

The Masks of Mer

Thursday 15 April, 4pm

U.K. 2010

Director: Michael Eaton

630 min

The Masks of Mer is the story of a film - a film shot over a hundred years ago, lasting for less than a minute, but a film whose enduring uniqueness transcends the long age and short duration. In 1898 Alfred Haddon led the Cambridge University Expedition to the Torres Strait islands between New Guinea and the north east coast of Australia. Among the team's many scientific instruments was a cinematograph which unfortunately only arrived a couple of days before they had to leave the island of Mer. Nevertheless, Haddon's work, largely neglected until recent years, arguably constitutes the first example of anthropological cinema and his footage raises questions of authenticity and reconstruction which have determined discussion about ethnographic film ever since. *The Masks of Mer* tells the extraordinary story of this cinematographic experiment and traces the sacred masks worn in the initiation ceremony Haddon filmed. And, for the first time since Haddon himself publicly presented the work, his films are 'synchronised' with the team's phonographic recordings.

In 1888 the young biologist Alfred Haddon undertook a research trip to the islands in the Torres Strait off the north coast of Queensland, Australia where he became increasingly interested in the islanders themselves rather than marine fauna. On his return he devoted his life to the study of anthropology and, ten years later, he was able to lead the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres



Straits. For the first time, indigenous peoples were 'captured' on the cinematograph in their own environment. Haddon became especially fascinated by the ceremonies of the Malu cult on the island of Mer - when boys became men. Though these rites had been largely suppressed by missionaries Haddon managed to persuade his friends among the elder initiated men to make copies of the long lost masks and recreate the awesome, secret, sacred ceremony. 'The Masks of Mer' is a documentary about these masks and Haddon's attempt to film them.