A close up of the battle of Culloden in *Culloden*.

THE SCOTTISH TERROR

Culloden

review by George Sax

The recent contretemps over the US airport detention of Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams as an officially listed security risk focused attention once again on the ancient Irish struggle against English control and tyranny. But as Peter Watkins' 1964 documentary film ***Culloden*** insists, the most ruthlessly violent English campaign against a subject people in the British Isles unfolded in mid-18th-century Scotland.

In April of 1746, Culloden, a moor outside Inverness, was the site of the last battle in Charles Edward Stuart's brief war to regain his ancestors' Scottish throne and capture the one in London. England and Scotland had been united in 1707 under British and Anglican dominion, but Catholic Charles, the "Bonny Prince Charlie" of legend, sought hopelessly to overturn this domination.

His crusade ended, ingloriously and bloodily, as his ragtail, outnumbered army of Scots Highlanders was routed and decimated by the English troops. The battlefield defeat was followed by a terroristic program of repression, eviction and butchery. Of the Highland force of about 5,000, more than 1,000 died during the hour-long battle and perhaps another 1,000 were slaughtered as they lay wounded afterward, or killed as they were hunted down by the English forces.

Civilians, including women and children, were harried or starved by the thousands, and hundreds more were murdered in retaliation for the rebellion. The English commander, the Duke of Cumberland, King George III's third son, pursued what one Scots historian has called "the inexcusable barbarity of the attempted genocide." Upon his return to London, Cumberland was feted, the celebrations including an oratorio composed in his honor by George Friedrich Handel.

Watkins' film portrays these bloody events and days with bitter, impartial methodicalness. (He casts contempt on both the English and the feckless Scots, but the former receive his condemnation.) One of the most engagé of filmmakers, his films *The War Game* (1965) and *Punishment Park* (1970) were suppressed by the same BBC that commissioned them.

In *Culloden* he seems to have had two general motives: to remind the complacently forgetful English of some of the bloody origins of their political situation and to convey the lunatic ferocity of war. He also has said he wanted to draw parallels with the burgeoning American intervention in the Vietnamese civil war in the 1960s.

In the 42 years since its completion, the 67-minute-long *Culloden* has become, to some extent, a historical curiosity. American audiences can't reasonably be expected to understand a foreign civil war fought 40 years before their country was founded. And the adoption of the old, 1950s CBS-TV "You Are There" format, with actors being "interviewed" by an unseen "journalist" in the midst of rapidly unfolding events, is a little quaint, even if it's still employed from time to time.

Watkins' use of an amateur cast, many of them direct descendants of participants at the battle, is effective, if a little self-conscious.

As an example of Watkins' work, *Culloden* is less impressive or representative than *Punishment Park* (recently released on DVD), a fictional portrayal of a fascistic security regime—the Nixon Administration, specifically—hounding and killing war protesters through legal mechanisms and blunt force. It resonates with current concerns and political sharpness more than the limited-interest *Culloden*. av

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