

"THE AUTONOMOUS FILM-MAKER"

Margaret Tait: Films & Poems 1951-76

a correspondence between Mike Leggett & Margaret Tait
edited by Richard Kwietniowski

**"There's a whole world at the foot of the stone
If you care to look."**

'The Hen and the Bees' in **"The Scale of Things"** 1960

Margaret Tait was born in 1918 and raised in Orkney. After qualifying in medicine at Edinburgh University in 1941, she served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in India, then studied Italian after the War in Perugia. Returning to Italy in 1950 with an idea for a film script on the life of St. Francis of Assisi, she heard about the **Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia** in Rome, and enrolled for the course which ran from 1950 to 1952.

The school was then at its high point, coinciding with the prominence of Neo-Realism (Rossellini, de Sica, Visconti), and a rapidly expanding production base aided by American capital, which was to nurture Fellini, Germi, Rossi and others. Although much of their work degenerated into a style better described as 'neo-romantic', many documentaries produced in Italy during the '50s were made by students of the Sperimentale. Like the Lodz film-school in Poland, it had been established on the reputation (and occasional presence) of film-makers involved in the re-constitution of a national film industry, and inevitably enjoyed a glamorous reputation.

Of the six productions Tait worked on in her first year there, **"The Lion, the Griffin and the Kangaroo"** was made with an American, Peter Hollander. They co-founded **Ancona Films**, the company Tait still runs today. The collaboration produced a documentary about the town of Perugia which was more typical of the Italian school than another film made by Tait during the same year on vacation in Orkney: **"Portrait of Ga"**.

A portrait of her mother, the film is characteristic of the work that was to follow. Free, hand-held camera movements frame an old lady while a monologue recalls her words. Its techniques revealed not just the physical appearance of the subject, but the terms under which the relationship between subject and film-maker (and between film and viewer) are established. Highly visible and distinctive controls are effected on the medium, the visible evidence of decisions taken.

"I think that film can be used for portraits of people as the present day equivalent of the carefully painted oil paintings of the past. I think you can get several facets at once. I mean 'at once' in the sense of within the film, as perhaps a great portrait painter would get 'at once' all in the one painting. It appeals to me to get this in the length of a film."

"Portrait of Ga" demonstrates a certain intensity of observation (motivated by affection) which is possible in intimate domestic circumstances but entirely unrelated to the 'home movie' tradition, which was then restricted to the privileged few. The design of the hand-held camera had been perfected during the War, but was considered unsuitable for anything other than front-line action or incorporating expressionistic devices into conventional treatments.

"Calypso" was a collaboration with Peter Hollander of a different nature. The Italian industry of the '50s used half-size 35mm stock ('mezzo-bande') for recording optical soundtracks, building up sound illusions in the same way magnetic stock is used in the multi-track dubbing-theatre today. A sympathetic studio assistant slipped them some junked footage which by chance had a Westernised calypso printed on it. A duplicate was made on full-width 35mm stock so the picture area remained clear, with the soundtrack running alongside. Even with Hollander's experience as a commercial artist, it was a lengthy process painting aniline dyes onto the acetate, frame by frame. They had already seen some of Norman Maclaren's work, which proved an obvious point of reference:

"I found them highly entertaining and imaginative in themselves, as well as stimulating, suggesting further development. Something about editing to a musical beat or using a musical length to determine an in-film length was in accord with some thoughts of my own at the time...I had always enjoyed the Len Lye films which used to appear in cinemas in the '30s...The use of sheer colour, screen-wide, coloured my idea of film (and perhaps of colour) from then on."

Several hand-painted films were to follow over the years, always painted onto 35mm stock, usually in conjunction with a soundtrack, then reduced to 16mm. In addition to providing intimate contact with the film material, this technique had economic advantages, as it was costly only in terms of time, that commodity the under-funded film-maker has in abundance. It was also often the case that the finished film was less important than its suggestion of new ideas and further possibilities, the technique being used as a kind of sketchbook, like the super 8 camera or video portapak today.

After graduating from the Sperimentale, Tait returned to Scotland and mounted the distinctive company logo on a door in Rose Street, Edinburgh. For the next twenty years, she was to be found anywhere between Orkney and this registered office: workroom and domicile. Her films during this period reflected the semi-nomadic existence, passionately evoking the people and places she encountered on the Islands and Highlands, and in Edinburgh.

Her intention was to earn a living by making films in her own environment, like the small Italian companies which produced documentaries chronicling the shift from a largely agricultural economy to a modern industrial one. In Italy this was seen as an important contribution to the changing social and political conditions that fostered a new film industry. In Britain, the situation was different. There was no support or backing for film proposals without assured financial returns. As 35mm production entailed substantial capital investment, the film-maker or organisation seeking some kind of autonomy inevitably resorted to 16mm, which remained barely respectable and poorly serviced for some time to come.

Tait nevertheless made six films by 1956, combining the aesthetic and techniques of the Neo-Realists with a degree of experimentation barely sensed by her and unrecognised by others at that stage. **"The Drift Back"**, a morale booster sponsored by the Islands Education Committee for local newsreel consumption, has many visual qualities which associate it with post-war Italy. Family groups unload household possessions from carts into boats and then back onto carts and lorries to make their return to remote Orkney farms abandoned a generation before, accompanied by local music and voices.

"Rose Street", about the 'life of the street' where Tait's office was, is equally influenced by the Italian cinema. Overcrowded tenements, shops and pubs (for which the street is still famous) are recorded with great compassion, as part of the life of a specific community which Tait was part of. Shot in black and white with a static camera, it evokes a strong sense of place, but like Atget's turn-of-the-century photographs of Paris streets, bears no reference to a specific time.

The highly controlled 'conventional' use of the camera on a fixed axis was to become as much a distinguishing feature of Tait's technique as the hand-held, because of the way it is used to mark out a space across and through which movement occurs, almost incidentally, while the camera remains imperviously static.

"Orquil Burn", a short stream in Orkney running from peat bogs to the sea, provided the thematic base for a 30 minute study of water textures as the stream flows past people and buildings along its course. The early Kodachrome colour process provided a dark-brown Guinness quality to the water as it merges with shadows cast by the bank and its objects, removing them from the context of the place into abstraction. Great attention was paid to aligning the flow of images as a flow of water, revealing a material delight in the passage of projected time, after the constraining demands of the social documentary.

Bessie Grieve recalled the film thus in the Orkneys' newspaper 'The Orcanian':

"I had seen the film many years ago and remembered it for its artistry and detail; the smooth flowing falling

water and the small plant life of the burn and its environs. Now I was seeing it again but this time the colours seemed to have a deeper intensity giving an exotic quality to familiar things."

"**The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo**" was also completed in 1955, from footage accumulated over a seven year period. It is Tait's first experiment with the interrelation of sound and picture, separating the two into distinct information tracks in order to increase their combined meaning.

Tait chose a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins, in whose work she perceived a prevalence of 'filmic images'. After making an optical soundtrack of her voice reciting the poem, she assembled diverse footage corresponding to the connotations of the poem, line by line. The effect is visually not unlike the structure of poetry. As meaning is conveyed sequentially, a number of resonances and associations are set up across and beyond the text.

In an attempt to gauge public response to the work, Rose Street organised its own film festival in 1954 and 1955. Three daily programmes ran for three weeks, concurrent with the International Festival. Holiday-makers, festival visitors and celebrities (including John Grierson) had to decide between the comforts of the official festival screenings, and the cramped workroom cleared out to become a screening space. It was difficult, however, to get the few patrons who did attend to view the work on its own terms. It was seen merely as a local adjunct to the orgy of cultural consumption.

Support and encouragement were forthcoming from Tait's future husband, Alex Pirie, but emerged only in small quantities from other quarters. While Grierson indicated support, his biographer Forsyth Hardy went somewhat further, raising the possibility of including a five minute extract from "**Rose Street**" in a television compilation called 'Wonderful World'. He also talked about raising £350 towards the completion of a hand-painted film, but nothing materialised. A similar outcome awaited her at the hands of the BFI's Experimental Film Fund, to be repeated 20 years later with the BFI Production Board.

For the next four years, Tait concentrated on publishing, producing three books of poetry and two of short stories. The poems in particular bear close relation to the films, some passages reading as descriptions of sequences from them. The following could, for instance, be seen as characterising the function of the camera in her work:

"Then, on the last day of delay,
-the day I took the marigolds from among the oats-
I gathered stones for you.
Smoothed, yellow, glistening grey, some almost pink,
some blue,

And the stones you could still feel, if you will,
Weigh in your hand,
Stroke the surface of
And sense from weight, surface, size the inherent shape
of them,
Know from their outward qualities
What they are made of and what forces formed them."

There is, throughout, great concern for 'the whole world at the foot of the stone', as well as the themes of memory, pre-history, superstition, mythology, and the position of women in patriarchal society. "One World, One Sun" documents the qualities of light encountered on travels in the Indian sub-continent, the Mediterranean and British Isles, paralleling many of the images she works with in the construction of her films. In "New", the film camera actually becomes the object:

"Cinematographically
I have registered the opening of eschscholtzia
On an early summer morning.
It gave me a sharp awareness of time passing,
Of exact qualities and values in the light,
But I didn't see the movement
As movement.
I didn't with my own perception see the petals moving.
Later, on the film, they seemed to open swiftly,
But, at the time,
Although I stared
And felt time not so much moving as being moved in
And felt
A unity of time and place with other times and places
Yet
I didn't see the petals moving.
I didn't see them opening.
They were closed,
And later they were open,
And in between I noted many phases,
But I didn't see them moving open.
My timing and my rhythm could not observe the rhythm of
their opening.

In order to raise finance for her next film project, Tait drew on the past practices of authors and publishers by circulating a leaflet in British and North American academic circles, proposing a production financed through subscriptions. Each interested party contributed a proportion of the costs in return for a copy of the finished product. The idea was either too novel, or the literati were suspicious of any medium other than their own. There was no response to the proposal, although the film was eventually made, and prints ultimately purchased by some of the same academic institutions.

The assembling of "Hugh MacDiarmid" in 1964 was similar to that of "Portrait of Ga". The same hand-held camera clearly establishes the proximity/intimacy of the camera/operator to the subject, allowing the elderly MacDiarmid to cover the course of a day in his Lanarkshire home. He reads some of his poems, and a voice sings others. He enacts visual accompaniments determined by Tait, at one point balancing on the edge of the pavement. This whimsical treatment certainly dissociated the poet and his work from conventional celebrations of genius and transcendence.

Alex Pirie, Tait's husband and assistant on many of the productions, and a writer himself, prefers to describe his role as 'sneak previewer', but he was credited as collaborator on Tait's next film. Their self-imposed cultural (and sometimes social) seclusion obviously placed great emphasis on their daily co-presence, touchstones to each other's activities.

"Where I am is Here" was the first of Tait's films I encountered, quite by chance, at the Demarco Gallery during the 1971 Edinburgh Festival. It possessed a complexity and sensuousness which had the allure of a chance encounter. Images photographed with great skill and sensitivity, assembled with great care, work in close relationship (firstly in a way that is complementary, but becomes ironic), to a soundtrack of unplaceable melody-with-words, flowing in an irregular pattern of repeated words and phrases.

"It marks a point of departure in my own film-making. In undertaking that film I understood better than before that I had to approach the task on the level of poetry, or there was no point in doing it at all. So the intensity of observation is specific and particular, and the rhythms come from the material itself."

The film is the first where the act of assembling picture and sound functions directly as a presence, rather than as something concealed behind authorial anonymity. A progression is now evident from the knowledge acquired in Italy, and from the cinema, about aspects of film language, through the early experiments with Hopkins and Orquil Burn, to a realisation of picture and sound with discrete and specific functions. Words remain present but are 'presented', located in and through the image, together with the place, the object, the 'finds'; the fragments across which Tait moved:

"What one actually sees is a mosaic of people in streets, buildings, doorways, waterways; there are birds, bonfires, traffic, snow, rain, lions, school-girls."

The film has seven separately titled components, and other words-as-images appear in the first of the sections: complex / writing / building / light / words; and then finally, A START/an end.

On the soundtrack, street noises (some accountable, some not) are mixed with the sound of a fiddle, an accordian, and a woman singing a poem by Tait, transposed into song by Hector MacAndrew, and based on the Pibroch compositions, the classical playing of the highland bagpipe: a melody (Ground) line, followed by variations, and completed by a repetition of the Ground. The poem had been written with a similar construction involving words instead of notes. The system of repeats was also carried through into the assembling of the film material.

By the time Tait finished her next film two years later, she lived on the north-eastern seaboard of the country in Sunderland, half-way between Orkney and Edinburgh, where she continued to run the Ancona office. In complete contrast to her previous film, **"The Big Sheep"** features entirely rural subjects: the hardy Highland sheep, the heather, the annual open-air auctions, the trucks transporting animals, the coaches transporting tourists, and the sound of rock and roll, pipe bands, and an auctioneer, all of which add ironic comment. The first part concludes with images of the Highlands abandoned and deserted, populated only by sheep and tourists. Another song sung by Lilane sounds hauntingly like the one used in the previous film.

Part Two observes daily life in Scotland: the seafront, the beach, passing trains; Sports Day in a local playing field with Highland events and the endless ritual of measuring and judging. In the background, a pipe band plays, ending the film with a 15 minute Pibroch piece as the images return to the moors, the sheep, the main road, the coalman, and a stream running through a garden.

The variety of different sounds throughout the 40 minutes function almost like an independent image track. They were in fact assembled in the same way as the picture, 'butt-joined' together end-to-end, with the dubbing process entailing only the levelling of each sound to the appropriate playback volume, rather than the usual process of overlapping. This was all done through written instructions to the dubbing studio in London, where all her subsequent films (including those which stretched to several tracks) have been dubbed, with the interpretative contribution of the staff. The cost of travel has always prevented Tait from attending.

In the same year, Tait made the first of three films with actors. They are now rarely screened, perhaps reflecting the problems film-makers face with actors trained predominantly for the theatre. It is however usually a prerequisite for securing more substantial funding. In 1976, Tait spent several months preparing a script for actors as part of an application to the BFI Production Board. Despite the encouragement of two Board members who had seen her earlier work, the proposal was ultimately turned down.

With the exception of these three films, and two short hand-painted ones, a pause took place in Tait's output, doubtless prompting reflection. A full retrospective took place, however, as part of the 1970 Edinburgh Film Festival, screening nightly at 11pm at the Filmhouse.

Tait's next film was completed in 1974. "On the Mountain" is not just a sequel to "Rose Street"; it incorporates it within it, complete with Academy leader and Censor's certificate, as a self-contained section towards the beginning of the film. As opposed to the carefully arranged set-pieces of the earlier film, recorded by a rigidly supported camera, the new footage is hand-held, and in colour. As opposed to the seamless flow of the earlier film, the presence of the film-maker is clearly apparent, as holder/guide of the camera, and as decision-maker. The earlier film now looks very much like a false construction, a mythic representation. If the overall project's formal system foregrounds alteration, it carefully matches its subject. The new footage of Rose Street reveals the fact that it is now a pedestrian precinct, crammed with fashionable shops and modernised pubs. Everything connotes prosperity.

Although it was shot in Edinburgh, Tait completed the film 200 miles north, as she had returned to her family home in Kirkwall, Orkney. The combination of city and country as homestead and film subject produced this anecdote:

"My uncle in Canada who is a physiologist and zoologist by his own taste let's say, had been doing some research up the Saguenay river in Quebec, and at some point he had to get back quickly to Montreal and he couldn't get to the normal transport and these Saguenay Indians led him through what to him was an impenetrable forest, and they recognised this tree, that tree, their way through it absolutely, and there he was, through in no time and catching his train from the point at the other side of the forest.

Well, he was so grateful to them, he invited these Indians to Montreal for a week or something. So they came down and they just hated it. They said they couldn't find their way. Everything looked exactly the same. Whereas town-people would say one street looks different from another street, it was trackless country to them. Now I think it's something like that perhaps. "On the Mountain" doesn't appeal to people who live in the country.

I suppose when I'm making a film, I'm doing something like that. I'm tracking my way through this known country. I don't think it's very interesting otherwise. I'm following things with my camera in terms of knowing them and, like the Saguenay Indians, I would be equally uninterested in just making something of something I'd

never seen before, as they were in trying to find their way through Montreal, compared with knowing every tree in the forest."

This was Tait's first film since "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo" to use colour stock, a decision that remained for all subsequent work, including "Ariel" and "These Walls" made in the same year. Both concentrate on the microcosmic gaze: images of grass, leaves, a dead bird; with the sounds of a pidgeon cooing, a bell ringing. They are in a sense preparation for "Colour Poems", nine short films which re-work similar material collected around the islands, but with the gaze turned outwards again. The immediate is seen within the context of external events and larger landscapes, containing overt reference to memory and history. Its combination of sound and image is probably the most subtle of all the films.

The film was assembled fairly rapidly into nine titled sections, the first of which takes its title from a poem by Sorley MacLean, "Numen of the Boughs", written in Gaelic in the late '30s (but not published until 1971), in response to the Spanish Civil War, and a sense of guilt at not having volunteered. Its publication brought back memories for Tait, of images seen in the 'Picture Post', "of frozen plains round Madrid with snipers and soldiers frozen to death in the trees clasping their rifles..."

Tait had also been reading Lorca for some time, in dual versions with the occasional help of a Spanish-English dictionary, and had based some paintings on his anthology "Poet in New York". Painting on paper or film was, like writing, part of Tait's daily routine, filling the odd moment or functioning as a substitute for live-action film work whrn funds were low. These paintings certainly contributed to the development of "Numen of the Boughs", and were incorporated into its opening moments, to be replaced by shots of marching veterans and poppies, symbolic of the rituals of remembrance performed by official history. But "Colour Poems" combines the evocation of distant causes with the 'sturdy present' of contemporary Orkney. Optimistic images of freshly painted steamers, and the bustle of re-constructive activity in full colour contrast distinctly with the toneless greys of "The Drift Back".

Shortly after completing this group of films, news came that the house which had been an integral part of Tait's life since the age of seven, was required by the local council for re-development. Once again, the workroom was dismantled, belongings gathered together, and Tait and Petrie moved 15 miles to the sparcer, windswept western side of the island. But not without comment.

Material for "Place of Work" was collected in the six months prior to moving, and assembled in their new home. It was shot entirely within the perimeter wall of the detached three-storey house, the camera moving freely from house to garden and back again. An occasional human presence blends with the wildlife and the familiarity of a domestic space. The images are rich and comfortingly familiar, as they were to the film-maker, but the film's time-span is disconcerting. The mostly hand-held camera moves sparingly, with changes in location figuring through cuts between shots, but such cuts act ambiguously. The gardener, botanist or careful viewer is likely to detect the repetitive seeding and blooming of the ubiquitous poppies, in an extremely short time-span. The soundtrack records everyday sounds: the radio, feet on boards, the muffled crump of the pneumatic hammer outside in the street, playfully ignoring the shots of the hammer jumping up and down completely out of synchronisation. The passing of time, the accumulation of resonances, are both dependent on the absorption of the camera and tape recorder in this space, and to its familiarity to the eye and ear guiding the apparatus. The place of work; the sense of place; the place we become familiar with through her eyes and ears.

"Tailpiece" was shot during the last few days in Buttquoy House, with piles of belongings, marks on walls, dust under carpets. Although shot on Eastman colour, the print is black and white, reducing the warm interiors of the previous film to the stark grey hostility of the final departure. Voices on the soundtrack nostalgically evoke the comings and goings of generations.

The distribution of Tait's films have been, like their production, undertaken on an autonomous basis. A film list was circulated to potentially interested parties; viewings arranged locally. Regular screenings were started at the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh, and bookings followed in Moscow (1957), and Brussels, followed by a screening on Belgian TV(1959). WGBH TV in the United States has also broadcast her work, and prints are held in archives in Sweden, Canada, California, and the Education Department of the Indian Government.

BBC Scotland's arts series "Spectrum" carried a profile on her and her work in the late '70s, as did Channel Four in the mid '80s, and the First Festival of Independent British Cinema in Bristol in 1975 led to her work being screened widely in England. In June 1979, she was invited to show work at the Third International Festival of Avant-Garde Film in London, where her work was received enthusiastically by film-makers from around the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1959 Lane Furniture (short stories)
 The Grassy Stories (short stories)
- 1960 Subjects and Sequences (poems)
 Origins and Elements (poems)
- 1961 The Hen and the Bees (poems)

FILMOGRAPHY

Production Details & Screening Notes

- 1951 THREE PORTRAIT SKETCHES
 1. Claudia Donzelli 2. Saulat Rahman 3. Fernando Birri.
 Camera/Editor/Director: Margaret Tait. 10 mins.
- ONE IS ONE
 Writer: Margaret Tait. Camera: Peter Hollander. Editor:
 Fernando Birri, Peter Hollander, Margaret Tait.
 Leading Players: Sergio Rusconi, Carmen Papio. 35 mins.
- 1952 THE LION, THE GRIFFIN AND THE KANGAROO
 A film by Peter Hollander & Margaret Tait.
 Music composed by Ulysses Kay & played by a section of
 the Rome Radio Orchestra. 18 mins.
- A PORTRAIT OF GA
 A film by Margaret Tait. Produced by Alastair MacCourt.
 Kodachrome. 7 mins.
- 1953 ONORATO
 IMMAGINI POPOLARI SICILIANE
 Two productions by Sperimentalfilm of Palermo.
 Producer: Alfonso & Agostino Sansone. Director: Mario
 Verdone. Camera: G.Raffaldi. Editor: Mario Serandrei.
 Stills: Margaret Tait.
- 1955 HAPPY BEES
 Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait.
 Music: the Orkney Reel & Strathspey Society. Kodachrome
 20 mins.
 "HAPPY BEES was intended to be an evocation of what it
 was like to be a small child in Orkney, when one
 (wrongly) remembers it being sunny all the time, and
 everything was bursting with life. A film about what
 surrounds a child, so quite alot of it is filmed from a
 child's level."

ORQUIL BURN

Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait. Commentary written & spoken by Margaret Tait.

Music: the Orkney Reel & Strathspey Society. Kodachrome 35 mins.

"A voyage of exploration, on foot, up the length of an Orkney burn, a walk which could be done in less than a day, but which, for the film, is spread and apportioned. It's the film-maker exploring a burn which she knows quite well, which she has 'always' known, but never before gone to the source of, in the hill. What I found, going upstream, was that while the actual stream of course got narrower and the bridges needed to cross it got smaller and neater (just a plank of wood for the highest one), the area of wetness was wider and wider. I had expected to find a source, but it turned out that the sources were many, the origins widespread. There was no particular point at which I could say, "This is the source of the Orquil burn"."

THE LEADEN ECHO AND THE GOLDEN ECHO

Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait.

Poem spoken by Margaret Tait. Sound recording by Campbell Harper Ltd. Kodachrome 7 mins.

"This is an early film, started in 1948, set aside and returned to now and again, and completed in 1955. I tried matching images of my own to the poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins. When it came to the editing, the picture fitted, because I had had the relevant lines in mind at the time of shooting, and I think I had to insert only one pause in the pre-recorded track of the poem."

CALYPSO

Painted directly onto film by Margaret Tait. Print on 35mm Eastmancolour by Kay's. Reduction print on 16mm Kodachrome by Reed's. 4 mins.

1956

ROSE STREET (incorporated into 'On the Mountain' 1974)
Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait. Director: Margaret Tait & Alex Pirie. Street music recorded by Margaret Tait. 20 mins.

THE DRIFT BACK

Writer/Director/Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait.

Music by Orkney Strathspey & Reel Society. Signature tune 'The Turn of the Tide' composed by Ronald Aim. Commentary spoken by Harald Leslie. Produced for the Orkney Education Committee and Rural Cinema. 10 mins.

1964

HUGH MACDIARMID, A PORTRAIT

Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait. Music by Francis George Scott; Singer: Duncan Robertson; Piano: Olive Ogdon. Poems spoken by C.M.Grieve. 9 mins.

"A study of the poet, who was 71 at the time. There is straightforward material of him in his own home, and in addition to speaking his own poems, he gracefully enacts the film-maker's interpretation of them. The poems heard are "You Know Not Who I Am", "Somersault", "Krang", and some lines from "The Kind of Poetry I Want".

PALINDROME

Writer/Director/Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait. Continuity: Alex Pirie. Music by Trevor Duncan. Boosey & Hawkes recording. Leading Players: Ron Conway & Stella Cartwright. 3 mins.

WHERE I AM IS HERE

Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait. The song "Hilltop Pibroch": composed & played by Hector MacAndrew; lyrics by Margaret Tait; sung by Lilane. 35 mins.

1966

THE BIG SHEEP

Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait. Producer: Alex Pirie. Music by Trevor Duncan & Monia Liter (Boosey & Hawkes recordings); the pibroch "Lament for Donald of Laggan" played by John MacAskill (recorded by Park Film Studios). 40 mins.

"Tourists are carried north, coach-load after coach-load, and here is the country-side they come to see, dotted with sheep continually cropping the grass. Then, after the lamb sales, the sheep are carried south, float after float.

Part Two shows the seaboard life of today; the railway line along the very edge of a sandy coast; school sports near the salmon river; crofters' fields where the Cheviot sheep now figure; local buses, electricity, Highland Games and the pibroch contest. A small burn tumbles endlessly seaward, and the film searches the same few yards of its length again and again, watching the swirl of water in the company of the coalman who could "listen to that sound forever".

SPLASHING

Writer/Director/Camera/Editor: Margaret Tait. Music by Monia Liter (Boosey & Hawkes recording). Action improvised by Paul Tait, Ian Pirie, Marion Pirie. 6 mins.

1969

A PLEASANT PLACE

Writer: Alex Pirie. Director: Margaret Tait.
Camera: Douglas Shearer. Sound recording: Bert Stockan.
Music played by Jim Robertson & Hugh Inkster. Leading
Players: Ola Gorie, David Birch, Rodney Groundwater.
21 mins.

1970

HE'S BACK (THE RETURN)

Writer/Director/Editor: Margaret Tait. Camera: Douglas
Shearer. Sound recording: Bert Stockan. Music played by
Hugh Inkster, sung by Jeannie Gourlay. Leading Players:
John Tait, Inga Flett, Ian Mackay, Jeannie Gourlay,
Peter Walls, David Hutchison, Nancy Bremner.
20 mins.

PAINTED EIGHTSOME

Painted directly onto film by Margaret Tait. 7 mins.

"An eightsome reel played by Orkney Strathspey and Reel
Society, recorded in about 1955/6, later transferred to
35mm optical track with clear picture and gradually
painted over the years. Eights of different things-
figures, antlers, or sometimes just blobs in tartan
colours- dance their way through the figure of the
reel."

JOHN MACFADYEN (THE STRIPES IN THE TARTAN)

Painted directly onto film by Margaret Tait. 3 mins.

"Made over the same period of time and by similar
methods to "Painted Eightsome", the music being a march
tune."

1974

ON THE MOUNTAIN

Camera/Sound/Editor: Margaret Tait. 32 mins.

"The film is about the life of the street. In the old
days, children played peever on the pavement and 'chainy
tig' in the back lane, and sang skipping songs.
Nowadays, shoppers can amble along in the middle of the
street. The smoke has gone, but seemingly the same
rubbish-cart collects the refuse, and the same
window-cleaner is washing the very same window as 16
years before, although the shop has a different name.

In 1973 there were still some great gap sites, towards
Princes Street and towards George Street, with beavering
bulldozers in their depths. I have tried to catch some
of this turmoil, while the ghosts of the budding
footballers of 1956 kick a ball around on the cobbles."

AERIAL

Camera/Sound/Editor: Margaret Tait. 4 mins.

"Elemental images, air, water (and snow), earth and fire (and smoke) all come into it. The track consists of a drawn-out musical sound, single piano notes and some natural sounds. The picture is a colour print from an original which is partly in colour and partly in black and white."

THESE WALLS

Camera/Sound/Editor: Margaret Tait. 4 mins.

COLOUR POEMS

Camera/Sound/Editor: Margaret Tait. Music by Monia Liter. 12 mins.

"Nine linked short films, about memories which affect chance observation. A poem started in words and continued in images; part of another poem read as an addition to the picture; some images formed by direct on-film animation, others 'found' by the camera."

1976

PLACE OF WORK

Camera/Sound/Editor: Margaret Tait. Music by Trevor Duncan, recorded by Boosey & Hawkes. Eastmancolour 30 mins.

"'Place of Work' was meant to define a place, or the feeling of being in one place, with the sense this gives one, not of restriction but of the infinite variations available. The place I pick on is a house in Kirkwall, Orkney, which was my home from the age of seven, which I often returned to (which in fact remained my 'permanent address' during travels elsewhere) and which I later made my own place of work for about seven years. At the time of filming I was living and working there.

The scheme of the film was to take you from the work-table out to the front-door, and round the house in an east, south, west, north circling, showing the shape of the garden, and then to repeat this circle, with excursions in and out of the house, observing equally on the way the creatures in the garden, human activity outside, glimpses of the town, sea and other islands beyond. Into this come some in a sense rather obvious observations about flowers budding, flowering, turning into pods, and being shaken and broken by the wind. As the trees are battered bare, we return to the editing bench, overhearing that the telephone is to be left connected 'until Monday'."

TAILPIECE

Camera/Sound/Editor: Margaret Tait. Music recorded by Boosey & Hawkes. Black and white from Eastmancolour. 10 mins.

"'Tailpiece', a coda to 'Place of Work', is more personalised, more allusive, and less naturalistic. The house is being vacated, it is now clear. Children's voices repeating handed-down rhymes suggest past time as well as the present, and there are reverberations of other times from the handling of objects, the revealing of marks on walls, shadows, and the mirroring of myself in a room. Fragments of verse (from Lorca's "Poet in New York") are released into the emptying rooms and clash with an ersatz pop music track, combining the familiar and the alien in the same situation."

* * * * *