A New History of Documentary Film

Second Edition

by

Betsy A. McLane

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The Work of Robert and Frances Flaherty

Between 1910 and 1915, at the time Edward R. Curtis was making *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* in western Canada, another American, Robert J. Flaherty, was exploring and mapping the Hudson Bay region of Canada. He was employed to search for iron ore by Sir William Mackenzie, Canada's railroad entrepreneur. Though Flaherty found some ore, the deposits were not rich enough to tempt anyone to try to mine and transport it. In the course of his travels Flaherty (re)discovered the main island of the Belcher group in Hudson Bay in 1914, and it was subsequently named for him. Flaherty often defined himself an explorer, and was very proud of his induction into the Royal Geographic Society of England for this discovery. But the most important discovery of his expeditions was how to make a new kind of motion picture. With this discovery he brought the life of the far North Country and its inhabitants, the Eskimos, to the attention of the world. And through this revelation, Flaherty forever put his personal stamp on documentary.

Robert Flaherty was born in Iron Mountain, Michigan in 1884, first son of an iron ore explorer whose family emigrated from Ireland. An early ability with the violin was taken as a sign of genius, if only the boy would discover 'discipline'. Despite such criticism, Flaherty continued 'playing' throughout his life; he applied real enthusiasm to his diverse interests, and photography especially grew to be a passion. He was determined to make 'beautiful pictures' even if it did mean lugging a bulky camera and tripod into turn-of-the-century

homes, soda parlours and classrooms. Brilliant, but not cut out for long-term schooling, Robert went with his father on expeditions from an early age. He followed in his father's footsteps, in love with the wilderness, and developed a fascination for the people who lived there, beginning with the Ojibwa Indians.

Flaherty was already an acclaimed still photographer with gallery shows in Toronto, where he and his wife Frances lived at the time of making *Nanook*. He had photographed life and work in the North America wilderness since he was a teenager and was acclaimed for the portraits of American Indians and Eskimos on his expeditions. It was on his third expedition – 15 August 1913 to 3 October 1914 – that Flaherty, encouraged by then-affianced Frances and again funded by Mackenzie, supplemented his still photo kit with motion picture equipment to record what he saw. Supplies included 'a comprehensive motion picture and camera outfit including 1,000 pounds of chemicals, 25,000 feet of film and 2,000 dry plates' (a letter from Flaherty to Mackenzie). To prepare, he took a short course in camera operation offered by Eastman Kodak in Rochester, New York. During the expedition he shot hours of the Eskimos, their activities and their surroundings.

While editing this mass of material in Toronto, he dropped a cigarette onto a pile of film on the floor. Since it was the highly flammable cellulose nitrate stock of the time, it went up in a great flash of flame, nearly taking Flaherty with it. Though the original negative footage was almost totally destroyed, an edited positive work print survived and Flaherty, as usual prodded by Frances, screened it repeatedly throughout the US and Canada in attempts to secure funding for another filming expedition. At one point in 1915, the Flahertys met with Edward Curtis in New York. He showed *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. They screened their work print of *Nanook*. Apparently this confirmed the Flahertys' sense that more human-interest storyline was needed in a new film.

Another novice might have given up filmmaking altogether following such an entry into the field; Robert and Frances not only persisted, they learned from the experience. In fact, some now speculate that the fire might not have been as much an 'accident' as a 'happy coincidence' that enabled a deeply flawed work to disappear. In this now-lost version, though, it seems Flaherty, ably assisted by the Eskimo crew, had faithfully recorded aspects of Eskimo

Fig 6 *Frances and Robert Flaherty as they appeared in Vancouver in 1908. The Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont CA 91711*

existence. Still, Flaherty's feelings for the people and their way of life was not expressed in a form that would permit audiences to share them. The film lacked emotion. When Mackenzie refused to finance any more expeditions

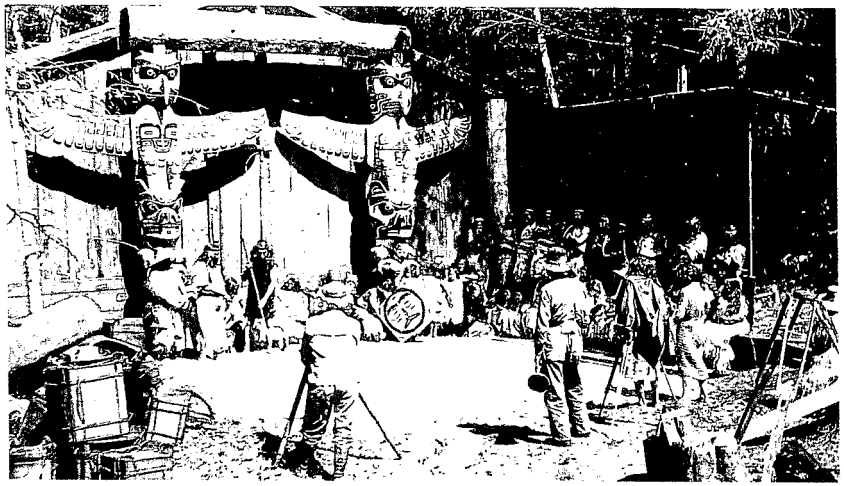

Fig 7 *Production still taken during shooting of* In the Land of the Head-Hunters, *aka* In the Land of the War Canoes, *Curtis is operating the camera (US, 1914, Edward S. Curtis). Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum*

(after attending a screening of the first work print), Robert and Frances spent several years fundraising and, after many setbacks, obtained backing from the French fur company Révillon Frères for a return to the North to make another film. As such *Nanook of The North* is sponsored film. The name Révillon Furs was painted on a sledge, an early example of corporate promotion in a documentary, although audiences could not read it in the final film. (Morgan Spurlock was only fulfilling a documentary practice that was in place eighty-five years before he made *POM Wonderful: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* [2011].) What resulted from Flaherty's shooting between 1920 and 1922 was the *Nanook of The North* we know.

In this unprecedented feature-length film ordinary people carried out and sometimes re-enacted things they did in everyday life – working, eating, sleeping, travelling, playing with their children – doing for the camera what they seemingly would have done if the camera hadn't been there. There are many scenes of the Eskimo working to survive, with a walrus hunt providing the most dramatic challenge. The shooting for *Nanook* was accomplished with a hand-cranked Akeley camera, weighing about sixty pounds, and by lugging

a bulky fifteen-pound wooden tripod and quantities of 35mm film (which shattered in the sub-zero cold) across ice floes and frozen banks. Flaherty and Nanook almost starved during a trip to film bears. Very important to the film is the deep friendship that existed between Flaherty and some of the Inuit, and this quality is evidenced on the screen.

When the Flahertys took the completed *Nanook* around to distributors, one by one they turned it down. 'Who would want to see a movie about Eskimos,

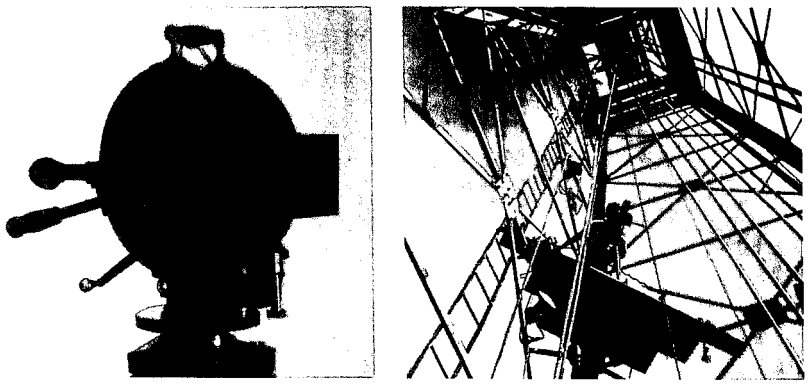

Fig 8A & 8B *The Akeley camera revolutionized documentary filmmaking. Nicknamed 'Pancake' for its odd rounded shape, the camera featured a gyroscopic pan/tilt head so it could tilt straight up while the viewfinder remained in a fixed position. It had two lenses on the front: one a viewfinder, the other the film lens, which allowed for simultaneous focusing and filming. The Akeley also allowed the operator to change film magazines in less than 15 seconds. It was invented by explorer and big game hunter Carl Ethan Akeley 'The Father of Modern Taxidermy,' for use during his expeditions. Although not a manufacturer, he built this camera to suit his own needs, and it remained in production from 1917 until 1940. The shutter mechanism was another innovation. The pancake design allowed room for the shutter to travel all the way around its circumference; as a result, the shutter angle was 230 degrees. On right: Robert Flaherty continued technological innovations throughout his career. In his last major film,* Louisiana Story, *he worked with Ricky Leacock to create striking images of oil drilling in the bayou. Leacock is seen shooting high on the drilling rig. Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center, Claremont School of Theology; Claremont, CA, 91711.*

a movie without story, without stars?', they seemed to be asking. It was Pathé Exchange, another firm with French origins, which eventually undertook worldwide distribution. No doubt much to the surprise of Pathé and perhaps to the Flahertys, this new kind of movie received an enthusiastic reception by critics and audiences. It became a substantial box office hit. Pathé's distribution deal, as often proved to be the case for documentaries, returned little to the Flahertys. Nanook himself, who received no compensation, became a recognizable face worldwide; he died of starvation less than two years after the film was released.

Following the success of *Nanook of The North*, Flaherty was approached by Jesse L. Lasky, head of Famous Players-Lasky (which later became Paramount Pictures), the first firm to have turned down distribution of *Nanook*. Lasky, not wanting to repeat a mistake, offered Flaherty what amounted to a blank cheque to make his next film. He was to go anywhere in the world and bring back 'another *Nanook*'. Flaherty had become interested in the peoples of the Southwest Pacific through the eloquent descriptions of Frederick O'Brien, who had written a popular book about the area, *White Shadows in the South Seas*. O'Brien urged Flaherty to go to Samoa to record the lovely culture of its gentle people before it was further eroded by the incursions of foreigners. With his wife Frances, three small daughters, their nursemaid, and his brother David, along with many filmmaking and family accoutrements including a piano, he set sail for the South Seas.

Flaherty was aware of what Hollywood expected from him – another box office success – and wondered what he would find in Samoa that could provide the drama of human survival contained in *Nanook*. Throughout his career he maintained a prickly relationship with the mainstream film industry. He sought money and on some levels craved its approbation; on the other hand, he refused to play by its commercial rules. Samoan existence seemed to provide no drama at all. Nature was munificent beyond belief; if one weren't hit on the head by a falling coconut one might spend life easily fishing and eating. For weeks, a dejected Flaherty sat on the veranda drinking apple beer, gloomily contemplating what form he might give to a film about Samoans. During this time, Frances, who learned photographic technique from Robert, took many beautiful still photographs, in a way creating a storyboard for a film. The role of stills artist was reprised by Frances on every subsequent Flaherty feature.

Through his informal investigations into the culture Flaherty learned of a ritual that interested him but was no longer practised. Formerly, young Samoan men had been initiated into manhood by undergoing elaborate and intricate tattooing over much of their bodies. Flaherty convinced himself that because there were few physical threats to their existence, the Samoans had invented a test of endurance involving considerable pain. He revived this custom for the purposes of his film and organized the narrative around the initiation of one Samoan youth named Moana. Preceding and paralleling the scenes of tattooing are scenes of the gathering of food – in the jungle, from the sea, and along the shore – the making of clothing and ornaments, the preparing and cooking of a feast, and the dancing of the Siva by Moana and his intended bride. When the tattooing was completed there was a ceremonial drinking of kava (a fermented beverage made from the crushed root of a shrubby pepper) by the chiefs, and a celebratory dance by the men of the village in honour of Moana's courage. In this resurrection of an old cultural practice, Flaherty was (most likely unknowingly) following in the footsteps of the first serious ethnographic film.

In his first two films – *Nanook of The North* and *Moana* – Flaherty's subjects and purposes led him into innovations in film form. In essence he was creating what would become documentary film. He found a means other than the plotted story, or simple topical organization of newsreels and travelogues, or even Curtis' work, to present real people and their everyday lives on the screen. Flaherty was intuitive and pragmatic, building his films out of long immersion in the culture of its subjects, and it is obvious from the films that he deeply respected them. He also was a true film artist and he made profound contributions to film aesthetic technique and to the uses to which films could be put. He experimented with film stocks and various lenses, spending days seeking the image he wanted. And Flaherty's body of work is the basis from which conversation about 'truth' 'reality' and 'illusion' in documentaries began.

The organizing structures of Flaherty's films involve loose narratives set within natural chronology. *Nanook of The North* extends through almost a

year, during which time Flaherty never left the Eskimos. Beginning in late spring and ending in deep winter, *Moana* covers the period of its hero's initiation rites, from preparations to festive conclusion – somewhere between a month and six weeks. The separate sequences within the overall time spans describe the various kinds of work of each of these people: ceremony, children's play and other activities most characteristic and distinctive of their lives and culture. We see Nanook spearing fish, catching and rendering walrus, hunting seals, and building an igloo. Moana and his family are seen snaring a wild boar, collecting giant clams, gathering coconuts, capturing a huge tortoise, making custard, scraping breadfruit, and baking little fish. What Flaherty chose to show are traditional skills and customs that, while different from the 'civilized', modern ways of his era, are rooted in common sense all can appreciate. *Nanook's* kayak appears an extremely serviceable craft for navigating the ice-clogged waters of the far North. Flaherty asked the Eskimo to build what seems to be an efficient and comfortable igloo, even though it was constructed with a cutaway side to create enough light for the camera. In Samoa, clothing made from the bark of the mulberry tree and outriggers of carved wood and spars bound together with vines seem good use of what is readily available and well suited to tropical climate and rolling surf.

What Flaherty offers is beautiful visual description of then-unfamiliar human activities and artefacts, of exotic flora and fauna, and an emotional connection to nature – a perfect purpose for a maker of silent films. His films are all virtually silent. When sound became available, he used it essentially as secondary accompaniment to the images, filling in another sensory dimension of reality with natural sounds, adding emotional colour with music. Dialogue is used sparingly in Flaherty's two major sound films – *Man of Aran* (1934) and *Louisiana Story* (1948). Mainly it serves to characterize the timbre and style of his subjects' speech and to suggest their attitudes, more than to convey information or reveal psychological motivation.

Those who spent long evenings in Flaherty's company, whether in his youth or at the end of his life, remembered him as a teller of tales, a consummate raconteur with a sure sense of drama. In all his films, the dramatic conflict is achieved with man against – or at least in relation to – nature. In *Nanook of the North* it is family against the arctic cold and desolation. In *Moana*,

amidst the warm soft abundance of a tropical paradise, it is man against invented, or at least man-made, pain. In Flaherty's later *Man of Aran* it is man and woman against the infertile rock of a barren island off the west coast of Ireland and the towering waves of the North Atlantic. And in *Louisiana Story*, with the most complex conflict of the four major films, it is still man in ecological relationship with nature – a boy and his raccoon moving amidst the secrets and dangers of a primordial swamp, and an oil drilling crew wresting commercial treasure from deep beneath its surface.

If Flaherty was a story-teller, he was also a teacher. His pedagogy employed mystery and suspense to arouse audiences' curiosity, to make them want to learn about the subjects that fascinated him. One of many instances of this method occurs early in *Moana* when Moana's younger brother, Pe'a climbs a palm tree. First we see him mid-frame, on a section of the trunk. He is allowed to climb up out of frame; then the camera tilts up to re-centre him. Pe'a again climbs out of frame and is again pursued by the camera. On the third climb-tilt the uppermost part of this majestic tree is revealed. By that time we are not only craving to see the top, we are prepared to accept this as the tallest palm in the world. Flaherty's visual exposition is splendid in its simplicity and clarity. Nanook's construction of an igloo is presented so clearly and simply we feel we could go out and build one. Much the same can be said for the making of soil in *Man of Aran*.

The dramatis personae of the Flaherty films are the nuclear family structured along conventional Western cultural lines. He did not acknowledge the polygamy practised in traditional Eskimo culture, nor the looseness of the Samoan family arrangement described by Margaret Mead in her seminal book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). A Flaherty film family usually has a strong, mature father; gentle but heroic mother devoted to him, to their children, and to the concerns of the family; and a son who is learning his way into his cultural and natural surroundings. The women in Flaherty's films are supportive of the men in the struggle for existence, assisting them in domestic and ceremonial activities. Maggie, in *Man of Aran*, is the most forceful in her strength of character, independence, resourcefulness and bravery. The young boys of his films perhaps are surrogates for the young Flaherty himself. Water, boats and fishing are important in his films, as they were for the life of

young Robert Flaherty, who grew up in isolated mining camps in the North Minnesota and Canadian wilderness.

The film families were artificially created for the films with considerable care given to the casting. Those selected to become father, mother, son, sister, and the rest are physically representative of the culture and also attractive – not necessarily handsome or beautiful, but 'best of type'. Nanook (which means 'The Bear') was played by Allarkariallak. Nyla's real name was Alice Nevalilnga. Community life is scarcely acknowledged; the family and the individuals are most important. The sudden appearance of numerous Eskimos, Samoans, or Aran Islanders for the trek to the fur trader's, the performance of a tribal dance, or the hunt for basking sharks is surprisingly within the prevailing intimacy and isolation of the central family. Ages and stages of life are present, but there are no human deaths or births in Flaherty films.

Fig 9 *Maggie in* Man of Aran *(UK, Robert Flaherty). International Film Seminars*

What he seeks out among his peoples are their consistent patterns of physical behaviour – activities related to obtaining food, clothing and shelter – rather than the aberrations of human psyches and antisocial actions which are the basis for Western fiction dating back to the Greeks. Flaherty may ultimately have been most concerned with the human spirit, but what he chose to show are its basic physical manifestations. He pays no attention to how his societies govern themselves, nor is there anything in his films about the spiritual life of the people. Religious beliefs and practices are absent – remarkable considering the importance of religion in the cultures he chose. We see neither anger nor grief. While affection is quite evident – of his subjects for each other and (implicitly) of the filmmaker for his subjects – there is no sex. (It has been verified that Flaherty did have an Eskimo female companion and fathered a son whom he neither saw nor acknowledged to the public on his sub-arctic expeditions.) Personal feelings – the emotions of individuals – are not central to Flaherty's concerns. Rather, more generalized notions of what a man, a woman and a child do are operative. What it means to survive, to exist in the culture and in the environment one is born into, are the archetypes of which his films are made.

Shooting in remote places in the way Flaherty did was fairly unique – at least in feature filmmaking up to that time – although at the same time in Scandinavia and Russia other explorers were using film to document their travels. Shackleton's 'Endurance' expedition (1914–1916) had been filmed. This venture – to be the first men to cross the Antarctic on foot – was extensively documented; even after their ship was crushed in an ice pack some eighty-five miles away from the continent, photography continued, and when, miraculously, all twenty-eight men survived, the cameraman, Frank Hurley, had the makings of a film. This became *South – Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance Expedition* (1919). But no one was developing and printing film on location, nor were they interested in and interpreting people's lives. Flaherty's methods of conception and production were especially original and unusual in two respects. One was what was characterized by Frances, constructor of what became the 'Flaherty Myth', as 'non-preconception'. Rather than approaching a society with an idea of the film they wanted to make, the Flahertys chose to live with and observe the people, to discover their essential

story, like the Eskimo sculptor who cuts into the ivory tusk until he finds the seal figure it contains. The other, corollary characteristic was Flaherty's practice of shooting tremendous amounts of footage on the aspects of the people and their environment that struck him as significant, or beautiful, or interesting. That initial lack of fixed intention and seemingly random shooting were accompanied by long evenings of screening, looking for the essences of the culture in the images, seeking the particular rhythms and graces of the life being shown. As part of the editing process, Flaherty's subjects and members of his family and crew screened the uncut footage with him and discussed it for weeks.

As innovative as his production methods were, his initial use of film language followed accepted practice. Flaherty's camera was always mounted on a tripod. His nonactors were directed to re-enact things he had observed them do and to repeat their actions in multiple takes. The conventional continuity editing evidently rested on some sort of post-production script that formed in Flaherty's head during the repeated screenings. He seems never to have used pre-written scripts, only scribbled notes and Frances' magnificent photographic 'storyboards'. Though occasional differences are evident, the sequences are constructed with long shot-medium shot-closeup, matching action and sightlines, and consistent screen direction.

Shooting in out-of-the-way locations required considerable technological improvisation and ingenuity. Many technological advances in film technique have come about first from documentarians working outside the studio trying to get close to unaltered real life. Though he tended to profess ignorance of technological matters and worked with cameramen and editors, Flaherty seems to have been a natural and perhaps superb technician. He also surrounded himself with masters in the technical. From assistant cameraman Sam Sainbury on his northern expedition through editor Helen von Dongan and cameraman Ricky Leacock on *Louisiana Story,* skilled craftspeople always contributed to the film. And Frances' imprint is always there behind the scenes guiding and protecting his methods.

For his first filming in the North in 1913 Flaherty used a 1912 Bell and Howell studio camera, adapting it to his needs. Later he would use the Akeley, a sophisticated gyroscopic camera employed by newsreel cameramen, and

then the Newman Sinclair, which became a standard camera for documentarians. On *Nanook of The North* he began his practice of developing and printing film in the field, necessary if he was to see what he was shooting while still on location. For this arduous task the Eskimo cut holes in the ice to obtain water for processing, carried it in barrels to the hut, and strained out deer hair and debris that fell into it from their clothing. The 'printer' was a rectangle of clear glass left on a window painted black. It corresponded to the 35mm film frame in size and dimension. Through it the low Arctic sun shone. That such a system of developing worked at all is amazing; that the quality of images in *Nanook* show little sign of the crudity of the 'laboratory' involved is even more astounding. The camera froze, the film cracked, the locations truly were dangerous, and Flaherty had no communication with the outside world during the long winters he spent with the Eskimo. Although *Nanook* is fully Flaherty's film, it is little noted that he had an Anglo assistant, Sam Sainsbury, who worked with him on the film, sometimes functioning as cinematographer, and helping with development as well as working to keep the equipment running in the freezing weather.

Flaherty was among the first to use Eastman Kodak's new panchromatic film on *Moana.* Though black and white (before practicable colour was available), panchromatic film is sensitive to all colours of the spectrum, unlike the orthochromatic film then in standard use. Orthochromatic film did not respond to red and was prone to harsh contrasts; *Moana,* shot with panchromatic stock, offers a Samoa of deeply rich and varied shades of gray. It was also on *Moana* that Flaherty first began to make extensive use of long (telephoto) lenses. Almost all of *Moana* was shot with lenses of six inches focal length and upward (two inches then being standard for most films). The use of such lenses had the obvious advantage of permitting the filming of distant and inaccessible subjects – the outrigger on the surf, for example. Also, Flaherty found that his subjects were less self-conscious and therefore behaved more naturally if the camera was some distance away from them. He also thought certain special photographic qualities resulted from the use of long lenses. 'The figures had a roundness, a stereoscopic quality that gave to the picture a startling reality and beauty,' he wrote, 'alive and real, the shadows softer and the breadfruit trees seemed like living things rather than a flat background.'

Man of Aran was Flaherty's first use of recorded sound. On the Irish island of Inishmore this would have been impossible with the cumbersome optical sound equipment then in use for fiction films (magnetic recording was not yet available). To solve this problem, Flaherty post-recorded in a London studio a soundtrack made up of music and noises and fragments of speech, laying it over the images in a complex and poetic blend. *Louisiana Story* was the first feature partly shot with the 35mm Arriflex camera, which had through-the-lens viewing capability (SLR) developed from the 16mm combat model used by the Germans in World War II. The Arri became one of the documentarians' favourite cameras. Some sound was also recorded on location, using a direct-to-disc method, with rather poor results.

The Flaherty Way

One aspect of Flaherty's overall significance is his special use of the film medium, which grew out of his creative impulse and began one main line of documentary. Stated simply, Flaherty used film to show people he loved and admired to the rest of the world. He was not an anthropologist; he idealized and interpreted as an artist does – a visual poet, in his case. The view he offers is his view, admittedly coloured by his own early life and the mores of the early twentieth century, but Flaherty's vision transcended the era in which he lived. At the 1904 Saint Louis World's Fair pygmies were exhibited in made-up 'villages' as curiosities, not considered fully human. Flaherty never condescended to or marginalized his subjects. In some respects his films are as much about him – his pleasures, his prejudices, his convictions – as about the people he was filming. Often he set them back in time to recapture and preserve cultures that were disappearing; and he always presented people at their finest, simplest and noblest, gaining their cooperation to achieve this presentation. *Man of Aran* especially – in which the hunting of basking sharks was recreated from past practices and the urgent contemporary economic problems of Aran were ignored – has been criticized for its 'distortions', but Flaherty did not invent or glamourize. His films were not created from make-believe or fakery; all that he shows did happen or had happened in the lives

of the people and/or their fathers. (*Louisiana Story* is the exception; though based on actuality, it is a story, as its title announces.)

True, Flaherty usually stuck to peoples in far corners of the earth and dealt with the essentials of their traditional existence. But this is not exoticism à la 'Hollywood' (as in *Tabu*, 1931, on which Flaherty worked with F. W. Murnau in Tahiti but which became Murnau's sexualized film fantasy). In Flaherty's films there are neither 'colourful natives' nor 'native colour'. Instead, he was attempting to show how other cultures are like our own; how understandable, rather than how different and strange. This he shares with the developing field of visual anthropology, but unlike the distancing that characterized anthropology, *Nanook* ends with a closeup of Nanook's grinning face, and audiences may think: 'There's a man I've enjoyed getting to know. If I were in his situation, I hope I would be able to do things as well as he does.'

Simply to categorize Flaherty as a 'romantic', as Paul Rotha and others have done, misses the point. One can see what Rotha is thinking, in that the people and settings Flaherty selected and the way he chose to present them are linked with the noble savage of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the idealized landscapes of early nineteenth-century painters. But Flaherty's films have little to do with

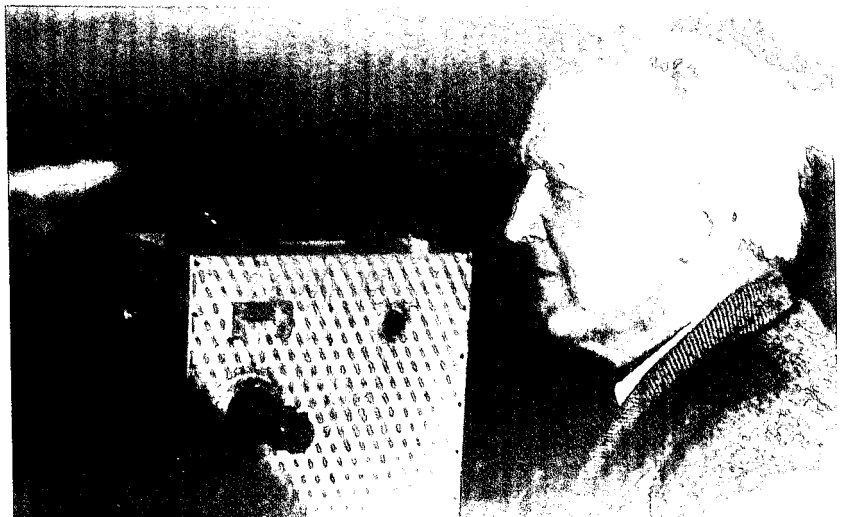

Fig 10 *Robert Flaherty with a Newman Sinclair camera, England, 1930s. Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive*

the romanticism of the 'romantic movement', resting as this does on individual imagination and heightened emotions. On the contrary, his work might be said to be 'classical', as the term is generally used in the romantic/classical dichotomy; it is spare and uninvolved with individuals' psychologies. Flaherty worked with what he understood and said what he had to say. Like many artists of substance this was essentially one thing reiterated throughout a career. The great French director Jean Renoir once remarked that a filmmaker spends his whole life making one film over and over again. What Flaherty said throughout his work was that humankind has an innate dignity, and that the world's meaning and beauty dwell in its patterns of existence.

The Flaherty Legacy

Though no school or movement ever formed around him, others who worked along similar lines have continuously followed Flaherty's example. *Nanook of the North* is a recognizable name even in the twenty-first century, and the idea of observing and recording people in their own milieu with a sympathetic eye continues to be a vital strand in documentary-making. Many also cite *Nanook of the North* as being among the first ethnographic films, and as anthropologists continue debate about the role of filmmaking (and ethnography) in their discipline, no one doubts that Flaherty holds a seminal place in it. The main strength of Flaherty's vision for ethnographic filmmaking lies in his refusal to pass judgment on his subjects. If his perspective sometimes sees quaint, it reflects more about the artistic milieu of the turn of the nineteenth century and perhaps the Pre-Raphaelites. Although this movement pre-dated Flaherty's work, it was the atmosphere in which his parents and Frances' parents lived. Since almost all of Flaherty's youth was spent in the wilderness, he was isolated from artistic trends in the early twentieth century and developed an aesthetic that reflected an earlier time. The films are about Flaherty's own unique poetic way of looking at life. For this his work is cherished, not only by visual anthropologists; but also by other kinds of filmmakers working today. For some detractors, Flaherty's lack of social comment was considered his downfall, perhaps even the antithesis of what they called documentary, but

the films speak for themselves; the major work continues to resonate with audiences today.

During the same period as Flaherty's early work, one film by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack and their female partner, Marguerite Harrison (she secured the funding) deserves similar high praise. This film, the sweeping epic *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925), records the migration of 50,000 Bakhtiari tribesmen in central Persia (today Iran) who cross a wide flooding river and climb a 12,000-foot mountain to reach pasture for their herds. Unlike Flaherty's work, the film does not focus on specific individuals, but rather captures the beauty and the dangers of a tribal culture from an almost objective point of view. The trio were the first white people to go with the Bakhtiari as they moved, carrying many pounds of gear on horseback. *Grass* is visually spectacular work that belongs in the pantheon of great documentaries. *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927), which followed *Grass*, is Cooper's and Schoedsack's (without Harrison) concocted account of a family in the jungles of Siam (Thailand) struggling for survival against hostile animals – tigers, leopards, elephants. *Grass*, like Flaherty's films, remains compelling; *Chang* is a sentimentalized melodrama that exploits rather than respects native culture and environment. The two men subsequently had great success in Hollywood with *King Kong* (1933) and other fiction films. Harrison made no further films.

In the same ethical and artistic vein as *Chang*, in the 1930s the husband-and-wife team of Martin and Osa Johnson made several popular travel/expedition pictures with meretricious 'educational' trappings and condescending asides about the natives: *Wonders of the Congo* (1931), *Baboona* (1935), and *Borneo* (1937) are among them. Frank Buck, in much the same vein, filmed his expeditions to capture wild animals in Africa: *Bring 'em Back Alive* (1932), *Wild Cargo* (1934), *Fang and Claw* (1935). Set in the wild and using superfluous plots, these films are a stereotype of fiction film potboilers, and the antithesis of the Flaherty's work. The French also made films in the explorer mode, the most notable being *La Croisière Noire (Black Journey)*, a seventy-minute movie made in 1926 by Léon Poirier, which documents the Citroën Kégresse (a car race sponsored by Citroën) expedition in Africa.

Another offshoot from Flaherty's nonfiction form was the application of some elements by John Grierson and the British documentarians to purposes

Fig 11 *Marguerite Harrison in* Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life *(1925) She, with co-filmmakers Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, became the first Westerners to make the migration with the Bakhtiari tribe. The film follows Haidar Khan as he led 50,000 people across the Karun River and through a pass in the highest part of the Zagros Mountains in what is now Iran*

and subjects quite different from those of Flaherty. The British were concerned with people in an industrialized, interdependent and predominantly urban society. Their interests were social and economic, and political by implication. Grierson often publicly attacked Flaherty viciously. But, in a moving 'Appreciation' published in *The New York Times* at the time of Flaherty's death in 1951, Grierson said of his old friend and ideological adversary that perhaps Flaherty had been right after all in pursuing the timeless rather than the timely. In eulogy, Grierson wrote of Flaherty's seminal importance in the history of film, concluding with a quote from e. e. cummings in loving tribute to Flaherty:

Buffalo Bill's
defunct
who used to
ride a watersmooth-silver
stallion
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
Jesus

he was a handsome man
and what I want to know is
how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death

Chapter Related Films

1919
South – Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance Expedition (UK, Frank Hurley)
1922
Nanook of the North (US, Robert Flaherty)
1925
Grass (US, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack)
1926
La Croisière Noire (The Black Cruise; France, Léon Poirier)
Moana (US, Flaherty)
1927
Chang (US, Cooper and Schoedsack)
Voyage au Congo (Voyage to the Congo; France, Marc Allegret and André Gide)

Chapter Related Books

Barsam, Richard, *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
Brownlow, Kevin, *The War, The West, and The Wilderness*. New York: Knopf, 1979.
Calder-Marshall, Arthur, *The Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert J. Flaherty*. London: W. H. Allen, 1963.
Carpenter, Edmund, ed., *Comock: The True Story of Eskimo Hunter as told to and by Robert Flaherty*. Boston: David R. Godine, 2003
Christopher, Robert J., *Robert and Frances Flaherty: A Documentary Life 1883–1922*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.
Flaherty, Frances Hubbard, *The Odyssey of a Film-Maker: Robert Flaherty's Story*. Urbana, IL: Beta Phi Mu, 1960.
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