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How Robert Flaherty Dealt with the Challenges He Faced in Making *Nanook of the North* (1922)  
and *Man of Aran* (1933)

Robert Flaherty was an American documentary pioneer and filmmaker. He directed and produced many documentary films including *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1933). Both of these films were commercially successful feature length documentaries. While making these movies, he faced different challenges. Despite those challenges, he was able to deal with them successfully in a number of ways.

*Nanook of the North* (1922) is a documentary movie about the life of an Inuk and his family as they search for food, travel, and trade in northern Quebec (Flaherty 14). This moving and compelling feature is about the hardships faced by the Inuit family as they struggle against forces of nature. In addition, this film depicts in detail different methods of hunting, igloo-building, and fishing that the Inuit used in their communities.

The first problem that Robert Flaherty faced while making this documentary was the difficulty in building a proper igloo. The difficulty was that Flaherty had to build an igloo large enough for filming its interior scenes. Normally, an average Eskimo igloo was only about twelve feet in diameter. Such a size was too small for shooting the interior scenes. In addition, there was inadequate light for filming from the igloo ice windows because of its small size. In order to

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ensure sufficient availability of light for filming the interior igloo scenes, the locals cut away part of the dome above the camera using Flaherty's directions. Furthermore, while building a large enough igloo for Flaherty's big camera to fit in, the dome collapsed. Later, when the igloo was successfully built, it was too dark for filming or photography. Robert Flaherty overcame this challenge by shooting the inside images of the igloo in a specially built igloo made up of three walls. One side of this igloo was cut away in order to allow in enough space and light for Flaherty's bulky camera so as to precisely capture the interior shots. The lighting in *Nanook of the North* is, therefore, excellent because Flaherty staged properly lit sequences.

Secondly, Flaherty encountered with the challenge of having only large and immobile cameras available to him. Because of having only these types of cameras, Flaherty had difficulties in adequately capturing most of the interior igloo shots and the exterior unstructured scenes. However, he overcame this problem by significantly altering the walls of the igloos. The locals also helped him by modifying the harsh surrounding terrains according to his liking.

Thirdly, Robert Flaherty faced the challenge of dealing with extreme cold weather while filming *Nanook of the North* (1922). In order to effectively deal with extreme cold temperatures, Flaherty made use of two Akeley gyroscope cameras that had been recently developed. He was able to tilt and pan these cameras in order to obtain precise shots because they required limited lubrication. As a result, the shots that Flaherty took were well framed because most of the time Flaherty did not have to rip out his equipment in a short notice while filming. In addition, these cameras enabled him to film close-up and private scenes. In so doing, Flaherty was able to concentrate more on the personality of Nanook and his family instead of filming only their action sequences.

Fourthly, Robert Flaherty experienced the challenge of convincing the locals in his film to agree to cooperate with him fully while he filmed *Nanook of the North*. He overcame this challenge by treating them with dignity both on and off the camera. As a result, he was able to utilize the style of closer participant observation rather than just ethnography in order to depict realistic scenes. Flaherty further cast various locals in fictionalized roles, such as a scene showing locals hunting for sharks with the use of harpoons from small boats. In reality, the locals had not been hunting for sharks for many decades. Flaherty also staged a climatic sequence featuring the locals. In this scene, three locals in a small boat struggled to row through dangerously high rocky infested waters to the shore.

Flaherty also faced the challenge of having to overcome sheer logistical barriers, which were the result of working in remote and frozen landscapes. These barriers included blizzards and unsuccessful hunting trips, hauling tons of water by dog sledge for film processing, and repairing the camera that dropped in the sea. He, however, managed to overcome all those challenges by convincing Nanook and his companions that the film came first no matter the hardships (Griffith 32).

*Man of Aran* (1934) is another documentary directed by Robert Flaherty. It depicts the traditional harsh lifestyle of characters living through extreme conditions off the western coast of Ireland (Messenger 350). It also describes their daily routines. Some of the routines include fishing off high cliffs and carrying seaweed up from the sea to construct fields for cultivation.

The first challenge that Flaherty experienced while filming this documentary was the problem of representing difficulties and struggles of life on Aran realistically. He overcame this problem by making a family central in the movie. Thanks to this idea, he was able to describe the lifestyle on Aran by focusing on daily routines of every family member.

Secondly, Flaherty encountered with the challenge of convincing the locals to participate in his documentary because they were reluctant to do so. They feared that outsiders would corrupt their lands. However, he managed to solve this problem by promising to pay the locals and using priestly reassurance.

Thirdly, Flaherty faced the difficulty of selecting the right cast for the documentary roles. He solved this problem by choosing the appropriate cast based on physical appearance. In addition, he created artificial families using the selected cast to depict their every-day lives.

Fourthly, Flaherty faced the challenge of ensuring that his documentary showed the most natural and truthful looking pictures portraying the existence of the island people. He overcame this problem by using large quantities of film for each segment of the film. As a result, he was able to produce a moving and dramatic documentary filled with drama and excellent cinematographic sceneries.

Another challenge that Flaherty experienced was the problem of filming dangerous scenes in his documentary safely. He solved this by convincing the cast to act in such scenes. As a result, the cast participated in some scenes that were very dangerous and exposed the actors to the possibility of death. These dangerous escapades also vindicated the people of the island and their heritage.

Thanks to Flaherty's inventiveness and wit, both *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1934) became commercially successful and won various awards. The reason for this was that Flaherty succeeded in overcoming all the challenges on his way during the process of filming the documentaries (Simens 40). Flaherty also became famous because he succeeded in shooting these documentaries in risky and dangerous areas.

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