



## The Rugged Island: A Shetland Lyric

Dir. Jenny Gilbertson (née Brown) | UK | 1933 | N/C U | 1h approx. + short (extract from *In Sheep's Clothing* (1932))

Performing live: Inge Thomson, Catriona Macdonald

7.30pm on Wednesday 20 March 2024

Screening material courtesy of National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive

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A very different life was envisaged for Jenny Brown (1902-1990) the daughter of a Glasgow iron and steel merchant. A middleclass life for a young woman could have comprised of bridge, dances, golf and accompanying her mother to events. But Jenny wanted none of it and instead became one of Scotland – nay, Britain's - first female filmmakers. She filmed a Shetland crofting community in the 1930s then, in the 1970s when she was in her seventies, she made films with the Inuit communities of Arctic Canada. *The Rugged Island* (1933) was Jenny's first and only work of fiction. However, it is a work of self-assurance because it is rooted in the friendships and community life she had fitted into in Heylor, a small settlement in northwest Mainland Shetland.

Jenny first visited Shetland in 1919 on a family holiday when they rented the manse at Hillswick. She befriended Phemie (Euphemia) Peterson who knitted for the Gilbertsons. Phemie was a bit older than Jenny but age never got in the way of friendship (indeed in her seventies when she was in the Arctic her great friends were younger Inuit men). The Gilbertson family returned to Shetland for numerous holidays. Later, Jenny would travel there on her own, staying with the now married Phemie and Johnny Clark and his sister Tina at the croft over the hill in Heylor which sits on Ronas Voe (a voe is a long, narrow inlet of water).

Jenny had trained as a teacher and when she picked up a film camera, a 16mm Cine Kodak, she saw making and showing films as a way to teach. She wrote to Phemie to ask if she could

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film them at the croft. In January 1931 she went to Shetland and began filming the crofting year. The first few months of the making of *A crofter's life in Shetland* (1931), her first hour long documentary, are recorded in her 1931 diary, which is held by the National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive. Like her Arctic diaries, written some 40 years after, there is some reference to filming. However, in the main they describe her way of being with others and the joy she finds in her growing relationships. This to me is the magic of Gilbertson whereby her friendships infuse her aesthetic and ethical filmmaking choices.



Made in the summer of 1933 she referred to Rugged Island as a “collaboration”. The actors were the friends she had made in Heylor. It was only the love interest, Enge (played by Enge Stout), who was a professional actor. The hero was beautifully and stirringly played by Johnny Gilbertson, the Hillswick crofter and friend who had helped her with her filming for a good few years. They would marry once this film was completed. His family (who appear in Jenny’s earlier films, notably his father in *Da maakin o’ a keshie* in 1932) play his character Johnny’s family. The Clarks play Enge’s family. His best pal Andrew “of Stucca” played Andrew who woos his sister Maggie. That everyone knew each other and felt comfortable with Jenny is maybe why they feel so natural in the film. If a director and a crew with all their cameras and lights had come up from the south, would they have seen such beautifully understated performances? It’s really only Jenny with her investment in friendships that could realise this vision.

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Jenny's response to the landscape offers some stunning compositions, such as the opening sequence with the lovers walking along the banks (cliffs) and ponds (watery peat land) and the subsequent lamb rescue. Her slow appreciation of the rhythms of crofting life also reveals the oneness of people and land, strikingly handled in the edit that follows Johnny's rubber boots in the ploughing scene. Similarly, Jenny's lingering camera shows the pleasures the non-human characters (Flora the dog and Caddie the lamb) bring to life. John Grierson (1898 – 1972) called Jenny "a real illuminator" and the screen lights up with moments of connection, such as the supper scenes at the beginning of the film, showing the gladness of the respective families as they sit down for their supper of freshly caught fish. Similarly, during the flitting (taking home the) peats, Enge's huff with Johnny is immediately forgotten as she and Maggie gleefully set about making tea. The stopping of time to make tea on a stove is something much loved by Shetlanders – and, as we find later, Inuit. The delight Jenny takes in these moments give her films warmth and spirit and something identifiable to the communities she filmed.

Made on the cusp of when silent film moved into sound there are two versions of this film. Jenny believed in this film to the degree that she sank £100 pounds (a lot of money in 1934) into a score by composer Kenneth Leslie-Smith. Days after she signed a distribution deal with Zenifilms, the company went bust meaning she would never make that money back. Undeterred, Jenny and Johnny married then headed to Canada to tour this and her earlier films to the Scottish diaspora.

On their return to Hillswick, motherhood then war put an end to making films. Johnny joined the front before being invalided out whereby Jenny turned to teaching for an income.

In Heylor, things had changed. Johnny Clark died in 1935 and his widow Phemie and sister Tina had to leave the croft. They moved back to her folks at the Packin where a byre was converted into a home. The idyll of the croft at Heylor was no longer reality but a memory.

We have Janet McBain the film archivist of the then Scottish Screen Archive to thank for this and Jenny's other films not just being a memory but beautiful preserved realities. The Shetland Archive's hold Jenny's papers and in them are Janet's letters of the 1980s, where Janet gently but resolutely pursues Gilbertson in an effort to obtain the 'cans' of *The Rugged Island* and her other films before Jenny's death in 1990. Filmmakers die and amongst the

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stuff families must sort through, things get lost, mistaken, never returned or thrown out. Gladly, Jenny's family were unburdened from this responsibility and Janet saw to the films' safe-keeping, preservation and digitisation.

This screening at HippFest will bring new audience to Jenny Gilbertson and with it a new imagining of its sonic landscape by Inge Thomson and the fiddle of Catriona Macdonald (Jenny loved the fiddle and greatly respected Catriona's mentor Tom Anderson). Once more, Jenny's kin, the Clarks and the Gilbertsons, and the croft at Heylor come back to life and the joy Jenny felt at being with them.

### DR SHONA MAIN

*Shona is a writer, filmmaker and kinmaker. She started filming her community in 2012 and made her first film Clavel (2014) about the crofter James Robert Sinclair. This stirred an interest in the work of Jenny Gilbertson that resulted in her doctoral research into Gilbertson's filmmaking approach. Shona lives in Shetland and is chair of the Bigton Collective that runs Hymhus, an arts and wellbeing hub in the former kirk.*

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