

TRANSCRIPTION

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ANDY McRORY (b. 1932, Ulster, Northern Ireland), former distillery worker and road construction worker, talks about his employment at the Tobermory distillery; his work on road-construction crews all the way from Fionnphort to Salen; about mishaps at the distillery, tourism, fishing, deer stalking on the island; about the culture of drinking on the island and related social life during the time he has lived here; about the decline in the number of pubs and the lack of social activities for the young; and about the warm welcome, as an Irishman, he has had with native-born islanders. 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 93AMR-01, recorded on 28 July 1993 by Cynthia Swanson, Diane Budres, and two other research team members at Island Cabins, Tobermory.]

I came to Mull from Yorkshire, where I had worked for ten years after leaving Ulster when I was 21, and I got a job with a fellow from the mainland, from Lochgilphead in mid-Argyll. They were coming to work here on Mull. I helped to build the single-track road from Bunessan to Craignure. On the double-track road I worked right through from Salen to Craignure. The single-track road from Craignure to Fionnphort was done in the 1960s and finished in the early 1970s. The road from Salen to Fishnish was done in 1972–1973, and the road from Fishnish to Craignure was done in '77, '78, and part of 1979. I worked on all the roads, every one of them that was done.

In 1971 I came to the distillery to work. It opened in May 1972 after being derelict for forty years. The distillery was built in 1723; it went for fifty years as an illegal distillery. It was built by a local family called Sinclair. The customs and excise got onto them, and they had to close down. In the early '20s, one of John Hopkinson's sons took it over, and they ran it until it was closed down in 1938, just before the war. Then the hydro board took it over. They turned it into a powerhouse, and they had it until 1971, until the power came into the island from the mainland. Then some of the old directors of Bushmill's in Northern Ireland, Mr. Morrison and some directors, came and started a company and opened the Tobermory distillery in 1972.

We worked there until '75, when the crisis started coming in the whisky business. Throughout the world, it was. We were paid off, and we were off. I still did a bit of work for them, but we worked on the roads until 1979 again, when we were taken back to the distillery. I worked there until '85; we were then paid off again. The rest of the boys were laid off in 1981, but I was kept on until 1990, doing maintenance and road work, until the distillery opened again to make whisky. They're still making it, though the distillery has changed hands now again. This is three different companies that have had it since I went there first. They're hoping this time they'll stay open, but there's no telling. The Tobermory distillery has had a very stormy history!

On all the main islands there's distilleries. There are nine distilleries on Islay; there's one on Jura, one on Mull, two on Skye. They're on Lewis — all the islands, in fact. Some of the great malt whiskeys are made on the islands, you know; it's the peaty water. The water we use down at the distillery lasts two days. It's just black. It's not filtered; it comes straight from up the hill. The dirtier the water, the better the whisky it can be.

I've held every job at the distillery: stillman, mashman, millman, boilerman, handyman. Mr. Morrison and Hamish MacDonald, the young manager, taught us how to make whisky. Mr. Morrison had been making whisky for 60 years; he started as a wee boy carrying drinks to the men in the distillery and went up from there. When he came to work at our distillery as managing director, he was 72 then, and it was the year '72. He worked until he was over 80. He lived up the east coast, at Dufftown; but he died about seven years ago. That's how we began to make whisky. But of all the boys who learned with me, there are none of them in the distillery now. Some are dead, some gone away, some are here on the island working at other jobs. I'm the only one of those that started in 1972.

I've been on the island for thirty years. I'll do anything to get a living, and always have. A lot of people are like me as well; there's a lot of people from the mainland, from all over the country here, and they seem to do well. I myself have never been a day unemployed in Mull; there's always plenty of work. Still there's quite a few people unemployed that don't work at all; but there is always plenty of work. I think they choose not to work. It's the same on other islands as well. If they get one particular job they would like, they would take it. As I said to a chap last year, "There's plenty of work cutting grass," and he said, "Cut grass? I wouldn't cut grass for anybody!" He was complaining he was only getting 40 pounds a week or something on unemployment, and I said, "Why don't you go cut grass? You could earn a couple of hundred pounds a week!"

I like it here; it suits me fine. It's a nice quiet life; the local folk are very nice. Nobody bothers you here. There's not a big distinction between the locals and those who come in; not with me because I'm Irish. With the English people, yes, there's a big distinction. A lot of English people come and have a big problem; the local folk just don't like them. I don't know what is the reason; maybe they think they're a bit brighter than the Scots are [*laughter*], a bit farther ahead than them.

The best thing about Tobermory is the peace and tranquility, and the people — the people of the sort who are here. They are great neighbors to live with. My door hasn't been locked for twenty years. There's very little crime; any crime now is from folk coming in from outside that's causing it, not the local folk. You get the odd local fight with the fishermen when they have too much to drink, but that's nothing, and they're all friends the next morning again, you know! There's five policemen on the island and they have the life of Riley; they don't do anything!

The population has practically doubled on Tobermory since I came here. Of course, when I came to live at the top of the hill, there wasn't a house between us and the Western Isles Hotel, only the little cottage on the corner there. Now there's been 84 houses built, all new since 1972. There have been a vast number of changes in Tobermory in the last 21 years. Few people comes back that went away; 90 percent of them that has come in are English. They retire here. Up near

the golf course there's a vast number of new houses built there. I think only but two Scots live there; they're all English people. Of course what happens is they can sell a room in London for fifty, sixty thousand pounds, you know, and they can come out here and build a new house for thirty-odd thousand. Any house in London today you can get a couple hundred thousand for it. They come up here and they have quite a bit of money in the bank, and they can buy a new house and live comfortable afterwards, you know.

These newcomers get very active, and I think that's what upsets the local folks. [Laughter.] You can see their point of view because they get into the local council and all sorts of things, like drama. I think the local folks feel that they take over, and they feel a great deal of animosity about it.

Two-thirds of the island are musicians, singing this and that.

I learned very little Gaelic. When we were in school in Northern Ireland during the War, we weren't allowed to speak Gaelic. It was against the law. It was a thing with the English government that Northern Ireland wasn't to speak Gaelic or couldn't learn it in school.

In the wintertime I paint my house and so forth; I don't go out much. Perhaps I'd go out for the odd game of pool in the pub. It's pretty wild here in the wintertime. When you get in, you don't want to come out! A lot of people are the same as me; they don't go out in the wintertime at all much. The young people go out, but the older folk don't.

The distillery operates all the year round. At one time, distilleries used to close at the end of May and they would open again in September; but that's stopped years ago. At that time the workers had to go out and cut peats, and dry the peats for distilling the whisky. But now it's done with diesel, so there's no peats used any more.

A lot of workers are injured at the distillery. Everything's done with heavy copper and cast iron and that. It's very unlikely for there to be a steam explosion, but it can happen. You get a steam line or hose bust. There's a great deal of danger in the distillery, especially in the still house, because it's very high pressure when you boil the stills. Those stills are filled with 500 gallons each. They have been known to collapse, at other distilleries. There's a great danger, too, of smoking. You'll notice "No Smoking" signs up, but you'll still get the odd person who'll smoke on the quiet. I've caught them at it, over the years; especially the young fellows, forgetting the dangers. Once in a still house I was looking down between two tanks, and them filled with whisky, and a fellow had been smoking; he was putting the fag end out on the floor. There were quite a few lying there on the floor. I warned him and he did stop it.

The distillery pays you no matter if you're sick or hurt. They have a sick scheme that covers all that. But if it was known that you were smoking and caused an explosion, I don't think you'd get anything because you'd be sacked right away. You'd be paid off, you wouldn't be kept at all.

You do get the odd accident. Once we had a man sleeping in the distillery, and he lost £22,000 worth of whisky just like that! [Snaps fingers.] The tank overflowed. I came into work

at quarter to six in the morning, and I thought it was water running out of the gate. I thought “That’s funny — there must be a bust pipe.” Then I realized it was whisky is like water when it’s made. Martin [the man at fault] was sound asleep, sleeping in the canteen! The tank that overflowed had been running for a couple of hours. I had to call the excise man, and Martin got fired right away. All the local folk got around; it was a big do [laughter]! In the morning it was £23,000; by nightfall it was £50,000! [*Laughter.*] You could smell the whisky as you were coming down the hill. There’s a beautiful smell of new run whisky; its’ a sort of sweet wine smell, you know, a beautiful smell of it.

The taxes are determined by London Parliament. In Scotland, they lift a vast revenue off the whisky trade. For every litre of whisky we make, the boss only gets £3 for it; but there’s £38 per gallon duty on it. Even last year from our little distillery they got over 8 million pounds of duty. It’s terrible, you know. But they don’t have to get it right away; it’s when you take the whisky out of the bond that you have to pay the duty. You can make the whisky, put it in to bond, then keep it in there for 20 years; you don’t have to pay any duty. But as soon as you take it out, you have to pay duty on it. And you can put a barrel of whisky in now and you can buy a barrel of whisky yet, for about £300. But when you take it out in three years’ time, you pay up to £5,000 for it in duty. This is the terrible thing about it.

It takes a long time for a decision made on the mainland to get here, but it gets here in the end. In little communities like Tobermory on the Isle of Mull, when it does come, it can cause great devastation. Everybody has their own way of life, their own little jobs. It’s like with fishing now. You know, the fishing is nearly finished here. They’re compelling the boats to stay in port and not go out fishing. Of course, maybe it’s the right thing; I don’t know anything about fishing. But if there’s nothing else here for them, then how are they going to live?

Tourist trade is dropping off. If there were no tourists coming through this isle, I just don’t know what they would do, or what anyone would do if there were no tourists. When I came here first in 1966 to Tobermory, there was very little tourists, maybe one bus a day coming up.

The tourists don’t bother me. You hear folk complaining about them, but they couldn’t do without them. There’s no way this island would survive without tourists now, because the islands that haven’t got tourists, like Barra, there’s 36 percent unemployment. Skye and any island that’s close to the mainland does well with tourists. But Lewis or Harris or Uist is too far for the tourists to go. Then there’s no work.

All the girls here work for the hotel. They’re all coming in from the Outer Isles: they come from Lewis, Barra, Harris, because there’s no work for them there, there’s no tourists. They come here and stay here and work here; stay here all the time, nearly. A lot of them come here to the island and get married. They come from Glasgow to work here; there’s three barmaids from Glasgow in the Mishnish Hotel. Some will stay all the time; some of them are students, they’ll go back to college again.

When I came to Mull first, there was four grocery shops on the Main Street, and there was four butcher shops. Now there’s only one butcher shop and one big shop, grocery shop. They all seemed to do well. The Co-Op was only small then; since the Co-Op went upmarket and

got bigger, little shops had to close down. They get this in the big towns too, of course. The corner shops have to close down. The Co-Op is a big concern; it's throughout the country, all throughout Britain. It's just a supermarket; they can sell their stuff a lot cheaper. They make a lot of their own stuff, grow their own vegetables on their farms and everything, and therefore it's all cheaper for them. The little man couldn't compete with them.

I don't buy anything in Tobermory; it's too expensive. Mostly they sell to tourists, because the local folk can't pay the prices. You can go to Oban and buy the stuff for half the price. For the Co-Op, it's the same price as nearly anywhere. It may be a little bit dearer in Glasgow.

The fishing is not as good, now. When I came here, you could take a rod and go down to the lighthouse path and catch fish any day you wanted off the shore. Now you can hardly catch anything off the rocks. There's no fish to catch! You could go down to the lighthouse any day, years ago, and fill up a basket of fish. You could spend all day there now and you wouldn't get a fish. The fishing here has failed, completely and utterly. There's nobody fishing here now; they're all on shellfish: lobsters, crabs, clams, anything. And they're all failing as well. People are really worried, now. All of the boats are still at it, but nothing like what they used to be. All the islands are the same; you get the big boats fish-netting the whitefish. But they themselves are not getting the catches they used to get.

You can buy a [fishing] license in the ironmongers for a day, or for a year, or for a month; whatever you want. But all the rivers are owned private: you have to pay someone if you want to go fishing. It's the landowners that own the rivers.

It's the same with deer; there's a great deal of deer shooting on the island. There's a vast amount of red deer on the island. People come from Germany and Holland, from everywhere to shoot deer here. The people of Mull shoot them as well as tourists. The people of Mull are inclined maybe to poach a bit, sometimes. The landowners are down on this terribly; they offer a big reward for poachers. You can go and shoot deer if you get permission at the farmer. I myself get a stag after asking permission; otherwise you poach it and the police are after you! Red deer is in season starting the end of this month; and you shoot them from now until November. And then they stop until the following July again. And the fish and the salmon is the same.

It's hard for somebody that's a professional to come in and set up practice here. If they don't take to you, then you can have big problems. A lot of them move on, because I know several people who have come in here and didn't start a business. It's funny — there's two builders that are here now. One of them comes from Uist, and one from Oban; they're the two main builders on the Island. They did very well, they're classed as locals. But other people that have come here from the south, especially from England, haven't done well at all. Several have come and started up and lasted a little while, and they struggled maybe for five years, and finally they had to give it up and go.

But I must say, I've never found that with myself; from the first day, I was accepted. But I was told very often, "You're all right here if you're Irish." There are not many Irish on the Island right now, but there used to be a great deal of them. The roads are nearly all done now.

There's a fellow who builds stone dikes [walls], a bit of a character, Jimmy is; but he's a good worker, a good diker. When I came here there was maybe a hundred Irishmen.

If you lived here 700 years, you wouldn't be a local— not even myself!

The local folk used to go to the pubs a great deal, but the young people don't go so much now. They prefer to run about in cars and that. Here in Tobermory you never see a young person in it. The young people don't drink the same as the old folk did. Not the same at all. Of course I know my son, himself, if you ever see him in the pub, he's drinking Coke! Coke and ice nearly all the time. An odd time like a wedding you'll see them drink. But the young folk don't drink a lot. When I came here every man you saw was drinking whisky. Few locals drink whisky today; it's all beer they drink. There are maybe half a dozen that are complete alcoholics; nothing like there used to be years ago.

Tobermory was once a great port of call for the boats. When the big trawlers were all going to the White Sea and out to Iceland and everywhere, Tobermory was the main port of call coming in. That's all stopped; there's no fishing off of Iceland anymore, or the White Sea — there's nothing. But it was great then; it's completely different today.

It doesn't bother me, not with my way of life. But Tobermory was a different place then. In some ways it was better for younger people then, because they had a big cafe where the Tobermory Hotel now is; it had two jukeboxes in it. All the young ones used to go in there and get fish and chips and play their jukebox and so forth. Also in the bottom of Aros Hall they had a snooker room and a pool room and a gym. They closed that all down, and now there's nothing for the kids. But children seem to make their own fun; it doesn't seem to bother them a great deal.

[End of interview.]