

## **The event which is in front of her eyes: 1930s' Scottish Highland and Islands life- the documentary photography and film of M.E.M. Donaldson, Jenny Gilbertson and Margaret Fay Shaw.**

'The event which is in front of her eyes' comes from the following John Berger quote:

*'The photographer chooses the events he photographs. The choice can be thought of as a cultural construction. The space for this construction is, as it were, cleared by his rejection of what he did not choose to photograph. The construction is his reading of the event which is in front of his eyes. It is that reading, often intuitive and very fast, which decides his choice of the instant to be photographed'.* [1]

For the purposes of this essay, I choose to imagine every 'he' of this quotation about a photographer's choice, reading and gaze, as 'she'. What did Donaldson, Gilbertson and Shaw see? Did they see their work as a 'cultural construction'? How did they read the events in front of them?

These women are not grouped together purely because of their biological gender. None were native to the rural communities they photographed or filmed, with only Gilbertson being Scottish by birth. [2] All chose independently to move to, and live over a substantial period of time with the rural communities they were documenting. M.E.M. Donaldson left England to build her own home on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula; Margaret Fay Shaw, an American, moved from New York to live with the sisters Peigi [1874-1969] and Màiri MacRae [1883-1972] for six years at their croft at North Glendale, South Uist; and Jenny Gilbertson (née Brown) went as a single woman to live on a croft in Shetland, in order to make films, then settled there following her marriage to a crofter. None were formally trained in photography or filmmaking. All taught themselves. All three had independent means [3], allowing them a freedom of movement unusual for middle or upper class women for their time. It should be noted that whilst women in the UK over 30 were given the vote in 1918, the age limit was only lowered to that of men in 1928. All three women had initially gone against their families wishes to move away and work independently. As Gilbertson wrote in later autobiographical notes:

*'In fact, when I think of it, this independent streak was probably developing the hard way all through my teens. My mother struggling to keep the Victorian idea of total obedience in a daughter.'* [3]

Donaldson states a family lack of support, the strongest: *'As regards to my literary and photographic efforts, they received every discouragement... I had no influence whatever – nor have I yet – to help me along and indeed in this and every other department of my interests... I have had to fight alone with my back to the wall.'* [4].

Unlike contemporaries such as Mary Field [1896-1968] or Evelyn Spice Cherry [1904-1990] who co-produced and collaborated on films for governmental agencies, neither Donaldson, Gilbertson nor Shaw was working within an institutional system. All were independents, either trying to sell individual works (films, photographs or essays for publication in magazines) in the cases of Shaw and Gilbertson, when they could, or making publishing opportunities (Shaw and Donaldson). There is no evidence that the three women knew each other, or each other's photography or film work, in particular in the 1930s'. [5]

These are the similarities. This essay will also look at each one's motivations for making the work that they did; and how they represented the subject in front of their camera. Through comparison of their work and processes to their better known male contemporaries who were also documenting Scottish rural communities, I will frame their work in a wider national and international context of the documentary photography and film making of the inter-war years.

### **Jenny Gilbertson**

Jenny Gilbertson's career as a film maker was in two parts; the first in the 1930s' filming aspects of Shetland life. She made one film '*Prairie Winter*' (1934) with Evelyn Spice Cherry in Canada. In the second part of her career, she recorded the lives of remote Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic. Her CV notes the reason for the lengthy break being that during WW2: '*She sold her Eyemo camera. She had two children to bring up and her husband was invalided out of the army. She began teaching and taught for twenty years. In the 1960s' she began filming again.*' [6] What makes Gilbertson's achievements even more noteworthy are that her career break meant she had to learn two different systems as technology expanded from cinema to broadcast. From making early connections with John Grierson, the 'father' of the British Documentary movement; she then latterly had to navigate television companies for her work to be shown via UK and Canadian Broadcasting Corporations.

Gilbertson said that she: '*...chose Shetland because I had been there many times on holiday, graduating from being a mere tourist in a Hotel to being a real friend of a crofting family and being one of themselves.*' [7] The first work she made, on an amateur 16mm Cine-Kodak camera, was '*A Crofter's Life in Shetland*' (1931). This film is not character-led, unlike Robert J. Flaherty's [1884-1951] '*Nanook of the North*' (1922), which follows one protagonist or family. Rather, through an episodic format, utilising title cards to punctuate and set the scene, Gilbertson's camera roams for over an hour, across her subject matter of Shetland people and place; showing different farming methods or different bird colonies, the form of a day's activity on the croft, the fishing boats bringing in their haul to Lerwick and the subsequent getting the fish ready for market on the quay side. Significantly her film charts a full year of life in Shetland, following the farming seasons. Gilbertson significantly roots the crofter's way of life alongside other events and life there, including a wedding on Fetlar,

life in Lerwick, Shetland's capital and '*the loneliest men in Britain*' at Muckle Flugga lighthouse, the furthestmost point of Shetland. '*A Crofter's Life on Shetland*' is, in a sense, Gilbertson's magnum opus due to the sheer range of subject matter it covers. Finely observed variation can be seen throughout, whether through different farming methods on the island, in particular the activity of ploughing which shows examples of different combinations of animal, through to just people working in a group to turn the land over. It is also shown in particular with Gilbertson's footage of bird colonies, types of bird, behaviours, nesting and young, including herring gulls, cormorants, crows, kittiwakes, common guillemots, arctic terns and fulmars. Gilbertson shows them in their natural habitat, populating the cliffs, soaring in their hundreds in the sky, yet she also follows them as they crowd the boats bringing in the catch, and also in one scene as adolescent gulls scramble over bread outside a Lerwick bakers.

Gilbertson (or Jenny Brown as she was then), had edited '*A Crofter's Life in Shetland*' in London then hired a studio to show it to John Grierson: "*He was unknown to me, but several people said he was the person to show it to...*" [8] Grierson was impressed by the film, writing for Gilbertson a forward for a programme [9] in 1932, commending her for, '*being a real illuminator of life and movement*'. He went on to comment that '*... [the film] gets down to the life of the crofters and the fishermen and brings the naturalness out of it... In amateur cinema, the people are always standing and staring and failing to be themselves. In commercial cinema the people might as well be standing and staring for all the reality they demonstrate. Miss Brown has already broken through the curse of artificiality.... I think the best thing she did was to go straight to the crofters and live with them.*' [10]

Grierson also recognised that her decision to spend real time in the crofting community in order to capture a more realistic and detailed picture of everyday life: "*She lived with them round the seasons for a year, on the unique assumption that the dramatic unity of a crofter's life could not conceivably be the period of a six weeks' summer holiday... You have to belong if you are to catch the details of the daily round which make up the drama of people's existence*". [11]

On seeing it, John Grierson went on to encourage her to make a film with a narrative. '*The Rugged Island- A Shetland Lyric*' (1932), follows the story of a courting couple in a dilemma as to whether they will carry on in the croft or emigrate. Gilbertson for this film worked with the Shetland crofters she knew, her husband-to-be Johnny Gilbertson and the Clarks who she had lodged with. Grierson went on to buy five of Gilbertson's shorter documentary films for the G.P.O Unit. These films, '*Da Maakin o a Keshie*' (1932, 5 mins), '*Sheep's Clothing*' (1932, 10 minutes), '*A Cattle Sale*' (1932, 3 mins), '*Shetland Croft Life [Peat from hillside to home]*' (1932, 6 mins) and '*Seabirds in the Shetland Isles*' (1932, 9 mins) were all edited from footage Gilbertson had taken from her first film. For '*Seabirds in the Shetland Isles*', Gilbertson camped alone with a tent and provisions on the uninhabited Isle of Stennis, to

capture footage of bird species, including eggs hatching. In the latter part of the 1930s' a series of other short films, edited and produced by Cuthbert Cayley were also made from off-cuts from her first film.

Gilbertson's motivation was primarily for her films to be educational. She made lectures and talks with her films, touring from the early 1930s' until the end of her life. As well as touring the work through lectures in Scotland and UK, Gilbertson also in 1934 forged her Canadian network, through her first lecture series hosted by National Council of Education in the winter of 1934-5, taking the lecture to '*... Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver, showing 'Seabirds' and 'A Crofter's Life in Shetland', in public halls, to Universities and to schools*' [12]. Interestingly, in reflection of this tour, Gilbertson in later life noted that the invitation occurred due to the migration of many Scots to Canada, giving an appetite for films about Scotland:

*'The previous year's lectures had been advertised as being about some aspects of Britain and Italy. Many Scots in Canada protested because Britain had been represented only by England, so for the following year the Organising Secretary was looking for someone with a lecture on some aspects of Scottish Life'*. [13]

Over the course of career she wanted her films to be '*edited for television and for educational purposes, or they will lie in the vaults of the museum uselessly.*' [14]. 'The museum' refers to films Gilbertson made for the Museum of Man in Ottawa, which held the negatives.

Gilbertson writes to one of the administrators Mr Shackell in a letter 19.1.89 that she wishes access to the material to make a further series of films from it: '*I am particularly anxious for this to be done in my lifetime: otherwise it is possible these negatives and records will remain buried in the vaults of the Museum for all time.*' [15].

### **Margaret Fay Shaw**

A trained musician, Shaw's primary motivation to move from New York to South Uist in 1929 was to transcribe Gaelic songs at their source. She had spent periods in Scotland as a teenager and in her early twenties [16]. In her own words, she '*... chose South Uist, as the island least visited by strangers and where there would be an opportunity to live amongst a friendly and unprejudiced people not self-conscious of their unique heritage.*' [17]. Early on after her arrival on South Uist, she heard Màiri MacRae, who had been brought in from the kitchen to sing to company at Boisdale House. She was invited by Màiri to learn the song by visiting her at home in Glendale. On making the journey to the croft, which was two miles from any road and easier accessed by boat, Shaw asked if she could lodge there with Màiri, her son Donald and her sister Peigi. Over the next six years, Shaw transcribed the MacRae's songs and those of their neighbours, further learning Gaelic over this period too. Michael Russell in his book '*A Different Country: The Photographs of Werner Kissling*' attributes Shaw's knowledge of Gaelic- '*almost unique[ly] amongst photographers who worked in the*

*Hebrides* - as a way 'to penetrate Hebridean culture more thoroughly and to get closer to the rhythms of place'. [18]

Like Shetland film maker Jenny Gilbertson, through the prolonged period of time spent living on a croft, Shaw was highly aware of its seasons and cycle. She records both in her diary, her transcript '*The Outer Hebrides*' and subsequently in her life work '*Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*' (1955):

*The spring work of the croft began in February, when seaweed, used as fertilizer, was cut with a saw-toothed sickle called a corran on the tidal islands of the loch at low water of a spring tide*'. [19]

The year closes with: '*All the harvest work done, the women wash and card the wool and start the spinning wheels. It is the season for the fireside and the ceilidh, the rough weather and the short days*.' [20]

Whereas Paul Strand was later to take single photographic portraits of South Uist islanders over three months in the summer of 1954, Shaw over her six years there, focussed on this single community and recorded it in detail. This rich material would be published in 1955 in her significant work '*Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*'. She also during this period made trips to St Kilda, the Aran Islands and Mingulay, all of which she photographed. Her essay '*Hunting Folk Songs in the Hebrides*' was published in National Geographic Magazine, whilst '*St Kilda and the Last Summer*' was printing in Scots Magazine in 1980. Following meeting the folklorist John Lorne Campbell [1906-1996] at Lochboisdale Hotel, they married and she moved to Barra where he lived, in 1935, and then to Canna House on the Scottish island of Canna by the end of the decade, where their home and archive is still maintained by National Trust for Scotland. Shaw, like Gilbertson, also had a connection with Canada, through her and her husband's networks of music and Gaelic, in particular with Nova Scotia. Shaw also took film of South Uist and Barra with her cine camera, but it remained unedited by her, to be shown to those in the South Uist community and her networks.

### **MEM Donaldson**

MEM Donaldson was the oldest of the three women - in 1930 she was fifty-four. Born in England and brought up in Surrey, Donaldson travelled to Scotland repeatedly, to write the first of her travel books, '*Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands*' (1921), and '*Further Wanderings- Mainly in Argyll*', (1926). Her photographs were illustrations for her books. She moved to her home which she designed, then had built in Sanna in 1927, on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. The house was complete with photography studio and she lived there until 1947. In the 1930's there were two further books, '*The Country of Clan Ranald*'

(1931) and *'Scotland's Suppressed History'* (1935); the latter a diatribe on Presbyterianism in Scotland. Donaldson's photographs over this 1930s' continued to be of the landscapes from her walks, stones, crosses and other landmarks, crofters from the Scottish locations she visited and those from the Ardnamurchan community. Donaldson also photographed those closest to her such as Isabel Bonus, other friends and the ghillies and guides who accompanied her on many of her walks.

Donaldson out of the three women, covers the widest range of Scottish landscapes and locations. Island locations include Eigg, Skye, Oransay, Colonsay, Islay, Jura and Iona. From the Highlands there are photographs of Kintyre, Kintail, Wester Ross, Appin, Arisaig, Glen Affric, Lochaline, Loch Linnhe, Ballachuilish, Kingussie, Glen Affric, Roy Bridge, Knapdale, Morvern, down into the Trossachs.

Her work is held by two archives, Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, who hold her landscape photography and the National Library of Scotland who holds her portraiture photographs. Donaldson's landscape photography mirrors author Nan Shepherd's [1893-1981] writing, where the experience of the landscape is a physical and psychological journey 'into' (in Shepherd's case, the Cairngorms) rather than merely a simple passage over. Donaldson's landscapes are not composed as passive views to be looked at; they are to be journeyed into. The photographs circle lochans, dip into glens and cross plateaus. In particular *'In Glen Carrich'* has a sequence of photographs that show the terrain unfolding. The eye traces the route in front of the camera, spotting the gap in the stones in the foreground, cutting round the corner of a rocky mound, tracking left around the hill with the three trees to the hidden landscape beyond. In others, a device such as a meandering burn, an intermittent path or rough track takes you further into the photograph. Donaldson wrote:

*'Certainly to a lover of the wild, the monotony of a level stretch of high road, with its dull, even surface, doubles the distance, while the interest of a constantly varied and often ill-defined track, full of surprises and with a marked individuality, seems actually to halve the distance.'* [21]

Donaldson's portraits also express the figure's relationship to their surroundings, whether photographs of villagers, or those she employed to accompany her over the terrain of the highlands. Rather than the staged photographs of Walter Blaikie [1847-1928], where he asked Hebridean islanders to re-perform a certain task to camera, Donaldson frames the subjects with her photographs really as part of their surroundings. Whether they either have a long way to go or want to get as close as they can to the landscape, both categories really *inhabit* the land. In one example, there is a profile view of a seaweed gatherer, bent double with the weight of the load he carries in a basket on his back. A second image from the sequence shows his figure in the middle distance. He is on the beach, framed by rocks in the

foreground, and showing the contours of the island of Rum behind. By reducing the scale of the figure, the viewer can see how far he must walk, and therefore the physicality and difficulty of his labour. Another photograph shows the ghillie John Mackenzie, lying horizontal on rocks, to drink from the Red Burn. The informality of this photograph, as he lies like Narcissus, is again in contrast to the norm in Victorian photography of people formally seated or standing.

This interconnectedness between people and place can also be seen in Gilbertson's work. Her editing and inter-titles consistently make the connection, for example, *'Out of the sea comes the crofter's dinner'*, shows men line-fishing for flounders in *'A Crofter's Life on Shetland'* (1931).

For Donaldson, the photographs, in particular her landscape photography, were linked to the walks themselves, and her need to engage her mind and body in this task. Also, highly religious, Donaldson viewed her walks into the landscape as a way to commune with her Creator. The sharpness in focus of Donaldson's photographs, which she processed herself, encourages a level of active looking. From her photographs in the Cuillins, the lines of the ravines on the flanks of the mountains in the background are as precise as the sheen of the wet stones of the plateau that gently coruscate in the foreground. Nan Shepherd describes a changing the focus of the eye, and the ego, to see the landscape anew: *'As I watch, it arches its back and each layer of landscape bristles... Details are no longer part of a grouping of a picture around which I am the focal point, the focal point is everywhere... This is how the earth must see itself.'*[22] Donaldson's photographs of landscape also encapsulate this shift of the ego from the person to land. Perhaps out of the three women, her work most represents an 'embodied' knowledge, which arises through the physical experience of the terrain.

### **Motivations**

Each woman had a different motivation for photographing and filming. For Gilbertson, it was primarily to educate and to inform about the way of life on Shetland. From a draft of an unpublished essay *'A Fetlar Wedding'* written in 1931, she defines her motivations for making her first film *'A Crofter's Life on Shetland'* (1931) as follows:

*"My reason for being in Shetland just now is to make a film of the islands that I may at some later date enlighten the uneducated masses in "the South" who are under the impression that Shetlanders are hardly yet out of the wood and skin stage and that the boat (if there is one) calls at St Kilda first".* [23]

'The South' is a phrase used by Shetlanders for anyone residing below Shetland, so includes Orkney, Scottish mainland and England. This spirited comment defines her motivations in opposition to factors that compelled her throughout her filmmaking career – to tell an

authentic story about rural communities. Gilbertson wished to give a picture of Shetlanders that was informed rather than sweeping. Her films fairly represented those who lived there, showing people and location carefully, rather than create a hackneyed or romantic view of the enchantment of island life. Whilst a number of other films of the period such as Werner Kissling's *'Eriskay – a Poem of Remote Lives'* (1935) re-iterate remoteness, with its voiceover and titles calling these *'isles of enchantment'* and *'distant'*, Gilbertson deftly widens the range of her film. Rather than focusing purely on crofting life, cutting it loose from modern time as the sole subject of a film, she places its scenes of farming and everyday life and labour alongside sequences of a more fashionable life in Shetland's capital Lerwick. The film shows cars trying to navigate the tight corners of narrow streets and a flapper in a leather coat walking down the main street. Exploring alternative ideas of remoteness, the film includes *'the loneliest men in Britain'* and the changing of the uniformed guards of the shoreline, the lighthouse keepers at Muckle Flugga. Kissling prefers to keep a romantic view of the islanders for the film audiences as if the crofters of Eriskay are trapped in time and mist: *'little has changed in this corner of Gaeldom'*. He shows the islanders involved in the same activities as Gilbertson does, carding the wool and spinning, bringing in the peats, or men and women working together on the land. However this activity is referred to as a *'primitive life'*, where the islanders are *'content with what they own and are happy to work the meagre soil'*. The narrative that Gilbertson applies is quite different. The language she uses is not placing a reading or presuming to give an overview of the islanders, rather to bring out points of interest for the audience. Sometimes it is a statement of fact, or giving a further bit of information to the visuals such as *'the herring gull – first to lay and first to hatch'* or *'Many girls leave their crofts for a few months to gut fish'*.

In her diary [24] she aligns her motivation to capture the reality of crofters and their lives with the opinion of the Shetlanders themselves, by noting down a debate a group of men were having on the very subject:

*'Came down to the shop where most of the men on the island were congregated, Jamsie in a pink scarf towering over them all. They had a controversy about what Shetlanders know of other places and how little the south knows of Shetland. One man left London for Lerwick and disappeared – at the end of a fortnight they found him in the Hebrides still looking for Lerwick. Jamsie can't understand it. "Doo hesna been in Cornwall or Devon," he said to one of the other men. "No". "But doo has read in books or keens what doo would expect ta find".- "Yes!!!" – "Weel why is it not the sam vice versa?"*

The islanders' understanding of the wider world is also backed up in Gilbertson's diary, where she details how a number of the islanders she is filming on different crofts have emigrated at one point and returned. *'13 April: Went down to Hubie this afternoon to see if there was any ploughing. I had heard of someone ploughing with four ponies – I found the man's brother who was carting seaweed up to the farmyard. .. He has been in most countries*



*and 20 years in Australia in a lumber camp and helping another brother with a dairy farm*'. She also comments in her diary on Andrew Manson, who she filmed again for 'A Crofter's Life on Shetland', ploughing a field this time with an ox and pony ploughing together: 'When a young man he was five years in New York, and has seen much of the world as a sailor – 28 years ago he came home, married and settled on a croft.' [25].

The movement of islanders is also interestingly recorded in Margaret Fay Shaw's biography notes for Peigi MacRae, who travelled from South Uist to Shetland one summer to gut fish: 'Shetland to Peigi was beautiful, green, green and no heather!' [26]. As well as noting the difference in terrain, Peigi notes the difference of carrying creels: 'The Shetland women were very nice, going home with a creel of peats on their back held with a strap across their forehead and always knitting, knitting as they walked about.' In 'A Crofter's Life on Shetland' (1931), the women are shown taking turns to wash each other down from fish scales at the end of the day. This practice is also described in Peigi MacRae's biography notes: 'When finished she would stand in a tub with her oilskins and boots and the others would rinse her off with salt water to be clean for the next day and she would have to do that for the other ones'. It is lovely to note that whilst there is no evidence that Shaw visited Shetland, Peigi MacRae did.

For Margaret Fay Shaw, her aim of her photography was to capture the authenticity and source that this community represented. The 'source' is the singer, the landscape, language, stories and lives. Martin Padgett in his book 'Photographers of the Western Isles' [27] notes Shaw's quest for authenticity, referencing the first occasion Shaw heard a Gaelic song, sung by Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857-1930) [28] and wishing that she could hear the song in its raw state sung by the original island singers. [29] Magdalena Sagarzazu, retired Canna House Archivist and Shaw's 'amanuensis' believes that the photographs cannot be viewed alone without relating them to music and culture; they sit holistically within a wider context. This is borne out through Shaw's pencil notations of the songs, held as part of the Canna House archive, as well as the final transcriptions in Shaw's 'Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist' where tune, words and sometimes composition are attributed to those who appear in her photographs from the Glendale community. For example, 'Óran Fogarraich – An Exile's Song': 'The tune, chorus and first verse from Miss Peigi MacRae, the second and third verses from Angus John Campbell.' [30] Shaw records for most songs how the singer learnt the song: 'Miss Macrae learnt the song from Miss Catriona MacIntosh while employed at Boisdale House when a young girl'. [31] The excellent online resource 'Tobar an Dualchais' contains original recordings of songs sung by Màiri MacRae and Peigi MacRae, that were recorded at a later date by Campbell and Shaw when recording equipment was available. It also contains an extract of a song 'Oran a' Chutaidh', sung by Donald MacRae, about a dog.

Shaw learnt Gaelic in order to be able to transcribe song at its source. Donaldson only picked up some Gaelic at a later stage. Gilbertson's notes and diaries suggest that she had a good understanding of the Shetland dialect, noting any dialogue she has with Shetlanders' in their own tongue.

### **Representation of Highlanders and islanders**

Brian Winston, in *'The Documentary Film Book'* refers to the ethics of the relationship between subject and object, and the representation of the 'native' as '*Griersonian victim documentary*' [32]. In particular he coins this phrase, citing the subjects as often not giving their permission, nor understanding what their contribution was or what would occur from the exposure of their lives to a wider audience. Gilbertson, Shaw and Donaldson's approaches would suggest they worked in an alternative way to this approach. Gilbertson records her methods of asking for permissions in her diary. Often word of mouth has reached crofts before she does, on what she is doing.

Through Margaret Fay Shaw's photography of the MacRae sisters, both in their fifties whilst Campbell was photographing them, she captured women who had key roles in their community. Indeed, looking through the South Uist photographs, capturing them and their neighbours, both men and women, working the land, looking after the animals, then at leisure, the photographs communicate a non-hierarchical and secure community with men and women represented as equals. She portrays men with the same sympathy and sensitivity that she detects in women. Màiri MacRae was a single parent, a potentially difficult path at that time, but her place in her own society is established and a given. She is the main subject of Shaw's photography, with Shaw capturing her in different moods and roles.

Both Shaw and John Lorne Campbell were drawn to authenticity, hearing Gaelic song and language at its source and in its raw form and dialect, unmediated by dictionaries which academically regulated the language or by translators who claimed Gaelic song for themselves. Shaw fastidiously credited in her book *'Folksongs and Folklore in South Uist'*, who sang the songs as she transcribed them, and often whom they had learned the songs from. The ownership remains firmly with North Glendale. Photographs in the archives at Canna House show the sisters with a paste-up of Shaw's book, outside their cottage in North Glendale. They also appear in family photographs held by Canna House continuing to visit Shaw and Campbell in the following decades. Shaw cited that the MacRae sisters taught her more than any university could have, and was buried alongside them in South Uist. The Archives at Canna House also hold Shaw's biographical notes on Peigi MacRae.

Their work is by no means romantic nor nostalgic. Gilbertson shows modernity being as much a part of Shetland as life on the croft. There are seaplanes landing; a fashionable woman walks down Lerwick main street, and a car tries to weave its way through the narrow streets. Màiri MacRae enjoys a drink in one of the photographs with her neighbours outside.

A contemporary, such as Kissling, in an *Eriskay Poem*, emphasises phrases to describe the island as '*remote*', whereas Gilbertson does not strand the crofting community she focuses on from the wider world. The storyline of '*A Shetland Lyric*' is a couple deciding whether to emigrate or stay, both holding a different opinion on the matter. Their work is ego-less too. Kissling's film '*An Eriskay Poem*' begins with him sailing in to the island community on a white yacht, a key protagonist in distinction to the poor islanders. Gilbertson appears in front of the camera in '*A Crofter's Life*', half way through the film, to be suspended by a rope in order to capture footage of some cormorant's eggs in a nest which lies on a ledge out of reach by normal means.

## **Wider Context**

### **Nationally**

Gilbertson, Shaw and Donaldson were not alone in this interest of everyday life and the rural working class. They were also not alone in being privileged middle class making work about the working class. Regarding film-making, the British Documentary Movement, led by John Grierson was at the forefront establishing the G.P.O. Library of documentary films '*recording real life and real people*'. Grierson's film '*The Drifters*' (1929) was partially filmed in Shetland. [33] Grierson also advised the Films of Scotland committee, formed in order to deliver seven films about different aspects of the national identity, to be presented at the 1938 Empire exhibition in Glasgow.

In Scotland, in terms of photography, leading up to and including the period of 1930s', Werner Kissling (1895-1968) captured the traditional customs and ways of working of communities in particular the crofters of Eriskay and South Uist. Robert Moyes Adam, a scientist from Edinburgh, photographed the islands of Harris and Scarp in the 1930s, leading on from his work on Barra and Mingulay. Earlier photographers such as Cherry Kearton (1871-1940) and Richard Kearton included the Hebrides and St Kilda in their work; whilst Richard Adamson and David Octavius Hill took the earliest plates in 1845 of fishermen's wives and their families in Newhaven. Shaw's nemesis [34], Alasdair Alpin MacGregor [1899-1970] was writing and photographing in the Hebrides in the 1930s' and '40s too. In terms of women photographers, Margaret Watkins [1884-1969] focused on scenes of industrial Glasgow in the 1930s' and advertising photography. An earlier photographer Isabella Bird [1831-1904] made trips to the Hebrides and wrote several articles for *Quarterly Review* about the plight of the crofters.

### **Internationally**

The Worker-Photography movement in the 1920s and 30s' had been established in Germany and the USSR and then spread to Europe as a call to amateur and worker photographers to record everyday life and the conditions that people were working in. This was a Communist-

affiliated movement and the antithesis of the agenda of the British Documentary Movement. Whilst the Worker-Photography Movement was backed by a '*system of alternative media networks such as the one established by Willi Munzenberg, whose weekly Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung (Workers' Illustrated News) was at its peak, the second-most-read periodical in Germany*' [35], Grierson's British Documentary Movement was more the norm. Backed by conglomerates and government, the disseminated images of labour were keenly linked to government message and economics. [36]

Internationally, government initiatives were significant commissioners of documentary photography and film-making, in particular in the inter-war years in USA. Following the Wall Street Crash of 1929 which led to the Great Depression which saw millions of rural farmers becoming migrants on the move, both social documentary film and photography were focused on this human disaster. '*The Plow That Broke The Plains*' (1936), written and edited by Pare Lorentz, (1905-1992) is a documentary film with a message, illustrating how farming on an industrial scale changed the nature of the Great Plains region of the USA, turning the land into the Dust Bowl and the dispossession of those farming it. Roosevelt, as part of his New Deal Programme of Relief, Recovery and Reform, had employed Lorentz to the Resettlement Administration, initially as a film consultant, then to make this film. Paul Strand [1890-1976], later in the 1950s to spend three months in the footsteps of Margaret Fay Shaw on South Uist, was the cameraman for this film. Strand in an interview with Paul Hill and Thomas Joshua Cooper in 1974 [37] recalled in particular the impact of Roy Emerson Stryker's commissioning at Farm Security Administration, another government initiative, where he assigned documentary photographers including Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Marion Post Wolcott, Louise Rosskam, Ben Shahn and others, '*...who went out to photograph people during that period when there was so much suffering. Every one of those photographers had an assignment. They were not given a camera and told: 'Here, go out and make some pictures of what you like'. No, not at all. They were sent out to take photographs of the dust storms and the displacement of thousands of people, who because of the storms, became migrant workers.*' [38] Strand directly aligns this commissioning with the strength of the tradition of social documentary photography in USA over that period. In the 1930s Strand focused mostly on film, making '*Redes (The Wave)*' (1936), about the fragility of a rural Mexican fishing community, whose life and fortunes are dictated by poverty, nature and the greed of the managing classes.

Grierson is attributed by BFI screenonline to being influenced by an earlier film directed by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler '*Manhatta*' (1921) which presents the modernity of Manhattan '*in a poetic manner*' [39]. Whereas Strand focuses on the injustice of industrialisation of rural labour, Grierson in his film '*Drifters*' (1929), emphasises how industrialisation is a positive force, closing on the fish being brought back for sale to an international market. The title card at the beginning of '*Drifters*' reads: '*The Herring fishing*

*industry has changed. Its story was once an idyll of brown sails and village harbours – its story is now an epic of steel and steam. Fishermen still have their homes in the old time village – But they go down for each season to the labour of a modern industry.'*

In comparing the motivations of Strand, Grierson and Gilbertson all had an emphasis on education of the public. Both Strand and Grierson were government or corporation sponsored; Strand initially through New Deal work, only becoming independent and forming a film co-operative in the swing in Congress in 1936 from Democrat to Republican. Grierson following his Rockefeller Fellowship returned to Great Britain in 1927 believing that film could be a tool to communicate a national message following the Great Depression, in essence a form of propaganda, working at the governmental agency of the Empire Marketing Board, which disbanded in 1933 as the businesses and trade it promoted struggled because of the Depression, moving to the GPO.

Gilbertson, however, was independent, neither belonging to a co-operative nor backed by government money and agenda. She wrote about herself, '*My films in Shetland and Canada have always been a one-woman job – camera work, wild track sound, lighting, directing, script-writing etc.*' [40]. Gilbertson repeatedly puts all the capital into making her films. Where income is noted, it never meets expenditure, either leaving her out of pocket or with very low income. Gilbertson notes on one of the most significant purchases of five films by John Grierson for the G.P.O. Film Library, that '*J.G.'s offer for the films was £40, which I, poor mutt, accepted. However, I did, and still do, have the right to have copies for my own use*'. [41].

## **Conclusions**

Sarah Neely writes about Gilbertson, and another Scottish film maker Isobel Wylie Hutchinson (1889-1982):

*'... with both filmmakers, it is sometimes difficult, considering their commitment to capturing the rhythms of the everyday, to understand their lack of engagement with wider political and social issues faced by the communities they filmed.'* [42]

This comment is made in relation to Gilbertson but can be expanded out to Margaret Fay Shaw and MEM Donaldson. Neither of these women used photography and film to comment on poverty, or that the rural population in Scotland being affected by the Great Depression which hit Britain during the 1930s'. However, all three had an awareness or involvement in politics and wider conditions. Gilbertson in her autobiographical notes mentions that in her twenties she had an '*enthusiastic support of the Labour Party*.' [43]. The Archive also holds some of her father's effects that Gilbertson had kept, including a leaflet entitled '*Crofter's Holdings (Scotland Act, 1886)*'. Margaret Fay Shaw's husband John Lorne Campbell established the Sea League with Compton Mackenzie, self-publishing and lobbying UK

Government in order to close the Minch to Norwegian and Icelandic trawlers who they saw as jeopardizing the Hebrideans' traditional methods of fishing. Mackenzie, very much part of Shaw and Campbell's circle, particularly in their early years of living on Barra, was a founder member of Scottish National Party. Donaldson, in particular in her book *'Scotland's Suppressed History'* (1935), a diatribe against Presbyterianism and secular society, was more concerned with religion and the state of Scotland. Why was it, given the awareness of all three of wider contexts, that neither their film nor photography work shows this? All were independent, so not making work for the government or sponsored by companies, as some of their male counterparts were. Their aims and motivations were all placed on different emphasis. Gilbertson aimed for her films to educate, and discount the stereotype of the islander, in the eyes of a national audience. Shaw learnt Gaelic in order to be able to understand and transcribe the songs and ways of one small community, North Glendale, at its source, recording both people and place over a six year immersion. Shaw does refer to 'scarcity' in *'Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist'*, relating that the women, '*never complained of the scarcity of the many things the townsfolk are unable to do without. Nor in those black depression years did they ever voice the worry for their mensfolk waiting interminably for a ship in a faraway city*'. Shaw therefore observes the people and their attitude towards their situation rather than the poverty, in her photographs. [44] MEM Donaldson recorded through portraits and landscape photography of her network and neighbours, the close relationship of people as well as her own, to the land. Whilst, as Neely points out, the work of Gilbertson is not political, it could equally be said that the work of Gilbertson, Shaw and Donaldson meets more the feminist maxim of '*the personal is the political*'. This can be seen in the ways Donaldson finds her own emancipation in the landscape, or Shaw documents the strength of women who would likely have been overlooked by wider society, or Gilbertson's films give equality to Shetland islanders through the depth of her portraits of them. One of the key aspects of their practice is the element of time. All three women immersed themselves in the communities and places they were documenting.

To conclude, three events, witnessed by each. A diary entry of Gilbertson's from Feb 1931 reads:

*'On the Monday night a meteor the size of the moon and lighting up the place so that one could pick up a pin; passed in a red flash above Rona's Hill east and disappeared as suddenly as it appeared, vanishing in a blue burst of smoke when it hit the atmosphere'*. [45]

In a 30 May 1931 diary entry, when on her five week visit, cooking for shepherds on the deserted island of Mingulay, Shaw writes, '*I stand in the door, watching the mist turn pink, then turn grey and the moon shines pale through it*'. [46]

MEM Donaldson walks out into the landscape of Eigg in mid-summer and stays up all night: *'I never saw anything more fascinating than the unfolding beauties of the dawn following upon the pale night. Rum and Skye both looked like dream fortresses of grey stone, and the plaint of the seabirds came across the water like the cry from the world of spirits'*. [47]

Jenny Brownrigg (2016)

### Footnotes

[1] P.92, 'Another Way of Telling', BERGER, J. MOHR, J (1982) Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative Society Ltd.

[2] Jenny Gilbertson was born in Glasgow to Mary Dunn Brown (1972-1957) and William Brown (1868-1952), the latter, an iron and steel merchant in Glasgow. Margaret Fay Shaw had an ancestral connection to Scotland through emigration. Her forbearer, her great-great grandfather John Shaw had left Scotland for Philadelphia in 1792. MEM Donaldson was born in England and brought up in Surrey. Like Shaw, Donaldson also a Scottish ancestral connection.

[3] GILBERTSON, J. Autobiography draft, Chapter 1 'The Growing Years', (Box 11, Shetland Museum & Archives)

[4] Letter from MEM Donaldson to Marion Lochhead, dated 'Saint Columba's Day 1929'. Acc. 12251/49, National Library of Scotland

[5] Whilst there is no evidence the three women knew each other in the 1930s', Compton Mackenzie, a friend of Shaw and her husband John Lorne Campbell's, satirized MEM Donaldson in his 1940 book *'Hunting the Fairies'*. He re-casts Donaldson as a male poet, living with his sister at 'The house of two hearts'. Donaldson lived with a female companion Isabel Bonus. The architecture of the poet's home in 'Hunting the fairies' matches that of Donaldson's unique home and building project at Sanna Bheag, where she incorporated the black house design into a modern low-rise complete with photography studio. It would not be too much to claim, that given the subject matter of the book and Mackenzie being a close friend of Shaw's husband, that she would have read the book and understood the characters.

[6] Gilbertson CV notes (Box 3, Shetland Museum & Archives).

[7] Gilbertson, Autobiography notes (Box 3, Shetland Museum & Archives).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Typescript by John Grierson, accompanying letter dated 10/2/32 to Jenny Gilbertson (Box 5, Shetland Museum & Archives).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] GILBERTSON, J. 'Notes for talks with films' (Box 3, Shetland Museum & Archives).

[13] Letter to the editor, *The Leopard*, Aberdeen 22.4.1982, Box 1, Shetland Museum & Archives.

[14] Letter dated 19 Jan 1989, from Jenny Gilbertson to Mr. Shackell (Box 4, Shetland Museum & Archives)

[15] Ibid.

[16] Following the death of her parents, Margaret Fay Shaw went to boarding school at St Brides School in Helensburgh in 1921. Later, she went on a summer cycling tour of the Highlands and Islands with two friends, which included cycling through Glencoe, Skye and the Outer Hebrides.

[17] P.10, '*The Outer Hebrides: Margaret Fay Shaw*', SHAW, M.F. Undated. Typescript held at the National Trust for Scotland Canna House. (CH1/1/2)

[18] P.32, '*A Different Country: The Photographs of Werner Kissling*', RUSSELL, M. (2002), Birlinn Ltd.

[19] P.3, SHAW, M.F. '*Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*', 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (2005), Birlinn Ltd.

[20] P.21, '*The Outer Hebrides: Margaret Fay Shaw*', SHAW, M.F. Undated. Typescript held at the National Trust for Scotland Canna House. (CH1/1/2)

[21] P.142, '*Wanderings of the Western Isles*', DONALDSON, M.E.M. (1921) Alexander Gardner, Paisley.

[22] P.10-11, '*The Living Mountain*', SHEPHERD, N. (2011) 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Canongate Books.

[23] '*A Fetlar Wedding*' typescript (1931), GILBERTSON, J. (Box 9, Shetland Museum & Archives)

[24] GILBERTSON, J. Shetland Diary Jan-Jul 1931, entry dated 12 April. (ref 4/6/10, Moving Image Archive, National Library for Scotland).

[25] 2<sup>nd</sup> April entry, Ibid.



[26] P.77, Peigi MacRae, biography notes, SHAW, M.F. National Trust for Scotland Canna House (CHMFS/1/2/1).

[27] P.126, '*Photographers of the Western Isles*', PADGET, M. (2010) John Donald, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.

[28] Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser was a professional Scottish singer, composer and arranger. Including songs she transcribed from Eriskay, Kennedy-Fraser made three volumes of '*Songs from the Hebrides*', published between 1909-1921.

[29] P.126, '*Photographers of the Western Isles*', PADGET, M. (2010) John Donald, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.

[30] P.5, '*South Uist in Sound*', SHAW, M.F. undated. Typescript held by National Trust for Scotland Canna House (CH1/1/2/1/7)

[31] P.96, '*Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*', SHAW, M.F. (205) 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Birlinn Ltd.

[32] P.11, '*The Documentary Film Book*', WINSTON, B. (213) Palgrave MacMillan

[33] Jenny Gilbertson recalls in her diary in an entry on 5 Feb 1931, going to see 'Drifters' in the 'picture house' in Lerwick, a place she describes as having '*horrible pink washed walls and glaring naked electric lights*'. She goes on to write down an anecdote she had heard from locals, '... *looking at the sea now at the bottom and now at the top of the screen, one understands the tale that tells how the cameraman after the first ten minutes took no more pictures until back in Bressay Sound.*' GILBERTSON, J. Shetland Diary Jan-Jul 1931, (ref 4/6/10, Moving Image Archive, National Library for Scotland).

[34] Alasdair Alpin MacGregor had an on-going spat with Shaw, her husband John Lorne Campbell and Compton Mackenzie, over their differing perspectives on how Hebridean islanders were depicted. This came later to a head following the publishing of MacGregor's book '*The Western Isles*' (1949, Robert Hale Publishers) where MacGregor called the islanders lazy.

[35] '*A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926-1939*', Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Devin Fore

[36] It should be noted that women were involved in both the Worker-Photography Movement and the British Documentary movement. Tina Modotti [1896-1942], Irena Bluhova [1904-1991], Kata Kalman [1909-1978], Judith Karasz [1912-1977] and Eva Besnyo [1910-2003] were involved in Worker-Photography, whilst Grierson's own sisters Ruby Grierson [1904-1940] and Marion Grierson [1907-1998] worked with him at the Film Unit. Marion Grierson produced and edited, whilst Ruby Grierson directed '*London Wakes*

*Up*' (1936), and was un-credited assistant on '*Housing Problems*' (d. Arthur Elton / Edgar Anstey, 1935) where she directly worked with the working class women interviewees. Evelyn Spice Cherry, also a collaborator of Gilbertson's on '*Prairie Winter*' (1934), began working for Grierson's Government Post Film Unit in 1931. She went on to be placed in charge of National Film Board's agricultural film unit in 1941.

[37] '*Dialogue with Photography*', HILL, P. & Cooper, T (2005), Dewi Lewis Publishing

[38] P.14, Ibid.

[39] [www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk)

[40] GILBERTSON, J. CV notes (Box 3, Shetland Museum & Archives)

[41] GILBERTSON, J. Autobiographical notes (Box 3, Shetland Museum & Archives)

[42] '*My Heart Beat for the Wilderness*': *Isobel Wylie Hutchison, Jenny Gilbertson, Margaret Tait, and other Twentieth-Century Scottish Film-makers*', NEELY, S. (2014). In: MacKenzie S, Westerstahl Stenport A (ed.). *Films on Ice: Cinema of the Arctic*. Traditions in World Cinema, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 299-309

[43] GILBERTSON, J, Autobiography draft, begun 21.5.1987, Chapter 1: '*The Growing Up Years*'. (Box 11, Shetland Archives & Museum).

[44] GILBERTSON, J. Shetland Diary Jan-Jul 1931. (ref 4/6/10, Moving Image Archive, National Library for Scotland).

[45] SHAW, M.F. diary, Fri 30 May 1931 National Trust for Scotland Canna House (CHMFS/1/4/1/4)

[46] P.259, '*Wanderings of the Western Isles*', DONALDSON, M.E.M. (1921) Alexander Gardner, Paisley.