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*The craft of the rural cinema operator: 16mm exhibition and the Highlands and Islands
Film Guild, Scotland (1946-71)*

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The communities who populate the Highlands and Islands of Scotland occupy a marginal position in relation to the rest of the UK. The declining population is scattered and the people who live and work there have experienced an often fractious relationship with governing forces to the south in Edinburgh and London (Burnett 2010). They have certainly not received very much academic attention as an audience for film, or as participants in a distinctive cinema-going experience (Blackburn 1961). More typically the Highlands and Islands often function representationally in films as a romantic landscape and setting for a transformative narrative. This trope has been the subject of an enduring debate by critics of Scottish cinema (MacArthur 1982, Petrie 2000). The research presented here looks at how Highland and Island communities were offered the opportunity to experience 16mm film programmes in their own spaces, through a band of rural cinema operators that delivered the shows on behalf of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild. This non-commercial organisation, formed in the post-war period after the end of the Second World War, caught the attention of *Variety* in 1948 who described their role as - showing entertainment films as morale builders for the inhabitants of the remote islands off the coast of Scotland (Variety 1948).

This is an account of the role of the rural cinema operator, the situations they encountered during journeys to community locations and exhibiting film shows in small, communal settings that did not readily accommodate a film apparatus to audiences scattered throughout the Highlands and Islands. It evaluates their social role as ambassadors for the Film Guild, and as visitors to and members of the communities who did not enjoy easy access to the cinema, and who, mostly welcomed and supported their presence.

The impact of the so called sub-standard gauge as an accessible and economic proposition was fully registered in the 1940s following the addition of sound to the projector in 1932 (Hibbert 1932, p.61-62). The context of the Second World War saw cinema being put to increasing non-commercial and often non-theatrical use, and 16mm was very well matched for this purpose. The continued growth of 16mm in the post-war period was met by a campaign within the Cinema Exhibitors Association and the Kinematograph Renters' Society to contain its influence on the established market for commercial 35mm film (Kinematograph Weekly 1947, p.12). The presence of the 16mm apparatus in the film industry was confirmed in this period and its importance as a means of fundamentally expanding the access of who gets to see and hear moving images was underlined by the publication of the report by UNESCO in 1949: *The use of mobile cinema and radio vans in fundamental education*. This quantitative survey of the pedagogic use of mobile cinema around the world highlighted the reach and instructive purpose that had been taken on by this critically neglected mode of cinema.

The attention given to other cinemas beyond the dominant paradigm of commercial 35mm and its digital equivalent by film scholars has increased in recent years. The appearance and findings contained in titles such as *Useful Cinema* and *British Municipal Cinema* demonstrate the extent to which other uses of cinema had been, for a long time, mostly overlooked (Slide 1992, Acland and Wasson 2011, Lebas 2011). This apparently lesser cinema, aptly described by Patrick Russell as consisting of films nobody sees, is coming into view, just as celluloid, particularly in its sub-standard form, is rapidly disappearing from view (Russell 2010, Horak, 2006, Schama 2011). This extended focus has been supported by the advance of New Cinema History with its stated intention to make the distinction between what might be called film history and cinema history: 'between an aesthetic history of textual relations between individuals or individual objects, and the social history of a cultural institution' (Maltby et al

2007, p.2). One of the important priorities of this revisionist approach that continues the work of Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, has been the extension of the geography of where cinema history is to be found (Fuller-Seeley 2008). The increasing attention to cinemas that are located beyond the city means that the bringing together of rural and cinema/cinema-going, is increasingly and suggestively present in historical and more contemporary work (Fuller-Seeley, 2008, Aveyard 2014, Atkinson 2014). The research presented here adds to this body of work through the example of a post-war non-commercial institution that grew to become the biggest exhibitor of 16mm film shows in the UK, and has been excluded from histories of British Cinema (Griffiths 2012). It draws on archival sources and oral testimony in an attempt to do critical and historical justice to the craft and social endeavour of the 16mm showman.ⁱ

The Highlands and Islands Film Guild

One of the examples highlighted in the UNESCO report as a beacon of good practice in organising a mobile cinema service to combat barriers of distance and rural isolation, was the Highlands and Islands Film Guild, which was compared with a similar arrangement in Canada:

'a highly efficient pioneer service, assisted from public funds, has been developed under the Highlands and Islands Film Guild. In many respects the problems met in the two countries have been essentially the same' (UNESCO 1949, p.19).

The Film Guild was established in 1946 following the success of mobile cinema shows provided for remote Highland audiences by the Ministry of Information during the Second World War (NA D4/441 28/2/46). The growth of 16mm exhibition during the early 1940s meant that there were more experienced projectionists available across the UK at the end of the war (Farmer 2016). This was reflected in the number of commercial 16mm operations that appeared throughout the UK, often in conflict with standard gauge permanent cinema exhibitors, in the post-war period prior to television that was so important to British Cinema

(*To-day's Cinema*, 1946, p.3, Murphy 1992). In Scotland it was the experience gathered in the Scottish Information Office, the Scottish branch of the Ministry of Information, that enabled the Film Guild to continue to offer mobile cinema to the Highlands and Islands (NRS GD281/92/8 1/3/46). One of the key aims of the new institution was 'to improve the educational, cultural and recreational amenities available to rural communities in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, by exhibiting and organising the exhibition of films on a non-profit-making basis' (Ross 1966, p.271). The need to improve facilities was recognised by the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society and in collaboration with other Highland groups and related interests a scheme for rural film shows was agreed (NA D4/441 28/2/46). There was common agreement on the need to stem the longstanding problem of depopulation and the departure of young people from the Highlands and Islands to the cities further south, which was given renewed focus by men and women returning from the war (NA D4/441 28/2/46).

The Film Guild's first show to an audience of schoolchildren and later adults and children in Hillswick in the north-west of mainland Shetland in 1947 was followed by a period of expansion generated by support from the education committees of the crofting counties of the Highlands and Islands, the Carnegie UK Trust and the Scottish Education Department (*The Scotsman*, April 26th, 1947, p.3, NRS ED30/2). The service grew to deliver 16mm film shows to many of the communities in the Highlands and Islands that did not enjoy easy access to a permanent cinema.ⁱⁱ The delivery of the film shows was undertaken by employees of the Film Guild who were called operators or rural cinema operators in Orkney where a semi-independent service was provided. The operators would drive Film Guild vans containing an array of 16mm projection equipment and other essential items to the venues in designated areas that were named Film Units.

The role of the operator

The *Men of the Wee Cinemas* as the Secretary of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild T.S. Morris named them, were essential to the work of the service (Morris, 1955). The connection between these travelling personnel and the itinerant exhibitors of early cinema is clear. The key difference is that these men were not self-sufficient entrepreneurs but accountable to and employed by an institutional centre (Abel 2005, p.340, Lowry 1976, Waller 2003). Recent historical work on British Cinema has revealed that the terms operator and projectionist designated the same position of responsibility for projecting the film. This research has also shown that women also took on this role during the exceptional circumstances of war (Farmer 2016, p.147, Harrison 2016). There is no evidence to suggest that the Film Guild continued this practice. Men were recruited as operators who were responsible for the projection of the 16mm film programme and other related tasks essential to the film show. Non-theatrical exhibition in the Highlands and Islands tended to take place in spaces without bespoke projection booths. The village halls, drill halls, army huts, or school halls where film shows took place were typically shared between the operator and the audience. It was the responsibility of the operator to make these spaces suitable for exhibiting a 16mm film programme. This preparation required technical knowhow in working out the positioning of the projector in relation to the screen and the focal length of projector lens ensuring that the image filled the screen; and the furnishing of the hall with the accoutrements of the cinema auditorium; which in the case of a village hall would include footlights and drapes. The mobility of the cinema demanded that the projection apparatus and accompanying equipment was dismantled and returned to the vehicle at the end of the show. The operators were also responsible for providing music before the programme started, seating the audience, keeping them well behaved, taking admission money and keeping records of admission and attendance that were essential to the effective administration and financial management of the Film Guild (Morris 1955). The operators were supported and dependent upon local voluntary

helpers who would assist in setting up the hall, taking admission money and putting up posters. The contribution of the helpers was essential to the operator putting on a good show and in sustaining the Film Guild as a non-commercial operation. They ranged from teachers to youngsters and for the latter this was an important aspect of their recollection of the Film Guild and the meaning and value that they put on their experience of cinema-going (Goode 2013).

The familiarity that developed between the operators and the communities who formed their audiences was an important part of their role. The son of one of the most experienced and respected operators, Donnie Allen, who travelled to film shows with his Dad comments: 'those Guild guys were a little like the local postmen in a way. Everybody in the area that they covered knew them' (e-mail correspondence 27/9/10). For the community audiences the operators personified their cinema. Morris describes how 'the men who now are driver-projectionists may once have been bus-drivers, crofters, fishermen or bartenders, but one and all they are now film ambassadors, friends and confidantes of the people and general factotums' (1955, p.30). Unlike the relatively invisible projectionist of commercial cinema the operators of the Highland and Island Film Guild became public figures known across the communities they served.

Other recollected accounts describe a closer and formative relationship with cinema and its technology. Donnie Allen worked as a projectionist at the Palace Cinema in Inverness prior to enlisting and the Orkney operator Ian Cameron recalls the attraction of machines of vision:

When I was about nine years old I got the present of a Mickey Mouse type projector and this, I think, started me off with an interest in photography and cinematography. This was in the late thirties, but then came the war and such things as cameras and films were few and far between. During the war a Bubble Gum company gave away frames of 35mm film which had been cut from studio scrap. With this, plus an old cocoa tin with a light bulb in

it and a lens from a magnifying glass, I managed to project an image of sorts on to the bedroom wall. I was now hooked. Later in my teens I bought a proper projector, a 9.5mm Pathescope, then a cine-camera and had a go at making my own films of life round our farm at Lighthouse and of fancy dress parades in Finstown and Stromness (Cameron 1993, p.24).

Fellow Orkney operator Sandy Wylie was similarly drawn to cameras, projectors and microscopes. A visitor to Orkney wrote how:

Sandy's accomplishments ranged through mathematics, optics, radio, astronomy, music, photography, watch repair, and the servicing of almost any complex machinery. He was also a voluminous correspondent in Esperanto. While still at school he made himself a high-power microscope with an ingenious fine-focussing device; and later, a four-inch astronomical telescope, the mirror of which he ground himself. In photography he ran his own developing and printing service, and specialised in quaint and unusual pictures and telephoto views taken through lenses of his own design (Wilson 1961, p.52).

This knowledge of Wylie's technical achievements is widely shared amongst Orcadians of his generation. It was because of the visibility and proximity of the operator in the exhibition spaces they shared with their spectators that this biographical detail was circulated around the small communities that knew their operator. In these examples the attraction and vocation of working with machinery is clear, but for others it was more a case of gaining employment in their own area where opportunities were limited. Given that the ways into the job were variable and that not all operators were either technically gifted or fulfilling a vocational calling, the training they would receive for the role was important because the Film Guild insisted on a high standard of exhibition at their shows.

The proliferation of commercial 16mm operators after the end of the war created an impetus that professionalised the exhibition of the sub-standard gauge (Kinematograph Weekly 1945):

27, 29). The subsidised funding of the Film Guild was no reason for demanding expectations to be set by the Film Guild management. Morris spells out precisely what the civic minded institution wanted their operators to avoid: 'not for them the slipshod methods and makeshift shows once presented by careless commercial exhibitors in remote village halls. One remembers with a shudder these shows with their bad lighting, distracting flutter and long pauses' (1955, pp.30-31). It was not enough for the operators to take film shows to remote areas where there was no cinema provision. They were expected to be representatives of the craft of 16mm exhibition in spaces that did not always accommodate this aim (Williamson 1992, p.400).

The sub-standard gauge initially associated with amateur hobbyists had through the passage of the 1940s become an integral part of the film industry. The 16mm exhibitors were typically referred to as showmen by the trade press who now acknowledged the significant role of the smaller gauge.ⁱⁱⁱ After the Second World War 16mm exhibition was increasingly recognised as a profession in its own right with good practice identified and encouraged (*The Mini-Cinema*, 1951): pp.31-32).

The availability of expertise in 16mm projection and the mechanism of the projector was provided for the Film Guild by their Technical Officer Jack Orviss (Ross, 1966, p.274). The new operators would receive a thorough training in the skills of projection and in dealing with projector problems from Orviss including the technique required to operate a dual projector system to ensure smooth reel changes (Ross 1966, p.277).

The projection industry would also issue instructions on how to achieve good exhibition practice. The Bell and Howell instruction manual recommends that:

the success of any film presentation depends a great deal on the preparations made prior to the commencement of screening. Where possible, always allow plenty of time to set up the equipment, arrange seating and carry out a test run before the show so that, when

the audience assembles, it will only be necessary to switch off the house lights and start the projector. It is unprofessional and disturbing to the audience to show the leader numbers on the screen (Bell and Howell 1966, p.18).

Donnie Allen's young son witnessed the lengths his father went to in order to ensure his shows met the professional standard expected by the institution and encouraged by the industry:

when he received a new film he would check through the film for bad splices and sprocket damage, repairing as required before showing. This was usually done at home. In the old man's case film shows were very professional in that an evening's programme would flow smoothly from start to finish without a break. The start of the screening was set so that no count down numbers ever appeared on screen and the screen was filled with picture from top to bottom and side to side (e-mail correspondence 3/10/10).

Preparation was important but so was the ability to adapt quickly in the face of problems that occurred either on arrival at new venues or once shows were underway. Willie Williamson, the operator for the unit covering the North Isles of Shetland, has written of some the issues that he encountered during his work for the Film Guild:

Projector lamps were expensive and had a limited life because of all the moving around and vibration. In an attempt to save money, we experimented with a cheaper type until it was found that they had a habit of exploding. This was no mild affair, either; it produced a sound like a gunshot accompanied by a remarkable amount of smoke, while the cooling fan blew the resulting shattered glass into the air to descend in a shower on equipment and operator (Williamson 1992, p.398).

One of the other hurdles that faced operators was a lack of mains electricity in the exhibition venues which was a frequent problem in certain areas of the Highlands and Islands in the late 1940s. To remedy this handicap projectors had to be connected via leads to nearby

generators. This sometimes exposed the power supply to the risk of grazing cattle chewing through the cable (Williamson 1992, p.396).

Another restriction imposed by the halls was the quality of the acoustics. Poor sound was perhaps the biggest problem that operators faced and was not easily remedied. A report by the development officer of Scottish Education Department submitted in 1947 confirms the extent of the restriction:

This problem of acoustics is, perhaps, the biggest with which the Guild - or any mobile cinema operator - has to deal, and is the basic cause of diminished audiences. It is from those villages where the sound is bad that the richest assortment of complaints are forthcoming, complaints that our films are poor, the screen is too small, the price is too high, the hall is too cold, the seats too hard etc. In villages where the sound is good, the films are enjoyed and local co-operation is readily available (NRS ED30/2 11/12/1947).

There was no immediate solution to the problem but a later report by a visiting amateur projectionist to a show at Gairloch on the west coast observed how the Bell and Howell projectors were extraordinarily quiet. The account goes on to describe how Orviss had worked to reduce the noise of the projectors by stripping them down and rebuilding them: - 'a thicker shim here, one less ball bearing there, trying different combinations of the faster running gears' (Ross 1966, p.278). If the noise of the projectors could be reduced it would improve the audibility of the film.

Another account describes the ingenuity of Wylie when the sound failed completely:

On one occasion unable to persuade any sound to come from the loudspeaker. After fiddling with it for some time, he announced to his audience that rather than disappoint them, he would run the picture as a silent film and supply the commentary himself. So, Sandy showed the film and spoke all the voices almost word-perfect to the satisfaction of everyone (Wilson 1961, p.53).

Part of the work of the operator in keeping the shows going involved maintaining their vehicles in the face of often long and arduous journeys. Sometimes weather conditions made the journeys across land and sea difficult; though cancellations were more often due to vehicle problems (ED27/251 28/6/54). The operators were clearly crucial to the success and long term survival of the Film Guild. The annual report of 1954 described them as 'a loyal band of men who, in many cases, have a sense of vocation and consider their work to be more than "just a job"' (ED27/251 28/6/54). Despite this appreciation there was also pressure to ensure that the institution maximised the contribution of the operators to the operation. The annual conference of the operators was an opportunity to discuss how to improve the service. One initiative consisted of a competition amongst the operators to increase the attendance for a particular film in their unit (ED27/251 26/9/52). A report on the operator's conference of 1952 states that:

everything which will improve the comfort and enjoyment of the patrons is the direct responsibility of the operators. They have previously been likened to ambassadors of the film, but they are also salesmen; they must do everything in their power to persuade more people to attend regularly. In every single location served by the Guild there are potential patrons who only need to be persuaded that it is worthwhile to leave the fireside, visit the local hall, and for two shillings receive two hours of first class entertainment (ED27/252 20/01/1953).

The standard of exhibition that was attained by Orviss and the operators whom he trained and supported is a testament to the possibilities of exhibiting film programmes using the 16mm apparatus. The craft of their individual and collective skills and techniques, while not necessarily excellent to the same degree, were expected to maintain a high standard. Richard Sennett has written recently of the value of such work: 'craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake. All craftsmanship is

founded on skill developed to a high degree' (Sennett 2008, p.9). The shift to digital projection which has so diminished the craft of the projectionist only adds to the historical resonance of these figures (Česálková 2017).

The cinema operator and sociability

One of the characteristics of the mobile cinema experience provided to audiences in remote areas of Scotland was its sociability. David Morley has described cinema as 'the selling of a habit, a certain type of socialized experience' (1992, p.157-8). Timothy Corrigan captures what Morley refers to as the phenomenology of the whole moment of going to the pictures: 'the queue the entrance stalls, the foyer, cash desk, stairs, corridor, entering the cinema, the gangway the seats, music, the lights fading, darkness, the screen, which begins to glow as the silk curtains open' (Corrigan, 1983, p.31). These influential accounts of the meaning of going to the cinema, pinpoint what is primarily an urban experience of standard 35mm cinema.

The value of the access to the experience of cinema that the Film Guild provided to its audiences was connected to the one described but also different from it for several reasons. The journeys typically made by the operators in their film vans to the locations included in their circuit meant that the cinema would be arriving in their local area at a point in the future.^{iv} Posters and advertisements communicating the dates of the Film Guild's imminent appearance would appear in shop windows and newspapers (Ross 1966, p.273). The prospect of arrival generated an anticipated event that would be looked forward to, particularly by youngsters, for whom, the Film Guild would often provide their first experience of the cinema. Part of the anticipation and attraction of this cinema that is specific to mobile and non-theatrical 16mm exhibition, is the prospect of being involved with the greeting of the arriving film van and operator and helping to transfer the equipment from the van into the hall. Once the equipment was inside the hall, the space then had to be converted into an exhibition space for a film show that the youngsters and their communities identified as *their*

cinema. A part-time relief operator who covered for the full-time operators describes the response to his arrival:

I was always well received, always welcomed.... always when you went into the community there was a lot of excitement, children and young people up to sixteen would all be around wanting to help.... They were just good kids and they would want to help me unload the van and I had to be careful because some of the equipment was very heavy and I couldn't let them lift heavy stuff. There were cables to take in and things like that. They knew where everything was in the hall. Involving them was great. I got to know their names and I told them who I was and they loved calling me Norman. They knew all the equipment too. I had great fun with them; I would tease them a little and thank them for their help. They were so pleased to be recognised and to have helped. They were excited by the technology, they were very interested in it. I had to tell them that this was delicate equipment and that I was the only one who could operate it (Interview with Norman Maciver, former part-time operator, 01/02/16).

It is this contact with the arrival of the apparatus of exhibition and its function in local space that not only spatializes non-theatrical cinema, but renders it rural cinema. The operator and the relationships cultivated with community audiences through a regular schedule of visits, lies at the heart of this post-war sociality that can be contrasted with the more familiar cinema-going experience in the city (Kuhn 2002). For Haidee Wasson such encounters should be part of a history of cinema history based on small images where what cinema was consisted of 'a highly variable, small-scale encounter, rather than a codified spectacular event?' (Wasson 2013, p.236).

The spatial variability and geographical particularity of such smaller encounters was often determined by what Robert C. Allen describes as 'the location and physical nature of the sites of exhibition' (Allen, 1991, p.349). The work that was required by the operator to ensure that

rural communities received a film show, including the journeys undertaken to reach them, is captured in this memory recalled by a visitor to the village of Drumbeg, in Assynt, Sutherland, in the mid- 1950's:

I wasn't a permanent resident, just a visitor every summer for five weeks. The area didn't receive television then. I remember almost the entire population packing into the local schoolhouse for the performance, one of which usually fell during my stay. The school's benches were set out in rows, like cinema seats, although I can remember people standing round the sides of the schoolroom. Electricity had arrived in the village in the early 1950's, but the Guild's operator still used a generator to power his projector, the noise of which, although it was out in his van, almost drowned out the film's soundtrack (e-mail correspondence 25/05/10).

It is apparent how in this example the respondent refers to the show as a performance but does not highlight the film being shown. Clearly the audience, in one of most remote and depopulated areas of north-west Scotland, wanted to see what was being projected on to the screen. For this young man the film programmes become part of the materiality of the exhibition space and the small scale cinema encounter formed within it. The memory above also highlights the operator's vehicle and it is important to consider the role of the film van in the social experience of the service.

Firstly, a lot of equipment was stored in the van not only to put on the show, but also to ensure that problems could be dealt with on the spot. Secondly, the arrival of the van in the village was a welcome and familiar sign for communities that the operator of the film show had arrived. The operators were valued by the communities they served partly because of the journeys made across land and sea to reach them. The idea of the operator and the cinema apparatus coming to often remote and peripheral village communities was an important part of the appeal of the Film Guild.^v

The departure of the audience at the end of a show meant the beginning of the return of the hall to its usual state of utility. The effect of this on Donnie's Allen's son is to register the shift from presence to absence:

I distinctly remember the end of a show, everybody up and off at the same time, the clattering of chairs as everybody left the smoky hall, then a silence followed again by the noise of the hall keeper stacking up the metal framed chairs. Quite often, as the last reel was showing, my father had quietly packed up the other projector and stand ready for his own quick getaway after the show. He would also rewind the films ready for the next show before leaving the hall (e-mail correspondence 20/9/10).

Donnie's daughter remembers the strength of the sociability and the strength of the friendships she witnessed through travelling to film shows with her father and visiting him at the Film Guild's central office in Inverness. She noticed and valued "the way you became part of the community, and the Film Guild represented an extension of the family" (telephone conversation 28/5/11). Such relationships were also facilitated cumulatively by the arrival of the operator and the film van into the community that were valued by the adults and children who attended and assisted. The event of the film show was a cherished part of the social and cultural life of the Highlands and Islands. The importance of the role of the operator can be summarized as a combination of the technical craft of projection required to deliver high standard 16mm shows in unreceptive spaces, and the sociality accrued through interactions with community audiences and the mobile 16mm apparatus. The operators occupied a vital role as mediators between, and ambassadors for, the central institution and the audiences in the crofting communities. They were cinema ambassadors who personified film for a lot of people experiencing it for the first time, helping to establish 16mm non-theatrical cinema as a legitimate experience of cinema. The importance of the expanded distribution of access to the cinema experience offered by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild to the history of British

cinema before and during the arrival of television, is heightened by the pace of its replacement by digital technology.

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ⁱ The Major Minor Cinema: the Highlands and Islands Film Guild (1946-71) is an AHRC funded project investigating the history of the UK's largest non-theatrical cinema, its surviving audience and operators while also encouraging creative expression of cinema-going memories.

ⁱⁱ At the height of its expansion in the late 1940s the Film Guild controlled 11 separate units covering the Highlands and Islands from the northern isles of Shetland to the Isles of Lewis and Harris in the west, as well as the Highland area reaching up to the north coast of Caithness and Sutherland (NRS ED30/2 23/2/51).

ⁱⁱⁱ Editorial Reel, *16-mil Film User*, vol. 1 no.1 (November 1946): p.3-4.

^{iv} Photographs taken of the operators often show them with their Highlands and Islands Film Guild van. The photographs fell into two categories: firstly, professional images promoting the work of the institution and secondly family photographs showing other members of the family next to the vehicle.

^v Not all the operators travelled with the film apparatus. The Guild also trained local part-time operators to put on what were called *static* shows as a means of reducing travelling costs. Fair Isle one of the most remote of the islands poised between Shetland and Orkney where the North Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean - had a static show. The static shows became an essential part of the Film Guild's coverage of the

Highlands and Islands.