***Transversing archives: building histories of early 20th century women filmmakers and photographers in Scotland,*** Jenny Brownrigg

**Introduction**

This paper draws upon the exhibition I curated, *'Glean: Early 20th century women filmmakers and photographers in Scotland'* at City Art Centre, Edinburgh, which brought together 125 works by 14 women, from 17 archives in 2022/23. Rather than presenting a homogeneous narrative, or the women's biographies over-shadowing their work, the exhibition sought to retain complexities and diverse motivations at play. The paper will look at curatorial research methods used to develop such an approach.

‘*Transverse’* in this paper’s title, is an awkward word, defined as: ‘*acting, situated or lying across something, set crosswise*’. I’ve selected it for this paper, instead of a smoother word such as ‘*traverse’*, to retain the tensions and differences that can sometimes get ironed out in the vehicle of a survey exhibition.

Indeed, this awkward path is sometimes present in how the archives themselves have come into existence. The precarity of an archive for example, is demonstrated in Violet Bank’s work, which only came to the attention of an antique’s dealer in Edinburgh, when he discovered her photograph albums in the bottom drawer of a wooden dresser that had come to him for sale. Understanding their value, he took them to Historic Environment Scotland. In a second example, the archives of MEM Donaldson, are split between Edinburgh and Inverness. The portraits are with National Library of Scotland, whilst Inverness Museum and Art Gallery owns her landscape photography. This is not a distinction she made, rather, a choice of a museum curator.

**Background**

What is learnt when these 14 women are grouped together in this survey show? Whilst the majority of the women in this exhibition made their work independently, a small number worked in the film industry. Two set up commercial photography studios. When assessing the aims of these women, their films and photographs were used for a variety of purposes – to record events, to share with communities as well as wider audiences, to educate, for research, to sell, or to illustrate the other activities that they were involved in. Whilst some described themselves soley as photographer or filmmaker, many described themselves in multiple ways – author, historian, folklorist, photographer, filmmaker. Two of the women had gone to art school, with the rest self-taught or learning as part of a job. A small number would not have thought of themselves in such terms as photographers or filmmakers. Many would not have viewed themselves or their work as feminist, so this also required acknowledgment, in view that the exhibition was curated from a feminist perspective.

The exhibition also acknowledged, in particular through the events programme, the researchers, gallerists and archivists, who have championed individuals in their work. The feminist ethics of ‘*Glean’* were to show the ‘live’ hive mind in this field of study. My contribution, through curatorial methods, has been to connect and bring together, for the first time, 14 women filmmakers and photographers from the early 20th century, working in Scotland. ‘*Glean’* as a choice of word, for the exhibition title, was to reflect an action shared three-fold: by those photographed eg gleaning in farm labour; to the photographers and filmmakers using the camera to glean disappearing ways of life; and my subsequent actions as a researcher in multiple archives. Seen in the whole, the work of these women provided a different insight into documentary practice from this period.

Rather than present each woman’s work individually, ‘*Glean’* had four cross-cutting themes, in order to allow for comparison of work and differing motivations. The themes were ‘*Capturing Scotland’*, *‘Nature, Landscape and Travel’*, ‘*Recording Community’* and *‘Women and Society’*.

**‘Capturing Scotland’**

*‘Capturing Scotland’* looked at the ways in which the women recorded rural and urban Scotland, often capturing historically significant moments for communities, ways of life, work and industry. Industry ranged from the docks in Glasgow to the Highland Home Industries and craft in the Highlands and Islands. In my research, a clear definer in the type of narrative about Scotland that the women were telling, as opposed to their male contemporaries, was that this was not a Romantic picture of a Scotland caught in aspic. Rather it was one where both modernity and traditional ways of life were simultaneous. It should be said there were differing views on modernity. Donaldson stated it most strongly in her unpublished 1939 transcript *A voice from a Highland Scrap Heap*:

‘*We left behind us a port, which originally entirely attractive, has, with the passing of the years, permanently changed this characteristic at the hideous hands of an alien modernity.*’[1]

Therefore, in this exhibition section I selected different examples bringing together tradition and modernity into the same frame. A grid of Isobel Frances Grant’s working photographs, held by Edinburgh Central Library, were displayed to show how she mapped different traditional Scottish building types. Her photographs showed them often in ruinous state, or with mends, such as in this roof, clearly seen. They are not aesthetically composed, more an aide memoire for her to note different construction methods. She was to subsequently commission reconstructions of such buildings at her Highland Folk Museum.

This 1930 photograph by Violet Banks, *The road by the western shore of Barra*,[2] clearly shows a modern building next to a traditional dwelling. IF Grant, in her book ‘*The Making of Am Fasgadh’*, gives some insight into this change of housing:

*In the early 1930s, the Scottish Board of Agriculture was carrying out a housing drive. Every steamer I travelled in appeared to be loaded with piles of window frames, sanitary equipment etc. One began to wonder if any cottage of the traditional type would be left.*’[3]

This transverse of tradition and modernity was also demonstrated in a sub section on craft. I introduced side by side the ubiquitous traditional image of the spinner, by Margaret Fay Shaw, alongside that of a different kind of design. *The Blythswood Multiple* by Margaret Watkins, is a collage composite of a photograph she took of steps and shadow in Blythswood Square in Glasgow. She collaged a repeat of the photograph to create a carpet design, which she tried, to no avail, to sell to Templeton and Stoddard, a carpet design company in Glasgow who made carpets for the White House and Titanic.

I also included the film ‘*A crofter’s life in Shetland’*, (1931), by Jenny Gilbertson, in its entirety at 44 mins. In her magnum opus, Gilbertson shows traditional life alongside modern life. Rather than focusing purely on crofting life, cutting it loose from modern times 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 girl in a leather coat walking down the main street. We see further examples of modernity in Gilbertson’s work, which, in her own words, was calculated 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*”. ‘[4]

**Nature, Landscape and Travel**

This exhibition section presented the ways in which the women were keen observers of nature and landscape. Land was also interpreted as an active rather than passive entity, to be journeyed into, traversed across or worked upon. Travel was across land and sea, with a number of the women travelling internationally. Women such as Gilbertson, Grant, Shaw, Banks and Garvie were keen to observe the specifics of how land was farmed, in order to record traditional methods before they disappeared. Here we have Shaw’s examples of farming implements, including Angus John Campbell demonstrating use of the foot plough.

There are times in the exhibition where subjects align, such as in shared methods, including the act of walking. Walking as a creative research methodology, is a very current topic. Both explorer Isabel Wylie Hutchison in her monumental ‘strolls’, and MEM Donaldson, in her journeys into the landscape, utilised walking as a way to understand Scottish landscape from its midst – a place to inhabit rather than to aesthetically frame. Wylie Hutchison’s walks were later transcribed in National Geographic Magazine, and there were copies of those articles on display in ‘*Glean’*. For Donaldson, her walking had a religious undertone, as she wished to get closer to her Creator. Her photographs were used to illustrate her own books, ‘*Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands’* (1921); and ‘*Further Wanderings-Mainly in Argyll’* (1926).

By transversing the archives, I also identified ‘overlaps’ of subject, place, and sometimes the same person, recorded by different people. I was able to make such groupings apparent in the exhibition allowing for a means for making a critical analysis of style through comparison of framing and focus. Here, for example, drawn from separate sources, I was able to illustrate that three of the women traveling independently to photograph the same unlikely subject, the post office in Eriskay. Here are clockwise: Violet Bank’s circa 1920 photograph *Telegraph and Post Office, Eriskay*; Margaret Fay Shaw’s *Slightly scattered houses, Eriskay*, date unknown; and the earliest, Isabell Burton MacKenzie’s 1912 photograph *Post Office – Isle of Eriskay*. I suspect that the post office was of interest as a further anachronism of modernity and tradition – technology existing within a remote island cottage.

**Recording Community**

The longevity of being part of a community over a lengthy period was a key factor in a quarter of the women photographers and filmmakers’ work. Gilbertson was commended by ‘father of documentary’ John Grierson on her methods, namely:

‘…*living with [the crofters] round the seasons for a year, on the unique assumption that the dramatic unity of a crofter’s life could not conceivably be the period of a six weeks’ summer holiday...’.*[5]

The exhibition section ‘*Recording community’*, took two examples, Margaret Fay Shaw, who lived with the sisters Peigi and Mairi MacRae, over a five-year period in South Uist, and Dr Beatrice Garvie, who was medical doctor for the Orkney community of North Ronaldsay, over a 16-year period. Work selected from both women demonstrated that the length of time spent gave a realistic and detailed picture of everyday life, covering labour, leisure and play. As a folklorist, musician, photographer and filmmaker, Shaw’s motivation was to transcribe Gaelic song at source. Rather than present islanders as ethnographic type, Shaw chose her subjects as they were bards and singers in the local community as well as crofters working land and sea. All are attributed in her key work ‘*Folklore and Folksong of South Uist’*, with the songs and stories they shared and this was a key motivation to be drawn out in accompanying interpretation and ephemera on display.

**Biography, women and society**

The layout of the first floor of the City Art Centre was over two spaces. A key decision was to have the audience meet the work first, in the first room, then to include the women’s biographies in the ‘*Women and society’* room in the second section, which situated them as subject to the society they operated within.

I chose the grouping of four examples of bird’s nests by Garvie, Donaldson, Shaw and Gilbertson, as a metaphor to present key tensions transverse in the contemporary presentation of this archival work. These women were not grouped together in this exhibition, like eggs in a nest, purely because of their biological gender. All fourteen of the women’s backgrounds were different to those that they recorded. All were white. None of the women were native to the communities they photographed or filmed. All had some form of independent means, key in terms of privilege, in making their endeavours possible. For example, 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.

A number of the women were motivated politically in their work, so were a key part of this exhibition section. Ruby Grierson was an uncredited assistant in ‘*Housing Problems’* (1935, directed by Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey) – latterly credited with getting those living in poor conditions to talk straight to the camera, rather than the norm of the received pronunciation narrator. This was an innovation for documentary film making.

The inclusion of two films by Helen Biggar, *Challenge to Fascism: Glasgow’s May Day* (1938) and ‘*Hell UnLimited’* (1936), a collaboration with Norman McLaren (1914-1987) were key inmaking this historical work relevant to the issues of today. The first film documented by Glasgow Kino Group – of which Biggar was a member- shows an International Workers day protest and rally in Glasgow, championing workers rights*.* The second, *Hell Unlimited* (1936) was made as a protest against profits in armaments during a period when fascism was growing throughout Europe, its mixture of stop animation and archival footage making evident the relationship between capitalism, armaments and war.

**Conclusion**

As an institution, the City Art Centre has an aim to *‘champion historic and contemporary Scottish visual and applied arts’*. From this platform, ‘*Glean’* aimed to build missing histories, through the survey show model, by retaining the complexities inherent in the work. It was also important to frame such archival work from a position of future histories, which lie, transverse, at the moment of exhibition. ‘*Glean’* sought to do this by presenting work through the varying contexts of the women’s motivations and aims behind the work and through keeping tensions of rural and urban, traditional and modern, as well as gender and class.

**Footnotes**

[1] *The Island of Enlargement*, *A voice from a Highland Scrap Heap* (1939), MEM Donaldson <https://www.ornaverum.org/reference/pdf/276.pdf>

[2] PA 243, On loan from Historic Environment Scotland, Courtesy of HES: Violet Banks Collection

[3] P.30, *The Making of Am Fasgadh: An account of the origins of the Highland Folk Museum by its founder*, Isabel Frances Grant, NMS Enterprises Ltd (2007)

[4] Jenny Gilbertson, *A Fetlar Wedding*, 1931, typescript, Box 9, Shetland Museum & Archives

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