TRANSCRIPTION
ScottishVoicesProj.0315

BOB RYAN (b. 1936, Hampshire, England), weaver and owner of a textile mill, talks about how he set up his mill on Mull and about the quality of life on the island. What follows is a record of the gist of the interview, not necessarily a word-for-word transcription.

> [Field project "Faces of Mull," University of California Research Expeditions, 1993; John Niles, director. Tape number 93BR–01, recorded on 13 July, 1993, by Jan Keep and Beth Scannell at Ryan's weaving workshop on the grounds of Torosay Castle, near Craignure, the Isle of Mull.]

I've lived on Mull for nearly six years. We used to live on the Isle of Islay, a bit south of here. I went to Islay for a visit, and eventually I came up and started to work for a man there. After three years I thought to myself, "Why should I work for this chappy if I can work for *this* chappy?" [*Indicates himself.*] If I work for me, I work for the devil I know, not the devil I don't. The only thing I knew anything about is textiles. If you're going to go into any business, you've got to go into the business you know. Where could we do it, though?

Living on Islay for three years, we'd gotten rather used to island living. It's a very good life once you get used to the idea; it takes a bit of getting into the way of life because there aren't the local big stores here. We had to move from the island if we wanted to set up on our own because there was already a mill on Islay. A man living on Mull came to visit Islay, and that chap happened to be the head gardener at Torosay Castle. He invited us there, not knowing my intentions, to come and have a look at Mull and to stay with them because they did bed and breakfast, seven miles up the road where you turn up to the Fishnish ferry.

When we got here, I said to Alec, "Down at this castle that you work at [Torosay Castle], have they any old buildings that they don't use?" I went on to explain why I was asking, and he said something that in his Scottish accent I didn't understand. He came back the following evening and told me that he'd got me and Cathy an interview with the lady at the castle. She brought us down to look at this building, which was a bit grim because it had been neglected. The last people to use it were the ferry men— the people who used to ferry out to the boat from the old pier to the big ferry and bring people from the big ferry into the pier. They said they would rent us the building at a peppercorn rent for two years, so long as we did everything necessary to get it through planning. I took on the job of getting electric, water, everything that was necessary to change it from a semi-derelict chicken shed to a weaving workshop.

We paid for everything, in a sense. But in those days we could get a grant and also a soft loan, a loan that is deferred for two years, and then you start paying it back at a fixed interest rate. It's a government operation to help small businesses get started. You've got your foot on the bottom rung and they will help you to get started up. It's called Island Enterprise; it's slightly different now because Island Enterprise has to make a profit. When we started up six years ago it didn't; it was just government money plowed into small businesses.

The Island Enterprise people have business counsellors — people similar to me who've been in business for many years, and they take on the job of interviewing people like me to see if, in their opinion, we've got the qualifications or the right idea. You don't get automatic money just because of your say so. Our interviewer knew the ins and outs of how the money was dished out. We had to come up with a three-year business plan, so I did this on paper, and I went to an accountant on Islay and showed him my business plan. We went over it and adjusted it into the only thing you can call a business plan: a fairy story. You've no idea whether you can achieve all this taddydiddle or not. We adjusted the figures slightly, but it still needed projections of what I could possibly do on the loom in X, Y number of days or months.

We went along to the bank manager, because although I'd come up with this idea, I had no collateral — in fact we were in debt. The bank man asked, "How do you know that you can run this business?" I said, "Because I'm better than anybody else. I've been in this game for thirty-five years. I've been the weaving director of a big company, general manager of many companies." I had the confidence that I could do as well as the next man. It is not what you know, it's who you know — that's a big part of the game. The bank said, "If the HIDB [Highlands and Islands Development Board] back it, so will we." The bank said, "We agree that those figures look all right"; it looked to them as though they, the bank, were going to make money out of my sweat!

The day Cathy and I left Islay, we took everything we had and gave it to people. We gave the fridge to the lady next door; we gave the washing machine to the girl next door. They had never had a refrigerator in their life, and the woman had never had an automatic washing machine. Everything else we just got rid of. The only thing we brought with us was a coffee table, all my tools, and all our personal belongings that would fit in one car. That's all we came away from Islay with. We took the car to Oban and left it with the bloke who we'd hired a van off. We left the car there, hired a van, and went down to Wales, because that's where all our machines were.

When we got to Torosay Castle, the looms and everything else were all in little bits. The bits that mattered were brought out of the rain. The bits that didn't matter just stayed out — it was like a scrapyard out there. Unbelievable heap. And the laird thought, "This idiot! What is my mother taking on!" It was his mother that took us on. Since then many locals, especially the friends of the castle, the richer end of the community, have been in here and said many times they didn't think that we would survive. They thought that it would fail. They've been proved wrong so far. We don't know what's going to happen in the future. We're in our sixth year.

The first year we didn't get electricity until April. The power coming into this little community was all being used, so I had to arrange that they bring another wire from this side of the mountain. I had to pay the equivalent of ten thousand pounds a pole, about forty thousand pounds in all. But, thank you God, somebody in the electricity board got the reckoning wrong, so we only got charged fifteen thousand quid. They had to put up a new set of poles — a new set up all together. Somebody made a mistake, they sent me all these papers, and I had to sign my life away for seven years. I had to guarantee that I would use X, Y, Z number of units of electricity per year for seven years or pay the consequences. I quickly signed this piece of paper and sent it

back, because I knew they got the figure wrong. It couldn't possibly be only £1,500, it were nearer £40,000 — but duly back came the acceptance that the electricity would be in for November. I didn't stir the pudding, because I didn't want anybody to start looking into it. Of course, the castle was highly delighted that I was paying for another line coming in — not me, but the bank, HIDB and me. I explained to the laird, "Say nothing, keep quiet, be calm, we're getting an awful good job done for next to nothing!"

It was just sheer luck. The way I thought about it — I started with nothing, and if I still finish with nothing I've had a wonderful six years. If somebody comes and takes the lot now, assuming the bank says "end of subject" and they want their money tomorrow, we've got an overdraft of £10,000. There's no way I could come up with cash because it's all in stock. They'd just have to take the business, but at the end of the day what have they got? Just the same as what I've got —they'd have to just puddle off somewhere else!

—Do people still use hand looms on the island?

Quite a few ladies on the island do. Some of them come here and buy yarn off of me. They do it just to play, as I call it. To them it's just a hobby; they're not making money out of it. They haven't got anything relying on their ability to weave. It's a therapy. There's one lady, she's very good actually, she weaves pictures, not like a painting. She's retired; she spends hours at this performance. There's been weaving here for hundreds of years, but it became unviable. Apparently, the last commercially operated weaver that actually sold his cloth to anybody was somewhere in Salen in about 1935.

Cath and I [*referring to his wife*] personally like being isolated, because both of us, even in Yorkshire, lived in the wilderness. We were brought up as "country folk" or backwoodsmen.

—How do you feel about the additional development going on here— building up the roads, increasing tourism?

That's all right because tourism is going to help my business. I'm all for anything. I won't want to see great big hotels from Fionnphort to Tobermory, but that will never happen. It doesn't matter how many tourists come here; they'll never get that line of hotels because the chappy, like this chap up here, owns an awful lot of land and he won't allow his land to be sold off to be used for willy-nilly trivialities. Neither will any of the other landowners on the island; they will keep a hold on the development of this island.

—If you could describe this area to somebody else not from here, how would you describe it?

Peaceful. The people are exceptionally friendly. I have never come across one person having any animosity towards us at all. Whether they're locals, Scots, or whatever — unless they're "comers-in" Scots. Sometimes you'll get someone that's a Scot coming from the mainland, and they will make some snide remark: "Typical bloody English, coming over here and taking all the jobs." All they know is "Mull Weavers" and then when they come in here,

what do they get, they get a Yorkshire accent! There's an awful lot of Yorkshire people here, and also "white settlers" (as we're called) running the businesses.

Let's face it, if you're born here, you're not born with a pot of gold in your hand. You go off the island to find employment. There's an awful lot of very brainy kids on the island, on any island, because there aren't the same distractions here as there are in Oban, for instance. There's no slot machine arcade here or street gangs. The young people are very musical, too. The parents are musical; they'll play violin, accordion, or piano, and consequently the kids follow suit. Here, kids develop. There's a limit to how many bank managers, solicitors, and brain surgeons there can be. There's a limit to what they can come back and do, so consequently they don't come back.

I can only talk about myself; I was on the mainland, and I've got a skill. I was very fortunate in having the skill to do something on an island that I could create. If I was a joiner, perhaps you could do it here, once you've got your finger in, but joinery you can't sell. Here I'm making an item you can sell to a tourist. You can't sell a stool, a bathroom cabinet, or a coffin to a tourist.

A lot of the people on the island are multi-employed. Odd jobs. On the island of Ghiga, for instance, there's less than two hundred people there. The chappy who owns the post office, he's the postman, the fireman, the policeman, and the undertaker. It's amazing how that happens on an island. The pier-master [at Craignure] also runs his own small holding; he's a crofter in the true sense of the word. He also cleans the toilet block. Somebody's got to clean it! I've never been in it; it's brand new — rebuilt for disabled people. His wife is the postmistress for Loch Don. It must be the smallest post office in the world; it's a garden shed about six feet by four. It only opens three hours a morning!

[End of interview.]