

TRANSCRIPTION

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DR. WILLIAM THOMSON (b. 1927, Blackridge, West Lothian), retired physician and former farmer, talks about his background on the mainland and abroad; about how he first came to Mull and decided to settle here; about the farm that he then bought and fixed up; about his passion for gardening and his work with the community council; and about the appeal of the island's tranquility, relative lack of crime, and abundant wildlife. He also speaks of certain problems relating to life on Mull, including the excessive numbers of tour buses, a lack of sufficient housing for the young, and insufficient in-house care for the aged. 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 93AMK-01, recorded on 27 July 1993 by Donald MacLeod and Jeraldine Kozloff at Dr. Thomson's house at Craignure, Isle of Mull.]

I was born in Blackridge, West Lothian, in Scotland, and I've lived on Mull for sixteen years. I was in the colonial medical service and spent — altogether, including army service — seventeen years out in the Mideast. I was in the south of England for another ten years, and then I came to Mull.

—What led you to choose Mull to come to?

Pure chance. I was a surgeon, and I had been ill. I had to give up surgery because I couldn't operate. It's very difficult to know what you can do when you're so specialized. I thought hard about it, and decided that if I was giving up surgery, my prime love, I wasn't going into medicine in any other form. No administration! — although I am the secretary of the Community Council. [*Laughter.*]

I thought I would give up something and have to do something totally different. I decided that — my wife being good with people and my daughter being hotel trained — we would go into the tourist business one way or another. My daughter had married and was living in Oban, so we gravitated toward Oban. We looked at various hotels, and we nearly bought a hotel after several attempts. We eventually got a bit sick of trying and decided to come to Iona just for a holiday. We came over for the day, but at the same time we looked at a property on the other side of the island [not far from Salen], one that took our fancy immediately. It was an old farm, derelict, that hadn't been occupied for years, but it had potential. This was just what I wanted: hard physical work to keep me busy.

It was purely that chance of taking that trip to Iona that brought me to Mull. We farmed cattle and did self-catering flats which we built ourselves, with my young son, who is no longer on the island. We loved it; it was a good life because we became self-sufficient in virtually everything. We grew our own crops, raised our own beef, and kept pigs. We had a good hard life and it was lovely.

There comes a time, though, when you say enough is enough. When I felt that I could still climb on top of the roof and fix the slates there —it was an enormous area!— *then* was the time to go, before I couldn't do it. We built this place, next to my daughter's house, and retired, and I've never been busier. [*Laughter.*]

—Were you elected to be on the council, or is it volunteer work?

I was volunteered, this particular time. Several years back I was elected to the community council in Salen. Having served there for two or three years, the then secretary left to go to Skye, and I took over his job. When I left Salen, of course, I could no longer represent Salen, so I came here thinking that was that. After a couple of years, they decided they wanted me back, so they co-opted me. I wasn't elected; I was coerced, you might say, into becoming secretary again. [*Laughter.*]

—Besides advisory power, do you have any taxing powers?

None at all; it's a talking shop. It has no statutory powers. It can go right to the top of government directly. It doesn't have to go through any particular channel. I could write straight to the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State, but usually one is dealing with the local government, the district council, or the regional council. We try to run a campaign to teach people how to drive properly on single-track roads by putting up little posters. We have no executive powers, but we do have power to natter at people. [*Laughter.*]

—It seems that most of the problems on the island have to do with the increasing population and the increasing tourism; would you say that's true?

I don't think the problem is with increasing population, but I think that the increasing tourism is creating a tremendous problem. Since we got the big new ferryboat that takes a thousand passengers, we're getting vast numbers of people on particular ferries. They get into coaches, sometimes twenty or thirty coaches at a time, and they either go round Mull in a circle or go straight to Fionnphort to Iona and then back up to here —and they spend nothing on Mull. We've often wished we had some executive powers. We could charge them 20 pence just to come to Mull, but we can't do it, of course. These big coaches are breaking up our narrow track roads.

The way the fishing industry is going, instead of there being lots of little companies and lorries, they're getting big articulated lorries to come and collect all of the fishing in one go. This is creating one of the problems.

The resident population is growing, but there are not enough houses. This is a horrendous problem. I can't remember how many families there are living in caravans. In winter they tend to move into houses which are summer lets for the tourist trade, but in the summer they then have to move into a caravan. Some of them live in caravans all the time. At one count there were 74 families living in caravans. With small children, this is not good enough. There are just not enough council houses, low-cost houses.

Because Mull is a very popular island and people come up and visit, they keep coming back for holidays. It has an attraction; it's difficult to say what it is. I think it's a sort of tranquility. It's away from the mad crowd. Certainly coming from London, we found this a great benefit.

A lot of people can't stand it, or else they think it's a little paradise, and of course it's not — they've got their own problems! On Mull there are bigger problems than on the mainland, mainly with cost. People keep coming back on holiday, and eventually they buy a holiday house.

The weather is awful, but people who like the outdoor life don't mind getting wet. There are some days when you think, "Oh Lord, this is awful, why do I live here?" Then you have the marvelous days. Mull is marvelous in good weather, and that compensates for all the bad days, which you rapidly forget.

You go to the mainland and the pressures are on; everybody's in a rush, and traffic is awful. People are rude, they haven't got time for anything other than themselves. As soon as you get on that boat, you sit back and say, "Oh, it's great to be home!" And you're not home yet, but it's just the feeling that you get. You're going away, you've cut yourself off — that strip of water is a great barrier.

In actual fact it *is* a great barrier, if you look at the crime figures on the island. You'll get the local drunk who'll go after a bit of breaking in — or he won't *break into* a house, he'll go right in through the front door — they're not often locked — and go and take a bottle of whiskey. You always know who's done it, but you never get your whiskey back. [*Laughter.*] You don't get the horrendous violence, you don't get the nasty things (touch wood!). So far we haven't had the nasty things that have happened on the mainland. I suppose it's inevitable that it will come, but again, that strip of water and the price of the ferry keeps the rowdies out.

I'm a very keen gardener. I love my garden, and I spend all the time I can in it. I like watching birds. I used to like walking the hills, though I don't get much chance for it now. The garden, I would say, is my main interest now.

We run a gardening club here. There are little societies in every village; they always have competitions, and Craignuir and Salen tend to combine. We in Craignuir decided at the beginning of this year that we would like to have our own gardening club. We meet every month and try to bring in people to talk and to demonstrate. We're giving a show next week. We're not competitive; it's more a special-interest club where people can talk about things. We go and visit local gardens. We went to Torosay; then the club came to me last time, and they're going to another garden next week. We go round and say, "Oh, I like a bit of that," exchange ideas, exchange cuttings, and buy plants. It's more trying to encourage the young people, really; we don't get enough of the young people to come gardening.

Salen always has a very good horticultural show, with flowers and vegetables, late in August. I've had the cup for some years, I'm afraid, for the vegetables, and my name's on it quite a few times. It's just one of these things; I seem to do well with the vegetables. My wife does well with the flowers. I always said when I came to Mull that I wasn't going to grow anything that I couldn't eat. That didn't last! [*Laughter.*]

All over the island, every big house has a walled garden, but none of them besides the one at Glengorm Castle are functional. They are all overgrown. When we lived at Gruline, which is up past Salen, Gruline House had a big walled garden. When I discovered it, I got a lease on it. It was about two acres in size, marvelous soil, but four feet high in weeds! We spent a long time digging weeds. It was very productive, but I left and it's now back to nature.

—Do you have children or grandchildren who live here on the island?

I have one daughter living next door. Her husband owns the local garage and she runs a guest house. I have two granddaughters, both of them at the Tobermory school. What they'll do, I don't know. The big one wants to become a mechanic. She's mad keen on racing. She's only fifteen but she actually has a license to race cars, and she wins and beats the men. [*Laughter.*]

The young one, she's only twelve. She doesn't know what she wants to do, yet. But this is a problem, because what can young people do [for a career] on this island? If they want to become nurses, they have to leave the island, and they may never come back. It is an enormous problem. The only hope in that aspect is the new act coming about community care. The increasingly aged population requires more people to be looked after in their homes, which would involve more careers. One hopes that eventually there will be an expansion of that local government service. The social work department runs it, but it's not adequately financed. They're trying to reduce the number of old folks' residential homes, of which there are two on the island.

—Do you find the population here is aging?

Yes, the lack of job opportunity is driving young people away. They have to leave the island to find a job. Afterwards some of them come back, but not all. The majority do not. But because it is a desirable island, you get a lot of people retiring to the island.

Mull is not so parochial now that they have a sixth-form school in Tobermory. When the children used to go to board in Oban for their upper schooling, they lost the island, as it were. Now they're staying on the island and going to school — from Craignure, Salen, Ulva Ferry, Tobermory — all to the one school. From the Ross, though, they still go to Oban. They'll exchange ideas and visits. I think when they went to board at Oban and then came back home, they came home and that was it; they forgot their friends in Oban or wherever, and they were only too glad to get home. It's not an easy thing to get communities to mix.

They're trying to build a swimming pool. I'm not very sanguine about it; I think people don't appreciate the running costs of a pool. The old Mulleachs say, "What do they need a pool for? We used to swim in the sea!" [*Laughter.*] The young people won't swim in the sea; I know I won't! It's never warm enough for me.

I'm very keen to diminish pollution and look after the countryside and after the wildlife. But what's the use of the wildlife if you can't go and look at it? This is why we should encourage people to come and look at these things. I was out with people on a tour today, and they said, "Ah! A golden eagle — first time ever!" The wonder in their voice was worth something. We

saw otters. People don't get a chance to see these things in a crowded urban situation. All the puffins, guillemots, and seals lying on the rocks: how do you publicize this sort of thing? We have a tourist board who do put up exhibitions in this country and overseas depicting the attraction of Oban, Mull, Lorne, and Lochaber, but my feeling is that they've gone too far to combine the districts. Perhaps Mull itself could do with its own little tourist board. We used to have one called "Holiday Mull," which was quite active at one stage, but it was under-financed. I think Mull itself will eventually take over more of its own advertising.

[End of interview.]