

TRANSCRIPTION

ScottishVoicesProj.0324

DUNCAN SWINBANKS, proprietor of Tackle & Books, Tobermory, talks about his coaching the rugby team on Mull; about employment and unemployment on the island; about the difference between the summer tourist season and the winter; about the islanders' need for a proper, safe, twin-track road to run from Salen to Tobermory, as well as for a community swimming pool; and about the old Mull estates, their trees, and their encouragement of deer stalking. 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 93DS-01, recorded on 7 July, 1993, by Sharon Cameron and Linda Schmicker, at Tackle & Books shop, Tobermory.]

[The recording begins in the middle of a conversation about sports on the Isle of Mull.]

People on the island tend to know each other more through sporting activities. There is now a very good rugby club that plays on the island that has members from all over the island playing on the team. When I first lived full time on the island, you'd go into a village and you wouldn't know other young folks and you'd always be a little bit *outside*, you know, if you went to Dervaig or Tobermory or Salen. But now you can go into any of the hotels or bars because you know there are people you will know from playing on the rugby team. There's also the shinty team. That's just started as well.

So I think young folks know each other more over the island; communication between the villages has improved very much. There isn't such an intensive feeling of rivalry between the individual villages. There used to be; that was quite strong when I first came here. People on the island have become more as one for Mull now as the island has prospered, because the island is prospering. In a prosperous community, I think, people tend to be more friendly toward each other; I don't think there's any doubt about that.

Yes, the rugby team plays away [referring to Oban or other locations], which has been very, very good. I'm very much involved in the rugby team: I coach the team. I do feel it's been an excellent thing for young folks. I started out playing, and now I'm involved in the administrative side. When it first started, which was about fifteen years ago, I can remember going with lads on the team who had never been off the island, and we played in the Glasgow league. As I say, two or three members had never left the island. That was only fifteen years ago, with some young men who had never ever left Mull, maybe just across to Oban but never further afield than that. It also helps, as I say, that people come and play on the team from Bunessen, Salen, Tobermory, from different villages, so they're all playing together.

For some reason, rugby has developed and become a very strong game on Mull. I think one of the reasons could be that Mull was quite an accessible island, and a lot of the families would send their children away to boarding school. They wouldn't need to go away for a tremendously long time; they could come home for weekends and things. At boarding schools rugby is very, very strong. These members of these families brought back rugby as

their sport. It's not something that's been introduced. People often misinterpret this; it is not a sport that has been introduced by incomers to the island who've tried to impose the game of rugby on the islanders. Nearly the whole of the team are indigenous locals [lists the last names of the families], and they have learned their rugby from either being away at school or from playing it at schools and have brought it over to the island to fill the gap, because there was no sporting activity that was done to any strength, especially through the winter. Football was played occasionally in the summer. I think this has really helped the youngsters, having something that brings them together socially like this.

It is amazing the way it has developed. We now have a ladies' rugby team on the island, so they play rugby as well. We started two years ago and they are joining the league for the first time. This is rather unusual; the girls have wanted to join in, which has been great. But we have been raising money as fast as we can because it's very strange how isolated and yet how accessible we are. We've become very accessible to tourists, yet the island has been very isolated when it comes to facilities from districts and regional councils, especially in the sporting way. There were no fields provided for any sports of any type until about five years ago. We actually, on the island, raised all the money for our own playing field. This is down near where the ferry comes in, in a place called Garmony. And there are no changing facilities at the moment, so we are raising money for those. People over here haven't really understood why there has been this lack, and it just seems that we've always been passed over. Even though we've become accessible to visitors, the local people who are here during the winter seem to have been passed over at our local government level. That seems to have been a problem with Mull for many years now, as you'll have seen, especially from the appalling condition of the road that leads into Tobermory.

During the winter there's quite a lot of people who are on unemployment, but during the summer there is very little unemployment. I think that just about everyone who wants a job can find a job during the summer. There's normally adverts up in the windows for people looking for summer work of one type or another, because it is busy in the summer. Some things there are just no opportunities on the island for, but if you want to work seasonally somewhere, all the hotels are needing workers, people need extra staff, everyone needs extra things because they're busy. And the season is quite long. The season goes really from April all the way through to the end of October. It's a long season; it's a good six- or seven-month season, and it's getting longer each year.

We've got Mull to ourselves all through the winter. I love the winter and I think most people love the winter. We can get on with playing our rugby or squash or joining group activities or doing our pantomimes. All our things that we do locally are fantastic! The winter's great. If we didn't have the tourists, many of us wouldn't be here, and I think we've got to have much more. There tends to be a bit of a slap-dash attitude sometimes toward tourists in Scotland because it is a new thing. We are bit behind other countries in that sense. But they are trying their very best to change this and I think that's coming. There's a more professional attitude toward tourists.

My view is definitely that it's great! I couldn't be working here if it wasn't for the tourists coming in the summer. I like the tourists. It's nice when the place is buzzing and busy. It's great when you walk out in the evening and there are people out looking around. It's a most beautiful place. People should be allowed to see Mull and to go to Iona and Staffa and everything like that. We don't want to keep it to ourselves — but it's still very nice when they go away and you get it. We're very lucky: we get the best of both worlds. We get the

place to ourselves in the winter when we can get on with our community life, and we get the tourists in the summer.

Pantomime's great fun. It's a Scottish tradition; it's like a play. It's acted out obviously in an amateur way here, but they have professional pantomimes in Glasgow and all around Britain now. It really has developed very much in Scotland. Just to explain, it's things like Snow White, Red Riding Hood. You act out a traditional story that has lots of slapstick and funny humor. And it has a dame in it, and the dame is the principal woman but is always acted by a man. And the hero, right, who is the man, is acted by a woman. So it's completely a reversal of roles. And it's a traditional type of theatre. It's totally slapstick and humorous with a little story running through it. Cinderella's another one, you know; there's Dames in the Wood, Robin Hood, this type of thing. Great fun! We do one [here in Tobermory]. We start rehearsing in September and put one on just before Christmas; it's a Christmas thing. So it's good fun.

The great thing about Mull, as far as I feel about the island, is that every bit of it is different. If you come up to the north here, you've got woodlands and it's got a beautiful sheltered bay in Tobermory, which is a unique looking town from anywhere. Then you can go over to Staffa and you've got these caves and great basalt pillars. Then you go down to the Ross of Mull if you travel to Iona and you've got moorlands, you know, and it's much more desolate. It's more like the outer isles. There are always different things to see. The majority of people obviously go to Iona because it's where many of the kings are buried, and it's where Columba landed with Christianity. Staffa is an amazingly interesting place as well, with its huge cave. And Tobermory is a lovely town to come to.

Mull is a big island, the second largest in the Inner Hebrides, the third largest in the Hebrides. And there is a lot to do and a lot to see on the island. And it's also — we're very lucky, as I say — because we're so accessible, because we're very near to Oban. The roads are improving to Oban all the time.

Thirty years ago, I started coming on holiday. We lived in Glasgow, and we used to go to the Isle of Arran, and then we decided that we would first come to Mull. We came here for four years on holiday. Then, unfortunately, my father died, and my mother needed to do something, so she bought a small hotel down in Salen. Since then I've lived here permanently about twenty to twenty-four years.

The Craig Hotel was my mother's hotel. That was the hotel that she bought and she started running it. Then she sold it to friends of hers. And this is why I have a personal grouse about the road. Twenty years ago, they wrote to my mother and said that they would be building this new road. There was a chance that the hotel would be knocked down because it was in the course of the road. And she was a single older person, and across the road was the village hall. And this, of course, worried her a lot. And then, in fact, they actually didn't knock her hotel down, they knocked down the old village hall and built a new village hall. But she went through all that worry, and the road still isn't built. They still haven't built it and that's twenty years ago. It's been put off and put off for other projects all the time. The proposed road is twin track, what is called a single carriageway. Single track mean only one track, which is what it is at the moment. But we would like the road to be the same as the road built up from Craignure to Salen. Lovely road! There are nice places for people to stop and look at the Sound on it.

We had a local vote about it. We wanted it. They offered it to us. The road is in a terrible state and we voted — 94% of the local people wanted to have it made into a single carriageway, twin track road. It's a relatively scenic road to drive on if you don't look at the bumps and bumps. But there's nowhere to pull off for people to have picnics. There's nothing on the seaward side, though there's some lovely spots where you could build places with benches and seats and people could sit and relax. It could be so pretty. It could be the most beautiful road in Scotland along the top of those high cliffs. And it needs to be redone.

As I say, when they came across with offering us these options, we had a lot of meetings. There were absolutely jammed packed meetings in the village hall. Some engineers came across from South Clyde. We made our points very, very clear to them. We voted overwhelmingly to have just a third of it done, but done properly. We wanted that. We wanted it to be done properly. That would be OK, we said; we'll suffer it as long as we know something's being done over the years. And they completely ignored what we said. They said — this is typical of politicians — “We want local input. We want to listen to the locals.” They asked us and we gave them our overwhelming reply, and they just ignored it. So they had made up their minds beforehand that they wanted to spend absolutely the minimum amount on it, and in fact, they postponed it again.

So I think they have absolutely no interest in the feelings of the islands up here. People do get put off; people don't want to come to Tobermory so much because the road's so bad. You're hitting cars, and people are dodging potholes on it and then going across the wrong side of the road. The buses are horrendous. There's near misses all the time. The only reason there hasn't been a fatality is because it's so bad; people are driving so slowly. That is the only reason there hasn't been a really bad accident on it. So that's our main grouse at the moment.

Building a swimming pool is another pet project for many islanders. This has been going on seriously for about four or five years. We've raised about 30,000 pounds. There isn't a swimming pool on the island. There are many people on the islands who can't swim, so this is always a worry, as often happens in isolated communities. People just never learn to swim.

Unfortunately, the traditional attitude has been, “Oh, when I was young I learned to swim in the sea!” There are very few people who actually can learn to swim in the sea because it is cold and you soon lose concentration. So a pool is desperately needed. It is amazing how many of the commercial fishermen who go out on the sea day in, day out, can't swim. So we are raising money for this. But the trouble is there are a lot of small communities in the same boat, so to speak, around Scotland. So it's a long term thing, and we've just got to keep going at it! It's extraordinary how few facilities there are on the island.

As for the trees around the bay, here — Tobermory Bay looks really, really wooded — several hundred years ago they weren't here. Most of the trees were introduced by the estate owners, who planted them. But most of them [the estate owners] have gone. There were a lot of sporting estates. You know, where people were based maybe in London and made their money in shipping. Our own estate here, which was the Allens' [this was Aros estate, the one owned by Elizabeth Norman's grandfather], he made his money with shipping. Now he was very much a local, and I think we were lucky with the Allen estate, which was run well.

There were some that weren't so good. There were bad ones and good ones. The good estates were the ones that were like a small community. Everyone would be involved, and they employed people, and they were well off and the people were successful, so they were putting money into the estate. So that was money that was coming from down south into an estate up here, and that was good. Then there were the people who bought estates because they couldn't afford to buy a big estate down south, so they bought one up here because they were cheaper, and they ran it on a shoestring. And they were the estates that weren't bringing money in. A sporting estate that was well run could be a very good employer. Sporting estates were for hunting and shooting and fishing. In the seasons people would come up for stalking [shooting deer], which was a huge thing in the Highlands.

The positive thing about stalking is that it's expensive. People pay a lot to do it. And we do have an excess of deer. We have more deer than people. And there's only two ways to deal with it. Either somebody sneaks out and you just kill them like cattle, or you can get a rifle and people willing to pay for stalking, and a lot more money can be brought into the community. So that's by far the more attractive of the options. But most of the estates are broken up. There are few that are left. Most of them have been broken up.

Many, many people who are in the Highlands would like to run a croft, which is a very attractive option. It's just a small holding of land. You have a few sheep and you work it, and it's your own place. Many of the small crofts, the owners have a few sheep and they look out for them. I know a lot of people locally, here, that own just a few sheep. That is their pleasure on their off time. It's not like a job: they just go up and there's a bit of common grazing, or they have their own little bit of grazing that they rent, and they'll go up and look after the sheep. And it's also the fun and the crack [that is, the casual conversation] of going over to the market and chatting to the other farmers, and things like that. That is very much a community thing that people enjoy. There are obviously still some big farms, but that too is part of the community.

[End of interview.]