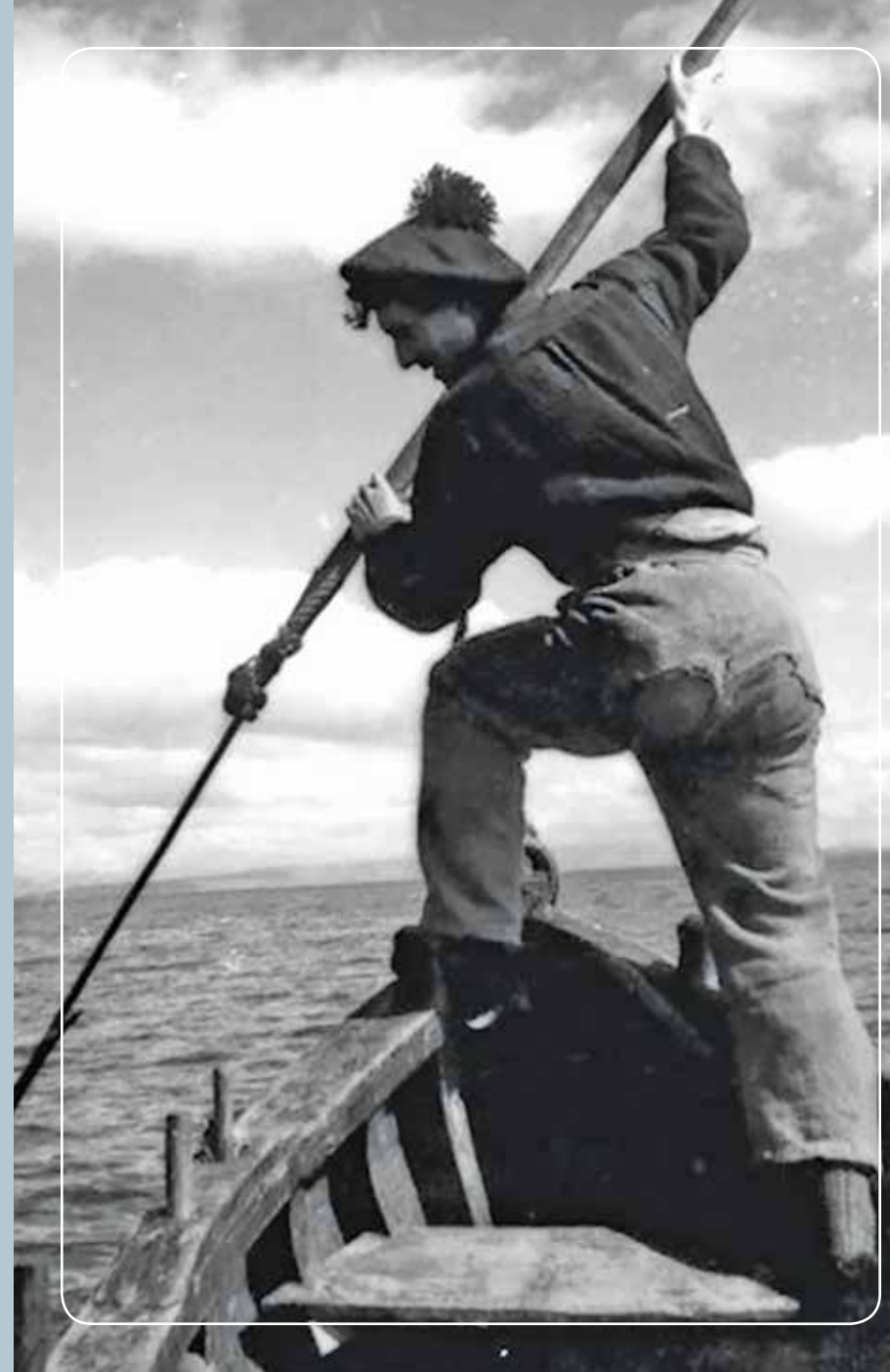
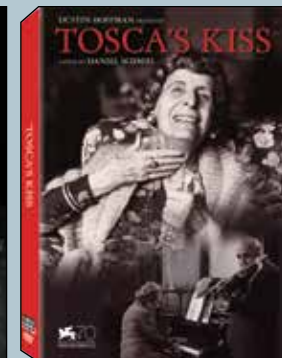
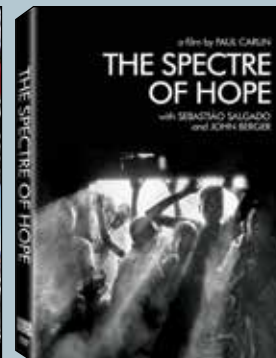
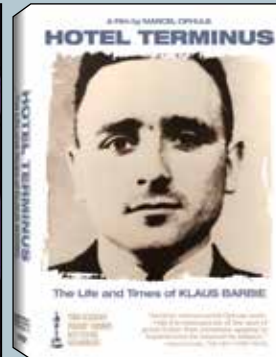
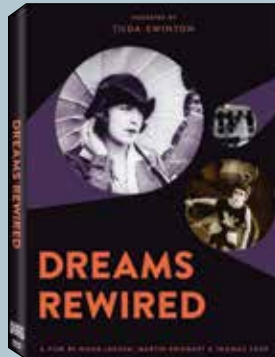
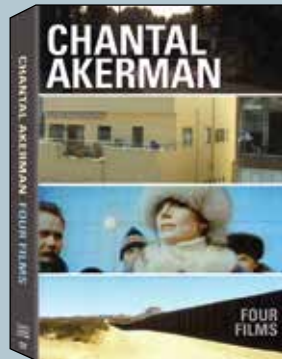
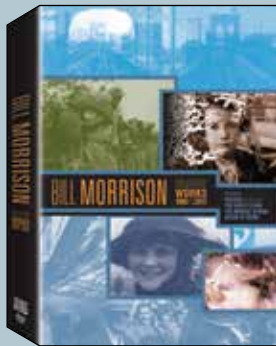
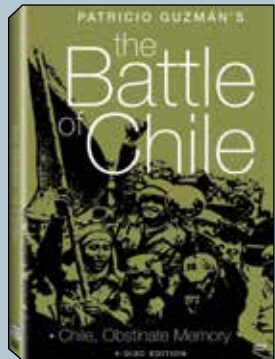



ALSO FROM ICARUS FILMS



A black and white close-up portrait of Robert J. Flaherty. He is wearing a dark, wide-brimmed hat and a light-colored, textured suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark, striped tie. He is looking upwards and to the right with a thoughtful expression. The background is out of focus.

Robert J. Flaherty (1884–1951)

ROBERT FLAHERTY

THE “FATHER” OF THE DOCUMENTARY (FOR GOOD AND ILL)

by Brian Winston

Robert Flaherty—“prospector and cinematographer”—was, his biographer thought, “a giant among men; a sultan of story-tellers.” An admirer wrote that Flaherty was a character who it “does me good to meet. It would do you good, too, merely to see him, a big expansive man with a face florid with enthusiasm and eyes clear as the Northern ice on which he had spent so much of his time exploring.” But others, especially after his death in 1951, would take another view and see him as less florid than fraudulent: an exploitative, insensitive romantic bringing back, from the far corners of the earth, footage that stereotyped and misrepresented the lives of those he filmed. Few reputations in the cinema’s first century have provoked such contradictory opinions; few have suffered such ups and downs. But one thing is very clear: No history of the cinema can be written without him. And there can be no better introduction to documentary—what it is, what its power and weaknesses are—than his work.

Robert Flaherty is conventionally considered the “father” of documentary film. He was, in fact, far from being the first to use film of “real” people (that is, non-professional “actors”) going about their business. What he did—his breakthrough—was to understand that a filmmaker could mould shapeless everyday actuality into fact-based engaging stories, an alternative to fictional dramas. And it is that—a form of cinema situated between fact (say, newsreels) and fiction (say, Hollywood)—which marks the documentary as being different from either. Flaherty’s first film, *Nanook of the North*, shot in what is now the self-governing Canadian Arctic territory of Nunavut in 1920–21, makes fair claim to be the cinema’s first recognizable documentary in this sense, causing a sensation and becoming a commercial triumph.

For months, he had filmed typical scenes of Inuit life or reconstructions of events he had been told about by them. Synchronized sound had yet to be introduced, so silent cinema title cards explain the sequences. All are coherent, whether just a few shots or more extended and complex. However, for the first third or so of the film's 75-minute duration, there is no overarching narrative. Then, the breakthrough: although he had not shot with a story in mind, Flaherty, at his editing bench, assembled from materials he had to hand a tale of a hunting trip in the frozen wilderness that nearly ended in disaster. The story of the trip presented in the film was created in the editing. It emerged from the footage. This was no mean trick. In effect, Flaherty—a brilliant cinematographer blessed with an “innocent eye”—as a film-editor turned the journalistic, ethnographic and scientific use of the factual cinema into an artistic endeavour of a piece with fiction.

Nanook's box-office success ensured Hollywood (Paramount) came calling, but *Moana*, the film they sent him to make in Samoa, had nowhere near the same reception. The rather accidental nature of the *Nanook* breakthrough became apparent. Equally beautifully shot, indigenous life in the South Pacific lacked the inherent drama of the Inuit's everyday struggle for survival and Flaherty failed to find an equivalent to that. Through 1923 and 1924, he filmed and filmed and filmed—240,000 feet—but in vain. No clear narrative line emerged. A great cinematographer though he was, and although he was to write, for instance, a professional (albeit unproduced) melodrama about the indigenous people of the American High Sierra for Fox, scripts were never Flaherty's strong suit. When filming, he often did not even provide himself with the reverse angle shots and cutaways that scripts required to create the Hollywood grammar of time and space. But then he still saw himself in the role which had first brought him to the Arctic—a prospector looking for a lucky strike. With *Moana*, he did not find it. In the year of editing that followed, nothing compelling emerged. His effort was cut in half by the studio and released to poor box-office reception.

In Flaherty's career, a pattern soon developed: idea after idea, project after project were ignored or frustrated. With the other two feature documentaries, as well as the half dozen or so shorts that he produced over the next three decades, he was always slow and over-budget. Collaborations ended badly and commissions more than once had to be completed by other hands. Nevertheless, he still cut a considerable figure in the world and, supported by his wife's money (he was wed to a mining executive's daughter), Flaherty, as great a self-promoter as he was a cinematographer, grew into the man “it does you good to meet.” His failings were overlooked and he was seen by many as a major, if somewhat erratic, artist; a



Nanook of the North (1922)

martyred figure, a genius pulled down by the crass blindness of the studios. He returned the compliment describing working in Hollywood as being “like sailing over a sewer in a glass-bottomed boat.”

The third feature-length documentary, *Man of Aran*, shot on the offshore islands in Galway Bay, was backed by a British production company. It, too, was to take two years (1932–34) and cost more than double the original budget (albeit only a modest £25,000 initially). The result, though, was received as a return to form, winning the Mussolini Cup at the 1934 Venice Film Festival. The government of the newly independent Irish Republic thought it perfectly displayed “the indomitability of the Irish peasant spirit.” Again, though, others were less sure.

Flaherty was born in 1884, and he was nearly 30 when he began filming the Arctic. He was a child of his time, a late Victorian trained in the quintessential exploitative, imperial business of mining. He did not rise above the condescensions of race and class, comporting himself like a colonial nabob in the far-flung corners in which he found himself filming. He was always ready to reconstruct what he had learned before travelling or what he was told when he arrived. Often, this knowledge was



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Similarly, Flaherty raises the central question of documentary ethics. He found a climax for *Man of Aran*, a frail curragh battling a roiling sea in clear danger of capsizing. But he did not chance upon this. He set it up, putting lives at risk by getting men, for £5 each, to put to sea. (£5 was a fortune in the near moneyless, depressed conditions of the times, and the offer can be seen as improper pressure to obtain consent.) As with the creative moulding of actuality footage, as with the use of witnessed reconstruction as well as observational footage, so with ethics... It can all be traced to Flaherty.

Nevertheless, complaints about fakery and misrepresentation, for all that they can be sustained, are often overstated. The tattooing in *Moana* might have been arranged for Flaherty, but tattooing is an important part of Samoan culture and is preserved and practiced into the present. And against the supposed damage caused by misrepresentations to the audience (always a very difficult thing to demonstrate and quantify), positives can also be noted, most dramatically on Àran. It is because of *Man of Aran*, the activist documentary filmmaker George Stoney felt, that Àran thrives today as a tourist destination. Flaherty literally put it on the map, leaving his mark on what he filmed, just as documentarists, positively or negatively, still do.

Time was moving on, and Flaherty, the genius, was giving way to Flaherty, the fraud. He became classed as an ethnographer, a title he never claimed, and in the post-imperial world that emerged after the Second World War, ethnography—“the eldest daughter of colonialism,” as Jean Rouch called it—was ever less respectable. Likewise, with his reputation as a genius frustrated by the evils of Hollywood, Hollywood was now being celebrated in critical and scholarly circles as a legitimate artistic powerhouse. It became unacceptably elitist to dismiss the popular, and the studio “suits” were no longer always the villains getting in the way of a Flaherty (or, come to that, that other “great man” Orson Welles). Now the studios were held to be the enablers of some of the greatest cinema ever made.

Man of Aran was followed by another long fallow period with no major work completed and many aborted projects. His fourth feature had to wait until after the war. When it came, *Louisiana Story* (1946–48) was as well-received as *Man of Aran*. It secured an Oscar nomination and was listed in the first *Sight and Sound* poll of the greatest films ever made. But it, too, has suffered from changing circumstances. In Flaherty’s eyes, Standard Oil’s (Esso’s) development of an oilfield in the Bayou of Louisiana enhanced a beautiful environment with the majesty of new oil rigs, while still sustaining the local Francophone Cajun culture. This extremely unlikely tale, as we now see it, was paid for by Esso. Before the war, government or industrial funding for factual films was regarded as a purer source of revenue than were the

of events long past, so the picture he gives is not of the present. In *Nanook*, for example, he reconstructed incidents he had heard about a decade earlier about the decade before that. For *Moana*, it was a tattooing ceremony specially arranged for the filming. In *Man of Aran*, he had read about shark hunting to make oil, so he got the islanders do this. They had not done so for a generation.

His sympathy for the people he filmed took the form of a paternalistic and stereotyping romantic blindness. In the name of a supposed primitive innocence, *Nanook* downplays the Inuits’ role as part of the west’s fashion industry and utterly conceals the fact that they processed his film for him and generally kept him alive. In Samoa, there is no hint of the political stirrings of the people, then ruled by New Zealand, and on Àran, he avoided the harsh realities of absentee landlords and oppressive religion. The documentary scholar Bill Nichols has explained documentary as being a story about the world (in contrast to fiction film which is a story about a world). Flaherty, though, was not telling the story of the world—an objective truth—but such a story (his) about it.



Louisiana Story
(1948)

corruptions of the box-office. After, it was held to be at least as corrupting. For all the praises it won at the time, rising environmental awareness has ensured that *Louisiana Story* is now received as a crass and distorting picture of ecological abuse.

Sensitivities—towards First Nations, commercial cinema, the environment—were changed. Flaherty's reputation as a genius, a celebrant of threatened and vanishing ways of life, a martyr to the studio system, did not long survive after his death. He soon came to be seen as unprofessional and self-indulgent, a romantic with a scant respect for the authenticity of what he filmed, and an arch-imperialist.

But this is to throw the baby out with the bath water. The fecundity of what Robert Flaherty did at his editing bench with the footage he had of the Inuit has seldom been matched. This is the rock upon which documentary was founded, and it is Flaherty who first built a film on it. Flaherty not only showed us all of documentary's strengths (its ability to "show us life," as Dziga Vertov had it, and preserve memory), he also laid out documentary's dangers (the ease with which it can misrepresent and the negative impact it can have on those it films).

Wherever the balance is drawn, though, documentary is still his legacy. Very few filmmakers can claim, for good or ill, greater influence.



ROBERT J. FLAHERTY FILMOGRAPHY

Nanook of the North (1922)

The Pottery Maker (1925), short documentary

Moana (1926)

The Twenty-Four Dollar Island (1927), short documentary of New York City

White Shadows in the South Seas (1928)

Acoma the Sky City (1929; unfinished)

Tabu (1931), co-written with F. W. Murnau

Industrial Britain (1931), co-directed with John Grierson

Man of Aran (1934)

Oidhche Sheanchais (A Night of Storytelling) (1935)

Elephant Boy (1937), co-directed with Zoltan Korda

The Land (1942), 45-minute documentary made for the U.S. Department of Agriculture

Louisiana Story (1948)

The Titan: Story of Michelangelo (1950)

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

MAC DARA Ó CURRAIDHÍN is an award-winning producer and director, and sometimes researcher, writer and editor. He lives in An Spidéal, on the eastern fringes of the the Connamara Gaeltacht and is a native speaker of the Irish language. He has made many arts, historical and current affairs documentaries, including “Synge and the Western World,” profiles of poets Liam O’Flaherty, and Máirtín O Diréain and “Poteen Making.” *A Boatload Of Wild Irishmen* is his first feature length documentary.

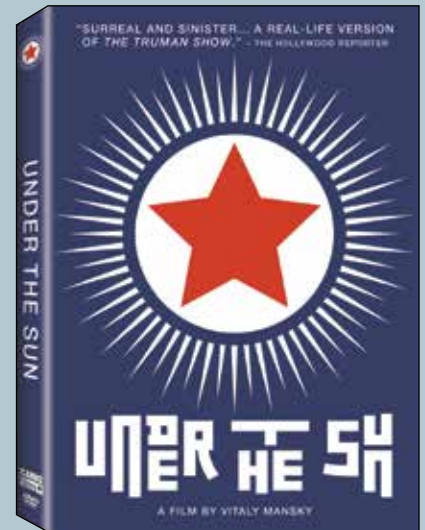
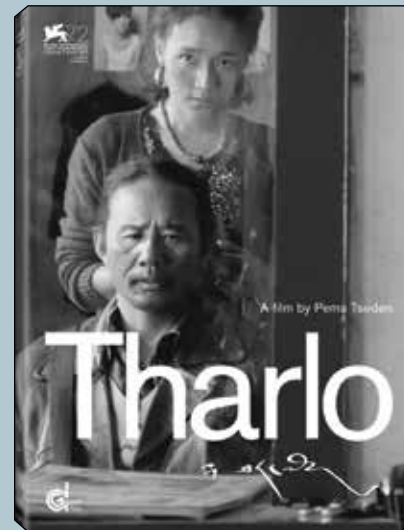
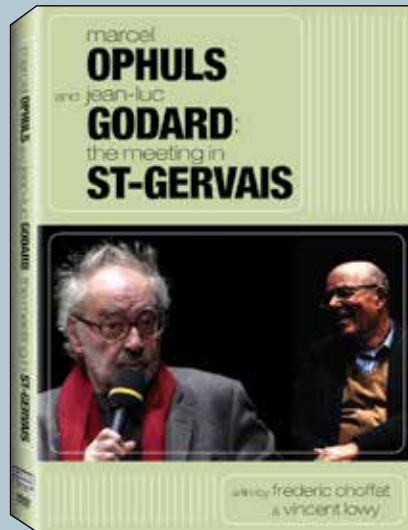
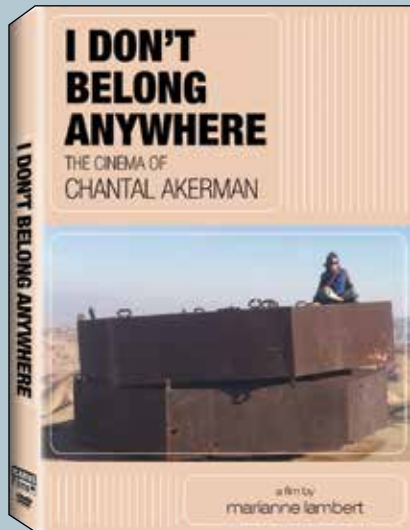
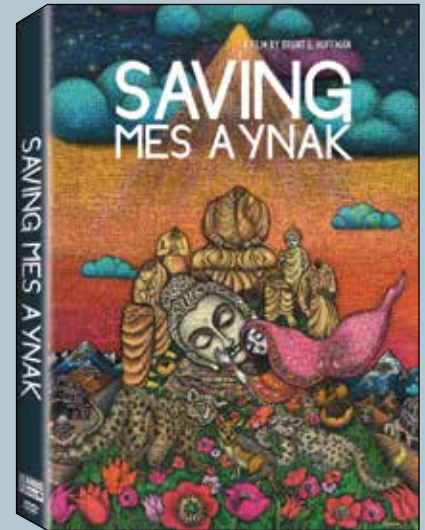
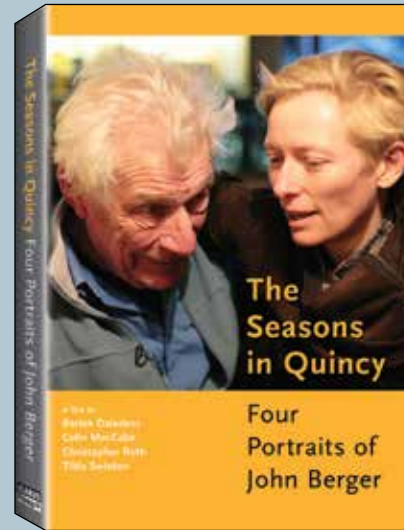
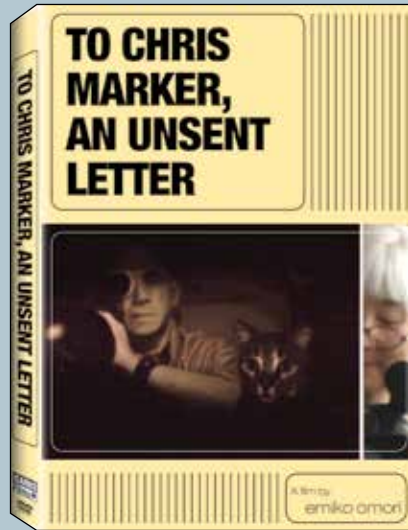
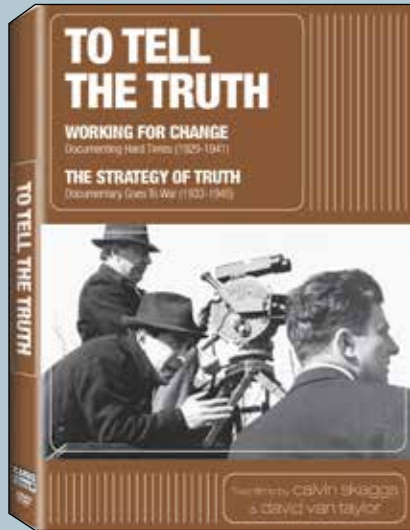
BRIAN WINSTON currently holds the Lincoln Professorship at the University of Lincoln. He started his career in 1963 on Granada TV’s long-running news documentary film series *World in Action*. In 1985, he won an Emmy for scriptwriting an episode of the documentary series, ‘Out of the Ashes,’ Episode 8 of *Heritage: Civilisation and the Jews 1985*. Winston has taught at, among other places, New York University Film School and the UK National Film School. He latest books on documentary are *The Documentary Film Book* (BFI, 2013) and *The Act of Documenting: Documentary Film in the 21st Century* (with Gail Vanstone & Chi Wang: BFI, 2017).

CHRIS HAINSTOCK is a film editor and senior lecturer in Media and Audio Production at the University of Lincoln. He worked for BBC Television for 25 years and began as a sound editor, moving to film editing, on a wide range of Arts and Science documentaries, and many popular drama series and features working with a vast array of producers and directors. As well as teaching, Chris still works on a range of sound design, editing and post-production projects. He was elected to the Guild of British Film and Television Editors (UK) in 2010 in recognition of his craft.

LIST OF PRINCIPAL CREDITS

Sound Recordists:	Arion Doerr, Chris Barker, Michael O’Donoghue, Nick Treacy, Richard Coles
Rostrum Photography:	Nico Vermuelan
Animation:	Steve Hatton & Neil Baker, Electric Egg
Music:	Steve McGrath
Sound Engineer:	Ciaran Mulligan
Production Assistant:	Kay Marriott
Post Production Assistant:	Ash Knight
Location Fixers:	Lisa Taouma, Lucy Tulugarjuk
Guides:	Mana Puni, Jason Kunuk
Translations:	Peadar Ó Cualáin, Pita Taouma, Rhoda Kayakjuakvt
Subtitles:	Europus
Facilities:	Bright Spark Studios, Electric Egg, John Talbot Lime Street Sound (Ireland), Mikey O Flatharta Lincoln School of Film and Media, University of Lincoln (UK)
Production:	A Léirithe le Mac Dara Ó Curraidhín Production in association with Bright Spark Studios and Minerva Productions, University of Lincoln
Director:	Mac Dara Ó Curraidhín
Written by:	Brian Winston
Editors:	Chris Hainstock, Mikey Flaherty
Cinematography:	Alan Wilson, Andy Lee, Chuck Fishbein, Ronán Fox, Warwick Wrigley
Music:	Steve McGrath
Producer:	Mac Dara Ó Curraidhín
Associate Producers:	Brian Winston, Brian Deptford
Executive Producers:	Alan Maher - Irish Film Board, Mícheál Ó Meallaigh TG4, Suzanne Alizart - EM Media

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