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## **“The Media of Modernity: film and new media in the Highlands & Islands 1946-1971: introduction”**

Ian Goode, Sarah Neely, Callum Brown and Ealasaid Munro<sup>1</sup>

Between 1946 and 1971, the Highlands and Islands Film Guild (HIFG) sent driver/projectionists in vans, each equipped with a projector and cans of film, to tour most parts of the crofting counties, bringing to the more isolated, less urban communities a fortnightly film show staged in village halls, former military Nissen huts or schools. Subsidised by the Scottish Education Department, this was a service that for many isolated, relatively poor and poorly-resourced communities brought their first encounter with the modern electric media. What happened?

The *Major Minor Cinema: Highlands and Islands Film Guild 1946-71* project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), has been an innovative study of the impact of cinema on the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, based at University of Glasgow and University of Stirling.<sup>2</sup> Operating between 2016 and 2019, it has been designed from the outset to be interdisciplinary in nature. It has been led by Goode as a researcher interested in the comparative impact of electric media in rural society. The second group member, co-investigator Neely, has come from a creative arts background, interested in the impact of cinema in both film and in other media, and the generation of contemporary, legacy and – through memory – creative impulses in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Scotland. The third group member, Brown, is an historian with a specialism in religion, secularisation and popular culture, bringing an interest in the way film was received in communities in which conservative

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<sup>1</sup> The organising editor of the collection of articles was Callum Brown, and principal author of this introduction.

<sup>2</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge the generous support of AHRC for this project. Thanks go to the members of the Project Advisory Committee.

religiosity was very strong. The fourth member, Munro, joined the group at Glasgow as the research assistant, before moving to University of Stirling and then OFCOM. She brought a fourth dimension – that of social geography, with a special interest in the Highlands and the interaction of film with the politics of the Gaeltacht. With the help of Roslyn Chapman and Rebecca Dunbar as research assistants in the later stages of the project, and David Wilson as technical and web support, this was a large team, joined by 14 transcribers who undertook the task of turning over 100 hours of tape into digitised text files.<sup>3</sup>

The result is a varied, multi-disciplinary exploration of Britain's geographically largest, most isolated and, for much of the modern era, poorest region, dominated by poor-quality agriculture and fishing. It also contained a large linguistic minority, the Gaels, and was dominated in the mid twentieth century by a conservative Christian religious outlook, mostly Protestant but in some areas Roman Catholic. Accumulatively, these features make the Highlands and Islands one of the most interesting regions for study within any European nation. And the Film Guild, pioneering a relatively large though low-cost system for delivering regular film shows comprehensively across remote rural areas and islands, offers an excellent opportunity for observing and interrogating the impacts of cinema – the first electric media in much of the Highland zone – upon a largely non-urban and non-cosmopolitan population.

This article contextualises the operations of the Film Guild. It will explain the methods used, including its large-scale oral history interviewing across the region, and its archival researching in Film Guild, Scottish Office, newspapers and local archives.

### The academic context

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<sup>3</sup> The audio and transcript files, together with other materiel collected by the Project, will be deposited in various locations – including at an enduring website, and local archives in the Highlands and Islands.

This is the first major academic and historical study of rural society, film and other electric media in the mid twentieth century. The history of the media and society in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s is still, in many ways, in its infancy. From the point of view of the social and cultural historian, the greatest emphasis by far has been in institutional histories – especially of the BBC<sup>4</sup> - and in the history of censorship in stage,<sup>5</sup> screen<sup>6</sup> and music.<sup>7</sup> Wider range studies of the arts, culture and society have been strongly focussed on London and the arts' challenge to religious conservatism,<sup>8</sup> whilst more recent work has done much to re-emphasise the focus on culture, sexuality and the cosmopolitan capital.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, some of the same attributes apply to the treatment of the arts and media in Scotland. Beyond in-house history of the BBC, the most impressive study of culture change, conservatism and religion in late modernity has been Angela Bartie's book on the Edinburgh Festivals between 1947 and 1968, which emphasised the conservative-liberal struggle within the annual official and fringe festivals which culminated in the late 1960s with a victory for the liberal arts.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom; volume IV Sound and Vision* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979); K.M. Wolfe, *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: the Politics of Broadcast Religion* (London, SCM Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Aldgate, *Censorship and the Permissive Society: British Cinema and Theatre 1955-1965* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1995); Richard Findlater, *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain* (London, Panther, 1967); Nicholas De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* (London, Methuen, 2001); Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama 1900-1968: Volume Three: The Fifties* (Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2011) and *ibid, Volume 4 - The Sixties* (Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2014); Dominic Shellard and Steve Nicholson with Miriam Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain regrets: a history of British theatre censorship* (London, British Library, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925* (London, Routledge, 1988); Guy Phelps, *Film Censorship* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1975); James C Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (London, Croom Helm, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Cloonan, *Banned!: Censorship of Popular Music in Britain, 1967-92* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Notable in the impressive series of books by Robert Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life on London, 1939-45* (London, Quartet, 1979); *idem, Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75* (London, Methuen, 1986); *idem, In Anger, Culture in the Cold War, 1945-60* (London, Methuen, 1988); *idem, Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940* (London, Methuen, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2010); and Judith Walkowitz, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Angela Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals: Culture and Society in Post-war Britain* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

If media history has tended to the metropolitan focus, and has been weak in dealing with rural societies in Britain, it has been vital for the investigators to take note of the academic approaches to the cultural history of the Highlands and Islands in the mid twentieth century. These have tended to concentrate much on the mix of conservative religion and civil society, Gaelic language, crofting, poverty and geographical isolation. A vital starting point has been the in-period social issues of culture and society, much of it undertaken from ethnographic, sociological and anthropological standpoints, and we relate our findings to relevant literature in this collection. But it is important for us to note here the emphasis upon the ‘otherness’ of Highland and Islands’ society, ranging from Erving Goffman’s hugely influential study in Shetland of the performative nature of face-to-face meeting, especially between islanders and incomers,<sup>11</sup> through to the wide range of ethnographic studies of the distinctive features of crofting society in the Gaeltacht.<sup>12</sup> It might admit of dispute, but, though more subdued now than some decades ago, the Highlands and Islands remain most prone to being treated as culturally disjoined in both governance and in everyday life from the experience of the rest of mainland Britain.

Into this academic scissors’ action upon the mid twentieth-century Highland zone – of media naïveté on the one hand, and laboratory of choice for ethnographic peculiarity on the other – the present group of scholars has ventured.

### The Film and TV Approach

The Highlands and Islands Film Guild was a non-commercial institution that was formed in 1946 following a proposal by the Scottish Educational

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<sup>11</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, Anchor, 1959 (orig. 1956)).

<sup>12</sup> F. Fraser Darling, *West Highland Survey: An Essay in Human Ecology* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1955); Judith Ennew, *The Western Isles Today* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980); Susan Parman, *Scottish Crofters: A Historical Ethnography of a Celtic Village* (Belmont, CA, Thomson Wadsworth, 2005 [1990]); Fraser Macdonald, ‘Scenes of Ecclesiastical Theatre in the Free Church of Scotland’, *Northern Scotland* vol. 20 (2000), pp. 125–48. Leading similar studies of crofting communities outside Lewis include Sharon Macdonald, *Reimagining Culture: Histories, Identities and the Gaelic Renaissance* (Oxford, Berg, 1997).

Organisation Society (SAOS) to provide mobile and static film shows for the crofting counties, in an attempt to improve facilities and counter depopulation. It continued a pre-war initiative of the Scottish Film Council to make non-commercial cinema available to rural areas through the substandard gauge of 16mm, which continued during World War II via the Ministry of Information and the Evacuation Film Scheme. The Film Guild was proposed to improve leisure facilities for remote communities, forming part of wider economic and cultural initiatives to bolster community activity, cohesion and recreation. It is a widely remembered but still unwritten part of Scottish cinema history, occupying a period stretching from before the advent of television and extending into its early penetration into these areas. The service was delivered by travelling operators with the assistance of local communities in spaces such as village or school halls. Localised exhibition projection in spaces shared by the operators, projector and audience generated a unique kind of cinema-going experience.

The Guild was managed by an executive committee and a larger council. Funding during its early years came from an initial grant of £2500 from the Carnegie UK Trust to establish the first two units, plus £5500 from the Scottish Education Department, and annual sums from each of the county education authorities who received shows in their area. As a registered charity the institution was also able to receive voluntary donations. The Film Guild eventually folded in 1971 following a long period of decline that began in the mid-1950s. Television was a factor in the decline though the delayed and problematic arrival of television in the Highlands and Islands also helped the Guild to endure through the 1960s. Other contributing factors were greater access to transport and other forms of leisure, and the relative discomfort of the halls that accommodated the shows.

For the film and TV scholar like Goode, the viewpoint of approach can be summarised as a concern with the key questions of: i) exactly what sort of

cinema is made possible by the more portable and economical apparatus of 16mm that had expanded significantly through the 1930s and the Second World War?; and ii) how can this distinctive cinema with its particular mode of exhibition in small, communal and improvised spaces be seen as specifically rural? How might this cinema and its particular social geography and mode of exhibition, offer a contrasting configuration of modernity to those associated with the urban experience of cinema?

Goode led with archival research and oral history interviews with members of the audience and the former driver/projectionists/operators and their families. This enabled combining an evaluation of the management of the institution and its policies throughout the different phases of its existence, with the experience of the audience and operators at the different locations and communities served. Interviews were recorded throughout a series of case studies at Inverness and the surrounding area, Shetland, Outer Hebrides and Orkney. In addition interviews were carried out with audience members who had left the Highlands and Islands for a life further south in Scotland, England or further afield in Canada. The opportunity of working closely with a geographer during archival research and fieldwork was particularly fruitful in bringing a more geographically-informed and expanded perspective to bear on cinema history than would have been possible working as a single researcher on the topic, as Goode had prior to the AHRC award.

As a film and television studies scholar Goode's approach was motivated by the desire to bring to light the distinctive nature of the Film Guild as a form of cinema, following a relatively recent turn in film studies that Annette Kuhn described as comprising of 'a concatenation of sub disciplines, in which a focus on the historical, the local and the specific flourishes and any ambitions to create a totalizing theory are eschewed'.<sup>13</sup> The concentration on the smaller, the local, and the useful that had expanded what film studies, or more

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<sup>13</sup> Annette Kuhn, 'Screen and Screen theorising today', *Screen*, Vol 50, Iss 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 1–12 at p.5.

recently new cinema history, represented as a field, could in this project take centre stage. Bringing together a series of case studies, visiting a multiplicity of peripheries with their own centres, and looking across what might otherwise be thought of as small, local and peripheral, and making an object of research that represented much more than this, not least through the different approaches that the project team would bring to it. This project offered the opportunity to go beyond the orthodoxy of scrutinising individual films closely, by examining and historicising a mode of exhibition and an experience of cinema that was made possible, during a period of British cinema history that witnessed the peak of cinema attendance and the beginning of its decline and the arrival of broadcast television.

Above it is the so called non-theatrical and rural situation of the cinema made possible by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild that has underpinned this research. The focus of study can be summarised as follows: watching a film show in a communal village hall where the space was shared with the operator and the machinery of projection, offered an experience of cinema and a mode of exhibition using the smaller, underwritten gauge of 16mm, that was not only distinctive, but deserves more and closer attention than has so far been granted to it.<sup>14</sup>

### Creative Arts

Inspired by the pilot study's surprising discovery of a number of creative works written by cinema-goers in response to Film Guild screenings from the period of research, the project adopted creative writing as a methodology, led by Neely, in order to examine the relationship between storytelling, memory and oral histories.

A series of creative writing and storytelling workshops were held at various festivals throughout the Highlands and Islands, including Orkney's

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, *Useful Cinema* (London, 2011).



Storytelling Festival, the Hebridean Celtic Festival in Lewis and Harris, Shetland's Screenplay festival and the Inverness Film Festival.

The half-day writing workshops were delivered by Neely with writer, Nalini Paul, and were designed to stimulate creative responses in relation to the memories of cinema-going in rural communities. A variety of workshop exercises encouraged participants to focus on a wide range of aspects of the cinema-going experience, from films themselves to the social aspects of the, including the journey to the cinema and a consideration of exhibition spaces. The writing workshops involved a combination of approaches, from asking participants to draw from their own experiences of cinema going, to more focused exercises responding to selected archival materials relating to the activities of the Guild in that area or more general aspects of the cinema-going experience. The workshop in Inverness was held the day after the project's public screening event reacting a Highlands and Islands Film Guild programme typical of the period. Taking advantage of the presence of a 16mm projector in the workshop space, the workshop included an activity asking participants to respond to the phenomenological properties of watching and listening to a 16mm film being projected. For the workshop in Orkney, held as part of the Orkney Storytelling Festival, festival director, Tom Muir began the workshop by delivering a short storytelling session on the theme of cinema-going in Orkney. The storytelling focus of this workshop helped to develop a more detailed consideration of the relationship between the reception of cinema in the Highlands and Islands and its storytelling traditions, a topic which is the focus of one of the articles included in this issue.

The methodological approach of the creative writing strand of the project, more suggestive rather than empirical, enabled a consideration of the role of the imagination in relation to memory and the cinema-going experience. It addressed questions of how stories are told within both personal and academic contexts. Furthermore, it questioned what we do with stories and what role

micro-histories can play in bringing to life and crystalising an understanding of the bigger histories. The creative treatment of memory affords some autonomy from the responsibilities of History and treats its fallibility as evidence of an opportunity to demonstrate the expressive possibilities of cinema experience in a rural setting where the oral tradition is historically embedded.

In addition to the workshops, the primary outcomes of the creative writing strand of the project included an edited anthology of creative writing on the theme of memories of cinema-going. The anthology included works from five commissioned writers from the Highlands and Islands (Alison Miller, Christie Williamson, Aonghas MacNeacail, Christine De Luca and Kevin MacNeil), as well as new works solicited through a writing competition, organised in collaboration with *Gutter* magazine. The final book, published by Cranachan, a publisher based in Lewis, contains contributions reflecting a wide-range of cinema going experiences, from distant childhood memories to the very recent, and across different generations and geographical contexts, both urban and rural.

### Religious and Cultural History

The Highlands, Hebrides and, to an extent, the Northern Isles have featured prominently in the treatment of religion and culture in not merely British but western European social history. Along with Northern Ireland, this was an area which until the 1990s was widely regarded by sociologists and historians as being ‘firm in the faith’, and this penchant for conservative Christian culture combined with distinctive Gaelic language and culture in the Highlands and Hebrides was held to both explicate and symbolize the differences between this zone and the rest of not just Scotland but Britain.<sup>15</sup> Yet, recent decades have witnessed convergence of the Highland zone with the rest of Scottish and British society; despite strenuous efforts to the contrary, Gaelic-speaking has

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<sup>15</sup> Steve Bruce, *Firm in the Faith* (London, Ashgate, 1984).

declined from just shy of a quarter of Scottish population in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to 3 per cent in 1931, 1.9 per cent in 1951 and 1.1 per cent in 2011<sup>16</sup> - the magnitude of the mid-twentieth-century drop coinciding with the cultural challenges of wartime influx and native outflow for military service. In the 1970s, Gaelic speaking for main Sunday church services virtually ended on the west coast of Highlands, whilst on the Western Isles this occurred in the 2000s. Church affiliation was still strong, at around 35 per cent of population into the 2000s, but has since shown significant decline, accompanied by a distinct challenge to conservative religious alignment in some parts of civil society. But one of the things we wished to do on this project was to assess just how much the evidence of high religiosity between the 1940s and the 1980s actually represented the form of cultural suppression imagined in so much of external commentary. In this regard, the undertaking of widespread oral history interviewing – over 100 people – was in large measure to see how the media of film, radio and television (as well as print media) fitted in with the narrative of imagined rigidities of conservative society in the 1945 to 1970 period, or whether there was to be found greater nuance about oppression, negotiation and resistance in individuals’ memories of exposure to media, sport and youth culture.

In this regard, some of the project’s research has already appeared in a study of the comparative popular and religious culture of British in the mid twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> The Isle of Lewis was used as one of five local case studies – the others being of London, Blackpool, Sheffield and Glasgow – to explore the ways in which the licensing system reflected struggle between conservative culture and liberalising forces between 1945 and 1980. This study brought out, firstly, how London did not lead the cultural liberalising of Britain, as much of

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<sup>16</sup> Data from the tabulation of census data at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish\\_Gaelic#Number\\_of\\_speakers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_Gaelic#Number_of_speakers) accessed 12 July 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Callum Brown, *The Battle for Christian Britain: Sex, Humanists and Secularisation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019).

the existing literature contends, especially in relation to religion, sex in the media and in organised leisure; secondly, it showed that Lewis was remarkably liberal in licensing in the 1940s and 1950s, and showed evidence of considerable advanced attitudes (notably in a high illegitimacy ratio in the 1950s), but that this – unusually – gave way in the mid 1970s to a distinct hardening of conservative mores in civil society and policing, partly brought on by local government re-organisation in 1976 that ended the role of Inverness-shire and Ross and Cromarty in Hebridean government. One of the morals of that new research narrative is that there was no uniform liberalising trajectory to media change in mid-century Britain.

So, part of the concern for the cultural and religious historian in this project is to see it as making the historical narrative of the Highland zone, and of Scotland as a whole, more complex. Certainly, the Film Guild was perceived by all we interviewed – both liberal and conservative in their social and religious views – as being a force for liberalising. It gave rise to struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which we examine in the last article in this collection. But one of the other narratives we found was that the Film Guild's role was educative as well as entertaining, providing a vision on the world that was hard to access in poorly-equipped Highland schools, libraries and newspaper shops. As a result, in the first article that follows we look at the excitement, joy and wonder that could be aroused by a scratchy film on a noisy projector shown in a draughty village hall on a cold winter's night in the Highlands in the 1950s.

### Social Geography

The Research Associate on the project Munro accompanied Goode when conducting the bulk of the field research. Having been brought up in the small, extremely religious community of Struan, on Skye's West coast, Munro was in an excellent position to negotiate access to individuals and communities throughout the Islands, drawing on a network of personal and professional

contacts who were able to vouch for her and the team. This proved invaluable given the initial reluctance of many people to speak to a team of academic researchers. As Hunter notes in the first article of this issue, we can identify a lack of self-confidence on the part of many Highland communities which seemed to be reflected in much of our initial correspondence with potential interviewees. Many people we contacted - initially at least - felt they had nothing of value to impart: our rich oral history testimony, which we draw on at length in the articles that follow, demonstrates otherwise. A further issue with accessing potential respondents, which was overcome in part by having a 'local' point of contact within the team, is the tendency towards 'over saturation' in oral history research on the Highlands, particularly given that this is an area of Scotland that has a strong, professionalised network of local history societies. Because Munro brought to the team a tacit, embedded knowledge of Island culture, she was able to elicit some extremely rich and nuanced testimony from respondents in collaboration with Goode, in part by being able to express familiarity with key actors, events, communities, and spaces.

Her approach to the research was of course also influenced by her training as a geographer: Munro's previous work has made forays into several sub-fields of geography, notably social, cultural, and historical geographies. Her concern across the life of the project was with the cultural and historical geographies of the Guild cinema, and the embodied experience of cinemagoing in this context. For Munro, her treatment of the empirical material collected as part of the project fits within cultural geography's mission to expand our definition of 'the social'. As Lorimer writes, for cultural geographers seeking to make sense of how 'the social' is lived, remembered, and made sense of, 'the focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements [...] affective

intensities, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions'.<sup>18</sup> For Munro, then, Film Guild shows were exceptional – though not entirely unique – spaces of social interaction within rural communities at this time. By bringing film to communities *in situ*, the Guild enabled the creation of densely woven, relational spaces where tensions between the global and the local, the metropolitan and the rural, and the traditional versus the modern found expression. As such, Munro's work on the Guild contributes to a body of scholarship that traces how media can enable new forms of sociality in specific spatial and historical contexts.

In this special issue, Munro collaborated with Brown to interview Jim Hunter about his childhood growing up in Duror, and to synthesise Hunter's vision of the 'place' of the Guild with the testimony of other respondents, in a bid to make sense of the broader role that the Guild played in the recent history of the Highlands and Islands. Munro and Brown also worked together to explore the intersections in respondents' recollections of faith and film, with Munro helping to draw out the fine-grained differences in how individuals remembered their families' and communities' attitudes towards the Film Guild and the Playhouse Cinema in Stornoway. The collaboration between a historian and a cultural geographer on this issue allows us to paint an empirically informed, rich and highly localised picture of individuals' everyday negotiations vis-à-vis the new experiences and cultural products that arose from the technological advances of the 1950s and 60s, whilst also theoretically locating the churches' diverse responses to 'modern' media as part of a broader evolution of the role faith played in Highland communities at this time.

### The articles

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<sup>18</sup> Lorimer, H. (2005). Cultural geography: the busyness of being 'more-than-representational'. *Progress in human geography*, 29(1), 83-94.

There will be a diversity of outputs from the project as a whole, but this collection is intended to illustrate key themes and different approaches. Diverse methods have been used in relation to oral history interviews – from group meetings to one-to-one interviews. In reflection of this, the articles that follow take different forms, but share some overlapping concerns. One is to do with narration, narratives, memory and community; a second is to do with film's use to challenge perceived social decline in the mid twentieth century.

In the first contribution, Brown and Munro use their interview with Jim Hunter to isolate a range of narratives in the recollection of film in the Highlands, and turn to sample observations from other respondents to elaborate some of the diversities in recalling media, modernity and community. In the second article, Goode explores the management of the Film Guild and its contest, if you will, with the arriving media of radio and especially television in the crofting counties in the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrating that film was by no means an inferior partner to the others. The next contribution from Neely challenges the oft-accepted notion that modern media undermined traditional culture in the Highlands and Islands; ranging across testimonies and group art events, she shows how film screening was very much not a destroyer of customary storytelling and its community role amongst the indigenous groups in these places. Lastly, Munro and Brown take the Isle of Lewis as a case study to explore the encounter between Presbyterian religion and film.

