

Robert J. Flaherty (1884-1951)



One of the few photographs of Flaherty during his arctic days. Courtesy of The Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center at The School of Theology at Claremont, California.

Robert J. Flaherty is probably best remembered for his first film, *Nanook of the North*. Less well known are his experiences as an arctic prospector-explorer on the Mackenzie expeditions and the exploration of the remote Belcher Islands.

Eldest of the seven children of Robert H. and Susan Kloeckner Flaherty, Robert J. was born in Michigan in 1884. He left school at 12 and with his father moved to Rainy Lake. Two years later, the entire family moved to Burleigh Mine in Lake of the Woods. Father and son went on numerous prospecting expeditions throughout northern Ontario. Flaherty attended Upper Canada College in Toronto until 1900, when his father joined U.S. Steel and moved the family to Port Arthur. He then attended the Michigan College of Mines, where he met Frances Hubbard, who, in 1914, was to become his wife and eventually the mother of their three daughters.

Of average stature, with slow, gentle movements, Flaherty nevertheless had a monumental appearance. His body was bulky and strong. He had a broad, rugged face with brilliant blue eyes, ruddy cheeks, expansive mouth, solid chin and jaw, bull neck, and blond hair that turned to silver in later years.

Flaherty possessed a child-like inquisitiveness and was delighted by new discoveries. A fundamentally kind person, he

was generous and easy to know but given to short-lived temper tantrums. He was an accomplished storyteller and violinist. Although remarkably self-reliant, he was at the same time a lonely, sentimental man, seeking the company of others.

His love for a primitive, unsophisticated way of life developed early, and as a young man, Flaherty pursued a career as explorer, prospector, and railroader. He worked in a Michigan copper mine and for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, and he prospected for marble on Vancouver Island and for iron ore at Lake Huron and the Mattagami River. It was while his father was employed by Mackenzie and Mann in Toronto that Flaherty met Sir William Mackenzie.

Mackenzie was building a railroad across Canada — the Canadian Northern (now the Canadian National Railway) — and looking for iron ore and other mineral deposits. It was Mackenzie's judgement of men and his receptiveness to new ideas that helped start Flaherty on his career as a filmmaker.

Setting out on his first expedition to survey the Nastopone Islands, Flaherty took the railroad to Ground Hog, travelled by canoe down the Ground Hog, Mattagami, and Moose rivers to Moose Factory, sailed to Charlton Island, then went by schooner to Fort George. With a party of Indians, he continued by

sledge to Cape Jones. From the Great Whale Inuit camp, Flaherty travelled 400 km by sledge through the isolated sub-Arctic to survey Taylor and Gilles islands, but he found no important deposits of iron ore. It was from the Inuit that Flaherty learned of the Belcher Islands. Their descriptions led him to believe he would find mineral deposits there. He reported his findings to Mackenzie, who excitedly asked him to make a second expedition.

Flaherty set out on this 19-month-long expedition in 1911. His ship was wrecked trying to reach the Belchers, so he instead journeyed by sledge with a party of Inuit across the barrens of the Ungava Peninsula, the first to survey it from Fort Chimo to Lake Minto. During the summer of 1912 he made a cross-section of an area of over 30 million hectares. Upon returning to Lower Canada, he again reported his findings to Mackenzie. Although at the time his survey results were thought to be mineralogically unimportant and economically unfeasible to work, their significance was later realized.

Mackenzie, impressed by the Inuit tales, insisted Flaherty should go to the Belcher Islands by proper ship. He commissioned *The Laddie* and equipped it for an 18-month expedition. Before setting sail in August 1913, Flaherty decided to take a movie camera, along with the glass-plate still camera he had taken on previous trips. His only formal training in filmmaking consisted of a three-week course in Rochester. *The Laddie* sailed along the coast of Labrador, through the Hudson Strait to Baffin Land, then put into winter camp for ten months at Adadjuak Bay. Early

in 1914 Flaherty began filming Inuit women, igloo building, conjuring dances, sledging, and seal hunting.

In the summer of 1914, with the aid of highly accurate Inuit maps, Flaherty mapped the Belcher Islands but found no ore of high enough quality to warrant mining. He spent the winter of 1914-15 shaping his film, but he thought it crude and uninteresting and vowed to attempt a better one. From his third expedition, Flaherty received two rewards: the Canadian government named the largest Belcher Island for him, and he became interested in the possibility of filmmaking as a career.

A fourth trip to the Inuit was undertaken mainly for filming. With over 21 000 metres of exposed film, Flaherty returned to Toronto and tried to edit his footage, but the resulting film was not what he had hoped for. He was an explorer and mineralogist, not a filmmaker. His aim had been to produce footage that he could incorporate with lantern slides of his photographs into an illustrated lecture.

In 1920 Flaherty met Captain Thierry Mallet, of Revillon Frères, who agreed to finance a filmmaking expedition to the company's sub-arctic fur trading post, Port Harrison on Cape Dufferin. Departing in August 1920, he travelled up the Innusuk River with a group of Inuit who had agreed to participate in the project. He filmed under the harshest of circumstances for man, camera, and film, journeying as far as 960 km to shoot a bear-hunting scene. He returned home in August 1921.

Nanook of the North (1920-1921) was the beginning of Flaherty's filmmaking career. His passion to communicate his experiences resulted in other films, in all of which a recurrent theme occurs: through their struggle with nature, human beings are purified, cleansed, and achieve maturity and dignity. Often made under equally difficult circumstances, his films include *Moana* (1923-1925), *The Pottery Maker* (1925), *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1927), *Industrial Britain* (1931), *Man of Aran* (1932-1934), *Elephant Boy* (1935-1937), *The Land* (1939-1941), *Louisiana Story* (1946-1948), and *Guernica* (unfinished, 1949).

Robert J. Flaherty died at his home, Black Mountain Farm, near Brattleboro, Vermont, in July 1951. His achievements under incredibly severe hardships assure his place not only in the history of Canada, but of the world. As an arctic explorer, Flaherty's contributions were significant. Today, untold wealth is mined in Ungava and the Belchers. As a filmmaker, Flaherty's contributions were monumental, creating a documentary film tradition that continues to engage audiences and to influence filmmakers.

FURTHER READINGS

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Photograph of Allakariallak (Nanook) at Port Harrison post, with record player, 1920-21, Inoucdjouac. Courtesy of The Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center at The School of Theology at Claremont, California.