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**Tantalising Fragments: Scotland's voice in the early talkies in Britain
and Jenny Gilbertson's *The Rugged Island: A Shetland Lyric* (1934)**

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Abstract

This article will consider the tantalising fragments of the Scottish voice in the early talkies, exploring the response of Scottish audiences to various accents and voices, and offering a survey of the films set or produced in Scotland during the period of transition from silent cinema to sound. Particular focus will be given to Jenny Gilbertson's *The Rugged Island: A Shetland Lyric* (1934), one of the early Scottish indigenous sound productions that has been largely overlooked in critical accounts of early sound cinema in Britain. As this article will illustrate, the film offers unique insight into the disjuncture between the ambitions of filmmakers in relation to how Scotland might feature on the soundtracks of the early talkies and the reality of what could be achieved given the limitations of the available technologies.

Keywords: Scotland, Scots language, dialect, vernacular, voice, early talkies, Jenny Gilbertson, John Grierson, Werner Kissling, Robert Flaherty, Marion Grierson, Ruby Grierson

In 1931, at a meeting of the Glasgow Orkney and Shetland¹ Association, as reported in *The Orcadian*, a heated debate centred on the question of whether or not cinema exercised an influence for the good. Unsurprisingly, the result went against the cinema, with a final vote of 27 to 20. *The Orcadian*'s coverage goes on to describe the argument of Mr. Laurenson, a participant in the debate:

The whole thing was so bound up with the box office that people did not get the really good films that demand intelligent appreciation. He referred to the great possibilities of the cinema as shown by those films of a higher class which it is the privilege of only the private film society to see. It was possible to get as good film material from everyday life as the 'stars' of Hollywood could provide, and he instanced a recent film about Shetland. (Anon., 1931b, p.5)

The Shetland film Laurenson refers to is most likely one made by the Glasgow-born filmmaker Jenny Gilbertson, who by that point, had made several documentary films set in Shetland. Gilbertson's films had been shown to the Orkney and Shetland Association, so it seems reasonable to conclude that Laurenson had her films in mind. What is clear from the emotive responses at the Orkney and Shetland Association meeting, and also in other accounts of the period, is that the Scotland's lack of onscreen visibility, coupled with a lack of Scottish voices following the arrival of the talkies, was regarded by some as problematic. Films made in Scotland, with Scottish stories, were eagerly anticipated, and yet it would be some time before indigenous film production took root. Gilbertson, however, would go on to produce one of the earliest examples of a Scottish indigenous talking picture with her film *The Rugged Island: A Shetland Lyric* (1934), a film that has been largely overlooked in critical accounts of early sound cinema in Britain. And yet, as this article will illustrate, the film offers unique insight into the disjuncture between the ambitions of filmmakers in relation to how Scotland might feature on the

soundtracks of the early talkies and the reality of what could be achieved given the limitations of the available technologies.

While this article's primary focus is on the marginal representation of Scotland in early British sound films, it is also concerned with examining a marginalised aspect of British film history, e.g. the study of film culture in rural Scotland. In most studies, focus is often centred on urban audiences. However, as Judith Thissen and Clemens Zimmerman's edited collection *Cinema Beyond the City: Small-Town and Rural Film Culture in Europe* (2017) demonstrates, recent research has made considerable effort to address the imbalance.

There are often a number of methodological challenges which accompany non-metropolitan cinema studies. Not least of these is the tendency for larger archives and collections to centre on materials pertaining to their usually urban contexts. Although many recent research projects focusing on rural cinema audiences have made fruitful use of oral history methods in their efforts to cultivate a broader and more nuanced articulation of film histories, studies of cinema from the earlier part of the 20th century are further limited by the fact that they no longer have direct access to audiences from the period. Annette Kuhn's pioneering research on cinema audiences of the 1930s, resulting in over 200 hours of interviews conducted in the 1990s, was unique because it was the first of its kind, but also because it gave voice to everyday cinema experiences from participants who for the most part are no longer living (2002). For the research team on the three-year AHRC-funded project, *British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound*, access to interviewees with direct memories of cinema-going in the late 20s and early 30s was unlikely. Although attempts were made to solicit interviews, unfortunately, by the time our research project began, the window for this kind of opportunity had passed. As a result, the consideration of audiences was limited to an often eclectic range of sources. Furthermore, since

so many of the films from the period no longer exist and are therefore unavailable as a resource for textual analysis, the films' descriptions in the trade press and other archival sources take on a more significant role. As John Caughie writes in relation to his research on early cinema in Scotland, in contrast to the kind of 'distant reading' Franco Moretti calls for as a solution for the historian faced with an abundance of texts, the scant existence of film texts for researchers of early Scottish films means we must instead employ a method of what Caughie terms 'remote reading' which, through its engagement with the descriptions in the trade press, 'offers a route to understanding the ways in which Scotland was represented – and marketed – in early cinema' (2018, p.148). For my own research on Scotland during the period of transition from silent to sound cinema, I also employed a form of 'remote reading', looking to newspapers, but also local memoirs, letters, local oral history collections, and other sources in local archives such as personal diaries and letters.

Thus, the tantalising fragments referred to in this article's title include the fragments of voices in the films themselves – the few examples of the Scottish voice on screen in the early talkies – but also the fragments of sources which piece together the history of audience responses across Scotland, and the imaginary traces of what voices may have emerged had the new technologies been more accessible to indigenous film production at the time.

From these fragments, I hope to establish a sense of the overall film culture in Scotland following the arrival of the talking pictures to Scotland in 1929. In order to do this, I begin by considering the reaction to the talkies in relation to the wider political and cultural debates in Scotland during the period, exploring the response of Scottish audiences to the various accents and voices in the early talkies, and the criticism of cinema for the apparent threat it posed to language and culture. This is followed by a consideration of how exactly Scotland did feature on

screen during the early years of the talkies, providing an overview of the scant body of Scottish-related, or Scottish-themed, fiction films from the period. The second half of the essay focuses on Jenny Gilbertson's film, *The Rugged Island: A Shetland Lyric* (1934), a film which came out of the more prolific field of indigenous Scottish film production at the time - documentary.

The Scottish cultural renaissance and concerns over the marginalisation of the Scottish language

The arrival of the talkies in Scotland intensified existing concerns over the marginalisation of the Scottish language which had been gathering force for some time in relation to other developments in the modern age. In an article in *The Scotsman*, reporting on a meeting of 'The Vernacular Circle' in the London Burns Club in 1931, it is noted that 'the influence of the motor bus, the wireless, and the talkies on the Scottish vernacular was discussed', and that George Blake, a Scots author and journalist attending at the meeting, was said to have expressed concerns over the kinds of programmes broadcast. For the most part, Blake describes the mass media as a kind of virus threatening to wipe out Scottish culture. As *The Scotsman* reports:

He imagined the ingenuous people of the Western Isles listening to vaudeville and dance music on the wireless. What about the effect on other districts of Scotland where the vernacular was still spoken in relative purity? The Director-General of the B.B.C. was a Scotsman, and the Regional Director in Scotland was a Scotsman, but the broadcasting programmes were announced in the most refined accents of Southern England. (Anon., 1931a, p.9)

Under the subheading 'Poisoning of the Scottish Mind', the article goes on to warn even more forcefully of the threat of the American talking pictures:

Even more important was the effect of that most inane and pestiferous form of entertainment known as the 'talkies' [...] All that nasal intonation, the little dirty catchwords of Hollywood, and its mental vulgarity were poisoning not merely the

Scottish people, but the Scottish mind. How was the vernacular to stand up against that insidious attack, aided by the motor coach, which took people from the country into the towns to hear that sort of thing? (Anon., 1931a, p.9)

The Scottish poet Edwin Muir, writing in his book, *Scottish Journey* (1935), expresses similar concerns over the impact that the ‘wireless and American films’ had made on Scottish culture.

The time of the talkies’ introduction to Britain was also notable as a period of cultural renaissance in Scotland. Burns Clubs, such as the one in London described in *The Scotsman* article, were popular throughout Scotland and were seen to play an important role in the expression of Scottish cultural identity, and vital for the assertion of Scotland’s place within Britain. As the following report of a meeting of a Burns society in Aberdeen attests, Robert Burns served as a figurehead, a protector in the face of the threat of cultural erosion:

In these days of unrest and intellectual disorder, said Mr. Williams, everything seemed to threaten the extinction of our good old tongue – increased transport facilities of land, sea, and air, with consequent freer intercourse; broadcasting, music halls, ‘talkies’, and even the enforcing of the extra year at school, were all factors. [...] Mr. Williams concluded by saying that the chief bulwark of the vernacular was our National Bard.

(Anon., 1929d, p.10)

Debates about language, the Scots tongue, and worries over the dying Gaelic language were central. Still, not all viewed mass media as a menacing threat. For some, new media forms had the potential to be deployed in support of growth of the language. In an annual meeting of An Comunn Gaidhealach (The Gaelic Association) in 1929, the case was made that

If Gaelic were to expand as other languages did, if it were to appear more extensively on gramophone records, if it were to be broadcast, if it were to appear in the ‘talkie’ films, it would surely be better that some guidance should be given by the body that had Gaelic interests at heart than that matter should be left to chance. (Anon., 1929e, p.7)

The first Scottish Gaelic talking picture was eventually realised a few years after the association’s meeting by the German ethnologist and former diplomat Werner Kissling. His documentary *Eriskay: a Poem of Remote Lives* (1935), shot while on holiday on the Outer

Hebridean island during the summer of 1934, features an English commentary, but also Gaelic speech, and music provided by the London Gaelic Choir. The soundtrack was recorded at Imperial Sound Studios in London; however, some of the Gaelic speech was likely to have been recorded by Kissling on Eriskay (Russell, 1997). Certainly, the soundtrack's inclusion of spoken Gaelic and Gaelic song was deemed by some reviewers to be one of film's best features. While many reviews highlight the film's amateur origins, they often make specific reference to the soundtrack's uniqueness: 'the talk throughout is in Gaelic [...] and the poetic effect of the whole picture is considerably enhanced by a Hebridean song accompaniment' (Anon. 1935a, p.3); 'a sentimentalised account [...] with its pleasing background of Gaelic airs was received with generous applause' (Anon., 1936a, p.16). Audiences' familiarity with the folksong arrangements of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, was also part of the appeal, as this report on a forthcoming London screening explains: 'the universal fame of the Eriskay Love Lilt [is] making curiosity about the film very keen, even among southern people' (Anon., 1935b, p.6). Although Kissling proposed to return to the Hebrides to make a dramatised film about life there, he never did (Anon., 1935c, p.6).

It is not surprising that the significant role of the talkies in the developments of language across the wider culture sometimes featured in these debates. Cinema of the period was criticised for its erosion of culture, both in terms of language and the tendency for its stories to almost always be situated elsewhere.

In many respects, the introduction of the talkies made the absence of representation more apparent through the resulting emphasis on the linguistic differences between the early talkies and their audiences. What was once seen as a more transnational medium was becoming narrowed by the cultural markers of language and speech. Voice became a marker of difference.

In this sense, the introduction of sound heralded a rupture in the reception of cinema as some audiences reacted negatively to styles of speech different from their own. In the silent era, by contrast, the films' musical accompaniments were often interpreted in more localised ways. For instance, in Scotland, many film exhibitors experimented with their own forms of sound accompaniment, sometimes incorporating local references (Griffiths, 2013).²

The arrival of the talkies and Scottish audience's responses to American and British voices

As was the case with many parts of Britain, audiences at the early talkies in Scotland often responded negatively to the twang of American accents.³ Even a favourable review of *The Jazz Singer* in the *Glasgow Evening Times* warns of the 'unmistakably American' voices, while reassuring the reader that at least 'the dialogue is not irritatingly drawling or too slangy' ('Projector', 1929).

Elsewhere in Scotland, in Orkney, reactions were similar. Although the first talkie didn't arrive in Orkney until June 1931, an account penned by a local grammar school student describing their first encounter with the talkies at an Edinburgh cinema provides a humorous portrait of what was a fairly common response:

Now, if I venture into one of these bug-collecting buildings my ears are greeted with roars and croaks which would do credit to a herd of wild gorillas! [...] With a horrid shock I realise that 'tis the voice of the petite heroine I hear. I gather from the story that she is an English woman of high rank. I am incredulous! I am moved to mirth when she tells her venerable father to "can it!" The hero – also English – remarks in strong nasal accents, "wha'an'alagant' view!" and when the hero's aristocratic mother booms like the Stronsay foghorn, "Sure, baby, she's some red-hot mamma!" I stagger out in a dazed condition and speculate the mentality of the American race [...] In despair, I go to a library and capture a stray but trenchant Shaw, a lonely but artistic Thornton Wilder, and a dusty musty much-unused volume entitled *From Giotto to Augustus John*. I gather them to me and go home. (Anon., 1930a, p.16)

In addition to this description of the assault-like infliction of harsh American accents on cinema audiences, and its association with the general decline of the cinema-going experience, the Orcadian student's essay expresses another common reaction to the talkies at the time: that literature was a superior art form, to be called on to protect the English language's sanctity from the menace that was the talking pictures. For example, Shaw – although technically an Irish playwright – was also cited by American film producer Edwin Carewe during a four day visit to London to speak to British authors about writing for the talkies. For Carewe, Shaw represented the kind of quality drama needed for producing talking pictures and meeting the 'very big demand in America for British actors as well as British plays, for when all is said and done Britain produces the finest conversation in the world, and its actors have the finest diction in the world' (Anon., 1929a, p.9).

In much press coverage of the time, the negative reception of the voices of American actors increased anticipation for the arrival of Britain's own talking pictures, and for filmmakers to make use of British acting talent. A 1928 article in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* predicts how 'the talking-film will now narrow the field of the world-famous vocal artist, but in doing so it offers great scope to British talent' (Penelope, p.4). Although it would be several months before the talkies reached Aberdeen, an article in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* gives an account of one of its readers pleading with cinema managers to support British productions: 'having heard two prominent American film stars speak, (or rather squeak), I would be on my knees for our cinema managers to install British "talkies"' (Kinema, 1929, p.4).

When the talkies were given their first outing in Aberdeen in June 1929, the newspaper's review uses the programme's inclusion of both American and British talkies as an opportunity to make detailed comparison: 'one would not hesitate for a moment in giving the vote for the

British production. George Jessel, the American singing idol [...] the Yankee drawl of his speaking voice was as tedious as it was difficult to follow. Bransby Williams' characterisation of Grandfather Smallweed in Charles Dickens' "Bleak House" – the English film – was a masterpiece, his voice and acting being perfect' (Anon., 1929b, p.8). For many the 'American articulation' made the films 'difficult to follow' (Anon., 1929c, p.9). The promise of British talkies provided a welcome antidote. British pictures are praised for their entertainment value, high-quality production, and what is seen as their greatest asset, 'the perfection of the English-speaking voices', which offers a 'more pleasing pronunciation' (W.H., 1931).

And yet in reality audience responses to British talkies were not always so positive. A number of respondents from Annette Kuhn's 1930s cinema-going project recalled difficulties with the accents in British cinema of the 1930s. Sheila McWhinnie, born in 1919 in the Gorbals, an area of Glasgow notoriously impoverished in the late 19th and early 20th century, was particularly blunt on the subject, and said she

preferred the American films every time. The British films were. [...] They were really diabolical. They really were. There were wan or two good ones out of hundreds of terrible wans. They were really honestly terrible. Well they had this accent that naeboddy could follow but everyone could follow the American accent. [...] There was a terrible dearth in the New Star Cinema when there wis a British film on. Nobody went. Nobody went.⁴

Similarly, in an interview conducted by Janet McBain, former director of Scottish Screen Archive, Charlie Hamill, a projectionist from the Paragon cinema in the Gorbals in Glasgow, describes the audiences' difficulties in comprehending the accents of English actors: 'they had all these West End accents and people were sitting and they could make out the Americans but they couldnae make out the English accents and they were all shouting and throwing things at the screen, this actually happened.'⁵

Scotland on screen in the early British talkies

Despite the scarcity of Scottish characters or actors in the early British talkies, the popularity and of Scottish literature and the music-hall tradition inspired some forms of Scottish representation on screen. Scottish literature, like British literature in general, also benefitted from its perception as a viable source for material for the early talkies. Although adaptations of Scottish literature didn't always retain their Scottish settings or characters.

By the 1930s, there had been dozens of films based on works by popular Scottish writers such as J. M. Barrie, Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Robert Burns's popularity at the time was also reflected in productions of the period. Most notably for our study, Herbert Wilcox's 1930 production *The Loves of Robert Burns* consists of a loose biographical narrative strung together by a number of Burns songs, sung by a well-known Scottish tenor, Joseph Hislop. The reception in Scotland was mixed. Reports of the film in *Northern Scotland* acknowledge the weakness of the script, but there is praise for the songs and Hislop's singing (Anon. 1930d, p.4; Anon. 1930e, p.1). Regardless of the film's quality, the appearance of a film with a Scottish subject provided a notable occasion for the local press, but also arguably its communities. In Wick, on the northernmost coast of mainland Scotland, positive audience responses were reported with further praise given for the cinema managers' showmanship, which saw the programme 'considerably enhanced [...] by preceding the picture with a series of mechanically reproduced renderings of Scots songs, choral and solo, sung by talented vocalists' (Anon., 1930c, p.1).

The reception of *The Loves of Robert Burns* perhaps indicates the appeal of a film more reflective of Scottish culture than the usual cinema product of the time. Burns was then a greatly celebrated figure: my research in the local papers has revealed a striking amount of coverage of

the popular Burns celebrations, but also the growing popularity of vernacular poetry and song. One report in the *John O’Groat Journal* from 1930 describes a noticeable increase in Caithness County of songs and sketches performed in the Scots and local vernacular, praising the potential for the spoken word over written literary forms (‘Norseman’, 1930, p.2). This popularity of Scotland’s oral traditions would have played some role in the film’s comparatively favourable reception. The Scots vernacular as articulated through the speech and song of Joseph Hislop, but also the enduring appeal of Scottish music, seemed to have lent the film a kind of authenticity that had failed to register in other films of the period.

Scotland’s music-hall tradition also featured in many of the early talking pictures. According to Trevor Griffiths, the enterprising travelling showman George Kemp purchased equipment in 1907 to attempt a synchronisation of sound with moving images featuring Harry Lauder (2012, p.21). A few shorts produced by the British company De Forest Phonofilms also capitalised on the popularity of the Scottish music-hall. In the 1926 Phonofilm *Billy Merson in his Harry Lauder Burlesque ‘Scotland’s Whisky’*, the popular English performer sends up his famous Scottish counterpart, delivering a stylised music-hall performance while donning an exaggerated Victorian interpretation of Highland dress, replete with a gnarled walking stick. It’s a simple comedy routine punctuated by the ‘Scotland’s Whisky’ song that gives the film its title. Merson speaks directly to the camera, and as in other such Phonofilms of the period, occasionally offers encouragement for the imaginary audience to join in.⁶ DeForest Phonofilms also produced two variety-style films with the Scottish music-hall comedian Tommy Lorne, *Dumplings* (1927) and *The Lard Song* (1927).

The popularity of Scots songs and the music-hall tradition is apparent in these and the many other productions featuring Harry Lauder, films that largely reproduce the songs as he

would have performed them on stage. However, Lauder's act in general and the humour it engendered was not without criticism. As one Glasgow cinemagoer from the period reflected, 'Scotland in the 1920s and 30s was one of the most industrial nations in the world and then here was this nonsense [...] There was a lot of nonsense about their behaviourisms and drunkenness and folk wearing kilts?... Perhaps we had something to do with it ourselves, with Harry Lauder [laughs] maybe we made our own mistakes.'⁷

Hugh MacDiarmid, the Scottish poet and key driver behind the Scottish cultural renaissance, was also highly critical of Lauder and his popularity with audiences outside of Scotland. Claiming to have 'never met a single intelligent Scot who would be seen at a Lauder performance' ([1928] 1997, p.115), MacDiarmid explains that

The reason why the Harry Lauder type of thing is so popular in England is because it corresponds to the average Englishman's ignorant notion of what the Scot is — or because it gives him a feeling of superiority which he is glad to indulge on any grounds, justified or otherwise. 'Lauderism' has made thousands of Scotsmen so disgusted with their national characteristics that they have gone to the opposite extreme and become, or tried to become, as English as possible. ([1928] 1997, p.114)

Lauder was widely celebrated at the time, at home and abroad; however, MacDiarmid saw the Lauder phenomenon as resulting in a crisis of confidence in Scottish language and culture. MacDiarmid was also scathing of another popular figure of the period, J. M. Barrie, the Scottish novelist and playwright, whose popularity he refused to excuse, citing what one critic described as 'a triumph of sugar over diabetes' (1926, p.28).

In many of the cultural debates circulating at the time the ubiquity of figures such as Lauder and Barrie is identified as an obstacle to be overcome. In *The Scotsman's* report on a BBC radio discussion on the state of Scottish theatre in 1930 and the promise of 'the rising tide of Scottish drama' to give voice to Scottish culture in the face of the threat of talking pictures, Andrew Wilson, then director of the Scottish National Players, a theatre group formed in the

early 20s in the spirit of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, expresses his dismay over a worrying pull towards commercial theatre, citing Barrie as an example: ‘A new play by Barrie would have proved an incentive to younger writers. An old play by Barrie was simply taking up the time and energies of producer and players which should be devoted to their proper function, that of creating a source of expression for Scottish dramatists who might otherwise never get a hearing’ (Anon., 1930b, p.8).

The production of indigenous talking pictures in Scotland took some time. In 1931, Ronald Jay’s film *Sunny Days* marked the release of the first post-synchronised sound-on-disc film made in Scotland. The film follows the activities of the Necessitous Children’s Holiday Camp, a camp established to give poorer children from Glasgow a fortnight’s holiday at the coast or in the country. In 1930, when the film was made, 4500 children were at the camp. The film also features Harry Lauder, shown welcoming a group of children at his house in Dunoon. The soundtrack was produced by a four-man production crew from Glasgow at the Reavli film studio in Elstree (Anon., 1931e, n.p.) and largely consists of a voiceover narration with musical accompaniment and some humorous, idiosyncratic animal sound effects created for a sequence featuring the children’s visit a zoo. But because the recording was made in the studio, we don’t ever hear from the children themselves.

Other pioneering efforts were made in Scotland to develop new sound technologies. For instance, an early cinema sound system, the Albion Truphonic, was developed and marketed to local cinemas in Scotland by the Glasgow-based company Scottish Film Productions (1928) Ltd. The company also held ambitions in the early 1930s to make feature-length talking pictures and planned to adapt T.M. Watson’s *Diplomacy and the Draughtsman* (1929), a play produced by the Scottish National Players which featured local dialect and was set within the context of

Glasgow's shipbuilding. Presumably the company's alignment with the ambitions of Scotland's radical theatre movement of period (briefly referred to earlier in this essay in relation to the resistance to Barrie) would have supported the production of films able to give adequate expression of contemporary Scottish life and culture. Unfortunately, only a few short films were completed and eventually the company decided to focus on factual production, something deemed to involve less risk (Griffiths, 2012, p.292).

Eventually, a film set within the Clyde shipyards and featuring some Scottish characters, *Red Ensign* (a Gaumont-British 'quota quickie'), would be made in 1934 by Michael Powell. Similar to Hitchcock's 1935 adaptation of John Buchan's novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, very little of the filming took place in Scotland (primarily because it proved too expensive to transport cast, crew and equipment from London). Although the film features Scottish characters, they are performed by a largely English cast, with a few exceptions; the film marked the Scottish actor, John Laurie's first appearance as a Scotsman (Laurie's previous film and first film performance was playing an Irishman in Hitchcock's *Juno and the Paycock*). In a review of the film by Forsyth Hardy, he concludes that the characters were a fair representation, but found 'the emphasis on dull-wittedness and a generous estimation of the Scot's idealism [...] difficult to accept' (1934, p.13). In the same review, Hardy offered similar criticism for another British 'quota quickie' from the period, *The Secret of the Loch*, filmed largely at the Associated Talking Pictures studio at Ealing (only a few external shots were filmed in Scotland) and also featuring a cast of largely English actors. One of the film's most notable Scottish characters, Angus, the Professor's burly personal servant, is played zestfully by the English actor, Gibson Gowland, who dons an exaggerated Scottish accent with almost as much awkwardness as the ill-fitting kilt he is forced to wear for the part. The film frames the narrative from the point of view of an

English journalist sent to Scotland to investigate the mystery of the Loch Ness monster. As Forsyth Hardy notes, it was a film made by an English company to capitalise on the mystery of Loch Ness and Scottish kilted stereotypes, and there was little to offer in its depiction of Scottish culture except ‘a quaint collection of characters in fancy dress, who, in dialects difficult to identify, affirm repeatedly in chorus, “Mine’s a whisky”’ (1934, p.13).

In search of local expression: the rise of the documentary tradition and the work of Jenny Gilbertson

From the 1930s to the 1970s, indigenous production in Scotland was almost entirely documentary. For the most part, Scottish audiences’ access to local culture onscreen was limited to ‘local topicals’, ‘short non-fiction films made or commissioned for local exhibition’ (Caughie & McBain, 2018, p.143), and the exhibition of local documentaries as a part of film society screenings or educational programmes. The rise of British documentary, spearheaded by Scotsman John Grierson, also added to Scotland’s particular visibility in the genre. In his book, *Presenting Scotland: A Film Survey* (1945), Norman Wilson, secretary of the Edinburgh Film Guild, writes of a Scottish sensibility expressed in the documentary output of the time: ‘Even if the number of actual Scottish subjects was small, the Scottish viewpoint or some sidelight on Scottish life or character was often introduced into films of wider application’ (11). In addition to his great contributions to the British documentary film movement as head of the Empire Marketing Board and General Post Office film units, Grierson also played a significant role in establishing the Films of Scotland Committee in 1938, as well mentoring several Scottish filmmakers, including Jenny Gilbertson.

The inadequacy of Scotland's representation in films of the period was certainly one of Grierson's motivating factors in strengthening indigenous Scottish film production. Writing in the *Spectator* in 1938, Grierson argues that:

The music-hall tradition of kitties and comics has been all too eagerly served. It was pleasant to recognise for once the genuine accent of the North in James Bridie's and Ian 'Dalrymple's *Storm in a Teacup*, but we have always been more likely to get a *Ghost Goes West*, written by an American, produced by a Hungarian and directed by a Frenchman. It has been pleasant too – by influence – to have as many documentary occasions as possible turned to Scotland's advantage and see the Englishmen very kindly allow it, but these pictures of Scotland that also suited the London purpose – *Drifters*, *Night Mail*, *O'er Hill and Dale*, and the rest of them – have been at best indirect in their service to Scottish expression. The local accent has been lacking and the substance of it. (1938, p.40)

While Grierson is dismissive of the music-hall tradition, which was a significant part of Scottish cultural life at the time and therefore just as able (and arguably more so) to serve as an authentic expression of Scottish identity as many of the subjects focused on in the documentary films produced under the Films of Scotland Committee, it is clear that he felt genuine dismay over the limitations of the existing output of films, including his own.

The ability to present more of an authentic expression of local culture is what eventually drew John Grierson to the work of Jenny Gilbertson. After viewing *A Crofter's Life in Shetland* (1931), a 46-minute film following the rhythms of the life and work of Shetland crofters over one year, he wrote his own critique of the film which he passed on to Gilbertson as a foreword for her programme:

It is her first picture, and she made it very daringly by herself, without any professional assistance whatsoever. For a solo effort it is an extraordinary job of work. It not only gives you very beautiful pictures of the Shetlands but it gets down to the life of the crofters and the fishermen and brings the naturalness out of it. That is what a camera should do and very seldom does. 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 and is on the way to becoming a real film maker, a real illuminator of life and movement.⁸

Born Jenny Brown in Glasgow in 1902, Gilbertson first trained as a teacher and then went to London to train as a journalist. She became interested in cinema after seeing a friend's amateur 16mm film shot around Loch Lomond. This prompted her to buy her own 16mm camera and begin making her own films. Her first film, *A Crofter's Life in Shetland*, was inspired by the many summer holidays spent in Shetland. It was filmed in Shetland over a period of nine months. After completion, Gilbertson arranged a screening in a hired studio and invited John Grierson, an event which led to Grierson serving as a great champion of Gilbertson's work, and which Gilbertson referred to as 'a turning point' in her life ([1980] 1999, n.p.).

With Grierson's encouragement, Gilbertson purchased a professional 35mm Eyemo camera and returned to Shetland in the summer of 1932. The result was five new films: *Da Makkin o' a Keshie*, *In Sheep's Clothing*, *A Young Gannet*, *A Cattle Sale*, and *Seabirds in the Shetland Islands*. Keen to assist Gilbertson in their production, Grierson offered her use of his London cutting room in Soho Square. He later purchased the films for the GPO Film Library (Gilbertson, [1980] 1999, n.p.).

Around the same time, Grierson also suggested to Gilbertson that she make a documentary with the thread of a story running through it. Gilbertson described how at the time she 'thought it sounded more than a little crazy', especially because she had never attempted to write a script before. But as she also recalled, 'somehow I got swept along in the current enthusiasm for documentary films. An idea for a story film began to grow' ([1980] 1999, n.p.). Filming was very much a community effort. Local crofters played the various roles in the film (the London-based actor playing Enga was the only trained player). Gilbertson also credited

three local families who helped prepare the filming locations and build the film sets (Anon., 1936b, p.7).

The Rugged Island tells the story of a crofting community in Shetland, focusing in particular on a young couple, Johnny and Enga, who are faced with the difficult choice between emigrating to Australia and staying in Shetland to care for their aging family. There are two versions of the film: the silent version and the sound version featuring a commentary, delivered by English actor Philip Godfrey, library music from the popular British music production company De Wolfe, and a specially commissioned score (for a small ensemble) by Kenneth Leslie-Smith, a composer who had a prolific career writing incidental music for radio dramas.

As Barbara Evans remarks, there are ‘striking differences’ between the two versions. The sound version begins

with a male voice-over that now carries the narrative that had been told through title cards. The focus is no longer the betrothed couple strolling hand-in-hand along the cliffs, but rather Andrew, the young man, and his battle to earn a living from the sea. Enga, the voice-over tells us, is merely ‘Andrew’s sweetheart’. While still a poetic documentation of life on Shetland, the film undergoes a subtle shift in focus.

(Evans, 2012, n.p.)

The sound version screened widely to audiences internationally throughout the 1930s, and is the version usually referred to in the relatively small amount of writing about Gilbertson’s work, with the film’s dominant soundtrack often the focus of criticism. For instance, although Duncan Petrie acknowledges Gilbertson’s contribution to documentary as ‘important and significant’, he criticises *The Rugged Island* for ‘relying heavily on voiceover for narrative information and coherence’ (2000, p.101). For much of the duration of the film, the commentary interprets the action as it unfolds on screen. This approach was common to documentary work of the period, including some of Grierson’s own films. For example, in *O’er Hill and Dale*, Basil Wright’s 1932 documentary, produced by Grierson for the Empire Marketing Board, the voice-over offers

a running commentary, describing the work of a shepherding community in the Southern Uplands of Scotland. Although arguably the commentary in Wright's film incorporates some sense of the local speech by making reference to the shepherd's call to his dogs ('c' wa by' which the narrator interprets for the viewer to mean 'come awa by' or 'come in close').

The discovery of the silent version of *The Rugged Island* was made in 1997 when Scottish Screen Archive embarked on a project to preserve the film and produce viewing prints of the film. Two versions were discovered in their collection – the sound version running 42 minutes and the silent version with intertitles running 56 minutes. In the programme notes for their premiere of the silent version in 1999, they write:

Jenny made no mention in her autobiographical notes of the existence of anything other than the sound version, and in the absence of detailed research we can only speculate that the film was originally shot as a silent film, but that in buying the rights for commercial cinema release the distributor required a sound track and a length more suited to a cinema programme. We believe that the silent version is closer to what Jenny wanted the film to be, but that the sound version is what audiences experienced of her work. For these reasons the Archive has preserved both versions of the film. (Scottish Screen Archive, 1999, n.p.)

The collection of Gilbertson's private papers, gifted by Gilbertson's family to the Shetland Archive in 2016, provides further clues to the origins of the two different versions. In an autobiographical note, Gilbertson describes how

In between shooting we rough-edited the film in a Church Hall, with the aid of a battery-lit, hand-cranked ancient 35mm Projector. (In those days there was no electricity in Shetland outside the small town of Lerwick.) I showed this rough edition to various Film Companies in London. Finally, a company called 'Zenifilms' agreed to distribute it. Music was specially composed and synchronised by Kenneth Leslie Smith (cost £100), commentary was added, a Preview was arranged in a cinema in Regent Street.⁹

Other sources make the further suggestion that it was in fact Gilbertson who recut the film in London (Anon., 1934, p.7), adding the commissioned music and voiceover, but also removing the intertitles and altering a couple of the scenes.

After its release in Britain it remained on cinema screens for over five years. A few copies were bought for schools, and it was included in a programme of Gilbertson's films shown for several months in London at the Academy cinema, Oxford Street (Anon., 1935d, p.2). Gilbertson also went with the film on a lecture tour, first in Canada during the winter of 1934-35, then later in Britain, in what was described in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* as 'an experiment on the road-showing of educational films' (Anon., 1935d, p.2). The film proved popular with audiences in Scotland; when the Edinburgh Film Guild organised a screening at the YMCA Hall, the demand was so great that the show was repeated the following week (Griffiths, 2012, p.223).

In many ways, the ability of an independent filmmaker to produce a dramatic feature with a soundtrack was a remarkable achievement at the time, and proved to be an attraction in itself. In fact, the Guild's screening at the YMCA was advertised with the headline 'The Sound Film "Rugged Island"' and included a short lecture from Jenny and John Gilbertson on 'Experiences in Independent Film Production'. Considering it was a time which was experiencing a notable boom in amateur filmmaking, with which Gilbertson was identified (Anon. 1934, p.7), the mention of a film as a 'sound film' could serve to differentiate filmmakers from less skilled ones, pushing them more towards the professional end of the amateur-professional sliding scale. Although it is not certain if Grierson played much of an advisory role in the film's soundtrack, it was recorded on Visatone, the same system purchased by his GPO Film Unit in 1934 (Aitken, 2000, p.49), the very year the soundtrack to *The Rugged Island* was completed.

Gilbertson's filmmaking was often the result of several months' work living in the community she was documenting; *The Rugged Island* was shot over the course of a year. By the nature of their production, the images had a strong connection to the community, whereas the soundtrack of specially composed music and a commentary added in London arguably had very

little. Still, the film's reception in Shetland was positive. But it is tantalising to consider what Gilbertson might have achieved if she had full use of the new developing sound technologies.

As Grierson wrote in 1936, great advances in documentary were due to developments in the use of sound. Furthermore, he argues that the advances are more noticeable in documentary than in studio production. He writes:

the fact that so much of the workaday material brings the microphone into direct touch with the idiom of the specialist, the vernacular of the workman, and the natural sound of a thousand and one interesting locations, provides an opportunity for sound which the directors of documentary film have very wisely taken. These several factors have produced a use of natural sound – vernacular, choral, and even poetic sound which I regard as the great technical landmark of the year, setting an example both to the film studios and to the broadcasting studios of the BBC. (1936, p.452)

Unfortunately for Gilbertson's film she did not then have access to the kind of technology Grierson describes. But in her diary kept during the making of the film there are scribbles of snippets of dialogue in Shetlandic, tantalising fragments of what she might have heard from the people she was filming, and what might have been included in her film had she been able to use sound in a more developed way¹⁰. Gilbertson went on to write a number of radio plays for BBC Radio in Shetland, with some of the characters written as speaking in the distinctive Shetland dialect.¹¹

Ironically, her silent films give the greatest indication of the Shetland voices connected to the subjects seen onscreen. Even Gilbertson's title for her short film *Da Makkin o' a Keshi* gives a taste of the subjects' voices, muted in the film. In the silent version of *The Rugged Island*, the voices survive in written form, in the intertitles, featuring a few Scots words¹², and a few letters appearing in the film's diegesis, as in the scene where the main character Enga reads a letter from her Johnny about whether they should emigrate to Canada:

but I can't leave my old folk and Maggie alone. I ken you think they'd be fine now

they've got the pension and your folk would help them with the croft work. But that's no my way.

In the sound version, the letter stays in, but the content is simplified and the Scots words omitted:

But as things are I can't leave my old folk and young Maggie. They couldn't manage the croft – work alone.

The simplified text was most likely modified in acknowledgment of the information now communicated through the soundtrack.

Perhaps the greatest difference between the two versions arises from the sound version's implementation of a rather domineering voiceover. The RP English commentary describes in detail the action as it unfolds on the screen, often serving an interpretive function for the viewer. In this way, the soundtrack seems to take precedence over the visual image, invoking Mary Anne Doane's description of a relationship between sound and image where 'sound carries the burden of "information" while the impoverished image simply fills the screen' (1980, p.42). In this form of documentary, the deployment of the 'voice of God' narration carries assumptions about the hierarchical relationship of sound to image (Doane, 1980, p.42).

Other films of the period employing commentaries were similarly criticised. In fact, many of the other productions distributed by Zenifilms received reviews that identified the commentaries as key deficiencies (HHH, 1934, p.20; Jennings, 1934, p.20). For instance, a review of *Matterhorn* (1934) criticises the film for its commentary which is described as 'not up to the standard of the fine photography' (Jennings, 1934, p.20).

It is inevitable that the sound version's dominant use of voiceover positions the narration as an outsider looking in, whereas Gilbertson's approach aligns the camera more firmly with its subjects. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Gilbertson's films were popular with local audiences.

Clement Williamson, a local photographer from Scalloway in Shetland, fondly recalled Gilbertson's screenings in the local hall:

Now when Jenny Gilbertson's film was shown in Scalloway hall, I think it was *A Crofter's Life in Shetland* that hall it would sit around 200-300 people. It was well received. It was before the days of sound pictures and there was only one picture house and they ran silent pictures. I don't think they'd ever seen Shetland pictures at all and moving pictures on the screen until Jenny Gilbertson started and that of course gave it an added interest. She really pioneered local cinematography in Shetland.¹³

Even today, her films are still praised by Shetlanders for their remarkable depiction of Shetland life in the early 20th century.¹⁴

In fact, one of her key aims in her work was to address the lack of films about the community in which she was living. Writing in the diary she kept when filming in Shetland in the late 20s and early 30s, she voices her dismay at the experience of going to the cinema in Lerwick, with its 'horrible pink washed walls and glaring naked electric lights' for a programme including Grierson's newly-released *Drifters* (1929), 'with local scenery but there was only a dash of it given'. She also expresses disappointment with the feature, describing it as the usual type, a film about the French revolution, involving as she describes, a young man aping Napoleon', before lamenting how it is 'Rotten stuff for kids growing up to be looking at and somehow so incongruous in Lerwick amongst these rosy-cheeked fishing folk.'¹⁵

During the period when Gilbertson was writing in her diary (and filming *A Crofter's Life in Shetland*) the talkies arrived in Shetland, with the first talking picture shown at the North Star cinema in Lerwick on 21 February 1931. The first film was the American musical *Sunny Side Up*, and was soon followed by *The Singing Fool*, which drew full houses each evening (Anon., 1931c, p.5). Very few talkies had the slightest Scottish focus in their stories. When there was even the vaguest connection to local culture, the *Shetland Times*, the local paper, would make comment. A screening of *The Lottery Bride*, set in Norway, prompted the newspaper to

proclaim: ‘Janette MacDonald [i.e. Jeanette MacDonald, the American singer and actress, born in Philadelphia] is our one SCOTCH film star!’ (Anon., 1931d, p.1). One of the few longer columns focusing on the North Star cinema’s upcoming attractions was dedicated to the ‘first all-talking picture made actually on the Arctic ice fields’. This is *The Viking*, thought to be the first sync-sound feature shot in Canada (Anon., 1932e, p.4).

For Gilbertson, telling the story of the Shetland community she had grown close to over the years was a key motivation for making *The Rugged Island*. Although Zenifilms, its distributor, seemed keen to emphasise the drama’s romantic nature (one advert from Zenifilms billed it as ‘A Crofter Romance’¹⁶), Gilbertson’s original intentions and sincerity of approach remained clear. As one reviewer in *The Times* wrote:

It is the object of this comparatively short film, directed and photographed by Miss Jenny Brown, to show the landscape of the Shetlands and the manners and customs of the Shetlanders. But there is also a story, and, for once, it is a reasonable and possible story which really ministers to the main purpose of the film and does not have the appearance of forcing the inhabitants into an unaccustomed romance. It is very simple, merely describing the fortunes of two lovers who are dissatisfied with the hard life of the island and wish to emigrate. (Anon., 1935e, p.12).

Although several reviewers made comparison between *The Rugged Island* and Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran* (Anon., 1935f, p.7; Anon., 1935g, p.9), some viewed Gilbertson’s film as more successful: ‘presented in a more intriguing and concise fashion’ (Kinomer, 1935, p.3); ‘a “Man of Aran” type, but treated in a more sophisticated way’ (Anon., 1935h, p.10).

Flaherty’s film included dialogue spoken by some of the islanders who travelled to London to record the soundtrack.¹⁷ Despite *Man of Aran*’s inclusion of more authentic voices, Paul Rotha cites the dialogue, recorded at the Gainsborough studios, as one of the film’s major weaknesses, since the resulting acoustic of indoor sound causes these ‘snatches of speech’ to appear unconnected with their screen setting. ‘This unfortunate effect,’ he writes, ‘gives the

complete film a strange and off-putting artificiality and makes it seem just what its makers were trying so hard to avoid, a silent film with sound added as an afterthought' (Rotha, 1983, p.159).

If Gilbertson had access to more advanced sound technologies at the time of filming, perhaps she would have been able to experiment with sound in a way that reflected her commitment to connecting closely to the community. She might have followed along similar lines as Alberto Cavalcanti's use of sound in his first film with Grierson, *Granton Trawler* (1934), which offers something more akin to the poetic approach described by Grierson in the quote cited earlier. The 'vernacular, choral, and even poetic sound' (Grierson, 1936, p.452) in *Granton Trawler* is evidenced in its ambitious interweaving of music, sound effects, and dialogue (albeit relatively incoherent; some of it was apparently spoken by Grierson in the studio). Although it was originally proposed that the soundtrack would feature a traditional commentary, the film's final soundtrack, produced in post-production, is much more experimental in its matching of sound with the film's impressive images shot by Grierson over the eight stormy days at sea spent on board the fishing trawler 'Isabella Greg' (Anon., 1933, p.7). We hear the creaking of the winch as it turns, lowering the lines into the sea. The wind howls as the boat's rigging rattles against the raging sea. The birds drifting in and out of frame can also be heard. While there is an obvious coherence in the relationship between sound and image, a general lack of synchronicity lends the soundtrack a more abstract quality.

The work of two other Scottish filmmakers, Grierson's sisters, also comes to mind as examples of the experimentations and more nuanced uses of sound which Gilbertson might have pursued; such as Marion Grierson's use of wild track and asynchronous sound in *Beside the Seaside* (1935), used to poetic effect and as a way of creating atmosphere; or Ruby Grierson's voiceover in *They Also Serve* (1940), employed to represent the internal thoughts of the film's

main character, an ‘ordinary housewife’ (Neely, 2014). It seems likely that had Gilbertson had the technology available to her, she would have attempted to incorporate the voices of the people she was filming into her final work. What is less certain is whether a film in the local Shetlandic language would have been as great a success outside Shetland as *The Rugged Island*. Would the Shetlandic language have had the same widespread appeal as the male English RP commentary? It is clear, however, that Gilbertson’s film, in both the sound and silent version, gave voice to the Shetland community she lived and worked in, at a time when Scottish culture in general was largely marginalised onscreen. Gilbertson’s output as an independent woman filmmaker in the early-20th century is a remarkable achievement in its own right, but seen within the context of the developments in British film production, and the general lack of Scottish indigenous film production at the time, her work shines forth as truly extraordinary.

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¹ Scotland's most northern island archipelagos.

² Comparisons could be made between this practice and the way in which contemporary screenings of silent films might employ live soundtracks to connect with various cultural contexts of their audiences. The Hippodrome Silent Film Festivals' screening of *Annie Laurie* with a newly commissioned score by Scottish folk musicians is particularly interesting as an example of a Hollywood film about a Scottish subject reinterpreted for contemporary audiences by Scottish musicians drawing from Scottish musical traditions.

³ For further consideration of the British reception of American talkies see Laraine Porter's essay in this issue.

⁴ Interview with Sheila McWhinnie (nee O'Connor), 21 November 1994, T92.4, Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain Archive, Lancaster University Special Collections.

⁵ Interview with Charlie Hamill, 8 November 1983, 8/58, National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Archive.

⁶ For example, Fay Marbe's invitation to the audience to join in the chorus in her Phonofilm rendition of the early George Gershwin song 'There's More To a Kiss...' even succeeded in engaging contemporary audiences when it was shown at the British Silent Film Festival in 2017. Sounds of audience members joining in with Marbe's chorus of kissing sounds could be heard throughout the Phoenix cinema in Leicester.

⁷ Interview with Norman McDonald, T94.1, 17 November 1994, Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain Archive, Lancaster University Special Collections.

⁸ John Grierson's response to *A Crofter's Life in Shetland*, Jenny Gilbertson Collection (box 5), Shetland Archive.

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¹⁰ Jenny Gilbertson's Shetland Diary, January - July 1931, National Library Scotland's Moving Image Archive, 4.6.10.

¹¹ Jenny Gilbertson, Scripts for BBC, Jenny Gilbertson Collection (box 2), Shetland Archive.

¹² Intertitles were sometimes used to give a flavour of the vernacular. For example, in the American film *Annie Laurie* (1927) the intertitles are peppered with the occasional Scots words (e.g. aye, ye).

¹³ From Jenny Gilbertson *Life in Focus: The story of Jenny Gilbertson*, STV 1980 (52m) SA3/2/163.

¹⁴ While conducting interviews in Shetland for the *Major Minor Cinema Project: the Highlands and Islands Film Guild* (a three-year AHRC-funded project led by the University of Glasgow and University of Stirling), a few respondents noted the significance of Gilbertson and her work.

¹⁵ Jenny Gilbertson, Shetland diary, January - July 1931, 5 February, National Library Scotland's Moving Image Archive, 4.6.10.

¹⁶ Zenifilms advertisement for *The Rugged Island, The Era* (London), 31 October 1934, p. 2.

¹⁷ It is likely that Flaherty took the opportunity to make what is now considered to be the first film featuring the Irish language, *Oidhche Sheanchais (A Night of Storytelling)* (1935) (O'Brien, 2004, p. 49), a film only recently rediscovered and restored by Harvard Film Archive in 2012.