

TRANSCRIPTION

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JIM HALBERT (b. 1967, Skelmorlie, Ayrshire), shepherd and shearer, talks about his work with sheep on Mull; about how he first came to the island; about the island's earlier history, when shearing was done by hand; about his use of sheep dogs; about the ruins of former villages on Mull; forestry practices; ghostly presences on the land; and lee lines. 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 93JH-01, recorded on 21 July, 1993, by Diane Budres in the open air, on the slopes above Kengharair Farm, near Dervaig, North Mull. Others present: L.K. Metz, Craig Metz.]

I have been responsible for shearing about 6,000 sheep so far this year; I have about 7,000 or 8,000 to go, yet. I was born in South Ayrshire, about 120 miles from here. My mother was a teacher and my father worked for IBM. They were encouraging me to take up an academic career and go to university, so I tried that to please them, but I gave up and ended up here. I was doing mechanical engineering.

I used to come up to Mull on school holidays and stay with an old crofter and help him; that was what got me hooked, really. I was doing just a little gardening with him; we used to grow potatoes and carrots and all that. I used to steer the old horse implements and he'd drive the tractor. We used to rack hay. It's all baled, nowadays. He used to cut it with a mower and rake it all up and put it in racks and then take it up into the shed loose. You don't see that much, nowadays. You get some wood and make a tripod, and then you stack the hay in such a way that it all sets in and makes a mound.

There's a lot of old people around here who know a lot of history. As they get older — well, once they die — it will all go away, and that's a shame. I'm quite interested in it.

There's a crofter who has the croft down at Croig. His uncle used to be here about forty years ago. They used to cut hay and bring it on a horse and cart. He used to go to the back door with his rifle and shoot deer, and that was dog food.

I like to find out about island history. Quite often, if you're out in the hills gathering sheep and you find something of interest and you ask an old person that used to work here, they can tell you all about it.

In the old days there might be a dozen people shearing sheep at one time, and each of them might only do thirty or forty a day. So you could have all these people over there shearing, and it takes you weeks to shear them all, whereas we can come in and do them in three days. That was just over fifty years ago. There are odd shepherds left on the island, but not the likes of what there once were. At Glengorm Estate there used to be six shepherds, all from different families. You find a lot of young people at Mull nowadays go to the mainland to chase the work, which is a shame.

You've got to have dogs to shift the sheep. Some people spend more time on the dogs; the more time you spend, the better they get. Sheep dogs have been the norm on Mull

for centuries and centuries. In the olden days in that village out there [*pointing*], they used to have sod dikes about that high [*points*]. They used to take their animals in; they would have a little house and beside it they had a little fold, and that's where they would keep their animals at night. And then during the day they would put them out and they would herd them all day with their dogs. They'd just follow the sheep all day, keeping them all up in a bunch, and then take them home at night again.

That village out there [*points to the ruins of a clachan*] would have been from just before the Highland Clearances, over a century ago, probably. If you go to the hillock over there [*points*], there's little cairns. The shepherds in the olden days used to bring a stone out with them and set it down. The next time they passed they would put down another one, and that was for the mist. If they got caught in a mist, they could find all these cairns and they'd know where they were. If you're up there and you get caught in the mist, you lose your sense of direction completely. It's quite dangerous.

You can come up here to Mull and do what you want and make — not a fancy living, but you can live, and get great satisfaction with what you do. Like working with dogs and animals; they never let you down like people do. I find that with most people, animals are far better; you can relate to them more. You know where you are with them. I would say that running sheep is a way of life, it's not the living you make off it. Definitely.

If you walk across the hill over there, there's a farm just about an hour and a half's walk. There's an old woman who had the farm, and another woman came over and she was dressed out of style, you know, even older than what the old woman would have been wearing. She said she came from a village that was just ruins at that time, and so the old woman reckoned that she must have been a ghost.

People never try to rebuild the ruins. There's another place in Mull where they tried to demoralize people to get them to leave. There's one place in Mull where they actually got their graveyard and dismantled it and made it into a sheep fank.

I think people are going to have to go more into the tourism industry to make a living nowadays. Farming is not making people as good a living as it did. The government is trying to encourage people to diversify; they're becoming tighter on people's sheep numbers and cattle numbers. They're making it harder for the farmers to make a living.

I think people in those former days had a good eye for things. Like all these old houses: the walls are all just about perfectly straight. All the corners are beautifully done. Time wasn't worth money then; time was just time, whereas nowadays, time costs money. They had all day to do what they wanted to do. At the end of the day all they needed was a few cows and a few sheep and some potatoes and that was it; that was all they needed. They made their flour out of corn; they got their sugar and stuff from little puffers that would come in twice a year, I think.

I used to spend quite a lot of time up here [on the slopes overlooking Kengharair Farm]. This is one of my favorite places at Mull. Up at the top of that hill there, you've got a beautiful view over to the other side of Mull. From that hill there [*points*], you're looking down at Dervaig. I've seen it up there some days, at four in the morning, getting the sheep just as the sun's coming up; it's beautiful.

The government's trying to sell its forestry now. It's trying to privatize forestry — so it will be even more of a mess once that happens. Not so long ago, if you bought forestry, it was a tax dodge, so you had a lot of rich people buying forestry. Hardwoods don't really seem to grow well in this country, especially in this kind of ground. There used to be native hazel bushes and small stunted trees.

People in those days were almost psychic, you might call it, towards things. We had these lee lines in Scotland; they all end up at Staffa, just off Mull. They go from a stronghold to a burial point, or something like that. You can follow them with things the same as water diviners. Some people follow them for their holidays, just trying to track them down. It's wonderful how they get them, how they manage to find them. It's a thing that people have lost over the years; the way that society is going, people have lost this ability. I don't know how you would explain it. I don't think you could pick it up overnight. I think it would just come naturally, eventually.

[End of interview.]