

TRANSCRIPTION

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RONNIE LECKIE (b. 1945, Lanarkshire), artist and printmaker, talks about how he first came to Mull and established his business here; the advantages of printmaking in addition to original artwork; and having a family and raising children on the island. What follows is a summary of the interview, not a word-for-word transcription.

[Field project “Faces of Mull,” University of California Research Expeditions, 1993; John Niles, director. Tape number 93RL–01, recorded on 7 July 1993 by Priscilla Johnson and two other members of the research team, at Mr. Leckie’s art studio, Main Street, Tobermory.]

[Mr. Leckie was born in Lanarkshire; lived in Germany, Denmark, and Holland from 1967 to 1971 while touring with a band; and attended art school in Nottingham for four years before moving to Mull in 1977.]

—How is it that you came to live on Mull?

A friend of mine moved to Mull to work as a salmon fisher. One summer I came up to see him, and close by there was a summer school of painting. I was invited to teach there, which I did. For the next 3 years, I was a student in the winter and a tutor in the summer. I realized it would be difficult to earn a living by painting only, so I tried silk screen prints; that was in 1977. My wife Val and I met in art school. We looked at Glengorm; we had no money except a £100 overdraft that I transferred here after having tea and coffee with the bank manager to open an account. We arrived with a hundred-weight of rice from Nottingham, plus half a hundred-weight of honey and half a hundred-weight of lentils.

We made the equipment we needed. The first project was printed cards that we sold locally. I was quite conscious that if I had left art school and gone to London, as lots of people did, I would be just swallowed up and lost. The first few years here were quite difficult, but we survived them.

—Was your wife working as an artist then?

She drew and designed, and I colored in. [*Laughter*]. It was all based on Celtic artwork and patterns. Our first cards were of wildflowers.

—You put them in local shops?

And trade fairs. Our first range did reach America; Macy’s in New York.

—How did you make that contact from here?

It may have been through a trade fair. We also had Harrod’s. In 1977 a project came up; we were asked to design a Mull cookbook. It would be sold for charity for the Jubilee fund. It was printed partly with litho, but lots of plates, pages, and the cover were screen printed. It was also entered into a competition for cookbook of the year, run by the Sunday Times; in fact it won the

competition. We had a half-page photograph in the Times. From that time on, things grew: kitchen labels, table mats, and so on. With screen printing, you can print on anything.

—Do you go on the road?

Yes, for more and more trade fairs and contacts. A publisher in Edinburgh asked me to do 30 prints; I also did posters for London or Oxford. I did album covers.

—What other media do you use?

—Etching, air brush. Thirty prints were screened and went to Germany. When I sell to a publisher it gets easier. Most of the prints are published in Sweden and Germany and then shipped. I do the original. If I had to do them all it would be too expensive.

—Do you run out of things to do in Mull?

Mull is changing; it is happening so fast.

—What are some of the things you don't like?

Progress, houses. When this open field goes [*indicates*], when it's filled with houses, I'll go.

—To another island?

Skye is so built up. The appeal of an island is the surrounding of water.

—Tell me about where you were born.

I lived near Glasgow until I was 20. I have two brothers, and they have English accents. My parents moved to England because of my father's work.

—How does your wife feel about Mull?

She's a bit frustrated. Running a business is hard. The tiles were difficult to export; delivery services are difficult. I'm left-handed; I am good at managing business, but I don't do things as the banks would like.

—Do you have children?

Two; one is in Oban, the other one on Mull. When they were born, there wasn't a hospital here, but there was a midwife.

—As an outsider, were you welcomed to Mull?

I've never felt like an outsider; it's my personality. I have friends, but most of my friends are not on Mull. The strongest links go way back to 1964. That's another reason why I might leave Mull.

—It seems like in Scotland there are a lot of people who are involved in the arts.

Yes, and my friends are also involved in the arts.

—Are your children planning to stay on Mull?

They are 12 and 14. In time they may want to leave. That's why we haven't left; our children have had a wonderful opportunity to grow up here.

—Are they artistic?

Eccentric! [*Laughter.*] The one who is 14 has done some things that could stand up in the galleries.

—What about opportunities for the young?

There's a lot of summer work for high school students. Until recently children seldom stayed here past age 14 due to the need to go to high school on the mainland. Until four years ago, you seldom saw young people except in the summer. It was quite odd. There are a lot of children now; the schools are growing. There are 20 children in the Tobermory primary school. They come in from other places. There are new technologies in Tobermory high school; that's why we are expanding. We need to remove computer fear. Some of our children need other skills so they can compete; otherwise they may leave the island.

About seven years ago in Germany, they referred to me as “the famous Ronnie Leckie.” Where I'll go next? Germany: but only for promoting my work, not to live forever. I've looked at languages.

—Do you speak Gaelic?

No; I don't feel positive about it. There are laws of nature, survival of the fittest. The more isolated you are, the more you're going to speak Gaelic. There should be translators, though, as with any language.

[End of interview.]