

# DEVELOPMENT COVERAGE EXAMPLE



TITLE: The Donnellys of Bidulph Township  
 AUTHOR: -----  
 GENRE: Historical Drama  
 ANALYST: -----  
 PERIOD: 1761; 1845-1888  
 LOCALE: Toronto  
 SERVICE: Development  
 DATE: -----

LOGLINE: An Irish family seeks to start a new life in Canada – but as community tensions boil over, they soon cement a reputation as the hellraisers of the county, starting a long-running feud that ends in blood.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Structure				XX
Plot/Story Line			XX	
Character Development				XX
Dialogue				XX
First 20 Pages				XX

	Recommend	Consider	Pass
Script			XX
Writer			XX

## **SYNOPSIS:**

1845. The Irish town of Tipperary is suffering from both famine and the radical tactics of the whiteboys, Catholics who target any Irishman found associating with Protestants. JAMES and JUDY DONNELLY see no bright prospects in Ireland and decide to immigrate to Canada, setting in Biddulph Township in Ontario. But despite the promise of a new life, they haven't escaped their troubles – the town contains a heavy whiteboy contingent, and James isn't one to back down from a fight. While he strikes back at attempts to harrow his family, he also starts to earn the Donnellys a reputation. When the land he squats on is purchased by FERRIS, he finds himself forced to share his home with someone who views him as dirt – and during a barn raising a few years later, a drunken fight breaks out between the two, resulting in Ferris's death. James is sentenced to seven years in jail, leaving WILL, his son, to lead the Donnellys – and the citizens of Biddulph start to turn on the Donnellys, viewing them as nothing but trouble.

Will leads the family through the slings and arrows of his neighbors, and the Donnellys often give as good as they get. When neighbor WATSON refuses to let Will court his young daughter MAGGIE, Will attempts to abscond with her. When EVERS, a local farmer, tries to frame associate of the family TIM RYAN for theft, Will's brother ROBERT takes a shot at him. Over the years, a number of fires break out in Biddulph, "coincidentally" targeting those who've harassed the Donnellys. The law is little barrier to them as well, as the Donnellys strike back hard against police harassment and often drive constables from the force in droves. Veteran citizens, such as DON CARLSON, wish to be done with the Donnellys once and for all, and even newcomers, such as FATHER BOYLE, just want peace. Once Carlson assumes control of the constabulary, he tries to bring the hammer down on the Donnellys, but finds they keep slipping from his reach. Eventually, Carlson resorts to dire measures, forming a "Peace Society" dedicated to solving the Donnelly problem once and for all – and the Society's answer lies in blood. Under the cover of night, Carlson leads an assault on the Donnelly homestead, killing all but Will, Robert, and their siblings PATRICK and JENNIE. The massacre swiftly becomes news across Canada, but Carlson and his compatriots are acquitted on their first trial – and when the case is retried with a change of venue, they're acquitted once again. The Donnellys are left broken, but Will and Robert decide to stay in Canada, determined to prove they belong.

## **DEVELOPMENT COMMENTS**

### **Premise:**

“The Donnellys of Bidulph Township” is an interesting take on both the immigrant experience and one of Canada’s darkest chapters in history, and it certainly has a lot of potential. While there have been many stories that focus on the struggle of immigrants to adapt to a new place and culture, many of them paint their subjects as patient and full of righteous fortitude in the face of assault from the community around them. The Donnellys, however, are quick to strike back, and as a result, quickly earn a reputation as troublemakers – and sometimes, it’s deserved. The script provides a good deal of material, detailing the various exchanges between them and their fellow citizens that lead to mounting tensions and, finally, a massacre. There’s a good possibility of providing a saucier take on the immigrant experience, one that reflects not patient assimilation, but fighting for your right to be a citizen.

Unfortunately, despite the strength of the framework, “The Donnellys of Bidulph Township” still gets a pass for both writer and script on the grounds that it never truly lives up to its own potential. From a plot that feels more like an assemblage of vignettes than a cohesive tale, to indistinct and roughly defined characters, to expository dialogue that tries too hard to pave over gaps in the story, the reader will provide detailed notes below and then offer possible solutions on how to implement them in future drafts. If the writer is willing to consider these notes and address the troubled areas of the script, then “The Donnellys of Bidulph Township” will take a few steps forward towards improved grades on the scoring chart, as well as the possibility of becoming a generational saga for the ages.

### **First Twenty Pages:**

In the first twenty pages of the script, the nature of the main characters, their major desires, their central conflict, and the world they live in must all be set up effectively. The script does manage to set up these points fairly quickly – civil and religious tensions in Ireland have reached a boiling point, and the whiteboys are striking at any Irishman who dare works for a Protestant. James Donnelly doesn’t want his family to suffer this lot, so he relocates them to Ontario. In doing so, however, he quickly discovers that he hasn’t escaped the whiteboys, and that even as he tries to establish a place for his family, they’re swiftly developing a reputation. All these items are checked off, and quite thoroughly. And while James eventually fades into the

background of the story, that's acceptable – by that point, it's become a generational saga as much as a personal one, and the clan that he represents has become the lead that he once was.

But in trying to set it all up, though, the script falls into a problem that shows up throughout the script – it tries to fit in everything it thinks is important, and in doing so, gallops too far, too fast. The tensions that lead to the whiteboys starting their campaign aren't actually demonstrated; they're all expressed in dialogue, so that the writer can get in and out of the struggle in one scene. James and Judy get across the ocean, but the trip is over almost as soon as it began – which isn't a good thing, as the troubles of the journey are meant to be demonstrated but just become footnotes. Certain events, like Norm Sims's murder, could be gripping if portrayed, and would cement the reality of life in London for the Donnellys – but events like this are skipped over by the camera, relayed only to the audience through dialogue. The events of the first twenty pages should likely be expanded so that page 20 features Will's birth. That way, there's enough time to give the dramatic material – the whiteboys' campaign in Ireland, the horrors of the boat ride over, James's attempt to strike back against the campaign of terror in London – time to breathe.

### **Structure:**

This script tries to capture the grand scope of an immigrant family's life in the New World. After establishing the presence of the Donnellys in London, Ontario, through the first generation of James and Judy, it allows them to step aside in favor of Will and the rest of his generation. Tensions rise between the Donnellys and the surrounding community over the years – sometimes through misunderstanding, sometimes through slander, and sometimes because the Donnellys actually put up a fight – and eventually boil over into bloodshed. It's a complex, knotty tale, weaving together a wide cast of characters, a great tableau of events, and a strong, fiery spirit.

However, while the tale is complex, that doesn't necessarily mean it runs together well. Indeed, one of the main issues of the script is that it seems to want to fit all the events of a miniseries into a two-and-a-half hour movie – and in doing so, it doesn't have much regard for how well those events are presented. Events that could be dynamic if shown properly (like the aforementioned death of Norm Sims) are just relayed after the fact through expository dialogue. There are about a dozen and a half B-plots in this movie, ranging from the Donnelly's carriage business to the theft of livestock to the many affairs of the family members. Some of these plots, like Will's romance

with Maggie, end swiftly and are promptly forgotten. Others, like Will's romance with Nora, aren't given nearly enough time to spread their wings, limiting themselves to about four pages as if the courtship and interaction of these two characters isn't as important as the fact that they're getting married. And some of the material with the most dramatic potential, like Jimmy's death from a burst appendix, is limited to about one page of content. The massacre causes the script to come together on one harrowing act, but once it's over, it falls out of order again. The trial, an event that could get a lot of mileage from seeing how the surviving Donnellys deal with it, instead chooses to focus on the testimony of the culprits and legal opinion from outside observers. It's understandable that the script is trying to cover the vast scope of history, but in trying to cover everything, it doesn't quite capture the depth of the experience. The writer would do better to pick out somewhere between six and nine B-plots to weave into the tale – preferably, ones that focus on Will's role as head of the family, such as his romances, his run-ins with the law, his struggles with the other families of London, and his reaction to the miscarriage of justice that occurs at the end.

### **Character:**

The script works to create a fine balance in the Donnellys. While it shows that they've experienced their share of persecution and distrust in their community, they've often struck back in fiery and sometimes illegal fashions. While they try to maintain the high ground, their efforts to fight back against the tide of public opinion often turns to impulsive and reckless acts that just leave them looking worse in the eyes of their enemies. It's an interesting take on the immigrant experience, as opposed to the usual narratives of newcomers facing a tide of prejudice with saintly fortitude.

But despite the intriguing possibilities of this balancing act, not much is done with the Donnellys, nor the characters around them. There's not much to distinguish them from one another by character or dialogue; while Will's clubfoot will serve well on the screen, it doesn't serve so well on the page when he sounds almost exactly like the rest of his brood. Then there are times they seem to react like consequences are things that apply to other people, like when Robert acts surprised he's being arrested for firing at Evers. The other townspeople don't have much of a chance to stand out, serving as either allies or obstacles to the Donnellys. Some characters do have their standout moments – while many of Father Boyle's defining features are demonstrated through the dialogue of others, rather than his own actions, the audience believes it when he says he didn't mean this to end in bloodshed, as the regret pours off of him in waves. But

like him, many of the characters have their most essential qualities relayed in exposition, thus not giving them a chance to demonstrate said qualities. There needs to be more space for each character to breathe, and more chances for each one to show the specific qualities and drawbacks they bring to the table.

### **Dialogue:**

The dialogue carries the story, but does little else. For the most part, it's exposition, and often rushed exposition at that. As mentioned before, the script relies almost entirely on dialogue to establish conflicts, setting, and tension, and sometimes entirely replaces scenes that the audience could stand to see. Even as exposition, it often fails to add depth to the characters. Characters rarely have a chance to let their dialogue reflect their experiences or viewpoints. Instead, everything about them is often related in exposition, like when Father Boyle first comes to London and a passing farmer tells the audience everything that's important about him. While the dialogue highlights their struggles and attitudes, it does so in a fairly naked fashion, without providing that certain spark or charm that gives each one a distinctive voice. The characters don't need to talk about the events of the story; they need to demonstrate how the events of the story are affecting their outlook, and voice their pleasures and displeasures without necessarily restating events.

### **Setting, Pacing, Tone and Transitions:**

The settings and locations all work.

The pacing tends to gallop forward, often moving forward by years at a time and trying to show everything in the lives of the Donnellys without truly isolating the key incidents. It would be best if the writer picked out a few key threads and built the script around them.

The tone is even and consistent throughout. No notes here.

The transitions are smooth and seamless.

### **General Notes:**

For a historical story, the script is rather unclear on the matter of period. The Black Donnellys massacre occurred in 1880, and the Donnellys emigrated from Ireland somewhere between 1845 and 1846. However, the script starts in 1761 with the formation of the whiteboys, and doesn't clearly specify how much time has passed

between their start as an organization and James and Judy's efforts to get by in Tipperary. Likewise, when the script moves forward in history, it doesn't specify a particular year – scene headings merely have descriptions like "three weeks later," "ten years later," or "some years later." There needs to be a clearer view of each event's place in history.