

# NATURE, LANDSCAPE AND TRAVEL

This section looks at the ways in which the women were keen observers of nature and landscape. Land is also interpreted as an active rather than passive entity, to be journeyed into, traversed across or farmed. Movement is across land and sea, with a number of the women, such as Isabel Wylie Hutchison travelling internationally.

Both M.E.M. (Mary Ethel Muir) Donaldson and Isobel Wylie Hutchison utilised walking as a way to understand Scottish landscape from its midst – a place to inhabit rather than to aesthetically frame. Donaldson's photographs encourage a level of active looking, suggesting routes through the landscape.

Some of the women, such as Isabel Frances Grant, were keen to observe the specifics of how land was farmed, and with which methods or tools, in order to record traditional ways of working before they disappeared. Others wished to show the interconnectedness between people and place. Jenny Gilbertson's editing and intertitles in *A Crofter's Life on Shetland* (1931) consistently make the connection, for example, '*Out of the sea comes the crofter's dinner*'.

There is an awareness in a number of the works of the complexity of the relationship between people, land and nature. In 1931 Margaret Fay Shaw visited St Kilda, in the last summer before the island was evacuated. She wrote in her diary: *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.*

# CAPTURING SCOTLAND

This section looks at the ways in which the women recorded rural and urban Scotland in the early 20th century, often capturing historically significant moments for communities, ways of life, work and industry. Industry subjects range from the docks in Glasgow to the home industries in the Highlands and Islands.

Rural and city work, industry and trade are represented in particular by Violet Banks, Margaret Watkins, Margaret Fay Shaw and Jenny Gilbertson. Isabell Burton MacKenzie was The Highlands Home Industry travelling organiser from 1911-14. Using a Kodak Vest Pocket camera as an aide memoire, she visited the homes of islanders involved in craft, to encourage them to sell their work directly through exhibitions on the mainland through The Highlands Home Industry initiatives.

Whilst M.E.M. Donaldson rankled at the modernisation she saw creeping into the Scottish landscape, a great number of the women show traditional and modern life side by side. A flapper girl walks down Lerwick main street in *A Crofter's Life on Shetland* (1931). In one photograph by Violet Banks, a modern house with slated roof sits next to the thatched roof of a traditional vernacular building. Whilst scenes of Scotland are commercialised, as in the original photographic postcards by Violet Banks, the portrayal of Scotland is not overly romanticised. While IF Grant makes her working photographs of traditional buildings across Scotland, she also captured them in demise.

# RECORDING COMMUNITY

Living in communities for a number of years, some of the women in this exhibition were able to observe ways of life connected with the seasons and experience time with individuals at work, leisure and play. By doing so, a more realistic and detailed picture of everyday life could be recorded. There is often evidence that, in their practice, they sought permission to photograph and film their subjects.

This section looks predominantly at the work of Margaret Fay Shaw in North Glendale, South Uist, and Dr Beatrice Garvie, in North Ronaldsay, Orkney. Shaw, an American photographer, filmmaker and folklorist, lived with the sisters Pèigi and Màiri MacRae for six years. Her primary motivation had been to hear and transcribe Gaelic song at source.

Dr Beatrice Garvie was the medical doctor for 16 years in North Ronaldsay. In particular, she photographed the babies she had delivered. She also captured island life including community events, work and the unique landscape of North Ronaldsay with its sea wall encircling the island to keep the sheep on the beach.

Through Margaret Fay Shaw's photography of the MacRae sisters, both in their fifties whilst she was with them, Shaw captured women who had key roles in their community. Shaw was to maintain a friendship with the sisters throughout her life.

# WOMEN AND SOCIETY

How did the work of these women filmmakers and photographers portray the role of women in both rural and urban society? How as women themselves, did they fit into society?

The majority of the fourteen women in this exhibition had independent means in terms of wealth, or worked, allowing them a freedom of movement unusual for middle or upper-class women of their time. It should be noted that whilst women in the UK over 30 were given the vote in 1918, the age limit was only lowered to that of men in 1928. Many of the women in this exhibition also had gone against their families' wishes to move away and work independently.

How do the women portray others in their work? Margaret Fay Shaw's intimate study of the sisters Pèigi and Màiri MacRae showed how central these women were to their small South Uist community. Ruby Grierson encouraged the voice of women to be heard on housing issues.

Did any of the work engage with issues facing society in the early 20th Century? Broom documented the suffragette marches in London. Helen Biggar in her collaborations filmed both national and international situations, from a workers' May Day march in Glasgow, to making evident the relationship between capitalism, armaments and war in her collaboration with Norman McLaren.