

## The Edge of the World (1937)

In 1936 the filmmaker Michael Powell was at a crossroads in his career at the age of 31. Ten years earlier he had been an apprentice working for the Irish-American filmmaker Rex Ingram in Nice. Learning all he could about the skills and techniques of film production, he got the chance to direct in the UK in 1931, making shortish low budget features – the ‘quota quickies’ which British cinemas had to show under government policies aimed at limiting the extent of Hollywood domination of British screens. He made 23 of these films in six years working quickly and efficiently with small crews. They gained experience but had little opportunity to develop their creativity. Powell was determined to make his own film on which he would be in charge.

In 1930 he had read a news report about the evacuation of Hirta, the main island of St. Kilda, the isolated island group some 40 miles from the westernmost point of the Outer Hebrides. He kept the story idea alive for six years until he was able to persuade Joe Rock, the American owner of the ‘Rock Studio’ based at Elstree, to fund a production. The ‘Edge of the World’ was the name given by the Romans to the inhospitable islands off the coast of Western Scotland and Powell intended to make an epic drama with relatable characters and a strong story using all the magic of cinema, including shooting on location. But the landowner refused him access to what was now a bird sanctuary. Powell sought advice and was recommended to consider Foula, an inhabited island 15 miles west of the Mainland of Shetland.



John Laurie as Peter Manson addresses the ‘boat parliament’.

Foula was more accessible, but still a challenge for a filmmaker. Powell had funds to take only twenty people and all the necessary equipment to the island, where they had to build sets and hire local people as extras. Cameras and sound recording technologies were heavy and cumbersome. Both photography and sound recording proved difficult in the extreme conditions and Powell’s team was on the island for five months.

In the film’s prologue, Powell and his future wife Frankie Reidy play a couple on a yacht who land on the island against the advice of their crewman. He goes with them and when they find a headstone, he begins to reminisce, since he is Andrew Gray (Niall MacGinnis), the son of one of the two leaders on the island in 1930. His memories are visualised in a long flashback to 1929 when the arguments about evacuation begin. This takes up the rest of the film. His father James Gray (Finlay Currie) is the postmaster and captain of the island’s fishing boat, often in dispute with Peter Manson (John Laurie), the Laird’s factor. Andrew Gray and Robbie Manson (Eric Berry) are also rivals and Andrew is courting Ruth Manson (Belle Chrystall). These are the professional actors, all the other parts, apart from Kitty Kirwan who plays Grannie Jean Manson, were taken by islanders.

The narrative is a love story against the background of tradition and the declining economic conditions of island life, arguably made worse by the stubbornness of the men. Powell was well known for his ability to present the emotional force of landscape as a feature of his films and this is certainly the case for *The Edge of the World*. Because of the difficulties of filming, Powell shot much of the film 'silent' and applied his knowledge of the great silent cinema directors from German and Soviet cinema in his selections of shots and in his use of double exposures.

When Powell presented his editor with 200,000 feet of film to be reduced to 7,300 feet, he knew that the film's chance of commercial success was limited. He hedged his bets by writing an account of the shoot, titled *200,000 Feet on Foula*, published in 1938. He was right about the commercial failure of the film and when it opened in 1937, Rock Studio was already bankrupt. The film was shown at the Venice Film Festival and in New York. Alexander Korda saw the film, recognised Powell's talent and signed him to a contract at London Films. A year or so later, Korda introduced Powell to his new screenwriter from Hungary, Emeric Pressburger and the partnership which later became *The Archers* was born. *The Edge of the World* originally ran for 81 minutes but was cut for a later UK and US release. The version you will see is the National Film Archive Restoration running at around 74 minutes.

## Return to *The Edge of the World* (1978)

Michael Powell was out of favour in the UK for many years after the very negative critical reaction to his film *Peeping Tom* (1959). But gradually during the 1970s, film scholars began to re-assess his career and his films began to be screened again and eventually restored. As part of this re-birth of interest, the BBC agreed to produce a short film, in colour, to 'bookend' their television showing of *The Edge of the World*. Powell and John Laurie (now 81) flew out to Foula after more than forty years and met many of the surviving members of the local cast still living on the island. The film is mostly concerned with interviews conducted by Powell and Laurie with surviving members of the cast and crew of the film and the responses include interesting comments on the impact of the film's later success on the population of Foula. In 1978, the coming of oil production to the Shetlands is seen as a major benefit – a contrast in terms of current arguments about the ecology of the region and ironic because the original film includes the argument that the trawler fleets from Scotland's northern fishing ports threatened the livelihood of the islanders because of damage to local fish stocks.

Powell offers an exciting read, probably slightly embroidered, about the production of *The Edge of the World* in two books:

*Edge of the World* (1990) faber and faber (This is a reprint of the 1938 book with added material.)

Michael Powell – *A Life in Movies* (1986) Heinemann (Part One of Powell's autobiography)

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