

Geddes Influence on Films

By Roger Kelly

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Michael Powell [British film director 1905 – 1990] was undoubtedly influenced by Patrick Geddes directly or indirectly. Here's what I mean.

Powell was familiar with - and loved - Edinburgh, and a delightful essay on the interrelatedness of the city can be found in his book: *Edge of the World: the Making of a Film, or 200,000 Feet on Foula*. His Edinburgh actor friends Finlay Currie and Grant Sutherland will have helped him there. Powell's films are culturally aware with a Geddesian appreciation of the wholeness of creation and of true values: *Colonel Blimp*, *I Know Where I'm Going*, *A Canterbury Tale*, *A Matter of Life+Death*, *Black Narcissus* are all excellent examples of this, and I'd particularly point to the Culpeper character with his Culpeper Institute and Lantern Slides (in *A Canterbury Tale* and Dr Reeves with his Camera Obscura (in *A Matter of Life+Death*) both spouting Geddesian lines. Both these characters have book-strewn studies where telling titles can be seen.

The first popularly written book about Geddes, Boardman's *Patrick Geddes Maker of the Future*, came out in 1944.

With advice of the Scottish Office (its new building on Calton Hill had been caressed by Cavalcanti's camera in 1939, its officials had helped to smooth the way for *I know where I'm Going* and it later promoted the making of John Eldridge's lyrical *Waverley Steps* in 1948) a young Edinburgh art student Ray Townsend joined Powell's team to work on *Matter of Life+Death* and later films -Ray devised the *Matter of Life+Death* "eyes closing" shots. When British films ran out of steam after *The Red Shoes*, Ray returned to Edinburgh as an art teacher beside the Edinburgh Crystal works at Norton Park, and made the charming *Singing Street* about children's games in 1951, other films later. Like Michael Powell in films, Geddes' powerful influence in Edinburgh began to lose ground in the early fifties. I could cite Alexander Mackendrick, Bill Forsyth and above all Bill Douglas as having cultural connection with Geddes's special perception of scale and identity: chaos and order, local and international.

In *The Edge of the World* and *I Know Where I'm Going* Powell used the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, and Finlay Currie the former Edinburgh music teacher takes up his old role in a minor way in both films.

In making *I Know Where I'm Going*, Powell was drawing on the childhood experience of Mull families like that of Colin Gubbins, wartime head of SOE and the subject of my current Penicuik exhibition. www.kosmoid.net/lives/colingubbins

Gubbins chief, cryptographer-poet Leo Marks later wrote both *Peeping Tom* and *Sebastian* for Powell.

Gubbins had grown up in his grandparents Mull household with Geddes influence in the Library -combining Celtic Twilight with Edinburgh Philanthropy - his McVean grandfather had helped map Japan's coasts and his grandmother (who spent her early marriage in Japan) was a member of the Cowan dynasty which financed Edinburgh Infirmary and old town good works. Conan Doyle's mentor the Edinburgh hospital consultant Joe Bell - the original of Sherlock Holmes - was another holistic Scot who was part of this second -and very Practical – Enlightenment. Geddes tied in to this medical world on many levels. I wrote about this a while ago: <http://www.makers.org.uk/place/convener0806>

Other fascinating links between cinema and the world of Geddes are Alastair Sim (elocution teacher on Castlehill, his young ward George Cole got a small part in Powell's *Gone to Earth*) and above all the film Performance's artist-director Donald Cammell (amazingly born in the Outlook Tower itself: how symbolic is that!). I have previously written about Finlay Currie and Muriel Spark <http://www.makers.org.uk/penicuik/murielspark#ralston> . From Annie S. Swan to "Surfaceman", from Edinburgh to Elsie Inglis, Rebecca West and Serbia, from Cox's Gelatine to University astronomy and phrenology, from Tom Johnson to Naomi Mitchison, from Lyon Playfair to Bovril -the cultural threads are always important!