

MEN AT LUNCH

Lón sa Spéir

A Documentary by Seán Ó Cualáin

67 Minutes / English / Digital (BluRay) / 2012



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Logline

Men at Lunch is the untold story of New York's greatest legend and one of the most iconic images of the 20th century - Lunch atop a Skyscraper - taken on the 69th floor of the Rockefeller Building in the autumn of 1932.

Synopsis

New York City, 1932. The country is in the throes of the Great Depression, the previous decade's boom of Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants has led to unprecedented urban expansion, and in the midst of an unseasonably warm autumn, steelworkers risk life and limb building skyscrapers high above the streets of Manhattan.

In *Men at Lunch*, director Seán Ó Cualáin tells the story of *Lunch atop a Skyscraper*, the iconic photograph taken during the construction of the GE Building that depicts eleven workmen taking their lunch break while casually perched along a steel girder - boots dangling 850 feet above the sidewalk of 41st Street –Central Park and the misty Manhattan skyline stretching out behind them. The definitive counterpoint of epic and mundane – a symbol of the indomitable working man.

Part homage, part investigation, *Men at Lunch* is the revealing tale of an American icon, an unprecedented race to the sky and the immigrant workers that built New York. For 80 years, the identity of the eleven men – and the photographer that immortalized them – remained a mystery: their stories, lost in time, subsumed by the fame of the image itself.

But then, at the start of the 21st century, the photograph finally began to give up some of its secrets.

Film Festival Presentations:

Galway Film Fleadh

TIFF

DOC NYC

IDFA

DOCPOINT

Santa Barbara Int Film Festival

Portland International Film Festival

Glasgow Film Festival

Chicago Irish Film Festival

Shanghai Film Festival

Crew

Directed by:	Seán Ó Cualáin
Executive Producers:	Mícheál Ó Meallaigh, TG4
Produced by:	Eamonn Ó Cualáin
Editor:	Dáithí Connaughton
Director of Photography:	Reamonn Mac Donncha
Script:	Niall Murphy
Composer:	Mike McGoldrick
Narrator:	Fionnula Flanagan
Cast:	Paddy O'Shaughnessy
	Pat Glynn
	Peter Quinn
	Jim Rasenberger
	Ric Burns
	Joe Woolhead
Additional Photography:	Andrew Clancy
Additional Editing:	John Murphy
Visual Effects:	Thomas Leveritt
Research:	Cathal Ó Cuaig
	Loretta Ní Ghabháin

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/movies/lunch-atop-a-skyscraper-uncovered.html?_r=1&

The New York Times

By JOHN ANDERSON

Published: November 8, 2012

WHEN they don't involve sailors kissing nurses, the symbolic photographs of New York City usually involve skyscrapers: Alfred Stieglitz's snowy shot of the Flatiron Building; Berenice Abbott's electric "Night View"; Margaret Bourke-White perched atop an art-deco eagle of the Chrysler Building. And Lewis Hine's celebrated portrait of 11 Depression-era ironworkers, lunching along an I-beam on the unfinished Empire State Building.

No? No, on several counts.

The shot isn't by Hine. And it's not atop the Empire State Building — despite common misperceptions, misrepresentations and an Internet that insists otherwise. Taken Sept. 20, 1932, during the construction of Rockefeller Center, the well-known portrait of 11 immigrant laborers, legs dangling 850 feet above Midtown, ran in the Oct. 2 Sunday supplement of The New York Herald-Tribune, with the caption "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper." Everybody knows the picture. Nobody knows who took it. And for most of its 80 years no one has known who's in it.

A bit of the mystery is resolved in "Men at Lunch," a documentary about the photo that's featured in the current DOC NYC series at the IFC Center in Greenwich Village. Its director isn't making any exorbitant claims. "We just muddied the waters a bit," Sean O Cualain said with a smile during a recent interview in New York. "It was already a complex story full of unknowns. And we added a few more unknowns."

But "Men at Lunch" does solve some of the puzzle created during a New York autumn when Babe Ruth's Yankees were winning the World Series and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was winning the presidency. Produced by Mr. O Cualain's brother, Eamonn, and made on a virtual shoestring, the film establishes the identity of at least two of the long-anonymous workers. Joseph Eckner, third from left, and Joe Curtis, third from right, were cross-referenced with other photos that the O Cualains were shown at Rockefeller Center. While the "Lunch" print itself bears no identifications, Eckner and Curtis were certainly the same men named on other photos taken that day.

Two others — at each end of the row, one lighting a cigarette, the other holding a bottle and glaring at the camera — were traced to Ireland, which is where the O Cualain brothers, natives of Galway, entered the story.

"We were in doing another documentary and were having lunch in Whelan's Pub, in Shanaglish," Sean O Cualain said, referring to a small village in County Galway. "We saw the picture on the wall, and Mikey Whelan told us the story." As Mr. Whelan, the publican, explained it, the framed copy had come from a Boston-area man named Pat Glynn, who was convinced that his father, Sonny Glynn, was the man with the bottle at the far right, and that his uncle, Matty O'Shaughnessy, was at the far left with a cigarette.

Comparisons with family photos seem to back him up. What Mr. Glynn knew for sure is that the men had emigrated in the '20s from Shanaglish, hence the prominent display of the photo in a pub there.

“With all the evidence they’ve given us and based on their own belief,” Eamonn O Cualain said, “we believe them.” By the end of the film, his brother added, “you want to believe them too.”

The popularity of the picture, which has been colorized, satirized, burlesqued with the Muppets and turned into a life-size sculpture by Sergio Furnari, is partly about the casual recklessness of its subjects: The beam on which they sit seems suspended over an urban abyss, with the vastness of Central Park spread out behind them and nothing, seemingly below. But in fact a finished floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza was probably just a few feet away. And it was certainly not casual. As the Rockefeller collection shows, it was among many such posed photos taken and distributed to the news media with the intention of promoting Depression-era real estate (albeit by photographers who were “absolutely mad,” said the archivist, Christine Roussel).

The confusion over Hine’s involvement stems from the wrong assumption that the skyscraper was the Empire State Building, which Hine did photograph. The Rockefeller archive attributes the photo to “unknown” because no one was credited, though photos exist of other photographers who were taking pictures that day. The suspects include Charles Ebbets, William Leftwich and Thomas Kelley.

The O Cualains have a copy of a second shot, evidently taken just seconds after the famous original, the cracked glass negative of which is owned by the Corbis collection and kept in the Iron Mountain storage facility, 220 feet beneath the surface of western Pennsylvania.

“We found it on a poster site on the Internet, but pretty quickly after we started asking questions the phone started going dead,” Sean O Cualain said, regarding the site. “They didn’t know who owned the copyright, you know what I mean? So we couldn’t use it in the film, but we have it on our office wall, and it’s taken three or four seconds after the original snap.”

The cigarette has just been lighted, his brother said. “And the guy on the far side has a funny look on his face, as if the photographer said, ‘Don’t look at the bloody camera!’ ”

The presence in the picture of Sonny Glynn and Matty O’Shaughnessy are another reason “Lunch Atop a Skyscraper” long ago became a classic: The synthesis of immigration, aspiration and determination, the vertical grasp of Manhattan at a time when jobs were scarce and men were desperate. As John Rasenberger, the author of “High Steel: The Daring Men Who Built the World’s Greatest Skyline,” says in the documentary: “The pay was good. The thing was, you had to be willing to die.”

All of which have obscured the merits of “Lunch Atop a Skyscraper” as a work of art.

“Lewis Hine was hired to document the Empire State Building, and as a body of work that to me represents a greater artistic achievement, at least across the series,” said Sarah Meister, a curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, who put together the exhibition “Picturing New York” of 2009. “But there’s a difference between a picture that transcends its function for its own intrinsic merits and one that has transcended it for other cultural reasons.” She would, she said, be delighted if someone wanted to donate a good print of “Lunch Atop a Skyscraper” to MoMA. “We don’t have one.”

Whether its subject is a masterpiece or a novelty, “Men at Lunch” was a natural for DOC NYC, now in its third year. “Needless to say, I am a fan,” said the senior programmer Mystelle Brabbee, who called the film a “love letter,” albeit one that takes a different tack from other films about architecture.

“We mostly hear about the famous architects and financiers, but this one iconic photograph shows the spirit of how Rockefeller Center was built — the fulfillment of the promise of Manhattan,” she said

“Beauty, service, dignity and humor dangling 56 stories above the midstream rush of the metropolis, all summarized in this moment.”

The documentary invites the viewer to meditate on that moment, she added, “without trying to reveal all the answers surrounding it.”

<http://blog.myheritage.com/2013/08/1932-a-most-famous-photograph/>



1932: A most famous photograph

As part of our Treasure Family Photos initiative, to preserve old family photos and to encourage people to learn more about their family history from them, we've seen some beautiful family photos and learnt about their history. There are also many other famous photos with a great history behind them. One of the world's most iconic photos is of a group of men sitting on a 69th floor construction beam high above Manhattan.

MyHeritage was delighted to be able to interview (via email) Seán Ó Cualáin – director of the documentary *Men at Lunch* – on his project.

Sean, when and how did you first see the photo?

My brother (Eamonn – the documentary's producer) and I were researching another documentary in 2009 when we went into Whelan's pub in Galway, Ireland on our lunch break. We saw the famous photo on the wall and a note from Pat Glynn, the son of a local emigrant who claimed his father and uncle-in-law were on the beam.

By the time we had left the pub, owner Michael Whelan had given us Pat's number, so it was simply a chance discovery. Within a few days, we had spoken to Pat and his cousin Patrick O'Shaughnessy, who both claimed that their fathers are two of the men having lunch.

We had originally intended for the film to investigate the claim of the O'Shaughnessy and Glynn families, but we found out that no records of the construction survived, that no information on the men, or the photographer existed.

How did you track down the photographer?

Before our documentary was screened the photograph was attributed to Charles Ebbets, the Rockefeller Center's Photographic Director during its construction.

In the course of our research, during the documentary, we uncovered other images of other photographers taking photographs on the beams on the exact same day the famous “Lunch atop a skyscraper” was taken.

We do not have a picture of the photographer Charles Ebbets, to whom that picture was attributed from that day, but that doesn't mean he didn't take the picture.

However, after the screening of our film, the authorship of the photograph was changed to “unknown.”

Unfortunately, the entire story of what happened on the 69th floor of the Rockefeller Building on that balmy September day in 1932 may never be known.

Where and how did you find the glass negative?

Ever since the photograph first appeared in the Sunday Supplement of the New York Herald Tribune on October 2, 1932, many assumed it was a fake.

Unfortunately this doubt about its authenticity has always taken from the true brilliance of the image.

Quite early in our research, we contacted Ken Johnston from the Historical Collection in Corbis about the image's authenticity as Corbis licenses the image to users.

Some 360 miles west of New York City, in rural Pennsylvania is Iron Mountain - one of the most secure locations on earth and home to the Corbis Collection. Here lay a certain glass negative that Corbis had always assumed - but never actually confirmed - to be the authentic master exposure of Lunch Atop A Skyscraper.

During the filming of our documentary, Ken Johnston confirms that the glass negative is the master-ending over 80 years of claims that the image is a trick photograph.

Is it true that the photo was a PR stunt for the new building?

Yes, the photo was a PR stunt, the famous image comes from a collection of images taken during construction of the Rockefeller Building.

It is a staged photograph - the photographer assembled the men on the beam, he was trying to get a great shot to create publicity for the center and to eventually sell office space.

Remember that this was during the darkest depths of the Depression, so it had to be an image to capture the public's imagination, and also perhaps hint that the worst of the depression was over.

During our research, we also uncovered a never-before-seen image of the same 11 men directly acknowledging the camera.

This image suggests that the timing of New York's most celebrated image was no accident. It was a set-up shot, but that doesn't detract from the power of the image or from the authenticity of the image. The

men in the picture are construction workers who went to the 69th floor that day to work - not to sit for a photographer.

Skyscraper construction was a very, very dangerous. Looking at the photograph, we see that none of the men are wearing safety harnesses. In the planning of these skyscrapers like the Empire State, developers factored in one dead worker for every 10 floors.

Can you comment on the relationship between history and the photographs that record it as history happens?

A photograph can only capture a moment in time, but sometimes that captured moment can come to represent a bigger event, be it a war, a tragedy, a moment of triumph or despair.

This image is simply of 11 immigrants having lunch, but it's more than that, much more than that.

Because we know it's in the middle of the Depression, because of the apparent height and the casual appearance of the men, the image has been elevated into a inspirational piece of art, where we identify with the ordinariness of the men and their apparent struggle to create a better life for themselves.

On the other hand, the photo also however reveals the limits of still photography. While it does reveal much for us, we know nothing of the 11 unknown subjects beyond the expressions on their faces.

We realised the film's story had to change. It was now to become the untold story of the most famous image in the world, the mystery of the 11 men on the beam and the great immigrant struggle.

<http://filmireland.net/2013/01/28/interview-the-story-behind-the-image-sean-o-cualain-eamonn-o-cualain-discuss-men-at-lunch/>



Interview: The Story Behind the Image – Seán Ó Cualáin & Éamonn Ó Cualáin discuss ‘Men At Lunch’

There was no documentary made about it, no film, no books – well, maybe one or two books on the Rockefeller centre itself, but nothing else,’ says Seán Ó Cualáin, talking about his new documentary Men At Lunch. The feature-length documentary, screening theatrically in selected cinemas across Ireland this week, tells the story of one of the world’s most recognizable photos – and how ‘a chance happening’, as the filmmakers describe it, in a Galway pub led to identifying the previously-unknown subjects of it. Produced by Éamonn Ó Cualáin and in conjunction with TG4 and Sonta Films, Men At Lunch is a fascinating look at the construction of a building, an iconic landmark and, indeed, the construction of a nation.

What with ‘The Gathering’ and how emigration is, again, a huge part of Irish life, was Men At Lunch an attempt to comment on Irish diaspora? ‘Not at all, when we started this documentary, there was some crazy people talking about a bust. It wasn’t a part of a master plan to make a documentary about emigration; it was just to investigate this claim. Since then, it’s been a huge realization of the importance of emigrants to American. We hear the cliché, America was built emigrants – but it was and Irish were one of the first emigrants in America. And the fact that these ironworkers were first-generation, descendants of Famine Irish is very powerful.’

Seán Ó Cualáin goes on to explain how it’s very easy to be flippant about the Irish influence, but for Irish Americans and, indeed, modern ironworkers, this image is their ‘badge of honour’. They’ve been invited to screen the film for the iron-workers of New York’s Freedom Tower. ‘It’s strange because, the photo was taken in the depths of the Depression, when the country was on its knees – and here we are, eighty years later, with an Irish photographer up there trying to recreate this (the Men At Lunch) image. We’ve come full circle.’ The image itself has now taken on a new importance, what with 9/11 and, as mentioned, the construction of the Freedom Tower. ‘We couldn’t not mention it, it wasn’t just name-checking it for the sake of it,’ explains Seán.

The response from international audiences for Men At Lunch has been overwhelming. Selected for the Toronto International Film Festival, all three screenings for the film sold out during its run there. As well as this, the film was selected for IFDA (International Documentary Film Festival) in Amsterdam and enjoyed four sold-out screenings.

Men At Lunch, according to Seán, wasn’t destined for a theatrical release. Indeed, the film was initially meant to be an Irish-language, one-hour documentary for TG4. ‘We never planned for it to be in Irish cinemas, we hoped for it – but how many Irish-language documentaries do you see being released nowadays? Or even Irish-language films, for that matter?’ When it was screened at the Galway Film Fleadh, the reaction from Irish audiences was more of horror at what the ironworkers went through. ‘It needs to be seen on a big-screen, y’know, the scale of how high up they were working.’

The image itself is shrouded in mystery; even who took the famous photograph is disputed. 'After six months of research, we went over and back to New York. We changed the original credit of Charles Ebbetts to unknown and we've managed to identify – with proof – two of the workers in the image.' The documentary plays like a detective story, as the research goes deeper and deeper and leaves them with more questions than they originally started. Already, a sequel is in the works and there's talk of a series about the other images found within the Corbis Iron Mountain facility. 'There's more truths to find, explains Seán Ó Cualáin, 'we have names now for the other workers – we need to find their story, as well.'



INTERVIEW: Sean and Eamonn O'Cualain talk Men At Lunch

From Brooklyn to Ballinasloe, the iconic image of eleven men taking tea above the New York skyline has enchanted countless generations, but who were the Men At Lunch? That's the question that Irish brothers Eamonn and Sean O'Cualain set out to answer. Little did they know that their little documentary about the search for the construction workers would become a smash hit, and even get a nod from the IFTAs. We caught up with them earlier this week to find out a little bit more about the film...

So lads, we've heard that this adventure, like many before it, started with story told over a pint in a pub in Shanaglish, Co Galway. What was it about this particular story that inspired you to make a documentary?

It was actually over a coffee and a toasted sandwich, we were in Whelans pub in Shanaglish near Gort in Galway and we saw the famous photo on the wall and a note from Pat Glynn, the son of a local emigrant who claimed his father and uncle in law were on the beam. By the time we had left the pub, the owner Michael Whelan had given us Pat Gynns number, so it was simply a chance discovery.

Patrick O'Shaughnessy and Patrick Glynn claim that their fathers are two of the men having lunch. When you first started looking into their claims you found it would be almost impossible to prove them, so what made you keep going?

We had originally intended for the film to investigate the claim of the O'Shaughnessy and Glynn families, but we found out that no records of the construction survived, that no information on the men, or the photographer existed. We realised the film's story had to change. It was now to become the untold story of the most famous image in the world, the mystery of the eleven men on the beam and the great immigrant struggle.

You've got the great Fionnuala Flanagan providing the narration in English and as Gaeilge! How did you manage to get her on board and what was it like to work with her?

We contacted Fionnuala's agent who passed on a draft of our script to Fionnuala. She liked it, and the story we were telling fascinated her. It was then just a matter of finding a time in her schedule to record her narration before its premiere. She was a joy to work with, she really enjoyed the Irish language telling of the story.

So, the documentary was first shown in Ireland last year. What was the response here at home like?

The film received its premiere at the Galway Film Fleadh, we had a lunchtime premiere and it was sold out, a great reaction from all. We did a 2012 recreation of the image in Eyre Square and those images were seen all over the world. From there we got an invitation to TIFF, Toronto International Film Festival which was great. We had 3 sell out shows and from there the demand for the film worldwide has been overwhelming. International audiences love the Irish connection and the mystery of the photo but also have a great understanding of the struggle all immigrants had when they arrived in America. TG4 have delayed the broadcast of the film to St Patrick's Day this year, without their help this film would not have been made.

I suppose an IFTA nomination is as ringing an endorsement from the home crowd as you can get! How did you feel when you found out the documentary was nominated?

We were delighted to get the nomination. Awards are strange - you would love to win on the night, but if it goes elsewhere you don't beat yourself up about it. We have two IFTA awards from previous years, but on both occasions we could not attend as we were on a film shoot elsewhere, so it would be great to finally get one in person.

When you were sitting in that little pub, looking at the iconic photo, did you ever think that Lon sa Speir would take you so far?

Driving home that evening we never felt the film, as it we saw it then, would get such a reaction. It began life as a one hour TV documentary to trace two Galway families and their claim to a famous photograph. When we realised no research had been done to help us - it did become something else and a film we knew would have a strong appeal all over the world because the themes of the image are universal.

So, when it comes down to it, what do you hope audiences will take from the documentary?

We always intended for the film to be very much a reflection of all the themes and emotions illustrated in the photograph. It is a celebration of what ordinary men from Ireland and Europe built when they arrived in America. I hope people feel a sense of pride in what these men achieved and that the next time they visit Top of the Rock in NY or see the NY skyline, they do so with the knowledge that Irish hands were very much part of its construction. It will also resonate with people and families who have just left or are leaving the country to work abroad. No matter where we live we can achieve and aspire higher.

And we know that many of the men still have to be identified so tell us, is the adventure over or will we be seeing more of the men on the skyscraper?

Very much so, Cuid a 2 is very much in the pipeline - since the film's release we have received a lot of new material and claims from families all over the world as to who the men might be. The identity of the photographer has also become a mystery because of information revealed in our film and that something we want to look into. We never intended to be the 'go to guys' for the photograph but we have become that, so for the foreseeable future the eleven men on the beam are very much part of our lives.