

## Overlaps: Tracking the Distinctiveness of Gaze of Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Women Photographers in Scotland

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### Overlap: subject, location and theme

What methods can be used to define early 20<sup>th</sup>-century women photographers' unique 'ways of seeing' rural Highlands and Islands Scotland through the camera lens? This paper seeks to establish comparisons through the 'overlap', a technique which has stemmed from an ongoing period of archival research, traversing multiple archives to map a wider context. I began to see examples where different photographers have separately photographed the same subject, landmark, theme, landscape, event or even people. This allowed for a method of close comparison, therefore analysis of differences, or similarities, in framing, composition or intention.

Whilst my ongoing research is centred on 13 early 20<sup>th</sup>-century women social documentary photographers and filmmakers in Scotland, in particular I will make reference to Mary Ethel Muir Donaldson (1876–1958), Violet Banks (1886–1985) and Margaret Fay Shaw (1903–2004). (For more on the photography of Margaret Fay Shaw, see Lily Barnes's paper, pp.16–29 of this issue.) I will identify instances where their work 'overlaps' with each other's, with their male peers', or with the photography of the islanders themselves, in order to further assess the distinctiveness of 'gaze' from a perspective of gender and class.

These women are not grouped together, like eggs in a nest, purely because of their biological gender. All three were white. Their photographic work overlaps in the 1920s and 1930s (Donaldson, as the oldest in the group, was active from 1900s). They were recording rural communities at a time when there was much interest in the subject. Contemporary examples of similar activity include the Farm Security Administration established in 1937 to record the rural poverty in USA, or the anthropological research of Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960). Hurston returned to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, to record friends and neighbours, their stories providing a rich cultural history of this community of Black Americans as detailed in her 1935 book *Mules and Men*.<sup>1</sup> Neither Donaldson, Shaw nor Banks were native to the rural communities they photographed, with only Banks being Scottish by birth (Kinghorn, Scotland).<sup>2</sup> All three had independent means – key, in terms of privilege, in making their endeavours possible. Whilst Shaw and Donaldson had family inheritances, Banks was an art teacher at a private school, setting up her own photography studio in Edinburgh in 1935.<sup>3</sup> 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. Whilst Banks had studied at Edinburgh College of Art, Donaldson and Shaw were self-taught in photography.

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, neither Donaldson, Banks nor Shaw worked within an institutional system. Photography was not their only pursuit. Donaldson was an author, with the primary purpose of her photographs being to illustrate her own walks and travels for her books, in particular *Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1921) and *Further Wanderings, Mainly in Argyll* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1926). Hugh Cheape makes the

point in his 2006 essay on Donaldson in this journal that her books were for a predominantly urban audience.<sup>4</sup> Margaret Fay Shaw had moved to South Uist to hear the authentic Gaelic singers at source, transcribing the music and words of the small community she lived in. She used photography and film to further document their lives. Banks's motivations remain unrecorded. It is only happenstance that an antiques dealer found her albums of travels including Barra, North and South Uist and Harris in the bottom drawer of a dresser for sale.<sup>5</sup> 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 ten of her original photograph postcards via eBay, providing evidence that she used her work commercially.

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. As an example of an overlap, both Shaw and Banks made separate studies of Highland Games on South Uist and Barra respectively.<sup>6</sup> Each photographer positioned herself behind the seated judges, who look towards a low stage, with individual male performers playing the bagpipes. In both photographs, the audience is in the distance, lining the perimeters of the show area, with a very low, undulating hill forming the horizon lines. The caption for Banks's photograph notes 'Details of Barra Games, Compton Mackenzie judging'. He sits in between two men in caps, with the back of his kilt folded neatly over the low bench.

#### Overlap: island Post and Telegraph Office



Figure 1: Margaret Fay Shaw, *The Post Office, Èirisgeigh (Eriskay)*, 1930–33, Canna House 2019.10138. © National Trust for Scotland



Figure 2: Violet Banks, *View of Thatched Cottages, Telegraph Office*, c.1920–1930s, Violet Banks Collection DP050868. Courtesy Historic Environment Scotland Collections

Both Shaw and Banks separately photographed the same Post and Telegraph Office on the Hebridean island of Eriskay (figures 1 and 2). 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 two 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. Shaw has taken a series of three photographs of the building, with life and the seasons circumnavigating it. These are held by the National Trust for

Scotland at Canna House, Shaw's home. Shaw noted on a duplicate of one of these photographs, held in the Isabel F. Grant Photographic Collection at Edinburgh Central Library, that the Post Office was one of a series of 'slightly scattered houses'.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, in her composition, Banks (who also has a smaller number of her photographs in the Isabel F. Grant Collection) sets her camera slightly further away and to the right of the Post Office, below the small rise of scrub ground it sits upon. Her photograph, *View of Thatched Cottages, Telegraph Office* (c.1920s), which can be found in the collections of Historic Environment Scotland, captures the building in the middle distance. She chooses to show the telegraph wires shooting out from the poles and rising upwards to the top left of frame. Intriguingly, they are not the only women to photograph this island post office. Isabell Burton MacKenzie (1872–1958) 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 showcase. In her travel diary, after a rough sea crossing to Eriskay, Burton MacKenzie describes the Post Office as a 'wee thatched hoosie',<sup>8</sup> and photographs it square on, with a young man in a suit standing in front of its whitewashed walls. The accompanying photograph caption in the published diaries reads: 'The beautifully dressed youth near the door must be a Stranger from the South'.<sup>9</sup> 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.

Overlap: Isle of Eigg

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'.<sup>10</sup> Banks shows the crannog, and full view of the 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.

Overlap: Donaldson's home, Sanna Bheag



Figure 3: M.E.M. Donaldson standing outside Sanna Bheag, c.1927–47, M.E.M. Donaldson Collection, Inverness Museum and Art Gallery. High Life Highland



Figure 4: Violet Banks, *House at Sanna built by M.E.M. Donaldson*, c.1920s, HES PA23815/4. © Historic Environment Scotland Collections

In her book *Further Wanderings, Mainly in Argyll*, M.E.M. Donaldson writes that the approach and view of Sanna, on the Ardnamurchan peninsula, 'bursts upon you with a splendor that is almost

overwhelming'.<sup>11</sup> Donaldson was to 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 (figure 3). It is clear in Donaldson's unpublished manuscript of her autobiography *A Pebble on the Beach*,<sup>12</sup> that the house, Sanna Bheag, was a joint design project taken on by both Donaldson and her companion, the illustrator Isabel Bonus (1875–1941), stating 'The friends had determined that it [the house] should offer no affront to the landscape.' The choice of wording in 'affront' reflects Donaldson's position on the modern houses that she saw creeping into the Highland landscape – 'I have not ceased to deplore the ever-increasing examples of bad manners in building that are disfiguring the length and breadth of the Highlands'.<sup>13</sup>

Their main aim was that the architecture would be sympathetic to the local vernacular, whilst being adapted to 'modern needs'. To achieve this they wished to demonstrate 'how unnecessary it was to import any alien and ugly material or fashions to procure such requirements'.<sup>14</sup> From an article Donaldson wrote in *Country Life*, materials included the local stone, 'a beautiful blue granite ... blasted with gelignite' and a thatch, partly crafted from nearby heather.<sup>15</sup> 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*,<sup>16</sup> 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"'.<sup>17</sup> 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 (figure 4) 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'. Banks also photographs 'The shore at Sanna and Sanna Village'.

#### Overlap: Mingulay



Figure 5: Margaret Fay Shaw, Ruined buildings at the village beside the sandy beach at the bay on Miughalaigh (Mingulay), 1931–34, Canna House 2018.16266. © National Trust for Scotland



Figure 6: Robert Moyes Adam, *Village Bay, Mingulay*, 1922, ID: RMA-H-1083. Courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums

Margaret Fay Shaw visited St Kilda in the final months before the island was evacuated. As she explains in her typescript, *St Kilda, 1930 – The Last Summer*, Shaw had learnt by chance that the McCallum, Orme & Co. ship *Hebrides* was calling in at Lochmaddy, taking passengers and cargo to St Kilda for £3 10s passage.<sup>18</sup> A set of collectable souvenir cards in Canna House's collection epitomise the 'tourist gaze', showing the museumification of St Kilda, as passengers scrutinise a woman at her spinning wheel on the street. The St Kildans' way of life had become a 'curiosity'. Shaw hints at this intrusion in the same typescript: 'On the 29th of August the St Kildans left their island. It was said they were defeated by Nature, but she was not wholly to blame.' She concentrates on the distinctive land forms and architecture, photographing Hirta and Soay from the sea, as well as framing the line of houses in Village Bay from a respectful distance, from a high position looking down over the cleits that form navigation points across this landscape.

Shaw visited Mingulay, with its own deserted Village Bay, in May 1931, returning in 1932, 1933 and 1934. Her first visit occurred nine months after she had witnessed the last summer of St Kilda. Mingulay had been uninhabited since 1912, but latterly was run as a sheep farm by the island's owner John Russell. She spent two weeks there, helping to cook as well as filming and photographing the shepherds, cliffs, birds and the island itself. An emotive excerpt from Shaw's diary, dated 10 May 1931, captures the atmosphere of this evacuated island:

I wander away to the deserted village – to look for cairns and fields and feel again that strange sorrow that can only be found here – the green sea rolling in across the sands, the gulls and oyster catchers screaming – running at the edge of the foam. The nettles growing thick and fast – the wild iris leaves and in the dips of the little streams, primroses – that little mound of graves – with crude stones and wretched remnant crosses barren, crumbling – not a name to be found – and not a roof on the houses rapidly filling with sand.<sup>19</sup>

A corresponding photograph to this diary entry encourages the gaze to track along the low bank of a stream, leading to four small crosses, marking the edge of the sand dunes and the sea beyond (figure 5).

Robert Moyes Adam (1885–1967), whose work is in the St Andrews University Library's Special Collections, was a botanical illustrator from Edinburgh. He visited Mingulay both before and after its evacuation, with short one-week visits in June 1905 and 1922. The majority of photographs from his 1905 visit relate to ornithology and botany – to be expected given his training. A small number of the photographs show Village Bay and some of its inhabitants, including a group of children and a peat cutter. When looking at his 1922 photographs, there is no trace of sentimentality in his work. It would be unfair to expect the same emotional response that Shaw had when on Mingulay, given it had been a decade since the islanders left. Moyes Adam's camera is very much led by a botanist's eye. He captures streamside vegetation, peers into rock pools, photographs rock plants and cliff flora. In his own photograph of Village Bay, his position is further to its edge, on the sand dunes, looking at the 'marram grass, sea holly, [and] wild carrots' (figure 6).

Overlap: Miss Mary Smith and Angus John Campbell



Figure 7: Werner Kissling, *Dwelling-Houses, Leth Mheadhoinneach Boisdale, South Uist*, 1936. The photo shows Mary Smith's House with Mary Smith and Angus John Campbell in the foreground. © Kissling Collection, Scottish Studies Archives



Figure 8: Margaret Fay Shaw, Màiri Smith (Mary Smith) sitting on a rock next to a stone building on Uibhist a Deas (South Uist), with a cat on her lap, 1929–34, Canna House 2016.1910. © National Trust for Scotland



Figure 9: Margaret Fay Shaw, Angus John Campbell sitting on a small boat off the coast of Uibhist a Deas (South Uist), c.1931, Canna House, 2018.10331. © National Trust for Scotland

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 (figure 7). Whilst the photograph caption names the islanders, the emphasis is equally on the vernacular of the architecture. He took his photograph a year after the six years that Shaw had spent living in North Glendale, before her marriage to John Lorne Campbell and their move to Barra. 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 (figure 8). Furthermore, in her 1955 book *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*, Shaw transcribed a number of songs sung by Miss Smith, noting the tradition in Smith's family of sharing knowledge, with both father and grandfather 'giving' ballads and songs to other folklorists.<sup>20</sup> Michael Russell in his book on Werner Kissling's photographs 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'.<sup>21</sup>

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 one photograph, she sits in close proximity across from him in a small boat and takes his picture (figure 9). He stares off camera, in a moment of repose. The composition places him firmly in the centre, with the glimpse of land behind, lying low. 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. The series of portraits Shaw makes of Campbell over the years she was in North Glendale give a detailed study of him as a crofter and fisherman. In *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*, Shaw names him, his brother Roderick and father Ian as three of four bards living in Glendale: 'The Campbell men were gifted in composing and they had amazing memories. They were not only familiar with the great Gaelic poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but could recite and sing much of it.'<sup>22</sup> This additional knowledge Shaw has of Campbell, and his standing, begins to offer a very different portrait from Kissling's. He is portrayed as his own man and very much in charge of his environment.

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 in a 'Griersonian victim documentary'.<sup>23</sup> 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. Shaw's approach, where she fastidiously credits in her book *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* who sang the songs as she transcribed them, and often whom they had learned the songs from, allows for the ownership to remain firmly with North Glendale.

Overlap: Islanders' own photographs



Figure 10: Angus MacCormick and Ishbel MacQuarrie, undated, Ishbel Anderson Collection, Photographic Archive, Comunn Eachdraidh Eige Archive



Figure 11: M.E.M. Donaldson, *Taking the Peats Home*, c.1905. National Libraries Scotland

Eigg History Society's Ishbel Anderson Collection affords an important final overlap. This time, the same islander, Ishbel MacQuarrie, is seen as part of a family photograph (figure 10), then from the National Museum of Scotland's collection, as photographed by M.E.M. Donaldson (figure 11). Donaldson's photograph is captioned in John Telfer's biography on Donaldson as 'taking the peats home'.<sup>24</sup> 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.

In this traversing of individual archives, the method of the overlap begins to connect the gazes of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century women photographers in Scotland, showing the themes they were drawn to, the ways in which their methods differed, between each other and male peers, the relationship between photographer and subject and by turn how their images were being used for an audience. It also begins to assess the nature of their multi-dimensional gaze – shifting between familiar, ethnographic and touristic. This research is ongoing, working towards a survey exhibition *Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Photographers and Filmmakers in Scotland*, due to take place at the City Art Centre, Edinburgh from November 2022 to February 2023.



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- <sup>1</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, first published 1935. First Perennial Library (New York) edition published 1990.
- <sup>2</sup> Margaret Fay Shaw had an ancestral connection to Scotland through emigration. Her great-great-grandfather John Shaw had left Scotland for Philadelphia in 1792. M.E.M. Donaldson was born in England and brought up in Surrey. Like Shaw, Donaldson also had a Scottish ancestral connection.
- <sup>3</sup> See Veronica Fraser, 'The Violet Banks Collection', *Vernacular Building* 32, 2009, pp.67–78.
- <sup>4</sup> Hugh Cheape, 'Herself and Green Maria: The Photography of M.E.M. Donaldson (1876–1958)', *Studies in Photography*, 2006, p.45.
- <sup>5</sup> Fraser, 'The Violet Banks Collection', p.68.
- <sup>6</sup> Margaret Fay Shaw, Man playing the bagpipes on a low wooden platform in a field on Uibhist a Deas (South Uist), 1929–34, Canna House 2019.10784.11.1. © National Trust for Scotland. Violet Banks, *Detail of Barra Games, Compton Mackenzie judging*, from Barra album, RCHAMS (PA 243/20/7). Historic Environment Scotland.
- <sup>7</sup> Margaret Fay Shaw, *Slightly Scattered Houses*, Edinburgh and Scottish Collection, Edinburgh Central Library: <https://www.ambaile.org.uk/asset/38429/1/>
- <sup>8</sup> Alyne E. Jones, *A Hebridean Journey: The Travel Diary of Isabell Burton MacKenzie* (Rochester Upon Medway: Hamilton House Publishing, 2020), p.59.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.
- <sup>10</sup> Camille Dressler, *Eigg: The Story of an Island* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998), p.4.
- <sup>11</sup> M.E.M. Donaldson, *Further Wanderings, Mainly in Argyll* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1926), p.248.
- <sup>12</sup> M.E.M. Donaldson, *A Pebble on the Beach*, unpublished manuscript autobiography: [www.ornaverum.org/family/donaldson/mary-e-muir-beach-pebble.html](http://www.ornaverum.org/family/donaldson/mary-e-muir-beach-pebble.html).
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> M.E.M. Donaldson, 'House at Sanna Bheag, Ardnamurchan, in the Western Highlands', *Country Life* LXIV (1645), 28 July 1928, p.144.
- <sup>16</sup> Compton Mackenzie, *Hunting the Fairies* (London: Chatto & Windus), 1949.
- <sup>17</sup> National Library of Scotland, Acc 12251/49.
- <sup>18</sup> Margaret Fay Shaw, Typescript – *St Kilda, 1930 – The Last Summer*, National Trust for Scotland Canna House, CH1/1/2/1/2.
- <sup>19</sup> Margaret Fay Shaw, Diary – South Uist, Mingulay, Oxford 1931, National Trust for Scotland, Canna House, CHMFS/1/4/1/4.
- <sup>20</sup> Margaret Fay Shaw, *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005), p.271 (first published 1955).
- <sup>21</sup> Michael Russell, *A Different Country: The Photographs of Werner Kissling* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2002), p.32.
- <sup>22</sup> Shaw, *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*, p.71.
- <sup>23</sup> Brian Winston, *The Documentary Film Book* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.11.
- <sup>24</sup> John Telfer Dunbar, *Herself: The Life and Photographs of M.E.M. Donaldson* (New Haven and New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1980), p.50.