

Robert Flaherty: The Old Longing

Robert Flaherty occupies a special place in the documentary pantheon. He is often called the father of documentary, best known for his first completed feature *Nanook of the North* (1922), which the Library of Congress numbered among the first 25 American films to be chosen for preservation in the nation's archives. *Nanook of the North* has won a place in the hearts of many film lovers both for the freshness of its images and the simplicity of its subject matter. It has been reissued several times in different formats and could still bring pleasure late in the century. In the film *Unzipped* (1995) the fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi is on the phone sitting on his bed: "I'm sitting here and I'm watching 'Nanook of the North,'" he says. "Oh, it's so amazing isn't it! And it's so inspiring, I can't even believe how beautiful these Eskimos are." On the screen is a famous sequence at the beginning of the film in which Flaherty introduces Nanook and his family to the world as they emerge, one after the other, from a kayak.

Nanook of the North marked a critical moment in Flaherty's life; a final throw of the dice after a series of defeats; and it marked also a decisive aesthetic move on his part. Hitherto he had attempted to capture the present day reality of the people and places he filmed in Northern Canada, as others had been doing in other parts of the world in the early years of film making; with this last attempt he decided to invent situations and people them with men and women whom he hired to act out roles, similar to what Curtis had done with the Kwakiutl people on Vancouver Island. Flaherty kept to this formula in all the major films he went on to make.

Flaherty himself has been the subject of several films and the inspiration of many filmmakers. His own life has become a story in itself, part myth and part reality, that of the artist pursuing his vision whatever the cost in time and money – or, which was more to the point, in employability. Some called him a romantic, in his own person as much as for his choice of subject matter for his films. He found these in the Canadian Arctic, the islands of the South Pacific, the storm-tossed Atlantic coast of Ireland and the bayous of Louisiana.¹ He worked in India for a British studio and in the United States for the American government. These far-flung experiences provided biographers with colorful material and Flaherty himself with a fund of stories with which he never failed to entertain friends and visitors.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, scholarly interest in Flaherty as a filmmaker was revived by an exhibition, *Robert Flaherty, Photographer/Filmmaker; The Inuit 1910-1922* held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1979. Curated by Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, the catalogue of this exhibition contained a wealth of documentary material on Flaherty and the Inuit of northern Canada, including a generous selection of Flaherty's own photographs together with studies of Flaherty's still and motion picture work in the early part of his career before the production of *Nanook of the North*. The exhibition made it clear that to understand Flaherty's place as a filmmaker, we must pay greater attention to these early years before the success of *Nanook of the North* turned Flaherty into something of a legend. In a new study, *Robert and Frances Flaherty, A Documentary Life, 1883-1922*, published in 2005, Robert J. Christopher adopted this approach, providing a much needed resource for all those interested in the early history of the documentary. Christopher focuses on the years Flaherty spent in northern Canada, including the making of *Nanook of the North*, and he has rendered an invaluable service in printing Robert Flaherty's diaries from this period and the diary of his wife Frances for the years 1914-16. What follows is

indebted to Christopher's work, both for providing the diary texts and for his own detailed and informative references.ⁱⁱ

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Though Flaherty's childhood does not figure often in his stories, its psychological presence may be felt in all his major films in the nostalgia they express for a world different from the one in which he had to make a living. In his memory it was a world where gold prospectors, traders, trappers and Indians mingled in the wild backcountry along the US-Canadian border of Ontario and Michigan. Gold was giving way to iron in this mining universe and you could suddenly come upon the latest technological monster that had somehow been transported to the wilderness to clank away in its pristine quietude.

Robert Joseph Flaherty was born in 1884 in Iron Mountain, Michigan. His father, Robert Henry Flaherty, was also born in Michigan. He was a mining engineer of Protestant Irish heritage and a man of some means; at one time he owned and managed his own mine and then managed other people's mines before joining U.S. Steel in 1900 when he moved the family to Port Arthur on Lake Superior. Flaherty's mother was of German Catholic origin. She bore Robert Henry seven children, four only surviving to adulthood. Of these, Robert Joseph was the eldest. She encouraged his flair for music, which he seems to have inherited from his father. The parents hired a private German music teacher for the young Robert and thereafter he took his violin with him everywhere.ⁱⁱⁱ

Flaherty's formal education was thin and haphazard. He was in and out of local schools in Iron Mountain as a boy and he spent many months away from the family home accompanying his father to mining camps and small towns in the still undeveloped land between Lake Superior and the Lake of the Woods, sometimes in Canada, at other times in the United States. In amongst these moves his father sent him for a year or two to board at Toronto's Upper Canada College, from which he was expelled for lack of academic progress. He later attended Michigan's College of Mines in Houghton, Michigan for seven months but was also asked to leave. His imagination was fed less by books on science than by the novels of Fennimore Cooper and R.M. Ballantyne, works that romanticized adventures on the frontier between civilization and native peoples. Ballantyne, indeed, began his career in the Hudson's Bay Company, and his novel *Ungava*, drawing on that early experience and published in 1858, the year after *The Coral Island*, remained a favorite with boys until well into the twentieth century.^{iv} *Ungava* no doubt acted powerfully on Flaherty's thirst for exploring northern Canada. But Flaherty's own gifts lay more in story telling than in scientific pursuits or, indeed, any kind of fixed occupation. In his late teens, his father having more or less given up on him, Robert Junior was drifting, offering himself as a freelance guide or explorer in northern Ontario, often hanging out on Vancouver Island in British Columbia.

During this period he became engaged to a young woman whom he met when he was at the College of Mines. Frances Hubbard was the daughter of a Michigan geologist and bibliophile, Dr. Lucius L. Hubbard, who had strong ties to the College of Mines and at the time lived some ten miles from Houghton as the manager of a mining company.^v Dr. Hubbard had hired Flaherty briefly as an odd-job man to help out on the mine, and he disapproved of his

daughter's romance with Robert. As Frances herself admitted later, between the Bryn Mawr graduate and the "lumberjack-handyman" of the Michigan woods there was a gulf in social class, what she called "breeding," as revealed in economic status and education. But they shared a love of music, he with his violin and she at the piano, which she studied in Boston, New York and Paris. They kept in touch with each other and in 1908 she joined him for a time on Vancouver Island, where she captured him in an early photo playing his violin; it was one of Frances's favorite pictures of him. But then, after a quarrel, she broke off the engagement. The relationship, however, survived, though it took a few more years before they were married. Frances then became an important support to Flaherty, bringing some intellectual discipline into his life and also, though less successfully, business sense.^{vi}

Whatever the older Flaherty may have thought of his son, in 1910 the situation for both of them took a fateful turn when he became the director of mining for the firm of Mackenzie and Mann, based in Toronto. The head of the firm, Sir William Mackenzie, was a railway magnate who hoped to develop a rail and sea route to Europe from Saskatchewan to Hudson Bay that would cut more than a thousand miles off the established route from Lake Superior and the St. Lawrence Seaway. Though this eventually proved impracticable owing to the short season in which Hudson Bay was navigable by ocean going steamers, Mackenzie retained an interest in mining, especially for iron. Thanks to his new position, the elder Flaherty was able to introduce his son to Mackenzie as the right man to search northern Ontario for deposits of iron and other minerals. In August 1910 the younger Flaherty signed on with Mackenzie to enter on what became perhaps the most rewarding part of his life. The two Flahertys, father and son, now worked together in Mackenzie's interest.^{vii}

Over the next six years Flaherty made four trips to the Hudson Bay area of northern Canada on Mackenzie's behalf, Mackenzie paying him a salary each time and all expenses. On each occasion his goal was to see if the vein of iron ore that had drawn Mackenzie's firm into mining in Minnesota extended beneath the waters of Hudson Bay to reappear on its eastern shores. You could make this journey overland from Toronto by traveling north on rivers that flowed into James Bay or by steamer that entered Hudson Bay for a brief period every year from the coast of Labrador and Hudson Strait. The Hudson's Bay Company plied the sea route once a year to supply its trading posts that were sited strategically among the Inuit camps scattered over the whole region.

Flaherty first took the land route. From the town of Cochrane in northern Ontario, it took a week by canoe on rivers that flowed into the Mattagami, camping at night and portage where necessary to get past rapids and other hazards, before debouching at Moose Factory, the main base of the Hudson's Bay Company.^{viii} He was in the country described in Ballantyne's *Ungava*, where Indians gave way to Eskimos as you left the forest country and entered the barren eastern shores of Hudson Bay.

The first trip, in 1910, was relatively short. It took Flaherty seven months to investigate mineral deposits on the Natsopa Islands on the eastern shore of Hudson Bay. He found that the deposits in question were of insufficient quality to justify major investment. The Inuits, however, spoke of another group of islands, further out in the waters of Hudson Bay, where there could be a richer vein of ore. These had to be the Belcher Islands, named after a British sea captain and

only vaguely indicated on British Admiralty maps. Mackenzie authorized a second trip to investigate these islands, which Flaherty made in 1911-12. But getting to them proved too difficult. Planning to sled across the ice with Inuit guides he found conditions made it impossible; instead, he decided to explore the Ungava peninsular in the company of two Inuits lured by the promise of hunting deer. After reaching Fort Chimo on the Labrador coast, Flaherty outfitted himself at the Hudson's Bay Company post for a return across Ungava to Cape Wostenholme, on the northeastern shore of Hudson Bay. Here, eventually, a steamer picked him up and returned him to Canada. In 1913, in recognition of this latter achievement, Flaherty was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Though he complained that he had already failed to reach the Belcher Islands, Mackenzie accepted a new proposal from Flaherty for a third expedition, this one entering Hudson Bay by steamer, to locate the Belcher Islands if they could be found and winter somewhere suitable. It was to be the most expensive trip to date and it included three assistants to work with Flaherty with enough winter supplies to support a larger party of Inuits. But this attempt also ran into difficulties. Instead of entering Hudson Bay in time to locate the Belcher Islands before the sea froze, Flaherty and his party were delayed at the outset and had to winter on Baffin Island. When their ship returned the next spring, there was again too little time for effective exploration. The party, in fact, nearly met with disaster in a last ditch attempt to reach the Belcher Islands.

On this expedition, however, Flaherty had with him for the first time a motion picture camera. He had included motion pictures in his proposal to Mackenzie for a third trip, arguing that sales of motion pictures of the expedition would help defray costs. In public Flaherty gave Mackenzie the credit for the motion picture camera suggestion, but the idea was undoubtedly Flaherty's. He planned to spend time with his motion picture camera whenever the opportunity arose. For this purpose, the Baffin Island site was as good as any other. It gave him all the time he needed.

As Flaherty settled in to his new quarters, his diaries express the joy these remote surroundings brought him where he was the master of his own fate. They might seem inhospitable to those he had left behind in Toronto, but to him they were more like home. An entry in September 1913 describes his arrival at Baffin Island when his ship anchored for the night at the inlet where he was to spend the winter. Many Inuit camps surrounded the area and there was a feast for them on board as evening came:

“The day was silvery gray and very calm. At night it cleared with a gorgeous sunset that splashed reds and purples over tiny islands far to seaward and over the high snow capped hills and blazed an undulating trail over ice-pans and water right up to the anchorage. The wolf howls of the dogs ashore all through the night sounded like the old days in Hudson Bay and we were glad of it – the old longing realized at last!”^{ix}

Flaherty had been interested in photography from his boyhood when he was often seen in Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) using his father's camera and tripod. As soon as he could he acquired a camera of his own. Part of his work as an odd job man in northern Ontario, when staking claims for others, was to provide visual proof of the geological formations he found.^x With his still photographs he often recorded people, objects and places encountered on his travels; he had also taken portraits of native people, usually posed and with their subjects'

garments and ornaments prominently displayed. His still camera was an important adjunct to his motion picture work, giving him ideas for shooting and useful for later promotional work.

The motion picture camera first made its appearance, according to his diary, on the first day of October 1913, almost as soon as they had settled in and their ship had left them. His first shots were of a group of Inuit departing in their big boat, or “umiak.” Thereafter, he turned to it with increasing frequency, first for shots in a “studio igloo,” which had to be rebuilt from time to time, and when the weather improved for outdoor activities and landscapes. He focused on one Inuit man and his family, capturing scenes of dances, igloo building, sledging, seal and deer hunting. He repeated some scenes several times over, like those of a woman demonstrating the traditional Inuit method of making fire, and a team crossing a river. In other cases he took advantage of events as they happened, such as a Hudson’s Bay Company officer leaving with his dog team across soft ice and the crew of a whaler they came across when eventually they touched on the Belcher Islands. By the end of March 1914 he had shot some 15,000 feet with relays of Inuit helpers being called in to carry water to his dark room to develop the negatives. At one time there were eleven families at Flaherty’s camp “for moving picture purposes.”^{x1}

Although none of this film has survived, one thing is clear: from the outset of his film making career Flaherty showed no interest in recording the geological purpose of the expedition, and it does not seem that Mackenzie expected him to do so. The camera work focused on people, not on topography.

When Flaherty returned to Toronto in late October 1914 he found that Frances Hubbard was expecting him to marry her. Their relationship had lasted eleven years. Surprised he may have been, but the marriage took place as soon as both parties found themselves together in New York. Once married Frances applied herself to helping shape her husband’s career, though not always successfully. As guardian of his muse she took upon herself the duty of “fashioning the Flaherty saga,” writing in her diary “his the conception, mine the detail; his the sowing, mine the garnering.”^{xii} While they waited for an acceptable print to be made of the film material, the two of them discussed what they should do with it. Frances saw that the film meant a great deal to Flaherty, though he was reluctant to present it as a documentary lecture, the form pioneered by Herbert Ponting, Edward Curtis, Lowell Thomas and Burton Holmes.

Despite his hesitation, on March 30 and April 3 1915 Flaherty gave two lectures in Toronto to accompany the screening of his film. Press reports gave some details of what appeared on the screen. They suggest that in his first attempt at film making Flaherty covered the same repertoire of scenes that he was to repeat with different Inuit people on later visits to the north. On this initial screening his film was received respectfully by the Toronto elite and with interest by Mackenzie, who attended one of the sessions. But Flaherty himself, unable to deploy his story-telling skills, was uncomfortable with his performance.

Intense weeks of business and pleasure followed. For the first time the Flahertys were brought face to face with the reality of a growing film industry in which the market for the kind of film he had made was dominated by Burton Holmes’s organization. You had to know how to deal with agents, distributors, theatre managers and middlemen able to provide lecturers to explain your film. In New York the newly married couple did all they could to find a distributor

for their Baffin Island film, as they now called it, coming up against crooks as well as fair dealers. Especially telling was a meeting with Edward Curtis. In 1915 Curtis was at the height of his fame, with offices and studios in New York as well as Seattle. A few months only had passed since the release of his own film, *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, and he too was hoping for its successful distribution. He welcomed the Flahertys and arranged a private screening at which both his film and theirs were shown, to which film distribution agents were invited. But though Curtis was kind he was not encouraging. His own film had fared poorly. It was too serious for the mass audience, he'd been told, and he said the same would be the case with Flaherty's film.^{xiii}

While Frances continued to look for a buyer of her husband's film, Flaherty proposed yet another foray to the north. There was still a chance that he could persuade Mackenzie to support a final bid to explore the mineral potential of the Belcher Islands. Amazingly enough, after some hesitation, Mackenzie agreed. Flaherty, as his biographer points out, was playing a kind of poker with Mackenzie. Both men were gamblers with fate, both masters of "betting and bluffing" when it came to raising money – though Mackenzie's stake in his own enterprises was at a far higher level than Flaherty's. Perhaps the Canadian magnate acted out of respect for Flaherty's father, now a senior executive of Mackenzie and Mann; or perhaps Mackenzie succumbed to the younger Flaherty's blarney in imagining himself as the "Cecil Rhodes of Canada." Or perhaps Mackenzie, like Flaherty, misjudged the commercial value of the new film that Flaherty promised to return with. "Of course the two men understood each other," writes Mackenzie's biographer. "They were both grand illusionists."^{xiv}

Whatever his reason, in accepting Flaherty's proposals, which in the final count cost him altogether some \$175,000, Mackenzie presented himself as the type of sponsor to whom Flaherty would have to appeal if he was to have a career in filmmaking.^{xv} The fourth trip north began and ended as something of a family affair. Flaherty's father, Robert Henry Flaherty, his brother David and his wife Frances, with a friend, all accompanied Flaherty Junior on the outward journey, following the route through northern Ontario to James Bay. Frances now found herself pregnant and knew she could accompany her husband no further. They parted when Flaherty left with his Canadian crew and Inuit assistants for the Belcher Islands. It was an emotional separation for Frances, the end of her hopes of being an active partner in every aspect of Flaherty's life. She wrote of it as a painful stroke of fate, seeing it as "a crisis in the direction of our lives and the quality of our relation – that it was too truly a parting of the ways."^{xvi}

Flaherty duly reached the Belcher Islands. On one of them he erected a spacious wooden hut close to the shoreline where he spent a year exploring the islands and traveling to and from the mainland for mail and supplies. He viewed veins of iron ore and sent the results back to his father in Toronto with two of his assistants. The wreck of his ship *Laddie*, which was then broken up for much needed firewood, and the firing of another assistant, provided additional drama.

Eventually Flaherty's father came north again in answer to his son's preliminary report, bringing two men with him, an official of the Canadian government and an expert in geology.^{xvii} They all agreed that the islands' mineral assets were not worth pursuing. But this can hardly have come as a surprise, for what impresses the reader of Flaherty's diary on his fourth expedition is

his commitment to film making, with geology taking second place. Throughout the drama of fierce Arctic storms, hazardous journeys ending with the loss of their boat, the comings and goings of Inuits, both those engaged by Flaherty in the project and hangers-on, there runs Flaherty's constant interest in motion picture work. After their meeting with Curtis in New York Frances and he had agreed that more film material was needed to turn the Baffin Island film into a viable motion picture product. From the two Flahertys' perspective, the point of this fourth expedition was film making. While Robert worked away on the Belcher Islands his wife was busy making contacts with film people in New York. They were staking their future on a new career for Robert. By the end of the fourth expedition he had all the material he needed.

But he returned to civilization in the fall of 1916 to new difficulties. The war in Europe was at its height and Canada was deeply involved in it. Mackenzie's empire, always debt heavy, was on the verge of collapse as the debts were called in. Flaherty was now a father. Frances had given birth to their first child, a girl, while he was in the Belchers. She was to present him with two more daughters in the four years following his return. But the Flahertys had no home of their own. Where would they live? Not permanently in Houghton, Michigan, the home of Frances's parents, almost due south across Lake Superior from Port Arthur, where Flaherty roamed as a boy with his first camera. Their second daughter was born in Houghton in September 1917. But the Flahertys needed to be nearer to New York, where films were bought and sold. They found places to live in Connecticut, close to the New York border. Frances gave music lessons to help with the family finances and Robert split his time between his growing family in Connecticut and Toronto, where he had an arrangement with Mackenzie's company for a place to work on his film.^{xviii}

He now had to decide what he was to do with the new film material. Flaherty had taken with him a print of the Baffin Island film that he'd screened in Toronto in April 1915 to show to the Inuit on his fourth expedition. He had been inspired to do so by the experience of Martin Johnson among the cannibals of the South Seas; he also showed it privately from time to time to special audiences.^{xix} How was he to add the new material from the Belchers to it? Adding new wine to old wineskins risks damaging the original. Should he make a wholly new film out of the new material? It seems Flaherty did not choose this route and he had little skill in editing; throughout his life he relied on others to make visual sense out of his many takes, retakes, duplications and shooting tests. Perhaps there was someone who could help him in Toronto. But perhaps he found himself dissatisfied with all that he had done to date, concluding that he was on the wrong track altogether. The months went by, a year passed, and there was no sign of a new and improved film and still no other job was in sight.

A mystery clouds this period in Flaherty's life. One day in 1918, his domestic distractions and professional anxieties were abruptly interrupted. In an apparent catastrophe, Flaherty destroyed all his accumulated film material, both negatives and positives. There is no satisfactory explanation of what happened nor is there certainty as to when it happened. Flaherty gave an account of the disaster, if disaster it really was, in which he said that while working in Toronto he accidentally dropped the ash or the lit end of his cigarette onto his negative film, which being highly flammable nitrate stock burst into flames, destroying every piece of celluloid in the room. Everything, positive and negative, was gone. All that was spared from three years of filmmaking

was a single print of the Baffin Island film. By good fortune Flaherty had earlier left this print in Cambridge, Massachusetts for Harvard University's ethnographers to study.^{xx}

What are we to make of this episode? The volatility of the flammable film stock in use at this time was so well known, no one in his right mind would be smoking a cigarette in the vicinity of it. Strict fire regulations covered the projection of films in enclosed public spaces. Flaherty's account of the accident is hard to believe and we may speculate on other explanations.

Speaking about this episode shortly before his death, long after he had made his mark with *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty offered a suggestive comment. He called his early efforts at filmmaking "utterly inept" and boring. They were, he said, "simply a scene of this and a scene of that, no relation, no thread of a story or continuity." The film was "little more than a travelogue," added Frances. These remarks are much quoted in studies of Flaherty, and their implication deserves further consideration.^{xxi}

When he spoke like this Flaherty could afford to disparage his early work. By then he was well known for his films. But if he had these same thoughts as he labored away in Mackenzie's building in Toronto, uncertain how to make the best use of the mass of new film taken on his fourth expedition, he might well have wished to be done with the whole thing. In this case, the lighted cigarette could have been a response to frustration or despair.^{xxii}

Some of Flaherty's energies during these years went into literary work. It was an area that Frances took in hand, guarding her husband's diaries of his northern adventures from untrustworthy promoters, encouraging him to write them up himself into a book, while she planned a literary career for him if film work came to nothing. Two articles bearing Flaherty's name - his first to appear in print - were published in the *The Geographical Review* in 1918. The first, published in June, covered the four expeditions to Hudson Bay and the discovery of the Belcher Islands; the second, published in August, covered the overland crossings of the Ungava Peninsular.

The articles were reports on topography and geology, on animal and bird life, and on Eskimo culture. They included still photographs documenting rock formations and landscapes. Flaherty wrote appreciatively of the Inuit people, mentioning his motion picture work: "During the winter we compiled a series of motion pictures, showing the primitive life, crafts, and modes of hunting and traveling of the islanders - an improved version of the film we had previously made on the Baffin Island expedition. With a portable projector brought for the purpose we showed the islanders a copy of the Baffin Island film, purposing in this way to inspire them with that spirit of emulation so necessary to the success of our filming."^{xxiii}

Flaherty must have composed these words - "an *improved* version" - at the same time that he was editing the selfsame material, scenes he later described as "inept" and boring. Once published in *The Geographical Review*, he could hardly disown them. It could be that he had trapped himself with something he either could not, or did not want to see through.

Another factor that might have affected Flaherty's state of mind at this critical moment in his life was competition in the market for Eskimo films. Eskimos had been popular subjects in

film programs from the earliest days of motion picture production. Short film clips showed them performing live acts at the Buffalo Pan-American Exhibition of 1901. The Carnegie Museum Expedition to Alaska and Siberia of 1909-1911, led by Captain Kleinschmidt, produced quantities of film of Eskimo life, and other explorer-adventurers followed. But the most comprehensive film studies of Alaskan Eskimos were made by William Van Valin over a period of three years between 1916 and 1919. They were funded by John Wanamaker, the Philadelphia department store millionaire, for the benefit of the University of Pennsylvania. The films, running for over two hours in all, covered many scenes of Eskimo life at the edge of the ocean at Nome and Point Barrow. These Inuit were well acquainted with visits of white men from Seattle in steamers bringing goods and supplies. Their arrivals were festive occasions for the Inuit communities. The film clips, running mostly from ten to twelve minutes, show scenes of blanket tossing and races, of summer teepees and giant ice floes, of Inuit men miles from their homes stalking seals with rifles on the shore ice and hunting whales further out in the ocean. One item covered the excavation of a prehistoric burial site.

Van Valin was a teacher who lived with the northernmost Eskimos near Point Barrow at the same time as Flaherty was exploring the eastern shores of Hudson Bay. With their catchy title, "Tip Top Of The Earth," the Van Valin films were popular on the lecture circuit and it is more than likely that Flaherty knew of them.^{xxiv}

We should therefore consider the possibility that the appearance of these other films about Inuit Eskimos cast a shadow over Flaherty as he worked on his Hudson Bay material. The film he screened in Toronto in 1915 was well received by his audience of Canadian dignitaries as an anthropological lecture, but it could not pass as a crowd pleaser. On his trip to the Belcher Islands he does not seem to have changed his approach to his subject matter, though calling it "an improved version." By the time he found himself struggling in Toronto to put the new material into an improved shape, Van Valin's films were being shown throughout North America.

The loss of all Flaherty's film to fire, accidental or not, was a low point in his life. He had no career prospects, a growing family to support, and his film work was reduced to one old battered print. Mackenzie was bankrupt, his railway empire taken over by the Canadian government. The Hubbard in-laws had once already suggested he take up a Ford dealership.^{xxv} In 1919 Flaherty was 35 years old. He had reached the midpoint of life, his filmmaking efforts apparently at a dead end. But he also knew that if he were ever able to return to Hudson Bay, he would have to make a different kind of film. It would not be, as we would say today, a documentary of the actual life of an Inuit community as an outsider might observe it, but something more dramatic, closer to Curtis's *In the Land of the Headhunters* than to Van Valin's (and his own) "travelogues."^{xxvi}

Against all the odds, Flaherty's nerve held. With a gambler's luck, the dice rolled his way again, this time from an unexpected quarter. In New York Flaherty had become friendly with a Thierry Mallet, a senior officer of Revillon Frères, a French fur trading company that was the main competitor in Canada of the Hudson's Bay Company. Mallet was in the audience at a private screening of Flaherty's surviving Baffin Island print some time in early 1920 and it gave him an idea. That year 1920 marked the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Hudson's Bay

Company, an event that was widely celebrated in Canada. Revillon Frères had been established in 1723; its 200th anniversary would therefore fall in 1923. Mallet persuaded the directors of Revillon Frères to sponsor Flaherty's return to the north to make another film featuring the company for showing in their anniversary year. After some discussion Flaherty signed a contract to make two films, one a film about the fur trade that would promote the name of Revillon Frères as the sponsor, the other a film on Inuit life and culture. The way suddenly opened for Flaherty to return to Hudson Bay – his fifth visit – this time exclusively to make a film – or two films. The outcome of this contract was *Nanook of the North*.^{xxvii}

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With funds provided by Revillon Frères, Flaherty now had a salary and a budget for another film or films. For twelve months, from August 1920 to August 1921, he based himself at the Revillon Frères post at Port Harrison, now Inukjuak, on the eastern shore of Hudson Bay, a little south of Cape Dufferin. It was a region that had been settled for centuries by the Inuit Eskimos. As had become his practice, with Inuit helpers he processed his negative as he went along in a dark room that doubled as his living quarters in the post's main building. He conducted most of his filming in the vicinity of Port Harrison, on the river that flowed into the sea there or in the waters, islands and winter ice fields of Hopewell Sound. Two expeditions took him further afield, one to a rocky island where walrus were to be found, which yielded a dramatic sequence in the finished film. The other, longer and more hazardous, necessitated hard sledding to a location two hundred miles northward where polar bears were thought to be wintering. It nearly led to disaster and there was nothing in the end to show for it.^{xxviii}

Flaherty knew well what he wanted to film, for it was very similar to what he had filmed before, namely “a series of motion pictures, showing the primitive life, crafts, and modes of hunting and traveling of the islanders.”^{xxix} *Nanook of the North* did indeed portray typical Inuit activities – fishing, hunting, trapping, sledding, and building igloos. But there was this fundamental difference. When Flaherty returned to the north in August 1920 his one idea was to follow the life of an Inuit family through the changing seasons of the year, and for this he needed a small number of Inuit people who could be relied on to stay with the project for the required length of time. Revillon Frères had agreed that he could put his players on a regular payroll and pay for extras when needed. Flaherty's first move was to select a dozen Inuit men and women to be his central characters in the scenes he wanted to film, paying them a regular wage while he was at Port Harrison. They become the dramatis personae who appear throughout *Nanook of the North*. Flaherty's aesthetic decision transformed his film from being “scenes of this and scenes of that” with no overall shape to one that had an ongoing narrative and continuity of personnel. No longer a travelogue, it was now a drama.

The consequence of this decision was that the members of his fictional family became actors playing roles. They were not a genuine family re-enacting their own daily life, but an invented family who staged the activities Flaherty asked for. Their names, too, were fictional. Flaherty called his principal actor, whose real name was Allakariallak, Nanook, meaning “bear” in Inuit speech – an inspired choice that won worldwide fame. To make Nanook stand out as his protagonist, Flaherty dressed him in special fur garments foreign to the local Port Harrison Inuit, so that his clothes and his poses combined to make Nanook's image unforgettable. The Maggie

of Flaherty's diary, Alice Nevalinga, was Nyla in the film, playing the part of one of Nanook's wives. She appears to have come from one of the families in Allakariallak's encampment at Port Harrison.^{xxx}

Many of the sequences that Flaherty planned to shoot were repeats of what he had taken on his earlier expeditions. Stalking and spearing a walrus had provided exciting images when he was on the Belcher Islands, but on that occasion the harpoon line had snapped. The film he took of Nanook killing a walrus proved a triumph when he screened it to the Port Harrison community.^{xxxii} He had learned from previous expeditions the importance of having a live silver fox in hand for filming operations. Nanook duly provide one. In directing him to simulate catching a silver fox, Flaherty skillfully changed the angles from which he shot the action. Nanook approaches the camera head on and locates the area where the trap lies beneath the snow-packed ground. He cuts out the covering snow and plunges in headfirst. When we next see him it is from a different viewpoint. He straightens up from the hole holding a young silver fox round the neck, which he lifts up for all to see. The change of the camera position allowed Nanook to pick up his semi-tamed young silver fox by its neck off camera and return to his position with his head and shoulders in the hole. He's now ready to be filmed from the new camera position, which shows him straightening up holding the young silver fox that he has supposedly caught in this trap. The sequence flows seamlessly. Directing, of course, implies intervening to control actions in response to the readiness of the camera operator. Flaherty found his Inuit cast members were well able to produce the effects that he wanted.^{xxxii}

After twelve months Flaherty had used up all his film stock and needed to deliver a film, or two films, to Revillon Frères before his contract ran out. He returned, most likely in September, to be reunited with his family, now increased by the arrival of a third daughter in May 1920, and to face the challenge of editing his material. How was he to reconcile the requirement of his patron to produce a film about the fur trade with his own vision for a film about Inuit culture? It seems he did produce a version with the title "Nanook of the Barren Lands" that answered Revillon Frères' needs, but it did not satisfy potential distributors.^{xxxiii} Eventually Pathé, another French company, came through in a deal worked out between Flaherty, Revillon Frères and Pathé, the two French companies, perhaps, making a common cause, whereby Flaherty surrendered his editorial rights to the film. Pathé's gifted newsreel editor, Carl Stearns Clancy, took charge of the production and by June "Nanook of the North," as the film was now called, was ready for the public. Its final shape suggests an amalgam of the two films he had agreed to make in his contract with Revillon Frères. Mackenzie came to New York to see the film, the long delayed fruit of his own financial support of Flaherty, and to claim his own share in his investment in it.^{xxxiv}

Nanook of the North consists of a series of vignettes. Through its inter-titles it tells the story of an Inuit man called Nanook and his family. He is the "Chief of the Itimuits," famous throughout Ungava for his hunting prowess. We meet him and his family at the beginning of the film as he prepares for his summer journey down river to the white man's trading post on the coast and the salmon fishing and the walrus to be found there. The journey begins in the empty interior where deer used to be plentiful. The party arrives at the trading post and does business. Ice fields prevent further movement and starvation threatens. Nanook must find food and shelter for his band. He "saves the day," by catching fish and killing a walrus. Soon it is winter; progress

slows to two miles a day. Nanook catches a silver fox. He builds an igloo. Low on food again he spears a seal at its blowhole. And so, apparently always on the move, the Inuits live in a daily fight for survival. Coming across an abandoned igloo, “Almost perishing from the icy blasts and unable to reach their own snowhouse,” Nanook’s band spends a windswept night in it. Which is where we leave them, alone in the icy wilderness, the wind howling, the dogs curled up tightly outside in the snow, the little group asleep, naked beneath a covering of skins. The last shot is of Nanook asleep, his face filling the screen. The final card reads: “The shrill piping of the wind, the rasp and hiss of the driving snow, the mournful wolf howls of Nanook’s master dog typify the melancholy spirit of the North.”

Some years later Flaherty said that his goal in making *Nanook of the North* was to show how the Inuit lived before they were contaminated by western culture. It is true that he showed some of the people’s older ways, like their primitive method of making fire, and banned the appearance of guns, though the Inuit had been using guns for decades past. Indeed, the film’s best known image was that of Nanook poised with a primitive-looking harpoon. But to exclude all evidence of western culture would have been tantamount to repudiating Flaherty’s contract with Revillon Frères for a film about the fur trade. Early scenes in *Nanook of the North* also give a different impression. In one, Nanook visits the company store to sell his furs. While he is there Stewart, the new manager of the post in the guise of a white trader, plays a record on his gramophone, prompting Nanook into a farcical pantomime of pretending he’s hearing it for the first time. He tries the record between his teeth, all the time laughing his head off at the part Flaherty has asked him to play. This is followed by another scene in which a teenager, playing Nanook’s son, has an upset stomach. The white trader (Stewart) administers castor oil, much to the young man’s delight. Both these scenes are intended to amuse white audiences at the exotic backwardness of Nanook’s world. No doubt Flaherty staged them because he knew that they were the kind of material that would persuade a New York distributor to take on his film.^{xxxv}

We cannot be certain how much say Flaherty had in the final assembly of his material. Skilful editing and the judicious placement of title cards cover up difficulties caused by Flaherty’s undisciplined shooting method, the titles echoing the literary quality of his diaries:

“Long nights – – the wail of the wind – – short, bitter days – – snow smoking fields of sea and plain – – the brass ball of sun a mockery in the sky – – the mercury near bottom and staying there days and days and days.”

The title cards thus play an important role in the film. They engage the imagination in the narrative drama of the film: “Nanook, seal hunting bound, becomes involved in the giant rough ice fields at sea.” “Nanook, seeing a white fox approaching one of his traps, signals the family to detour.” The present tense, the different angles from which the camera observes the action, the suggestive images all combine to carry the audience along with the story. But it is a cinematic story, not a real one happening now, actually, in front of the camera. It is its own kind of fiction, a form of graphic novel that a Flaherty hero like Ballantyne might have written.

In this western literary tradition Flaherty depicts his Inuit family as solitary beings, living on a frontier knowing little of what lies beyond. There’s no hint of the rich social life of the Inuit Eskimos, which we read about in first hand accounts from observers with different backgrounds,

among them “People from our side” (Inuit), “The Last Gentleman Adventurer” (British) and “The Incredible Eskimo” (Catholic Missionary). In these accounts Inuit life is observed as certainly constrained by the environment, which was frequently hostile to human existence, but it did not exclude social contacts with members of their own extended community.^{xxxvi}

In this respect it is instructive to compare *Nanook of the North* with Van Valin’s films. In *Nanook of the North* we get no feeling for the community to which Nanook belongs. He is a lone figure. He has his family and he makes one visit to the trader’s store. But there is none of the communal Inuit life that is recorded by others. Van Valin’s films are crowded with men, women and children engaged in all kinds of activities, laughing and tossing each other in blankets, going about their business on the ice and at the water’s edge, their settlements a chaos of refuse, furs, tents, dogs and children.^{xxxvii} Only occasionally in *Nanook of the North* are we aware of other Eskimos; some men join him in trying to pull a seal from its hole in the ice; there are other men with him as he stalks a walrus. But for the most part we are left with the image of a solitary figure, one who battles nature alone with his little family, travelling across a deserted landscape with no obvious destination in sight and survival from one day to the next the only purpose in life.

Flaherty in his own writings conveys a greater sense of community than this. A hundred men were waiting at the landing place at Port Harrison when he arrived to begin his year living among them. As he describes that year there always seems to be something going on. The men come and go on hunting expeditions in the interior, they join him for parties, help him and each other with particular needs. There is fishing, kayaking, “playing ball” and “women and children playing hide and seek.” Still photographs that Flaherty took of Port Harrison show a substantial settlement of tented living quarters stretched out in front of the fur company’s buildings.^{xxxviii}

But what *Nanook of the North* gives us and is absent from the Van Valin films is our feeling that we know Nanook as an individual, a man with a sense of humor, one we can trust to lead us to safety, who is affectionate toward his children, a simple but noble character. We cannot tell whether these qualities actually existed in the real “Nanook,” but they are characteristics of Flaherty’s portrait of him. For all their activity, Van Valin’s men and women hardly register with us as individual human beings. Even though many of them appear in close-up, we don’t get to know them in the way that we know Nanook.

In *Nanook of the North*, then, with its compromises between the present and the past and its evocation of a timeless drama of man’s confrontation with nature, Flaherty created a mythic Inuit world, which he idealized through the person of one Inuit man. It was his greatest artistic achievement and it changed his life.^{xxxix}

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Although the domestic appeal of *Nanook of the North* was modest its international success and the public craze for cheap commercial Nanook brand spin-offs brought Flaherty worldwide fame. Paramount in the person of Jesse Lasky invited him to write his own ticket for “another Nanook” in the South Pacific. Flaherty spent two years on a Samoan island, accompanied by his wife and three young daughters, and with his brother David also on the

payroll as project manager. The outcome, *Moana* (1926), was a beautifully shot impression of Polynesian life climaxing in the experience of a young man undergoing the ceremonial ordeal of the body tattoo. But the film was a commercial flop, which ended Flaherty's connection with the Hollywood studios. Later he returned to the South Pacific in partnership with F.W. Murnau for another cinematic exploration of Polynesian culture. But he was unable to keep up with Murnau's more professional approach and he withdrew from the project. In Murnau's hands it became *Tabu* (1931), as dynamic a rendering of Polynesian culture as *Moana* is placid.^{xl}

In making *Moana* Flaherty kept to the formula he devised for *Nanook of the North*. It was the template also for his two other films, *Man of Aran* (1934) and *Louisiana Story* (1948). In natural settings a small cast of characters chosen by Flaherty from people he found on location play roles in a staged family drama. *Moana* was a silent film, and *Man of Aran* belonged to the silent era in spirit, but in *Louisiana Story* the actors, though not professionals, followed a scripted dialogue. It was a formula uniquely Flaherty's, marking his films as unlike anything made in Hollywood, but unlike also the documentary, as we have come to know it.^{xli}

In *Man of Aran*, a windswept island located off the west coast of Ireland, Flaherty's scenario centered on a hunt in a coracle-like rowing boat for basking sharks in a turbulent sea. As the islanders had long abandoned this kind of ocean hunting, Flaherty brought in a man to teach them how to do it. The film was financed by Michael Balcon for the British Gaumont Company and was Flaherty's first with sound. *Louisiana Story*, which premiered at the Edinburgh Festival, appeared in the post World War II years of austerity in Britain. Striking images of an oil derrick gliding down the bayous of Louisiana accompanied a scripted story of a young Cajun boy and his pet raccoon entranced by the new world the oilmen brought with them to the quiet Southern backwaters. It was commissioned by the Standard Oil Company.^{xlii}

To these four films that were Flaherty's own creations should be added, as Flaherty's additional film work, a contract with the émigré Hungarian producer in London, Alexander Korda, to direct a feature based on Kipling's story "Toomai of the Elephants." *Elephant Boy*, as the film was called, featured the teenager Sabu (in his first film) as the handler of the lead elephant. But Flaherty had difficulty with the script and to forestall a fiasco Korda brought the production back to England, finishing it with another director in a studio with elephants from the London zoo.

For long stretches of his life after the appearance of *Nanook of the North* Flaherty was without work. He made and received several proposals, most of which came to nothing. When John Grierson was heading the Empire Marketing Board in London, he asked Flaherty to join his team, but soon had to let him go because of Flaherty's impossibly high ratio of film shot to film used, way beyond the budget of a parsimonious British Treasury. (On all his films Flaherty's use of film stock was wildly extravagant for non-fiction film budgets and only accepted by the studios because of the high returns feature films were expected to win. None of Flaherty's films garnered high returns.) Years later, at the request of Frances Flaherty when her husband seemed to be stuck in London with nothing to do and war in Europe was on the horizon, Grierson persuaded Pare Lorentz, who was then running the U.S. Film Service under the Roosevelt administration, to find Flaherty some work in America.^{xliii} Lorentz offered him the job of directing a film for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Flaherty was at a loss to know how to

fulfill the assignment, which called for what was emerging as a recognizable documentary film genre. Flaherty could not resort to his usual model of creating a story around a make-believe family. The outcome was *The Land*, a forty-two minute survey of American agriculture, which showed a landscape depressed through overuse and erosion, but expressed hope that men could master their machines and use them responsibly. Though beautifully shot, the film is shapeless. Completed toward the end of 1941, it was never released. Its sponsors thought it gave too negative a picture for the United States to be showing the world in the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Its main interest lies in hearing Flaherty's own voice on the film's sound track.

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Flaherty was a big man physically, growing bulkier as the years went by, and he had a large presence at the bar or dining table where there was nothing he liked doing more than drinking, smoking and talking. When talking he seemed larger than life, like the stories he told, in print or to his friends. They knew they were unreliable as to historical accuracy, but they loved listening to them all the same if only to hear how they would change in the retelling. Anyone studying his life has no difficulty finding inventions and discrepancies in the spoken and written records he left behind. When Flaherty and his wife were working up his diaries for publication they would not hesitate to enhance them with fictional extras. They were "fabulists of the exotic," as one biographer has well put it.^{xliv} Driven, it might seem, by "the old longing," Flaherty lived his life in search for an ideal world instead of the actual one that existed in the places where he found himself. But he was never able to make another Nanook.

Flaherty's movie-making life unfolded at a time when documentary films began to appear as a distinct, if ill-defined genre. When Grierson reviewed *Moana* in 1926 for the *New York Sun*, writing that it had "documentary value," he meant that it had value as a visual record in much the same way as Edward Curtis had done fifteen years earlier in relation to his photographs and plans for a film about the Kwakiutl people of Vancouver Island. When *Moana* appeared Charlie Chaplin and Hollywood studios had created a film industry that went far beyond what Flaherty and his wife had learned from their experiences in New York ten years before, in the spring of 1915.^{xlv}

Grierson and the filmmakers of the British documentary movement welcomed Flaherty as an ally in the fight against the commercial studios. He brought prestige to their endeavors and they acknowledged him as a superb camera artist. Whatever might be the limitations of his methods, his ability to capture unforgettable images through the lens of a motion picture camera is Flaherty's enduring legacy. There will always be debate about his position in the documentary tradition, but of his camera artistry there can be no doubt. What we take away from Flaherty's films are unique images – a boy climbing a palm tree, Atlantic rollers smashing against rock-studded cliffs, a small row-boat seen through a long-focus lens, half hidden by the ocean swell, as if in a painting by Hokusai. His admirers often write of Flaherty's films as poetry, but in truth they are more like paintings, which shock us for the vision that produced them. Rather than trying to fit him into this or that category of filmmaking, it is better to accept that his films, in keeping with his willful personality, were *sui generis*.

There is another way to view *Nanook of the North* and this is to see it as the record of a collaboration between a white man with a movie camera and one Inuit man who has been given the name Nanook, the Bear. Viewed this way, the staged episodes, the recreation of old-time methods of hunting, the semi-tame young silver fox -- all have documentary value as visual records of this process of collaboration. More than the props and supporting actors, it is the relationship between Flaherty and Nanook that is the real subject of the film. Nanook, it becomes clear, is the one who makes the film, Flaherty is a canvas on which Nanook paints himself. There's no faking when Nanook laughs at Flaherty's antics with the camera, clowns before a gramophone for Flaherty's sake, grasps a half-tamed young silver fox round the neck, sticks it into a hole in the ground and on Flaherty's command pulls it out again, holding it up for all to see, and finally ties it up for another day's shoot if needed. These are valuable records of the process of collaboration between Flaherty and Nanook. The "Nanook" that existed in the flesh as Allakariallak, who took to his sick bed and died two years after Flaherty left Port Harrison, survives in the form of the celluloid Nanook, a timeless figure outliving his collaborator.

It is often the case that non-fiction films tell us more about their makers than about their ostensible subject matter. If melancholy shadows fall over the latter half of Flaherty's life, it may be, as some have suggested, that he felt a nostalgia for his own childhood when he was able to roam the wilderness as an imaginary character from an adventure book for boys. Boys or young men play major parts in all but one of his surviving films - the young Inuits, Allee and Allegoo in *Nanook of the North*; the eponymous hero of *Moana*; Sabu, the *Elephant Boy* in his first film; and the Irish teenager Mikeleen anxiously awaiting his father's return in a coracle in a heavy Atlantic swell. But the most affecting of all, coming near the end of Flaherty's life, must surely be his loving portrait of a Cajun boy and his pet raccoon, entranced by a huge oil-drilling rig moving slowly through the southern bayous. "*Louisiana Story* is autobiography," wrote Frances Flaherty. "It is Bob remembering his childhood with his father."^{xlvi}

Flaherty never returned to Hudson Bay, the site of his life-changing triumph. Had he done so, he would have found that he was the father of a boy whose mother played Nyla in *Nanook of the North*. The child was born after he'd left and grew up along with the other children in her mother's family. His mother insisted on calling him Joseph Flaherty after his father. Inuits customarily offered their own wives or daughters to males staying with them and Flaherty's acceptance of this feature of their hospitality must surely have contributed to the special human quality of his famous film and the warmth of feeling shown by its principal actors.^{xlvii} In his writings Flaherty's own feelings for the people he lived with for so many years, sharing their hardships as well as their relaxations, were mixed. What seems to have drawn him back to their northern habitations was a longing for the environment itself, its air and its challenges, its isolation and the freedom it gave him to live his own life as he wanted, without the demands and expectations of urban civilization. He could never capture that on film, though filmmaking gave him an alibi to be there. And yet, paradoxically, there were times later in his life when he chose to leave the home in Vermont that Frances had made for him and come to New York to live in his favorite club or hotel in order to be near to the activity of the city and the talking, drinking and smoking to be had there with friends and visitors.

It was in this hotel that he died, from a cerebral thrombosis, alone, in July 1951.^{xlviii}

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ⁱ The Hudson Bay area, where Flaherty spent much of his time exploring and filming, lies south of the Arctic Circle. But its climate is the same as most of that north of the circle.

ⁱⁱ Christopher, Robert J.: *Robert and Frances Flaherty, A Documentary Life, 1883- 1822*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. Christopher's endnotes are testimony to a deep and wide-ranging research into every nook and cranny of his subject. They are a veritable encyclopedia of information about northern Canada and the history of Hudson Bay. The Flaherty diaries are kept in the Butler Library of Columbia University, New York City. References in this essay are to their reproduction in Christopher. Two earlier biographies should also be mentioned: Calder-Marshall, Arthur: *The Innocent Eye*, W.H. Allen, 1963; and Rotha, Paul edited by Ruby, Jay: *Robert J. Flaherty: A Biography*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

ⁱⁱⁱ Christopher, 4; one elder sister died in infancy; two brothers died. Robert had a sister, Frances, and two other brothers, David and Arthur.

^{iv} Christopher, 390 note 16: Ballantyne spent six years of his life as a Hudson Bay Company agent.

^v From 1911 to 1933 Lucius Hubbard was a Regent of the University of Michigan.

^{vi} Christopher, 43, 220. Flaherty had money problems for most of his life.

^{vii} Christopher, 49, 392 note 13.

^{viii} Christopher, 393 note 16: Moose Factory was renamed Moosonee in 1932.

^{ix} Christopher, 146.

^x Christopher, 43.

^{xi} Christopher 410 note 51. In an article for the *Geographical Review* in June 1918 Flaherty described his motion picture subjects as "travel and igloo life and some of the religious performances, conjuring, and dances of the Baffin Island Eskimos." (1918 a)

^{xii} Christopher, xvi, 220.

^{xiii} The Vancouver Art Gallery's catalogue was the first to subject the Flahertys' lives and ambitions during this period to close study based upon Robert's diary of his third expedition and Frances's diary from December 1914 to February 1916. Christopher provides a clear and illuminating commentary on them.

^{xiv} Christopher, 131, 132 for "betting and bluffing; 79 for Mackenzie as the "Cecil Rhodes of Canada." Fleming, R.B.: *The Railway King of Canada, Sir William Mackenzie, 1849-1923*, University of British Columbia, 1991, 197 for "Mackenzie's biographer."

^{xv} Fleming, 198 for the total of the four expeditions.

^{xvi} Christopher, 220.

^{xvii} Christopher, 429 note 22.

^{xviii} Sponsors of expeditions held the rights to everything found and brought back by the expedition. This included art and photographic work. Mackenzie may have made it a requirement that Flaherty edit his film on the premises of one of his companies. He was to claim a share in the profits of *Nanook of the North*, which Flaherty respected by making over to him 25% of the 49% he owned in his original contract with Revillon Frères (Christopher, 385/6).

^{xix} In his article "How I Filmed 'Nanook of the North'," in *World's Work*, October 1922, Flaherty wrote: "New forms of travel film were coming out and the Johnson South Sea Island film particularly seemed to me to be an earnest of what might be done in the North." Terry Ramsaye has an amusing description of Johnson's use of a film projector to show the cannibal

chief the motion pictures he had taken of him on his first visit, when Johnson had narrowly escaped being eaten. (*A Million And One Nights*, 601.)

^{xx} Christopher, 319ff. It is impossible to know for certain what happened to Flaherty's material. In his correspondence with Mallet of Revillon Frères he wrote that what he showed Mallet was a work print of new material added to the Baffin Island film. But, he added, the poor quality of this work print made it impossible to take a duplicate negative from it. It seems highly unlikely that Flaherty would have sent his work print, or carried it himself, from Toronto to Cambridge, Massachusetts for somebody at Harvard to view, and left it there while he continued with more editing in Toronto. The most plausible explanation is that he had sent Harvard a print of the Baffin Island film – or his only print of it – prior to the bonfire in the cutting room in Toronto. This print then was all that was left of his film work. If he had cut the negative of it himself, both negative and any other prints went up in flames. Flaherty took The Baffin Island film with him to the Belcher Islands on his fourth expedition and showed it to the islanders, as he recounted in *The Geographical Review* of June 1918. He used it for private screenings in the pre-*Nanook* years before winning the contract with Revillon Frères. Grierson said he once saw “what could only have been the Harvard print of *Nanook*” that had somehow ended up in the possession of a former film distributor in Toronto. But he thought poorly of it. Perhaps this was the last trace of the Baffin Island film. (Rotha, 27, 332 note 19.)

^{xxi} Christopher, 322; Rotha, 27 – both citing “Robert Flaherty Talking”: *The Cinema 1950*, ed. Roger Manvell, 1950.

^{xxii} In *The Innocent Eye*, 69, Calder-Marshall quotes an incident in northern Canada, recorded by Pieter Freuchen, when Flaherty smashed his violin in a rage because he felt the people at the trading post were dancing disrespectfully to his music. If the account is true, it suggests that Flaherty was capable of sudden self-destructive acts.

^{xxiii} *The Geographical Review*, Vol. V, No. 6, June 1918 “The Belcher Islands of Hudson Bay: Their Discovery and Exploration.”

^{xxiv} Fienup-Riordan, Ann: *Freeze Frame: Alaska Eskimos in the Movies*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1995, 40. For Van Valin see <http://siris-archives.si.edu>: Tip Top of The Earth: Arctic Alaskan Eskimo Educational Series, and “Van Valin Films” in <www.casberg.com>. A large, possibly complete set of Van Valin films is held at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

^{xxv} Rotha, 25.

^{xxvi} In February 1915 Robert and Frances discussed the best way of presenting his Baffin Island material. Frances urged the need for a lecturer to create the right atmosphere for viewing the film. Robert thought “amply” designed titles would do the job without the need for a lecturer. “The real intrinsic value of the pictures is, of course, scientific, ethnological and geographical, and their real place is with schools and universities and scientific societies,” wrote Frances in her diary. But they lacked drama, “some sort of thrill.” “There is nothing spectacular about the daily struggle for existence of the slow-moving Eskimo.” (Christopher, 232.) Frances had her way with the lecture presentation in Toronto, but seven years later Flaherty was proved right about the titles supplying the drama for *Nanook of the North*, while turning it into fiction. With the advent of sound, the lecturer returned in the form of voice-over narration and then as an on-camera speaker.

^{xxvii} In his famous book on early movies, *A Million and One Nights*, published in 1926, Terry Ramsaye included a single reference to *Nanook of the North* as “conceived as propaganda for

Revillon Frères.” It’s ironic to think that if Flaherty had made the film that Revillon Frères wanted it would have been more in the documentary tradition than *Nanook of the North*.

^{xxxiii} There’s a puzzle about Flaherty’s account of his sledding trip to Cape Smith to film a polar bear. The journey took 55 days and they covered 600 miles in all, narrowly escaping disaster. But they found no bears and could spare no more time to look for one. As it happened Captain Mallet included an account of this bear hunt in a book about his northern adventures published a few years after the appearance of *Nanook of the North*. It seems he was present for the climax of the bear hunt, though Flaherty never mentions it. According to Mallet, when Nanook came to rouse the bear she bolted so quickly from her den that Flaherty was unable to film anything. “Filming a White Bear on Land” in *Plain Tales of the North*, by Captain Thierry Mallet, Privately Printed by Revillon Frères in 1925 and by Putnam in 1926.

^{xxxix} As he described it in 1918 in his June article in the *The Geographical Magazine*.

^{xxx} If their names and identities are correct it seems that Flaherty first met Allakariallak, or Attata as he appears in his diaries, four years earlier on the Belcher Islands when Flaherty gave him a ride on a three day journey to the mainland. Nevalinga was also there and came with them on his own sledge. Christopher 298, 432 note 25.

^{xxxii} It seems that he had a man with a gun ready out of sight of the camera in case the same thing happened. The walrus that Nanook has speared gives up the fight suddenly and Nanook’s helpers roll it onto the shore without difficulty. Flaherty processed his negative on location and made prints of some of it.

^{xxxiii} There are several references to Flaherty’s Inuit helpers catching live silver foxes “for our motion picture.” Christopher 151, 291, 427 note 13.

^{xxxiv} An opening title card catches an echo of this first title: “The mysterious Barren Lands – desolate, boulder strewn, wind-swept – illimitable spaces which top the world.”

^{xxxv} Christopher, 382; Rotha, 42-44 gives more details colored by Flaherty’s account in “Robert Flaherty Talking” in *The Cinema, 1950*. There is disagreement between David Flaherty’s account of its opening and others, from which it would seem that it did modestly at first at The Capitol in New York. It must have picked up later in distribution in the U.S. for Lasky to be so enthusiastic about it. Christopher 385/6 and 437 note 12, and Fleming 241 for Mackenzie’s visit and claim.

^{xxxvi} Gramophones and the sounds they produced were as familiar to the Inuit of the Hudson Bay area as guns. They were a staple form of entertainment that Flaherty provided on his earlier expeditions.

^{xxxvii} *People From Our Side*, by Peter Pitseolak, Hurtig 1975; *The Last Gentleman Adventurer, Coming of Age in the Arctic*, by Edward Beauclerk Maurice, Houghton Mifflin 1995-2004; *The Incredible Eskimo: Life Among the Barren Land Eskimo*, by Raymond de Cocola and Paul King, Hancock House 1986 – the last two are later than Flaherty’s visit to Port Harrison, but they describe the same world.

^{xxxviii} We should also note the difference between the Canadian and Alaskan environments.

^{xxxix} The Hudson’s Bay Company established a post at Port Harrison soon after Flaherty’s arrival in 1920. It was a profitable station for both companies. Christopher, 333, 432 note 24.

^{xl} Reading Christopher’s biography, which ends with the release of *Nanook of the North*, and the extraordinary wealth of detail laid out in his end notes, one may indulge a regret that Flaherty did not put together a different kind of film of his adventures in the north. Of course, *Nanook* is a national treasure in its own right. But what an opportunity there was for Flaherty to record all

that was actually taking place in the world of the Inuit when he lived among them. What a priceless film that would have been! The large collection of Flaherty's still photographs held at The Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center at Claremont School of Theology, California, gives an idea of the "documentary value" – to use Grierson's phrase – of his still camera work.

^{xl} Calder-Marshall ends his chapter on *Tabu* with this paragraph: "By Rotha and Wright, *Tabu* is regarded as a meretricious film, with 'special effects' of fake moons and rubber sharks shot in Hollywood to heighten the cinematic effect. As an outsider, I can say that as a young man, *Tabu* gave me a vision of the world as vivid as that which *Nanook* had produced in me earlier and more vivid than *Moana*. Perhaps this was because I was beginning to write novels, and not documentaries. Perhaps it was just that I, like most filmgoers, enjoyed the fictional employment of the imagination." *The Innocent Eye*, 129.

^{xli} In some versions *Nanook of the North* is presented with a distracting and misleading foreword stating that the film is generally regarded as the first film from which all others attempting to bring real life to the screen have stemmed. Paul Rotha was among those who were inspired by Flaherty and his biography does justice to that inspiration. But the British documentary movement in Britain initiated by Grierson took a different path altogether. Grierson admired Flaherty's gift with the camera but rejected his romantic approach to his subject matter.

^{xlii} The Shell Oil Company in Britain created a film unit of their own that followed Grierson's ideas for the documentary genre (<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/513754/>). For several years in the last decades of the 20th Century Mobil Oil were generous donors to the documentary output of the Public Broadcasting Company. But as Misrahi says in *Unzipped*, if he were now to produce a line of fur clothes he would be stoned off Seventh Avenue and sponsorship of documentary on the fur trade by a major international fur company would be unthinkable. At the height of the television networks' production of documentaries, sponsorship by commercial companies was forbidden. The cost was born by the networks as a public service.

^{xliii} Rotha, 187.

^{xliv} Christopher, 323.

^{xlv} Grierson was not, as most cineastes assert, anticipating his later use of the term "documentary" to describe a film genre. In his earliest writings, in which he tried to define this emerging genre, for which he was a passionate advocate, Grierson at first called it "the Natural cinema," (in 1929) and "the cinema of public affairs" (in 1930). Even in writing about Flaherty in 1931 and 1932, he used terms like "the naturalist tradition in cinema." ... "For we have to build on the actual," he continued. "The medium itself insists on the actual." It was only later in that year of 1932, in "First Principles of Documentary," that he settled, reluctantly, on the "D" word: "Documentary is a clumsy description, but let it stand." Flaherty died (1951) before the new medium of television had taken full possession of people's home life. In the 1960s the three main American networks each developed their own documentary units as an essential part of their public service obligations. This new source of funding with its built-in means of mass distribution transformed the field of documentary beyond the imagination of its earliest practitioners.

^{xlvi} *The Odyssey of a Film-Maker*, by Frances Hubbard Flaherty, 1984

^{xlvii} Marcus, Alan Rudolph: *Relocating Eden, The Image and Politics of Inuit Exile in the Canadian Arctic*, University Press of New England 1995. That the Nyla of *Nanook of the North* gave birth to a boy fathered by Flaherty after he had left Port Harrison became more widely known when the Canadian Government passed laws requiring the Inuit to adopt western names.

Suddenly a large number of Inuit Flahertys appeared. These were Robert and Nyla's grandchildren. Marcus focuses on the Canadian Government's policy of relocating the Inuit from Hudson Bay over a thousand miles north to Resolution Bay and Grise Fiord in 1953-55. This included the Flaherty-Inuit grandchildren. See also *The Long Exile* by Melanie McGrath, Knopf 2007.

^{xlviii} Rotha, 274.