

TRANSCRIPTION

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RODDY MacNEILL (b. 1920, Salen, Mull), retired fisherman and man of many trades, talks about how things have changed on Mull, not often for the better. He speaks about his childhood on the islands of Gometra and Ulva; about social life on Mull in former days; about the declining use of Gaelic on the island; about the islanders' former self-sufficiency as regards food; about transportation by land as opposed to by sea; and about his occupation as a fisherman. What follows is close to a word-for-word transcription.

[Field project "Faces of Mull," University of California Research Expeditions, 1993; John Niles, director. Tape number 93RMN-01, recorded on 28 July 1993 by John Niles, assisted by Cynthia Swanson and Janet Laughter, at Mr. MacNeill's home at 1 Ardmore Road, Salen.]

—You see a lot of people coming to the island. How is that changing things, in your eyes?

It's changed a lot. The way of life has changed; they are changing everything. When I remember it as a boy, everything was run by the islanders. We had our Highland Games, regattas, agricultural shows, shooting matches, and plowing matches with horses. Now there is no farming, as I remember it—very sadly. They won't do anything unless they get money from the government; the same as everything else. The bed and breakfast ladies won't do anything unless they get something from the government to improve their houses. The fisherman are the same; they're shouting about help from the government. They should realize that the government has no money — it is *our* money.

They want to call it the taxes. I am now a pensioner; I am paying towards those people, which I strongly disapprove of. When I was a young man and I couldn't get a job, I went away and looked for it. Now they won't go. It's very, very sad. All the incomers, "white settlers" as we call them, they have got their finger into every pie. They came here to get away from the rat race. They brought the rat race with them, unfortunately.

I remember when you could go out and you never locked your door. You could leave your shed open, you could leave your bicycle at the side of the road, and nobody ever touched it. Now houses are getting broken into; things are getting stolen, you can't keep a thing. This is what they have brought in with them. Television has brought this in—the ceilidhs have gone, the conversation, the old stories, because they sit and watch television.

A ceilidh originally was a gathering in people's houses; your neighbors came in and they had a chat, a song, or a storytelling. Then they eventually had them in halls or the community center. Now it is just a glorified concert.

I'm interested in Gaelic because there are so few Gaelic speakers. I can't get anybody who will carry out a conversation in Gaelic. There are a few Gaelic speakers in Dervaig. The younger ones are just falling into the same rut as the white-bred settlers have brought in. The thing that amazes

me is that these people are coming, a lot of them retired people, and the next thing they're building houses and doing bed and breakfasts.

They're taking jobs away from the locals. The locals can't find jobs and have to go away to the mainland. Those that want to work — but an awful lot of them don't. It's a sad fact. If they're not on the dole, they're on social security, and they're getting just as much as they would if they were working. If they're on social security and income support, they've got everything that's going. They get a reduction of their rent, they don't need to pay community tax, they get free school meals, they get single parent's allowance— they get every damn thing that's going. I'm a pensioner; I get £60-odd a week, and I'm paying £33 a week in rent. I've got to pay £55 a month in council tax. This really annoys me.

I think I could count on my one hand the people in this village that were born on Mull. You are overrun. You're made to feel a stranger in your own country; where you were born and brought up, you are a stranger. They won't talk to you unless they want information, and once they get that, you are dropped like a hot knife. There's an awful lot of the local people that will not admit this. They welcomed them with open arms when [incomers] came, and now they've overrun the place.

—Who is a “white settler”?

They are all the ones that come from the mainland and from England. The houses here were going cheap a few years ago, and the people from the south had the money and they were coming and buying them. The locals that were selling them, they sold to the highest bidder. You can't blame them. There's a lot of Scots people that are the same way; they've made money somewhere else, they come in and they're in the same boat.

—So the problem is really one of power and control?

Yes. It's the same with the farmers. You'd be lucky if you got one actual Mull farmer on the whole island. They've brought in a different way of farming, one that is not working. You can't buy a potato that's been grown on the island; they're not raising oats or turnips. When I started on the farm, you grew oats, barley, wheat, potatoes, turnip, cabbage and carrots. There's no produce grown here. Maybe a few of the cottages have gardens, but I remember when the farms had a vegetable garden as well. They not growing any grain crops; they're grazing.

—What do you think about the work of the Forestry Commission?

Our ancestors went away to America and Canada and cut forests down to grow food; now they're planting damned trees where we were growing food on this island. They've gone to the extreme with their farming here. In the past there wasn't big fields. They used small implements. Now they've gone in for combine harvesters and big tractors, which cannot work on these fields. They've widened the gates. They're not doing anything now; they're grazing sheep.

I heard one [farmer speak] a few weeks ago about the sheep shearing. He says it's not worth shearing the sheep, for all we're getting for the wool. They're getting 60 pence, which is nearly a pound, and they're getting £30 a head subsidy from the government for having them on the ground. They've overstuffed their land [with sheep] so they can get this £30, which means there's not enough food around to feed them, and they're poverty-stricken.

—If they could grow more crops, would they become more self-sufficient?

We were [once] self-sufficient. When I was a boy there was never a bale of hay brought on to the island; now there's lorry loads coming on. We used to sell potatoes out from our garden. We used to exchange seed with the farmers out of our garden.

Pensioners talk about bringing tourists to the island. What have the tourists done for me? Nothing. They've torn up all the roads; you can't get moving in the summertime. The shops put up their prices for the tourists in the summertime, and the locals have got to pay for it as well. I can get a loaf 20 pence cheaper in Oban than I can in Mull. We do all our shopping in Oban; we go over there once a fortnight.

—You say you spent your first years on Ulva; after that you went to Gometra. What was it like growing up on these places? How is it different from today?

There's nobody living in Gometra now. When I was there, there was about 14 children in school. There was a school on Gometra, but not on Ulva. It was classed as a "side" school. The teacher from Ulva Ferry, which was on the mainland on the Mull side, went there twice a year to see if the teacher on Gometra was carrying out her duties. [She was] more like an inspector. The teacher came there straight out of college. I suppose in those days it didn't matter where you worked — it was a job.

I can just imagine today a young teacher straight out of college going to the like of Gometra and teaching! There's no television and no shops. We had a little community there; we had our ceilidhs; people came round and visited. We got no daily newspapers; you got your weekly paper every Saturday. There was six houses occupied by families. The merchant house was occupied all the year round. They ran it as a farm, and you had all your own milk and potatoes; you were more-or-less self-supporting. You only got fresh bread once a week. In the summertime they ran the launch, and in the winter time it was a pony and trap. There was a cargo boat once a month and you got oatmeal, flour, sugar, and tobacco.

[I spoke] Gaelic. I knew no English when I went to school. We had to learn correctly at school — we had no bad habits with our English. We were book-taught.

—Was there a church on the island?

On Ulva there was. They had an English and a Gaelic service on a Sunday. There was a Gaelic minister when we were there; he was a Skye man. I don't think they could get a Gaelic-speaking minister after that.

—Were there many other people living on the island when you were a boy?

Oh yes. All the houses were occupied by workers, cart-women [?], gardeners, and ferrymen. My grandfather was the gamekeeper; they looked after the shooting lodge that went with the estate for tenants coming from all parts of the world. There was no deer on Ulva; there is now.

—You've worked at many different occupations. If you were to describe yourself in your work in a phrase, what would you call yourself?

I just don't know. This was the thing— you just took the job that was going, that would pay the wage. [I liked] fishing the most; I liked the comradeship. [I would go out for] sixteen to eighteen days at a time, and you didn't wash from the time you left port till you came back again. There was a crew of thirteen on the bigger ones, an odd number for fishermen, who are so superstitious. We caught all kinds of fish, hake mostly, off the coast of western Ireland [or] the port of Milford Haven in South Wales.

—What kind of food did you eat on the boat?

That depended on the cook. [*Laughter.*] Some were pretty rotten; others were very good. We had a fish every day for breakfast after we'd started fishing. Usually the first 48 hours out it was bacon and eggs. That wouldn't keep, so they used them up during the first few days. There was a joint of meat for every day. It was buried in the ice in the fish room; you dug a hole in the ice and buried the meat in there.

The skipper would never tell when we were going home. Why, I don't know, because you couldn't tell anybody [anyone who was off the boat]. You could usually tell if you could count the joints of meat in the fish room. Sometimes we would stay out an extra few days to make up a catch, or if there was a poor market.

We were always in radio contact with the other boats and told each other a lot of lies. They never told where they were fishing, or if they were catching a lot of fish. If they were catching a lot of fish, they would tell you the trawl was ripped or they had no fish, or they wouldn't answer the radio at all. Of course, the other boys would get suspicious then and the fleet would converge to where you were working.

I've even seen them on the way home, hearing the skipper talking to somebody, "Oh, we're still fishing; we're off Barra Head or we're at St. Kilda, and haven't caught much." We'd be steaming, we'd be almost home. This was so we'd get to the market before anybody else. The first boat in was the first boat sold, so if you were at the end of the queue the prices would be dropping. [I don't know] why they didn't tell the crew, because we had no access to the radio, and you couldn't tell anybody. The cook was always well into the skipper. The cook would bring up a cup of coffee to the skipper in the morning [with] special sandwiches. If you got around the cook, he would probably drop a hint, "We're going home on Friday."

—Did other people from Mull go into fishing?

I took my uncle down; he only stuck it for six months — he couldn't stand the cold. You had to clean, gut, and wash all the fish and put them below. We did all that work on deck. As soon as you hauled, you shot away again. With each haul, the fish landed on the deck. [Then you] shot away again.

Everybody, excluding the engineers and the cook, had to set to and gut all that fish, separate it out into different classes. All the different varieties had to be separated for market, that went down below and had to be iced. There were compartments down below, fish holes made in compartments, all the same size. You had a pile of boards which were cut to fit, and at the very start you put in a bottom layer of boards. They were just like horse stalls— you put in a layer of boards, and there was a layer of ice put on that, and you put so much fish in, and another layer of ice. And you built that up, and you built the boards up in the front, until you filled it all up. All these compartments were for the different fish; there was hake and haddock. We had a place called “the rough” that was for skate, dogfish, and conger eels; they all went in together. The rest were kept separate.

I did a couple of trips to Iceland from Fleetwood [in Lancashire]; I thought I would try a different place. We used to shelf the cod, which meant the fish didn't touch one another. You had to pack it on its stomach; you didn't put any ice near it. You laid a shelf on it and you put one lump of ice in its mouth. You'd just get to the edge [of the board], which would roll, and the whole lot would roll over, and you'd have to start all over again. When they dried, you'd think they were varnished. You got extra money for that, but the cod wouldn't keep for a long time, they would only keep for the last three or four days. That's why you only put one lump of ice in the mouth. There was no ice touching them; the skin was perfect. It looked beautiful. That went on the market, and you saw that lovely green sheen off the cod. That was extra work, and we did it.

—Do you think there's any way that fishing could be developed from here in the Hebrides?

It's overfished. It's because of our own fishermen's greed. There again, they've got grants from the government to build their boats. They've jumped on the bandwagon. There was people going fishing who knew nothing about it. I remember not too long ago, down between Bunessan and Uisken, there was over three thousand creels in that little spot of water.

When I was a boy, you only fished for the summer months from May, when the weather settled. [We fished] with open boats, and you had no harbors. You finished before the October gales started; the gear, the boats, and everything was all secured ashore. Now they keep their boats in the like of Tobermory or Ulva, and they travel by car or van. They fish all the year round. They fish right through [the spawning season]. A few years ago, there was a fishing ban on lobsters that carried spawn. They weren't satisfied with returning those [to the sea, as mandated]; they were scrubbing the spawn off with a scrubbing brush. It's man that is destroying his own environment. It was the same with small lobsters— they're not supposed to keep anything under nine inches. They can't enforce it. The men are living aboard these boats, and they cook that size of lobsters for themselves and throw the shells over the side; who's to know?

—So for you, the whole way of life has changed?

Completely. All the houses round the coast, when I was a boy, had a boat to do their own fishing. Before my time they travelled by boat. If you were going to Tobermory they would take a boat and sail up; there were no cars. My uncle was here last week, he's 80, he was born and brought up on Ulva. His wife was born and brought up in Tobermory. I took them to places they had never been to, because when they were young they didn't have the means of travel, and neither had I. I've been to places these past few years, since I got a car, that I'd never been to on the island.

You had to cycle, and they weren't mountain bikes with fifteen gears by any means! [*Laughter.*] More often than not they were built by yourself out of bits and pieces that you begged, borrowed, or stole. You didn't steal it [the bike], but you got it by various means.

The War made a difference. A lot of the young men who went away from here, myself included, they saw a different way of life, and there's an awful lot that didn't come back. They stayed on the mainland; they could move about. They had cinemas, things you just didn't have on the island, and they didn't come back to the island. There was a lot that lost their life. Of my family, I'm the only one who came back to Mull to stay.

—Why did you come back?

I don't know; maybe I was the idiot of the family. [*Laughter.*]

[End of interview.]