



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

The Edge of the World

The Edge of the World

Directed by: Michael Powell
Production Company: Joe Rock Productions
Production Personnel: Gerald Blattner, A. Seabourne, Vernon C. Sewell, Sydney S. Streeter, W.H. Farr, George Black Jr
Story: Michael Powell
Camera: Ernest Palmer, Skeets Kelly, Monty Berman
Camera Assistants: John Behr, Jimmy Gray *
Editor: Derek Twist
Assistant Editor: Robert Walters *
Props: W. Osborne
Choral Effects by:
The Women of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir
Musical Director: Cyril Ray
[Glasgow Orpheus Choir] Conducted by: Sir Hugh Robertson
Orchestrations: W.L. Williamson
Chief [Sound] Recordist: W.H.O. Sweeny
Sound: L.K. Tregellis
Recorded on: The Marconi Visatone System
Re-recorded on: Western Electric

Cast:

The Gray family
Finlay Currie (*James Gray*)
Niall MacGinnis (*Andrew Gray*)
Grant Sutherland (*John, the catechist*)
Campbell Robson (*Dunbar, the laird*)
George Summers (*the trawler skipper*)
The Manson family
John Laurie (*Peter Manson*)
Belle Chrystall (*Ruth Manson*)
Eric Berry (*Robbie Manson*)
Kitty Kirwan (*Jean Manson, grandmother*)
and...

all the people of the lonely island of Foula

uncredited cast:

Michael Powell (*Mr Graham, the yachtsman*)
Frankie Powell (*Mrs Graham*)
Sydney S. Streeter (*man at dance*)
Margaret Grieg (*the baby*)

UK 1937

75 mins

Digital

Return to the Edge of the World

Director: Michael Powell
Presented By: Poseidon Films, Frixos Constantine
Sponsor:
Bank of Credit and Commerce International
Producers: Michael Powell, Jason Krasucki, Sydney S. Streeter
Camera Operator: Brian Mitchison
Editor: Peter Mayhew
Post Production Facilities: Roger Cherrill
Music Composed and Conducted By: Brian Easdale
Sound Recording: David Hahn
With:
Michael Powell
John Laurie
Grant Sutherland
Sydney S. Streeter
UK 1978
23 mins
Digital

The screenings on Fri 20 Oct and Wed 15 Nov will be presented with subtitles including descriptions of non-dialogue audio

Having made two dozen low budget pot-boilers over the preceding five years, Michael Powell finally got the chance to make his first really personal film with the ambitious drama *The Edge of the World* (1937).

Powell based his script on the true story of the evacuation of 36 people from St. Kilda, an island ten miles off the west coast of Scotland, on 29 August 1930. The film was made over four months during the summer of 1936 on the island of Foula, in the Shetland Isles. Permission was denied to film on St. Kilda, which is in the Hebrides, and where they actually speak Gaelic, while on Foula they speak Norse. Powell was adamant that local people be in the film, and that it all be shot on location (which, except for some pick-up shots back at the studio, turned out to be the case). Powell himself told the story of the filming in his first book, *200,000 Feet on Foula*.

The mixture of documentary and drama, location footage and studio filming is occasionally awkward, as is the mixture of professional and non-professional actors. However, despite its simple and rather melodramatic story, *The Edge of the World* still stands up today, particularly for its stunning location cinematography, as well as the film's opening scenes in which we see various ghostly apparitions on the now deserted island. Also notable is John Laurie's brooding, yet sympathetic performance as Peter Manson, the film's most complex role, one which is shown to be inextricably linked with the fate of the island itself. Powell's script and direction also give the first real indication of the love of nature and his mystical use of landscape to shape and comment upon human stories, which would be developed further in his celebrated collaborations with Emeric Pressburger.

In 1978 Powell and members of the cast and crew revisited Foula for a BBC documentary, *Return to the Edge of the World*.

Sergio Angelini, BFI Screenonline

Michael Powell interviewed on Desert Island Discs

Tonight's castaway is a prominent figure in the world of British films – one of our most accomplished directors. His name is Michael Powell. What is your first record, Mr Powell?

An arrangement of 'The Campbells Are Coming' sung by The Glasgow Orpheus Choir. I'd like you to notice particularly how an instrumental effect is obtained just by the human voices. It's one of the most dramatic records I know and I never get tired of it. That record has already qualified as a desert island disc.

Don't tell me that you and a gramophone have been marooned on a desert island.

Marooned, yes. Island, yes. Deserted, no. A few years ago I made a film called *The Edge of the World*. In 1930 I came across a newspaper article about the gradual depopulation of the outer Scottish islands, and the way that modern conditions were forcing the inhabitants to the mainland. It caught my imagination. It seemed an ideal subject for a film. I thought out a story and pestered everybody in the film business with it until 1936, when I found someone to back the idea. I persuaded a bunch of unsuspecting people to go with me and we spent the whole summer on the little island of Foula, the

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westernmost of the Shetlands, about 20 miles from the mainland. Our unit consisted of 24 men and two women, our average age was 25. We shot 200,000 feet of film on the island.

How much of it was used in the finished picture?

About 7,000. We had a desperate struggle to finish and by the end of October we still had a number of vital scenes to make. Every day brought the winter gales nearer and we stood a good chance of being marooned on Foula for the whole winter.

And were you?

No, by the skin of our teeth. We were cut off for several weeks with no fresh meat, bread, vegetables and, worst of all, cigarettes. In those days that seemed like hardship. At the end of October there was a lull in the gales and a relief ship was able to take us off.

But you had finished the picture?

Yes – in a 100-mile-an-hour gale. At night we used to sit in our huts, which were lashed to the ground to stop them blowing away. We would play games, work or talk while the floor heaved under us and sometimes we listened to my portable gramophone. It was our only music. One record I took to Foula was 'Tintagel' by Bax – eerie, mystic music that seems to me the very essence of islands and the sea. Often I've propped my gramophone against a streaming wet boulder and heard that music pour out over the mountainside while the actors appeared and disappeared in the mist. I know from experience that these first two records that I have chosen stand the test of constant repetition under very trying circumstances. Also they would remind me of a wonderful year and the fulfilment of an ambition. I don't think I shall ever make another film, however good it may turn out to be, that will mean as much to me as *The Edge of the World*. So you see, Mr Plomley, that I have special qualification to be a castaway.

How did the islanders react to having a film unit dropped into their midst for months?

On the wall of my house is a coloured map of Foula. Every member of the unit has one, and it is inscribed 'From the men of Foula to the men of *The Edge of the World* in memory of four months comradeship.'

Perhaps in one of those stone crofts on Foula, with the gab howling round it, someone is listening to you now.

I hope so. They are our friends and we have never forgotten them.

Interview by Roy Plomley, 8 October 1942