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## **The unsatisfactory medium: the transition from mobile cinema to television in the post-war Highlands and Islands**

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In their account of selected moments of British modernity, Conekin, Mort and Waters identify the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth and its mediation by television in 1953 as the defining moment in British modernity after the Second World War. It is described as the moment *when television came of age*, and what has also been described as the medium that became symbolic of the nation's shift from austerity to affluence.<sup>1</sup>

At this point in the 1950s broadcasting in the shape of radio and television had the capability to address the nation and was typically shared with others. The existing accounts of the arrival of the new medium do not, understandably give much attention to the particular circumstances of the Highlands and Islands where television wasn't available in 1953.<sup>2</sup> In other histories the Highlands and Islands, are elided into summaries where, for example - 'the number of TV sets grew from 41,000 in 1952 to well over one million ten years later, an explosion that was fuelled partly by the huge demand for televisions at the time of the Coronation in 1953'.<sup>3</sup> The reality of the early 1950s was that much of the Highlands and Islands was beyond the reach of existing transmitters. This article offers a counterpoint to the modern moment identified by Conekin et al through a historical account of the delayed arrival of broadcast television in the Highlands and Islands and the necessary overlap with mobile film shows provided by the Film Guild. It emerges from a composite historiography of three parts i) the policy discussion extracted from archival records, ii) a selection of oral history testimony from the generation of young television viewers who grew up in the Highlands and Islands who recall the impact of both mobile film shows and television in their communities and iii) the implications of i) and ii) for an understanding of a rural modernity that reflects the post-war Highlands and Islands.

### **The Coronation**

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<sup>1</sup> B. Conekin, F. Mort, C. Waters, 'Introduction', in B. Conekin, F. Mort, C. Waters (eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945-1964*, (London, 1999), 1-21; R. Farmer, 'Film and Television' in R. Farmer, L. Mayne, D. Petrie, M. Williams, *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema*, (Edinburgh, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> J. Moran, *Armchair Nation: An intimate history of Britain in front of the TV*, (London: 2013).

<sup>3</sup> T. Devine, 'The Sixties in Scotland: A Historical Context', in E. Bell and L. Gunn (eds.), *The Scottish Sixties: Reading, Rebellion, Revolution?*, (Amsterdam, 2013), 23-46 at 28.

In the standard history of television in Britain by Asa Briggs states that: ‘of the approximately 20 million people in Britain who watched the coronation on television, 7,800,000 did so in their own homes, 10,400,000 did so in friends’ homes, and 1,500,000 did so in public places such as cinemas and public halls equipped with television screens’.<sup>4</sup> In the Highlands and Islands the Coronation was not widely seen on television because it was not widely available in this area of Britain. Instead, communities saw the Coronation on 16mm film via mobile cinema shows provided by the Film Guild soon afterwards. In response to the demand to see the event of the Coronation a documentary film *A Queen is Crowned* (1953) was quickly produced in Technicolor with narration by Laurence Olivier<sup>5</sup>. In the absence of access to the live broadcast there was a great public demand to see the Coronation on film and the Film Guild responded by arranging special matinees in cooperation with local Coronation Committees, with indications that there would be record attendances in most villages.<sup>6</sup> One respondent noted in his recollection of the Film Guild shows in Glen Hurich on the Ardnamurchan peninsula that ‘people were much more patriotic in those days’.<sup>7</sup> *Variety* the screen trade publication from the United States reported this event from the islands of Eigg and Rum:

The first motion picture films have arrived on this lonely West Scot island. The 120 residents gasped with astonishment at the pictures brought by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild. It was *A Queen is Crowned*. Islanders on nearby Rum saw the film the next night, but minus sound, since the generator was not strong enough. It was Rum’s first film, too, solid mitting greeting the silent version. Several 90-year old patrons nearly panicked at sight of their first screen production [sic].<sup>8</sup>

This account describes a technology that was only *just* able to provide a projected sound and image of the Coronation, because neither television nor mains electricity were available to these islands. It contrasts with the account of the Coronation witnessed live, that this report takes on significance showing how the event was available to be seen weeks later by the

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<sup>4</sup> A. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom IV: Sound and Vision 1945-55*, (Oxford, 1979), 429 quoted in J. Chapman, ‘Cinema, monarchy and the making of heritage: A Queen Is Crowned (1953)’, in C. Monk and A. Sergeant (eds.), *British Historical Cinema*, (London, 2002), 82-91 at 85.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* 86.

<sup>6</sup> National Records of Scotland [hereafter NRS] ED27/251, Highlands and Islands Film Guild 1951-55, 10 July 1953.

<sup>7</sup> Iain Thornber by e-mail correspondence to the project, 13 November 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *Variety International*, 19 August 1953, 13.

small isles on the western edge of Scotland through, what was, for some, the new and relatively scarce medium of film.

One hundred and eighty miles to the south a viewing of the same event was reported from the Lanarkshire town of Motherwell: ‘on Coronation Day the Old People’s Club will have a television show of the processions and service, by the kindness of Brown’s Radio, Wishaw’.<sup>9</sup> The use of the term ‘show’ denotes something provided for the audience by the electrical retailer, comparable to the film show the islanders received a few weeks later from the HIFG. These comparable accounts disrupt the separation between television and film and the trajectories of so called new and old media that recur in academic writing covering this area.<sup>10</sup>

### **The legitimacy of the Film Guild**

The version of cinema that was offered to rural audiences by the HIFG had the benefit of legitimacy that was achieved in a number of ways. The cinema that was taken into the crofting counties carried the credentials and legitimacy of educational purpose that were part of its founding remit from the Scottish Education Department. Feature films included in the programmes would tend to be U certificate films that could address the family, with violent genres other than war films mostly avoided.

This enabled the Film Guild to position itself as educational and entertaining, and not simply a replica of the commercial cinema that was available in the towns and cities of the rest of the country. The *Stornoway Gazette* reported in 1949 when the Film Guild expanded into the Isle of Lewis that their aim was ‘to bring the best films of all types to the remote areas. These would include documentary films of a high educational standard as well as feature films and newsreels. Shows would be given during the day for school children and for adults in the evenings.’<sup>11</sup> The Guild had secured the support of local educational and social services as it was agreed that access to cinema could help to retain young people in their communities and that mobile cinema units would do more to remove the feeling of isolation and neglect in isolated communities than even the prospect of mains electricity. In addition the Guild would

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<sup>9</sup> *Motherwell Times*, 22 May 1953, 13.

<sup>10</sup> C. Geraghty, ‘Cinema as Social Space: understanding cinema-going in Britain, 1947-63’, *Framework. The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 42, 2000; P. Lester, ‘Cultural continuity and technological indeterminacy: itinerant 16mm film exhibition in Canada, 1918-1949’, unpublished PhD thesis, Concordia University, 2005; C. Acland and H. Wasson (eds.), *Useful Cinema*, (London, 2011); C. Marvin, *When old technologies were new: thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century*, (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> *Stornoway Gazette*, 27 September 1949.

aim to make its audience better citizens and more discerning spectators.<sup>12</sup> Compared to other initiatives for the Highlands and islands this was something that would and did bring tangible benefits and pleasure to the crofting communities. With the ecologist and social commentator Fraser Darling among those offering support, the Film Guild was soundly established as a non-commercial cinema with social purpose.<sup>13</sup>

The legitimacy of their cinema enabled the Film Guild to negotiate from a position of relative cultural and moral authority when further into the 1950s audiences and revenue began to decline, and adverse comparisons were being made between its role and the new medium of television.

### **Television policy in the Highlands and Islands**

The Film Guild had expanded significantly before the availability of television in the Highlands to cover all of the crofting counties from the Northern Isles to the Outer Hebrides. It was appreciated by the communities it served and it had cemented the legitimacy and social purpose of cinema in the region; audience sizes were strong, and local halls were customarily packed for film shows. However, the financial backing required for this non-commercial facility was by no means secure, and while audiences had grown since formation, the second half of the 1950s onwards saw the start of prolonged decline for the Film Guild, and for cinema generally.<sup>14</sup> The end of what was made possible by post-war renewal is signalled through growing financial pressure on the Film Guild from the Scottish Education Department to cut costs and reduce the reliance on subsidy, following the change of government from Labour to Conservative in 1951, and the re-election of the Conservatives in 1955.

The policy discussion regarding the emerging effect of television on the Film Guild involved a dialogue with the Scottish Education Department in Edinburgh and the BBC in Glasgow. There was also a debate not involving the Film Guild directly, concerned with establishing when television and an improved broadcast signal would be made available to the whole of Scotland. This involved the BBC, the Broadcasting Council for Scotland, the government and Highland MPs. Meanwhile, the annual report of the HIFG for 1958

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<sup>12</sup> The National Archives [hereafter TNA], D4/441, Report of discussions at conference at Inverness on 30/5/46 on the society's memorandum – 'Film shows for rural areas', 30 May 1946.

<sup>13</sup> F. Darling, *West Highland survey: an essay in human ecology* (London, 1955), 317; T. Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinema-going in Scotland, 1896 -C.1950* (Edinburgh, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> D. Docherty, D. Morrison, M. Tracey, *The Last Picture Show?: Britain's Changing Film Audiences* (London, 1988).

acknowledged the arrival of television into parts of the Highlands but cites other reasons for the downturn: 'the decrease in admissions (5000) and receipts (£500) was due to four factors a) snowstorms in January and March b) open Spring weather in April and May c) the growing impact of television of television in the Inverness and Argyll areas and d) the general downward trend in actual attendances throughout the trade.'<sup>15</sup>

The report is careful to cite a number of causes for the decline but the suggestion that was starting to be made by some in the Scottish Education Department was that the social amenities provided by the Film Guild were being superseded by television.<sup>16</sup> Transmitters capable of providing access to the television signal had been installed for the benefit of the north of Scotland at Meldrum near Aberdeen in 1955, Rosemarkie near Inverness in 1957 and at Thrumster near Wick in 1958, all on the east coast.<sup>17</sup> Given the geography of the Highlands, and the organisation of the Film Guild into separate units covering large areas or whole counties, one of the emerging questions was how far west could the signal from these transmitters reach, and how would the technology of television broadcasting adapt to the unaccommodating landscape of the Highlands?

It was clear by 1957 that television was not going to be immediately available to much of the Highlands and Islands. In response to this situation a discussion started between the BBC in London and Glasgow, bodies representing the Highlands and Islands and the Conservative government. The Film Guild were not directly involved, but the discussion took place in parallel with their own deliberations with the BBC and the SED on the effect of television on their service. The groups that represented the Highlands and Islands included the Highland Panel, the Broadcasting Council for Scotland and Highland and Islands members of parliament.<sup>18</sup> An early meeting with the BBC in 1956 called to discuss broadcasting quality and access, panel member James Shaw Grant stated that: 'reception in Lewis was very poor, both of the Scottish Home Service and Light Programme, and the Third Programme was unobtainable. People were most anxious to listen, especially at this time when the Mod competitions were being broadcast.'<sup>19</sup> Naomi Mitchison added that reception in

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<sup>15</sup> NRS, ED27/236, Highlands and Islands Film Guild 1950-1966, 15 April 1959.

<sup>16</sup> NRS, ED27/355, Highlands and Islands Film Guild 1959-1961, 28 August 1959.

<sup>17</sup> D. P. Walker, *The BBC in Scotland. The First Fifty Years* (Edinburgh, 2011), 238.

<sup>18</sup> One of the recommendations of the Beveridge Committee on Broadcasting Report of 1951 was to form the Broadcasting Council for Scotland to represent the interests of the area to the rest of the BBC, D.P. Walker, *Ibid.* 174.

<sup>19</sup> BBC Written Archives Centre [hereafter BBC WAC] SC5/11, Scottish Region Policy Highlands and Islands 1956-62, 'The Problems of reception in the Highlands and Islands', 28 September, 1956.

Kintryre was subject to interference from Barcelona.<sup>20</sup> There were no immediate measures taken as a result of the meeting but as the Chair of the Highland Panel pointed out at the subsequent press conference ‘it was felt that the provision of adequate services of this kind was an element of great importance in the rehabilitation of the social and economic life of the Highlands and Islands’.<sup>21</sup> This ongoing dialogue would exert increasing pressure on the BBC and the government. It was not concerned with the possible effects of television on cultural standards, but regarded as a facility that should be as accessible to the whole of Scotland.

The introduction of VHF (very high frequency) broadcasting offered the possibility of more wavelength and better reception to the areas where it was unsatisfactory.<sup>22</sup> However, it could not transmit across large areas and was more applicable to smaller local areas.<sup>23</sup> The Broadcasting Council for Scotland were also pressing for a comprehensive report on the steps required to provide an adequate television service for the whole of Scotland.<sup>24</sup> In response the BBC acknowledged the need to improve their service to the north of Scotland facilities ‘on account of the scarcity of other facilities for entertainment, the tendency of the population to drift away from the more remote parts of Scotland, and the needs of the new communities concerned with the atomic station at Dounreay’.<sup>25</sup> It was also pointed out that there were also competing claims from other parts of the country such as Wales that were still without a satisfactory television service.

Some parts of the BBC were prepared to concede more than others. The Director of Engineering admitted to the Broadcasting Council for Scotland that ‘the technical and economic difficulties of serving the mountainous and thinly-populated areas of North-West Scotland and the Islands had existed since the earliest days in broadcasting. Coverage of these areas would be a costly and difficult undertaking with more populous areas in effect already subsidising the thinly -populated areas so far as transmitter costs were concerned.’<sup>26</sup> The map showing the coverage of the UK by BBC television reveals the extent of its physical and spatial absence of the Highlands and Islands. The discrepancy between this representation and the statistical message preferred by the BBC, that claimed to be reaching

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> BBC WAC, SC5/11, 3 October 1956; Walker, *BBC in Scotland*, p. 237

<sup>23</sup> *BBC Handbook 1961*, 47.

<sup>24</sup> BBC WAC, SC5/11, Sound Service to the outlying areas of Scotland, 29 July 1957.

<sup>25</sup> BBC WAC, SC5/11, Sound and television broadcasting in the north of Scotland, 13 February 1957.

<sup>26</sup> BBC WAC, SC5/34/2, Reception in Scotland, 13 June 1957.

98.8 per cent of the UK population, is a palpable demonstration of the geopolitics of centre and periphery<sup>27</sup> (BBC Handbook 1963).

**NEAR HERE Insert map image BBC Handbook, 1963, c/o Random House**

The economics of providing universal access to broadcasting were at the root of the discussion and while the costs involved were significant in relation to the revenue and other spending commitments of the BBC, the pressure to improve access would not abate. It was clear that additional funding would be needed to provide the transmission capacity required. The Highland Panel suggested to the BBC that a capital grant of £1,000,000 spread over three years should be sought to provide a chain of TV/VHF stations. The cost was justified by the possibility that the drift of young people to the south could be stemmed by knowledge that television available within say, three to four years. The admission that extra funding would be required dragged the government and the Postmaster General into the discussion, hampered by the BBC being instructed by the government to reduce expenditure by 20 per cent.<sup>28</sup>

The discussion continued to be framed by the urgent requirement to address the ongoing social problems afflicting the Highlands. An advisory panel informed the BBC, the Scottish Home Department and Scottish Information Office of the issues: ‘depopulation, the ageing population remaining; the neglected and obsolete economy; the disparity between urban and rural districts; and the impossibility of keeping women and children in remote areas without water, energy, communications, links with urban centres and amenities such as radio and television. This was a matter of extreme urgency as in certain areas populations were already reaching a dangerously low level and might well fall below visible level within a short space of time’<sup>29</sup> The agencies representing the area continued to come up against the argument that the cost of providing a broadcasting service for such a small number of people residing a long way from centres of population could not be justified as a priority. It is a measure of the lack of belief in the prospect of an improved service that the British Aluminium company located in the reception blackspot in Kinlochleven submitted a request

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<sup>27</sup> BBC Handbook 1963, 28.

<sup>28</sup> BBC WAC, SC5/34/2, Sound and TV Services to the outlying areas of Scotland, 26 July 1957, 24 September 1957, 13 December 1957.

<sup>29</sup> BBC WAC, SC5/11, Advisory panel on the Highlands and Islands meeting with BBC, 1 February 1958.



to the BBC to provide their own transmitter.<sup>30</sup> At this point pressure was applied by MPs. Labour MP Malcolm MacMillan asked a minister in the Commons ‘why radio listeners in the Western Isles are being refused better quality service by the BBC while being charged full licence fees; and if he will state when it is intended to introduce sound quality improvement and very high frequency service to this area?’ Some improvement came the following year with a plan for low power satellite stations for television and VHF radio in the east, but not in the west Highlands.<sup>31</sup>

At the end of the 1950s it was still not possible for large parts of the Highlands and Islands to access the range and quality of broadcasting enjoyed by a majority of the UK. For the Film Guild while the availability of television in the Highlands and Islands was limited and open to question, the SED to cited television as a reason that overrode the decline in film attendances . The SED reported internally in August 1959:

[T]he Highlands and Islands Film Guild are in financial difficulties owing to the advent of television into the more populous and profitable areas of the Highlands. They are pressing us to finance them to maintain approximately their present service at whatever expense and however low income may fall. It might be that the only practical policy would be to limit the service to those areas which television will never or not for a very long time reach and to subsidise that service as a social service for the most remote areas.<sup>32</sup>

In their defence the Film Guild could point to the importance of their educational shows for schools and the response of one civil servant in the SED was that despite the appreciation of pupils and teachers, and despite ‘very valuable’ education work it did, ‘I cannot regard the service as of vital importance’.<sup>33</sup>

So, after the first ten years of operation the necessity of the Film Guild was under greater scrutiny from the SED. A report from 1959 suggested that: it had important social functions lacked by TV:-

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<sup>30</sup> BBC WAC, SC5/11, British Aluminium Company Ltd. at Kinlochleven, 17 February 1958.

<sup>31</sup> BBC WAC, SC5/11, House of Commons extracts from motions and orders of the day, 25 June 1958; Press statement, 24 June 1959.

<sup>32</sup> NRS, ED27/355, 20 August 1959.

<sup>33</sup> NRS, ED27/355. The production of television for schools by the BBC was underway but there was no immediate prospect of it being utilised in Highland schools, nor replacing the educational film shows being provided by the HIFG for schools and colleges.

Although the Guild did nothing but show films for hours or so, and no social arrangements for tea, conversation, or later dancing were made, its shows provided an incentive for the younger element in the community to meet, which television in the crofts will not do unless, as is possible, some of the village hall committees install it in their halls. In scattered and isolated areas this incentive to meet as a community is probably more important socially than actually viewing the films.<sup>34</sup>

Though John Caughie has observed that TV even in the 1950s lacked the ritual family listening associated with early radio, being viewed on special occasions rather than continuously,<sup>35</sup> television was a medium with clear communal potential, as something to be shared with others who did not enjoy access. But this was not entertained by the HIFG or encouraged by the SED. However, the National Council for Social Service (NCSS) was more positive and encouraged its members to consider the new medium as a means of generating new community activities in village halls, and formed the National Advisory Committee for Television Group Viewing to discuss the initiative and the hope that television might prove to be a more permanent communal influence.<sup>36</sup> For its part, the SED recognised the contribution of the Film Guild to community life but would not accept that the non-commercial film shows could co-exist with television:

It is clear that in areas where television reception is good the attendance at Film Guild shows has fallen off drastically and that though climatic factors have also been adverse, this is the main factor. The areas so far affected are mostly those served by the Rosemarkie Station ie. Easter Ross, Inverness, northern part of the Great Glen and Spey Side.<sup>37</sup>

The equivalence between the film shows and television that was assumed by the SED was strongly contested by the Film Guild secretary who countered that the SED were proposing: 'to lock into their houses with a silly little box all the inhabitants of areas with television'.<sup>38</sup> The assumption that television would be a medium of the home and that it was not a substitute for the film shows was not shared by the SED which regarded improving TV

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<sup>34</sup> NRS, ED27/355, 5 September 1959.

<sup>35</sup> J. Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture* (Oxford, 2000), 37.

<sup>36</sup> London Metropolitan Archive LMA/4016/PA/C/03/032, National Council of Social Service Annual Report 1957, 7-8.

<sup>37</sup> NRS, ED27/355 2 October 1959.

<sup>38</sup> NRS, ED27/355 18 February 1960.

reception would be a greater aid in improving the life of communities than the fortnightly film shows.<sup>39</sup> The effect of withdrawing film shows on community cohesion and educational leisure was not a major concern for the SED, even though the HIFG would continue to argue that it should be.

In the face of rising criticism, the Film Guild proposed a reorganisation, reduction of units, and a geographical cut in operations. in those areas receiving a television signal. A problem was that data on television reception was poor, and Guild operators were asked to assess television signal in their areas. The BBC admitted that ‘in practice it is almost impossible to define clearly TV and non TV areas’ even within villages.<sup>40</sup> The uncertainty generated confusion, confounding plans for narrowing Film Guild operations, and raising press and political attention. Conservative MP for Caithness and Sutherland, Sir David Robertson asked the Secretary of State for Scotland in the Commons:

[I]f he is aware that the fortnightly service provided by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild to Melness, Tongue, Skerry, Bettyhill, Melvich and Halladale, will be discontinued following his decision to cut the Government grant; and how much is being saved per annum by cutting this service to these townships, which are many miles from any commercial cinema.<sup>41</sup>

The answer from the Secretary of State suggested that the Film Guild was already reconsidering the withdrawals following revised information from the BBC about television reception in the area.

The opening out of the debate to include the facilities available to the Highlands communities had the effect of diverting attention from the level of SED funding to the Film Guild, and the government instructed the Scottish Office and the SED to reverse the proposed reorganisation.<sup>42</sup> The decision was as much a reflection of the uncertainty over the quality and availability of television reception as a declaration that the decline of the Film Guild could be reversed. The Film Guild continued to suggest that there were other reasons for the decline such as poor quality films and depopulation, but the reality was that television would

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> NRS, ED27/425, 12 April and 8 June 1962.

<sup>41</sup> [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1962/jul/25/highlands-and-islands-film-guild#S5CV0663P0\\_19620725\\_CWA\\_21](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1962/jul/25/highlands-and-islands-film-guild#S5CV0663P0_19620725_CWA_21) accessed 14 August 2019.

<sup>42</sup> NRS, ED27/424, Highlands and Islands Film Guild 1962-65, 20 June and 11 October 62.

eventually become available to more of the Highland area.<sup>43</sup> This was confirmed by a BBC plan to build relay stations for its TV and VHF sound broadcasting services to extend the coverage to additional areas and to improve reception in areas where it is unsatisfactory. The two stage plan would provide stations in the western Highlands improving service to those who were out of reach of a good quality broadcast signal.<sup>44</sup>

### **Oral history testimony: film as television**

The archival records of policy meetings don't indicate how people inside the communities were responding to the prospect of the new medium of television. The representatives of the Highlands and Islands exerted pressure on behalf of their marginalised areas for greater access to broadcast television. On the ground the received wisdom of the new medium of television replacing the older other of film, was problematised because of the versatility of the 16mm film apparatus. Recollections of access and exposure to television reveal how these media of modernity were experientially related while being viewed in opposition by the institutions controlling them.

The service provided by the Film Guild in areas where television was assumed to be available was reduced. In Argyll, Dalmally was assumed to be in a television area; its location close to the west coast and with Ben Lui to the east and the Trossachs to the south east, it was likely that this location was at the very limit of the signal strength being transmitted. The Film Guild received this letter in 1962 from the youngsters of the village pleading for their service to be continued:

We are writing you in the hopes you will reconsider your committee's decision in withdrawing your film unit from Dalmally. The reason we believe is that this is considered a TV area. Believe us, there are only approximately six TV sets in our district and those who have them do not get good results. We are not owing to the high cost ever likely to have the piped system. With no pictures in our area it makes it very dull for us young people. To help with the running costs of the films, we could organise functions. We have written our MP for his support.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> NRS, ED27/424, 26 February 1963.

<sup>44</sup> NRS, ED27/425, Highlands and Islands Film Guild 1961-65, 29 March 1962.

<sup>45</sup> NRS, ED30/33, Correspondence: B.B.C. Television Services, 1961-68, 23 June 1962.

Alison, one of our interviewees who grew up in Dalmally, recalls being able to watch television by visiting the house of a local man:

Oh, and of course, we got to watch television. Not in our house, it came very late to the Highlands, but there was a man in the village who could get reception. Captain Oldham. And he was on our way to school, and after school, once a week we went in to watch television. He would line his chairs up and all the children would go into his house to watch television. So, I, that was before I left primary school, so I must have been about eleven then – ten or eleven. And we watched *Lone Rangers*.<sup>46</sup>

Alison reveals what a privilege it was to watch television in this village, compared to what had been the more widely accessible, though not constantly available, mobile film shows, that had been withdrawn from the area. The investigation of the situation in Dalmally by the BBC, confirmed that the village was outside the service area of the transmitters, but some reception was possible depending on local topography. This was confirmed by the survey of television reception carried out by Film Guild operators.<sup>47</sup>

Notwithstanding local opinion, the view of the SED was that television was not simply a competitive rival to cinema as it was in urban areas, but for the crofting counties of the Highlands and Islands it was a cultural resource that could replace the mobile film shows. A consequence of this position was that television was typically assessed against the background of priorities and legitimacy that gave rise to the formation of the Film Guild. A study of leisure in parts of the Highlands, carried out by the Scottish Educational Film Association (SEFA) demonstrated some of the negative opinions that had formed about television.<sup>48</sup> Television was not sufficiently developed to occupy a similar role to the mobile film shows and for potential viewers its promise was frequently deferred. The unsatisfactory status of television enabled the Film Guild for some years to reiterate that the contribution of the film shows to communities could not be replaced by television.

The chair of the Film Guild C.J. Cadzow pointed out in the early 1960s that the longstanding problem of depopulation that had justified the formation of the Film Guild, remained:

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Alison Lindsay, 20 April 2017.

<sup>47</sup> NRS, ED30/33, 16 July 1962. NRS, ED27/424, Television coverage: official statement by BBC Engineering Information Department on locations scheduled for withdrawal, 2 July 1962.

<sup>48</sup> J. Blackburn, *Pattern of Leisure. An enquiry into the place of cinema and television among leisure activities in the Scottish Highlands and Islands* (Glasgow, 1961).

The decline in attendances was also caused by continuing unemployment in the Highlands and steady depopulation in rural areas. This was a serious factor. Young married couples with children & people in their late teens and early twenties were leaving the county districts to get employment, and they were the normal picture goers. There was less money to spend and the films available were, during 1962, not particularly attractive.<sup>49</sup>

The issue of depopulation and the loss of young people from the crofting communities continued to be an issue. As Devine points out, between 1950 and 1965 over half a million people left Scotland, roughly divided between those who moved overseas and those who settled in England.<sup>50</sup> The issue of young people leaving the Highlands due to lack of opportunity was the subject of the short documentary drama film *Highland Laddie* (1952) in which a voice over is used to persuade a young boy, Donald, to reverse his decision to leave for the city of Glasgow and realise the opportunities of Highlands and Islands modernity offered by the Hydro-Electric Board, Forestry Commission, tweed manufacture and fishing industries. In addition, the changes to cinema in the 1960s made it less straightforward for the Film Guild to address the audience as a family. There were fewer Scottish films produced and there were no films to carry on what *Whisky Galore* (1949), *Laxdale Hall* (1953) and *The Maggie* (1954) had started. These films were popular with Film Guild audiences and produced very good attendance. Moreover, cinema had changed in response to the effect of television, but the Guild was largely unable to follow. Films of the so called British New Wave and European Art cinema were not a part of Film Guild programmes. The X certificate introduced in 1951 was, by the next decade, a more established part of British film production, and Technicolor horror films were popular with a younger audience.<sup>51</sup> The Film Guild attempted to reflect some of these changes, by programming features such as the crime thriller *Hell is a City* (1960), while maintaining their selective remit. However, on the evidence of attendances it was clear that the universality of appeal achieved in the immediate post war years, was, by the early 1960s, less attractive and less readily available.

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<sup>49</sup> NRS, ED27/424, 10 December 1962.

<sup>50</sup> T. Devine, 'The Sixties in Scotland: A Historical Context', in E. Bell and L. Gunn (eds.), *The Scottish Sixties: Reading, Rebellion, Revolution?*, (Amsterdam, 2013), 23-46 at 33.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Kermode 'The British censors and horror cinema' in J. Petley and S. Chibnall (eds.), *British Horror Cinema* (London, 2001) 10-22; P. Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: the British horror film*, (Manchester, 1993).

Guild records show that where television was available, one of its effects was to split the audience, with older patrons of the film shows remaining at home to watch television, while the younger audience still valued the opportunity to go to the pictures.<sup>52</sup> The Guild secretary continued to argue that the film shows were a necessary part of the culture on offer and that the novelty of television would pass:

There is abroad at the moment a strange resurgence of interest in youth clubs, youth organisations such as Scouts and Guides, choirs and other community media. The cause is unknown, but it may well be the failure of television to provide a social amenity. The Guild Executive have always taken the view that television was no alternative to, or at best a poor substitute for social activities in rural areas.<sup>53</sup>

The policy position of the Film Guild viewed film and television as antinomies, but the delay in providing television broadcasting that was accessible to all of the Highlands and Islands, created a situation at the beginning of the 1960s, where there could be a degree of overlap through institutional co-operation. Television in the area could not assume the historical force of 1950s modernity attributed to it by Conekin et al., it was part of a contrasting configuration of non-metropolitan modernity that emanated from the next decade.

At the end of the 1950s 16mm film became more embedded in the infrastructure of television production at the BBC, with its light and portable equipment being used for news, current affairs and documentary.<sup>54</sup> There was potentially more material available on 16mm film for the Film Guild to show if it was accessible to them. The secretary wrote to the 16mm film manager at BBC Glasgow asking for content that could be built into a mobile cinema programme such as football matches that had been filmed for television purposes, citing requests from youth organisations and members of the public for such material.<sup>55</sup> The BBC responded favourably and Corporation-filmed football and shinty become part of the Film Guild's cinema programmes. For instance, the European Cup Final of 1960 held at Hampden Park in Glasgow was recalled by one of our interviewees, Iain, from Ness on the Isle of Lewis at a Film Guild showing:

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<sup>52</sup> NRS, ED27/425, 13 December 1962.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> J. Sexton, '“Televerite” hits Britain: documentary, drama, and the growth of 16mm filmmaking in British television', *Screen* 44:4 (2003), 429-444.

<sup>55</sup> NRS, ED30/33, 29 November 1962.

And usually it was children and teenagers, that used to be there. Around forty and fifty would attend and we used to enjoy it. We used to go into the local shop for lemonade, ice-cream on the way. We walked up, we walked or cycled from Harbost to Cross School. Previously the films were shown in the old RAF hall in Adabroc but the Adabroc hall was closed probably 1959 or '60 and it was taken down, because it had become rather dilapidated. So for a number of years the films were shown here in Cross School and after that in the new Ness hall which was built in 1964. I used to go there for films as well. I remember seeing the Eintracht Frankfurt v Real Madrid European Cup final through the Film Guild. I think it was in Ness hall I saw that and it was the cup final around 1960. The score was six-three Real Madrid, it was a spectacularly wonderful game and Puskás was playing and Di Stéfano.<sup>56</sup>

Iain probably saw a 16mm film of the highlights of the match that had been condensed into thirty three minutes – now part of the NLS Moving Image Archive collection.<sup>57</sup> Images of the final were also widely shown in newsreel cinemas in Britain.<sup>58</sup> As in the 1953 Coronation, Iain describes in glowing terms the experience of going to the film show in his area to watch an event that had previously been broadcast on television in ---- where it was available.

The overlap between the civic remit of Film Guild and the public service broadcasting responsibilities of the BBC, continued to develop with the Guild undertaking the projection of the television drama *Culloden* (1964) for the BBC at Kentallen Hall in Glencoe and at Portree Hall on Skye.<sup>59</sup> Given the limited availability of television in the Highlands, it was a little ironic that 16mm mobile cinema shows had to take on some of the work of broadcasting television programmes about the history of Highlands.

The gaps in public service broadcasting that remained into the late 1960s were being filled by the Highlands and Islands Film Guild with mobile films shows on 16mm acting as a surrogate for television.

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Iain MacDonald, 20 July 2017.

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[https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/5389?search\\_term=european%20cup&search\\_join\\_type=AND&search\\_fuzzy=yes](https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/5389?search_term=european%20cup&search_join_type=AND&search_fuzzy=yes)

<sup>58</sup> G. Hare, 'Football and the European Collective Memory in Britain: The Case of the 1960 European Cup Final' in W. Pyta and H. Havemann (eds.), *European Football and Collective Memory* (Basingstoke, 2015), 101-118 at 101, 102.

<sup>59</sup> NRS, ED30/33, 15 June 1966.



## **Towards a rural modernity**

The asynchronous arrival of television in the Highlands and Islands not only suggests the need for an alternative configuration of modernity, but also one that must take account of the effects of geography. The combination of oral testimonies of what and how youngsters watched visual media with contributions that begin to reveal the impact of television, and together with the previously discussed policy evidence, also brings to light a *rural* modernity that, following Bluemel and McCluskey, is ‘material, social, and geographical’<sup>60</sup>.

There has been no major study of the television audience for this period. There was no shortage of opinion on what the new medium was showing, but much less on how actual audiences were responding to it.<sup>61</sup> For a number of the early audience of the film shows in islands such as Lewis the appearance of television coincided with other significant changes. Donella, a young girl who had moved from the village of Brue on Isle of Lewis where she had attended the film shows, to the town of Stornoway to begin secondary school, recalls the impact of television on her life:

I think I was about twelve when we first got television...[I]t obviously made a big impact because it just sort of opened up the world really because instead of reading about it, I mean I read, I was described as a voracious reader but you were no longer having to just visualise for yourself. When you went to the mainland, I was 12 first time I went to the mainland and it was to Glasgow. And walking along and, you know, looking at the tenements and everything was totally different because you’d never experienced anything like it. But with television you could see it was bringing the world, the outside world, it was bringing it to your doorstep and you no longer had to use your imagination to the same extent to try and visualise what other places were like. Where up until then, the first time we went to the mainland it was really hugely different, we had no double decker buses, we had no trains, we had nothing like that, we still don’t have. I’m quite sure it made a difference as well in that instead of keeping up-to-date with popular music by hearing it on the radio, or by buying records which is what we did then, what we called them then, you got everything on

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<sup>60</sup> K. Bluemel and M. McCluskey ‘Introduction: Rural Modernity in Britain’ in K. Bluemel and M. McCluskey (eds.), *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*, (Edinburgh, 2018), 1-16 at 5.

<sup>61</sup> C. Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, (London, 1986); T. O’Sullivan, ‘Dreams and Displacements: Perceptions of British TV in the 1950s’, in J. Medhurst, S. Nicholas, T. O’Malley (eds.), *Broadcasting in the UK and US in the 1950s: historical perspectives* (Newcastle, 2016), 71-99.

television, you know, *Top of the Pops*, it wasn't just the music but it was the fashion, you know, you could see instead of just seeing it in a magazine or wherever, you see what was current, you were keeping up-to-date and it was a lot easier to keep up-to-date. But also things that you couldn't see in magazines or couldn't sort of pick up on by listening to the radio, things like dancing, dance moves which, of course, by that time dances, what people were doing totally changed, you know, pop music and rock music and everything, style of dancing changed totally. But you could see what they were doing from the television it meant you could pick up on dance moves, what was actually popular. If you did go away you weren't out of place because they were wearing what other people wore and you were doing you could dance how other people danced, so it made that difference. So there were sort of, there were real positive impacts. Probably the main kind of negative impact would be something we touched on yesterday, that gradually people did stop visiting to the extent they used to.<sup>62</sup>

This lucid narrative describes the role that the visual medium of television played in showing the world to rural audiences. Donella was by this time a teenager going to secondary school in a rural town and eager to know more and see more popular music and fashion. *Top of the Pops* was first shown in 1964 and for Donella, and a lot of her contemporaries in the Highlands and Islands, television was not a medium that was synonymous with the 1950s and the national address of the Coronation, but rather a medium of the less formal 1960s, when popular culture more explicitly and more immediately addressed the younger generation. Donella describes how closer access to the latest popular cultural styles fostered more of her self-identity in line with a modernity of the 1960s.

One of the questions raised by a post-war rural modernity concerns what the 1960s meant for the Highlands and Islands and how the changes and events that occurred during the decade were registered in this area of Britain.<sup>63</sup> It is not clear the extent to which the 1960s were as Mark Donnelly suggests 'a party that was happening elsewhere', but it was apparent that the popular culture of the decade was more accessible in the towns of islands such as Lewis than it was in the villages.<sup>64</sup> Devine suggests that 'for the Scots of the time the decade

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Donella Bartlett, 19 July 2017.

<sup>63</sup> E. Bell, L. Gunn (eds.), *The Scottish Sixties: Reading, Rebellion, Revolution?*, (Amsterdam, 2013), M. Stokes, M. Jones, 'Windows on the World: Memories of European Cinema in 1960s Britain', *Memory Studies*, 10, 1, 2017, 78-90.

<sup>64</sup> M. Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: culture, society and politics* (Harlow, 2005), xiii.

was not one of drastic revolution but rather a transitional bridge between an old society, much of which was reminiscent even of the nineteenth century, and later modernity'.<sup>65</sup> More work needs to be done on inscribing a geography of the media of modernity into such summaries, and though this was not a task that we were able to address explicitly, it is one that became increasingly relevant as a result of discussions with our interviewees.

Eleven years after the Coronation in 1964 *The Scotsman* declared that 'TV was spreading to nearly all of Scotland'.<sup>66</sup> This claim was made on the basis that a number of smaller transmitters and relay stations throughout the Highlands and Islands were being installed by the BBC and the Independent Television Authority (ITA) and this would be complete by early 1965. The result of this investment would be that more than 98 percent of the population of Scotland would be able to receive a television signal. The newspaper revealed that there were 1,200,672 television licences in Scotland in 1964, up from a figure of 144,273 in 1954. In the same year the BBC announced the launch of its second channel, there would still be about 100,000 people in the Western isles and Highlands who would not be able to receive a signal at all. The overall figures for sound and television licences were 1,240,352 in 1954 and 1,447,099 in 1964, demonstrating the early popularity of the wireless in Scotland.<sup>67</sup> But Scotland was not well served by the technological promise of television or of broadcasting and its staggered and uneven arrival. It certainly did not have the same impact on our contributors as the film shows, and, as the Highlands and Islands entered the 1960s, more communities had access to what was still a new medium. The campaign that put pressure on the BBC for better access had taken a number of years to achieve results, and with commercial television also available in parts of Scotland, positions were already being taken up on the implications of the new medium for its effects. As Blackburn wrote of the SEFA 1961 survey of responses to the media in Scotland: 'Correspondents did express fears about the effects of television. It was felt that "the crime, violence and banality" which characterise many of the programmes are bad for both adults and youngsters. It was felt too, that...television is dangerous in as far as it encourages people to sit and be entertained, rather

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<sup>65</sup> Devine, 'Sixties in Scotland', 45.

<sup>66</sup> *The Scotsman* 3 August 1964.

<sup>67</sup> *BBC Handbook*, 1955, 161, 1965, 163; *The Scotsman* 3 August 1964; Television reception remains far from perfect for parts of the Highlands, such as the 11 or so families of Strathkanaird, seven miles north of Ullapool, who are among the 3 per cent of people in the British Isles who can't receive a normal television signal. Here great voluntary interventions are necessary in all weather to improve and maintain the quality of the television signal. T. Bryan, 'Television – the hard way', *Scots Magazine*, vol. 141, no.5 (Nov.1994), 468-473.

than go and engage themselves in doing something.’<sup>68</sup> The contributors to the SEFA study were not viewers like Donella but were ‘teachers, ministers, business men and others active in the life of the parishes in which they lived’. These citizens were able to assume that for a lot of the population of the Highlands and Islands this was not the sort of content that they saw at the cinema, because the programmes shown by the Film Guild were more selective and tended to avoid crime and violence.

One example of resistance to the presumed effects of television, not necessarily representative of the interviews as a whole, but indicative of particular exceptions to some of the general assumptions expressed, came from Mike Russell MSP, currently member of the Scottish Parliament for Argyll and formerly leader of *Cinema Sgìre*, a community film and video project on South Uist and Benbecula in the 1970s and 1980s. In response to a question on the effect of media such as television on the oral tradition within communities, he recalls the viewing practice deployed by Finlay Macleod, his Gaelic-speaking associate from the Isle of Lewis, when watching television with his children: ‘[W]hen Finlay’s daughters were young, he used to sit them in front of the television and turn the sound down and then tell the story on television in Gaelic. Finlay is a passionate Gael and believes in his language and his culture’.<sup>69</sup> Mike was less sweeping about the effects of visual media, and highlighted instead, the effect of linguistic imperialism on the Gaelic oral tradition. He added that in his area in the Outer Hebrides unsatisfactory television reception didn’t seem much of a worry to people, because there was a very lively social scene.<sup>70</sup> People’s actual uses of television, such as Finlay’s, show the effort to continue the oral tradition as part of the practice of viewing television, where speaking and viewing combined. Such accounts suggest that in contrast to Film Guild shows in the 1940s and 1950s, television did not necessarily assume the historical force of 1950s modernity described by Conekin et al. but was part of a contrasting and less uniform trajectory of modernity. The scrutiny of television’s history in the Highlands and Islands and its intermedial connection with 16mm film, installs a necessary geography that is absent from other accounts. This confirms Carolyn Marvin’s argument that: the history of

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<sup>68</sup> J. Blackburn, *Pattern of Leisure. An enquiry into the place of cinema and television among leisure activities in the Scottish Highlands and Islands*, (Glasgow, 1961), 27-28.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Mike Russell MSP 18 April 2018. Finlay Macleod was also interviewed for this project, and contributions by him appear elsewhere in this collection. A similar practice occurred in the film shows. In Gaelic-speaking communities the older folks were seen to be visibly translating the English into their native tongue - a job which no doubt presented not a little difficulty when it came to Cagney’s Bowery slang! ‘The World Comes to the Shieling Work of the Highlands and Islands Film Guild’, *Highland News and Football Times* 16 October 1954, 7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

media is never more or less than the history of their uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate.<sup>71</sup>

This hoists the idea that modernity is not urban but a change in social practice. This is illustrated by another interviewee, Magnus, who describes a visit to Orkney where he had partly grown up shortly after the arrival of television. Television was made available to mainland Orkney in 1959, with the Belfast Telegraph reporting that the number of television licences had doubled in three weeks with the total then at 134.<sup>72</sup> Magnus recalls his observation and reaction to its appearance in a rural setting:

I have a picture in my mind of going back to Orkney, possibly in my teens and going into a farmhouse which was as primitive a farmhouse as you can imagine, and I may be exaggerating this, an earthen floor but it may have had paving stones, slabbed stones on it, a very sort of dark and gloomy place with an ancient stone in the kitchen etc. And in the corner a huge television set on which the ancient farmer, sitting in it, was watching a Las Vegas show, with show girls. And I just thought it an extraordinary contrast.<sup>73</sup>

The image of the family in the home gathered around the glowing television screen that was typically used to promote the new medium is problematized in this recollected moment, as the consequences of television in a traditional agrarian location begin to register.<sup>74</sup> Rosemary Shirley has argued that rural modernity, as a counterpoint to urban experience, could usefully be thought about as ‘moments of profound contrast rather than as a constant onslaught of minor shocks’<sup>75</sup>. The scene described represents a common trope in narratives of Highlands and Islands modernity, where the technological apparatus of modernity encounters the rural environment, and is affected by it. These rustic encounters told by some of respondents typically take an anecdotal form; other examples include reels of film being lost overboard, recovered and restored for use, or the power cable connecting a domestically located

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<sup>71</sup> C. Marvin, *When old technologies were new: thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century* (Oxford, 1988), 8.

<sup>72</sup> *BBC Handbook 1960*.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Magnus Linklater, 6 December 2017.

<sup>74</sup> S. Frith, ‘Pleasures of the Hearth: the making of BBC light entertainment’, in T. Bennett ed. *Formations of Pleasure*, (London, 1983), 101-123.

<sup>75</sup> R. Shirley, ‘Electricity Comes to the Countryside: Visual Representations of a Connected Countryside in the Early Twentieth Century’ in K. Bluemel and M. McCluskey eds. *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*, (Edinburgh, 2018), 50-65 at 53.

generator to a film projector being chewed on by grazing livestock; in most cases the Film Guild shows were not jeopardized by rural mishaps. It is occurrences like these that crystallize the migration of modernity beyond the city into the Highlands and Islands, posing a modernity that is vernacular and rural, that, in comparison to the modernity of the city, receives less academic attention, but should be part of a more representative historiography of British modernity<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup> J. Vernon, 'The Mirage of Modernity': A Report on the Moments of Modernity? Reconstructing Britain, 1945-64' Conference Held at the University of Portsmouth, 9-10 July 1996', *Social History*, 22:2 (1997), 208-215 at 209.