TRANSCRIPTION
ScottishVoicesProj.0350

PETER MACLEAN (b. 1914, Dervaig, Isle of Mull), retired fisherman, talks about the former way of life in the neighborhood of Dervaig: the former grist-mill that his ancestors owned; the former smithy where they used to work; the offshore salmon fishing (bag-net fishing) that was his chief means of livelihood for many years; the use of Gaelic as the language of everyday life; the multitude of recent incomers to the island; the clandestine whiskey stills of former days; poaching deer, shooting rabbits, and shooting seals when they interfered with the fishing; and the forms of social life in general. What follows is a record of the gist of a pair of interviews, not necessarily a word-for-word transcription.

> [Field project "Faces of Mull," University of California Research Expeditions, 1993; John Niles, director. Tape numbers 93PM–01, recorded on 6 July, 1993, by John Niles and three members of his research team at MacLean's home in Dervaig, the Isle of Mull; and 93PM-02, recorded by John Niles and three other members of his research team on 28 July, 1993, at the same location.]

—Could you tell us about your family's connection with the blacksmith's shop, the smiddy, here in Dervaig?

I can go back a little further than the blacksmiths. Before that they were boat builders over at Penmore, about 2-3 miles from here. That trade, like other things, sort of fell away, and it was my great-grandfather who started to go to mills. In the old days there was always water-driven mills for oatmeal and flour, so some of them went to that. There's still a mill at Penmore — well, the remains of it. You can see where the wheel was. It was my great-grandfather and his family that built that, and they built another one elsewhere in Mull as well. One of the family went to Tasmania, and he built a mill there.

That fell away in Mull, and it was my grandfather, or great-grandfather, who first went over to the blacksmithing. Then of course, my father took over. They went to Glasgow to perfect their trade. When my father died, my brother Tom took over. Eventually, with the change-over from horse power to motorized, that was finished. There's no blacksmith at the smiddy today, but it's still there. It's very easily found; you go down the road to the church, and there's a house and a little stream. You go across the bridge, and just beyond the house, that was the smiddy. It's still there, it's got a fairly tall chimney. My nephew stays down there and keeps it as a workshop.

At that time, Dervaig was quite a busy place. All the surrounding farms, crofters, took their horses to the smiddy for shoeing and their plows and their implements for sorting out, sharpening up, and changing over. It was quite a busy place, a very popular place with the local young people. My father used to work late in the evening. There was a lot of trade, then. They'd be gathering down there in the wintertime; there was a good fire going. It was warm, and it's interesting to watch somebody working. I think it was probably the same all over in those days; the smiddy was a social center as well as a workshop.

—Were you ever tempted to go into the trade?

No, no way. It was just beginning to go anyway when I was young. Of course, my brother was always helping my father in the smiddy. With time it just faded away — no more horses, it's all tractors.

—When did you get into salmon fishing?

I decided to get into salmon fishing after I came back from the Second World War. There wasn't an awful lot of work, but there was an opportunity of going into the salmon fishing. The Crown Commissioner has ground in different parts of the island, so I applied for this and got it. It was quite good— the freedom. You went out on your boat and you hoped for the best. If it wasn't good today, it would be better tomorrow. Sometimes it was, and quite often it wasn't. [*Laughter*.]

Och aye, it was good fun, though it was your occupation at the same time. We sent our salmon to the Glasgow market. It was not much bother, once the ferry started to Craignure. You had ice machines. You iced your fish and went up to the ferry, and there it was, off to the market. Before the Craignure ferry started the fish went to Tobermory, and it was taken from Tobermory [by boat]. It was a better system at Craignure.

—Did you have your own boat?

Yes. The type of fishing I did was coastal. It was done with bag nets, which were fixed nets, round about the coast of Mull. You didn't need a very big boat; there's not many of them over 24 feet for bag-net fishing. That again has sort of fallen away. It fell away in my time, just at the time I packed it in.

With the influx of this farm fishing, of course we laughed and sneered thinking it would not last. It jolly well did, and it has snowballed. At almost any loch in Mull, or anywhere on the coast, you'll see fish cages. What happened then, the price of the oil fish deteriorated— went right down. Even in the market, the last year I was working, they couldn't care less; they didn't want your fishing. Your price dropped very much. What could you do? There's people working at it yet, but they've got difficulty, they've got to phone all over the place to different hotels and catering places to see if you would like some salmon. I wouldn't do that. I couldn't be bothered with it. Too old for it; but even supposing I was a young fellow, I wouldn't be bothered going round hawking. The salmon fishing fell away due to the farm salmon. This gives employment to quite a few chaps, more so than the oil fishing did.

When I first started out, I got a boat locally from a fisherman who had retired. After a year or two I bought a new one, as things were progressing a little better. To begin with, around the coast here, the boats have no engines, or very few of them. You had to row it; you didn't have far to go. About a mile. It's a long way if it's a bad day!

—Did you grow up with boats?

I did, in a way. My grandfather and his brother were lobster fisherman. They did nothing else all the days, so I was used to boats and the tradition of fishing. I just tried the salmon— from 1950 to 1986. My grandfather and his brother — that was in the days of sail, they were further along the coast over at Haunn, which is about 8 miles from here [somewhat inland from Treshnish Point]. There was a very poor harbour there; they had to walk about a mile before they got down to it. It was a dangerous place. With the surf breaking, you couldn't get out to sea. If they could get out, they were off, regardless of weather. They used to go quite a long way, with the sail, over to Iona on the other side of Mull.

—Is there competition between the residents of Tobermory and the people of Dervaig?

No, I don't think so. The people from Tobermory are very friendly. Once, one time, they got us the nickname of "the bears." Seemingly it goes back quite a long time. This chap with a dancing bear came round for entertainment. He was in Dervaig, but moved back to Tobermory, and they asked him how he had got along in Dervaig. He says, "Not very well. There's too many bears in Dervaig already!" After that they used to call the people here "the Dervaig bears." I think it was because he got so little money; that the opposition was that strong.

—Is there any special name that the people here use for Tobermory?

No, there isn't really. Dervaig and Tobermory are the same. There used to be certain characters, but all those people have gone, people with a great sense of humor and wit, but they're gone. There was a man from Dervaig, it goes back a long time ago, I don't know when he was even born. As I told you before, my ancestors were over at the mill; one of their names was Hugh MacLean. They had crofts, turnips, potatoes. This chap from the village was a bit of a lad; this ancestor of mine had quite a bit of turnips just across the road. So he had a horse and cart, a door with a sack, and he was busy filling the sack with turnips — and when he looked behind him, here was Hugh MacLean standing behind him. "Oh, my goodness!" he said. "It's a good job it's yourself, Hugh. If it was anybody else they would have thought I was pinching them!" [*Laughter*.] There were those sorts of people in every village.

—Are you a Gaelic speaker yourself?

I am. Every place Gaelic was spoken in the home, that was the mother language. When you went to school you had to try and learn English. I'm still trying to learn, but I get around.

—I heard that in those days you got beat if you used English in the home, and beat if you used Gaelic in the school.

That's right. The primary schools are teaching Gaelic, now, but they'll never be Gaelic speakers; it's got to be spoken in the homes naturally, without drumming it into them. When they're taught in school in a class — well, when they decide to start speaking English, we're back to square one. I don't think there's any home left where Gaelic is the main language spoken. None; not in Dervaig or anywhere else. I think it's the same when you go over to the other end of Mull: Ross, Iona, and that. Mull is sassenachized, Englishized, Anglicized. A Sassenach is an Englishman. I

wouldn't say it was an uncomplimentary term any more than to say the inhabitants of Mull are called "Mulleach." Aye, that's really just Gaelic for "English."

—If a Sassenach comes and settles here, can that person ever become a Mulleach?

Well, I suppose they could call themselves that, but to be a Mulleach you've got to be born and bred in Mull. It's happening all over the Highlands now: there's a great influx of English people who like to come up here and get away from the rat race.

—What about in Dervaig; have there been many newcomers?

Yes indeed. Once they come here, they like it and they settle here. It's happening all over the Highlands of Scotland; this is not the only area. Even in the Outer Hebrides, in Barra and Uist, there's a great influx of English coming in to get away from it all.

—Are they bringing in something of value?

I'm not sure they are. They might be taking something away: the hereditary Gaelic language. If I go down to the village today, there's not more than about two people I could speak Gaelic to. The English are taking over. It's been an occupation, ever since the 1745 rebellion.

—What of your own family?

All my family are dead except my sister and myself. I had three brothers, but they're all gone. One was killed in Italy during the war. He was an engineer in the Eighth Army, and he was killed at the bridge building. It was a very nasty job. As for the other two, the blacksmith is gone and my other brother is gone. They lived here. Most of their family is still around here.

There are not many opportunities here for young people. Farming has declined; it employs a few. Forestry did employ a lot of people, about twenty or thirty years ago, when they took over a lot of the hill ground. That employed a lot of people in planting and draining, but that phase is now over. Now when a certain area is cut down, it's just a small amount of people doing the work. It certainly did help employment for a while. There's fishing as well, which employs a reasonable number. Fishing has increased a terrific deal since the last World War, because we have better gear and boats. There was a lot of fishing around Mull, not only for whitefish, but also prawns, clams, lobsters, and crabs. Employment hasn't declined very much yet; it may well do with regulations by the EEC for the conservation of fishing. I suppose we must have conservation, but they're cutting folks down to only so many days at sea. Most of the boats are self-owned. Some people work on a shared basis. They haven't got a set wage; if the fishing is good everybody does well; if the fish is bad, well, that's it. They don't do so well. The fish get sold in Glasgow. Some of them go over to the Continent. There will be a local agent that collects the fish, and then it goes on a big refrigerator lorry over to the Continent.

One thing we don't do now is we don't make our own whiskey. [*Laughter*.] They used to. I think in every place there were little stills, which were called in Gaelic "pota dhubh"— "black pot." [This spelling of the Gaelic should not be trusted.] I remember my grandfather telling me about

it. His uncle and father made it. He said he remembered — he must have been quite young — seeing the very highly polished copper vessels. They would cross to Belfast to sell it. It wasn't a monetary transaction; they would barter their whiskey for piglets. [*Laughter*.] They had a long way to go, the boats were small, and in those days they weren't built for sailing, but more for rowing. They had to go beyond Iona and a good bit out to sea before they were out of territorial waters. They used to go away at dusk and get out of territorial waters by daylight, and then they were safe. In those days it was all Gaelic spoken in Belfast as well as the Western Islands.

My grand-uncle would make his whiskey near a little ruin that is still there, beside a sort of a pit cliff, and there's a stream that comes close to the ruin, about a mile inland from the shore. The stills weren't all inland; some of them were coastal. Peat was the form of heating; it was easily available. They grew their own barley. It was too easy, wasn't it? No problem as long you had the equipment.

—You said you were born here in Dervaig opposite the church. How is the village different now from when you were a boy?

There's quite an influx of people in the village. Then they were all local, and everybody knew one another well. Nobody locked their doors. The language was Gaelic; if you met anyone in the road, you would speak Gaelic. That's gone now.

The main street of Dervaig was built in 1800. There were a few outlying cottages; they are just roads now. Those people were expelled by the landowners who put sheep in their place. That's how they went all over the world — Australia, America, Canada, New Zealand. The potato famine didn't help. When potatoes were introduced to this country and Ireland, they thought it a great thing. It was good food, easily grown — much easier than crops of corn or barley. When the potatoes didn't grow, they hadn't anything to fall back on. They had stopped producing a lot of that stuff.

I moored my boat in Loch Mingary. That's where we have the wee station we worked from. I took the Landrover there. It's the only suitable thing; it's a very rough road down there, about three miles from here. We had a cabin we used to stay in, there. It was very handy in the morning; we were out on the job right away. I would go out to fish each day and return at night. Well, it wasn't a whole day's job, but we changed nets once a week. They would be full of seaweed and dirt. I had to wash them out and clean them, hang them up and dry them. That kept me going for quite a while of the day. Whatever fish you had, you had to get rid of them [fast] — catch the ferry and send them to Glasgow.

—What about seals? Were they a problem for you?

Yes, they always were, from the beginning, to any salmon fisherman. There are a lot of seals around this coast. The problem is not only what they eat and spoil, but if there's a seal about your net, it's just like having a policeman. Fish are very scared of the seals, so they spoil the fishing in several ways. Seals usually go right in the nets; it was a very handy way of getting their breakfast. They tear the nets, especially if they couldn't find their way out; they would go out through a corner, or through the top or bottom. Well, the fish can escape through those holes,

so you're losing both ways. All we were concerned with were the seals that were bothering you in your own area, and we shot them when we could with a high-powered rifle. They were out of the way until another came and took its place. It is quite legal to shoot seals that are marauding your nets; otherwise they're protected.

My nets would be set out from the coast, tied to the shore. They had to be very well secured with heavy anchors, and then there were ropes all around. You've got the tide to contend with; you've got jellyfish, which land up and create a wall which causes you more time. A good day would be six to eight boxes of about 75 pounds each. You didn't get that very often, unfortunately; some days you got no boxes at all. All fishing is precarious, and you've got good days and bad days. Mostly salmon weigh six to eight pounds and very few are over 20 pounds.

I liked fishing; it was my hobby as well as my trade. There was a lot of freedom about it. It was nice to be out there; there was nobody bothering you in any way. You only contended with the other men.

—It sounds like you were the master of your own life. You couldn't control your income, but you could lead your life the way you wanted.

Yes. It was always precarious. Most fishing is hard. You lived in anticipation that the next day would be better; it was hardly predictable. In the middle of the season, in July, in the westerly wind, you expected to get a reasonable haul of fish in. If you got the wind offshore, easterly, it was never so good. The weather played quite a big part in it. In foggy weather you didn't get any fish.

I could only fish in the summers. During the winter I wasn't earning any money, but spending the damn thing I made over the summertime. [*Laughter*.] You didn't make any fortune, but you could make enough to last. I might go out and shoot rabbits. I was always used to guns; I've used a rifle since I was so high [*gestures*]. I remember the first rifle I ever got; it was a .22 caliber Winchester single shot. I used to kill a hell of a lot of rabbits with that thing. I would take them home for the pot. I sold rabbits as well, sent them to the market in Glasgow for the meat, and possibly for the fur.

—Did you ever hear stories about the days when people had to keep their stills hidden [from the excise men]?

Yes. A lot of them were betrayed by do-gooders. The excise men smashed up the still. Then you've had it. People thought that was them finished — until they got the money to get another one. Sometimes they smashed up the excise men as well! [*Laughter*.]

—The whole village must have known what was doing, and they'd keep a lookout.

Oh yes, the bush telegraph! [*Laughter*.] I don't think there was two or three miles between people brewing whiskey. In those days they kept it in barrels. They also had porcelain jars; they used to be brown, I remember seeing them. They held maybe four gallons. I think they were

selling it; they would probably get very little for it, but it was always something. I don't think there was much distilling after 1840.

—What about poaching? Was it common here in earlier times, for deer or salmon?

Oh yes. People used to poach deer. I poached it myself when I was younger. It was just something that you maybe hung up, and then cut it up and gave to some of your friends. I think the thrill of poaching and hunting is the best part of it, really. Nobody was ever caught — they were too crafty.

—Was there there a lot of house visiting, ceilidhs?

That went on when I was young. There was no radio, no television. Maybe people would go to a certain house and play cards, have a cup of tea, or tell a story to pass the night. It's passed now; I think television played the biggest part in that.

—Do you think this area will change much in the next five or ten years?

I don't think there will be any great change. Probably a few more houses being built. This gradual change is taking place all over the Highlands and islands of Scotland. I'd like to leave things as they are.

[End of interview.]