



Munro, E. and Brown, C. (2020) The Curse: Film and the churches in the Western Isles 1945 to 1980. *Northern Scotland*, 11(1), pp. 60-79. (doi: 10.3366/nor.2020.0205)

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/212551/>

Deposited on: 20 March 2020

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

The Curse: film and the churches in the Western Isles 1945 to 1980

Callum G Brown & Ealasaid Munro

I

In late 1976, the Rev. William Maclean of the Free Presbyterian (FP) Church in the district of Ness on the Isle of Lewis publicly placed a biblical curse upon Duncan Mackinnon, the manager of the Playhouse Cinema in Stornoway. Mackinnon had programmed the film 'Jesus Christ Superstar' (1973) in which, as the FP Church viewed it, there would be a blasphemous depiction of Christ by an actor. The following 15th January 1977, the *Stornoway Gazette* reported that after forty years the cinema was closing. As the only fixed cinema in the north west of Scotland, and with a capacity in excess of 700 people, this was significant news. The story quoted Maclean, from thirty miles to the north of Stornoway, as saying: 'It is a cause for real rejoicing that this has happened.'¹

From that moment, the myth arose that Maclean's curse had worked. This myth had two forms. In the first, it was believed by some Lewis people, on what might be described as religious grounds, that the Playhouse had closed as a result of God's Will - a view held presumably by many of the one thousand people who had signed petitions directed at the local council to have the film banned from the island. In the second form, the myth was believed by many liberal commentators and observers from outside of Lewis who looked with incredulity upon what they understood as religious fundamentalism, which had the power to close a film that was hugely popular elsewhere and which had been welcomed by many, seemingly most of the other Christian churches of Britain. From these opposing perspectives, an outwardly credible view emerged that a part of modern Scotland was in the grip of a scarcely believable rejection of both a popular version of the Christian story and of film itself. From a secular gaze, it seemed to add credence to the view that Christian faith was capable of rejecting the instruments of modernity.

In this article, we use the Playhouse story as a way of thinking through and disrupting a particular and enduring ideological construction of the Highlands and Islands in the mid-20th century. As Lorimer notes, the construction and representation of the Highlands in both

¹*Stornoway Gazette* week ending (we) 15 January 1977, p. 1a.

academic and popular literature has historically been ‘through the vocabulary of spatial and temporal *dislocation*’.² Here, we use the Playhouse episode as a lens through which to view individuals’ complex and nuanced responses to the media of modernity, and to interrogate the academic treatment of religious puritanism in secular twentieth-century Britain. Many historians have tended to turn their backs on religion in their narratives of British cultural history, whilst even many religious historians have confined their narratives to their own churches or traditions. There is something of a lacuna in this body of literature concerning denominational responses to cinema in the post 1945 period.

In this paper, we explore the ‘place’ of film on the island of Lewis – probably the most religious place in late-modern Britain. We examine how this medium, as a harbinger of modernity, was received there, and look at how films – for some brought by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild (operational between 1949-69 in Lewis), for others via the Playhouse – were perceived both in the local community at the time and in the oral testimony given us by a range of people raised on the island in the mid twentieth century. Though the Guild’s operations and impact are examined more fully in other articles in this special issue, we do indicate how its reception fitted in beside the Playhouse ‘episode’. We show that negotiation of the place of film in relation to Highland culture was an evolving process, and remained so throughout the 1970s after the Guild stopped functioning. We engage with the curse itself, and more broadly with the consolidation of a Calvinist evangelical power in the island in the decades following the Second World War. Lewis was dominated by two Calvinist churches, the Free Church (founded 1843 as a conservative schism from the Church of Scotland) and the smaller Free Presbyterian Church (founded 1893 as a conservative schism from the Free Church), Scotland’s largest denomination, the Church of Scotland, wielded lower strength and less influence. Calvinist religious power in Lewis, we argue, came quite late in modernity, the result of a combination of changes to central and local government that engineered a space for the churches to exert their influence, in ways not found elsewhere in mainland Britain. In the 1970s, it seemed to many – academic historians and anthropologists, media personalities, entrepreneurs, Westminster politicians and Scottish office civil servants in Edinburgh – that Lewis represented an irredeemable backwater of social conservatism and Calvinism. Britain had just come through the ‘Liberal Hour’ of the 1960s, yet Lewis remained seemingly stuck in the past. In actual fact, what was going on there was rather new.

² Hayden Lorimer, ‘Ways of seeing the Scottish Highlands: marginality, authenticity and the curious case of the Hebridean blackhouse,’ *Journal of Historical Geography* 25.4 (1999), pp. 517-533 at p. 517.

Calvinist political power in the islands was in the early stages of formation and consolidation, rather than in any survival phase. And what was going on in places like Lewis did not represent a popular gullibility to puritan isolationism. Rather, we argue here that the people of Lewis were strongly enamoured of modernity – from film to football to rock ‘n’ roll – but were compelled to negotiate their affiliations in individual and personalised ways in relation to the local Christian culture.

After a brief review of the place of conservative Christian communities in British history and social anthropology, we look at the evolution of tensions between the secular and the religious in Lewis. We observe how film was seen in one retrospective view as planting the seed of an alternative secular narrative in a Gaelic culture which had been, in the immediate postwar decade, strongly impacted by the strengthening grip of religious revivalism. We also look at the (limited) extent to which the churches were openly critical of film during this period, before moving on to examine the episode concerning ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’.

II

The way in which places like Lewis features in academic literature is distinctive.³ There appears to be a set pattern for the treatment of conservative religious communities within the United Kingdom. In much of this scholarship, the characteristics of isolated evangelical congregations are held to define the whole communities – the towns, districts or islands – in which they are situated. Indeed, the fact that some of the most conservative places in the UK are islands has a particular resonance, producing in the literature highly charged economic and social histories of these places. In short, the academic rationale is that there is an ‘otherness’ to a place like Lewis. The result is that writing on the island accentuates and often exaggerates this otherness, nurturing a self-referential circularity within the literature. Academics and cultural commentators, drawn by these distinctive features, may end up reifying difference, erasing or eliding complexity and detail. The result is a distortion of the way in which we understand ‘difference’ in the economic, social, cultural and religious histories of place.

In Britain, it is difficult to find a community which has been so singularly characterised in various disciplines as ‘different’ from the rest as Lewis. Despite its sectarian

³ For a detailed listing, see the introduction to this special issue.

heritage, high levels of community violence, and social structure defined by religion, even Northern Ireland does not feature in the same way as quite so ‘odd’ as Lewis. Lewis seems different on multiple, and interacting levels. It is a community defined firstly by economic otherness, dominated by crofting and fishing, making for a struggle to match the same growth in prosperity experienced in other parts of the nation after 1945. With this comes the history of landownership and social division, in which the crofters of Lewis are understood to have been historically subordinated by the landed class who extracted wealth as landlords and estate managers, and who were responsible for clearance and wilful mismanagement throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, leading to serious environmental degradation, depopulation and the production of an alienated and oppressed crofting class. In the case of Lewis, the otherness is then fed by a different language. Gaelic-speaking is taken to denote not merely a different tongue but a different culture, defined in various and often shifting ways to include ceilidh culture, distinctive poetry, song, dance and storytelling, but also most importantly religious worship: there are some examples of this later in the paper. As Gaelic declined on mainland Scotland, so Lewis came to be seen as the last seemingly firm stronghold of the language and its associated culture.

The result has been the strong impulse of academics of, on the one hand, Gaelic and Celtic studies, and, on the other, of film history to believe that the Rev. Maclean’s curse was, in a sense, true. By ‘true’, we are not meaning that they believed it to have been a supernatural victory over the Playhouse and ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’; rather it was believed that the curse of a Free Presbyterian minister was so supported by the people as to bring about the cinema’s demise. The clergy and elders of the Free and Free Presbyterian churches especially were none too enamoured with cinema and with ‘Superstar’ in particular. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, and the age of many of the key actors, it has not been possible to investigate how pressure was brought to bear to encourage a boycott of ‘Superstar’, but it was likely instigated via sermons from the pulpit, in school lessons, and in the pages of the *Gazette*. Door-knocking occurred as well, as happened over many issues (such as opposition to drinks licensing).⁴ The local Calvinist churches canvassed quite vigorously for signatures to petitions to present opposing the showing of ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’. By the end of December 1976, at least 6 petitions had been received by the Western Isles Council – from the communities of Gress, Bayhead, Newton, North Lochs,

⁴ *Stornoway Gazette* 2 December 1967. Callum G. Brown, *The Battle for Christian Britain: Sex, Humanists and Secularisation 1945-1980* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 222.

Sandwick and Aignish.⁵ And there was clearly some public antipathy to the film. In a group interview we conducted on Benbecula, one of our (not particularly religious) interviewees said the real problem with ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ was that it was just a bit ‘disrespectful’ and ‘daft’ for the Playhouse to think of showing it. She had no real opposition to the film, she just felt it was needlessly provocative towards certain sections of the community. Her recollection is emblematic of how a lot of people felt about the episode – that is, not very strongly.

Languidness, indifference and silence in oral respondents’ reactions to past controversies or aspects of life, especially connected with religion, are difficult issues for the researcher. But they are nonetheless noted by historians. They point to how those most exercised about an issue tend to have been the most vocal in a society or community, and consequently tend to be the most ‘heard’ in the historical archive – including in oral history interviews.⁶ The result is that it becomes important for the historian to calibrate – however crudely – the extent to which community members were then, or now, exercised by an issue, and how silence may indicate either traumatic or indifferent reactions. So, we encounter evidence in this article of not merely different recollections of cinema, but differences in the significance attached to the recollections by the respondent.⁷

From this, it would be wrong to imagine that ‘secular’ popular culture was under the cosh of presbyterian polity on Lewis or other Hebridean islands. The people - and in particular children and young people - negotiated their way quite freely to the cultural opportunities emerging with new technologies, better communications and new desires in the twentieth century. This resulted in two things. One was that the recollections of cinema and film shows differed between clergy and laity. Second, there is evidence pointing to incidents of small-scale, yet significant, cultural resistance by children and young people to clerical attempts to discourage attendance at film shows.

III

Ecclesiastical suspicion of film was not limited to Lewis, but was probably stronger there than anywhere else in Britain. John Caughie notes that though Stornoway obtained its first cinema, the Lewis Picture House, in 1915 to fanfare from the Provost, even he was aware in his speech at the opening of ‘those who had misgivings’. Yet though Caughie also notes the

⁵ *Stornoway Gazette*, 25 December 1976, p. 1h.

⁶ See for instance Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory: Second Edition* (London, 2016), pp. 47, 104; Callum G Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London, 2017), pp. 66-86, 163-8.

⁷ See Neely, this volume, for an examination of the ‘place’ of cinema memories in community ‘lore’.

‘mythology’ that the absence of cinemas in most of the Highlands and islands was due to the dominance of the Calvinist churches, he concludes from ‘the evidence of Stornoway and Oban that, at least in the early years, this predisposition [against cinema] was not absolute and the role of religion was prescriptive rather than proscriptive’.⁸

Yet, by the 1930s, the mood seems to have changed, and to have remained so for the rest of the twentieth century. The Lewis Picture House was bought out and closed by the builders of the new Playhouse cinema, which was to become the subject of divided opinion. The ecclesiastical institution most critical of film was the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. In 1936, when the Playhouse was brand new, the FP Church came under fire for demonising the medium of film *in toto*, and was ‘severely criticised’ for protesting against school children being taken to see educational films at that cinema. The Church was openly satirised in an article in the *Stornoway Gazette* for suggesting that in this manner ‘the devil [was] ... creeping in unawares and destroying Protestantism and Presbyterianism’. Some of us, a commentator averred, were glad the children were not growing up as ‘dumb dogs’.⁹ From the inauguration of the Playhouse onwards, we can identify a series of church-led moral panics relating to cinema throughout the century in Lewis. For example, in 1967, attempts to show the film *Fanny Hill* at the Playhouse were stymied by a campaign organised by the conservative Provost Anne Urquhart.¹⁰ For many adherents and clergy in the dissenting presbyterian churches, the arrival in quick succession of film, radio and television constituted a serious threat to public morality.

By comparison, the larger Free Church of Scotland was not so associated with being outright opposed to film and cinema. The Revd Prof Donald Macleod (1940-), later principal of the Free Church College in Edinburgh, played down the extent of ecclesiastical censure of the medium. He said in interview that though one minister from a United Free Church tradition encouraged his congregation to avoid cinema, this was not followed up outside of the pulpit.¹¹ Macleod did not attend the cinema, though he told us that it was his own ambivalence to film that fostered in him a neglect of picture-going. In trying to explain this, he cited his passion for other, putatively ‘secular’ entertainments such as sport (especially

⁸ John Caughie and Trevor Griffiths, *Early Cinema in Scotland* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 64-5.

⁹ *Stornoway Gazette* 11 September 1936, cited at North Tolsta Historical Society website accessed 19 January 2017.

¹⁰ *Stornoway Gazette* 15 April 1967 p. 1g.

¹¹ The United Free Church originated in 1900 when much of the Free Church, especially in lowland Scotland, amalgamated with the United Presbyterian Church, causing ecclesiastical and community disturbances in the Western Isles; Lucy Moore, ‘Church union, community schism: The impact of the church union of 1900 on the Isle of Lewis’, unpublished MA dissertation, History Subject, University of Glasgow, 2016.

football and cricket). Other ‘modern’ media were fair game: as a young man he greatly enjoyed radio, listening to football reports most notably. But cinema-going - even when close to hand at the Playhouse in Stornoway - just failed to feature large. He recalls seeing only one film as a young man: 'The Dambusters' (1955). Of the cinema he told this project:

DM: I never frankly bothered very much about it. I don't know, I wasn't the only person, the only family, I don't think we were, but you know, in context it's a fundamentalist thing, and it's a worldwide phenomenon that you have. Every tradition has its own taboos, and it so happens that that was a taboo which was fairly prevalent, I suppose, in our family. Where it came from I'm not quite sure, but my friends would go, some of them anyway would go, and we had local folk who went every second night.

CB: Right, so it wasn't a matter of the particular film? It was the Playhouse [in Stornoway] in principle?

DM: Yeah, it was the Playhouse in principle. I mean, I never, I mean to this day I don't go to the cinema.¹²

Though he has been to see a few films, they were rare excursions, yet he indicated that he now has a television. Similar views came from another interviewee from Lewis, the Revd Angus Smith (1928-2019), who was a well-known campaigner for the traditional religious culture of the Hebrides – notably in relation to keeping the Sabbath as the Lord's Day. Smith is widely remembered as the ‘Ferry Reverend’ for protesting the first Sunday ferry sailing in 1965 to the Isle of Skye by lying down on the jetty at Kyleakin and blocking traffic, leading to his very public arrest and physical removal by four constables.¹³ In the 1960s, he was minister of Cross Free Church on Lewis, and, though in interview he evaded the question of whether he was ‘anti film’, he told us that he had never attended either Film Guild shows or the Playhouse cinema in Stornoway. However, he was emphatic that he had never actively discouraged people from attending either. Smith told us he was not a fan of feature films, but took a more relaxed view of other media: ‘I think the television is entirely different,’ he told us, indicating that he watched factual television programming on his iPad.¹⁴ Taken together,

¹²HIFG 39 Donald Macleod.

¹³ See the account and photograph of the incident in Callum G. Brown, ‘Spectacle, restraint and the Sabbath Wars: The “Everyday” Scottish Sunday’, in L Abrams and CG Brown (eds.), *A History of Everyday Life in Twentieth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2010), pp. 153-180 at p. 153-4.

¹⁴ HIFG_37 Rev Angus Smith.

what Macleod and Smith's testimony shows us is that modernity is rarely a monolithic object of opposition.

There is a 'live and let live' attitude that is remembered by adherents and non-adherents alike. Ministers were not always united on what to condemn and what to condone; we found evidence of a young minister being admonished for playing football with local children. More broadly, the widening of leisure opportunities in the postwar years included the surge of village hall construction in the 1940s and 1950s (spurred by Scottish Office funding), and this triggered disapproval. Three respondents recalled there being Free Church opposition to constructing village halls in west Lewis at Bragar and Shawbost, with young converts to a religious revival in the area in the late 1940s leading the collecting of signatures for Church petitions.¹⁵ Archive records show that dissent around the building of village halls was often led by vocal individuals on behalf of a silent – insofar as their views are not recorded – majority within communities. The *Stornoway Gazette* reported a resident of North Tolsta on the east coast of Lewis protesting against the building of a 'dance hall' in the name of his community, 'for the reason that it won't be wholly used for dancing, but it will be used as orgy, and it will have a bad effect on the rising generation of this locality'.¹⁶ More broadly, though, even the culture of religious revival must not be regarded as unified amongst Calvinists. At the time of the 1949-1953 revival on Lewis, there was considerable rancour from some clergy towards the leading figure and his backing organisation, the Faith Mission; a recent religious historian has concluded that though many Free church people attended revival meetings, the Free and Free Presebyterian churches both opposed the revival.¹⁷

So, there were constant complexities to the religions of Lewis. Even the Revd Prof Donald Macleod recalled stories of the Free Church opposing the building of village halls, but he himself assisted in raising money in the 1950s toward such a building in his native Laxdale just to the North of Stornoway.¹⁸ The complexity of the church's role in relation to these symbols of progress was also remembered by those whose families were not staunch churchgoers. Kathleen Barry and Marion Urquhart, two women who had grown up in the

¹⁵ HIFG_32 Murdo Morrison; HIFG_35 Norma Macleod & Finlay Macleod. EhiThe Free and Free Presbyteiran churches were not wholly in support o

¹⁶ The Stornoway Gazette, 1 March 1946, p.3 col.7.

¹⁷ Norman A Afrin, 'A Critical Aalysis of the 1949-1953 Lewis Revival', MRes thesis, Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow, 2017, pp. 50-1

¹⁸ HIFG_39 Donald Macleod.

extremely religious community of Skeabost on the Isle of Skye, at the time when the Rev. Angus Smith was the local FC minister, told us:

MU: There was no concept that there was, people were Catholic. You knew people were ch- Church of Scotland, or Free Church, but it wasn't a problem, nobody bothered about it.

KB: And the, the only thing was the whole thing about not doing the things on a Sunday. [That] was the big thing, you know. They weren't allowed to do anything on a Sunday [...]

MU: But it wasn't, it wasn't an issue. I don't ever remember anyone talking about religion as, as any kind of issue when we were growing up. Other than [...] the practical Sunday things.¹⁹

This testimony was echoed by a respondent from Shawbost in Lewis. A non-adherent, this respondent was emphatic in her assertion that religious matters were largely confined to the private and public spaces of worship. For her, religious affiliation had little bearing on the day to day life of the wider community, except in relation to the Sabbath.²⁰

Interviewer: And did the different affiliations to the church affect how the community interacted with each other, who you played with [for example]?

Marie Christine Macaulay: [emphatically] No. No, no, no.²¹

In contrast to this 'live and let live' attitude, however, there exists in the Hebrides a more concerted interpretative framework of criticism of the churches. Within this, some Gaels attribute a more malign influence to the Free Church and the Free Presbyterian Church in particular, citing a vague sense of 'surveillance' that kept individuals – particularly in small rural communities – in check for fear of attracting censure or disapproval.²² Our interest in this article, of course, is media, and some of our respondents did identify church resistance to

¹⁹ HIFG_184 Kathleen Barry with HIFG_25 Marion Urquhart.

²⁰ Though resistance to the tenets of Sabbatarianism was common at this time. For a discussion of the theory of everyday resistance as applied to the Scottish Sunday, see Brown, 'Spectacle, restraint and the Sabbath Wars'.

²¹ HIFG_48 Marie-Christine Macaulay

²² It is notable that many of our interviewees, from both churchgoing and non-churchgoing families asserted that 'the churches' would be against the Film Guild, and the Playhouse, but were unable or unwilling to offer any concrete evidence of their opposition.

the encroachment of film and other media into their communities. The greatest exponent of this framework has been the Lewis-based educationalist and critic of organised religion, Dr. Finlay MacLeod (1937-), who argued in interview with us that new media forms represented a challenge – on many fronts – to traditional ways of life in Lewis, but not always in the way that people reckon. He remembers his childhood and being exposed to ‘modern’ media for the first time.

FM: The provision for young people, in Lewis, in rural Lewis, was very sparse. [...] There was no library, no children’s library, no books to speak of in school, school usually arid and not enabl[ing]e people to become readers. No books at home, except religious ones. D.C Thomson was just coming on stream, thank goodness. *The Dandy* was born the year I was born. *The Beano* soon followed, and then, really, where I learned to be a reader was through D.C Thomson’s *The Adventures of the Rover*, *The Hotspur* – these four were very important. I mention these as the kind of secular aids that were around, other than sport, football, very much, local football, and national football. Newspapers used to come, from friends in Glasgow – *The Sunday Post*, with the Broons and Oor Wullie – all of these were just coming in, but very slowly. And sport newspapers, you know. Pink papers and green papers, all very exciting. Second, third hand, coming from friends who lived in Glasgow. Into that mix came the Film Guild. As *the most important* – there was no telly, there was no radio, very little written material, as I said, and into that world came films. Pathe News, with the news, and films of different kinds: cowboys, opening another world altogether; a plethora of war films, navy, air force, army, and of course, Hollywood of all kinds.

Evoking the widespread sense of excitement with the Film Guild we encountered in Lewis interviews, Finlay MacLeod credits these media with rescuing the education, identity and freedom of the young of the postwar generations. He was especially eloquent about the liberating and educating role of the Film Guild. He said: ‘As an educative means - and no wonder it had been funded by people like the Scottish Office, and so on - like the whole idea of what [the Guild] was for and what the aim of the Guild was, it just couldn’t have fitted better to the needs of people of my age.’

The Guild shows became the object of strong popular affection, and as with other media, if there were hostilities from the churches, these were generally contained within their respective congregations. Several respondents from Lewis did recall the Rev. Maclean – later,

conjurer of the curse on the Playhouse manager – trying to stop some youngsters from Ness from going to a Guild show by standing in the middle of the single-track road with his arms outstretched, but the young people of the village walked past him.²³ Young people especially were creative in how they negotiated access to ‘modern’ media, and for some of our Lewis respondents, it was clear that existing power structures within their communities were ripe for subversion, even by the small-scale revolts.

It is worth noting that by the time the Guild was established in Lewis, film had already made significant inroads into community life – the genie was out of the bottle, as it were. Film had arrived with the military, and the Ministry of Information had screened films and newsreels throughout the islands during the war. Films were also shown in military camps, and these were often open to the public: at the RAF camp at Adabroc near Lionel in north-west Lewis, films were screened by the local headmaster. Westerns, murder mysteries and comedies were recalled with affection by one of our respondents.²⁴ Girls were let in to the films by the airmen whilst young boys attempted to avoid paying the entrance fee by employing various ruses: on one occasion using a purloined Air Force uniform, on another two boys dressed in their sisters’ clothes, then a boy who forged tickets, and later having passes made for the boys who joined the Air Training Corps. When the Film Guild took over the film showing in the late 1940s, these wiles continued – one interviewee recalled young men entering the film hall by a floor hatch on one occasion.²⁵ The shows were hugely popular. Two respondents from Ness reported that ‘All the young people went because it was one big excitement’, almost irrespective of the particular film: one woman told us ‘I didn’t mind, any kind of film, as long as it was a movie.’²⁶ Big queues formed at the door to pay their two shillings or two-and-sixpence, with children catching a bus to attend from neighbouring townships. We found that whilst people could not always recall the films they saw, they did remember liking and looking forward to particular genres: westerns, war films, and musicals for example. More than this, though, it was the embodied experience of attending the Guild cinema – the sights, sounds and smells - that lodged in our interviewees’ memories.²⁷

²³ HIFG_35 Finlay Macleod

²⁴ HIFG_44 Norman (Tormod).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ HIFG_42 Anonymous

²⁷ This echoes work done by Annette Kuhn in her ethnographies of cinemagoing, for example: Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London, 2002)

Aside from ceilidhs, walking, football, and swimming in the sea, those we interviewed in rural Lewis recall few other secular activities than the films available for young or old. The Film Guild shows stood as the excitement for a generation for the quarter century after the Second World War. The fondness for the Film Guild arose because it represented pure pleasure in an era where leisure time was rare and precious. The Guild came to communities *in situ*, and little effort was required on the part of local people to draw down the benefits of the cinema. It would be wrong, however, to insinuate that audiences in this period were merely passive consumers of film. Rather, there is other evidence of a strong film culture in Lewis after the Second World War.²⁸ In October 1945, some fifty people attended the inaugural meeting of the Lewis Film Society at Stornoway's Nicolson Institute, and continued for at least several years discussing films seen at the Playhouse.²⁹ One of our respondents from Sgiogarstaigh (Skigersta) at the Northern tip of the island of Lewis started to collect film magazines in the late 1950s: despite protesting that she'd never been a film 'buff', she produced large pile of these magazines from the loft of her house, where they had been kept for 65 years. This rich film culture was not limited to Lewis. We also found an independent film society culture in Lerwick in Shetland in the late 1940s enjoying frequent showings.

We cannot and should not draw crude generalisations about how religious affiliation intersected with cinema and cinemagoing in Lewis at this time. However, we can offer some observations. Oral history testimony demonstrates a series of incredibly diverse responses to both the 'idea' of cinema and individual film texts: these vary geographically as well as by denomination. Bearing in mind that this is a period when the quality of data on churchgoing was poor, and there is only really local accounts to go by, some of our respondents recall rather lower levels of attendance than is commonly assumed. The Rev Donald Macleod commented that:

It's easy to overestimate the churchgoing element in Lewis. Going back to the 1940s there always has been, especially in the Stornoway area, a high proportion of non-church attenders, and that was the case in my own young days in Laxdale too, that

²⁸ For discussion of Scotland's Film Society movement see Ryan Shand, *Amateur Cinema: History, Theory, Genre* PhD thesis University of Glasgow, 2007.

²⁹ *Stornoway Gazette* 3 October 1945 p.3b; Trevor Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinema-Going in Scotland, 1896-1950* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 231..

some families went to church regularly, but most didn't go to church, and certainly boys my age didn't go to church.³⁰

Notwithstanding Macleod's observation, the Western Isles had by far the highest churchgoing rate in Britain. In 1984, at the first modern reliable church census, weekly adult church attendance in the Western Isles (which included the mainly Catholic islands in the south), plus the neighbouring Isle of Skye and the adjacent Lochalsh district on the mainland, stood at 54 per cent; this dropped to 39 per cent in 1994 but stayed the same in 2002. For comparison, the next highest churchgoing in the UK was in the adjacent Highland region with, in 1984, a 'mere' 18 per cent weekly churchgoing. And the UK average in the 1980s was under 9 per cent.³¹ Other respondents vividly remembered attending church and Sunday school despite the fact that their families were not particularly religious. We can discern in their testimony a sense that sometimes this was more about 'keeping up appearances' within the community than any real sense of adherence. One respondent told us:

CM: If you didn't have the right clothes you didn't go to church. Eh, you went to Sunday school, which was, eh, on Sunday afternoon, in the, in the school, and, eh, there was a church service in the morning, a church service in the evening, and, ehm, the boys of our age, between, say 10 and 12, we would go to the evening service only.³²

Many of our respondents who attended Guild shows as children and teenagers were from churchgoing families, in both the Free Church and Church of Scotland. We spoke to relatively few respondents who had grown up in the Free Presbyterian Church, often seen as the most 'hardline' of Lewis denominations in terms of their approach to popular culture and secular entertainment. Some extremely strict religionists did not engage with cinema at all. One respondent, joking that churchgoers were not as common in north-west Lewis as was often assumed, told us: 'Very few went [to church] - they were the holiest of the lot

³⁰ HIFG_39 Donald Macleod.

³¹ Data in Brown, *The Battle*, pp. 69, 89-90, 95, 100-1, 110-11.

³² HIFG_95 Calum MacRitchie.

[laughing]’ ...[T]hey never saw a film, so, maybe if they saw a film, they would be against it [laughing].³³

In recalling the Rev. Maclean’s attempts to discourage young people from attending the Guild cinema, Finlay MacLeod told us: ‘I never knew anybody of the Church coming into the films, or talking to you when you were in a queue at a film [...] they left them alone.’³⁴ He felt that the Church would not have appreciated the Mr. Maclean’s public proselytising, as this would be seen unbecoming for such a respectable institution. For some of our respondents, however, this ‘live and let live’ attitude on the part of the Church masked a steely resolve: eventually, it was felt, many of these former sinners would come to the Church and this – as one interviewee put it in ironic tones – ‘was worth waiting for’.³⁵ Alongside these expressions of tolerance, there is evidence that some denominations actively welcomed film, seeing its potential as a ‘moral’ medium which could be used to promote Christian values.³⁶ In particular, the Church of Scotland in Lewis appears to have engaged enthusiastically with the Lewis Film Society (LFS) in the years after its formation in 1946. The LFS showed educational and religious films on occasion to interested groups; the *Stornoway Gazette* in 1947 reported an event held in the Nicolson Institute in association with Martin’s Memorial Church, consisting of an exhibition of educational and religious films, including a Campbell Harper film commissioned by the Church of Scotland documenting their poverty relief work in Edinburgh.³⁷ Church of Scotland ministers were known to attend LFS screenings at the Nicolson Institute, and on one occasion in 1949 allowed the LFS to erect a display of film stills in the church itself on Francis Street in Stornoway.

The culture of restriction was somewhat lighter for those living in Stornoway. The town offered a sense of anonymity that was lacking in smaller rural communities, and the vague sense of ‘surveillance’ that many of our rural respondents reported does not feature in the same way among our Stornoway interviewees. Many of our respondents recall the move from their local primary school to board in Stornoway for the town’s secondary school as a defining event in their youth.³⁸ New freedoms, including cinema and cinemagoing, feature large in many of our respondents’ recollections of their teenage years in Stornoway; the

³³ HIFG_44 Norman (Tormod) Gunn.

³⁴ HIFG_35 Finlay Macleod.

³⁵ Anonymised.

³⁶ Brown analysed church films of the 1950s and 60s for a BBC Norwich TV programme, 2002.

³⁷ Campbell Harper, *New Lives* (Edinburgh, 1939).

³⁸ For some respondents this was a positive move, appreciating the new freedoms, though for others it was recalled as a traumatic experience when sent to board at 10 or 11 years.

female boarding hostel (described to us by one ex-resident as ‘Colditz’) was right opposite the Playhouse, so it was the natural recourse for the 57 girls staying there, where ‘all the romances in Stornoway’ became common knowledge.³⁹

The spirit of resistance to church culture reach an apotheosis for some in the illegal drinking houses that developed in the late 1940s and 1950s from the earlier *ceilidhs*. These *bothans* were mostly located in old croft houses or tin huts in northern and western Lewis, and were frequented almost entirely by men (except, it was reported, at weddings when girls would come in to pass the time, but not to drink). The *bothans* were not only condemned by the churches, but were illegal and subject to periodic police raids. In one particularly famous case, nine men – including one of our respondents - were caught in the bothan and tried for excise offences; an acclaimed lawyer got them off.⁴⁰

What we want to emphasise here is that, rather than there being a blanket disavowal of modern media in places like Lewis, as is far too often assumed, we can identify a series of complex negotiations – person by person, occasionally community by community, medium by medium - at work in attitudes to things like cinema, but also television, radio, literature and music. Our oral history interviews demonstrated that many young people especially engaged in small resistances to ecclesiastical rules and associated community norms, in an echo of the theory of everyday resistance outlined by Michel de Certeau and, in precisely the same vein, of small-scale rebellion as outlined by James C Scott and others from the Subaltern Studies school. Just as Brown has used this theory to explore Lowland resistance to the Sabbath, we found it alive and kicking in the Hebridean world of remembrance created by our respondents.⁴¹

However, whilst we identify a relatively *laissez-faire* attitude at play within rural communities at this time, there was undoubtedly an underlying moral watchfulness regarding popular culture in Lewis. This was often expressed in oral history testimony as a vague sense of ‘surveillance’: one of our respondents from Carloway told us:

[T]he church would see [film] probably as something new, something to be a bit suspicious of and understandably so [...] And the church would have been overseeing

³⁹ HIFG_48 Anonymous.

⁴⁰ The story has recently most fully presented in two BBC Alba films, ‘A Night in the Bothan’, and the wider context of the *bothans* in a portrait of Finlay Macleod, ‘One Magical Year’ (2012).

⁴¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984). For discussion of using de Certeau and Scott in historical analysis, see Callum G Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Harlow, Pearson Longman, 2005), pp. 89, 124, 136-7, 140; Brown, ‘Spectacle, restraint and the Sabbath wars’.

it, I would almost certainly say, and there'd be individuals, who dignitaries from the church or from establishments that would be vetting it so to speak to see that this wouldn't be something that would be coming into the thing that we might be exposed to our detriment. [...] They wouldn't have allowed exposure to this kind of thing, to the inhabitants of the island, the church wouldn't, without knowledge of who, where, what, what, when, why and the purpose of and the calibre of what was being viewed and coming into our midst.⁴²

As this respondent carefully articulates, the influence of the churches was not easy to escape, and had to be carefully negotiated in everyday life. This moral watchfulness was to reach a high pitch in relation to the Playhouse in Stornoway.

IV

In June 1963 the American *Time* magazine reported:-

Excursioning to the Outer Hebrides with classmates from Scotland's stiff-upper-lip Gordonstoun School, bonnie Prince Charles, 14, stepped up to the bar of the Crown Hotel, Stornoway, manfully plonked down two and sixpence for a cherry brandy. It was grand fun until his royal bodyguard collared him, shooed him off to join the boys for dinner and a movie (*It Happened in Athens*, starring Jayne Mansfield). But since Scottish law sets 18 as the legal drinking age, that spot of brandy soon splashed into the headlines.⁴³

Though the *Time* reporter stated that Charles got to see Jayne Mansfield at the Playhouse, other sources say not – that instead, he was whisked off to Stornoway Harbour, put aboard the Gordonstoun ketch, and sailed to the mainland. The cherry brandy episode was but one incident in a long line of moral panics about both the Crown Hotel and the Playhouse – the former for decades of breaching licensing laws by failing to close on communion days and lock-ins after hours, the latter for showing libidinous and blasphemous films. The licensing laws were stern in Lewis – distinctively so, even greater than in the mainland parts of Ross &

⁴² HIFG_106 Catherine Treacy.

⁴³ *Time* 28 June 1963, cutting in framed collection, Crown Hotel lobby, seen 2017 and 2019.

Cromarty County of which Lewis was the Hebridean part until the mid 1970s. However, as a recent study by Brown has indicated, the Licensing Appeal Court in Dingwall tended to overturn more extreme measures of the court in Stornoway, and pointedly ignored petitions collected by the Free Presbyterian Church. Meanwhile, the Playhouse was under steady sniping from presbyterian churches in the 1950s for a variety of things – including in 1952 when the manager ordered the painters to redecorate it when closed on the Sabbath, and when in 1958 it started to run a highly-popular bingo club. But the 1960s seemed to bring other harbingers of liberalisation that arguably drew attention away from the Playhouse for a time. Youth clubs opened, new village and community halls were erected, and dances with live bands were established in many townships. Beauty contests started, and in the summer of 1967 girls were invited to come to a dance with flowers in their hair to mimic the ‘Summer of Love’ in San Francisco.⁴⁴

The mood of the times in Lewis changed in the 1970s. Whilst the rest of Britain (though much less so Northern Ireland) felt the lasting – if still contested – liberalisation of popular culture, sexual life and media content, Lewis turned towards greater, not less, conservatism, and seemingly giving new power to the Calvinist churches. The central cause of this was the major re-organisation of Scottish local government in 1976. The Wheatley Commission on Local Government had heard pleas from the churches, Lewis District Council and Stornoway Town Council – on each of which notables of the churches were strongly represented – to allow the Outer Hebrides to have self-government in local administration, breaking the links that had prevailed since 1888 with Ross & Cromarty and Inverness-shire county councils (the former including Lewis, the latter containing all of the other Outer Hebrides). With support from the churches (including the Church of Scotland), and against the advice of the Wheatley Commission and the wishes of the two county councils, the Western Isles Council (later renamed Comhairle nan Eilean Siar) was created. The first convenor of the Council was a Church of Scotland minister, and his deputy was a Catholic priest from the southern islands, signalling three leadership attributes at once: Christian dominance, bipartisan unity to forestall sectarian fears, and religious moderatism amidst considerable Calvinist pressures.⁴⁵ Notwithstanding this, the strength of Christian representation on the Council ensured that that the whole system of licensing of venues – including the Playhouse – came under a new close scrutiny by a self-governing Calvinist-

⁴⁴ See the account of the Lewis licensing system and the sixties changes in popular culture discussed in Brown, *The Battle*, pp. 109-115, 204-13.

⁴⁵ Obituary of Rev Donald Macaulay OBE, *The Scotsman* 8 February 2006; obituary of Father Calum MacLellan, *The Scotsman* 28 July 2012.

dominated local authority. One consequence of this was the police campaign against the *bothans*, the illegal drinking houses of north-west Lewis, which disappeared in the late 1970s and 1980s largely as a result of police intervention. In a similar vein, in late 1976, the new Western Isles Council started a widespread panic concerning the films at the Playhouse. It started when Councillor Peter Macleod representing Gress ward in the extreme northeast of Lewis raised the concerns of people in his ward, one of the most isolated parts of the island and with a strong Free Presbyterian Church following, presented a petition of 250 signatures opposing the screening of 'Jesus Christ Superstar'. The petition, raised by objectors going from door to door in that very rural community some distance from Stornoway, stated that: 'The film is a Satanic attack on the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and, as such, cannot but be grossly offensive to the Christian susceptibilities of the vast majority of [his] constituents.' The reason for the objection was the 'blasphemy' of an actor depicting Christ - a practice effectively proscribed by the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) until the 1950s, and banned on stage by the Lord Chamberlain until 1966, but then suddenly removed in that year largely at the instigation of religious dramatists and churches wanting to evangelise using these media.⁴⁶

In contrast to this liberalising Christian movement elsewhere in Britain, Councillor Peter Macleod told the manager of the cinema, Duncan Mackinnon, of the concerns of Lewis electors. Mackinnon watched the film himself and told Macleod that 'he had not seen anything that was blasphemous' and that the film would be shown. It transpired that in the period from January to November the cinema had shown 59 films rated by the BBFC, with 18 at X (over 18s only), 8 at AA (over 14s), 18 at A (any age with accompanying adult) and 15 at U (for open family viewing). These figures raised concern regarding the moral atmosphere in the cinema, intersecting with some very specific and localised ideas about leisure. Finlay Macleod told us that many churchgoers disliked films – whether the Guild or the Playhouse – because they represented pure pleasure (*'faion'* in Gaelic – which can be translated as foolishness, giddiness, childishness). Dan Murray, another respondent from Lewis, told us: 'Strict churchgoers wouldn't be seen in the movies. I mean, no churchgoers went to things like that. They probably thought it was evil. Now, I don't know why, but these were the facts of life. As they would say, *droch rud*, you know, bad thing. *Droch rud*.⁴⁷ For others attendance at film shows or the cinema was an expression of 'vanity', or self-indulgence (*'diomhanas'*): it was vain to put a high price on leisure, to elevate it above work.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 150-1.

⁴⁷ HIFG_051 Dan Murray.

The concept of vanity is a particular idea, unrelated to blasphemy, but which also forms part of the moralising vocabulary of Gaelic-speaking Lewis which seems to have found a new currency with local government reorganisation in the mid 1970s.

Other councillors criticised the types of film being shown. Councillor Kenneth Macdonald representing Coulegrein ward in Stornoway reported being 'continually' approached by people objecting to the films. He asked: 'Are we satisfied that the films being shown in the Playhouse are in the best interests of the younger generation? If they are not, it is up to the local authority to see that are stopped.' He suggested that a Council committee view the films, and report back. He was supported by Councillor Rev Roderick Macleod (Paible ward) who had seen the advertisements for films and felt 'that in itself appeared to be outwith public decency', adding that: 'The Council has a great moral responsibility to take this seriously and see if they can exercise their duty to the people that have elected them.' The Councillors had previously accepted for some time the advisory classifications awarded by the industry body the BBFC, but now considered taking responsibility themselves over which films were shown and under what conditions – a move they had every lawful power to exercise. In the interim, the Rev Donald Macaulay (1926-2006), the more moderate Church of Scotland minister who chaired the Committee, managed to limit council concern to only X rated films.⁴⁸

This then exploded into a defining case in the moral history of Lewis, notable for the fact that it played out so publicly. In the week following, the Free Presbyterian minister of Ness in north-west Lewis placed his curse upon the cinema manager, and sent it to the *Gazette* which printed it in full:

I have a message from God for you: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema 'maran-atha'." That awful curse lies upon you now It will lie upon you at death and to all eternity ...' His only hope, the curse letter said, was to immediately cancel the 'blasphemous film' Jesus Christ Superstar 'and to cry to Christ for mercy.'⁴⁹

With the Free Church also expressing concern about 'Jesus Christ Superstar' and leafleting by objectors in Stornoway, the affair played out in the pages of the *Gazette*, with people writing

⁴⁸ *Stornoway Gazette* 11 November 1976 p.1h. Macaulay was also the first convenor of the Western Isles Council.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 18 December 1976, p.1a. The quotation comes from 1 Corinthians 16:22.

in to both condemn and support the film. One (notably anonymous) letter-writer described 'Jesus Christ Superstar' as 'spiritually awakening'.⁵⁰

The issue rumbled on into January 1977, attracting the attention of the national press to the conservative religious atmosphere on the island, and causing some consternation in the film industry; the owners of the Playhouse, Kingsway Entertainments of Kirkcaldy, observed that the film possessed an 'A' certificate from the BBFC and 'has been warmly received by churches all over the country. Why should Stornoway be different?'⁵¹ But something else happened. Coinciding with the controversy over 'Jesus Christ Superstar', statutory fire inspections resulted in a demand being made for the construction of an external fire escape from the balcony of the cinema - reputedly the preferred seating for patrons. And it was this, rather than the film, that proved fatal to the Playhouse. The owners could not afford to install new fire escape measures, leading to the ending of film showing and the use of the cinema only for bingo; despite a later brief revival in 1979 as a cinema (with an external staircase added), the building subsequently closed as a result of legal action by neighbouring property owners who claimed the fire escape encroached on their land.⁵²

This was but one episode in the long history of fire regulation being used to shut down cinemas. The dangers of nitrate film became appreciated in the 1910s and 1920s, rising to a high point in Scotland with the Glen Cinema disaster of 1929 in Paisley when the discovery of a smoking film canister led to the deaths of 71 people (including 69 children) in the crush to escape. This loomed large in popular memory, and, likely, in that of the fire inspectors. In this respect, the closure of the Playhouse fits within a long and mundane history of the regulation of the cinema space under the auspices of fire prevention. The Playhouse debacle reinforced the sense in Lewis Calvinist mythology that Stornoway was a morally dangerous place. Its bars and heavy drinking reputation had cemented that for decades, and so too its air of being a place with much lower rates of church attendance than the rest of the island. The episode also undoubtedly brought satisfaction to conservative Christians, leading some to think that the curse had worked. It also directed popular censure towards the FP Church in particular, with liberals attacking the it for its narrow-mindedness and *ad hominem* attacks on the cinema manager.

The rising popularity of other media – notably, television – likely also had a major role to play in the closure of the cinema. Television came in the late 1960s and early 1970s to

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 18 December 1976 p. 6b.

⁵¹ Letter from JW Brown in *Stornoway Gazette*, 25 Decemebr 1976, p. 6b.

⁵² *Stornoway Gazette* 4 August and 25 August 1979, p 1a.

most of the Highlands and Islands, and, whilst initially reception was poor, this quickly improved. Speaking of the demise of the Film Guild (which eventually withdrew from Lewis in 1971 after years of declining attendance), Norman Gunn in *Lionel* told us:

NG: Oh, well, I suppose the telly killed the films. Aye. Yes. I mean, you could [get] plenty films on the, on the telly anyway, so, so. And the films, you didn't know what, what was gonna be on anyway. And, eh. Well sometimes you'd be as disappointed, watching the- 'I wish I'd drank a half crown.' [laughing] Instead of spend it, say, watching that [laughing].⁵³

Whilst in other writing on the Guild, we complicate Norman Gunn's assessment of the role of television in the decline of communal film viewing,⁵⁴ there is no doubt that the availability of other types of media had a negative impact on cinema attendance throughout this period.⁵⁵

The Playhouse building was sold in the 1980s to the British Legion, and as of the time of writing it sits empty. Somewhat ironically, the building sits in the shadow of An Lanntair - Stornoway's new state-subsidised cinema and arts centre – which opened in 2005 on the site of the old girls' boarding hostel for the Nicolson Institute. An Lanntair has been the subject of much controversy in recent years regarding the general manager's decision, in 2018, to commence Sunday opening, demonstrating that concerns about breaking the Sabbath persist up to the present day. However, some of the resistance to Sunday opening has come from a non-religious angle: in some quarter, Sabbath observance is seen as one thing apart in a positive sense. In an era when there is concern over touristification and the commodification of the islands, for some the Lewis Sabbath has come to symbolise a rejection of consumerism more than anything else (setting apart Lewis and Harris) as well as restrictive religious associations. Still, it may admit of dispute, but all the signs are that with advancing leisure, work, shopping and ferry travel on Sundays in Lewis, and declining churchgoing, that the direction of travel is firmly towards liberalisation.

V

In this article, we give insight into the way that religion, civil government and the people intersected in Lewis in response to the arrival of film during the period 1945-1980.

⁵³ HIFG_41 Norman Gunn.

⁵⁴ See Goode's article in this special issue.

⁵⁵ David Docherty, David Morrison and Michael Tracey, *The Last Picture Show? Britain's changing film audience* (London, 1987).

The story of the Film Guild and the Stornoway Playhouse is in Hayden Lorimer's term a 'small story',⁵⁶ yet in a broader sense it allows us to reconsider the way in which places like Lewis are understood in both popular and academic accounts. As noted earlier and in the Introduction to this collection, writing on Lewis and the Western Isles tends to cast the islands as 'a place apart', particularly in relation to their religious character and the impact of the churches on everyday life. This article, then, articulates some of the complexity concerning individual and community responses to media in an era of religious growth.

It is notable that the Guild started up in Lewis only a few years after a religious revival amongst young people centred on Barvas in west Lewis. In rural parts the Guild was active with regular fortnightly shows in the 1950s and 1960s in noted religious 'strongholds' such as Ness, Barvas and Breascleite. That these things could coexist relatively peaceably is remarkable, and goes against the grain of a lot of commentary on the 'Long Island'. Despite our assertion that individuals – particularly young people – were able to negotiate their way relatively freely to new media forms making their way into the islands throughout the period, there was an underlying moral watchfulness at play within rural communities. Yet we have been unable to come across any significant conflict or controversy concerning the Guild shows. In large part this was because of the great care taken by the Guild in its film selection: Guild operators had a good knowledge of the communities they served, and they knew what would be enjoyed by frequent filmgoers, and tolerated by those who did not attend. The Guild head office in Inverness was careful to respect community norms in all of the areas served.

In addition to this, the Playhouse in Stornoway – by virtue of its location in the town, and perhaps also the seeming freedom the manager enjoyed in relation to making some local decisions⁵⁷ – almost certainly acted as the lightning rod to divert ecclesiastical censure. Yet, the focus on the single cinema allowed controversy to blossom, and the very public nature of the curse placed on Duncan Mackinnon and the subsequent discussion in the pages of the *Gazette* was unusual in that religious intervention in relation to media was generally conducted in closed settings such as at council meetings, within schools, or in places of worship. This was a public dispute in a manner well-rehearsed in Lewis and other parts of the Highlands by churches willing to brandish power in public spaces.

⁵⁶ Hayden Lorimer, 'Telling small stories: spaces of knowledge and the practice of geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28 (2), pp. 197-217.

⁵⁷ The cinema seems to have gone through a number of owners, but in 1976 the firm of Kingsway Entertainments Ltd of Kirkcaldy defended its operations in the *Stornoway Gazette*, 25 December 1976 p. 6b.

But we have shown that even in this most conservative and outwardly religious place in Britain in the mid twentieth century, the community represented a bricolage of the traditional and the modern, the liberal and the conservative, and certain spaces and practices facilitated the productive friction between them, as also between the global and the local, and the metropolitan and the rural. Film presented both excitement and some satisfaction as resistance to the quotidian attempt to suppress the Calvinist-proscribed vanity of pleasures. However, it is likely that by the 1950s the clergy recognised that the people loved films. In this way, modernity was negotiated into the islands partly by the power of the laity in the pews who, whatever might be said from the pulpit, were willing to navigate ecclesiastical censure and at times, popular disapproval, and ensure access to film. The closure of the Playhouse was neither literally nor metaphorically a victory for conservative Christianity, for that was part of a wider and longer history of media change, whilst the films which it and the Film Guild had brought to Lewis since the 1930s nurtured for very many people a pleasurable, educational and enduring immersion in the culture and the technology of modernity.