted to coach him at home, but gave up on the task. It was hard to imagine that his eldest son would make anything of himself. Instead he resigned himself to Rex’s plans to travel to America. His only consolation was that an American by the name of Bert Hitchcock had contacted him wondering if they were related. They weren’t but the two men kept in touch and now Bert agreed to look after Rex when he arrived in America.

With Rev Hitchcock now appointed Donnellan Lecturer at Trinity, it fell to Frank to see off his brother: ‘At 6.30 am we left on a lovely morning from the rectory, Kinnitty, for Roscrea railway station across the Slieve Bloom Mountains, by a road called Boharaphuca – the way of the spirits,’ he later told Liam O’Leary. ‘As we climbed the road, we always dismounted from the outside car as the gradients were too steep for the horse. We could see the Shannon glistening in the morning sun and the Devil’s Bit Mountain, also the great keep of Leap castle.’ He was not to see his brother for another fifteen years, when Frank himself was in a Swiss hospital near Davos Dorf still recuperating from the damage inflicted on his lungs in the trenches. ‘I returned home very, very miserable, I remember, for he had always been such a kind and gay brother to me, particularly since the death of our mother in 1908.’ Rex sailed from Queenstown (now Cobh) on the S.S. Celtic on 25 June 1911, registering his profession on the ship’s manifest as ‘artist’ and his age as 19 (he was now eighteen). He too was filled with a sense of loss: ‘I felt my confidence leaving me, and leaving me, also, the longing to see far-off lands and the men and women who lived in them. And I wondered what was going to become of me, and if I had not been a fool. And I turned so I would not see the Irish coast any more, for I was beginning to feel a tightening in my throat. I walked forward, bent against the wind, and crossed the deck to the starboard
rail where I could see the open sea. The wind was higher on the starboard side, whipping spray from the wave-crests, and everything was grey on this side too, but there was menace as well, the black sky, waves breaking high over the bow. And suddenly, as I looked, the sun broke through the clouds and three great shafts of sunlight lit up the sea ahead.' His final destination was New Haven, Connecticut. He arrived in New York on 3 July 1911.

Extracts are quoted from Rex Ingram’s unpublished memoirs, A Long Way from Tipperary, held at the Trinity College Dublin archives. Ingram evidently changed the names of many of the people he described.

Francis Clere Hitchcock (Frank) served with distinction in World War One and his diary, Stand To: A Diary of the Trenches 1915-1918, first published in 1937 and reprinted by the Naval & Military Press in 2001 is a classic account of an Irish regiment in the war.

Ruth Barton’s new biography of Rex Ingram, Rex Ingram Visionary Director of the Silent Screen is published this autumn by University Press of Kentucky. Ingram’s Mare Nostrum will play at the Irish Film Institute on 9 December with a new score performed by 3epkano.

See also: www.rexingram.ie

Ruth Barton