TRANSCRIPTION
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ANN MACKENZIE (b. 1959 in Dunoon, Argyll), Gaelic language researcher living in the village of Salen, Isle of Mull, describes the Gaelic Project for which she has been one of two principal workers. She talks about her background as someone aspiring to become a fluent speaker of Gaelic; about the present state of the Gaelic language on Mull; and about the importance of the Gaelic language as a link to a unique Highland culture. 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 93AMK-01, recorded on 27 July 1993 by John Niles at MacKenzie's cottage in the village of Salen, Isle of Mull. Others present: three research team volunteers.]

—We would like to hear about the Gaelic Project you've been involved in. I know a bit about it from conversations with you and Mairi MacArthur [author of several authoritative books on the island of Iona], but could you tell us what its nature has been, what its aims are or have been, what the expected date of completion is — these sorts of things?

About ten years ago, there was a Mull Gaelic working party set up to promote Gaelic in the island in all sorts of ways, in schools and writings, and they had various projects, one of which was to set up a Gaelic Archive with information that could be used by schools or individuals and that would preserve specific Mull dialects — Gaelic dialect and words. But this project took quite a long time to complete because of funding. Eventually, last year, funding was finalized and two people, Mary and myself, were interviewed for this post of researcher. So in six months, starting last June, we went round various people in Mull, whether Gaelic-speaking or of Gaelic-speaking family descent. We recorded information, took photographs of them, and borrowed photographs of various areas in Mull, and are now trying to put this into an archive which will be stored in the school. Hopefully at the end of the project we will have an archive, perhaps some publications, and an exhibition, so the people of Mull can see what has been done.

The information we collected is slightly different from previous recordings in Mull, which had concentrated on a more mythological past, you know — fables and legends — whereas we concentrated on things within living memory: social history, education, religion, work, medicine. A variety of everyday topics; the War; how life was here on Mull. And if possible, we recorded the Gaelic words used for these things. Especially things that have changed since the War, you know, with different estates and people doing different sorts of work.

—Is your father a Gaelic speaker? And your mother?

Yes, he is a Gaelic speaker. No, she's from Argyll, as are all her relations. That family didn't speak Gaelic, at least latterly.

—Did you pick it up from your family as a child?

I had a bit of it when I was very young, but despite being in school in Argyll, traditionally a Gaelic-speaking area, nobody else did at that point. So unfortunately, I didn't learn more and it wasn't taught in school. I made various other attempts after that, but again none of the schools I attended taught Gaelic. So I learnt more with my father. Part of the idea of my coming to work in Mull and returning to the West Coast was to learn Gaelic, which I still hope to do. But the tapes that I made were in Gaelic and I managed to learn enough before that.

—How would you describe your proficiency now?

I don't think it's improved very much, because conversation is obviously the most important part, and I was asking a series of standard guiding questions to encourage people to talk more about certain things on Mull.

—And you would address people in Gaelic, normally?

Yes, and they would answer in Gaelic. So I think I'll have to do some classes to learn more Gaelic, but unfortunately in Mull it seems to be members of a much older generation that are fluent Gaelic speakers. Then there are two generations which have lost it because of lack of teachers, or because there was a deliberate policy of not learning Gaelic, so the younger people here have very little. It's only now that it's coming back into the schools, and hopefully in the next year or two there will be Gaelic Media units set up in Mull, including here in Salen. So that's hopeful, because unless interest is generated with younger people, it really will die out in Mull. That would be a shame, because from all accounts of Gaelic speakers, the Mull dialect is a very good one, with lots of interesting words of its own.

—About the language dying out: you must be part of the missing generation, then, because Gaelic wasn't taught in schools and you didn't have both parents speaking it at home.

Oh yes, and also because a lot of that generation would have moved away from the islands or the west coast of the Highlands to the mainland or to large cities for work, where it was probably more difficult to learn Gaelic. But I think I'm also typical of my generation in that a lot of us are coming back to the Highlands to work and hopefully to learn Gaelic again.

—How interested are people on Mull in general in learning the language again?

That's very difficult to say, really, because while I've been working on the project, lots of people have been interested in it. And there is a pride in their heritage, or whatever you'd like to call it. Unfortunately, very few are really willing to learn it at classes. I think they would be more interested in their children learning it. But there seems to be a big difference between the interest and the actual practical commitment people will give.

—Are there any parts of the island where the community seems strong enough for the community of Gaelic speakers to maintain the language casually?

There are areas where Gaelic has been maintained more because it's more traditional. In the Ross of Mull, where there's more crofting still going on, I think it's stronger there. And there are links; there are *feis* [Gaelic festivals] and mods [Gaelic singing competitions]. Perhaps through something like that, with singing, you could preserve it; you can draw people in through that.

—I suppose it's on the Ross of Mull that the conditions of life are closest to what they have been in the past, and so people attach more meaning to the maintenance of the Gaelic language there.

Yes, but at the same time, if Gaelic is to survive, it has to adapt — or life has to adapt to it — so that it relates to modern life. Things are very different now in the Highlands; the economy is completely different. I think that was one of the intentions or hopes of the Mull Gaelic working party, that Gaelic could be brought into everyday life, even with tourism, so that people coming here would be aware of the separate culture. But so far that hasn't really happened.

—Then that would include people involved in Gaelic in the schools, perhaps the Gaelic choir, or people involved in the mod. Is there a *feis* on Mull as well?

There's a *feis* in Bunessan. The first one was held last year and there hopefully will be one next year. That is good because it brings together lots of people and various musical instruments and singing. There was a local history workshop as well. That was very successful, and it does encourage young people to be interested in the music or traditions of the place, if not directly in the language, which is a start.

—That could tie in, as you suggest, with a different kind of tourism in the West Highlands than you find elsewhere in Europe. That looks to me as an outsider as potentially a bright idea.

Well, I suppose it all depends on whether tourism takes over a place and changes it. You know, what people come to expect in the Highlands doesn't really exist, in a lot of cases. A lot of traditional things have died out. I don't know if it is possible to preserve these things under tourism.

—What everyone that I've seen seems agreed upon is that you don't need more curio shops. But there is a kind of cultural tourism which can appeal to certain people, one that would involve a genuine attempt to preserve and maintain certain aspects of life here, as with living history and museum-related exhibits. There's a potential for that here that seems only partly developed. Marvelous archaeological sites as well, marvelous sites some of which are completely planted over or grown over, you know, and so out of reach. It doesn't have to be that way.

No, but I suppose you have to worry about over-popularizing certain things. Then you lose the interest. Take Stonehenge, for an example at the extreme end. And to a certain extent, in the Highlands, things are geared toward people's romanticized idea of Highland life. Perhaps it's been done badly in the past, but I think that's what, if you interview tourists and people who came to this area, perhaps that's what they want to see.

—How did working on the Gaelic Project make you feel about your own heritage? It sounds like it revived your interest in it.

I wouldn't say revived; it continued my interest and I suppose it made me see in a more realistic sense the problems of recording people, and what you do with information gained from people as well. Whose property is it? Can it be used in the community from

which it came, which is I think the most important thing? The work has made you question whether dwelling on the past is the right approach, or whether it's possible to integrate that approach with interests today. And hopefully the work will continue, because there's no limit to what sort of information and stories people can tell. And hopefully the Project will be updated, so that younger and younger generations will add their stories as well.

—Where was most of your work done?

Well, the way the project was organized, the island is divided into two. Mairi MacArthur took the south because her relations and her work were concentrated in Iona. I suppose with my connection with Ulva, it seemed a simple way of doing it. So, I think the majority of Gaelic-speaking people would be in the Ross of Mull, because in the North, people seem to spread out a bit more. A lot of people I contacted don't live in the place they were brought up. That's another point, that a lot of people of the older generation have moved to villages, to larger places. And in fact, a lot of work could be done off the island as well. That was part of our idea, to contact people who had left Mull: Gaelic speakers, parts of families. There's still an awful lot of work to do with them.

—Would some of that be in Glasgow?

A lot in Glasgow. Oban too. All over, really. Mull is also involved in lots of emigration from here. You could go all along and further and further out. We have tried to contact people through the local publication [the newsletter *an Mulleach?*] as well as through the *Oban Times* because we know that lots of people over the world have subscriptions to that. So hopefully we'll get more information.

This sort of thing seems essential to maintaining the language. Any sort of living thing, making sure that children, particularly if they have Gaelic in the home, can have it in the play group, can have it in the primary schools — and not just come to it like studying Russian, Italian or French in the secondary school. That will preserve the language, but only in a very artificial way.

—If the children are learning it in school, then won't their parents have to learn it too to know what their children are talking about?

Well, that's a problem, really. A lot of children learn it, but they don't speak it at home because their parents don't. I think it's important that you make Gaelic very acceptable and normal. That's what you have do to break this tradition where Gaelic is spoken by certain people only. That's probably the hardest part: to make people, especially young people, realize that Gaelic can be a modern language. It's not a purely historical language spoken by their grandparents.

—I have a provocative question. Someone might ask, why bother with Gaelic? What difference does it make to you or to other people whether the language continues as a living language or not? Would you not be the same people in the same place doing the same things? How does it affect what you are, or what you want to be, by having Gaelic or not?

That's a very hard question to answer. Simply put, so much of Gaelic is connected to the culture, and it's one way of linking parts of that culture throughout the world. It links Scottish people and Irish people and people who have gone to Canada or South America —

all sorts of people. It's one way of preserving a lot of the tradition, the poetry, the ways of describing certain things that you can't describe in English. It's such a hard thing to explain this, really, but to say that Gaelic is not worth preserving is to say that Highland life is not worth preserving. I think the two things go together. And why should life be so centralized and similar all over the place? That's happening so much nowadays, you know, Europeanism, Americanism, whatever you call it. I think it's good to preserve local interests and culture, and perhaps you can learn from them. Cures, for instance, the things that people are learning now about the South American rainforests. All sorts of things that people haven't thought about, or that perhaps got lost — these things also apply to the Highlands.

—At what point in your life did you decide to come back to Mull?

I suppose when I had completed a lot of courses and had worked in museums and had completed a photography course as well. I felt I had enough courses and it was just time to come back and live in the place that I personally perhaps have romanticized as well. I think lots of people can be like that, to be brought up with a connection with the Highlands and then educated somewhere else. And even if they come back for the summer holidays and think life is wonderful here, I think most people wouldn't particularly want to come back and see what it's like to actually live here. But I wanted to do that, to see what the reality of the place was like.

—When did you start moving here?

Last June [that is, of 1992].

—Do you intend to stay on?

Yes, I'd like to if I find enough work and a place to live, but it's very difficult to get the two of these things at the same time.

—Here's a question for you. In dealing with a number of Gaelic speakers on Mull, you may have been dealing with people who not only speak a language in which they can communicate with fewer and fewer people, but they might also be economically marginal, some of them, and feeling politically on the fringes as well. How deep resentment would you say there is directed against outsiders — the "white settlers," the powers that be, whatever? Have you perceived a deep well of resentment, or only minor irritations?

There is obviously a lot of resentment, especially I think in Mull, where the situation is perhaps more extreme than elsewhere. Mull is more accessible; there have been more people coming into the islands. There's been a history of estates, as well, owning most of the land. I think people do feel powerless here; that's something that's gone on for so long.

[End of interview.]