

## Document Citation

Title	<b>A guide to the appreciation of Robert Flaherty's pictural saga of the sea : 'Man of Aran'</b>
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	study guide
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Flaherty, Robert
Film Subjects	Man of Aran, Flaherty, Robert, 1934



A GUIDE TO THE APPRECIATION OF ROBERT FLAHERTY'S  
PICTORIAL SAGA OF THE SEA

## "MAN OF ARAN"

### THE STORY

MEASURED by modern standards, life on Aranmore was hard. But the people smiled when they were told that they had been left behind by the march of progress. Life, perhaps, was primitive, and they were a primitive folk. The joy of real living, however, was theirs. Raged the sea never so fiercely, dragging at the fishermen in their frail curraghs; poor the crop sometimes from the hardly-won soil, life was the life their fore-fathers had lived when Progress was not knocking at the door of possibility.

Tiger King; Maggie, his wife; and Michael, their son, were typical of the island folk. Their humble cottage home, built of the limestone of the island, sheltered as happy a family as Aranmore could boast. Together they fought fierce fights against the elements and against the difficulties of winning a livelihood from hard nature.

On the limestone outcrop forming the island, soil was a rarity, and while Tiger pulverised the stone as best he could and laid it in furrows, Maggie toiled up from the shore with baskets of sea-weed, searching in the crevices for scanty soil formed of disintegrated rock and decayed matter from fish and birds. This they placed on the seaweed and hoped for a harvest of potatoes and, perhaps, something more.

Michael was more of a fisher-lad than an agriculturist. With crab as bait, he perched himself upon a jutting crag three hundred feet and more above the sea. Guiding the line between his toes, he ran it down to the water and fished to his heart's content, often with intense satisfaction.

One day a rare sight aroused the happy fisherlad. Into the little cove below had strayed a basking shark, a monster such as sometimes ran to thirty feet in length and yielded from its liver six to eight barrels of oil. The news he quickly gave to his father, and Tiger with others of the crew manned the frail curragh—built of thin strips of wood and hide—and put out to sea to catch the shark.

For many years the fishermen of Aran had fought the shark as the fish went into a shoal past the coast of Galway from the southern seas. It was a bright, sunny day, and the sun fish—as the basker was known—was swimming near the surface. The upright dorsal fin of the fish wore pointers as Tiger stood, harpoon in hand, until the moment to strike.

The barb of the harpoon infuriated the shark. With a rush he sought the bottom to rub off the weapon and three hundred feet of line ran out as he swept below. Tiger held on until the fish moved. Then came the long tussle between the enraged fish and a crafty crew, anxious to kill, but careful to avoid the savage blows from the tail. Today Tiger won, and ashore Maggie was long busy extracting the precious oil from the ton and a half of liver.

The seas of Aran are not always as sunlit and peaceful as on the day when Tiger and his mates fought the basking shark. It was Michael's ambition to "be in at the death" one day. His father would not allow him to take the risk. Besides, on the day that Michael was most persistent, Tiger did not like the look of the weather.

A cloudy day foretold a southwest blow. At home Michael was

aroused by the rising wind and rapidly darkening sky. He joined his mother, and, buffeted by the fast-growing gale, they went to the headland and gazed seaward. No sign of the curragh; nothing to be seen but "white horses" dashing shoreward.

Sweeping in, impelled to fury by the gale, the Atlantic smote Aranmore with an angry roar. As the tide grew, the wind lashed the waters in fury against the rocky bulwarks of the island. The waves broke and hissed as they pounded the shore. Flung hundreds of feet upwards into the murk and the gloom, the sea fell back and gathered strength for another assault.

Maggie and her boy gazed with fear at the fury of the storm. Tiger and his mates were as good and as fearless seamen as those Irish who hundreds of years before had crossed to Cornwall in equally fragile curraghs to barter. But today saw the Atlantic in its fiercest mood. Rank upon rank the impatient white-crested waves pressed to the shore, treacherous, death-dealing in their grasp.

Then came the curragh, making for the only landing place—a frail craft for such an exploit. Maggie and Michael yelled their loudest to direct the sturdy rowers fighting their way yard by yard to safety. Lifted by an angry wave, the curragh struck the shore. The men scrambled free, and then the sea claimed the boat. The ribs of the curragh were flung at their feet.

But the Man of Aran was ashore. The little family looked with sadness at the wreckage, and then, as oft before, turned home with the light of hope gleaming in their faces.



### THE SETTING

The Aran Islands are three rocky isles, 30 miles by steamer from Galway, on the coast of Ireland, approximately at the latitude of Dublin or Liverpool. The wind-swept cliffs, against which the breaking waves rise to spectacular heights, form a natural breakwater at the entrance of Galway Bay. According to *The Encyclopedia Americana*, which has an unusually interesting and complete article on the islands, the inhabitants are "perhaps the most primitive people of Europe."

The natural language of the islanders is Gaelic, but they also speak English, as shown in the photoplay. Their religion is a curious mixture of Christianity and Druidism.

"In recent years," the article in the *Americana* points out, "the islands have been a hunting-ground for philologists, linguists, artists . . . who find here open chapters . . . which have been long since closed elsewhere. The islands were a favorite resort of the late John Millington Synge, the Irish playwright, who made them the scene of his drama *Riders to the Sea*." It is easy to see why this locale attracted Mr. Flaherty and why it proved to be a treasure-trove of documentary cinema.

### THE DIRECTOR

Robert J. Flaherty, director of *Man of Aran*, as well as its producer and cinematographer, is the most famous maker of documentary films. He originated this type of photoplay in

1920-22 with *Nanook of the North*, a classic picture of Eskimo life made on the northeast coast of Hudson Bay.

Mr. Flaherty was born in Iron Mountain, Michigan, February 16, 1884. He was educated at the Upper Canada College in Toronto and at the Michigan College of Mines. As a youth he showed his bent for exploration and spent several years along the west coast of Vancouver Island and in northern Canada. He led four expeditions into subarctic eastern Canada under the sponsorship of Sir William Mackenzie. He explored and mapped the large island archipelago known as Belcher Islands, Hudson Bay. He explored and mapped the unknown barren lands of northern Ungava, making two sea-to-sea crossings of the Peninsula in 1910-16.

The background of a director's experience determines the type of picture in which he excels, and Mr. Flaherty's background is that of an explorer and discoverer. His entry into the motion-picture field was as a result of persuading a great fur-trading company, Revillon Freres, to sponsor a new type of film. The film turned out to be *Nanook of the North*, which made motion-picture history. After more than twenty years, this film is still widely used as an aid in teaching Eskimo life.

Mr. Flaherty's career as a documentary cinematographer and producer has carried him to far places—from the Arctic to the South Seas and from the

Aran Islands to India. He made *Moana*, with natives of the Samoan Islands, in 1923-25. He collaborated with MGM in 1927-28 in the production of *White Shadows in the South Seas*. He co-produced (with W. F. Murnau) the beautiful picture *Tabu*, made in Tahiti in 1929-31. Then came the classic *Man of Aran*, which he made under the sponsorship of Gaumont-British in 1932-34.

In 1935 Mr. Flaherty broadened his reputation by co-directing *Elephant Boy*, based on Kipling's *Jungle Book* story, *Toomai of the Elephants*. He filmed this in India under the aegis of Alexander Korda.

Mr. Flaherty's experimental activities have included the development of a new process in color photography in collaboration with Maude Adams and a documentary depicting New York City in 1927. His writings include two monographs in the *Geographical Review* (American Geographical Society), *The Belcher Islands of Hudson Bay, their Discovery and Exploration*, and *Two Traverses Across Ungava Peninsula, Labrador*, in 1918; five articles in the *World's Work* on exploration, in 1922-23; (with his wife) *My Eskimo Friends*, in 1924; *Samoa*, in German, in 1932; *The Captain's Chair*, a novel, in 1938; *White Master*, in 1939; *A Film-Maker's Odyssey*, in 1939; *The Islands That are Not There*, in 1939.

We present in this guide Mr. Flaherty's own account of how he produced *Man of Aran*.

## THE MAKING OF THE FILM

BY ROBERT FLAHERTY

**A**ROUND the isles of Aran the great seas usually come in threes, rolling in one after another; then there is a bit of lull while the smaller seas come rolling in. Then suddenly, as if it had only been waiting to gather strength, comes the first of the three great seas; again

the lull; again the great sea. But oftentimes when one expects the lull, it never comes. Instead, a great mountainous wave may rise up unexpectedly and come rushing in as though bent on utter destruction. Yet always, inexorably, the sea moves in, encroaching upon the

land. Its true force can never be gauged by either lull or mountainous wave. Its power lies in the constancy of lull and wave, the never-ending beat of pounding surf against the limestone rocks, year in, year out, age upon age.

So with *Man of Aran*, a saga



## MINIATURE STILLS FROM "MAN OF ARAN" — TO ILLUSTRATE WRITTEN AND ORAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE FILM



ABOVE: Man of Aran and his family. How does their mode of life compare with your own? Note the rugged, determined look in their faces. How does the lighting, shadowing half of the face, contribute to this effect? BELOW: Maggie and the baby. Note the softer look resulting from the low angle of illumination, which lights up the smile and emphasizes it.

ABOVE: The fisherlad, Michael. Note the patches in his trousers. How did Mr. Flaherty build sympathy for the lad? Is the boy likable? BELOW: How do light and shadow create mood and atmosphere in the scenes where Maggie carries seaweed?

ABOVE: Director Flaherty at work. Apply to him some of the criteria for judging the work of a director as listed in the March, 1940 issue of *Group Discussion Guide*. BELOW: What makes this shot impressive? From what angle was it made? Why? Does it create suspense?

ABOVE: Beaching the curragh. Note the contrast of the dark figures and the boat against the white breakers. Make a list of other contrasts in the film, and tell which you like best. BELOW: Why does Mr. Flaherty make so much of the capturing of the shark? Did you enjoy the episode? What primitive use is made of the oil from the shark? From what other large sea animal was oil once derived extensively?