

ROBERT J. FLAHERTY

Widely regarded as the inventor of documentary cinema, Robert Flaherty approached filmmaking with an ethnographer's eye. Generating ideas 'in the field', he would shoot a vast footage - in his own words, photographing what the camera wanted him to photograph - and distil ideas and material from this. Flaherty is credited with eight films, all distinguished by an instinct for finding lyrical images. He made three of them during his eight-year stay in Britain during the 1930s.

The eldest of seven children, Robert Joseph Flaherty was born in Iron Mountain, Michigan on 16 February 1884. Having received little formal schooling, he briefly attended Upper Canada College, Toronto and the Michigan School of Mines (where he met his wife and collaborator, Frances Hubbard). He spent the years between 1910 and 1920 prospecting for iron ore in Northern Canada, where he gathered material for his first film, "Nanook of the North" (1922).

In 1931, Flaherty came to Britain at John Grierson's behest to make a documentary for the Empire Marketing Board: this was to be an extensive study of the art and craftsmanship in Britain's major industries. After some weeks, travelling around the country and shooting a great deal of 'test' footage, the EMB's limited film stock and funds ran out and Flaherty was taken off the film, which was completed by EMB personnel. A sound version of Industrial Britain, incorporating some of Flaherty's footage, was released in 1933 for distribution to commercial cinemas.

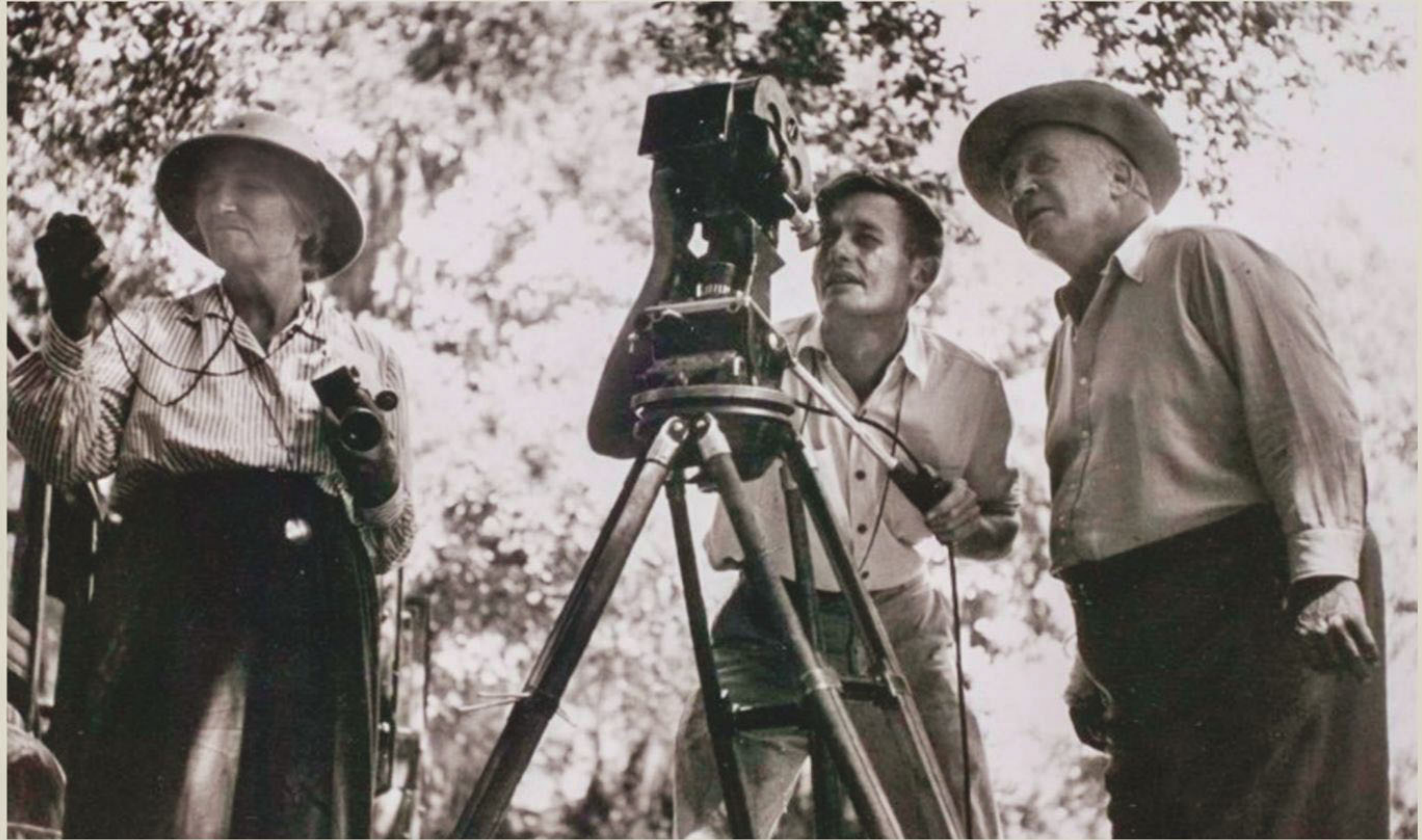
For his next assignment, "Man of Aran" (1934), Flaherty and his crew spent over a year on the island of Aran, off Ireland's Galway coast, shooting the film and absorbing Irish life. Again, the

production, financed by Gaumont - British, overran and the shoot was closed down: this time, however, Flaherty took part in editing the film which, despite charges of inauthenticity (the islanders re-enacted long-abandoned fishing practices for the

Flaherty's earlier work, and he was unable to complete it: after two years of shooting, the film was finished at Denham Studios by Korda's brother Zoltan. A "wretched piece of cinema by all standards," was Paul Rotha's verdict, "but it does contain some fine examples

thrombosis. His work continues to be commemorated at the annual Flaherty Seminar, inaugurated by his widow in 1954.

Although his best work was done outside Britain, the single-minded, ungovernable Flaherty's sojourn here



camera), was enthusiastically received and garnered many awards, including Best Film of 1934 at the Venice Film Festival.

In 1935, Flaherty was commissioned by Alexander Korda to film "Elephant Boy" in India. This was a big-budget production by comparison with

of Flaherty's work."

When Flaherty returned to London, no further projects were forthcoming, and in 1939 he and Frances returned to the USA, where he spent the remainder of his life, completing two more films. Robert Flaherty died in Dummerston, Vermont on 23 July 1951, of cerebral

delivered a stimulating culture shock to the relatively staid men dominating the British film scene. More significantly, the scenes Flaherty shot for his British-made films remain among the most beautiful in the history of documentary cinema.

by Mohaiminul Islam

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