

Overlaps: Island Post Office

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In the course of researching early twentieth century women photographers in Scotland, I began to notice periodic overlaps of subject matter, locations or even people in their photographs. From trawling their archives, I saw that Edinburgh photographer Violet Banks (1896-1985) and American photographer and folklorist Margaret Fay Shaw (1903-2004) had separately photographed the same post and telegraph office on the Hebridean island of Eriskay.

Their interest in this particular building remains unrecorded. Whilst Shaw was living on the neighbouring island of South Uist (1930-36), for Banks her stop on Eriskay would likely have been part of a wider independent tour as she documented life on the Hebrides.

Why did they choose to document this island post office? Perhaps the two women photographers saw it representing one of the ways in which modernism had begun to infiltrate the traditions of highland and island life. The functions of post and telegraph office had been grafted, like a strange hybrid, onto a thatched, traditional blackhouse. Shaw has taken a series of three photographs of the building, with life and the seasons circumnavigating it. These are held by National Trust for Scotland at Canna House, Shaw's home. A woman and her cow walk past in one photograph. Children stand in the open door of the blackhouse behind the post office in a second photograph. Whilst the whitewashed walls of the post office are apparent in one, it is back to the bare stonework in another (Image 1). The sandy ground is turned over in one image; whilst holding a crop in another. Shaw noted on a duplicate of one of these photographs, held in Isobel Grant Photographic Collection, [1] that the post office was one of a series of 'slightly scattered houses'. Banks meanwhile, sets her camera slightly further away and to the right of the post office, below the small rise of scrub ground it sits upon. Her photograph, *View of thatched cottages, telegraph office*, (c.1920-1930) (Image 2) which can be found in Historic Environment Scotland Collections, captures the building in mid distance. She chooses to show the telegraph wires shooting out from the poles and rising upwards to the top left of frame. In the house behind the post office, like one



Image 1
 02363 Post Office, Èirisgeigh (Eriskay)
 Margaret Fay Shaw, c. 1930s
 Courtesy National Trust for Scotland © Canna House



Image 2
 DP 050868 Eriskay Telegraph Office
 Violet Banks c.1920-1930s
 Courtesy Historic Environment Scotland © Estate of Violet Banks



Image 3

Postcard: *Post and Telegraph Office, Eriskay, South Uist*
Photographer unknown. Year unknown.

of Shaw's, she shows the resident children. This time, instead of the doorway, they lean against the wall, facing forward.

Shaw and Banks were potentially not the only people to photograph this scene. The *Post and Telegraph Office, Eriskay, South Uist* can still be purchased as an original photograph postcard via eBay, (Image 3) printed by SS Photographs Blackpool. The photographer is not credited. The photograph's close crop and simple composition and framing of subject differ from those taken by Banks and Shaw. Replicated as a postcard, the image of the post office becomes a marketable view of Scottish island life as somewhat of a novelty and potentially a tourist draw. An anachronism, particularly to city eyes, that the most modern of inventions- the telegraph with its promise of communication and connection- could be found on a remote isle. A postal ouroboros if you will; its image printed on a postcard, to be posted through the system it represents and to be consumed elsewhere.

In considering the modalities of this island post office and how it has existed, the next move is from site of production to archive. Banks' and Shaw's original photographs of the post office appear in domestic photograph albums which form part of their respective archives. In a further overlap, Shaw's photograph appears in the collection of Dr Isobel Frances Grant [2], held by Edinburgh Central Library. Whilst the word 'archive' may appear stable, it must be noted that the trajectory towards becoming part of an archive can be more precarious. Banks' work was discovered by an antiques dealer in the bottom drawer of a dresser on sale [3]. Beyond the physical archive, Shaw's photograph digitally exists on Am Baile. [4]



Image 4

*Post Office and Tower, The Clachan, Empire Exhibition, Scotland
1938 Printed by the official souvenir manufacturers, Valentines
& Sons Limited (Dundee and London)*

The phenomenon of this island post office continues with one further iteration, taking it from island periphery to city life. It appears to have inspired a heritage copy as part of An Clachan, 'The Highland Village', at Glasgow's 1938 Empire Exhibition in Bellahouston Park. Official Empire Exhibition ephemera, in the form of postcards and small souvenir cards, again bought on EBay, show the post office, illustrating the same style of stone walls and thatched roof. This time it was part of a larger blackhouse. The whitewash can be seen to extend slightly past the first door of this building. The surface delineation moves to bare stone, denoting that here the remaining section of cottage had a different function- that of a bookshop.

One postcard (Image 4) in particular shows the fiction of the scene, asserting the past and future simultaneously. Beyond the trees, the futuristic art deco of Tait's Tower of the Empire can be seen, surpassing the original dichotomy of the modern telegraph versus traditional cottage, by creating a further anomaly of architectural dissonance.

A further postcard (Image 5), is entitled 'Royal Party interested in Post Office window, An Clachan, Empire Exhibition, 1938'. King George VI is in frock coat, with Queen Elizabeth II, dressed in white formal wear following. As King of the United Kingdom and the Dominions of the British Commonwealth, this official visit to Glasgow, then known as the Second City of the Empire, signified his place as its Sovereign.

This short analysis creates transversals between origin (the island post office in its cultural context), original artefact (documentation by Banks, Shaw and unknown photographer),



Image 5

An Clachan, Empire Exhibition, Scotland, 1938
by courtesy of Gaumont-British News

archives (physical and digital), systems of distribution (postcards, eBay) and commodification of the origin as cultural myth (post office, An Clachan). By drawing out repetitions, appropriations and entanglements, the researcher can begin to trouble singular narratives around context, use and reception. In this case, the overlaps of the island post office show it firstly as a symbol of changing highlands and islands life; then trace it through to being a questionable empirical asset performing highland life. In order to recover the past, any singular story around an artefact requires being unfixed, by drawing out parallel histories in order to create new narratives.

Footnotes

- [1] Am Baile, 'Slightly Scattered Houses', Margaret Fay Shaw, Edinburgh and Scottish Collection, Edinburgh Central Library <https://www.ambaile.org.uk/search/?searchQuery=isobel+grant+collection+eriskay>
- [2] Dr Isobel Frances Grant (1887-1983) was a collector of traditional Scottish life, and founded the Highland Folk Museum in 1935.
- [3] P67-78, 'Vernacular Building 32', Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group 2008-2009, ISSN:0267-3088
- [4] Am Baile, 'Slightly Scattered Houses', Margaret Fay Shaw, Edinburgh and Scottish Collection, Edinburgh Central Library https://www.ambaile.org.uk/en/search/do_similar_search.html?md_16=I+F+Grant+Photographic+Archive