

**Growing Things
the Rural Patience of Robert Flaherty**

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Growing Things: the Rural Patience of Robert Flaherty

Making a film is like searching for a gold nugget ... The making of a film is the elimination of the unessential.

Robert Flaherty¹

Harry Cohn, Columbia studio boss, defined it [a documentary] as follows: "It's a picture without women". He said, "If there's one woman in it, it's a semi-documentary".

Monica Flaherty Frassetto²

On 14 August 1913, a month before Griffith left Biograph to make *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*, Robert Flaherty left on his third expedition to search for mineral deposits around the Hudson Bay. Flaherty, 29-years-old and an American, had spent most of his life beyond the age of twelve in the Canadian north in the company of Indians, trappers, loggers and miners. He had followed his father into a career as a cartologist, explorer and prospector and intended to continue on.

Before departing, however, his boss, William Mackenzie (known later as Sir William Mackenzie, the 'Cecil Rhodes of Canada'), had suggested that he join the growing group of explorers filming their expeditions. After a three-week training course with the Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester on the elementary techniques of filmmaking and film processing, Flaherty departed with a camera, much film and a small printer and processor.

Four years and a fourth expedition later, as Flaherty was assembling the film in Toronto in 1917, he dropped a lighted cigarette amongst the footage and burned the negative. Three years later he was back in Hudson's Bay, reshooting the film with the backing of Revillon Frères. In 1922 *NANOOK OF THE NORTH* was released to worldwide acclaim, and the legend of Robert Flaherty began to grow.

¹ Quoted in the editor's Introduction to Paul Rotha's *Robert J. Flaherty: a Biography*, edited by Jay Ruby (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), page 5.

² "New Birth for Moana (1955)", in "The Flaherty: Four Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema", guest-edited by Erik Barnouw and Patricia Zimmermann, *Wide Angle: a Quarterly Journal of Film History, Theory, Criticism & Practice*, Vol. 17, Nos. 1-4 (1995).

Legends are important.³ Indeed, if carefully distinguished from the facts, they may well be more important, for a legend encompasses often what its subject worked hard to become or was taken to have become by others, regardless of what he or she may have been.

Flaherty's legend had two sources. The first, due to Flaherty himself (with the later connivance of his wife, Frances), encompassed the vision of the artist of the innocent eye, unconstrained by either the techniques and technologies or the economical and political biases of urban civilization, attuned to the elemental things of life, self-taught and self-reliant, an integral human being of consistent and unquestioned moral integrity.

Remarkably, there is more than a little truth in this self-portrayal. Flaherty completed only six lengthy films in his lifetime, but he could be ethically proud of every one of them. Without exception they focussed directly upon the uncommon concerns dearest to his heart, were free of pandering or perversity, were made with the cooperation, respect and approval of those filmed, were completed as he intended them to be seen and yet garnered the international respect of his peers, stimulating many to produce wonderful works of their own – a record of moral achievement unsurpassed by any other filmmaker known to me. And if Flaherty occasionally padded the story (he told at least three people, for example, that he had learned filmmaking from a missionary upon whom he stumbled in the far north), the padding was almost always in the right direction. Whatever Flaherty may have learned in Rochester, New York, the Eastman Kodak Company never taught anyone to process and print film by passing arctic light through a cleared spot in a blackened window in a hut on Hudson's Bay after clearing the water of reindeer hair falling from the coats of the Inuit as they brought it from holes cut in the ice! 'Self-sufficient' may be the wrong term, but it's hard to think of one that better captures the competence-keyed-to-the-lay-of-the-land that pervaded every freely-chosen endeavour Flaherty undertook.

There is much less truth in the second tale, however, originated early on by Paul Rotha and Basil Wright and sustained thereafter by a host of acolytes, that Flaherty was the romantic precursor of the practices of later documentarists – the harbinger of Griersonian propaganda and *cinema vérité* but limited in his achievement by inattention to the social and political contexts of his endeavours. To suggest either is to overlook the core of Flaherty's classical disdain for present events – a gulf separating him from every documentary filmmaker since.

³ Especially when referring to movies and their makers. As the Mr. Scott, the editor of the local newspaper within THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE, reminds us as the movie is about to conclude, courtesy of the screenwriters James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck and John Ford, its director: "This is the West, sir! When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

As the anthropologists of cinema verité have said and as anyone with eyes can see, Flaherty was indeed a 'shooter rather than a cutter', a user of long takes, panning shots and titled cameras and a cameraman who brought everything that he could within a single shot if possible; and many documentarists, having seen Flaherty's films, have been inspired to travel to distant places to record. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Flaherty never photographed what he found, for he had no interest in photographing what he found. His only interest was in using what he found to re-enact the *past*, and hence his impulse was as unanthropological as it could be.

Grierson, unique amongst his colleagues in his ability to measure accurately the achievements of others while attacking at the same time,⁴ caught on to this. In an obituary tribute, Grierson noted that Flaherty's timeless approach to his subjects, classical in its avoidance of contemporary concerns, was not only unlike but quite likely better than Grierson's own.

The lesser legend aside, then, what did Flaherty do and why? What problems did he solve, and which couldn't he solve? In particular, what unsolved problem did the coming of synchronous sound bring?

I know of no more interesting topic, for the way that Flaherty made films, and thought they ought to be made, was not only radically different from the way in which most films have been made, then or now, but of singular importance, for from the very possibility of making films his way we can learn much not only about the constraints of continuity cutting in the sound era but therewith the possible practices of viable filmmaking in general.

Flaherty's Practice

How did Flaherty go about making his films? Let me summarize step-by-step the process as it matured during the silent era. I shall compress and unclutter the practice somewhat but not much, as those who witnessed it firsthand could attest.

- A. When seeking subjects for a film, Flaherty would look for a small, cohesive, homogeneous grouping of people as far removed from the mainstream of the contemporary urban world as possible yet only a generation or two removed from the technologically unsophisticated everyday working habits of their ancestors.

⁴ Grierson was the first person, for example, whom I ever heard affirm that Eisenstein's best film was IVAN THE TERRIBLE rather than POTEMKIN or one or another of his earlier movies.

- B. Having selected a subject, he did no research on them whatsoever – no literature searches, no consultations with expert anthropologists, no scholarly contemplations. Instead, he moved into the community and lived amongst the people, not for a few days or weeks, but often for a year or more, using local labour to assist him in building a small film processing laboratory attached to a screening and assembling room.
- C. While living, moving and working amongst the people of the community, Flaherty looked and listened.⁵ He was seeking three things:
 - 1. Evidences of a continuity of communal habits of behavior from days long ago (stories of past events, for example, that seemed to him exemplary of deeply-embedded patterns of courage and tenacity in the face of a hostile nature and in which he could imagine those about him participating had they been living years ago, or ways of responding to everyday occurrences that seemed continuous with the patterns of their ancestors);
 - 2. Three people – a father, a mother and a child, usually a boy – who appeared to exemplify that continuity, were photogenic and would be capable of re-enacting on film those ancestral ways of behaving; and lastly
 - 3. Local places, objects, vistas that seemed comparably to exemplify that continuity and that would withstand photographic scrutiny and re-enactment of past events.
- D. While looking and listening, Flaherty would shoot film of snatches of the resonant things he saw and heard, re-enactments of events seen the day before or of which he had been told, often of events from the far past. The events photographed would bear no obvious connection to one another and the shots that he took – often mountains of them – would have as yet no anticipated place within any film. He was, as he said, "testing".
- E. Simultaneously, after developing and printing the exposed footage, Flaherty would screen the rushes over and over and over again, looking for "the gold

⁵ Flaherty was noted for never listening to his urban friends, dominating every conversation as a raconteur, telling the same stories over and over again, for he obviously found little worth listening to – when in a city. On location, however, he listened well, and the people told him much.

nugget" – the one event amongst many, that is, that seemed to have meaning when seen by means of a shot of film.⁶ Over and over again he would view that shot, and, if it were of a person doing something, he might ask them the next day to re-enact it again – perhaps changing something here or there – and photograph it again, perhaps from a clearer perspective or closer in.

- F. Often, while he was screening the footage, he would invite the people he had photographed to screen it with him, and then invite their comments upon the events, take suggestions from them for other events to be filmed, argue over aspects of them, solicit stories of related events as yet unheard.
- G. As he showed the developing sequences to people – to colleagues, guests dropping by, members of his family, members of the community – he would listen with especially attentiveness to comments on the photography. If anyone ever said of a shot, 'That's lovely!' or 'What a striking image!', Flaherty would immediately remove the shot from the film and began to reassemble the sequence from others! A shot that stood out for its beauty, he believed, could never blend into a film. (As one might imagine, this practice nearly drove his co-editors berserk.)⁷
- H. Slowly he would begin to collect those shots that survived collective and repeated scrutiny, assembling them into sequences that he would again screen over and over, trying new combinations, looking for linkages, adding footage photographed more recently, looking again at older footage that now seemed to promise a significance previously unnoticed.
- I. Only then would he try to assemble the sequences into the ordered semblance of a film.

The Priority of Things Seen

Small wonder that Flaherty often shot 250,000 or even 300,000 feet of film to make a movie 6000 feet long lasting scarcely more than an hour. Or that he seldom stopped shooting on location until his money or film or both ran out, or he was ordered to stop

⁶ See the quotation with which this essay opens and footnote 1 above.

⁷ "It was often hard for those who worked with him to know why he rejected some shots and retained others. And often infuriating. But I found his decision always most definite and I can think of no occasion when, after many months, if I had retained some rejected shot in the film for some reason or other of my own, he did not spot it and again reject it with the same decisiveness." Goldman, as quoted on page 129 of Rotha, op. cit..

by whatever company was producing it. Or that he often spent a year or two on location, shooting and assembling, and then at least as long, often much longer, doing the final assembly at home. Or that he used only the simplest of sequences, knowing little and caring less about the niceties of narrative.⁸

Small wonder, as well, as Jean Renoir pointed out, that no other filmmaker was ever to emulate Flaherty's example (though many were to pick and choose a bit of the practice here, another bit there, and wonder forever after why their wholes were less than his and much less than the sum of their parts). But Renoir, I think, got the reason wrong:

Flaherty was not the type of artist we can consider as a teacher. There will be no Flaherty School. Many people will try to imitate him, but they won't succeed because he had no system. His system was to love the world, to love humanity, to love animals, and love is something you cannot teach.⁹

But Flaherty surely choose to constrain his filmmaking within a 'system' if any filmmaker ever has – the time-consuming practices sketched above from which he seldom varied and never by choice! Other filmmakers could not duplicate his results, not because a system was absent or misunderstood, but rather because they were unwilling to commit themselves to it. No other filmmaker, to my knowledge, has ever been willing to put the emerging parts of a film to the tests to which Flaherty subjected his own.

For at the heart of Flaherty's system was a goal – a priority to which few others have ever given such uncompromising allegiance and from which the core of his "integrity" derived. I have used the verb 'to assemble' rather than 'to edit' to describe how he constructed a film from the footage he photographed, for Flaherty was no 'editor' – a competence that he refused to acquire to preserve a sure sense of having something other and more important to do with his footage – and therein lies both the source of his genius and the troubles in which he was enmesh his editors with the coming of synchronous sound.

⁸ As noted by John Goldman, the editor of *MAN OF ARAN*, Flaherty relied too often, to the consternation of his cutters, on the simple withholding of the sight of anticipated objects and events from his viewers until the last moment, thus building a suspense psychologically irrelevant to the events themselves. See Rotha, *op. cit.*, pages 131-132. The extensive recollections and commentary by Goldman of what it was like to work 'with' Flaherty, as reproduced within Rotha's book, are uncommonly revelatory. (As Rotha confirms on page 338, they were encompassed within "Notes to the author, July 24, 1959".).

⁹ Quoted by Rotha, *op. cit.*, page 289. Rotha notes on pages 331 and 345 that Renoir's remarks on Flaherty and his work, recorded by the BBC for possible inclusion within a "Portrait of Robert Flaherty", a programme "comprising the recorded memories of his friends, devised and written by Oliver Lawson Dick, produced by W. R. Rogers" and broadcast on 02 September 1952, never appeared within it.

To Flaherty, a film was a means by which to see objects and events resonant of *things past*. One assembled the shots of a film to enable viewers to encounter those objects and events as clearly, thoughtfully and memorably as possible. Flaherty was as aware as anyone that viewers would see other things as well by means of the shots of the film (that is, the moving patterns of light and darkness on the screen). The latter, however, were to be forever and always in the service of enabling viewers to attend without impediment to the former.

Never wavering from this absolute priority of substance over form, Flaherty assembled his movies in two steps, the first necessarily preceding the second.

Decide which shots should appear in which order.
Then, and only then, decide where to cut between them.

The practice had a two consequences.

If two shots, when correctly sequenced by substance, cut together smoothly, well and good.

If not, insert a *title* between them!

But what if the use titles were prohibited? That's exactly what the coming of synchronous sound did.

Editing with Sound but without Titles

What happened, then, when Flaherty was forced to make his first sound film, *MAN OF ARAN*? He had never before had to worry about connecting one of his shots to another – if an edit resulted in an unacceptable 'jump-cut', one could always 'cut away' to a title. When sound came, however, Flaherty had suddenly to construct continuities without titles, and he didn't know how to do it!

He couldn't combine things into longer takes, as the *cinema verité* filmmakers were later to do, not because he lacked the equipment (though indeed he did lack it and thus couldn't have done so if he had wished), but rather because he wanted to re-enact events of the past rather than document events of the present as they occurred, and such re-enactments could not credibly withstand the scrutiny of long takes.

But he couldn't use short takes either without encompassing jump-cuts, for he knew no way of eliminating them.

Needing help when assembling a film, Flaherty hired an editor. Integrating the habits of an editor of the 'sound era' into the practice of the 'silent era' to which he was accustomed – assembling shots of long duration without concern for cutting points – could never be thoroughly accomplished no matter how compatible or well-intentioned the editor may have been.¹⁰ Even Rotha, who could never bring himself to admit that Flaherty simply never learned how to cut effectively, couldn't overlook the obvious when viewing *MAN OF ARAN*, though he tried hard to absolve Flaherty of blame.

First, the editing is curiously disjointed, creating the effect that Goldman [Flaherty's editor] was trying to impose a style on the footage which was not shot with any style in mind. We know about the divergent views of Goldman and Flaherty, and this lack of agreement does, unhappily, show on the screen without either of them to blame.¹¹

Unfortunately, *MAN OF ARAN* was only the first of the projects upon which Flaherty's editors worked day and night to salvage passable continuities from the footage that he gave them, for Flaherty was incapable while on location of shooting pieces of film that could be edited without access to titles.¹² Long after Frank Capra fired Flaherty as a newsreel cameraman during World War II for consistently delivering uncuttable footage, Richard Griffith, a Flaherty champion, could only suggest lamely that Flaherty must have been uninterested in newsreels and hence chose not to do so.

To a degree Flaherty sabotaged himself ... His heart was not in it. In spite of his jokes about adding to the virility of the war effort, he loathed all war propaganda, however innocuous, and hated being part of it. There was also the simple stupidity of putting a man of Flaherty's gifts and calibre to work on a newsreel.¹³

Given the legend, it took a courageous Calder-Marshall to counter this nonsense bluntly: the supposed 'continuities' of *MAN OF ARAN*, he noted simply, remained 'discontinuous', despite the best efforts of its editor, for exactly the same reason that

¹⁰ And Flaherty chose extremely well. John Goldman (*MAN OF ARAN*) and Helen van Donagan (*THE LAND, LOUISIANA STORY*) could hardly have been improved upon.

¹¹ Rotha, *op. cit.*, page 159.

¹² Keep in mind that Helen van Donagan, in particular, was one of the finest documentary cutters in the world.

¹³ Quoted by Arthur Calder-Marshall in *The Innocent Eye: the Life of Robert J. Flaherty* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1970), page 204.

Flaherty's newsreel footage had been uncuttable, namely that Flaherty had no conception of the constraints of continuity cutting.

I think this should be taken further. Flaherty's gifts and calibre were not the reason why he failed as a newsreel director. The reason for that was that he had never learnt professionally to tell a story in film; in silent pictures, this deficiency was covered up by the use of sub-titles and in later pictures by the agony and bloody sweat of editors such as John Goldman and Helen van Donagan. He was not a good enough technician to shoot a newsreel story.¹⁴

The Lesson

Flaherty had no answer to the question of how to avoid jump-cuts once discovered in footage shot, and no answer as to how to shoot footage to avoid them. The solution to the problem of jump-cuts forever eluded him.

The reason why it eluded him, however, was that he remained true to the priority of substance over form. He could so easily have junked it, as Vertov, the younger Eisenstein and Ruttmann had done before him, abolishing the integrity of the objects and events shown. He never did. Better to jump-cut between long shots of integrity, he insisted, than destroy the former.¹⁵

In the long run Flaherty was to be proven right about this and much else besides. Soon after the coming of sound, documentary filmmakers were to learn how to shoot and cut footage to preserve both substantial and formal continuities, encapsulating their solution to the problem that had bedeviled Flaherty within precepts of such remarkably simplicity that they were to enable competent filmmakers ever after, whether working upon documentaries or movies of other kinds, to secure without ado visual continuities that had once upon a time been unimaginable. But that is a story to be told elsewhere.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., page 204.

¹⁵ Jean Rouch was later to take the same tact and for the same reason. JAGUAR, for example, shot in 1953 but not edited until 1967, abounds in jump-cuts. Partially for this reason, however, it also captures exactly the quality of 'home movies' for which Flaherty was noted. The films directed by Humphrey Jennings, in contrast, also noted for retaining the 'home movie' quality, were cut by editors, Stewart McAllister foremost among them, who knew how to retain it without discontinuities (see footnote 13 below).

¹⁶ See the relevant essays encompassed within the 'Screenwriting, 1905-1930B Uncoupling Movies from Paintings & Photographs' sub-section of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University. [<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35755>]