3. Island Geographies, the Second World War film and the Northern Isles of Scotland

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A visitor to the Northern Isles off the tip of Scotland can't help but recognize the importance of the Second World War to their history. Yet this group of islands rarely feature in the common representations of the war produced by feature films from Britain, including those which, occasionally, involve Hollywood studios. The films that typically populate the schedules of daytime television in Britain give little indication of the extent of the role played by the Northern Isles in the war. One might argue that, in the British cinematic imaginary of World War II, the contribution of the Northern Isles to the war effort suffers from something of a similar lack of recognition to that of much of the then British Empire. There are, though, a small group of war films that do reveal the importance of these islands in the war and warrant further discussion. This contribution will show how ongoing local histories and heritage help to correct the blindspots of the Second World War film, before analysing the representation of the islands in a selected group of war films. I suggest that while the islands are viewed as geographically peripheral to the rest of the UK, a factor which influences their position in the mental cartography of the war, they were in fact strategically central to the war effort, and provide a means of re-orientating the history and geography of the Second World War film as it has come to be both represented and memorialized by British Cinema. The particular terms of this analysis will also highlight how the unique location of the Northern Isles means that they occupy a historical and cultural space that is both distant from the

centres of Scotland and the UK, and close to and connected with the Norse countries to the north-east.

Orkney, Shetland and the local reclaiming of history

The imbalance in the geography of representation of the war effort in the British war film is underlined by the ongoing rewriting of histories of the Second World War and the articulation of memories from those who experienced it. This writing and documenting of the past is manifest locally and nationally through the museums and local history and heritage groups that are active in Orkney and Shetland.[1]

This rebalancing of history is underlined visually by the architectural reminders of the war that characterize the landscape of the Orkney Islands. The area around Scapa Flow which was the base for the British fleet in World War I and II is notable for the continued presence of the surviving structures of war. Wrecks of boats sunk during the war protrude from the sea, and on land former army Nissen huts are a common feature of local farms. Numerous ruins of gun batteries that defended the coastal entry points to Scapa Flow remain, along with the renowned tourist attraction of the Italian Chapel at Lamb Holm, crafted out a Nissen hut by Italian prisoners of war.[2]

insert wreck.jpg

Wreck of Loch Maddy torpedoed by U-boat 57 at Inganess Bay 1940 c/o Orkney Image Library.

The Shetland Isles lie one hundred and fifteen miles to the north of Orkney and the special archipelago, where Scotland meets Scandinavia and the North Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean, represent the most northerly point of the British Isles (www.shetland.org). These islands are just over two hundred miles from the western coast of Norway, a country that was occupied

during the Second World War, making these islands vital to the defence of the United Kingdom and the struggle for the North Atlantic Ocean.

The defence of Britain's north easterly edge was confirmed by a major transfer of forces to Shetland and this has been documented at a local level:

> in 1939 Shetland was flooded by more than 20,000 servicemen to garrison the islands. They found a friendly, hospitable race of Shetlanders living simple, relatively contented lives but (in many places) without such facilities as electricity, drainage, piped water and good roads.[3]

The influx of servicemen, with troops outnumbering civilians, led to an increase in employment, improved facilities and a higher standard of living.[4] As Shetland became an important base for the Army, Navy and R.A.F. it became more liable to attack. The invasion of Norway in 1940 caused a large number of Norwegians to flee their homeland for refuge on Shetland confirming Shetland's historic allegiance with Norway, and cementing a link that would become a significant part of the war in Northern Europe.[5] Shetland's proximity to occupied Norway enabled the sea between the two island coastlines to function as a lifeline for resistance fighters and refugees via a clandestine operation known and since commemorated as *The Shetland Bus* (Hewitson, 2004, Howarth, 1998). Formed by the combined forces of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the military intelligence service of Norway's government-in-exile, *The Shetland Bus* demonstrates how the particular geography of these islands off the north east coast of Scotland made a significant though frequently overlooked contribution to the defence of the country.[6]

The importance of memory to the articulation of local histories is shown through the website *Remembering Scotland at War*.[7] This resource, developed by Museums Galleries Scotland

aims to function as an online museum and secures memories from different areas of Scotland. The emphasis on oral history and remembered experience, rather than expert commentary, means that the people who witnessed the onset of war are given a voice in writing their history. The testimony of Arthur Flett gives an indication of what people living in Orkney were feeling as the events of World War II unfolded:

> We went into the war in September and Hitler meantime was marching virtually unrestricted through Europe, he went right through it like a knife through butter. He then turned his attention to Norway which is the hot seat for us because it's just two hundred miles across the water. We was positive that he would carry on from Norway and go into Kirkwall, which was a plum place because it was a premier anchorage for the Navy, in the world really. [sic] It was completely landlocked and secure and all the ships could get in there…destroyers, pocket battleships, the whole lot.[8]

Arthur's testimony reveals the insecurity and impending threat that the civilian people on the islands of Orkney felt under the changing conditions of war. The strategic importance of Scapa Flow combined with the invasion of Norway to the north exposes Orkney in a way that heightens its significance within the geography of the war. Gordon Barclay's recent research confirms how this feeling of island vulnerability was by no means unjustified (Barclay, 2013). Barclay cites a paper submitted to the Chiefs of Staff Committee in 1940 which presents a hypothetical account of how the invasion of the north of Scotland could be executed from Norway. The author Admiral Sir Reginald Plunket Ernle-Erle Drax suggested 'that the Germans could put 50,000 troops into northern Scotland and within a few days concentrate on the aerodromes near Wick such a force that Scapa Flow would become untenable. Once the Home Fleet had been driven off, Orkney and Shetland could have been taken and Scapa captured' (Barclay, 2013, p. xviii). The hypothesis was dismissed by the Joint Intelligence Committee but Barclay is surely correct to highlight the vulnerability of the

northern coast of Scotland once Norway was invaded (Barclay 2013, p. xviii). Taken together these supplementary and corrective histories confirm Daniel Travers' argument that the Northern Isles have acted 'to remember where the rest of Britain has chosen to forget' (Travers, 2015, p.114).

Tracing the Northern Isles in the war film

It is against the ongoing background of corrective historicity that I want to examine a group of Second World War films that are to varying degrees set at sea and make reference to the Northern Isles. With the exception of *The Spy in Black* (UK, Michael Powell 1939), the films were produced after the war, during the 1950s and early 1960s when the war film genre, popular with audiences, was one of the dominant genres in British Cinema (Slater, 2009, p.94). In this period cinema-going in the UK reached its apex and the beginning of its decline. There is an extensive literature on the representation of the war in British Cinema and the image of the nation that it produces (Gledhill, Swanson, 1996, Murphy 2000, Rayner 2007). This contribution is intended to reorientate the critical geography of the war across a selection of feature films, and to thereby scrutinize the effect of island geography on the representation of the conflict and the means of its visualization through film.

The films that make reference to the Northern Isles are *The Spy in Black*, *Above us the Waves* (UK, Ralph Thomas, 1955) *Sink the Bismarck!* (USA, Lewis Gilbert, 1960) and *Suicide Mission* (Michael Forlong, Norway, 1954). The films prior to *Suicide Mission* were made within the constraints of the British film industry and demonstrate how, in the absence of extensive location shooting, the Northern Isles tend to be visually approximated through the use of the map. The latter film was produced independently and on a lower budget, in Norway, and as such is able to exploit to a greater degree the authenticity of location and the geography of the North Atlantic. Together, the films, sharing a common concern with the naval context, all address the war fought at sea, but reveal a differing scale of reference to the

Northern Isles which, the following analysis shows, indicate how films historicize their geographical position in the war effort, after the fact, in slightly different ways.[9]

The first of the films to be produced, *The Spy in Black,* while not explicitly referring to World War II, anticipates the concerns raised for the islands when the conflict started. Shortly after the war with Germany broke out the British battleship HMS Royal Oak was sunk inside Scapa Flow during October 1939, within three months of the film's release in August (Barr, 2005, p.33). The breach of Scapa Flow by the German U-boat cost eight hundred and thirty three sailors' lives, out of a crew of one thousand two hundred and nineteen.[10] This shocking tragedy had the effect of ensuring that the defence of the harbour was fundamentally reinforced and modernized, mainly through the building of causeways that shut off previously useable channels around Scapa Flow, in the process connecting previously separate islands. These structures were named *The Churchill Barriers*.

The Spy in Black originated as a novel written by the author Joseph Storer Clouston and published in 1917. Clouston was a prolific writer and resident Orkney historian.[11] The development of the novel into the film produced Powell's first working collaboration with screenwriter Emeric Pressburger, who reworked the novel into a script. The location of Orkney which was a feature of the novel was a draw for Powell following the location shoot on the island of Foula, Shetland for *The Edge of the World* (UK, Michael Powell, 1937). This was a film inspired by the evacuation of St. Kilda, Britain's remotest island, in 1930.[12] Powell had to persuade the producer Irving Asher that location shooting was necessary, since Asher believed that 'all those northern islands are the same' (Powell, 1986, p.309). Powell disagreed and demonstrated his commitment to the Scottish islands by insisting that he visit the author on Orkney, and demanding that location shooting be part of the film (Powell, 1986, p.246). This is confirmed by Kevin Macdonald who asserts that Powell promised actors Valerie Hobson and Conrad Veidt that they would do exteriors on Orkney (Macdonald 1994, p.150).

In the end the actors did not get to go to Orkney but Powell's adaptability with limited resources, including using locals as doubles, ensured that he captured 'some of the atmospheric establishing shots which give the film an edge over most studio-bound thrillers' (Macdonald, 1994, p.150, Powell 1986, p.310).

The Spy in Black has often been discussed in relation to the main star Conrad Veidt, the use of expressionist motifs, and as an early illustration of the key features of the significant body of work that would emerge from the partnership between Powell and Pressburger (Christie & Moor 2005, Moor, 2005). Here however, my analysis will examine the role of the island and the location of Hoy in the film. The film is comprised of footage of battleships at sea, the schoolhouse at the village of Longhope on the island of Hoy where the drama develops between the spy Captain Hardt (Veidt) and the schoolteacher Fräulein Tiel (Hobson), and scenes shot on the island including the famous landmark The Old Man of Hoy. The combination of the studio constructed schoolhouse, location footage and darkness, emphasizes the isolation of Hoy and its vulnerability to enemy incursion from the sea to the west.

Hardt is shown arriving off the shore of Hoy by U-boat, having navigated his way through the mine defences of Scapa Flow. This negotiation of the defences is shown through the cramped interior of the U-boat, and a detailed map of the coast around the island that provides instructions on the depths and directions required to avoid the minefield that fortifies the sea surrounding the island. The exchange of close shots between the map, officers issuing the instructions on when to alter depth and direction, the crew who carry out the instructions, and the surrounding machinery of the U-boat in the depths of the North Sea, creates an atmosphere of tension and jeopardy that registers just how important the defence of Scapa Flow was to the fleet of the Royal Navy. This, without actually showing the space

above the surface of the sea where the ships were located. Such an economical use of the map provides the overall perspective that cannot be shown by the naturalistic image. It charts the geography of the territory that will be fought over, but which cannot be filmed due to the limitations imposed by Asher. Thus the map image, an important element in the visual configuration of the war film that takes place at sea, here reinforces strategic importance of the Northern Isles (Wood, 1993).

As Hardt makes his way on to Hoy, Fräulein Tiel's aides kidnap and replace the school teacher also bound for the schoolhouse. The importance of Orkney to the security of the nation is reinforced by the English spy Mrs Sedley asking the rhetorical question: 'these Orkney islands - I thought it was quite impossible for civilians to go there in wartime'. The teacher answers that she has gone to great lengths to secure passport clearance to go to the islands. Indeed, the parallel arrival of the spies on Hoy has to circumvent not only the island security patrols, but also the insistent and welcoming surveillance of the small, local community. This takes the form of the Reverend Hector Matthews and his wife whose keen offer of hospitality to Fräulein Tiel is politely rebuffed as the international espionage of war meets the insistent scrutiny of a small island community.

In the schoolhouse Hardt gains access to a vantage point from the east coast of Hoy where it is possible to survey the British fleet in the natural harbour of Scapa Flow**.** Rather than Hardt gazing out upon the coastal landscape vista that is typically offered by the Northern Isles and with romantic encounters set in the Scottish landscape, he surveys the assembled vehicles of modern maritime warfare that occupy Scapa Flow.[13] The volume of armament gathered at Scapa Flow confirms its strategic importance to the war at sea.

The ongoing drama between Hardt and Tiel in the confines of the schoolhouse is rendered through an expressionist mise-en-scène that is associated with prior films starring Veidt,

including the iconic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, Germany 1920). This aesthetic underlines how the need to defend or infiltrate the island during war means that it becomes a place of refuge and subterfuge, where, under the cover of darkness, the machinery and imminent threat of war displaces the meanings traditionally associated with the remote island setting.[14] Part of this inversion also involves duplicity between key characters that is exposed later in the film. Rather than the island being a place of certainty where everyone knows each other, it is, instead, a place redolent with what Robert Shail describes as 'the expression of impending invasion or subversion from within' (Shail, 2005, p.241).

Prior research links the films of Powell and Pressburger to the romantic tradition through the treatment of landscape, and whilst islands in particular and the Scottish landscape in general are typically locations for the expression of a romantic encounter, this is clearly not the case with *The Spy in Black* (Petrie, 2000, Moor, 2005). The attachment to landscape in this film is reworked to suggest a visual and dramatic appreciation of the particularities of island geographies, their historical significance and the cinematic opportunities they offer. Finally, and adding to this focus on the significance of the Northern Isles in the history of the war, another distinctive feature of *The Spy in Black* is the way that the drama of the story, which is largely confined to the islands, also makes little reference to the centre of command in England. This, along with the features discussed above, effectively recentres the geography of the war onto the Northern Isles as a central location for engaging with the enemy.

A stark contrast in approach is found in *Sink the Bismarck!*, a more typical and later war film predominantly shot in the studio with little location shooting, and making use of two surviving battleships HMS Belfast and HMS Vanguard.[15] The narrative concern of the film is the mission to sink the formidable German battleship because Britain was losing the war at sea. Set in the spring of 1941, the film dramatizes the personal and national struggle to win

the Battle of the North Atlantic. It strikes a different tone to *The Spy in Black* through a greater degree of personification in dramatizing the gendered necessities of war.

The geography of the film is located in the struggle for control of the North Atlantic, though as an American reporter describing the plight of Britain in the war states 'the Battle of the North Atlantic is fought at sea but it is directed from the Admiralty here in London'. The Admiralty is represented as a war room underground in central London where the new officer in command, Captain Shepard (Kenneth More) asserts his authority by stamping out the signs of informality he observed on his arrival. The war room is the space where the strategy for targeting the Bismarck is decided. The film alternates between documentary style footage of battleships at sea and the enclosed interior of the war room. Scapa Flow and the coast of Norway are shown in the film and it is the stretch of ocean between the Northern Isles and Norway where the pursuit of the battleship occurs. The Commander-in-Chief of Scapa Flow is shown smoking a pipe in a more informal room talking to the Admiralty. The low ceilinged room in Orkney is an improvised space with domestic curtains and light fittings co-existing with a room full of naval officers with English accents, played by lesser actors than those located in the Admiralty, poring over their smaller map of the North Atlantic. This time, as in the previous film, the role of the map is similarly to discuss the importance of the territory over which war is being waged. There are no explicit markers to show Orkney in wartime, these are provided in the main by images of maps, again an integral part of visualizing the geography of war within the constraints of the studio system. The major difference from *The Spy in Black*, is that in this film Orkney does not become the centre of the film. The pursuit and sinking of the emblematic German warship occurs in the North Atlantic where the Orkney Isles are located, but the dramatic and narrative centre of the film remains with the Admiralty, in central London.

The strategic formation plotted on the maps in the Admiralty and at Scapa Flow enables decisions to be taken, and the results to be recorded through changes to the positions and overall formation of the model ships of the home fleet and the enemy on the map in the Admiralty, where decisions are taken. In this sequence the importance of the Orkney and Shetland islands in relation to Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Norway, the rest of Scandinavia, and the North Atlantic is emphasized as the officers attempt to predict the probable route that the Bismarck might take. The possibilities are four convoy lanes: 'the Denmark Straight, the passage south of Iceland, the Faroe, Shetland passage and the Fair Island passage between the Orkneys and the Shetlands'. These routes are traced on the map by the pipe held by the officer and they register the centrality of the Northern Isles to the strategy and enactment of the war fought at sea.

insert Bismarck.jpg

(insert caption: The North Atlantic, the Admiralty and the map: *Sink the Bismarck!*)

The static and inanimate nature of this perspective and its underground location serves to amplify - firstly, the contrast with the action of battle and its effects on the sailors and officers on the front line, and secondly, the need for co-ordinated command of the operation being undertaken at sea and effective communication between them (Conley, 2007). This hierarchical relationship between different levels of the Royal Navy also keeps Orkney subordinate to the Admiralty in London, even though it was strategically central to the events portrayed. In this popular film, then, character is favoured over location in registering the drama of loss and national triumph that ensues. As a result, the Northern Isles remain just that, 'northern' in relation to the supposed centre of the war effort.

As Sébastien Caquard argues, one of the functions of images of maps in films is to create the impression of perspective on a flat surface and provide a perspective that shows the geographical relationship between land and sea that has been produced by cartography

(Caquard, 2009, p.49). The condensed geography represented by the map functions to connect the command and operational spaces and illustrates the plotting of military strategy and its effects, in concert with dialogue and performance. The images might be an inanimate substitute for physical reality, but they demand serious concentration since the decisions that are made and confirmed via the map, are critical to the course of the war.

In *Sink the Bismarck!*, the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland are key to the battle for the North Atlantic that is the concern of the film, but as they are not visually established as an external location they remain peripheral to the drama of the film which is registered inside the Admiralty through the character of Shepard, his emotional journey, closing romance with second officer Anne Davis (Dana Wynter), and in the battle sequences. In this studio film which commands a higher budget, the representation of the islands is not a visual priority. It occurs instead through the image of the map within a spatial economy, where the confines of interior space underground is combined with exterior imagery of battleships at sea level. The casting of the characters also reflects the emphasis on generating narrative drama through renowned actors, with little explicit reference to the situation of the Northern Isles beyond the territory shown by the map.

Finally with regard to this spectrum of filmic scales of reference to the Northern Isles, *Above us the Waves* is like *Sink the Bismarck!* in that it is based on the repeated efforts of the Royal Navy and Air Force to sink another of the biggest German battleships. This time it is the Tirpitz, which is located off the western coast of Norway and within reach of the Northern Isles. This Rank film did not enjoy the support of a Hollywood studio, and offers a more sombre drama about the losses incurred by the operation. In 1942 it became clear that while the Tirpitz was moored in a Norwegian fjord, it could threaten Arctic Convoys supplying northern Russia.[16] Scapa Flow was involved in the strategy to contain the threat but not directly involved in the submarine operation to sink the battleship.[17] The book on which the

film is based reveals a more fluid geography that emanates from the naval base at Portsmouth and moves surreptitiously along the west coast of Scotland, taking advantage of the less militarized secrecy offered by certain islands and inlets along the west coast (Warren & Benson, 1953, p.25).

The opening of the film shows officers being shown a newsreel film inside a naval headquarters. The narration of the newsreel details the threat of the Tirpitz which was diverting resources from elsewhere, and the ongoing threat of U-boats to the supply lines of the UK. The narrator summarizes the danger with the declaration that 'we are an island people; we cannot survive without our communications across the sea'. After the film has finished and the lights have been brought up, Admiral Ryder puts the following question to the audience: 'Somehow gentlemen the Tirpitz has to be put out of action. How?' The suggestion is made by Commander Fraser that torpedoes are taken to the target by the more clandestine means of a team of divers. The film shows the different stages of realizing this suggestion, from early pilot tests through to its partly successful culmination in the serious damage inflicted on the Tirpitz.

The geography of the film is not made as clear as in the other films discussed. The map image is used briefly to pinpoint where the target is located, in a sheltered spot off the coast of Norway but still some sixty miles inland.[18] As in *Sink the Bismarck!*, in the absence of specific geographical markers of where the selected men are in the journey to carry out their mission, it is the relationships between characters (this time between those who undertook the dangerous mission in the small, highly enclosed spaces of the submarines that were navigated through the defences of the Tirpitz) which take precedence. The first attempt to get the human torpedoes close to the target is through a small unarmed boat with forged papers declaring that she is a Norwegian fishing boat carrying a cargo of peat to Trondheim. The fishing boat is carrying the torpedoes underneath the hull, and though it gets close to the

target the torpedoes become detached and are lost. The crew are shown to be Norwegian but there is no explicit reference to the men of *The Shetland Bus* (the operation that linked occupied Norway to Shetland during the war, which is explored further below) who made this part of the mission possible.

The main reference to Scotland in the film is registered through the Skye Boat Song which underlines the theme of the clandestine journey between islands by sea.[19] The song is deployed diegetically through the voice of Lieutenant Alec Duffy (John Gregson), and non-diegetically to open and close the film. Its lament serves to divert attention from the imminent danger and sacrifice required by the mission and resists the triumphalism evident in similar war films of the period. It is the implications of the proximity of the Tirpitz for the Northern Isles within the larger struggle for the North Atlantic that makes *Above Us the Waves* relevant to the discussion. The Northern Isles are again visually absent from a predominantly internal drama of cramped and tense submarine spaces and an operation that was essential to the security of the area.

The three films discussed so far position the Northern Isles as more or less central or peripheral to the war, the common feature being their recourse to maps in order to construct a geographical positioning which informs popular understanding of their role in this history. In comparison to the previous films *Suicide Mission* represents an exception in its much fuller registering of the importance of the Northern Isles as a strategic location in themselves, as a crucial threshold to the North Atlantic that was, for this reason, central to the war effort. In this the film is closer to the historicity evident in the location memorializing that can be found on Shetland.

Shetland Bus/Suicide Mission

The process of disclosing and publishing the story behind *The Shetland Bus* was started by former Naval Officer David Howarth. Howarth was the officer who helped set up and operate

the base and the author of the book that told 'the classic story of secret wartime missions across the North Sea' (Howarth, 1998). The book was initially published in 1951 and was advertised as being responsible for the disclosure of 'Scotland's Greatest War Secret' (*Aberdeen Evening Express*, 12th December 1951). The resonance of this island story and its inherent drama involving local people in dangerous journeys across the sea provided the impetus for subsequent versions of the story, which act as reminders of the importance of the connection between Shetland and Norway. The memorial erected in Scalloway by the Shetland Bus Friendship Society is a testament to the operation.[20]

insert memorial.jpg

Shetland Bus memorial c/o Shetland Amenity Trust

The strategic relationship between Britain and Norway that gave rise to the operation was forged after the invasion of Norway. Patrick Salmon points out that because the long coastline of Norway was not properly fortified by the Germans, clandestine operations flourished from 1940 to 1945 (Salmon, 1995, p.161). Salmon adds that the Norwegian contribution to the Allied war effort is insufficiently recognized and included the destruction of Germany's supply of heavy water, at Vemork in 1943, and at Lake Tinnsjø in 1944.[21]

Norway's relationship with Shetland and Britain is also barely represented in the aforementioned films about the war, and this is what makes *Suicide Mission* an important and overlooked exception within the considerable body of World War II films. The claiming of the right to articulate the story of co-operation between the Shetland Isles and Norway islands by the country that was occupied, is reflected in the form taken by the film of *The Shetland Bus* (renamed *Suicide Mission* for release in the UK and USA and initially in Norway as *Shetlandsgjengen*). The low budget production was made possible by the small company Nordsjøfilm and directed by Michael Forlong. Forlong had a background in non-fiction, initially with the National Film Unit in New Zealand. Forlong developed the script for

Suicide Mission with Howarth and they shared a commitment to 'make the picture as sincerely and factually as possible' (Forlong, 1956). This approach meant that the compromises demanded by production companies in England, and evident in the previous films discussed, could be refused because of the importance of the truth of the story to the people of Norway (Forlong, 1956). Given Forlong's aims it was appropriate that the film took the form of a drama-documentary with non-professional actors who had served on *The Shetland Bus* recruited, including the renowned figure of Leif Larsen.[22] The commitment to non-fiction extended to location shooting on fishing boats in the North Sea in order to dramatize the story authentically.

The importance of the sea separating the west coast of Norway from the Shetland Isles is registered in the opening of the film. The opening credits appear over a rostrum shot of a map showing the geographical proximity of mainland Britain, the Shetland Isles and part of the continent of Scandinavia with the territory of Norway highlighted. As the camera closes in on the map the voiceover of Anthony Oliver, echoing the opening of Howarth's book, states:

> I know it happened just as you will see it because I was there. But I'm not the hero, the heroes are Vikings, modern Vikings, Norwegian fisherman. This is the true story of our wartime comings and goings across the North Sea between a British Naval base in the Shetlands and a dozen secret bases along the rocky Norwegian coast.

As this declaration is spoken the camera moves closer in and then pans right to emphasize first Scotland, then Shetland and Norway, and finally Norway, echoing the journey across the sea taken by the fishing boats, and unlike other map images discussed, highlighting the historical connection between nations rather than the struggle of a singular nation.

The first image at sea shows one of the fishing boats off the Norwegian coast, which reminds the viewer that these ships do not conform to the iconography of the naval battleship but are

part of the island life and landscape of Shetland outside of war. The working boats had been forced to function as amphibious ships in order to support the resistance of Norway against its occupiers. After a sequence showing a German plane circling overhead and the crew maintaining their disguise as a fishing boat, the image of the map returns with the camera panning to the left back towards Shetland. Again the camera movement stresses the other danger of using the boats to make this journey during winter, when the camouflage of darkness was available, but the weather and conditions for sailing were likely to be much worse:

> the planes were vicious but there was an even more treacherous enemy - the sea itself. Our fishing boats were no larger and not much stronger than the Viking Long Ships of a thousand years ago. Five hundred miles between Norway and the Shetlands but in a storm this could stretch out to two thousand miles of the roughest sailing in the world.

The rostrum image is replaced by an image of a wind lashed Shetland island coast and one of the lighthouses so essential to landing back at the Shetland base. Location shooting enables closer proximity to the conditions at sea endured by the crews of the boats and reveals a typical journey made by Larsen and his crew as they rendezvous with Jewish refugees and other members of the resistance at a sheltered inlet off the coast of Norway.

The small fishing boats could navigate the intricate network of islands and fjords that comprise the coastline of Norway in a way which bigger vessels such as German patrol boats were unable to match. The local knowledge of the resistance also allows the boats to navigate routes back out to sea unnoticed. Once back out in the ocean the film documents and dramatizes the conditions the boats and crew had to endure when crossing the sea to and from Shetland. The force of the North Sea in high winds during a storm, and the pressure the small boats come under in withstanding the power of nature, is emphasized by long shots that

register the scale of the relationship between the boat and the ocean: the diminutive boat is rendered insignificant by the vast expanse of the surrounding sea. This is contrasted with a series of closer shots that show the waves crashing against the boat, causing water to enter the outer and inner areas of the vessel. The sound of the wind and waves is mixed with the gentler, more even puttering of the boat's engine. This was a distinctive feature of the boats and acts as a reminder that the vessel had not submitted to the conditions.[23] The dialogue between the crew and passengers makes clear that the storms did not pass in a matter of minutes or hours but often lasted for days. The mazy island and coastal geographies of Shetland and Norway enabled local boats and knowledge to mount a clandestine contribution to the resistance. Once into open sea the small boats were at the mercy of the weather and the Luftwaffe.[24]

At the British Naval Base at Shetland the comparatively unregimented nature of the operation is revealed in an encounter between a Shetland Bus crew and an Admiral from the British Navy. The Admiral asks to take a look at the 'private navy' by going aboard one of the boats, where his salute is not returned and the lack of uniforms and protocol underline the difference of the operation from the rest of the Navy. When asked about 'smartening the crew up a bit' the officer at the base states that the crew 'cannot be expected to look like ordinary fishermen in Norway and naval ratings in Shetland'. After Larsen's boat arrives back at the base and the crews and officers celebrate another successful return journey the Admiral recognizes that while the work of the operation is absolutely vital to the war effort in tying down German forces in Norway, 'this is not a job for the Navy'. The meeting of relative informality and formality, amateur and professional protocols underlines how *The Shetland Bus* - whilst made possible by the British Navy using the island location of Shetland - remained distinctly Norwegian in character and orientation, with 'the British Navy and modern Vikings learning to work together and understand each other'.

Suicide Mission faithfully dramatizes the work of *The Shetland Bus* and the cumulative fortitude of the operation in the period before the fishing boats had to be replaced by more armoured vessels to resist the increased attention of the Luftwaffe. The film also demonstrates, on a different scale to more typical war films involving battleships, fighter planes and infantries of soldiers, how the shelter and knowledge needed to negotiate the geography of small islands clustered along a coastline can be a space for subterfuge under the conditions of war.

The resumed alliance between Shetland and Norway effectively pulls the orientation of the most northerly group of islands away from Scotland. There is little reference in the film to mainland Scotland. This is underlined in the television documentary *War Without Flags: the Story of the Shetland Bus* (Channel4/STV 1988) that concentrates on the perspective of the Norwegians. A former refugee speaks about the dual identity formed while residing in the Shetland Isles:

> there were two homelands during the war actually when you were in England you were always talking about going home thinking of Norway and once you landed in Norway you started talking about home and then you thought of England and even today we have a feeling that England is our second country actually.

The reference to England against an image of the Norwegian and Union flags together is symptomatic of the absence of reference to Shetland as a part of Scotland. While some Norwegian refugees did go beyond Shetland to mainland Scotland and England, in effect, *Suicide Mission* and the associated texts of *The Shetland Bus* pull the relationship between Shetland and Norway to the east and back towards the historic connection between them. This lessens Shetland's connection with the rest of Scotland in a way that is less apparent in the representation of Orkney. The co-ordination of the Special Operations Executive in

Shetland is represented as an English affair and does little to lessen the invisibility of the Scots in the war effort. The importance of the operation to Norway and its eventual liberation from Germany is reflected in the way it continues to be commemorated. This also means that the film does not yield the same degree of British/English patriotism compared to more prominent generic films about World War II, and at sixty nine minutes long critics recommended *Suicide Mission* as a supporting film on a double-bill.[25]

Despite the long term marginality of the film, the Shetland Bus story continues to resonate in the public imagination of Shetland and Norway[26]. The Shetland Bus Friendship Society point out the importance of the operation to the war effort was out of all proportion to the numbers involved. 'The very fact of its existence gave a tremendous psychological boost to the people of occupied Norway for whom Shetland was the light at the end of a very long, dark tunnel' (Shetland Bus Friendship Society, 2003, p.2). *The Shetland Bus* made a significant contribution to the level of activity on the Norwegian coast, convincing many Germans that the Allies planned to invade Norway, and when the Germans finally surrendered, it was down to resistance fighters armed with weapons from Shetland (Shetland Bus Friendship Society, 2003, p.16). The distinctive narrative of the Shetland Bus operation continues to act as a catalyst for commemoration and history as the recent publication of different witness accounts demonstrates (Sørvaag, 2003, Iversen, 2000). This confirms how the specific location of the Shetland Islands the most northerly part of the British Isles, which is both close to Norway and distant from, yet part of, Scotland and the rest of the UK. The strategic advantage of this geography is documented and dramatized by *Suicide Mission*, which, when viewed in relation to other films concerned with World War II that attempt to recognize role of the Northern Isles, remains an atypical and overlooked film. A further significant legacy of Shetland's affinity with Norway is demonstrated each January by the *Up helly-aa* festival. This celebration of Viking culture broadly consisting of a torch procession of the Jarl Squad

and culminating in the burning of a replica longboat, represents the most prominent and enduring public imagining of Shetland's Norse history and heritage (Brown, 1998).[27]

Conclusion

In the more typical genre films discussed, the Northern Isles tend not to be seen directly as established locations, but are referenced by the geography of the films. This visual absence tends to be filled by the image of the map that provides an approximation of the territory being fought over and the role and relative positioning of the islands within this geography of conflict. As Denis Wood states 'maps give us, *reality*, a reality that exceeds our vision, our reach' (Wood, 1993, p.4-5). The scale of perspective provided by maps in naval war films is important because the same range of vision cannot be achieved by location shooting and the human eye. The specificities of island locations and characters are displaced by the general imperative of showing the drama of warfare performed by English actors with reference to specific operations, while continuing to adhere to budgetary constraints and priorities, and the realist aesthetic of British Cinema.

The less typical example of *The Spy in Black*, thanks to Powell's attachment to the Scotland's islands, shows how Hoy is transformed by the circumstances of war into a strategically vital setting for espionage, inside a small remote community that is encircled by the hardware of the war being fought at sea. Going further still, *Suicide Mission* was deliberately produced to allow a commitment to the truth of *The Shetland Bus* operation to be shown, along with the role of the Shetland Isles in facilitating Norway's resistance to occupation. This dramatization is relatively independent of the military formality that typifies the British war film and is reflective of the shared island geographies found at the outer edges of Norway and Britain.

The clear commitment of Powell to the islands of Scotland and the continuing commemoration of *The Shetland Bus* demonstrate how local perspectives enrich the history of the Second World War and expose the geographical parameters of dominant

representation. The demonstration of the importance of the war to the history of the Northern Isles continues to be articulated, and the impending production of a film about the Italian Chapel on Orkney is further evidence of a historicity of the future.[28]

The meanings of the north and of the idea of the island as its own centre, rather than someone else's north, show a reversal of the assumed tropes that would normally include a distinctive natural landscape remote from major centres of population, with exposure to more extreme aspects of climate (Davidson, 2004). The historic events and situations discussed also refuse to confirm the stereotypical assumption that is described by Ysanne Holt - of the Northern Isles as 'an alternative space: remote, isolated, empty…with at times an elemental purity and authenticity, offering purification, retreat and escape' (Holt 2010, p.323). The Northern Isles at war become one of the centres of military modernity, yet also a territorial edge, where defence is demanded and attack of various kinds anticipated by the military hardware that populates the sea and sky (Shirley, 2015). Under these circumstances ideas of centre and periphery are overturned by the exigencies of war. The outer limits of the country were transformed from isolated outlands into a strategic centre with crucial territorial ramparts. The co-ordination of this operation dictated that communications between centre and periphery be sufficiently developed to displace prior notions of geographical isolation. As such the typical and the preferred, mythical associations visited on these places are replaced by the practical necessities of warfare which remain visible on the landscape of the Northern Isles and in the ongoing act of writing their own history.

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[1] For example: http://www.rememberingscotlandatwar.org.uk/exhibitions, http://www.odin.uk.com/cms/ and the Aviation Research Group of Orkney & Shetland http://www.crashsiteorkney.com/page41.htm
[2] See http://www.scapaflow.co.uk/, http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/ITALIANCHAPEL/
[3] http://www.shetland-library.gov.uk/documents/ShetlandWWIIS1-3byKatBrack.pdf
[4] http://www.shetland-library.gov.uk/documents/ShetlandWWIIS1-3byKatBrack.pdf
[5] http://www.shetland-library.gov.uk/documents/ShetlandWWIIS1-3byKatBrack.pdf
[6] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandshistory/20thand21stcenturies/worldwarii/theshetlandbus/index.asp
[7] www.rememberingscotlandatwar.org.uk
[8] Arthur Flett http://www.rememberingscotlandatwar.org.uk/Accessible/Exhibition/174/Defending-Scapa-Flow
[9] Robert Murphy points out was the war at sea was the aspect of the conflict that featured in most films about WWII (Murphy, 2000, p.220)
[10] http://www.hmsroyaloak.co.uk/plus Education Scotland
[11] http://www.writingthenorth.com/j-storer-clouston-novelist/
[12] Zach Finch writes that this film reveals Powell's love for the Scottish Islands and melodramatic storytelling. The opening titles of the film state 'the slow shadow of death is falling on the outer isles of Scotland. This is the story of one of them - and all of them'. (Finch , 2015, p.144)
[13] Powell describes how this shot of the whole British North Sea Fleet at anchor was recreated from photographs of the 1914-18 war in Scapa Flow (Powell, 1986, p.312).
[14] The island setting and construction of the drama in *The Spy in Black* also enable more rounded representations of Germans. Barr 'The First Four Minutes' in Christie and Moor eds. p. 27.
[15] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054310/locations?ref_=tt_dt_dt
[16] The importance given to sinking the Tirpitz is indicated in this electronic chronicle of the events of the war: http://ww2today.com/9th-march-1942-fleet-air-arm-attacks-the-tirpitz
[17] http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world-war-two/war-in-the-atlantic/the-tirpitz/
[18] Brief location shooting took place on the island of Guernsey that shows the crew preparing for their mission further north. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047797/
[19] *The Skye Boat Song* is described as a Jacobite lament describing how Bonnie Prince Charlie, disguised as an Irish woman, was rowed over the Minch to the island of Skye to hide from the British soldiers. http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandssongs/primary/genericcontent_tcm4555681.asp
[20] The serialization of Howarth's book in the *Weekly Journal* was mentioned by Alec Guinness in a newspaper interview where he stated that he would like to star in the film version of *The Shetland Bus* (*Aberdeen Evening Express*, 26th Feb. 1952). There was also a BBC radio drama *The Story of the Shetland Bus* scheduled to coincide with the anniversary of Norwegian separation from Sweden and liberation from German occupation (*Radio Times*, 3rd June, 1955, p.9).
[21] The strength of the desire in Norway to resist and overthrow the occupying forces is dramatized in the film *Edge of Darkness* (USA, Lewis Milestone, 1943). *Edge of Darkness* was a Warner Brothers production shot mostly in studio, based on William Woods' novel, the film depicts the efforts of the Norwegian resistance and eventual uprising against the occupying German forces. The references in the film to allies are to England and Churchill rather than Shetland.
[22] Larsen was nicknamed 'Shetland Larsen', and made fifty two tours to Norway and back in fishing boats or sub-chasers and became the most highly decorated allied naval officer of World War II. http://shetlandbus.com/pages/the_crewmen.htm See also Kaare Iversen, *Shetland Bus Man*, Pentland Press, 2000.
[23] The fishing boats had a distinctive engine sound that made them readily identifiable to local people. A radio drama based on Howarth's book sought out one of the few remaining fishing boats used during the operation to ensure it captured this sound for the production. *Radio Times* 3/6/1955.
[24] The boat is essential to the Shetland way of life where the distance between islands is relatively small, and as T.A. Robertson writes 'the Shetland way of life has been determined to a great extent by the small croft and the open boat' (Robertson, 1948, p.5).

[25] *Daily Film Renter*, 7370, (30th April 1957): 4.
[26] The Shetland Bus men are featured in the annual Remembrance Sunday and Norway Day commemorations. 'A Day of Remembrance', *Shetland News*, 9/5/15. The memorial to *The Shetland Bus* at Scalloway is also a focus for public figures visiting Shetland from Norway.
[27] http://www.shetland-library.gov.uk/documents/AVeryBriefHistoryofUp_000.pdf.
[28] http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandssongs/primary/genericcontent_tcm4555681.asp