EXPLORER AND TELLER OF CELLULOID TALES
JAMES WILSON – VETERAN INTERNATIONAL
FILMMAKER AND PRODUCER FOR BBC SCOTLAND

Kenny Munro

Abstract

The importance of documentary filmmaking as a living medium and its historic contribution to recording and preserving Scotland’s culture and international viewpoint cannot be overstated. But before the digital age, where was all this film material stored and what has survived? The current debate on film restoration and public access is ongoing and is illustrated through this article with my personal introduction to veteran BBC film producer James (Jim) Wilson whose enterprising career has documented so much of the twentieth century. Reflecting on this unique creative achievement, the historical context and value of his films, and those of others to society, deserve closer scrutiny.

Kenny Munro is a visual artist, a director of the Sir Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust and previous chairman of Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop. He has undertaken public art commissions in Scotland, Germany and France and published on a range of environmental arts topics. His recent contribution to Walter Stephen’s book on Sir Patrick Geddes, published by Luath Press (Learning from the Lasses) focuses on an associate of Geddes, theosophist, Annie Besant and also refers to his own project work in India.

He previously collaborated with George Wyllie, and filmmaker Ed O’Donnelly from Arran, who has contributed to Munro’s film projects created in Australia and Bengal. They explored the film – poem genre with the marine environment, supported by the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and a bursary from the Scottish Association of Marine Science at Dunstaffnage. Films also include commissions from the Stanza poetry festival and East Neuk festival. Most recently a short film with O’Donnelly entitled Picture Yourself has been inspired by historic archive film and the musical composition ‘Swallow Tail’ by musician Martyn Bennett. Relating to this article, Munro has captured a series of film interviews with Jim Wilson.
Questions need to be raised regarding government policy on film preservation and how Lottery funding can further support film restoration. Clarification is required, in this case, of possible relaxation to certain BBC licensing agreements to stimulate cooperation. Discussions are in progress which highlight the growing demand for more democratisation and further public access to these celluloid assets which can be quickly forgotten or destroyed. It is therefore encouraging that new partnerships are being forged to identify and restore the vast film collections. Building on the very significant activities of Scottish Screen Archive/National Library of Scotland. They deliver services on several levels including online film archive research/restoration facilities and exhibitions. But there is still a great deal of work to be done in this field. The Wilson film legacy is one such area and a meeting with BBC has been arranged to discuss the future potential of celebrating this special film collection.

Keywords: Scottish film; Geddes; BBC Scotland Producer James Wilson.

‘Odysseus made his journeys first and then Homer wrote about them. To discover and to reveal – that’s the way every artist, every poet, every painter and every sculptor, sets about his business. All art is, I suppose, a kind of exploring’

Robert Flaherty (1898–1951)

Introduction

Currently, The Sir Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust (Edinburgh) is working with BBC Scotland Archive department to source and restore examples of James Wilson’s work, in particular, to start with, his films on Patrick Geddes, John Grierson and Hugh MacDiarmid. This has received encouragement from the Saltire Society. The Trust has viewed a working copy of Jim’s striking BBC film depiction of Patrick Geddes, entitled; An Eye for the Future, and recognise the importance of saving and hopefully restoring this and other films for educational and public benefit.

Over a ten year period I have been fortunate to get to know veteran Edinburgh filmmaker James Wilson. Our meeting, like some of the best experiences, had that feeling of serendipity – linked, initially, to a shared interest in the ecologist Patrick Geddes, but offering much more with new perspectives of culture depicted in films by Jim Wilson, revealing facts and stimulating ideas which enrich a sense of Scotland’s confidence at this present
Jim’s meeting with explorer and filmmaker Robert Flaherty and other major figures provided a beacon of inspiration for him during his varied career. I’ve been consistently impressed by his breadth of experience and infectious enthusiasm for the ongoing international significance of Scottish culture and how he’s seen it evolve, in film and print, over a lifetime. Film continues to have magical and mercurial qualities, often capturing profound and poetic fragments of its time, holding a mirror to the moment and maturing as historic archive. There is now a crucial need for his surviving films to be identified and preserved for posterity. I hope this will inform others of his film output which is of collective interest to the Nation.

This crucial work might be undertaken by a film producer / journalist or PhD student whose research will reveal the lifestyle and process of filmmaking for TV fifty years ago.

The history and evolution of BBC radio, post 1945, and film production for television made by BBC Scotland can be tracked and was significantly influenced by the energetic life of Jim Wilson. His career evolved from film journalism to BBC Radio then film production for the Documentary Department of BBC Scotland. Now in his ninties he reveals through a series of film interviews his mission and passion for the profession he relished. Ongoing discussions highlight the personalities that he met and worked with, exploring international locations where several dramatic assignments were undertaken. The opportunity for this article has emerged from discussing the topics and personalities within the many ‘shooting scripts’ which he has made available to me. At this historic time his experience and contribution can
reveal his unique perspective to a new audience, illustrated by a series of short film sketches, which I’ve created since 2004 in collaboration with Ed O’Donnelly. Significantly, Jim Wilson brought ‘current affairs’ and culture programmes to the weekly *Tuesday Documentary* slot in BBC television broadcasting, in the 1970s. He reflects on a kaleidoscopic life and creative pragmatism; even his few regrets and disappointments are constructively frank. Interestingly, he told me that a parallel career beckoned for a while and recently he diffidently showed me two of his novels from the early 1960s, as hardback publications. One entitled *Interrupted Journey* which reflects on military intrigue in Cyprus, and another, *Straw in the Wind* explores his passion and family associations to the early aviators and barnstorming public events often staged with spectacular aerial displays. This extension of his ‘visual thinking’ and imagination informs an aptitude for writing screenplays and film production.

In his youth, Jim Wilson anticipated the growing power of radio, then television, applying journalistic research and his imagination to communicate many aspects of Scottish affairs, but importantly addressing its significance to contemporary audiences. He presented science and art, education and entertainment to a new generation supplied by ‘tellers of celluloid tales’. The themes were strong but Jim’s ability as a story-teller had been forged in journalism and radio production. Many essential subjects as diverse as deer stalking, the discovery of North Sea oil and the Hudson’s Bay story were expressed to reveal the character of Scotland and the Scots, within an international context. All that and much more was brought to national television by a man who has suggested to me that he was in the right place at the right time. However, on reflection, his many historically themed films, although presented on prime-time television, may have been overshadowed by world focus on the American cultural media-marketing machine and the space race, in the 1960s, with its scientific and moral implications. His significant back-catalogue of around thirty films for TV and a substantial archive of paperwork offers a tangible testament to enterprise and endeavour which now requires to be given national recognition.

When we met again, in summer of 2014, he gave me a bulky folder headed with the name ‘Flaherty’, packed with correspondence revealing attempts to make a film in 1977 for Scottish television. Robert Flaherty was possibly the most significant master of the early ciné-verity artform in North America, within documentary film. Jim had met the explorer/filmmaker responsible for such classics as *Nanook of the North* and *Man of Aran*. One of Flaherty’s last films, *The Louisiana Story*, was brought to the Edinburgh Documentary Film Festival in 1949. In due course Jim was to become part of the Films of Scotland
committee eventually to become absorbed as part of Edinburgh Film Festival. That ambitious film on Flaherty was not realised but a project with Fred Zinneman was produced which had a poignant connection to Flaherty, in the mid-war years. At a time when filmmaking in Scotland was picking up momentum, ethnographic explorers such as Jenny Brown and Werner Kissling were creating powerful poetic films here on the dramatically changing social landscape promoting its attraction to filmmakers with global connections.

After service in India and Burma during World War 2 Jim Wilson returned home to commence a career in journalism, following the professional influence of Forsyth Hardy, an eminent film critic since the 1930s and a specialist in appreciation of Scandinavian film. The early years of Jim’s employment with the Scotsman newspaper, as film critic, enabled him to interview many British and Hollywood stars, often engaging them during their visits to the Edinburgh Festival. One of his many anecdotes reflects on being spell-bound by attending a live performance by Orson Welles at an early Edinburgh Festival. Jim went on to join the BBC Radio team in Aberdeen before a period on the BBC TV news desk from 1955 to 1959.

On a recent visit to Jim’s home I was able to conduct a film interview in which he expressed a sense of satisfaction, and also resignation. He gave me a bundle of scripts which I recognise as a treasure chest of archival value: wads of full-scap typewritten sheets, copies of shooting scripts, photos running back across his career, all neatly detailed with passionate efficiency. It’s good to know that Scottish Screen Archive - National Library of Scotland have also consulted with him and have copies of many of his papers and of his photo collection. It is important now to establish the number of his audio and film recordings which still exist.

The earliest script material which I received from him is dated 1960. This details three programmes for the Scottish Home Service: it is a series for BBC radio entitled, Scottish Life and Letters, introduced by Alastair Maclntyre and edited by Maurice Lindsay and George Bruce. Although transmitted from Edinburgh the pencil annotation identifies the transcript as belonging to James Wilson based in Aberdeen. The first synopsis, entitled Theatre in a Vacuum, identifies presenters W. Gordon Smith and Ronald Mavor discussing the plight of poor attendance in Scottish theatres. The second features poet Norman MacCaig introducing a collection of his latest poems entitled, A Common Grace. The narrator was Iain Cuthbertson. The concluding element in the programme, outlined in this script, features Sir Compton MacKenzie in conversation with Maurice Lindsay as they discuss Mackenzie’s recollected meeting with Lloyd Osbourne, the adopted son of Robert Louis Stevenson.
Serial numbers and dates for the transmissions will, in theory, enable the audio recordings to be traced. The title of a film he later made about Compton MacKenzie entitled: *Life that Late We Led* (1974) presents another subject worthy of research.

Producing these programmes gave Jim Wilson a very personal introduction to key figures within 20th century culture, echoing back to the Victorian era and revealing the adventurous spirit of individuals who experienced a tough life which he was able to record for posterity. These studio-based interviews had limitations, were formal and could be technically restricting. However, his appetite for on-location assignments with modern lightweight tape recorders enabled him to search out and explore. He captured unique glimpses into rare and exceptional lives of folk in isolated communities. He recalled a passion for field-work audio recording, and mentioned, on one occasion, that he found an ancient mariner in a village near Stonehaven who had worked on the whaling ships in extreme conditions in the early part of the 20th century. This is reminiscent of the invaluable work also undertaken by the School of Scottish Studies scholar, Hamish Henderson. Jim’s perception and congenial manner combined to enable the interviewee to become relaxed. He recalled, ‘that very quickly they forgot the microphone was there and revealed often much more poignant material than they realised’.

Jim had the visionary ability to jump from one unique assignment to another – in which he was often the instigator, producer and editor. Wilson was also to have a guiding role within the Edinburgh Film Guild which was co-founded by Forsyth Hardy. It gave focus to, now, one of the longest running Documentary film festivals as part of the Edinburgh International Film Festival. Particular importance was given to the significance of John Grierson with Forsyth Hardy’s book entitled *Grierson on Documentary* published in 1946. This helped ‘pull focus’ on a new international light beamed across Scotland with the emerging Edinburgh International Festival in 1947.

Growing up in the era of exploration, invention, international conflicts and aviation Jim often refers to his passion for all matters aeronautic. The energy expressed by travel, technology and exploration is clear in the theme. For example, his film *Trail Blazers*, the story of aerial conquest of the Atlantic, captured this spirit and was screened on BBC TV in April 1969.

As a youngster he experienced the early talkies and Hollywood blockbusters which evoked fantasy, assured full attendance at hundreds of picture houses across the UK and dispelled the dreich Scottish winters for a few hours each week. It was a drug and everyone was addicted! But Hollywood was not the only heart which beat the pulse of his life. He knew the environmental work of Muir, Geddes, Jenny Gilbertson, Tom Weir, Seton Gordon and
Frank Fraser Darling. Striking the correct mood for a new audience engaging with new formats of short ‘environmental’ TV productions must have echoed elements which pre-dated and possibly encouraged popular shows, such as *Weir’s Way*, which were influenced by the recreational themes of three early short films by Wilson within the BBC Scotland – part of the *Take the High Road* documentary series (not the soap opera), in 1965, featuring *Deer Stalking*, *Freshwater fishing* and *Sailing in Scotland*. A much earlier archive film from the 1940s, *Wealth of a Nation*, would have provided inspiration to Jim’s era of filmmakers, utilising the *jump-cut* approach to composing the driving pace of the film.

Thankfully, the diverse elements of his career are gradually being rediscovered and researched. Appreciation of other practitioners includes the seminal role of Laurence Henson’s documentary film work, with previous projects commissioned through Films of Scotland. New work has also been highlighted recently, when his film on John Grierson, the other titan of documentary genre, was presented at Glasgow Film Festival of 2014 and also on BBC television.

Since my introduction to Jim in 2004, a special friendship has evolved through a shared fascination in the diversity of Scotland’s ‘cultural foundations’. In particular the visionary working practice of a polymath, as important as John Muir and certainly further-travelled, but less well understood. Jim had seen a bronze sculpture I’d created in 1990, entitled *A Place for Geddes* inspired by the international impact of ecologist Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932). His global peregrinations intrigued me with his ‘thinking machines’ and ‘outlook-towers’ of Edinburgh and far flung locations of India, Palestine and France which acted as great magnets for rediscovery. I was hooked by his philosophy which recognised creative empowerment and community participation at the heart of life. Indeed, many have followed these travails of Geddes. My eureka moment was in 1988 and I was to learn that twenty years earlier Jim had made an international docu-drama film for BBC Scotland television, based on the complex and often misunderstood genius who was born in Ballater. The film – *Patrick Geddes: An Eye for the Future* was broadcast in colour on BBC2 in 1970. Many have tried to define the essential character of Geddes and his global contribution. Often this is hugely underestimated, his achievements tended to be strangely underplayed by institutions. He has been given the misinterpreted and simplistic title ‘Father of Town Planning’.

Alasdair Gray records his own early encounter with Geddes. He said; ‘I first learned of him in a book by Lewis Mumford, American critic and social theorist, and at first thought Mumford had invented him, as he sounded so
improbable.’ Gray had also been in conversation with Jacques Duras, a French filmmaker who also knew of Geddes, yet many Scots remained unclear of the man’s achievements. However, the mood has changed dramatically since Gray presented his pamphlet *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*, published in 1992. I’ve since spoken with Gray who encourages enthusiastic debate on these related subjects. With discussion intensifying about Scotland’s future there are new references to Geddes’s inspirational life philosophy in publications by Walter Stephen, Lesley Riddoch, and Neal Ascherson, who refers to Frank Fraser Darling being directly influenced by Geddes. Darling himself challenged the status quo and presented a fresh analysis of the concept of ecology. His book *Pelican in the Wilderness* (1956) is possibly one of the strongest environmental travelogues ever published, drawing attention, as it does, to global conservation issues in North America, and predicts, among other things, a general cultural meltdown and the recognition of climate change. Darling also challenged the view that Scotland’s ‘beautiful wilderness’ was a timeless natural phenomenon, advocating the need for radical environmental changes to promote biodiversity.

Technological developments and industrialisation was at the heart of many elements which drove the twentieth century and the world in which Jim’s generation grew up, experiencing the extremes of world conflicts within a colonial Empire. This also drove opportunities for film innovators. The next generation was excited and also fearful of world conflict driven by global economics, nuclear power and space technology. The younger generation of the 1960s, in which I emerged, wanted freedom. The USA and Europe were both struggling with demands for social equality, civil rights challenging existing iniquities driven by ‘cold war’ politics. Coming of age at the waning of ‘flower-power’ I became an art student twenty years after Darling’s environmental predictions and recollect my possession of a copy of *The Whole Earth Catalogue* published by Stewart Brand (biologist with an engagement with arts and social issues). I was interested to be reminded that the title WEC grew from the public campaign to encourage NASA to release the early satellite photographs taken of our planet earth. With this sensation the medium of photography was rediscovered! So saturated are we now with visual images that its difficult to imagine the excitement associated with that event - a planetary first, seeing ourselves, the Blue Planet, as others may have seen us, back then – even before the first Moon landing, when everything changed!

New ways of thinking were literally ‘in the air’ and this inspired alternative student manifestos of the time: ‘happenings’ stimulated creative thinking. On reflection I find it ironic, now, that, in 1973, our profit priority culture was
being reminded of the clear and present dangers of unfettered global economics. An alternative philosophy was on offer, if any would heed it, within the incisive pages of the publication, *Small is Beautiful* by E.F. Schumacher. It valiantly illustrated the need for sustainable change which global oil-politics has since suppressed. Geddes and Ruskin also foresaw the danger of poor investment in local communities – indeed their mantras *Vivendo Discimus* and *The Only Wealth is Life* deserve current scrutiny. So the aspirations of the student in that era recognised a change was necessary and many prototype projects grew from the alternative life-style model. For instance the college group I was very fortunate to join conceived a project which enabled us to design & create geodesic pods inspired by WEC (transported flat pack style). Then a concrete canoe was built with sea sand and local cement which did float! In reality we were acting out an alternative lifestyle. Unbeknown to me at the time, in 1973, this was a *Thoreauvesque* experiment. Living in eco-huts. I now think of this transcendental foray as having a very strange irony. The experiment occurred on a beach at Barnness, on which we camped near the lighthouse. Just a short walk to the west was John Muir’s birth town, Dunbar, and the same distance to the east was to become the site of the Torness nuclear power station. In fact I remember walking that East Lothian road to demonstrate against the power station with the, then young, politician Robin Cook. The national student mood at the time was rebellious and totally in accord with the trade unions which seemed to be marching almost every week. At this time Jim Wilson was delivering a vast array of diverse film offerings for TV, covering other kinds of strikes in the North Sea, profiling the work of Scots writers, poets and indeed international economic subjects, scientific topics within the broader cultural programming.

But that political unrest of the early 1970s was also driving a re-evaluation of Scottish culture. It was a time of mixed fortunes, political ambitions for devolution which coincided with the discovery of viable oilfields in the North Sea. Jim Wilson recorded the latter with a film, for which he received an award. Candidly however, he tells me now that he didn’t think it was very good. What were the real facts? Does it still exist in the BBC archives?

One thinks of the 7:84 Theatre Company at their best delivering a hilarious and uncomfortably satirical portrayal of what was really happening in Scotland at the time. Who owned the country? Who was in control? But let’s remember there were other creative civic expressions too, all given form with the visionary emergence of community arts, public arts workshops, pioneering organisations. This stimulated cultural life-blood in venues such as the Traverse, Theatre Workshop, The Third Eye, Printmakers Workshops and the
Sculpture Workshops. Omnipresent was the indomitable Richard Demarco, opening our eyes to internationalism and alternative arts, followed in his wake by many, notably the precocious Sage of Gourock, George Wyllie with his Paper Boat, Straw Locomotive. Later we worked on the 32 Spires for Hibernia and Stones of Scotland at Regents Road Park, Edinburgh. It’s regrettable that the flagship exhibition – Generation 2014, by National Galleries of Scotland – seem not, as yet, to be celebrating these projects?

A colleague of Jim Wilson’s at BBC for a while was Murray Grigor, who produced films about Demarco, Wyllie, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and jolted us into considering Scotch Myths, the exhibition epic by Murray and Barbara Grigor. Later he gave us his classic production about the Book of Kells. Jim was trail-blazing through history with an open mind and a generous spirit, flitting confidently between great sporting events such as the outdoor curling Bonspiels and the fidelity and craft of fly-fishing for trout and salmon. Casting his net wide, he was influencing programme policy to capture diverse cultural documentary themes for the BBC, working with actors such as Fulton Mackay, Iain Cuthbertson and Leonard Maguire, who portrayed Robert Louis Stevenson and most notably Patrick Geddes. I’ve watched the film on Geddes recently and despite its need for technical treatment and colour restoration it still carries a punch with clear audio dialogue examining the essential evolving role of humanity within nature. It includes an interview with Lewis Mumford which pulls together an American’s view of Geddes as a renaissance man offering links with Goethe, Ruskin and even Leonardo Da Vinci.

I’d like to encourage more formal research into Jim’s films which would be rewarded with a unique perspective, for example, his contact with Alfred Hitchcock in Hollywood attempting to promote new films based on books by John Buchan. Although he was unable to progress that idea with Hitchcock, Jim did go on to make a film about Hollywood director Robert Stevenson, entitled The Dream-Maker, filmed as an in-depth interview augmented with illustrated examples of his films over forty years. The following titles of Jim Wilson’s films offer a tantalising glimpse of output, some of which may have survived but now require resurrection from the vaults in BBC Archive. Could Scottish Screen Archive and the National Library of Scotland offer further help with this task?

The actor Leonard Maguire was a major collaborator on several of Jim's films. He portrays Patrick Geddes convincingly in the 1970 film entitled *An Eye for the Future*. Patrick's appetite for cultural exploration took him from Ballater to Perth, Dundee, Edinburgh, Mexico, Paris, India and Montpellier. Jim's documentary film treatment, inter-cutting drama sequences with contemporary interview sequences and archive clips, builds up a ‘narrative of comparisons’ which shapes the biographical picture of Geddes as a global visionary whose messages on citizenship and empowerment through education ring true today. As the character of Geddes ages, in the film, Maguire’s delivery melds even more convincingly as he reviews his career in the gardens of his Scots and Indian Colleges in Montpellier, a venue which is now being considered for restoration as an international educational hub.

The method for making short documentary films for TV back then is worth outlining, bearing in mind the wet chemical processing of all film-stock and the four week production time designated. The typical film production team was often less than ten folk. On that Geddes film Gordon Mackay was the cameraman, John Evans the principal sound engineer and Robert L. Fairfoull the editor. Jim’s film on R.L.S. in California, *The Silverado Episode* is introduced by Leonard Maguire as Stevenson. The production was mainly shot on location at the R.L.S. Silverado Museum, St.Helena, California, established by philanthropist Norman H, Strouse who established the Vaiima foundation in
1968. The film team included Dick Johnstone, Charles Clark, Ken Morse on rostrum camera and production assisted by Dianne Forsyth. The film celebrates the new museum including an interview with Norman H. Strouse. It was broadcast in 1977 on BBC1.

Referring to this Californian project. Jim informed me that it’s said that it was during this period in the 1880s that R.L.S. first used a telephone. Given that inventor Edison and fellow Scot W.K.L. Dickson were evolving early movie films at the time it did make me wonder if Stevenson might have spoken on the phone to these innovators about the future of the moving film images and how that could, in theory, have inspired the dramatic filmic potential of his novels. R.L.S. and Lloyd Osbourne certainly engaged with the use of plate cameras and magic lanterns which he took to Samoa. The link to Edison is conjecture but it does stimulate the imagination.

To put Jim Wilson’s documentary films in context, it is valuable to consider the mix of cultural offerings on TV within that decade, fifty years ago, as the medium evolved with the newly emerging BBC2.

During the early years of television selection was limited with often only one major feature film per week, integrated within a mix of locally produced programmes. I digress in order to give some general background mood to the period in which Jim Wilson’s apprenticeship was forged. In the 1960s, the concept of the Wednesday Play emerged then, and also the genesis of what has become, the evergreen science fiction series Doctor Who. Scotland’s own attraction to doctors was revealed in one of the first serial soap operas, from the pen of A.J. Cronin; Dr. Finlay’s Casebook which introduced some special performances - such as the genius of Bill Douglas, seen acting in the first episode, who went on with encouragement from experience in Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop, to make enduring filmic gems such as My Childhood – The Trilogy and Comrades. These are available now from the British Film Institute, on DVD, and recently re-launched by a French Film agency. And although Douglas, from Newcraighall, died in 1991 the vast archive which he accumulated with friend Peter Jewell can now be experienced at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum in Exeter University. But such visceral visionary films were not promoted or encouraged by the official Scottish film funding agencies at that time; the British Film Institute, London, led the way.

The broader awareness of cinema was also influenced by the colossal impact of John Grierson, but I wonder, if he’d lived longer, could he have helped promote film funding in Scotland for the likes of Bill Douglas and Werner Kissling? Jim Wilson argued that ‘John Grierson encouraged filmmakers to fly…and they flew’. Grierson’s visionary TV programme This Wonderful World, which he presented, was a beacon of innovative television
which gave so many folk their first taste of alternative global cinema and a show-case for other Scots innovators such as Norman MacLaren. In 2014 the centenary of MacLaren’s birth has, at last, been celebrated with events and exhibitions across Scotland. Jim Wilson interviewed MacLaren, for his film on Grierson, shown in the 1970s. Jim was very much in tune with the advances in culture programming on TV and acknowledges the landmark arts series; Civilization, presented by Kenneth Clark which was followed by a glossy publication. This created a new bench-mark which proved there was an appetite for the ‘marketing’ of world culture in colour, on TV. Jim’s film on Geddes was indeed one of the early colour BBC2 Scotland productions, delivered fifty years ago. The science/current affairs flagship series Horizon also offered a fertile platform for richly illustrative and well informed science episodes, like tutorials on the telly, as it were. This was characterised by diversity of educational material emerging from TV and Radio which enabled ‘distance learning’ and scope to gain qualifications via the brilliant concept of Open University. But, on reflection, was the right balance struck? I do remember contemporary arts programmes, some presented by W.Gordon Smith. Jim’s film on explorer Jenny Gilbertson was part of the Spectrum series. But should we not have been hearing more about cultural figures such as Geddes, Violet Jacob, John Ruskin, Annie Besant, Margaret Faye Shaw and indeed R.L.S. in Samoa?

Jim Wilson’s perceptive approach to defining assignments and topics did seem to have a cosmopolitan mix of themes. His experience was recognised with freedom given to influence many topics; domestic affairs balanced well with the more international innovative emphasis.

At times self-effacing, James Wilson’s life and career deserves note on many levels, as his visionary panache spans much of the halcyon years of the film era in the 20th century and was significantly inspired by pioneers in the international world of film in the years leading up to emerging experimental television. Wilson’s third unrealised film on R.L.S., entitled A Choice of Weapons, intended to focus and be filmed on Samoa to reveal Stevenson’s affinity with the indigenous communities’ desire for self government. Sadly this project was not approved for production. Was this due to the nature of a political narrative and possible empathy shared by Scottish people and rebellion within Ireland in the 1970s? The synopsis for the film still survives. Jim may have responded to R.L.S.’s comment that ‘I repeat to you that thing which is sure: if you do not occupy and use your own country, others will.’

Jim made direct links with the establishment of Scottish Screen Archive driven by the pivotal presence of Janet MacBain in the 1970s. Much of
Scotland’s character and aspirations has been uniquely captured and embodied within filmmaking practice over the last century by Wilson and his contemporaries. During many conversations with Jim he has reflected on his filmmaking career as being; ‘a good time to be working’ in what he described as ‘a cottage industry’, a time when he could conceive an idea, and a screen-play, and control a budget for shooting on location with four or five crew and simply seek approval from his bosses in BBC. He had a considerable success rate, completing assignments in California, Canada, France and Norway. Preferring to travel with a compact film team he recognised the flexibility he had as Producer/Script writer/Editor.

Many of his films were shot on 16mm Eastman Colour film-stock with two weeks on location (often abroad) and two weeks editing a typical 50 minute programme for television. This drove the efficiency and determination of the production team and the parameters of post-production. He suggested to me that fronting a much bigger company with all the related hardware and staff would in effect be restricting, indeed literally as he amusingly referred to such as ‘a juggernaut stopping the traffic’! Unfortunately, much of that colour film stock from the 1970s has not endured well technically with deterioration of colour balance, but hopefully can be rectified with restoration. Importantly we’re trying to establish how much of Jim’s back-catalogue, of over thirty films, has survived and how best this unique mirror of Scottish culture can be preserved and introduced to a new audience.

His passion for North American and Scandinavian culture may have been partly inherited from Forsyth Hardy and during national service travelling across Burma and India he experienced the extremes of human conflict. Within that experience we need to consider the upsurge of reportage in fact-based observational filming and journalism; a Scottish well-spring was emerging in which Wilson played a significant part in civi-street.

Cinéma vérité has a role in this viewpoint influenced by innovators such as Rouche and Flaherty. Much shaped by the unbelievable risk and courage required for cinematic reportage by explorers such as Hubert Wilkins, Herbert Ponting, and James Cameron. Interestingly one of the first assignments given to Norman MacLaren by John Grierson was to film aspects of the Spanish Civil War, on location.

The limited air-time on television in the sixties may have been challenged by certain technical priorities. BBC1 and the emerging BBC2 channel in 1964 heralded a new era in which film producer James Wilson relished the opportunity. His generation comprehensively embraced with a broad band of thought-provoking short films, examining local and international cultural topics and current affairs.
Jim’s recurrent attraction to R.L.S. was punctuated when he recently spoke with me. Reciting elements from his third but unrealised film on Stevenson in Samoa, he was laconic and resigned, reluctantly accepting that particular lost opportunity. After recalling the elements of the film which planned to depict the last years of the bard’s life in the South Seas Jim paused, and, being reminded of the two films which he did create, expressed the view that we still owe so much to R.L.S., even now. Many share that view and in the film he shot to celebrate the ‘jewel-box’ R.L.S. Museum at St. Helena created by wealthy philologist Norman H. Strouse we are reminded of an perceived imbalance. Edinburgh’s Writers Museum apparently has over three hundred items relating to R.L.S. By extraordinary comparison the benefactor Mr. Strouse, an advertising magnate, whose obsession was driven by his first purchase of a specialised volume of The Silverado Squatters. This so enthralled him that he moved to California to invest a considerable personal fortune in collecting over four thousand R.L.S. items - specialised books, original scripts and artefacts which are housed in a purpose-built centre entitled The Silverado Museum, which opened to the public in 1968 and still operates. It’s enlightening to read a transcript of Strouse’s inaugural speech, Dream and Realisation of the Vailima Foundation, which he established, presenting a spectacular story of wealth and obsession in which his collection includes the original scripts of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Travels with a Donkey and The Guager’s Flute. It would appear that just about wherever R.L.S. slept in America during his visit in the late 1870s–80s seems to have been lovingly saved and transformed into venerated public shrines in homage to the man, his wife and family, including a plethora of ‘Stevensonia’ relics - for example: the ‘Stevenson House’ Monterey which was purchased for the nation in 1941, gifted to the state of California and contained in 1970 ‘...pieces of Stevenson family furniture from Edinburgh and souvenirs of his life in Samoa’. Then there’s the Saranac cottage in New York occupied in the late 1880s and what appears to be a show stopping Beinecke Collection at Yale University.

This passion for collecting and preserving cultural artefacts can be illustrated with an equally marvellous twist of geographic displacement. The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum at Exeter University reveals much of film and pre-film optical technology/devices with related film references as diverse as R.L.S. to Werner Kissling. These associations with film have inspired much of my own creative work. For example, I made a sculpture for Newcraighall Rail Station to mark the significance of Bill Douglas. I’m also designing an outdoor sculpture feature for the Douglas Museum in Exeter. Other projects celebrate the importance of John Grierson and John Buchan translated into sculpture.
Portraits which can be seen at Stirling Rail Station and Perth Rail Station respectively.

This is a good time to re-examine the legacy of our filmmakers. For example a publication could focus on veteran women filmmakers, such as the Grierson sisters, Kay Manders, Jenny Gilbertson, Margaret Tait etc. Their work and others deserve more regular air-play. Jim knew these folk and was inspired as they were by the excitement of engaging with the drama of life – a desire to explore the world through the medium of film.

As a voluble man, Jim developed many friendships; he explained to me the meaningful connections and film he made with Fred Zinnemann and also his visit to the Alfred Hitchcock shooting set in Hollywood. He corresponded with Hitchcock as he was keen to explore his fascination with the work of Scots novelist John Buchan and the classic film interpretation of The 39 Steps with Robert Donat and Madeleine Carol. More films inspired by the diversity of Buchan’s output are overdue. I wonder if his classic story ‘Sick Heart River’ has ever been filmed?

Closer to home Jim recognised the vitality and acerbic wit of poet Hugh MacDiarmid, with his film depiction – Rebel Poet – and also made a powerful film on John Grierson, father of the British Documentary film Movement, The Name Grierson – The Word Documentary. Broadcast in 1973 on BBC1 it contains within the 50 minute duration some of the most significant folk involved in film in the 20th century: Forsyth Hardy, Edgar Anstey, Paul Rotha, Stuart Legg, Basil Wright, Harry Watt, Norman MacLaren and James Beveridge. Part of the film examines the ground breaking film Night Mail with musical score by Benjamin Britten and memorable lyric poetry by W.H. Auden. This is given additional recognition with recitations and commentary by the great actors Fulton Mackay and Ian Cuthbertson.

Conclusion

Jim has a vast repertoire of anecdotes including meetings with Finlay Currie and many dealings with the ebullient Gael, Findlay J. Macdonald. Indeed I think it fitting to conclude with this quotation from a memo sent to Macdonald in 1969. The following synopsis reveals his passion for filming in general and specifically the life of Robert Louis Stevenson. Five decades later the sentiments are still palpable.

The way to understanding of Stevenson is through an appreciation of his Scottish background, the interaction of his life and work. The scenes jump out at one. The bed-ridden child, imaginatively
overwrought, listening to the wind on the wind-shaken shutters; the
walks with his nurse in dank Edinburgh kirkyards; the exploration of
the old town; the seeking out of the disreputable; the velvet coat, the
long hair, the rejection of bourgeois values. Then there’s the American
wife, cigarette rolling, barefooted, practising revolver-shooting on the
beach in Samoa; the ride on top of the railway carriage across the
prairie; the wine drinking, parasol-shaded days near Fontainbleau; the
journeys by boat and donkey; the speech against capital punishment
and the row with his father which is reflected in Weir of Hermiston. So
many more marvellous moments – the meeting with W.E. Henley, the
maimed giant who was the model for Long John Silver; the constant
re-working of the conflict between good and evil – well known in
Jekyll and Hyde, superb in The Master of Ballantrae, but fascinating
also in The Ebb Tide and The Beach of Falesa.

‘The words are there and so are the pictures’ signed James Wilson
The National Libraries of Scotland and Scottish Screen Archive, now merged
must be applauded for their vision and democratising philosophy, enabling
direct access to thousands of films – many of those online. They also offer free
access to public exhibitions, most of which celebrate the function of NLS with
moving image, the printed word and the digital web.

Since drafting this article I’m pleased to say there have been positive
developments connected with raising the profile of Jim Wilson’s work.
Constructive correspondence with the chief executive of BBC Scotland has
resulted in the organisation of a meeting at BBC HQ. Pacific Quay, Glasgow.
Instinctively, I feel optimistic and sense that a new wave of cultural awareness
will enable the restoration of Jim’s film on Patrick Geddes, as a start to new
initiatives and possibly a new BBC programme or series, on that topic which
will examine the contemporary significance of, not just Jim Wilson and Patrick
Geddes, but the many themes and characters whose film presence will inform
a fresh perspective of Scotland in the 21st Century.

Sources
Geddes Film – Scots College Montpellier. Jim Wilson filmed there in 1969 and
adhoc international arts and architecture exchanges have consistently raised
awareness of these cultural assets.

This upland site in the north of Montpellier still has two key buildings
created by Geddes in the 1920s plus the remains of symbolic gardens. This site
is adjacent to the university’s architecture department and campus and was
James Wilson – Filmmaker

close to being desecrated by developers in 2013. Fortunately they have been reprieved after vigorous lobbying and now designated as part of the historic site which has been given cultural protection by the French authorities.

Scottish Screen Archive is to relocate to Kelvinhall in 2016 providing more public access which I’m sure will be organised to encourage more exposure to filmic resources and display of memorabilia. New financial resources must however be identified by the Scottish Government to support this important resource.

References

Listing of Jim Wilson’s films in Scottish Screen Archive/National Library of Scotland. NMS Ref: (MSS) TD 3509 – BBC Scotland Scripts – James Wilson (This document lists 36 film projects from the 1960s – 1970s. Although we have evidence of its existence, the Geddes Film is not listed here and there may be others, yet to be discovered).

BBC Radio Life and Letters script – 1960
- Maurice Lindsay and George Bruce – Theatre in a Vacuum Recording No: TGW 45263
- Norman MacCaig Recording No: TGW 45356
- Sir Compton Mackenzie Recording No: M/THE 45254

Cinema Quarterly 1932 magazine which refers to Grierson, Hardy and Jenny Gilbertson/Brown

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