



MARK JENKIN'S THE CINEMATIC DNA OF ENYS MEN

## Penda's Fen

There has to be an Alan Clarke film in this season. Although it's a real outlier in terms of his body of work, this was a touchstone when I was developing *Enys Men*. I'd be lying if I said I fully knew what the film means. As with Robert Bresson's work, I prioritise feeling over understanding. Besides, even Clarke claimed to not really know what it was about.

**Mark Jenkin**

There's scarcely a speech like it in British cinema: 'No, no! I am nothing pure! My race is mixed! My sex is mixed! I am woman and man, light with darkness, nothing pure! I am mud and flame!' So cries Stephen, the teenager whose transformation from sanctimonious parroter of establishment values to apostle of cultural alterity, is chronicled in *Penda's Fen*. It's a moment of awakening and of revelation, a jailbreak holler, a vision of a new kind of nationhood that anticipates by decades the work of historiographers and academic theorists who would later speak of the inseparability of 'nation and narration', of 'the invention of tradition', of 'imagined communities'.

And yet, although widely hailed as a visionary work – troubling, beautiful, unforgettable – almost as soon as it was broadcast as part of BBC1's *Play for Today* strand in 1974, *Penda's Fen* had never been made commercially available until the BFI's current DVD and Blu-ray releases. For years it existed in the form of rumours and hand-me-down memories, a folk myth about a lost televisual civilization. Then, after it was repeated in 1990, wobbly, nth-generation videotapes circulated among aficionados and collectors, one of which was uploaded to YouTube in 2008; its final scenes – as if in tribute to the internal revolution Stephen himself was undergoing – were especially buckled. This disappearance – or, at best, spectral existence – seems almost pre-ordained. Penda himself (d. AD 655), the last pagan king of England, leader of a province where intermarriage with the Welsh was common and which was noted for its racially mixed population, a once-celebrated warrior whom Michael Wood describes as 'bestriding the seventh century like a colossus', is barely known today. The chief biographical source for information about his life, Bede's Ecclesiastical History, was completed 70 years after Penda's death.

Paganism itself has, in many quarters, been reduced to a synonym for something witchy and cabalistic. The film, though, treats it as being about the politics of scale, and draws attention to the word's etymology – of the village – to suggest that radical questions and alternative answers are present not out there in universities, museums or sanctioned citadels of learning, but closer to hand, on the ground beneath our feet. Penda himself becomes a symbol of heretical nationhood, of pre-Christian identity, of an imaginative wildscape which has the potential to redeem us from the lies and orthodoxies of state knowledge.

The film's screenwriter David Rudkin was both an insider and an outsider. He was of Northern Irish descent and his parents were evangelical Christians. He'd also studied at Cambridge, performed National Service in the Royal Corps of Signals, and taught classics at secondary school. This proximity to

and muscle memory of the architectonics of Englishness is palpable in every scene of *Penda's Fen* where he deconstructs most of its pillars. Stephen, a rather priggish adolescent, is defined by his education (a traditional grammar school), his religion (his father is a Rector), his home (a gorgeous stretch of the West Country whose green fields of forevermore his bedroom overlooks), and his politics (he believes in the sanctity of the nuclear family, and that the country is imperiled by left-wingers).

All these markers of a certain conservatism are brought into question by Stephen's growing doubts about his sexuality. *Penda's Fen* is not a film about homosexuality; it doesn't depict it as a subculture, a lifestyle, a social category, far less a cause. But it is, long before the term was first used to describe the work of directors such as Todd Haynes and Isaac Julien, a queer film. Stephen's vagrant, barely understood desires are fundamentally destabilising. They lead him to see through the values he used to espouse. The military masculinity of his school, mainstream Christian doctrine, the eternal benevolence of English pastoralism: all of these come to seem like fronts and conspiracies. Homosexuality provokes climate change, inspires heterodoxy, is a gateway drug to a new enlightenment.

*Penda's Fen* is perhaps the most significant film to be made during the rural turn that, as William Fowler has noted, British cinema took in the early 1970s. A decline in manufacturing had led to the shrinkage of many urban centres, and that, combined with a post-sixties vogue for communes, free festivals and pre-industrial ways of being, inspired artists such as Derek Jarman (*Journey to Avebury*, 1971), William Raban (*Colours of This Time*, 1972), and Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo (*Winstanley*, 1975) to explore the submerged histories, altered states and radical possibilities of the British landscape.

Rudkin shows the English countryside as a place, not of becalmed continuity and 'old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist', but as a historical battleground and in constant turmoil. It offers wormholes and geysers, faultlines that fertilise, ruptures that release energy. It's a philosophy of pastoral – and of what makes a nation – that sloughs off Little Englandism and Middle Earthism in favour of something less self-satisfied and more attuned to its lurking darkneses.

No account of the film's making would be complete without mention of its commissioning editor, David Rose. Tasked in 1971 by David Attenborough to head a new regional television drama department at Pebble Mill Studios in Birmingham, he immediately set about developing adventurous projects – by writers such as Alan Bleasdale, Alan Plater, Michael Abbensetts and Willy Russell – that were steeped in the lore and soundworlds of non-metropolitan Britain. He has described *Penda's Fen* as 'a milestone, if not the milestone, of my career', though, 40 years after it was first broadcast, he also admitted, 'I didn't understand it at all, but that's as it should be.'

If it's uncommon for films to be associated with their screenwriters rather than their directors, it's especially strange when the director is Alan Clarke who, by the time of his death in 1990, had established an international reputation for the likes of *Scum* (1977), *Made in Britain* (1982) and *The Firm* (1989). *Penda's Fen*, with its rural setting, flights of dark lyricism and non-realist cadences, might seem a world away from the tough, urban milieus found in Clarke's work. Initially, Rudkin recalls, the director considered it too much of 'an intellectual piece'. Roy Minton, a playwright and regular Clarke collaborator,

claimed, ‘I didn’t know what the fuck was going on with that piece. Nobody on the production seemed to. Much later, in 1990, it was repeated and I asked Al, “Do you know any more now?” He said, “I had no idea what I was doing.”’ Stephen may not be as strutting or as vicious as Tim Roth or Gary Oldman’s characters, but, like them, he bristles against authority and institutional power. The questions he poses – in his yearnings and in his interactions with others – are seismic. He talks up the value of community and group identity, but seems most himself when he’s alone. ‘When the chips are down, *Penda’s Fen* is just about somebody who has to kick things over,’ Rudkin has claimed. The film, like many which draw on horror motifs (Rudkin admired the baroque Romanticism of Hammer movies), pulsates and quivers, is often on the brink of a nervous breakdown, and it’s Clarke, with his steely focus and mastery of dramatic stillness, who ensures it doesn’t degenerate into a lysergic freakout.

For all its invocation of deep time and older Albions, and its revisiting of themes that Rudkin had been exploring for well over a decade, *Penda’s Fen* is clearly a work of the early 1970s. It features a photograph-burning character based on Mary Whitehouse, the self-designated custodian of public morality who, from the 1960s to the 1980s, railed against the permissive society. The film’s discussions of cultural purity would have struck a nerve as, particularly following the arrival of almost 60,000 Idi Amin-expelled Ugandan Asians to Britain in 1972, funereal orations to true Englishness were routinely delivered by pundits and politicians, Enoch Powell’s fear-mongering prophecies about immigration leading to rivers of blood were endlessly echoed. After a recent public screening of the film, Rudkin distanced it from the field of ‘folk horror’ – ‘psychogeography, hauntology, folklore, cultural rituals and costume, earth mysteries, visionary landscapism, archaic history’ – in which it has come to have hallowed status. ‘It’s a bloody political piece,’ he observed, before adding, ‘I’ve always thought of myself as a political writer.’ Dread and paranoia permeate the drama: mounting industrial disputes, whispers about top secret military installations, withering denunciation of ‘the manipulators and fixers and psychopaths who hold the real power in the land’.

There is so much to say about *Penda’s Fen*. It is, as the poet and curator Gareth Evans has written, ‘an outrider of its origins and the era of its making, a singular, far-seeing and multi-chambered work of art that has unravelled and reconstituted very many who have encountered it.’ It is ceaseless and profound, dangerous and delirious. It is, in words that are spoken to Stephen at a crucial scene in the film, ‘strange, dark, true, impure, and dissonant.’

**Sukhdev Sandhu, booklet essay for *Penda’s Fen* Blu-ray/DVD (BFI, 2016)**

## **A Warning to the Curious**

When I think of *The Ghost Stories for Christmas* series, I think of Lawrence Gordon Clark more than MR James. But of all the James adaptations, this is my favourite – a highly atmospheric piece of visual storytelling with a chilling climax. I find the simplicity of the filmmaking invigorating. No doubt born of limitation, this is cinema by way of TV.

**Mark Jenkin**

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**PLAY FOR TODAY: PENDA'S FEN**

*Directed by:* Alan Clarke  
©: BBC  
*Production Company:* BBC Birmingham  
*Producer:* David Rose  
*Script Editor:* Tara Prem  
*[Written] By:* David Rudkin  
*Film Cameraman:* Michael Williams  
*Operator:* Ken Morgan  
*Special Effects:* Clifford Culley  
*Animation:* Bernard Lodge  
*Film Editor:* Henry Fowler  
*Design:* Michael Edwards  
*Costume:* Joyce Hawkins  
*Make-up:* Jan Nethercot  
*Sound Recordist:* John Gilbert  
*Sound Mixer:* David Baumber  
*Radiophonic Sound:* Paddy Kingsland  
*Cast:*  
Spencer Banks (*Stephen*)  
John Atkinson (*Reverend J. Franklin*)  
Georgine Anderson (*Mrs Franklin*)  
Ron Smerczak (*Joel*)  
Ian Hogg (*Arne*)  
Jennie Hesselwood (*Mrs Arne*)  
Graham Leaman (*Sir Edward Elgar*)  
Christopher Douglas (*Honeybone*)  
John Richmond (*headmaster*)  
Ivor Roberts (*Cooke*)  
Joan Scott (*the lady*)  
Ray Gatenby (*the man*)  
Helena McCarthy (*Mrs Kings*)  
Joyce Grundy (*Mrs Gisbourne*)  
Frank Veasey (*council workman*)  
Elizabeth Revill (*nurse*)  
Moray Black (*sixth former*)  
John Scott (*Sir Nicholas Pole*)  
Roy Preston (*Brott*)  
Pat Bowker (*Joel's girl*)  
Geoffrey Staines (*King Penda*)  
Geoffrey Pennells (*demon*)  
Martin Reynolds (*angel*)  
Ian Gemmell (*Harry*)\*  
BBC1 tx 21.3.1974  
UK 1973©  
90 mins

\* Uncredited

**A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS: A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS**

*Producer:* Lawrence Gordon Clark  
*Production Company:* BBC  
*Adapted by:* Lawrence Gordon Clark  
*[Story] by:* M.R. James  
*Camera:* John McGlashan  
*Designer:* Geoffrey Winslow  
*Sound:* Dick Manton  
*Cast:*  
Peter Vaughan (*Mr Paxton*)  
Clive Swift (*Dr Black*)  
Julian Herington (*archaeologist*)  
John Kearney (*William Ager/ghost*)  
David Cargill (*boots*)  
George Benson (*vicar*)  
Roger Milner (*antique shop owner*)  
Gilly Fraser (*girl at cottage*)  
David Pugh (*station porter*)  
Cyril Appleton (*labourer*)  
BBC1 tx 24.12.1972  
UK 1972  
50 mins

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**MARK JENKIN'S THE CINEMATIC DNA OF ENYS MEN****Walkabout + Oss Oss Wee Oss**

Sun 1 Jan 13:10; Mon 9 Jan 20:30

**The Stone Tape + Journey to Avebury**

Mon 2 Jan 15:40

**Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles**

Wed 4 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:15

**Symptoms + Stigma**

Fri 6 Jan 18:10; Sun 15 Jan 15:30

**Lost Highway + Jaunt**

Fri 6 Jan 20:15; Sun 22 Jan 18:10

**Haunters of the Deep****+ The Living and the Dead Episode 2**

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Tue 10 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 20:30

**Penda's Fen + A Warning to the Curious**

Wed 11 Jan 17:50

**Two Years at Sea + A Portrait of Ga**

Sat 14 Jan 18:00 (+ intro and Q&A with Mark Jenkin and Ben Rivers);

Tue 24 Jan 20:45

**Daguerréotypes + World of Glory**

Sun 15 Jan 12:00 (+ intro by Mark Jenkin); Thu 26 Jan 20:50

**Bait**

Sun 15 Jan 18:00; Mon 30 Jan 20:50

**Requiem for a Village + The Signalman**

Fri 27 Jan 18:20; Tue 31 Jan 20:40

**Berberian Sound Studio + Wind**

Sun 29 Jan 15:30 (+ intro by Mark Jenkin and Peter Strickland);

Tue 31 Jan 18:10

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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