Article

Identity construction and collusion in documentary of the Gaelic-speaking community: A filmmaker's perspective

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Abstract
If Gaelic has been symbolically appropriated to represent Scotland, then it follows that we need to look more closely at the part played by documentary film both of and from the Scottish Hebrides, in furthering the dissemination of what is an idealised and contested identity. As documentary is a negotiated contract between the producer and those they 'represent', the discussion needs to consider whether the representation of a Hebridean identity, and by extension a mythical Scottish identity, is constructed by the filmmaker, and if so, how filmic constraints and practices inform this representation. Within this framework is an acknowledgement of the extent to which Hebridean identity has been mediated by books, photographs and films for the past 300 years. This article will deliver the findings of a research project undertaken in the in the Outer Hebrides (also known as the Western Isles and Lewis & Harris). The research investigates the extent to which interviewees themselves collude with documentary makers in presenting a view of the Gael that reflects the Gaelic-speaker's own self-assigned role as guardian of the land and traditions. As this research marries practice with research, it will present it in a semi-autobiographical style.

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The Western Isles perspective

> We know that the Highlands of Scotland are romantic. Bens and Glens, the lone shieling in the misty island, purple heather, kilted clansmen, battles long ago, an ancient and beautiful language, claymore and bagpipes and Bonny Prince Charlie. We know all that, and we also know that it's not real. (Womack, 1984: 1)

The Gàidhealtachd, a description that can either be applied to the geographical area known as the Highlands and Islands, or to a community defined by culture and the Gaelic language, has had a strong role in constructing the narrative of Scottish identity (Chapman, 1978; Cormack, 2008; Macdonald, 1997; Withers, 1988; Womack, 1984, 1989). In the late 18th century, post Jacobite rebellions, its distance from the capital allowed Edinburgh, and southern Scots, to allow it a romanticised independence from England, while not in any way threatening the benefits of union (Chapman, 1978). The result of this was, and sometimes still is, an idealised and contradictory view of the area (Chapman, 1978; Womack, 1989).

This confusing mythologising of the Gàidhealtachd is most tangibly expressed in the number of icons regarded as representing Scotland which derive from the area, like whisky, tartan and bag-pipes (Macdonald, 1997). As Chapman (1978) writes, 'the face that Scotland turns to the rest of the world is, in many respects, a Highland face' (p. 9). Yet too often, there persists a misunderstanding about the Gàidhealtachd that seeks to extend the apparent wild remoteness of the area to the people, labelling them as backward and unsophisticated, ridiculed as 'teuchter' or as a 'rude savage in an uncultivated landscape' (Withers, 1988: 147). Mewett (1982) and Chapman (1978) wrote of a perception of islanders as culturally backward.

This mythologising of the Gàidhealtachd is now so ubiquitous that it is inevitably challenging to understand when and why it arose, and for whom. Womack (1984, 1989) and Pittock (1991) point to the events after the Act of Union between Scotland and England in 1707 as the pivotal moment for myth-making, arising from a perceived sense of loss of nationhood with the defeat of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. The resulting loss of confidence in a national identity led to the promulgation of the myth of the highland warrior as heroic and gallant. This confection of courageous Gaelic clans fighting for their independence was of course highly ideological. The response of the victors of Culloden, in seeking to destroy the threat from the Highlands once and for all, resulted in a suppression of all things highland including the prohibition of tartan. This, arguably, led to the defeated highlanders identifying their land and peoples as belonging to an 'older, antiquarian, sacred, and mythic set of values' (Pittock, 1991: 6) which the British army and government had destroyed. Hence, initially at least there is an argument that the mythologising came from the defeated highlanders themselves as part of a yearning for a lost 'golden age' (Pittock, 1991). Womack (1989) argues that it was to the benefit of the lowland Scots and the rest of the UK, post-Culloden, to caricature highlanders as a shambolic and ridiculous people, which morphed into a more complex view framed by the landscape resulting in the highlander being viewed with fear and delight. From here, there arose a description of the people from this area as distinct from those in the industrialised south, less sophisticated, backward. However, once the military threat of another

uprising had been vanquished, it became possible for the highlander to undergo a further image makeover. Now the Gael, framed within an imaginary place brought about by the Romantic movement, became warmer, more generous, from a lost time where there was more innocence. As Richards (1997) says,

> Scotland . . . [was] essentially 'invented' by Romanticism . . . characterized by wild landscape, music and song, and by the supernatural, the mainstream features of the Romantic movement. (p. 178)

This romanticising of the Gàidhealtachd snowballed during the 18th and 19th centuries with painters like Landseer and poets including Macpherson and Burns, reaching its apotheosis with the works of Walter Scott, who played an integral part in cementing the idea of a Scottish tartary around the world. And yet, the tendency to link the wild landscapes and a primitive people continued (Devine, 2012).

The lives of people living in the Highlands and Islands gave rise to numerous popular autobiographies that give insight into a fast diminishing way of life (MacInnes, 1997; MacIver and MacIver, 1990), and while anecdotally interesting, they tend not to offer much by way of the broader issue of their communities. More scholarly investigations from anthropology and sociology look deeper into issues of identity (Burnett, 2011; Macdonald, 1997; Mewett, 1982; Parman, 1990). Mewett's description of island life and how a sense of belonging arises reminds me of my childhood experiences fishing, digging the peats and roaming the hills during summers spent on the Western Isles, as does Parman's (1990) description of a crofting village on the Isle of Lewis, where she looks at the construction of culture. Macdonald spent time on the Isle of Skye in a community she called 'Carnan' and described perceptions around Gaelic culture and way of life as healthy, traditional and wholesome, while acknowledging confusion over unpacking the notion that this culture was both 'traditional' and 'authentic' while islanders themselves could also be considered modern.

From Johnson's journeying to the Western Isles in 1773, the notion of a romantic, empty, unspoilt and therefore backward place has been, for many readers, the accepted narrative of island life. This is not insignificant in the light of Ennew's research in the Western Isles in 1980 which found that islanders gained much of their view of themselves from books about themselves and their land, of which there are many. Like Johnson, 18th- and 19th-century writers often described the Gael as naïve innocents, indolent, worthless and, crucially, romantics in a romantic land. How then, is the Hebridean Gael meant to see themselves?

The cultural dominance of England in the United Kingdom has put pressure on the culture and language of the Gàidhealtachd, with 19th-century education policies considered at the forefront of the suppression of the language (Withers, 1988). Alongside this, economic imperatives and industrialisation have resulted in an exodus of people which may be primarily remembered at its emotional height in the 19th-century clearances, but has continued since then (Burnett, 2011). A counterpoint to rural migration was a movement of outsiders into the area, 'white settlers' (Jedrej and Nuttall, 1996) who were not always accepted or assimilated easily into the community, but have helped reverse depopulation. This dual pressure on language and emigration has resulted in a substantial

drop in the number of Gaelic speakers since the 1950s, which has led to questions over whether its distinct culture and identity can be regarded as meaningful given the decline in the number of native speakers (Burnett, 2011). Kenneth MacKinnon, speaking at the Royal National Mod in Oban, in 1956, said, 'without the knowledge of the Gaelic language, we cannot be true highlanders or islanders' (cited in Burnett, 2011: 243). The health of the Gaelic language need not, though, be the only measure of whether the culture is surviving. Rogerson and Gloyer (1995) argue against looking only at the number of Gaelic speakers to measure the cultural vibrancy of the Gàidhealtachd, focusing instead on the development in the arts, media and education.

Today, approximately half of Gaelic speakers live out with the geographical area of the Gàidhealtachd. This, and the increase in bilingual schools teaching Gaelic to families who have never spoken Gaelic, has resulted in it becoming harder to talk about native Gaels 'bounded by the Gàidhealtachd' and complicates our understanding of who Gaelic belongs to, as it is less clear as to who the 'insider' and the 'outsider' is (Oliver, 2005). Macdonald (1997) suggests that Gaelic may not be so central to the identities of the younger generations from traditional Gaelic communities, and also suggests that Gaelic may be shifting from a language of interaction to a more symbolic marker of identity.

The 20th century has seen seismic changes in the Gàidhealtachd. Through the 1970s and 1980s, Gaelic has moved from being a language spoken within the Gàidhealtachd communities, with little reach beyond this, to a recognised language of Scotland through the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act (2005). The 1970s saw the beginning of a Gaelic renaissance with a growth of language activism and a nurturing of traditional culture. The opening of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college in 1973, bilingual education, and agencies set up to promote the language such as Comunn na Gàidhlig helped promote the language and culture. Macdonald (1997) argues that the Gaelic renaissance was part of a 'wider movement of ethnonationalism within the established nation states of Europe' (p. xvi), and formed part of Scotland's attempt to re-engage with its diverse culture.

Arguably, the most obvious signifier of the Gaelic renaissance was the launching of BBC Alba, the Gaelic-language channel, that began broadcasting in 2008, after a hard-fought battle for funding. Dòmhnall Caimbeul, the CEO of the channel, describing it as follows:

> The most important moment of our TV history. It gives status to the language, raises awareness at the national level and helps to normalise the language. (Maclean, 2018: 8)

The channel has heavy lifting to do, given it is there to support language growth and create confidence in the language and culture of the people and allow the Gaelic community to have control over 'its fictional media representation' (Cormack, 2004: 30). Margaret Mary Murray, Head of BBC Gaelic Broadcasting, attributes to BBA Alba a further role, that of trying to change outsiders' perceptions of the language and the people. What she describes as shifting 'the rejecters into apathetic and the apathetic into valuers' (Maclean, 2018: 8). While the channel itself has been a success, it has not addressed the persistent reluctance from many in the central belt of Scotland to value Gaelic, with the mainstream media fulminating dissent for the perceived waste of public finance with, for example, promoting Gaelic through bilingual road signs. Caimbeul

agrees that there 'is something in the psyche of people in Scotland that they reject Gaelic' (Maclean, 2018: 9).

The Gael's growing confidence in the language and culture is manifest in an engagement with the area which is often still rooted in the land, to provide notions of identity through the idea of genealogy and identity. Basu (2007) looked at how this is attracting a new migration, or 'roots tourism' (p. 7), which sees migrants returning to hunt down a 'more authentic sense of home' (p. 8). He highlights a genetic connection to the ancestral identity that needs to find itself in the places from the past. Thus, a profound 'resonance' is felt at certain sites: something strange and affecting, which is rationalised as 'race memory', 'ancestral memory' or 'genetic memory' (Basu, 2007: 161).

If notions of 'authenticity' that have previously relied on the importance of the Gaelic language – that this is in itself necessary to enable 'nativeness' – are less prevalent, then it may be that the self-identification of people living in the Gàidhealtachd is now more manifest in a particular sense of place: their link with the landscape of the historical land that defined their identity. This perception of identity deriving not just from language, but from place, is not new. Oliver (2005) found this when interviewing young people in Gaelic medium schools to establish what their identity meant to them. A number of participants insisted on a connection with the place as being integral to the negotiation of Gaelic.

This connection between using the land, and being part of the land is reflected in television and film. If the Gàidhealtachd is framed by its geographical area, then many Gaelic films and television programmes elevate this majestic, and still today largely unspoilt, landscape to a primary character in their work, giving it heroic status. Blaikie, writing in 2001, described how photography helped perpetuate a perception that the Western Isles were an 'antique curiosity held in aspic'. The Gàidhealtachd, then, in the media, often stands for a 'paradise lost'.

Petrie (2008) talks particularly about how Gaelic is portrayed in films, where the cheery Gael is positioned within a landscape constructed 'as a liminal space within which fantasies can be played out, desires fulfilled, anxieties expressed' (p. 42). For Cormack, Gaelic appears,

> as the most extreme signifier of difference. . .where lowlanders can indulge in their fantasies of rural life, and find their 'true selves' against a background of beautiful scenery and eccentric (and frequently rather simple-minded) locals. (Cormack, 2008: 31–32)

This coalesces in the types of films which use lazy stereotypes of Scotland and the Scots (produced by both insiders and outsiders), which play to a global audience's appetite for tartan and kilts, shortbread and bag-pipes. In Tartanry, we have a twee extension of the Walter Scott myth of the Highlands with depictions of wild nature, music and poetry, superstition and the heroic highlander (Bechhofer and McCrone, 2013). This view typifies what Devine describes as a Scotland 'locked in the past, cut off from modernity and progress' (Devine, 2012: 72). It is evident in documentaries too. Take *Crofters*, a 1944 film of crofting life that opens with a voice over describing the village as 'Remote, primeval . . .'.

Even films made by islanders are framed by the landscape. *A Boy in Harris*, filmed by Harris man Finlay J Macdonald in 1966, opens with a young boy looking out to sea, with

the voice over placing him at the periphery; his 'boundaries are the sea and the mountains of his Atlantic village'.

It is therefore important to investigate who, in documentary film, represents this idealised and unrealistic space. Is it the 'native' who despite centuries of imposed external characterization may yet, for reasons of their history and culture places themselves within the context of where they were brought up, and notions of 'land'? Or is it the director who represents the Gael through their directorial choices; choices that are both aesthetic, and informed by commissioner and sometimes budget? Perhaps both collude with the idea of the Gael as being represented through their land – and relish, aesthetically, narrationally and morally, this contested, idealistic view of a people, their culture and the land.

Nissology

This notion of a 'paradise lost' is heightened when the 'place' referred to is also an island. Nissology, the study of islands, has asked that we consider studying them on their own terms (McCall, 1994). However, Baldacchino makes clear that 'Island studies is explained not as a pursuit by islanders, islands, or *with* them, not even *for* them, but *of* them' (Baldacchino, 2008: 37). In other words, once more, rather than empowering or allowing islanders to claim their own narrative and tell their own stories, these are still being told *at* them. This is relevant to the people in the Gàidhealtachd who have, for so long, been 'explained' by outsiders, and never been given their voice. This experience is relevant to production mores and decisions, which consistently turn subject matter into object matter. Hay explains this as the consequence of marrying real islands with human attachment to these places. Here, he describes how islands are 'special places, paradigmatic places, topographies of meaning in which the qualities that construct place are dramatically distilled' (Hay, 2008: 31)

Urry suggests that the missionaries, traders and explorers of the past (those doughty Victorian travellers) are replaced today by modern explorers, who continue to interpret the 'state' of being an island or islander:

> Islanders appear to continue to suffer as the passive and unwitting 'objects of the gaze' of others unto this day. They persist as perennial targets of new 'civilizing missions': not only of academics and social researchers, but also of consultants, investor, journalists, filmmakers, conservationists, novelists and tourists (Urry, 1990: 9)

Like the Highlands of Scotland themselves, islands are often romanticised, glimpsed through rose-tinted glasses (Smawfield, 1993: 29). In this way, the island frequently stands as a metaphor for paradise, especially a lost paradise of romantic yearning. Island metaphors may also be used to connote loss, especially of innocence and a 'concomitant pathological condition of isolation and anti-sociality' (Gabilondo, 1998: 88). Their very isolation is extended to suggest a versatility and resilience in the people who live there (Baldacchino, 2005; Hay, 2008), and are ritually 'aesthesicised, sanitized and anaesthetised' (Connell, 2003: 568). But again, echoing some of the literature around the Gàidhealtachd, the metaphor can stand for backwardness and irrelevance (McCall, 1994: 3).

Identity is a key focus for nissologists, who seek to interrogate the 'islandness' of the islanders' identity – or at least islanders' perception of their identity shaped by their geographical location. This identity is both individual and describes a community identity too (Weal, 1991: 81). This identity can be shaped, and most certainly is in the Western Isles, by shared community, oral stories, culture and often by a communal need to work and socialise together. As Bonnemaison (1985) writes, 'identity is reproduced and reacquired in each generation through journeying and circulating within the areas of alliance and shared identity' (p. 61). This identity – the uniqueness of living on an island – is often reflected back to me, as a filmmaker, from the people I interview, and suggests that for islanders themselves, their 'place' and self-identification with this place is important and not to be lost or forgotten. This understanding of who they are and where they are from begins at birth:

> Children born on [small] islands differ from Elsewhere children in that they are knowing of each rock and fencepost of their homeplace, of every field-corner and doorway, every spit of sand and beach pebble. They are able to look out across the widewater and observe the wonder and diversity of our earth-home. May it ever be so. (Shields, 2004: 428)

This theme of understanding where they are from, and not wishing to lose it, is a strong focus of the interviewees, for consideration later in this article. During every visit to the Western Isles, I am struck again and again by the strength of feeling that belonging, land, name, people, place names, have for the islanders. Co leis thu – who are you, or more accurately, who are your people and where are/were they from, is, as has been remarked on by a number of ethnographic studies in the Gàidhealtachd (Basu, 2007; Macdonald, 1997; Parman, 1990) of extreme importance. Although the extent to which these Hebridean islanders are reflecting back an identity that has consistently been imposed on them through centuries of descriptions by others, is an area of challenge and one that in memory studies acknowledges the power of the media in constructing memory and therefore identity.

Collective memory

Collective memory, a term defined by Hugo Van Hofmannsthal in 1902 (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 106), is a version of the past, crafted by a community to aid their perceptions of themselves, and therefore, need not be accurate or authentic. The social group's construction of themselves is evolving, continually bending and shaping the past; it is a 'social construction' (Halbwachs, 1992). Events are chosen, processed and organised to give significance and prominence to experiences (Gongaware, 2003). Not surprisingly, work on collective memory studies acknowledges, and is concerned with the role played by the media in constructing memory. Like film, collective memory is narrational in its construction, and needs to be told as a story, which has resonance with how film makers themselves build versions of an event, or past, and craft it into a story for further dissemination. This constructing, and defining what makes groups unique (in the community's eyes at least), is evident in the case study chosen here involving a family from the small village of Ness in the Western Isles. Here, the islanders do not simply self-identify as 'Leòdhasach' (people from the Isle of Lewis) but 'Niasach' (people from Ness).

Memory work has been described in different ways, but there is a common acceptance that cultural memory operates through first retrieving events, or 'practicing remembering' (Kuhn, 2010) and then 'pre-forming' them to commemorative them (Connerton, 1989: 102). Importantly, too, elements are omitted – selection can entail conscious deselecting of events in order to ensure that the collective memory is fit for purpose for the community, thereby allowing a 'useable past' (Zelizer, 1995: 226) which serves politically and identity-driven needs (Schudson, 1992; Schwartz, 1982; Wertsch, 2002). Again, this process of constructing memory is similar to that practised by a filmmaker in the edit to construct meaning, and a way of shaping the narrative. Van Dijck (2007) is clear about the need for memory work, writing that it:

> involves a complex set of recursive activities that shape our inner worlds, reconciling past and present, allowing us to make sense of the world around us, and constructing an idea of continuity between self and others. (p. 5)

This mediated memory is bound by space; it happens in localities where memories are strongly linked to the place, landscape and any additional markers that set the place out in the community's memory (Nelson and Olin, 2003; Nora, 1989; Young, 1993). Alongside place, objects too have become associated with personal and collective memory (Olick et al., 1998; Rossington and Whitehead, 2007), and these objects, alongside place, can become memory holders, and stimulants to continued constructing and reconstructing memory. Again, this has strong resonance with my experience of the people of the Western Isles who name stones, fields, way markers and other areas of cultural and geographical importance, pass on oral traditions connected to these sites – oral stories that frequently embody morality tales, origin stories, and capture important events, great tragedy, loss, heroism and love.

While remembering was previously reliant on social groups (Halbwachs, 1992), today, the focus of collective memory is more often concerned with media, and television's role in mediating memory (Hoskins, 2004).

Collective memory and television

Collective memory and television artefacts are similar as 'in both fields the final outcomes/products that are probed by scholars are the result of processes of selection and construction' (Neiger et al., 2011: 6). In other words, collective memory construction and television documentary production share common practices in order to 'narrate' a story or event: Deciding which elements or testimony to include or exclude, pacing the delivery, and, commonly, including moral judgements, social comments and aids to understanding.

There is some consensus that media and television has replaced the role that social groups had in constructing memory (Neiger et al., 2011; Zandberg, 2010). During the last 20 years, research has focused on media and memory, and the role of journalists as mnemonic agents (Edy, 1999; Kitch, 2005, 2008; Meyers, 2009; Schudson, 1992) that gather, assemble, canonise and disseminate messages (Assman, 2011; Edy, 1999; Garde-Hansen et al., 2009; Neiger et al., 2011; Zandberg, 2010). Of particular note here in

relation to Case Study 1 is the power of the filmmaker to use analogies between present and historical events that suggest that the future may resemble the course of past experiences (Edy, 1999). Ahsuri sets this out clearly:

> media artifacts, so the argument goes, serve to link members of a community to their history, endowing them with a sense of identity whose roots are located in the past. Such products stand at the intersection of social time, linking the past with the present, and linking those two with the future. (Ashuri, 2007: 31)

If we admit the tension often at play between digital memory and the vernacular voice, then we have to acknowledge the over-bearing imposition of the dominant voices to continue to shape memory and identity (Cohen, 1982). Here we are also acknowledging the influence on communities to have their identity shaped or re-shaped by multiple sources that are influencing their memories (Kitch, 2008; Zelizer, 1995).

As in other memory functions, television now has a set of visual referents that can both re-affirm and construct memory (this might be the treatment of archive, or use of music), to the extent that the power of who produces images can be said to have passed into the media's hands (Kaes, 1990: 112). Identity, therefore, could be said to be shaped in part by memory, and this in turn has been constructed by the media. In looking at the interplay between nation, collective memory and the media, there is agreement that memory is at the heart of identity. As Smith (1986) writes, '. . . no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation' (p. 383).

This is of importance in describing the work that I have done in both commissioned work, and academic filmed research in the Western Isles, where islanders have been subject to imposed identity, and an external source shaping collective memory for hundreds of year (Ennew, 1980). It is also of importance when considering the intertextual weaving of oral stories that are passed down through the generations, and then collated, captured and then by the act of being broadcast, given supremacy over original stories. Gaelic television on BBC Scotland, and then on BBC Alba has often commissioned stories that capture oral histories with current BBC Alba commissioning guidelines specifically requesting 'proposal[s] reflect[ing] real, lived experience' (BBC Alba, 2023).

BBC Alba was set up in September 2008 and delivers Gaelic programmes to the 60,000 plus Gaelic community (although its audience reach is significantly higher). The service remit of BBC Alba is to 'reflect and support Gaelic culture, identity and heritage' (BBC Trust, 2012). Prior to BBC Alba's launch there was programming produced for and by Gaels. The programme-makers were keen to avoid a 'crofting tinge' while ensuring that programmes sat firmly within the community. But if Gaelic news is much closer to their audience, the ambitious decision to commission Eòrpa a European current affairs programme in 1993, spoke of a wish to demonstrate that Gaelic is a modern European language and to take it 'out of the shadow of English' (Morrison quoted in Maclean, 2018: 12).

I argue that much of the Gael's self-identification, which BBC Alba can support, is about conserving vanishing traditions and language, whether this is place names, histories, oral stories or rituals. For the older generation at least, the loss of these are suggestive of a greater loss, as the world becomes more globalised, more incomers move to the islands and fewer young folk find work at home and leave their ancestral homesteads.

Gaelic television has a strong resonance with its audience, and the programme-makers have a strong affinity with the audience too. The programmes reflect back to the community an idea of itself that is shaped by filmmakers who more often than not are from the community, or, like me, both insider and outsider. Filmmaker and audience often share the same collective memories and, by extension, collective memories of what Gaelic television looks like. It is therefore unsurprising that directors have, over time, built up a set of informal protocols of how Gaelic programmes should be shot and edited, look and feel. Martin-Jones (2010) talks of the recurrence of storytelling in Gaelic films and broadcasts, demonstrating the importance of the 'act of mythologising Gaelic culture and folklore in these films' (p. 162).

Insider/outsider perspective

I joined the BBC in 1989, which had, at that time, a rigorous process for mentoring and encouraging talent. I was a director on the Gaelic-language current affairs programme, *Eòrpa* (1994–1996), on the Gaelic cultural event *The National Mod* (1993, 1994) and made a four-part documentary series about the history of women in the islands, *Eideadh nan Guth* (1994). During this time, I worked with established directors and producers, who introduced me to a particular 'craft' of working in Gaelic broadcasting. Although I did not grow up in the islands, my parents both came from the Isle of Lewis, and we spent many summers there. I self-identify, to a degree, as a Gael, albeit one who lives outwith the geographical area.

During the years in which I worked in television, documentary itself was changing, with a pushing against boundaries and the introduction of a less formal execution towards a much freer style and delivery. Some of these changes crossed over to Gaelic television, particularly in programming for children and young people. John Smith, a very successful UK director who began in Gaelic programming, talks about consciously confounding people's expectations of Gaelic television by taking his aesthetic lead from Janet Street-Porter's new 'youth' programmes from 1987 (quoted in Maclean, 2018).

However, while it seems that technical advances have continued to inform and shape Gaelic programming, editorial shifts, particularly in documentaries, have largely passed it by. This is partly down to the limited budgets often allocated to Gaelic programmes, but it also reflects the tastes of the practitioners, commissioners and audience.

I have been making documentaries for BBC Alba for 4 years and the accusation of mythologising Gaelic culture can easily be laid at my door. Flaherty had a romantic approach to the Inuit whom he filmed for *Nanook of the North* (1922) and also the Irish islanders in *Man of Aran* (1934). There can be no doubt that Flaherty cherished the people about whom he was making films, and he admitted that his view was coloured by his underlying sadness at the demise of a way of life he regarded as somehow superior to that of the West. I share Flaherty's sentiment, in my case forged by family connections to the area and executed within the context of early 1990s BBC production values and practices. As both insider and outsider, I have an imperative not unlike Gruber's 'salvage ethnography', to gather stories and testimony from people whose way of life is changing and disappearing. This nostalgic engagement with the islands is evident in my shot choices, music selection and the way that stories are cherished. Above all, the use of

landscape as character in my films demonstrates, I think, an underlying grief that the way of life is dying out.

Here, though, I need to acknowledge the near impossibility of trying to extract the Gael (and I identify as one) themselves from an upbringing in the land, with the culture that they have had. As Ingold (2002) tells us, 'through living in it, the landscape becomes part of us, just as we are part of it' (p. 153). I know firsthand the extent to which my extended family, to a degree, kept warm the idea of an idealised *Gàidhealtachd*, alongside a too-long held sense of grievance against the rest of the United Kingdom. I recognised the mythologising of the Jacobites, born out of a continued sense of Gaelic being marginalised, and the very real lived experience of many from the islands who had to leave to succeed.

More and more, then, I am questioning the extent to which my insider/outsider position imposes an identity on the subjects I interview, and that this demonstrates, despite my recognition and identification with the people I interview, that there is no way, as Nolley writes, 'to escape the fact of their [the producer's] final controlling power over the films they construct' (Nolley, 1997: 283).

Case study 1: Scarp, Isle of Harris – commissioned broadcast

> Western Scotland is an area in which canonical levels of 'remoteness' are to be found. (Ardener, 2012: 524)

There can be, arguably, fewer symbolically remote places with which to investigate marginality and identify than the small islands off the Western Isles where I carry out most of my commissioned and non-commissioned filming.

In 2012, I produced *Leasan sa Bhàs (A Lesson In Death)*, a drama-documentary about a 19th-century murder on a very small island off Harris. This island, Scarp, was abandoned in 1972. It is now home to three summer visitors who have holiday homes there. None of them are from the islands or indeed Scotland. Although the programme uncovered the possible murder of a schoolmaster in the 1880s, the 1-hour programme also captured important ethnographic information about the island, and the island and islanders were ever-present throughout the re-telling of an old murder mystery. Scarp is beautiful; white sandy beaches, turquoise water, rolling hills peppered with flowers, leading to a vista of breaking waves and misty mountains (a deliberately hackneyed description). As we have seen, this beautiful remoteness is constantly emphasised in documentary film; crashing waves, headlands, setting suns, boats, birds and wind. Scarp is an almost embarrassing cliché of a magical deserted island. The one village street, filled with the ruins of old houses, still follows the shoreline, in varying stages of disintegration.

I have a growing awareness of the tendency I have to position the majority of interviewees within the landscape, often specifically within the ruined landscape of their familial homes. And what I have become interested in examining is whether this is me imposing an outsider's view of the Gael – or whether the interviewees have themselves

colluded in a representation of themselves as 'heroic', imbedded in landscape and guardians of an important, and at risk, culture.

A key interviewee in this documentary is Donald John MacInnes, whose family came from Scarp and were the last ones to leave when the island was emptied in 1972. I visited Scarp with Donald John prior to filming and asked him why he did not rebuild the family house and use it in the summer. He replied that as he and his family no longer lived there, the house might as well go back to the earth from where it had come from – that without people, and by people he meant the indigenous community, the island has lost its soul.

This had a strong effect on me. The story was rich, evocative and, not unexpectedly, I chose his ruined home as the location to set his interview. As a filmmaker, I acknowledge that the aesthetics of the interview setting with Donald John, the ruined house with the sea and blue hills in the distance is both beautiful, and stands as a metaphor for the destruction of an old, unsustainable way of life. Filmed as it was on a beautiful summer's day, the interview location undoubtably adds to the myth making of islanders as 'of the land', and imbues them with the 'heroism' of the landscape in which they have been placed.

The second interview setting was again aesthetically pleasing, down by the seashore, again framed by hills and sparking turquoise sea. Here, the artist Gillies MacKinnon talked dejectedly about the ending of a way of life, reminiscing of his time on the island, and the way of life that was now lost and even worse, in danger of being forgotten:

> The children that played on the shore, the children of 'Sgoil air an traigh' (School on the beach) were in fact the last generation, the lost generation in a sense, because they were denied the life that they were prepared for on this beach. (Maclean, 2011)

This documentary is useful as a comparison to from the next two case studies, as it was made prior to my PhD, and without the 'benefit' of reflection, and academic understanding of ideas like identity construction, and the role of the producer. It, therefore, remains an unadulterated, if you will, commission, that can act as a control for the next two pieces of work.

Case study 2: Ness, Isle of Lewis–commissioned programme

> The key feature of islands is of course the shoreline – the fixed but ever shifting perimeter . . . those who live inside this shoreline have a powerful sense of community – of communal home – dictated by geography. (Harry Baglole quoted in Hay, 2008: 21)

I spent July 2014 filming *Balaich na h-Airde* (*The Aird Boys*), a documentary about four brothers from the village of Ness, the most northerly tip of the most northern island in the Western Isles. There is nowhere else to go after Ness, but across the Atlantic to America. It is the most north-westerly community in Europe. While the area is no longer remote, connected as it is to the Internet and only 30 miles away from the main Lewis town of Stornoway, there is a geographical sense of Ness being cut off from the rest of Lewis. A moor separates it from the west side villages of Barvas and Shawbost, and this

sense of separation is embraced by the locals, who articulate a distinction from the rest of the island that is echoed by other islanders not from there. People from Ness also narrow down their definition of where they are from even further. The Smiths, the family that I filmed, came from South Dell, a village set back from the road, which was and is, the interviewees suggested, a special place, idyllic and not only different from Scotland or Lewis, but different also from the rest of Ness as one of the brothers, Donald, explained:

> We lived in South Dell which was separate from the rest of the village. It was only a quarter of a mile away . . . but you felt removed. I suppose although Ness is a big place, with a big population, South Dell was a place apart. (Maclean, 2014)

Initially, Donald did not want to be in the programme. I met with him, and he took me round the village, the moors and his croft. He explained that he did not want 'another boring programme with him sitting in a chair talking' about his life, because what was actually important was where he came from. Here, we have an instance of where production budgets can affect aesthetics. The weather in the Western Isles is often mixed and dark, wet and windy during the winter months, which means it can be challenging for the filmmaker if the weather is unkind. Add to this that Gaelic programming is, as we have seen, closer to its audience, the result is that more often than not, interviews are shot in and around people's homes, and if it is wet and windy, the default becomes the interior. So, here the interviewee is referring to the preponderance of interior interview shots, often with elderly men sitting in their comfy chair by the fire.

As he took me round his croft, his village and the surrounding countryside, I began to understand the importance of his village and environment to him, and so changed the underlying theme of the programme. It became not simply about family, but about place, which in Gaelic culture terms is of huge importance. He summed it up during the interview I did with him, sitting on a disused buoy, on his croft, with the sea and the distant headland behind him:

> As the saying goes, much have we seen and much have we done. I liked London and all of that when I was young, but you know I think it was here that we were made. I still think the first few happy little years we passed in this sweet, kind, beautiful place left us pretty happy all round. (Maclean, 2014)

This sentiment is contrasted to that of his half-sister, Kirsty Anne, who was moved from her village (Coll, on the same island, but some 15 miles away) to Ness, who describes acutely the vast difference in perception and identity between two villages on a small island:

> When I went to Ness it was as though you had dropped me off in the middle of New York. I never felt it was my home because my heart was always in Upper Coll. I had nothing against Ness people or anything like that . . . it's just that I was born and raised in Upper Coll. They made fun of my accent; it wasn't Niseach (Ness) enough. (Maclean, 2014)

The documentary began and ended in the land – with a family friend summing up the boys' connection to this very distinct geographical area as follows:

> They are a Gàidhealtachd family. And the culture and the language wove all of that together, and the lifestyle they had, which is very important to them as far as I could ever tell. And Ness. Ness. Ness is where they are from. And that is in their blood. (Maclean, 2014)

Case study 3: Uig, Isle of Lewis – non–commissioned

After these two commissioned works, I wanted to consider the notion of interview location and setting outside broadcast works – with all their production requirements and constraints I began a short research project that took me again to Gaelic speakers in Lewis, this time in the small west-side village of Uig. Here, I pre-interviewed the people I met with. I then considered where I would place them for interview, and asked them to think about where they would like to be placed – which interview setting they would feel most comfortable with. The results are interesting.

First, I interviewed a man who was still living in the house he was born in. He left briefly to join the merchant navy, and saw the world, but returned home when his father's health deteriorated and he was no longer able to work the loom that he used to make Harris Tweed. Donald's story was not untypical for the islands. Often, the men folk travelled far and wide either fishing or in the merchant navy. Often they returned home, although the de-population of the islands through the 20th century also speaks to the number who never returned. Half way through the interview Donald's son came to join us. He had recently returned to the village and built a new loom to weave Harris Tweed. The global resurgence of the industry had again begun to make it viable. For me, this was an interesting theme, so unsurprisingly perhaps I choose the new loom shed as the interview setting for Donald.

When I asked Donald where he would like to be interviewed, with no hesitation, he requested that we interview him with the old, not new, loom shed in the background – and also, and this was important to him, his sheep.

Calum and Janet also still lived in their old family home, although not the one they were born in. When they were born, in the 1960s, the family still lived in a Black House. Black Houses were primitive homes that most islanders, and indeed most poor people in the Highlands, lived in through the 17th to the early 20th century. They were stone built, with a fire in the middle of the room, recessed beds and, in some cases, cattle at one end of the house. Most people moved from the Black Houses to more modern houses during the first half of the 20th century, so it was unusual to hear of a family still living in one in the 1960s. The ruined Black House was still visible in the croft, and given it was unusual to have remembered living in it, I opted to place them both within the ruin.

When I asked them about where they would place themselves, Janet explained that she would have been mortified to have been filmed within the ruin. She did not want to be drawn too much on it, but I sensed that she felt the poverty of her youth – even though in the interview they were both adamant that they were happy and wanted for nothing – to be something of which that she had become ashamed. Instead they wished to be placed with the 'beautiful Uig hills' in the background.

I conducted further interviews, and almost without exception, interviewees chose to place themselves within their landscape – a place they clearly felt comfortable with, but also, again felt represented them. This does suggest a complicated relationship and self-identification with Hebridean islanders and their land. As has previously been noted, much of island identity has been presented to them through books and films. As described, it is rare for such a small community to have been so filmed, photographed and written about. However, during every recce that I do in the island I am often struck by the strength of feeling about belonging to the land, and an understanding of the history of place, which the islanders have. I am identified through my family names to the extent that when people ask who I am, I am not identified by my immediate family, but right back to the first 'Maclean' on the island. They are an outdoor people, crofting, fishing, walking to church, and although this is changing, it is still a defining element of the community. Their land, and their position in it, defines them. This is often how they have been shown on film, but also how they see themselves. For me, this initial research would suggest that in part at least, the placing of the islanders in the landscape is not a construct, but in my case, has been firmly guided by the hand of the interviewee themselves.

Conclusion

This article sought to examine the extent of an imposed identity on the people of the Western Isles, constructed by books, film and television for hundreds of years. It asked whether this island identity was brought from without, or whether, and to what degree, the islanders self-identified as living in a particular 'place' – a place that influenced them and their upbringing to a greater extent than others who do not live on their island, or even their particularly village on the island, are influenced. The role of the insider/outsider was investigated to consider whether BBC Alba gave back control to islanders in regard to shaping their identity. Finally, the article asks whether islanders themselves collude in perpetuating an identity that is marked by their geographical homeland, and shaped by its 'islandness'.

The contrasting films that considered interview setting suggest that while filmmakers are invariably driving by production choices, like aesthetics, within Gaelic television itself, there are protocols that dictate the look and feel of Gaelic programmes, and that these protocols are not necessarily imposed by outsiders. Further research with villagers from Uig suggests that islanders themselves would more often opt, when offered a choice, to be interviewed within the landscape of their birth and home.

In conclusion, while it remains challenging to distinguish between islanders' views of themselves as gleaned by continued exposure to external identity construction (Ennew, 1980), there is some evidence to suggest that the islanders' notion of Co Leis Thu – who you are, founded as it is in a need to understand where a person is from – used thereby to identify who their people are – is a strong self-identifier, and that therefore, positioning islanders within their cultural and geographic homestead may not necessarily be simply an external imposition.

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