

Panel 14.4.21: A Porous Picture: The Influence of Gender and Relationships on Images of Scottish Island Life

Paper title: *Making the Pictures: Women Behind the Camera* – Jenny Brownrigg

Introduction

In this paper I will look at the work and motivations of six late 19th and early 20th century women photographers and filmmakers of rural highlands and islands Scotland: namely Violet Banks (1896-1985), M.E.M. Donaldson (1876-1958), Jenny Gilbertson (1902-1990), IF Grant (1887-1983), Isabell Burton-MacKenzie (1872–1958) and Margaret Fay Shaw (1903-2004).

In this image (00630 *Taken from the sea, off coast of Barra* (c.1930s), Margaret Fay Shaw ©National Trust for Scotland, Canna House), we see Margaret Fay Shaw approaching the Isle of Barra, from the sea. Shaw was to live there from 1936, following her time in South Uist. To consider ‘women behind the camera’, the title phrase, this photograph very much gives the viewer the embodied perspective of being behind the camera. The camera, a Graflex in this case, is likely balanced on the edge of the boat. Shaw, without a tripod until later years, talks in her autobiography, *‘From the Alleghenies to the Hebrides’* of using different methods to balance the camera, which weighed ten pounds. These include using piles of stones, walls, and in one case, a shepherd’s back in Mingulay. As we see from the imperfect angle of the horizon line, the boat is moving, giving us the audience, the anticipation of the photographer of when to press the release lever. Before making the picture, she will have had to set the mirror, decide on shutter speed, decide on aperture, set the shutter curtain, and select the time exposure.

Overlap: Eggs in a nest

I'll begin with picking up on the fact that these six women’s backgrounds were different to those they photographed. These women are not grouped together, like eggs in a nest, (slide is of photographs of birds eggs taken by the following: 01469 A black and white film negative of three speckled eggs on a sandy beach on Miughalaigh (Mingulay), **Margaret Fay Shaw**, ©National Trust for Scotland, Canna House; *Oystercatcher’s eggs breaking*, **Jenny Gilbertson** (1932), Shetland Museum & Archive; **MEM Donaldson**, date unknown, Inverness Museum & Art Gallery) purely because of their biological gender. All six were white. None of the women were native to the rural communities they photographed. All had independent means – key, in terms of privilege, in making their endeavours possible. Whilst Shaw, Gilbertson and Donaldson had varying scales of family inheritances, Banks was an art teacher at a private school, setting up her own photography studio in Edinburgh in 1935. This allowed the women a continuing, independent freedom of movement which was unusual, even for middle- or upper-class women, under the prevailing feminine ideals of family and home. M.E.M. Donaldson left England to build her own home on the Ardnamurchan peninsula in 1927; Margaret Fay Shaw, an American, moved from New York to live with the sisters Pèigi (1874–1969) and Màiri MacRae (1883–1972) for six years at their croft at North Glendale, South Uist from 1929 to 1935; Banks made a substantial tour of the Scottish Highlands and islands at a point during

the 1920s to 1930s. Grant travelled in order to collect implements and understand ways of working specific to Highland communities. Isabell Burton-MacKenzie was sent to the Western Isles in 1912, as the travelling organiser of the Highland Home Industries Board, in order to find craft work for its Scottish selling showcase.¹

Index of women photographers and filmmakers

<p>Jenny Gilbertson (b. Glasgow, 1902-1990)</p> <p>Filmmaker, teacher</p> <p>Subject: Nature, daily lives, agricultural practice, fishing.</p> <p>Location: Shetland, Canada, Canadian Arctic</p> <p>Motivation : educational; to tell an authentic story of Shetland</p> <p>Methods: Lived in the community she was filming</p> <p>Camera: First work, 16mm Cine-Kodak camera; then 35mm Eyemo on advice of John Grierson</p> <p>Dissemination: films, lectures and film screenings</p>	<p>Isabel F Grant (b. Edinburgh 1887-1983)</p> <p>Founder of Highland Folk Museum; folklorist, collector, author, photographer</p> <p>Subject: Folk ways – implements and usage, Highland Life, agriculture, social structure, economy, vernacular architecture</p> <p>Location: Highlands & Islands; Orkney, Shetland, St Kilda</p> <p>Motivation: disappearing ways of life</p> <p>Methods: Travel, research</p> <p>Camera: Unknown</p> <p>Dissemination: Museum, exhibition, books, postcards, talks</p>	<p>Margaret Fay Shaw (b. Glenshaw, Pennsylvania 1903-2004)</p> <p>Folklore collector, photographer, filmmaker, author</p> <p>Subject: Portraits of an island community; farming methods; fishing; seascape, nature</p> <p>Location: South Uist, Eriskay, Canna, Barra, St Kilda, Arran Islands</p> <p>Motivation: Music, everyday Gaelic language, song 'at source', community, disappearing ways of life</p> <p>Methods: Lived in the community she was documenting; transcription</p> <p>Camera: Graflex</p> <p>Dissemination: Books, magazine articles (National Geographic Magazine, Scots Magazine), photographs, film</p>
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Figure 1

Unlike their filmmaking contemporaries such as Mary Field (1896–1968), Evelyn Spice Cherry (1904–1990) or Kay Mander (1915–2013) who co-produced and collaborated on films for governmental agencies or production companies, none of these six women worked within an institutional system and worked independently.² Although Burton MacKenzie had a business role, she chose to use photography as her own means of recording her travels. Jenny Gilbertson referred to it as a 'one woman job'³ where she did write the script, did the filming, dealt with sound, lighting and direction herself. However, though mainly self taught, the women should not be thought of as amateurs nor remote or without networks. Gilbertson for example, made early connections with John Grierson, the 'father' of the British Documentary movement, in order to show him her first film.

¹ Jones, P.5, *A Hebridean Journey: The travel diary of Isabell Burton MacKenzie*, Hamilton House, 2020

² Brownrigg, *The event which is in front of her eyes: 1930s' Scottish Highlands and islands life – the documentary photography and film of M.E.M. Donaldson, Jenny Gilbertson and Margaret Fay Shaw*, The Drouth, issue 54 Interstices 2016

³ Gilbertson, CV notes (Box 3, Shetland Museum & Archives)

My index (Figure 1 and figure 2) allows us to compare each woman's motivations, areas of interest, location, methods and chosen dissemination.

To note:

- The majority of the women describe themselves or are described in a number of capacities, with photographer or filmmaker being only one aspect of what they did.
- The motivation to document a disappearing way of life is strong for Donaldson, Shaw and Grant.
- Both Shaw and Burton MacKenzie learnt Gaelic for their work in the Hebrides. Michael Russell in *'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'.⁴
- Out of the six women, four are born in Scotland, one in England and one in USA. None are born in the Highlands and islands, although three, Gilbertson, Shaw and Donaldson, moved to live in the communities they documented, staying there over a prolonged time. We will see shortly, what this factor affords and how their work responds to this immersion.
- As a means of dissemination, both Banks and IF Grant utilise postcards as a method of using original photographs. Whilst Grant registers hers with James Valentine's & Co, Banks self prints. The postcard as a vehicle opens up as early as the 1890s that there was a wider interest and tourist gaze.

<p>Violet Banks (b. Kinghorn, Fife 1896-1985)</p> <p>Trained at Edinburgh College of Art; art teacher; set up commercial photography studio in Edinburgh in 1935</p> <p>Subject: Highland industry, island life, landscape, portraits, Edinburgh</p> <p>Location: Ardgour, Ardnamurchan, Kilmartin, Kilmore, Trossachs, Loch Lomond; Harris, Lewis; Sutherland; North and South Uist; Eriskay and Benbecula; Barra; The Small Isles; Coll and Tiree; Islay, Jura, Gigha, Colonsay and Oronsay</p> <p>Motivation: unknown</p> <p>Methods: unknown</p> <p>Camera: unknown</p> <p>Dissemination: postcards, photographs</p>	<p>M.E.M. Donaldson (b. Croyden, England 1876-1958)</p> <p>Author, historian, photographer</p> <p>Subject: Landscape, Scottish history, archaeology, religion, portrait</p> <p>Location: including Ardnamurchan, Eigg, Skye, Oransay, Colonsay, Islay, Jura, Iona, Kintyre, Kintail, Wester Ross, Appin, Arisaig, Glen Affric, Lochaline, Loch Linnhe, Ballachuillish, Kingussie, Glen Affric, Roy Bridge, Knapdale, Morvern, down into the Trossachs</p> <p>Motivation: disappearing ways of rural life; photography to illustrate her travel books;</p> <p>Methods: Walking</p> <p>Camera: half plate</p> <p>Dissemination: Books, magazine articles</p>	<p>Isabell Burton-MacKenzie (b. Aberdeen, 1872-1958)</p> <p>Travelling Organiser (1911-1914), The Highland Home Industries Board, Edinburgh</p> <p>Subject: Highland industry; knitting, weaving and sewing, methods relating to</p> <p>Location: North Uist, South Uist, Benbecula, Barra, Eriskay, Skye, Gairloch</p> <p>Motivation: Documenting processes; finding highlanders and islanders who made work that could be sold;</p> <p>Methods: spoke Gaelic; travelled then used local networks such as churches to present work of Highland Home Industries and go and see those who made work to see examples of their work</p> <p>Camera: Vest Pocket Kodak camera</p> <p>Dissemination: Talks; selling exhibition; documentation for diaries</p>
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Figure 2

⁴ Russell, *A different country: the photographs of Werner Kissling*, P.32 Birlinn Ltd, 2002

Farming practices

When seen in full panorama, the women recorded the lives of small Highlands and Islands communities, events, nature and landscape, places of archaeological note, historic moments and moreover, a changing Scotland in its shift from traditional ways of life to modernity. Farming practices (Slide: *Shetland crofters winnowing corn*, postcard, (c. 1887), Dr IF Grant Collection, Edinburgh Central Library; *Winnowing corn in the wind*, film still, *A crofter's life in Shetland* (1931), Jenny Gilbertson, National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive) in their variation crop up as a key subject of rural life – with Grant, Shaw and Gilbertson in particular document different farming practices. It is a key factor that both Gilbertson and Shaw lived in the communities they documented and this affords an additional insight. Whilst they captured the different methods the crofters employed, for delling potatoes or ploughing a field or cutting peat, as we see with Grant's example, the fact that Shaw and Gilbertson stayed there, in essence to metaphorically allow their cameras to keep running, allowed them the length of time to firstly show the seasonal nature of crofting work, and importantly, to situate it as part of everyday living and patterns.

Islander portraits

Furthermore, the length of time spent with crofters, as we see here, Gilbertson and the Clark sisters, and Shaw and the MacRae sisters, (Slide: Film still, *In sheep's clothing*, (1932), **Jenny Gilbertson**. Film still showing Tina and Phemie Clark. Courtesy Shetland Museum and Archives; 00984 A black and white film negative of Pèigi and Màiri Anndra (Pèigi and Màiri MacRae) cutting oats on South Uist, **Margaret Fay Shaw**, ©National Trust for Scotland, Canna House) affords genuine insight and access into the lives of women, leading to a more authentic framing of their subjects' experiences. Through Margaret Fay Shaw's photography of the MacRae sisters, both in their fifties whilst she 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. Màrie 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. Without these photographs we would not have known of her.

Eriskay Post and Telegraph Office

In my research, traversing the separate archives, I began to see examples where different photographers have separately photographed the same subject, landmark, theme, landscape, event or even people. Both Shaw, Banks and Burton MacKenzie separately photographed the same Post and Telegraph Office on the Hebridean island of Eriskay. Their interest in this particular building remains unrecorded. Whilst Shaw was living on the neighbouring island of South Uist at the time, for Banks her stop on Eriskay would likely have been part of a wider independent tour as she documented life on the Hebrides. Why did they choose to document this island post office? Perhaps the three women photographers saw it as representing one of the ways in which modernism had begun to infiltrate the traditions of Highlands and Islands life. The functions of post and telegraph office had been grafted, like a strange hybrid, onto a thatched, traditional blackhouse. In her travel diary, after a rough sea crossing to Eriskay, Burton MacKenzie describes the Post Office as a 'wee

thatched hoosie',⁵ and photographs it square on, with a young man in a suit standing in front of its whitewashed walls. The date of Burton MacKenzie's photograph, 1912, establishes that the blackhouse had been operating as a Post Office, with its telegraph pole apparent, for at least ten or more years before Banks and Shaw photographed it.

Recording modernity in rural situations

We see further examples of modernity in Gilbertson's work, which was calculated on her part as a way to '*enlighten the uneducated masses in "the South" who are under the impression that Shetlanders are hardly yet out of the wood and skin stage*'.⁶

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. (Slide: Film stills, *A crofter's life in Shetland* (1931), Jenny Gilbertson, courtesy of the Gilbertson family and National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive).

This is in contrast to other films of the period, such as Werner Kissling's '*Eriskay – a Poem of Remote Lives*' (1935) which re-iterate remoteness, with its voiceover and titles calling these 'isles of enchantment' and 'distant'. Kissling prefers to keep a romantic view of the islanders untouched by modernism for the film audiences as if the crofters of Eriskay are trapped in time and mist: '*little has changed in this corner of Gaeldom*'.

Gilbertson's understanding of the issues that underpin the island economy

Lynn Abrams in *Myth and materiality in a woman's world: Shetland 1800-2000*, writes 'Fishing, crafting and knitting provided the economic backbone, albeit an extremely insecure one, for the majority of the inhabitants of the scattered settlements of rural Shetland throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th.'⁷ She also states that 'whilst women were marginal to the main economic activity of fishing', their associated labour such as gutting fish, or on the croft as well as knitting, meant 'the economic roles of men and women were similarly interwoven'.

We see from the intertitles of '*A Crofters Life in Shetland*' that Gilbertson in 1931 understood the economy that underpinned Shetland as well as its precarity. (Slide: Inter-titles and film stills, *A crofter's life in Shetland* (1931), Jenny Gilbertson, courtesy of the Gilbertson family and National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive).

She also shows in her imagery – for example how the colour white can be traced through sea spray, salt for herrings and the Shetland shawl: that as a filmmaker she clearly articulates the ways in which the sea, land and ways of life and labour are interwoven.

⁵ P.59, *A Hebridean Journey: The travel diary of Isabell Burton MacKenzie*, Hamilton House, 2020

⁶ Gilbertson, *A Fetlar Wedding*, 1931, typescript, Box 9, Shetland Museum & Archives

⁷ P.58, Abrams, *Myth and Materiality in a woman's world Shetland 1800-2000*, Manchester University Press 2005

The rural industries

Whilst she is far better known as the founder of Highland Folk Museum, IF Grant's collection at Edinburgh Central Library comprises mostly of photographs she has taken, although she purchased photographs by Shaw and Banks for her collection. She is the only woman I have discovered so far to cover Orkney. This example from 1889, *Kelp Burners, Orkney*, comes in the online catalogue with a great description of the industrialisation of kelp into soda and potash for industry: 'The following morning the pieces of kelp ash were broken into lumps and transported by ship to Leith, Dumbarton, Glasgow, Newcastle, Liverpool or Bristol.'⁸ This descriptor shows the connections between the islands and other places of industry, disputing again the romantic idea of remoteness.

Also, here on the slide we have more smoke, this time from the fires in Banks and Burton MacKenzie's photographs of dyeing wool. (Slide: *Women Dying the wool, Violet Banks (c.1920)* Violet Banks Collection, © Historic Environment Scotland Collections PA239/11/3; 'Mrs MacDonald in North Uist (Cladach Kirkibost) dyeing wool – unconscious of the Kodak...' *A Hebridean Journey, The travel diary of Isabell Burton MacKenzie (1912)*, p. 55; *Kelp burners, Orkney*, postcard, **Dr Isabel F Grant**, Dr IF Grant Collection, Edinburgh Central Library.)

Rather than the verb, photographing, Burton MacKenzie repeatedly uses the phrase 'Kodaking' in her 1912 diary, which perhaps, in this language takeover, hints at the universality and popularity of the brand of camera at the time. She describes an occasion in Skye where the crofters show her how their quern stone worked – 'we went outside & I Kodaked first her & then him working it.... After the Kodaking we were given some tea and scones very reviving'.⁹

Violet Banks' photographs of industry

In 1 of 8 Violet Banks albums held by Historic Environment Scotland, we also see examples from Harris and Lewis of industry with *View of wool drying plant*; and *Detail of Teasing Machine*, Violet Banks, taken by Banks in the c.1920s. It should be noted here the precarity of some of the women's archives. It is only happenstance that an antiques dealer found Banks's albums of travels including Barra, North and South Uist and Harris in the bottom drawer of a dresser for sale. However, from a photocopy of two original photograph postcards in the Eigg History Society collection, I have been able to slowly track and purchase a further 13 of her original photograph postcards via eBay, predominantly of Barra, providing evidence that she used her work commercially.

Donaldson and Banks' photographs of Eigg

Here in another overlap, both Donaldson and Banks photographed key landmarks on Eigg, in particular An Sgùrr, the distinctive pitchstone outcrop, as well as significant historic locations like Massacre and Cathedral Caves. Both Donaldson and Banks also separately photographed the loch to be found en route to the Sgùrr, known as Loch nam Ban Mora – Loch of the Big Women – where myth has it that the submerged causeway to the crannog in the middle could only have been forged by a race of women of 'supernatural proportions'.¹⁰ Banks shows the crannog, and full view of the

⁸ <https://www.ambaile.org.uk/search/?searchQuery=I+F+Grant+orkney>

⁹ p.99, *A Hebridean Journey, The travel diary of Isabell Burton MacKenzie (1912)*, Jones

¹⁰ p.4, *Eigg, story of an island*, Dressler, Polygon, 2002

loch, whilst Donaldson – for whom walking the landscape was an embodied experience, bringing her closer to her maker – hints at the route, skirting round the loch, to carry on the journey. (Slide: *Sgurr of Eigg*, date unknown, MEM Donaldson. Courtesy of Inverness Museum & Art Gallery; *Loch Nam Ban Mora*, showing *Sgurr and the Crannog*, Isle of Eigg, Violet Banks. RCAHMS PA244/4/2)

M.E.M. Donaldson's home, Sanna Bheag

MEM Donaldson was to design, build and settle in Sanna in 1927, living there for 20 years until a fire damaged the property. Inverness Museum and Art Gallery holds a series of photographs of Sanna Bheag (Small Sanna) being built. Having been featured in *Country Life*, and, I believe, later satirised by Compton Mackenzie, as The House of Two Hearts in his 1946 novel *Hunting the Fairies*, one wonders if Sanna Bheag, somewhat like the Post and Telegraph Office on Eriskay, became a known place to visit. A caption slip accompanying a photograph of Sanna Bheag, held in the National Library of Scotland, reads: 'A plaque fastened to the wall at one end of the house bore the words "M.E.M. Donaldson, Author, in 1927 built this house, to show others how the beauty of the old Highland fashion and its fitness in this scenery, can consort with every comfort needful in these days".¹¹ The very fact of a plaque, and 'to show others', suggests the audience for Sanna Bheag was wider than the neighbouring community.

The discovery of Violet Banks's photograph from one of her photograph albums held at Historic Environment Scotland was the first physical evidence I found that one of the women photographers knew of one of the others, with Banks's gaze falling on Donaldson's home. Her typed caption in her album reads: 'Views at Ardnamurchan. House at Sanna built by M.E.M. Donaldson'. (Slide: *Donaldson outside Sanna Bheag*, M.E.M. Donaldson Collection, Inverness Museum & Art Gallery, High Life Highland; Detail, *House at Sanna built by MEM Donaldson*, Violet Banks c.1920s, © Historic Environment Scotland Collections PA23815/4)

Comparison, Miss Mairi Smith and Angus John Campbell

This overlap sees two photographers, in this case Werner Kissling (1895–1988) and Shaw, photograph the same islanders – Miss Mary Smith and Angus John Campbell, of North Glendale, South Uist. In his 1936 photograph, Kissling evenly balances two of North Glendale's blackhouses, to the left of frame, with two islanders, Smith and Campbell, in profile to the right. Whilst the photograph caption names the islanders, the emphasis is equally on the vernacular of the architecture. (Slide: *Dwelling-Houses, Leth Mheadhoinneach Boisdale, South Uist, 1936, Mary Smith's House; Mary Smith and Angus John Campbell in foreground*, Werner Kissling © Kissling Collection, Scottish Studies Archives; 03631, Mairi Smith (Mary Smith) sitting on a rock next to a stone building on Uibhist a Deas (South Uist), with a cat on her lap, Margaret Fay Shaw, (c. 1930s) ©National Trust for Scotland, Canna House; 00332 A black and white film negative of Angus John Campbell sitting on a small boat off the coast of Uibhist a Deas (South Uist), operating the rudder, Margaret Fay Shaw, ©National Trust for Scotland, Canna House)

¹¹ National Library of Scotland, Acc 12251/49.

In her portrait of Miss Mary Smith, Shaw foregrounds Miss Smith and seems to delight in the contrasting patterns – the stones on the curving wall, the markings on the cat and the flowers on Miss Smith’s apron. Again, tracing Angus John Campbell from his ‘islander’ representation in Kissling’s photograph, this overlap is from one of many portraits that Margaret Fay Shaw took of her neighbour. In this photograph, she sits in close proximity across from him in a small boat and takes his picture. The composition places him firmly in the centre. As with Miss Smith’s portrait, the ratio between environment and subject, in comparison to Kissling’s, has been flipped with the main focus the person. Shaw made many photographs of Campbell over the years she was in North Glendale, offering a very different portrait from Kissling’s- he is his own man and very much in charge of his environment.

Eigg islander, Ishbel MacQuarrie: as photographed by M.E.M. Donaldson and an unknown photographer

Eigg History Society’s Ishbel Anderson Collection affords an important final point. This time, the same islander, Ishbel MacQuarrie, is seen as part of a family photograph, then from the National Museum of Scotland’s collection, as photographed by M.E.M. Donaldson. Donaldson’s photograph is captioned in John Telfer’s biography on Donaldson as ‘taking the peats home’.¹² The caption goes on to read, ‘the woman with a white kerchief tied round her head is described as “the embodiment of good nature, health and contentment”’. Eigg History Society’s archives, amassed from photographs held over generations by islanders, is key in locating the voice of ‘the subject’. The photograph of Ishbel MacQuarrie here is to record her significance as a relative who is part of a family, not just as an example of island life.

Conclusion

The focus of who is behind the camera has historically had much time dedicated to the lineage of male photographers who captured the lives and landscapes of rural Scotland. Through the painstaking work of women like the late Magda Sagarzazu, and archivist Fiona J Mackenzie at Canna House on Margaret Fay Shaw; Alyne E. Jones on Isabell Burton MacKenzie; Shona Main on Jenny Gilbertson; to name but a few, the shift in the field is changing. And through the work of these women photographers and filmmakers from the late 19th and early 20th century, we see a different narrative of a changing Scotland emerging.

¹² Dunbar, *Herself: The Life and Photographs of M.E.M. Donaldson*, New Haven and New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1980, p.50.