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## **Sarah Neely “‘The Skailing of the Picters’”: The coming of the talkies in small rural townships in Scotland’**

### **Abstract**

Like that of many other nations, Scotland’s film history has been characterised largely by its focus on its great metropolitan centres. The occasional studies which do look outside ‘The Central Belt’ stretching between Scotland’s two greatest cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh, are likely to concentrate on two of its other sizeable cities, Aberdeen and Dundee. This article will consider cinemas north of Inverness (Scotland’s most northerly city), including those in Wick, Thurso, and the islands of Orkney and Shetland.

The talkies arrived late to all of the townships considered. Cinema audiences dwindled as silent films fell out of favour with local audiences well aware of the ubiquity of the talkies elsewhere in Britain. When sound finally did arrive, the return of audiences to local picture houses had a great impact on the small rural townships, forcing councils to deal with the ‘problem of the talkie queues’ and the ‘skailing of the picters’ (the audiences spilling out into the town after a film). Using a variety of archival sources – from local newspapers, council reports, oral histories and diary entries – this article focuses on the various economic and social impacts resulting from the arrival of sound.

Like many film histories, Scotland’s film history has been characterised largely by a focus on its great metropolitan centres - Edinburgh and Glasgow. Recent research on Scottish cinema, such as that developed as part of *Early Cinema in Scotland, 1896-1927*, a research project funded by the United Kingdom’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC),<sup>1</sup> has aimed to address the gaps in studies of the period in Scotland by adopting methods developed in the field of New Cinema History, an area which has sought to illuminate the ‘sociocultural

history of cinema's audiences', including focus 'on questions of the circulation and consumption of cinema – on the commercial activities of film distribution and exhibition and the political and legal matrix that underpinned them'. (in Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers 2019: 3). The approach is especially fruitful in Scotland, where in the early years of cinema there was little local film production and, as a consequence, the predominance of text-based approaches has meant there is little to say of the period. Offering a different approach, research such as the *Early Cinema in Scotland* project, as well as that from which this article stems, a three-year, AHRC-funded project, *British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound*,<sup>2</sup> have been able to draw on sources from various archives, newspapers and the trade press, assembling a constellation of sources in order to provide a more detailed account of the period. Although many of the sources offer rich detail and description of the period, unfortunately, there are only scant sources available able to give voice to audiences' remembered experience of the novelty of sound films. Still, the sources available sufficiently enable this article's account of the arrival of the talking pictures to communities in Northern Scotland, offering a sense of the distinctiveness of cinema-going across rural Scotland.

My own research, like that of the *Early Cinema in Scotland* project, places emphasis on cinemas outside the urban centres of Scotland – again, in an effort to address the imbalances of previous studies which have privileged analyses of Glasgow and Edinburgh and largely ignored the vibrant cinema-going communities in Scotland's rural districts (Neely 2018). As Trevor Griffiths points out, by the middle of the 20th century, although many of Scotland's cinemas were located in cities such as Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh, a quarter of them were situated in much smaller towns and villages (2012: 1).

This article attempts to address this oversight by looking at the main cinemas north of Inverness (Scotland's most northerly city), considering cinemas in Wick, Thurso, and the islands of Orkney and Shetland and looking specifically at the impact of the arrival of sound cinema on small rural townships. It aims to question what a consideration of cinemas outside the urban centres might do to our understanding of cinema exhibition and cinema-going in the period. It asks how might we consider modernity outside its tendency to be situated in relation to metropolitan life and what might a consideration of modernity in rural contexts have to offer. Although this article does not draw from 'spatially enabled methods' to the extent that *Early Cinema in Scotland* project does through its productive use of mapping and geo-database tools (Vélez-Serna and Caughie 2015), it does adopt a broadly spatial approach in its analysis of cinema-going in rural Scottish communities in the 1930s. While the majority of academic studies of the social geographies of early cinemagoing focus on urban centres, this article will

reflect on the impact of modernity and the cinema-going experience on rural small town life.

In the 1920s, Scotland's largest cities, Edinburgh (population 338, 627) and Glasgow (population 1,034,069) both boasted a great number of cinemas. Glasgow in particular had the reputation of being a 'cinema city'. By 1929, Edinburgh had 33 cinemas and Glasgow had 113 (Martin 2000: 25). The impact of the talkies on cinema audiences was immediate and the transition to sound in Scotland's cities was rapid. By 1930 in Edinburgh, 22 (over 50 percent) of its cinemas had been wired for sound and in Glasgow 73 (again, well over 50 percent) were now equipped with the new sound technologies.<sup>3</sup> Audiences went to the cinema in record numbers. Cinemas able to equip for sound became hugely well-attended while, as Adrienne Scullion reports, cinemas unable to afford the expensive new sound systems closed down. In Glasgow, Scullion writes, 'in just the immediate aftermath around fifteen cinemas in Glasgow alone closed' (1990: 43). Long cinema queues for the talkies were also reported in Scotland's urban centres, something that was common throughout Britain. Queues for the first talkie in Scotland, *The Singing Fool* (Lloyd Bacon, 1928) at the Glasgow Coliseum in January 1929, are described in various oral history accounts as 'tremendous'.<sup>4</sup> As other accounts recall, many cinema-goers based their decision about which film they would go to on which cinema had the shortest queue.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, in 1929, in the cinemas of Northern Scotland, the talkies had not yet arrived. None of the cinemas of the rural townships considered in this article were wired for sound until well into the 1930s. As a result, for some cinemas, audiences dwindled as silent cinema fell out of favour with local audiences well aware of the ubiquity of the talkies elsewhere in Britain. As the talking pictures had taken firm hold in major metropolitan centres, production of silent films had ceased, and there was a shortage of silent films (Sibanda 2018) which left exhibitors struggling to find sufficient films to entice their audiences. Furthermore, the geographically remote locations of many of the townships made travelling to cinemas fitted for sound an impossibility.

A trip to the cinema to see the new talking pictures would have involved long journeys to towns further south such as Inverness (population 21, 607), the central capital of Scotland's Highlands, or Aberdeen (population 158,969) on Scotland's North East coast.<sup>6</sup> The Playhouse in Inverness was a luxury cinema seating over 1400 people and purpose built for sound in 1929 (Anon. 1929a); and in Aberdeen in 1929, four of its cinemas were rushing to show their first talking picture (Anon. 1929b). By 1930, all but one of Aberdeen's fifteen cinemas had been wired for sound.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile in Shetland, Orkney and Caithness, it took

nearly two years before sound films were introduced to local cinemas. Each unique geographical location presented very particular challenges in terms of cinema exhibition.

In Wick and Thurso, two small townships<sup>8</sup> on the northernmost coast of mainland Scotland, the two cinemas, the Picture House in Thurso and The Pavilion in Wick were in competition with one another since residents of each town and from the wider area could potentially travel to both (they are twenty miles apart). Both cinemas featured regular advertisements in local papers for their forthcoming programmes. After a period of closure for refurbishment under new management, The Pavilion in Wick was the first cinema to show talking pictures on 1 September 1930, with a screening of *Sunny Side Up* (David Butler, 1929). In the months running up to the event, large front-page advertisements in the local paper, the *John O' Groat Journal*, built-up a sense of anticipation: 'The talkies are coming!'.<sup>9</sup> Various articles describing the nature of the cinema's refurbishment being undertaken by its new owner, an Inverness company, Inverness and District Picture Halls, also featured in the paper in the months leading up to the reopening (Norseman 1930; Anon. 1930a). The Pavilion's refurbishment, including installation of the 'latest and most perfect "talkie" apparatus', established it as 'a place of up-to-date entertainment' one that 'ranks with those in modern cities' (Anon. 1930b). It was several months after the talkies' arrival in Caithness (at the Pavilion in Wick), that the Picture House in Thurso exhibited its first talking pictures.<sup>10</sup> After a month-long closure for refurbishment and the installation of 'ALL BRITISH "TALKIE" APPARATUS', it held its Grand Re-Opening performance on 6 July.<sup>11</sup> The opening film, *High Society Blues* (1930), also directed by David Butler, was advertised as a 'Brilliant Stellar Attraction [...] The Greatest Musical Comedy successor to Sunny Side Up'.<sup>12</sup>

Until then, the Thurso Picture House had attempted to draw audiences with a mix of silent Hollywood comedies and drama, including popular favourites like Buster Keaton, as well as Norma Shearer's last silent film, *A Lady of Chance* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1928) and British silents such as *The Return of the Rat* (Graham Cutts, 1929), starring Ivor Novello, and Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929), both of which were released in both silent and sound versions.<sup>13</sup> Although these films were no doubt exhibited in an effort to keep up with recent releases, the fact that The Pavilion in Wick could and would show the sound versions would have diminished their novelty. For instance, the sound version of *Blackmail* was shown at The Pavilion a month after the silent version in Thurso. The Picture House also attempted to draw audiences with films that had direct local appeal; for instance, the North Sea setting of John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929), would have had direct relevance for cinemagoers in

Caithness, a community largely reliant on herring fishing.<sup>14</sup> Another way in which the Picture House maintained its source of revenue was by serving as a venue for touring musical acts. These included performances from a violinist as well as a baritone from the BBC Concerts and the Lyric Opera Company.<sup>15</sup>

In Orkney, the role the cinema played in social and cultural life was recognized to be of great importance to the community. Orkney is an archipelago which garners its livelihood from agriculture and fishing and has also suffered continual depopulation. By 1930, the population had declined from 35000 in the early 1900s to 25000. Only about a thousand of the population lived in Kirkwall, the largest town in Orkney and the site of the main cinema.<sup>16</sup> So the efforts made to travel to the cinema were often a key aspect of going to see of a film. The first cinema in Orkney was established by a local businessman, D. B. Peace, in order to provide something for local children to do. Like many cinemas, it started out as a roller-skating rink, first opening its doors in 1910, and then was later converted into the Electric theatre in 1912. In 1928, the cinema moved to Albert Street, a main street of the town, and became the Albert Kinema, with seating for 300. The first talkie was not shown until 8 June 1931, with a screening of the American film *Blaze of Glory* (George Crone and Renaud Hoffman, 1929). The sound equipment installed was from British Acoustic, a system developed by Gaumont British in 1928. On the opening night, a talk was given by someone involved in the installation of the system, who provided information about the new technology as well as ‘interesting facts’ such as a claim that the new talking pictures had been fitted on board battleships by the same company, as well as a rather odd ‘fact’ that a male audience absorbs twice as much sound through their clothes as a female audience (Anon. 1931a: 5). As with many other cinemas’ first ventures in sound, there was inevitably technological failure. After the Albert Kinema’s talking picture debut, the local paper, *The Orcadian*, reported amusement when, ‘through a momentary failure of the projector, the picture faded from the screen but the dialogue continued at the point where the heroine, Miss Betty Compston, asks “What’s the matter?” The question raised a ripple of laughter from an audience deeply touched by the realism and dramatic power of the film’ (Anon. 1931e: 4).

Shetland was also defined by its distinctive island geography – and by its herring industry, which created a large influx of people to Lerwick, the main town in Shetland, particularly in the summer months. Like Orkney, Shetland had suffered from depopulation, with a population drop of around 6000 registered between 1911 and 1931, and unemployment also reached its peak during this time.<sup>17</sup> The purpose-built North Star Cinema

opened on Harbour Street in Lerwick in 1913. Its exhibited its first talking picture on 21 February, 1931, the American musical, *Sunny Side Up* (David Butler, 1929), accompanied by *Steamboat Willie* (Walt Disney, 1928). At the end of the week, the second programme followed with *The Singing Fool* (Lloyd Bacon, 1928).<sup>18</sup> What is perhaps interesting to note is the repetition in titles selected for premiering the cinema's new apparatus and that the film which had opened the talking pictures in Glasgow in 1929 continued to appeal to audiences in 1931. The first performances were well-received, with *Shetland Times* reporting full houses each evening and praising the sound reproduction as 'excellent' (Anon. 1931f: 1). As well as installing the new technology, the cinema had made a number of other improvements to the building, including altering the balcony to include emergency exits (ibid.: 1), a requirement for all cinemas following the tragic Glen Cinema disaster in Paisley in December 1929, when the appearance of smoke in the cinema led to panic which caused 69 young children to be crushed to death (Anon. 1930c: 2).



Albert Street, Kirkwall, 1930s, courtesy of Orkney Library and Archive.

The Albert Kinema is pictured on the far right (its name appearing on a light fixture). After the arrival of the talkies queues stretched all the way down the street to 'the big tree'.

When sound finally did arrive in the early 1930s, the return of audiences in such large numbers had a great impact on small rural townships. The first talkie was shown in June 1931, and by November 1931 the Albert Kinema had installed additional seating, replacing a café at the back of the cinema with extra seating to keep up with demand (Anon. 1932a: 4). By December 1931, *The Orcadian*, began to refer to the problem of the talkie queues, something which the local council was forced to address. In February 1932 it was noted that complaints had been made to the council about the queues and the obstruction they caused on Saturday nights. Suggestions were made to alter the hours of the Saturday performances. It was also noted by a councillor that a queue was already beginning to form on his way up the street to the council meeting (Anon. 1932f: 1). A year later, Kirkwall cinema audiences' enthusiasm for the talkies showed no signs of waning. The reviewer of *Good-night Vienna* in *The Orcadian* on 22 December 1932, complains about how 'a queue waited for three hours in pouring rain to see the first screening' of the film (Anon. 1932g: 1).

In Shetland, the arrival of the talkies provoked a similar response, with queues forming before performances becoming a regular occurrence. On 5 March 1931, the *Shetland Times* reported that the 'talkies at Lerwick picture house continue to attract huge and record audiences. Every night last week the large building was packed, and on several evenings many were unable to gain admission' (Anon. 1931d: 1). A description of the draw of the cinema in Wick, written for the *John O' Groat Journal* by a journalist who went under the name of 'Norseman', is about the period just before the arrival of the talkies, but still offers a good portrait of the impact of the social practices linked with cinema-going on the town at the time. The phrase 'skailing of the picters', , uses the Scots word spilling, to refer to a vision of people literally spilling out of the cinema at the end of a programme. Norseman writes:

To look on the 'skailing of the picters' on any evening after ten o'clock is to see a swarm of humanity big enough to make one wonder if there is such a thing as unemployment or poverty in Wick. The denizens of Poltney, Back Bridge Street, Louisburg, and a host of other lanes and side streets and closes are each night let loose from the yawning exits of the Pavilion, and, with hundreds of 'woodbines' glowing, they disperse to their respective pallets, where they snore out the night in dreams of next night's advance on the waiting 'fourpennie.'



(1930: 3)

Although some councils might have experienced challenges in dealing with problems associated with an increased influx of people into the towns, there were obvious economic benefits as the towns became bustling centres at weekends, with residents from surrounding areas travelling in and public transport being supplemented to meet the increased demand. Although there is evidence of travelling cinema exhibitors throughout Northern Scotland at the time,<sup>19</sup> which would have serviced the more geographically remote areas, the appeal of the talking pictures proved great and audiences returned to the cinemas.

For many rural areas, the rising popularity of the cinema eventually led to an increase in transport, scheduled to coincide with the cinema's timetables. In Caithness, additional train and bus services were introduced to enable those in the country to travel into town at weekends. On 12 September 1931, *The John O'Groat Journal* reported that the talkies were proving to be a draw for many people from the country districts and, as a result, one of the train services on Saturday evenings would be run later so as to allow people to catch the train after the film programme finished:

Wick Pavilion, with its talking pictures, continues to attract large and enthusiastic audiences at each performance. This week they have been treated to wonderfully good entertainments [...] The Talkies are drawing many people from the country districts, and the train from Wick to Lybster on Saturday evenings is to be run at 11.20 o'clock instead of 10.30. (Anon. 1931b: 4)

In Orkney, Caithness and Shetland, enterprising local businessmen started their own bus services which were advertised in the local papers. In Orkney, shortly after the talkies were introduced at Kirkwall's Albert Kinema, advertisements for 'Flett's buses' began to appear in *The Orcadian*: these were placed on the front page next to the cinema adverts.<sup>20</sup> Bertie Harvie, a current resident in Birsay, a small settlement on the north coast of mainland Orkney, has memories of what he says was still referred to as the 'talkie bus' until as late as the 1960s. According to Harvie, the bus was not just used by people travelling into Kirkwall to the cinema, but could also be used by for other purposes such as going to visit friends in a neighbouring village. The talkie bus could stop off at various locations on its way to Kirkwall and also collect people on their return home at the end of the evening.<sup>21</sup> Harvie's account provides a striking example of the great impact the talkies and their popularity had at

the time, but also of the way its impact resonated long after the novelty of the talking pictures had worn off. Just as the popularity of cinema-going in the 1920s and 30s influenced the web of transport carved through urban spaces, the draw of cinema in rural settings also left its mark on the rural civic landscape.

Other social and cultural practices traditionally associated with going to the cinema in the city were shared with rural audiences in Northern Scotland. Accounts in local newspapers of the period, as well as oral history interviews from local archives, include mention of various aspects of the cinema-going experience, from the importance of seating arrangements to cinema etiquette.<sup>22</sup> The cheap seats at the front were called, ‘the scratchers’ because they were uncomfortable.<sup>23</sup> Cinema-goers in Northern Scotland, like the audiences of Scotland’s metropolitan cinemas, are also reported to have used ‘jeely jars’ or jam jars as payment to get into the cinema as children (some recalled exchanging soda bottles for money to go to the cinema).

There were also shared social practices relating to the journeys to and from the cinema. In her research on cinema-goers in 1930s Britain, Annette Kuhn describes the significance of the journey in expressions of remembered cinema-going experiences. In particular, she refers to the way in which what she terms ‘the walking trope’ serves as a dominant feature in the way memories of cinema-going are structured (2002: 33). As she points out, walking was the predominant mode of transport for the 1930s generation in towns and cities and the cinema-going experience also entailed a journey on foot to and from the cinema. For this generation, ‘cinema buildings are recalled as familiar features of the everyday landscape, among the places close to and readily accessible from home. They are, in other words, a taken-for-granted element of what in Cockney parlance is called one’s “manor”’ (2002: 34). However, as Kuhn goes on to mention, ‘not all 1930s cinemagoers were metropolitan, nor even are they all urban’ (2002:35). But for many cinema audiences, particularly those in the areas under consideration here, attachment to place is crucial to their experience of the cinema. As Kuhn writes in relation to respondents’ memories of the spatial practices of cinema-going, ‘these people belong to the area, and the pathways they tread all lead to the pictures. In their memory maps, local picture houses serve as stopping-off points in familiar, everyday foot passages from home through remembered streets’ (2002: 35).

For many cinema-goers in the North of Scotland, cinema-going and the cinema as a local landmark played an important role in the way they ‘read’ their everyday environment. Like the cinemas in larger metropolitan areas, rural cinemas also attempted to draw in customers with elaborate promotional campaigns. In Orkney, for instance, the Albert

Kinema's Sweet Shop staged enticing displays in the cinema's windows that faced onto Albert Street, a main thoroughfare in Kirkwall. An article in *The Orcadian* in December 1932, offers praise for the cinema's Christmas themed display:

Seldom has there been a more attractive window display at the Albert Kinema Sweet Shop than there is this Christmastide. Snowy ground effects set off to perfection the many novelties in chocolate or candy which tempt old and young alike. [...] There are some very pretty little country inn gifts--snow on the roofs, picturesque windows lit up, prancing coach horses arriving with Yuletide guests and the interiors of the inns crammed full of good things from the sweets factory. (Anon. 1932e: 5)

Such displays would have doubtless proved a draw for local children. In the diary of the Orcadian filmmaker and poet Margaret Tait, written when Tait was thirteen, the cinema proves a central reference point in an account of her activities over the course of a weekend. Although Tait attends the cinema on a number of occasions, she also refers to the cinema as one of various landmarks identified as a place to meet-up with other teens.<sup>24</sup> For instance, on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day after April Fool's Day, Tait writes about meeting other children at the cinema on what was known then as 'Tailing Day', an old Orkney tradition whereby children would secretively pin paper tails on one another (or even better, on upstanding adult members of the community). The tails were made of paper or even pigs' tails kept aside by local butchers. In Tait's account of Tailing Day, she describes how, after walking out to Scapa Bay at the very edge of the town with her friend Isobel, they make their way to the 'picture house', where they meet a group of boys who were there ready with a lot of tails.



Norwegian Sailor outside the North Star Cinema in Lerwick (Shetland), 1930s, Shetland Archive

Although there are many similarities between the accounts of cinema-goers in rural Scotland and those in more metropolitan contexts, there are also distinct variations to the cinema-going experiences in Northern Scotland in the 1930s, much of which stems from the challenges presented by the region's distinctive geography. All the communities looked at in this article were near to the sea, and this created a unique inflection in the overall cinema-going experience. As noted earlier, many cinema-goers in rural areas, like those attending metropolitan cinemas, shaped and benefitted from rapid developments in train and bus transport. However, in cinemas in the North of Scotland, sea transport was also vital, transporting cinema-goers and also the films themselves. In both Orkney and Shetland, the films arrived by boat. In one account of the North Star cinema in Shetland, the film cans were sometimes quickly unloaded from a late arriving boat and rushed up to the cinema for the evening's screening (Anon. 2003: 22). Close proximity to the sea also ensured a regular flow of non-local visitors including, as previously mentioned, those tied to seasonal fishing work; but there were sailors and the military as well. Orkney's history as a significant Royal Navy base led to a great influx of non-natives, and their ships also introduced new technologies. In the early 1930s, a number of battleships had been fitted with sound cinemas, including the HMS Queen Elizabeth. Other novelties also provoked interest from the local community, such as the sighting of servicemen with small, portable "baby" movie-cameras' (Anon. 1932d: 5). The influx of such visitors to communities would have also altered the experience

of cinema-going through simply through the resulting diversification of cinema audiences, and the different customs accompanying them. For instance, some cinema-goers in Shetland, have described how their memories of watching films there were marked by the distinctive aroma of cigarettes traded by Russian sailors.

For many people in the areas covered by the case studies, the spatial routine of cinema-going extended beyond the geographical confines of the towns where the cinema were situated. Instead, a trip to the cinema involved lengthy and often complex journeys to into town. In an interview with Shetland Archives, James Lawrence Hall recalled trips to Lerwick being part of routine, necessary travel to the town:

Well, you see, dey wir more ta do in Lerwick. An well, you wir drivin most o da times an if you didna drive you could obviously get a seat in buckshee if da other fellows, if the other fellow was drivin. Well, he used to court as well in Lerwick, so he used ta gien an go ta da pictures or socialise.<sup>25</sup>

The journey to the town undoubtedly shaped the overall experience of going to the cinema for many cinema-goers who faced similar challenges accessing transport and travelling through geographically remote locations. Similarly, the influx of people travelling into the town for the cinema would have also made its own noticeable impact on the overall complexion of the town itself. Writing in the *John O' Groat Journal* in February 1932, 'Norseman' notes: a 'feature of the modern Saturday night is the large number of country people who are visiting the town. The bulk of these visitors are transported by the curious buses which now ply regular Saturday night trade. The "talkies" attract some, the shops and the sense of life attract others, and the accumulative result makes this night interesting above all others' (1932: 4).

For many country people, the town was an exotic place. In the 1920s and 1930s, many roads into town would not have been paved, making journeys to the town challenging and infrequent. In his memoir, James W. Irvine, recalls growing up in his village in Shetland, when 'by the time children had reached school-leaving age they would have been to town maybe only two or three times in their lives.' Lerwick, as he describes it, was seen as 'a frightening place [...] There was an awful lot of people, and quite a lot of cars, and the people seemed so different from those at home. If, by chance, your trip to town involved a visit to either dentist or hospital, you would remember for many years thereafter the distinctive smells you associated with both. But the town also had bonuses in the shape of

shops selling sweets of all kinds, and some selling toys of all sorts. [...] they were the product of these Aladdin's caves which could only be found in Lerwick' (2000: 24).<sup>26</sup>

As James W. Irvine points out in his book-length study of Lerwick, however, apart from home-produced entertainment, in its early days The North Star provided the main source of entertainment in the town (1985: 219). In an interview for Shetland Archives, Harry Budge, describes the North Star as a central focal point in social life in Lerwick:

Bit da North Star really wis some place, dats where everybody went, hit wis da only social life apairt fae dances an dat. Gathered in dere, every Saturday efternun dey hed a matinee fur da youngsters an dat an dey got maybe Tarzan o da Apes or somethin laek dat, an dey got maybe a half an oor wan saturday an dan ta be continued next saturday. [Laughter] An you wir fightin each idder in da street fur a penny ta get in.<sup>27</sup>



Harry Budge on his bicycle outside the North Star, 1937

The journey to the cinema was also distinguished by the modern conveniences afforded by the town. Around the time of the arrival of the talkies, electricity itself was still relatively novel in the North of Scotland, with many areas not receiving electricity until the 1950s (Anderson 2018: 23). Certainly in Orkney, outside a small radius around Kirkwall, very few could afford to use electricity.<sup>28</sup> In this context, the comfortable surroundings of the local cinema, replete with electricity and now ‘talking pictures,’ served as a draw for many in the community. In a report on a special meeting of the Glasgow Orkney and Shetland Association in November 1932, called to debate on the topic of ‘The Influence of Cinema’, one member argues that ‘many cinema patrons go to “the pictures” simply to pass a few hours in a comfortable seat with shaded lights--they do not go there to think’ (Anon. 1932b: 5). Electric lighting was also used in other ways by cinemas to entice audiences with a sense of glamour. For instance, within a few months of the Albert Kinema being wired for sound, the cinema had installed a new electric sign, which an article in *The Orcadian* boasted to have ‘seventy three lamps, 14 feet long by 14 inches high’ (Anon. 1932c: 4). The novelty of electricity, but also other extravagances such as dining experiences and live music were all part of the rural cinemas’ presentation of lavish settings equal to those found in larger towns and cities. In an advertisement for the opening of The Pavilion in Wick, the new sound apparatus, changes in electric light and seating are referred to as establishing it as ‘a place of up-to-date entertainment [...] [that] now ranks with those in modern cities.’ (1930b: 4).

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The experience of cinema-going in the 1930s described throughout this article shared much in common with experiences in Scotland’s larger cities. Although as John Caughie has argued, cinema played an important civic role in rural Scottish life (2016), it clearly also played a role in the articulation of modernity in communities in Northern Scotland. However, Scotland’s distinctive geography shaped unique variations in aspects of the cinema-going experience. In many of the townships discussed in this article, the geographical remoteness of some communities in relation to the local cinema presented a very particular set of challenges to cinema-goer and their journey to the cinema. It can also be argued that cinemas of the North of Scotland benefited from their geographical distance from larger cities.

In his book, *From Silent Screen to Multi-Screen*, Stuart Hanson describes how in the 1930s ‘there was a move away from smaller local cinemas to newer sites in city and town centres and the burgeoning suburbs. [...] smaller cinemas associated with particular

localities [...] found it increasingly difficult to compete with the newer, more sophisticated cinemas, particularly since the advent of sound had favoured the large chains who could afford the conversions.’ (2007: 60). This could also have affected districts within reach of the larger cities in Scotland. Writing in 1928, J. S. Ratcliffe blames the improvement of public transport systems for the demise of small-town cinemas: ‘every big town is linked up by a network of bus routes running in and out to a late hour to all the smaller places within 20 or 30 miles. [...] The residents in the small towns, now having the facilities to get in to the better shows, have had to be better catered for to try and retain their patronage locally.’<sup>29</sup> While this was certainly true in relation to the conurbations of Glasgow or Edinburgh, the distinctive geographical locations of the cinemas in the North of Scotland, meant that smaller, more geographically isolated, local cinemas survived their slow transition to the new sound technologies. However, although the talkies arrived late to the rural cinemas of the North, the impact was still great – the new technology proved to be a significant draw and ticket sales rose, producing a similar lively impact on the town centres that had been experienced a few years earlier in Scotland’s larger cities.

As John Caughie points out, there is ‘no grand narrative flowing from the centre to the peripheries’ (2016: 36). However, it is important to acknowledge the similarities as well as the differences. This article, as with other accounts of New Cinema History research, insists on the ‘acknowledgment of the diversity of the social experience of cinema and a concomitant resistance to compress that diversity into a single overarching account of “the cinema” (Biltreyst, Maltby, Meers 2019: 13). In the early twentieth century, the cinemas of Wick, Thurso, Kirkwall and Lerwick played an important role in the great network of experiences associated with modernity: the increased mobility and movement of people, the crowding of towns and ‘skailing o’ the picters’, experiences which provided just as relevant an encounter with modern life as any of those enjoyed in larger cities.

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<sup>2</sup> *British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound*, was an AHRC-funded project led by Laraine Porter at De Montfort University, AH/L013800/1.

<sup>3</sup> *Kinematograph Yearbook* (1931), London: Kinematograph Publications, Ltd.

<sup>4</sup> Willie Docherty, interviewed by Janet McBain, 19 March 1979, ref 8/16, National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive.

<sup>5</sup> Janet McBain questions Docherty specifically about this in her interview with him (see previous note).

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<sup>6</sup> Other cinema exhibitors were also experimenting with sound during the period. For instance, In May 1929, it was reported that the manager of the Elgin Picture House (near Aberdeen) had ‘completed and successfully installed an apparatus which, it is claimed, will compare very favourably with the most expensive installations (Anon 1929c). Also in the East, the Town Hall Cinema in Inverurie and the Picture House in Forres were both equipped with sound by the 1930s (*Kinematograph Yearbook* 1930).

<sup>7</sup> *Kinematograph Yearbook* (1931), London: Kinematograph Publications, Ltd.

<sup>8</sup> Wick’s population in 1931 was 7,548, a slight decline from the 8,115 recorded in the 1921 census. Thurso’s population in 1931 was 2,946, also a decline from the 1921 census, which recorded a population of 3,039. A Vision of Britain Through Time project, University of Portsmouth, [http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10168326/cube/TOT\\_POP](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10168326/cube/TOT_POP) <accessed 13 February 2019>.

<sup>9</sup> Advertisement for the ‘New Pavilion’, 27 June 1930, *John O’ Groat Journal*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> In 1914, the Thurso Picture House had held a demonstration of Edison’s early experiment with talking pictures, the Kinetophone. Trevor Griffiths has noted that, in Edinburgh, the Kinetophone was adopted at least two cinemas (2018, p. 170).

<sup>11</sup> Advertisement for the Picture House, *Caithness Courier*, 5 June 1931, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Advertisement for the Picture House, *Caithness Courier*, 3 July 1931, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Advertisements for the Picture House, 29 August and 19 September 1930, *Caithness Courier*, p.2.

<sup>14</sup> Advertisement for the Picture House, *Caithness Courier*, 1 August 1930, p. 1. The herring industry led to significant migration into Caithness which experienced a dramatic population boom from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and at one point Wick was noted as the busiest fishing port in Britain.

<sup>15</sup> Advertisements for the Picture House, *John O’Groat Journal*, 2 Jan 1931, p. 1 and 12 December 1931, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Information on population drawn from *Peace’s Orkney Almanac and County Directory for 1935-1940*, Kirkwall, Orkney: Orkney Herald, 1940; *Peace’s Orkney Almanac and County Directory for 1930-1934*, Kirkwall, Orkney: Orkney Herald, 1934; and Anderson (2018).

<sup>17</sup> See UK Census 1911 and 1931; also A Vision of Britain Through Time project, University of Portsmouth, [http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10168326/cube/TOT\\_POP](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10168326/cube/TOT_POP) <date accessed 13 February 2019>. In the 1930s, film exhibition also took place in Stromness (Orkney’s second largest town) at the North End Cinema and on the Isle of Stronsay, *Kinematograph Yearbook* (1931), London: Kinematograph Publications, Ltd.

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<sup>18</sup> Advert in *Shetland Times*, 21 February 1931, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> In January 1931, one travelling exhibitor equipped with sound apparatus, began showing talking pictures to audiences along the Northeast coast (Brora, Dornoch and Golspie). The film shown was the US musical, *Street Girl* (Wesley Ruggles, 1929), starring Betty Compson (Anon. 1931c: 4). However, shortly after its inaugural screening, the service was discontinued with little explanation other than that it was ‘owing to the delicacy of machinery’, advertisement in *The Northern Times*, 22 January 1931, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Orkney Herald*, 13 January 1932, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Bertie Harvie, Birsay, Orkney, interviewed by Sarah Neely, 21 September 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Shetland Archives and Orkney Archive both hold oral history interviews which include discussion of cinema-going during the period

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Shetland Archive’s interview with Harry Budge, SA3/1/193/1.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Tait, diary, 1932, Margaret Tait collection, D97, Orkney Archive.

<sup>25</sup> James Laurence Hall (1914-1995) interviewed by Isobel Mitchell for Shetland Archives Community History Project, Tingwall, Whiteness and Weisdale Parish.

<sup>26</sup> Irvine also refers to the fact that many children were sent to boarding school in Lerwick. Boys and girls were placed separate accommodation, with the female pupils given a 6 p.m. curfew, whereas male pupils had none, leaving them free to pursue leisure activities in the town, such as going to the cinema (2000: 28).

<sup>27</sup> Harry Budge, interviewed by Isobel Mitchell, Shetland Archives, 18 July, 1985.

<sup>28</sup> The novelty of electricity in hotels in Orkney’s two major townships is testament to this. An advertisement for the Kirkwall and Stromness Hotels in the 1930 edition of *Peace’s Orkney Almanac and County Directory* (Kirkwall: Proprietors of Orkney Herald), describes them as ‘most up-to-date hotels in the North of Scotland’, with ‘electric light’ and ‘excellent cuisine’.

<sup>29</sup> Ratcliffe, J. S. (1928), ‘Scottish Notes’, *The Musicians’ Journal*, October, p. 14 (Musicians’ Union Archive MU/1/3, University of Stirling).