

These notes were prepared for an international conference of anthropologists and filmmakers meeting in Canberra, Australia, in May of 1978:

MUST A FILMMAKER ALWAYS LEAVE HIS MARK?

By George C. Stoney

When I started working on *How the Myth Was Made*, a film study of the documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty at work on his classic *Man of Aran*, my intention was to show how a representative filmmaker in the classic mold went about doing his job. For several years I had been teaching a course called ‘The Documentary Tradition’ and have observed most of my students – all children of the 1960’s and cinema verité – so dominated by that genre of filmmaking that they find it hard to open their minds to any other approach. So they miss the poetry and power of the earlier films while they fret about the veracity of details. I hoped a film that went to the heart of this matter might help.

Writing these notes on the evening before our final mix, I realized that ...*Myth*... does what I had intended, but this is now almost incidental to a more important matter it wrestles with, one which affects all filmmaking done outside a studio that involves non-actors either representing themselves or playing roles that interpret the life they know and the place where they will continue to live.

How the Myth Was Made illustrates what I believe to be a common truth: the

filmmaker always leaves his mark on the places and the people he films. In doing so it raises questions about the responsibility that every one of us who work at the craft should ask ourselves before we go on location, frequently while we are filming and, perhaps most important of all, when we are editing and planning our film's release.

I first saw the Arans, three tiny islands in Galway Bay off Ireland's West Coast, six years ago and was delighted to find the landscape had changed remarkably little since 1931 when Flaherty arrived there from America. The house the Flaherty family occupied was still solid. The large stone twin-gabled cottage he built to serve as a shooting stage, cutting room, projection theatre, and as housing for his British crew was a bit neglected but could be made ready to resemble the one seen in Flaherty's original with a little refurbishing. The skylight he built into the thatched roof to permit daylight shooting of interiors has been covered over, but no matter. Flaherty seemed never to have used it, but insisted on huge electric globes fed by a gas-driven generator. We found some of these fixed into makeshift reflectors fashioned out of enameled bread-boxes, along with a ton of other filmmaking paraphernalia, in the attic of the Flaherty cottage where they had been resting undisturbed by film nuts like us ever since 1933 when Flaherty left.

Many of the Islanders who had worked with Flaherty were still present on the Island, and most of them were eager to share their memories. It soon became evident that Flaherty's two-year stay on the Arans was the historic benchmark by which most older Islanders measure their existence. Some of those who prospered from his coming (the knitters of Aran sweaters, which his film made famous; the proprietors of guesthouses

that cater to tourists his film attracted) can sound a bit like the official testifiers for the Peoples' Republic of China talking about pre and post Mao-time. Others, who resented his making of their Islands a worldwide symbol of desperate poverty, are equally willing to pass along their favorite stories about Flaherty's fabrications of Aran ways or accounts of how he took advantage of their need.

As I continued to work on the project I found that the basic facts about Flaherty's filmmaking methods on Aran were very easy to pin down. Most of them are adequately (if a bit charitably) described in a book called *Man of Aran* written by Flaherty's Islander assistant Pat Mullen soon after the film was finished. My research confirmed Mullen's account throughout. Flaherty's young camera assistant, John Taylor, who is still an active filmmaker in London, gave me the facts about equipment used and precise details on locations and procedures followed in the field laboratory where all processing was done. John Monk (née Goldman) the editor, who was also on location for most of the shooting, was equally generous with facts about production and why so much of what was photographed was rejected once they got in the editing room.

Flaherty chose his cast and locations with considerable reliance upon photographs taken by his wife, Frances. Hundreds of these are now carefully preserved and available for study at the Flaherty Film Study Center archives. Copies of these are now treasured possessions on Aran mantelpieces.

It soon became apparent to me that Flaherty went about his filmmaking on the

Arans much more like the conventional feature director of his day than the explorer-filmmaker who had made *Nanook of the North* a dozen years before. Sequences were blocked out and action repeated time and again for match cutting. Some 6,000 feet of outtakes were discovered in Dublin a few years ago by Alf MacLochlain of Ireland's National Library. These show Flaherty's Aran characters going through all the necessary foolishness of making old-style films. Most of the communication between the director and his non-professional cast was through Pat Mullen, for the Islanders spoke little English and they say Flaherty learned no more than five words of Gaelic in his two year stay among them. In none of the production records is there much support for the idea that Flaherty was practicing "non-preconception," the filmmaking approach so persuasively presented as the "Flaherty Way" by his widow, Frances, for twenty years after his death.

Pat Mullen's book makes it clear that, for him, the making of the film became the most important event in his life. What Mullen could not know when he wrote it in 1935 was that this would be true for almost everyone else who got caught up in the enterprise, Islanders and non-Islanders alike. Since then two generations of Aran children have grown up under the film's influence. It was this aspect of the Flaherty experience on Aran that came to play a more and more important part in my research as it proceeded and, finally, to dominate my film.

Frankly speaking, I might have made a more useful film for visual anthropologists had I known this was to be my central theme at the outset, but of course I didn't. People

with an anthropological interest may find the hour-long study neither fish nor fowl, half cinema analysis and half sociology. But it reflects concerns about filmmaking that have shadowed me ever since I first asked a Mississippi farmer to drive his cows into camera range back in 1946 and found him borrowing shoes from a crew member lest he appear on screen “barefooted, like a nigger.”

If proof is needed that filmmaking with ‘real’ people in ‘real’ places is an activity that should be entered into with forethought of the consequences, one can find it on the Aran Islands. Flaherty himself was not unaware of this. Yet today his behavior seems strangely ambivalent. According to his biographer Arthur Calder-Marshall, Flaherty revived the shark hunting that dominates the latter part of the film (but which had not been practiced on Aran for generations before he came) not only to make an exciting climax for his story, but, he hoped, to leave the Islanders with an industry that would improve their poverty stricken lives. On the other hand, accounts of Flaherty’s parading the case in ‘native costume’ through theater lobbies of England and North America reminds one of the cruder practices of Christian missionaries and side-show barkers a generation earlier.

Two of Flaherty’s leading characters (Tiger King, the archetypal father and Michaelleen, the young son) found they could not live on Aran as former film stars. Tiger, who had been the Island’s blacksmith and soccer champion, spent the rest of his life as a minor city employee in London and died there in a nursing home without once revisiting his family on Aran. In a filmed interview with the Island-born journalist

Braendan O’Heithir, made for Irish Television shortly before Tiger’s death in 1976, he speaks with considerable feeling about the matter. The interview is conducted in Gaelic, but when answering O’Heithir’s question about his reaction to being paraded through the world as a “primitive film star” King resorts to the single English word he spoke in the half hour. It was “bullshit.”

After the film tour, Michaelleen found his next adventure in England’s war with Germany, for which he volunteered. Badly wounded at Tabruk, he was invalided out a cripple. Years later he returned to Aran on crutches for a brief half-day and hasn’t been heard from on the Island for several years.

On the other hand, Maggie Dirrane, the female lead, has lived in the film’s glow for more than forty years. Aran wags say that Maggie is the site more tourists want to see after Dun Aonghusa, the huge pre-Christian fort that dominates the Island’s 300-foot high cliffs. But Maggie herself seems to have experienced every minute of her fame with such simple joy that only the most black-hearted could wish her anything different. In truth, for Maggie and a great many other Islanders, the tourism inspired by Flaherty’s film has brought enriching contacts with people from all over the world. Though the visitors may come romantically misinformed about Aran, they leave their photographs and addresses behind as well as their dollars and pounds. For they have found openhearted friends on these rocky shores. Many correspond regularly and come back to Aran year after year.

Without the Flaherty film, some believe the Arans might be all but deserted now,

like the Blasket Islands, 75 miles southwest. Others claim the recent revival of the fishing industry here would have come to pass two decades ago if local folk had not been so preoccupied with catering to tourists.

The real conundrum is the kind of influence *Man of Aran* has had, and continues to have, on the Aran Islanders born since Flaherty left. That the film's influence has been substantial almost everyone on the Island will agree. Kevin Gill, principal of the high school and himself a native Aran man, works hard to interpret the film as an heroic myth, a poem akin to the Gaelic sagas that are still repeated by the local elders. Pat Mullen himself retold many of these in a volume of stories he called *Hero Breed* published in 1938.

Among the three islands' total population of about 1,500 (900-odd of them on Inishmore, the largest, where Flaherty lived and worked) are a startling number of poets and short story writers "working in the Irish," as they say. These are ordinary fisher folk and farmers, who are sustained in this financially unrewarding endeavor by the extra attention they get in the national press and on Gaelic radio because their work springs from these famous bits of rock.

Do the locals believe these legends? I would say that to ask such a question insults their native wit. It is at this point that I part company with the American ethnologist John Messenger. In *Inis Beag, Isle of Ireland*, written after an eighteen-month sojourn on the smallest Aran Island in the late 1960's, he goes to great lengths to

prove that the Islanders are not “a hero breed.” One proof he offers is that the Islanders often stay abed until after 9 o’clock in the morning! This is true enough, but the fact is misleading. For when the tide is right you will find them manning their boats, whatever the hour. Except, of course, on Sundays.

After Mass on that holy day the men gather in the pubs to drink until three o’clock, and then again at six to drink until after ten (closing time being only roughly observed.) After that the younger fishermen crowd the dance hall to stamp and shout in flush-faced fury until past one o’clock, when the trawlers leave the pier, though ahead of them is an eighteen hour day of desperately hard labor. Yet I met only a couple of young men on the Island who did not prefer this kind of masculine challenge to the softer alternative available to them catering for tourists, or working as crofters.

They say that when the local owner of four trawlers (he started with one a few years ago) had a leg severed by a cable at sea, he didn’t even miss the catch. Such stories are told by the Islanders with pride. A young fisherman of my acquaintance has been warned repeatedly by the Island’s doctor to give up the work because his hands are being poisoned by the constant snagging and exposure to fish goo. “Why not wear gloves?” I asked. His reply was a look that said quite clearly I didn’t understand what it meant to be an Aranman. So yes, there is a code of heroics on Aran today that makes Flaherty’s film quite as ‘true’ to the spirit of the place as Messenger’s daily timetable.

In the past half-dozen years a new generation of Aran artists have gained some

recognition. Two actors from the Islands are now at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Others play regularly at the Gaelic theater in Galway and perform for Gaelic radio. Braendon O’Heithir, a regular columnist for the Irish Times, recently published what has been called “the first modern novel in Gaelic.” When he read it serially on Gaelic radio the Islanders were both shocked and titillated by what one of them delicately referred to as O’Heithir’s daring use of “the language of the body.” Young Islanders in the senior form of the local high school, now fluent in both English and “the Irish,” talk knowingly of John Millington Synge who first put their homeland on the literary map, scarcely aware of the fact that he was a Protestant.

A few local folk have read – and will admit they have read – the works of Liam O’Flaherty, the famous novelist (*The Informer*, et al.) short story writer and political radical, who was born on Inishmore and makes the Aran the setting for much of his best work. A few years ago the local priest would have denied sacraments to anyone rash enough to risk this mortal sin. In many parts of the Irish West Country a village priest might still swing this much power if he wished, but not on Aran, not any longer. They have seen too much of the outside world on their doorsteps.

O’Flaherty’s short stories make clear just how much things have changed since he was a boy, for he has drawn upon the Island’s bitter poverty of mind and spirit as well as its hardihood and heroic legends. From my own observation I would say his stories get to the heart of Aran life, the gloom of it often so dark one could not survive without some flash of legend of the skyline.

As life gets more comfortable on Aran, the likes of schoolmaster Kevin Gill may help the next generation of Islanders to deal with the reality of Liam O'Flaherty's stories as well as the myths celebrated by the American filmmaker Robert Flaherty. But the physical facts of life in the Islands cannot change all that much. Fogs and storms still cut them off from the mainland for weeks at a time. Each time this happens, the diesel-fed generator on the big island sputters to a halt. Oil lamps are lit in the cottages and talk takes over from television. It could be Flaherty time.

Soil is so shallow that finding adequate water is a major problem facing those developers from "outside" who appear each year or so with grand schemes for turning Aran into a holiday resort. One summer I spent there the chief activity of the Islanders was carrying water for their stock from small cisterns scattered across the rocks. The fancy guesthouses, those with flush toilets, had to close down or ask their customers to use the more basic accommodations most prudent Islanders have maintained for such emergencies. Because nothing invented in the 20th century seems to work reliably on Aran, they may be spared the kind of development that has turned many corners of the West Country of Ireland into Wee Thatched Villages.

Interestingly enough, the new-built holiday villages on the mainland, with their fake thatched roofs, are occupied quite as often by native Irish families as by the thousands of German, French, and English tourists who come each summer, along with Yanks with Irish roots. Many of these Irish tourists are now three generations removed

from peasantry and the soil, far enough removed to forget the shame of poverty that caused the “lace curtain” Irish of Dublin and Boston to picket both Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* and Flaherty’s *Man of Aran* as slanders against the fair name of the Emerald Isle. Now twice removed from poverty, they can look back with pride to the legendary hardihood of their ancestors, not unlike people in the American West who dress up in old-time costumes on Frontier Days to celebrate their outlaw forebears.

One wonders how long it will be before we see Flaherty Days on Aran. Not long, I fear. Still, my six year association with the Islands themselves convinces me that they will know how to join in the fun, rake in the profits, and still maintain the fascinating privateness that intrigues and baffles every visitor who tries to get close in, myself included.

How The Myth Was Made, film by James Brown and George C. Stoney, 16mm color, 58 min., released 1979.

Man of Aran, {book} by Pat Mullen, 1935, reissued 1970, M.I.T. Press

All outtakes, transcripts of interviews and research materials amassed in the production of this film are deposited with the Robert Flaherty Film Study Center, Clairmont School of Theology, 112325 NW Foothill Blvd., Clairmont, California, 91711

As above.

A 16mm copy of these outtakes is deposited with the Flaherty Film Study Center (as above). Originals stored with the National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

The Odyssey of A Filmmaker: Robert Flaherty’s Story, by Frances Hubbard Flaherty, Urbana, IL, Beta Phy Mu, 1960.

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Hero Breed and Come Another Day, by Pat Mullen, Faber and Faber, London, 1938 and 1939.

Inis Beag, Isle of Ireland, by John C. Messenger, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1969.

Lead Us Into Temptation (LigSinning Cathu), by Braendon O’Heithir, Routledge &

Kegan Paul, London, 1978

The Aran Islands; essays with drawings by Jack B. Yates, by H. M. Synge (originally published 1904), Boston, J.W. Luce, 1911.

The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty, (criticism) by Patrick F. Sheenan, Wolfhound Press, 1976.

The Wounded Cormorant & Other Stories, by Liam O'Flaherty, N.Y. Norton, (1956) 1973.

The Playboy Riots, by James Kilroy, Dolman Press, Dublin, 1971.

My Wallet of Photographs, the collection of photographs of J.M. Synge, arranged and introduced by Lilo Stephens, Dolman Press, Dublin. (Some used in the film.)

The Aran Islands, by Daphne Pochin Mould, David & Charles, London, 1972
(Recommended general reference on the Aran Islands.)