

TRANSCRIPTION

ScottishVoicesProj.0349

PETER WALKER (b. 1956, Glasgow), potter and owner of Isle of Mull Pottery, Tobermory, talks about growing up in Glasgow; about his initial trips to the Isle of Mull as a teenager; his education; his apprenticeship at a celebrated pottery works in Japan; his decision to set up shop in Tobermory; recent changes on the island, including new housing conversions, new businesses, and government sponsored projects; and the techniques involved in his craft. 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 93PW-01, recorded on 9 July 1993 by Priscilla Johnson and Jan Keep, at Timbertop holiday cottage, Tobermory.]

—When did you first come to the Isle of Mull?

I came up here when I was fourteen with a Glasgow scout troop. We camped for a week or two. We liked it, and we started coming back on our own accord for weekends and school holidays. Just fell in love with the place, basically. We camped along the lighthouse path at a place called the salmon nets. That's where in the olden days they used to hang the nets to dry out and clean them, big bag-nets and big poles, on a patch of flat green grass in the middle of nowhere. We could pitch our tents there, had a great time, got involved with the locals, had barbecues, parties. In those days the pubs closed at ten, and so more effort was made to make our own entertainment.

—How did you get here?

I hitched, but with the scout troop I took a minibus. You got the train to Balloch, which is just outside of Glasgow, and then hitched up, and it was no problem.

—Would you camp out every summer?

Oh, yeah, I camped all the time. I think it's a case of just getting outside Glasgow. Every school holiday we were off, or even weekends we were off.

—It's interesting that the scoutmaster chose this place, and then you settled here later.

I suppose I went to a few other places, and no other places really grabbed you, so to speak. My friend Stewart had relatives here, and his mum and dad stayed up here quite a lot, and you met the local girls and the local boys, and it just sort of knitted well. There were no problems, and everyone got on well, and that's why I liked it.

—And you were getting away from the city?

Getting away from the city as well, yeah. I enjoyed going back to the city when I was younger. I could go down for a weekend, go down and stay with my folks for a weekend, but that was enough. I had to get back; driving's too much of a problem. The pace of life's

different here. People are more polite; well, they have more time for you. There's no stress in comparison what there's like in the city, you know.

—How did you get into the pottery business?

At school I was quite clever when I was about fourteen doing physics, chemistry; then I did my O-Levels, Scottish O-levels, and then went on to do the A-levels, or Highers in Scotland. I found out there was a lot of homework involved and couldn't be bothered with that, so I decided to take an O-level in Art, and a higher eventually, and the only way you could do it, in what we call a crash course, is take a craft subject as well. So I took ceramics or pottery, and went on from there, really.

—And that was just your thing?

Yeah, I just took to it, enjoyed it, dodged off all the other classes and went to pottery, had a really good art teacher who didn't mind.

—This is when you were about fifteen or sixteen?

About sixteen. So I continued to do the other highers and A-levels, but thankfully didn't do physics and chemistry because it was just too heavy. You're either academic when you're older or not. A friend and I liked to go out and about, as kids do, and we didn't have time for homework and serious studying. It just went on from there, and then I applied for art school, got accepted for art school, but decided not to go there.

I ended up going to Japan, where I worked in a place called Mashiko, about 68 km outside Tokyo. It's a sort of the ceramics center of Japan, or one of the main ceramic centers. It was a small town, maybe about the size of Oban, you know, 12,000 population, but it had about 800 potters in it. I just went over there, got my flight paid for me, it was a pre-advanced twenty-first birthday present. But I saved up a lot of money cause you had to work over there. There's no pay, but you got your accommodation. It's a place I always wanted to go to as a kid and see the culture over there, which is fascinating; oh, it's incredible. I met a good load of Americans over there, from Minnesota, and got on well with them too, they were all pretty mad. It was quite a learning experience.

The guy I worked for was a student of Shugi Hamada, who's one of the most famous potters in Japan. He's dead now, but he was a cult hero, so to speak, in his time. After that I came back to Tobermory, working in a hotel, the Mishnish Hotel, washing the dishes, things like that, odd jobs. I went back to Glasgow, but I couldn't stick it, so I had to come back to Tobermory. I rented a wee place and started up with small pottery. It was very much part time, though, working at the hotel and working in the pottery at the same time. Then a couple of winters I went off and worked in other potteries, full time, just getting more experience.

—How long have you had your business over here?

Eleven years now. I started out in a washhouse in the back of the Mishnish Hotel, down the road there, a very small place but it did the job. We bought, saved up for equipment. In those days I just had a bit of money coming in, and that was fine. You only wanted money for beer, getting you by.

—Well, you just had yourself to take care of.

Yeah, basically a sort of hippy type. The business just grew from there, I suppose, but basically I've been like that up until about five years ago, not worrying about money or anything like that. Then two kids came along, so that changed things, plus the materialistic way of life's coming so much. Do you want to be left behind or do you want to keep up with people?

—Did you get any outside help with financing?

None at all, no, nope, bad news, the Highlands and Islands Development Board — sorry, now it's Highlands and Islands Enterprise — they're meant to be up here helping, but they only seem to help big-named incomers that come up from down south with a lot of money, great ideas or something like that, and they'll help them put a lot of money into their business, and they'll disappear after three years, maybe sell it. I don't know if Ronnie — Ronnie Leckie, the painter — told you when you were interviewing him today, he's gone through a helluva patch with his building, it's so bad. I'm in the same building, but he's on the windward side of it. So we're having a bit of a battle with them, but not to worry, it's not that loud.

The building was originally a Highlands and Islands building. Their policies before were to try and bring up companies from down south to start production up here. That building was an electronics building before, that's why it's such a bland, pre-fab type thing. Eventually, now, they're starting to realize you can't run an export sort of business from an island up here. The costs are just too high. You've got to be in the central belt, with communications and proper labour. After about fifteen or twenty years, they're starting to realize this. Most of the guys that work for this government quango are maybe graduates from university, but with no experience of having lived in the Highlands and Islands.

—They're building something near you now [referring to a big bulldozed site across the road].

That used to be what they called the council site. It was a horrendous site; a huge big black garage was there for the council lorries, and it was a real eyesore. They decided to do something about it; they spent a fortune infilling the land, putting in all these fences, and it's now a bigger eyesore. They're trying to lease the land to local business.

—It doesn't look very stable.

No, it's not. It's another mess, there's no consultation done at all. This area is governed by Strathclyde, based in Glasgow. They make their ideas down there without coming up here to consult.

—What is Strathclyde, then?

It's an administrative region; it takes in Argyll, Mull, Coll, Tyree, Oban, the Mull of Kintyre.

—There was an article in the paper that showed they were thinking about breaking it down into ten separate districts. Are most people in favor of that?

Yeah, most people are in favor of breaking it back down to the old Argyll region. But they don't realize we benefit from the Strathclyde region, because we are actually spending the money of the Glaswegians. We are spending their rates, and we have a fantastic fire service, medical service, schools, all our services. The Argyll region is not very well populated and hasn't got a big rate income, but all the people don't realize that. They think, "Oh, we'll be free from Strathclyde, we'll be able to do things more." But I'm afraid we need the money from the Glasgow ratepayers; it basically comes down to that.

—Do you think that development on Mull is a good thing or not?

Development, in what way?

—Well, the way that things are growing, with more businesses coming in, more people coming in. A man told us today that since 1972 the population declining is now double what it was.

That's only 3,000 people though, on an island this size. The population had to grow from 1972, but now it's starting to break the balance. You're talking about Mull, it was a very depopulated island, but then you're going to have to strike a balance, where you actually don't want any more people on it.

—How can you do that?

It's very difficult. A lot of people can't afford to move onto the island now, because house prices are quite high. Mull's house prices are related to London house prices because a lot of retired people have come up. They've sold their house down south, so they come up and they'll pay what they can afford, so they keep the house prices at that level. This a shame for the younger folk, the kids on Mull that are starting to grow up. They've got married, and they're trying to find a house, they can't, there's no way they can afford to buy a house, there's not even a place to rent. You can get a winter lease from a holiday cottage, but then you're out, in the summer months.

—What do they do then?

They take a caravan or move back in with their parents, or something like that, and now with the cuts in public spending and not building the council houses any more, you know it's pretty tough. But they're starting to —I don't know if you noticed the bond house, the old distillery bond house. What they've got now is a sort of privatized council housing association funded by the government, and they bought that house and they're doing it up in one-bedroom, two-bedroom flats, which is a good sign.

—It's a pretty building.

Yeah, they've done a good job on that, haven't they?

—Won't it cost a fortune, though, to do it up, to fix it?

Well, how they're covering themselves in that way is that they'll sell half a dozen flats. People can rent the others with the opportunity to buy. It's getting so complicated

nowadays because they want to privatize off everything. It's a type of privatized company subsidized by the government. They'll lease these flats to the needy — well, not to the needy but the homeless, the local homeless — and they'll give them various options, how to rent. You can half-buy/half-rent, you know, put down a deposit with a time you're going to buy the house, which everybody in Britain's now been trained to do. These Margaret Thatcher type benefits; she's wanting everybody to be homeowners, but so many people have had frights. You know the big financial down-turn about four years ago, when everything fell flat and everybody got caught out? They ended up owing money, having to give the houses away, back to the building societies. But you know, hopefully it's getting there, slowly.

—They're doing up the bond house; but what about the distillery? Where does the whiskey go and bond?

That all gets taken away because it's cheaper to bond it in a city, in a big proper bond house. That's an old, old bond house; you're talking maybe 180 years old.

—There seems to be some question about the distillery, we went in there, we were talking to the people, and they said it was being taken over this week, and they were kind of in limbo, they have no idea what's coming up, what's happening

It's just been sold to another distillery company — well, a whiskey company, not a distillery company — who are more prospectors than anything, and they have promised to increase the production of whiskey, which would increase the number of jobs, plus make more of the tourist facility. They don't reckon much of what's there just now; they could make it much better, you know, for the visitors to come and see the whole progression of making whiskey while bringing the audio-visual thing in, all this sort of stuff. From the papers I've read — I read the business paper — they've promised to do a lot, and hopefully they will do.

—I wonder if they're buying up other distilleries.

No, it's a small company that's growing, not grown rapidly. In the last five or six years, they've only got one distillery and about three bond houses. Before that they were brokers, whiskey brokers. They brought in the whiskey, bonded it and then sold it. They bought a distillery a few years ago and they found it quite successful, and they've just bought that one, cause what they do is they produce the malt: Tobermory malt, which in the likes of maybe the States or Japan is kudos [high prestige value]. It's a genuine, rare whiskey, a good Tobermory malt, a fifteen- or ten-year-old malt, and they sell that very expensively. But they take a lot of the whiskey away, as well, and they blend it with whiskies from other distilleries and buy it in cheap. That's what your blended whiskey is, you can mix it with water or cocktails.

—And then they won't call it Tobermory; they'll call it, what, Stewart Barnes?

They'll call it any name they want; they'll call it Sheep Dip [*laughter*]. You can call it any name. You can buy the whiskey yourself, you know, if you can get it bottled, and you just get your own labels printed.

—I wonder why they sold it? Were they getting on in years? It seems like a profitable operation.

The guy that owned it before was actually a property developer. He's in for his bucks, and he's out for his bucks let's speak. He did have a genuine interest in that distillery, but it really wasn't his forte, so eventually he sold out, but it's for his gain and the distillery's gain as well at the same time, and hopefully the town's gain. He hasn't sold out cheaply just for making money, he's actually had a genuine interest in it.

—Well that's good, if it's good for the town.

Yeah, as far as things are going, it looks like it.

—They'll be maybe more jobs for people.

In The [Glasgow] Herald business pages there was a big front page spread about it, I don't know if many people saw it up here, but it said they were going to take on another seven people. This town's about maybe 1,800 folk, so seven people is a lot.

—And many of them are retired.

Yeah, most of the young folk leave, ones that have gone off to university or college, they can't find a professional job up here, so they stay down, go abroad, work in the city, wherever. They come back always.

—What about shipping your pottery out? That's heavy, that must be a big problem.

Not really; you get used to it. It was a problem at first, but you just get used to it, everything's just really well wrapped. Wrapping and shipping have to be taken into costs; we ship it all over the world.

—How about breakage and all that?

It never breaks, it's packed so well. The pottery's pretty strong as well. [*Laughter.*]

—So this building was available; it didn't turn into an electronics factory?

It actually did turn into an electronics factory, but that only lasted about three or four year because of the costs. You just can't have a manufacturing-base business up in the rural areas of Scotland to compete with the city areas of Britain. It's just not on, with transport costs and finding your skilled labour and such.

—Then the building became vacant?

Yeah, the company went bust.

—Then who thought of putting the workshops here [at the Baliscate complex]?

It was actually me that said it to the H.I.E., the Highlands and Islands Development Board. They were thinking of buying it, and I knew one of the guys in it, and I said, "Oh, why don't you buy it and start a craft center or something like that up there?" And he said, "That's a good idea." So that's how it went ahead. Originally it was just that building [the

studio] and the pottery, and then it became quite successful, with tourists coming in. Then they built another building alongside. But it's disappointing they haven't made it into a more aesthetically pleasing area, you know, maybe putting up stone walls, making it more attractive for visitors passing by, making it look more like a craft center.

—Where is your kiln?

It's inside. Well, there's one outside as well. We've got a gas kiln, a salt glazing gas kiln outside on the far side, but there's two electric kilns inside. The gas is very expensive up here; there's no piped gas like in the city. In Glasgow you can get piped gas and it's dirt cheap, far cheaper than the electricity. Up here you can use the bottled gas, but it's twice the price of electricity. We work in white meter, which is overnight electricity; we fire the kilns overnight.

—Do you have this one outside because it's so large?

Well, it's outside because it's fumey. The salt, you know; it's soda, it gives off soda gases and such like. It's got to be outside, and all different types of gas come off it, plus with the gas firing and flames through the flue, you know it eventually comes through the chimney.

—Have you ever experimented with any of those firings like the Indians used to do where they would dig a hole in the ground, get the wood or whatever it is very hot, put in the pots and leave them there for hours and then take them out? It's like a black glaze, a matte finish. Have you ever experimented with that?

Yeah, I did that in Japan, actually. That's what they call a really heavy reduction. It brings out all the iron in the clay. There's always a lot of iron in clay, and if you can pull out the iron through starving it of the atmosphere of oxygen, then the iron comes through the clay and turns it black, and that's what they call a heavy reduction. They do that in Japan as well, and it's a quite nice effect.

—You don't see much of that around.

It's just quite hard to do, and if you're wanting to do it on a commercial sort of scale, it'd be very expensive. You can probably find an artist potter who will do that sort of thing, but it will be very pricey.

—You can't do it in a regular kiln, can you?

No, not really. Well you could if you wanted to, but you actually don't know the results until you open the kiln, or bring up the kiln. You know that's part of the fun, part of the risk. You laugh or cry, one or the other.

—Do you do a lot of unique work in addition to your regular stock?

Well, I used to. I still do sometimes. I just had an exhibition at Christmas there, in Aberdeen, but there's not the money there. I get asked a lot by shops in London or whatever to give them stuff, but I can sell the odd piece myself down in my own shop in the Main Street. It's where you get the good sales, you know; I get the full price for it. A gallery can

take between 33% to 60% of the price of the pot, you see. I'm happy that way, but Simon, the guy that works for me, he wants to make a name for himself, so he's got an exhibition going on down in Wales at the moment.

—I was in your shop today and I saw his pieces and his write-ups and things. He does some very unique-looking things.

Yeah, he does. He's a really good potter.

—I missed the shop on Main Street; where is it?

The red building. It's a red shop, it's got a lot of pottery at the top of it, before the McDonald Arms Hotel. I buy in a lot of ceramics from all over Scotland. We can't keep up with that shop, we sell everything we make and have a hard job keeping up, so we buy in all sorts of different types of ceramics from all over Scotland. That's one thing about potters, artists, or whatever. The buyer is into their own individual tastes. Somebody might think one piece is beautiful, whereas somebody else will think it was a lot of rubbish.

—That oatmeal glaze; is that one that you started with?

Yeah, it's quite a unique oatmeal, for an electric kiln. That's what we call oxidized firing. It's very hard to get a good oatmeal out of an electric kiln. You can get good oatmeals out of reduction kilns: gas kilns where you starve the atmosphere of oxygen, again, and it pulls the iron blobs out. It's a thing I invented myself, and the glaze, and I got write-ups in a few magazines and things like that about it. That was a great seller fifteen or ten years ago, but it hardly moves now. It's fashion, it's all fashion, taste.

—How did you develop this one with the shells and the sort of "sea and sunset" effect?

I just don't know, it depends on your mood. I was just experimenting with the glazes, saw a glaze I liked, and I was mucking about with the sandy color of the clay. It just developed. The first production of that is a wee bit different from what's being produced just now. It's just developed further until I think it's fine, and I just can't make enough of it. It's commercial in a sense. If someone's asking you, "What's all this pottery with shells on it?" and they think "Oh, my goodness," you know; "This is like the old lamp bases you used to stick the shells on with polyfiller when you were a kid." It's been in the ideal homes magazines, country magazines and all that stuff, so, this is a few years ago by the way. The seashore or sea themes been picked up by a lot of potters now, but we've been doing it for about three or four years now, so it's time to move on, maybe. I'm going to travel a bit this winter and stay out in Australia for a couple months, maybe. I'll check out the potteries there and just hopefully will get a wee bit of inspiration for something new, a new design, a new range.

—Do you ever get special orders, for some kind of a fish dish or something?

Och, aye. But if somebody comes up, "Do something like this for that," you try to put them off, you know. You feel guilty actually charging the price it takes to do it. At other times you're doing individual stuff, and you're doing it when you feel like it, and your mind's inspired, and you're working at it — that's fine and it's flowing through, and you've produced it. But then if somebody comes and asks you to do something special, you've got to

think and think, and it takes so much time. It's actually more awkward, and it should be more expensive, but you can't charge the full value. You try to put people off from doing anything like that. It's not a very nice thing to do, I suppose.

—Well, you've got to think of your time.

Nowadays you have to. Maybe before, seven years ago, you didn't bother, no problem, but now things have totally changed. It's becoming a cruel world, so to speak.

—Those pots you were making on the wheel, now: will you glaze them green and fire them, or do you glaze them after the bisque firing?

We bisque fire them. We let them dry out and bisque fire them, and then we take them out and then we glaze them, decorate them and put them in the glaze firing and fire them twice. When you were watching the throwing there today [the work with clay at the wheel], that's the easiest and fastest part, making a pot. The people who are watching, they see the price of a pot down in the shop, and they go "Crikey, you must be making a fortune!" Throwing the pot is the easiest part. The time-consuming part is cleaning the thing, glazing, and putting packing material in the kiln, taking out the kiln, glazing or whatever; it's a long process.

A lot of the potters I know have been going for a few years and have developed their own way and style, one that you could never copy at all, no chance. So I think each potter is unique in his own way. You get a lot of amateurs who will try to copy what you're doing, but there's no way they'll ever do it, because it's taken you years to evolve your style. It gives us individuality.

—Now that you're here and you're established here with your business, do you think that you're in Mull to stay?

I don't know, I don't really know. I've asked myself that question a few times. Mull's changing, and I don't think for the better.

—What do you not like about the changes?

A lot of people who live in Tobermory take it for granted and they don't appreciate what they've got. There's a big campaign to get this double-track road built from Salen to Tobermory, which I'm totally against because I feel it'll just bring in all the bus tours. Tourists coming up to Tobermory to just have a look and leave; bus tours, you know, folk that don't really have — I'm not being snobbish, but they don't have money to spend, to put into the island. I feel that that the present single-track road is a hurdle to come to Tobermory and the north end of the island. Those who want to come will use that road; they see it as part of the character of the island.

The worrying thing now is this big 300-million-pound grant that's coming from the E.C. into Scotland. I think it's going to totally destroy its culture, character, everything. I think it's going to take away what the Highlands and Islands are. With the big fast roads, links will be too easy; it will be a case of driving around Scotland in a day. You'll still have some people that will stop in one place and then go off the beaten track and discover places, but cars are so comfortable now, most people won't get out of them. We want the tourist or

visitor who appreciates it, that comes up and says, “What a beautiful island”; those who can appreciate what’s here.

A lot of the locals want this double-track road, and I say, “Why?” “Oh, cause you can get to the ferry five minutes earlier.” That’s the only reason they can give. “Oh, there’s accidents as well, you know, it will be safer with a double-track road.” The double track road between Craignure and Salen was built ten years ago, and there’s been three people killed on it already. There’s been nobody killed on the single-track road. Well, one cyclist was killed

I feel the culture of the island, its character, can all be lost shortly. Turn to a place the likes of Oban: Oban’s destroyed itself. It’s the bus tour capital of the west coast; it’s a sort of Blackpool of Scotland. It’s packed full of cut-price woolen shops. It’s Scottish wool that’s been sent over to Thailand, knitted there, and sent back here. You can buy a so-called Scottish jumper for a tenner. If you wanted a real knitted Scottish jumper you pay like sixty quid for it. That’s the way commercialism’s coming to be too much, and it’s going to drive away the sincere, well-off, quality tourist, so to speak.

You know, I hope to go to Southeast Asia and certain islands there. They’ve actually started to limit the number of people that visit their islands, because they don’t want to destroy it, whereas I think mass tourism will destroy this place.

—What kind of a future do you see for your children here? What would you like it to be for them?

I don’t care, really, as long as they’re happy, you know that’s the main thing. [*Speaks ironically:*] I want them to take off and become a doctor or a lawyer, of course.

—But they’ll leave and they might not come back if they do that.

That’s what you’ve got to put up with. That’s what you face up to; that’s one of the things about being on an island. It’s just a fact of life. They’re going to leave you anyway, aren’t they?

—Is your son old enough to go to school?

Yeah, he’s five, he’s at primary school now. They used to teach Gaelic at the primary schools, and now the schools have chosen not to spend their funds on Gaelic teaching in the primary school, so the school down in Salen has decided to start a Gaelic-medium primary school. That’ll be quite interesting to see what happens there.

I’ve got my own feelings about the Gaelic language. I don’t know whether it should be taught as a useful language. I tend to be a wee bit cynical. Excuse me for being a philistine here. It is part of the culture of the West Coast, and not just the West Coast, it’s the whole west of Scotland and the northeast coast of Scotland. The Gaels themselves destroyed the language when the English moved up from the north. The parents didn’t want their kids to know what they were saying, so they didn’t teach their kids Gaelic. It was banned in the southern parts of Scotland by the English or Scottish lords, or whatever.

Mull used to be a big Gaelic speaking island; it’s just the older folk that speak the Gaelic now. My wife speaks a bit of Gaelic; that’s because her mother’s from Mull. It’s two

schools of thought, really. Are you going to be involved in the modern world within Europe? Are your kids going to be involved with a German company or a French company? What's the point of teaching your kids Gaelic, what are they going to do with it? There's more Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia than there are in Scotland.

I'm probably saying that because I'm a Glaswegian and I wasn't born here, I don't know. My wife's heavily into Gaelic; she's into the Gaelic choir, she is a Mulleach, she enjoys it, it means more to her. She should've been a fluent Gaelic speaker, but her mother never taught it to her and it wasn't in the school criteria. It was banned at one point. The government's putting in money, getting the odd Gaelic program on the television, trying to rekindle interest. Actually, the Gaelic choir is half English, but they're keen on it; they want to learn it, they're interested in the culture, the songs.

—There's a renaissance now of roots.

Well, I think that's what's happening. That's a good point, because it's all becoming so computerized now and technical and boring, I think people are coming back to their roots. I think that's why the likes of pottery and crafts are becoming more popular, because people sit at their high-tech office and everything's a modern design. They want to go home to something more natural and take a break.

—People want a simpler life, things are moving so fast.

It's moving too fast; people can't keep up.

[End of interview.]