TRANSCRIPTION
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DUNCAN MACGILP (b. 1925, Tobermory), coach driver, retired auto mechanic, and leader of the local Gaelic Choir, talks about his background as a native of the Isle of Mull; his employment on the island; the situation of newcomers to the island; and his work as leader of the Gaelic Choir; and sings a song of his own composition, "Sunset on Sunart." He also talks about deficiencies in his education; his military service abroad; and the state of the Gaelic language on Mull.

[Field project "Faces of Mull," University of California Research Expeditions, 1993; John Niles, director. Tape number 93DM–01, recorded on 23 July 1993, by Cynthia Swanson, John Niles, and five other members of the research team, at Timbertop holiday cottage, Tobermory.]

I was born on the Main Street, Tobermory, one of a family of four. I went to school here and subsequently went to high school in Oban. From there I short-circuited my education to go to the army. I served four years in the army, two of them in the Commanders. And I came out in 1947 after the war; and we spent some time in northwest Europe and also in Italy, which I enjoyed very much. I went to Glasgow and served five years training as an engineer, in mechanical engineering. I had intended to continue in Glasgow in engineering, but at that stage, letters from home indicated that my father was not very well, and I waited and waited to hear of some improvement. There was no word of improvement, so I wrote to the local doctor, who was a family friend for many years, and asked him just what the situation was. And it wasn't very good. I had suggested that if necessary I could come home, and he thought this would be quite a good idea. So I came home to support my parents. I was the only member of the family who was really free to do that.

At that time my sister was married with her own family. My older brother was married with his own family. My young brother was in Singapore in the Air Force. I came home and my father died six months later. I'm very glad that I had done it. I got a quite humble but satisfying job in a little local garage. MacLean's, Donald MacLean's, a good Mull name. I worked with Donald for eight years. He then retired, and I started in that business on my own, running and developing the garage, which I did until 1985, when I retired. Not wanting to have nothing specific to do, I reverted to an earlier love, coach driving as a summer part-time job. But when the summer ended the operators asked me about coming into the garage and working on their coaches. I did that for several years. I've now retired from that due to some ill health 18 months ago, and I confine my employment now to driving: coach driving four days a week, tour driving. I enjoy it very much.

—Could you go back to what you were saying before about the three layers of government on Mull; is that traditionally how Mull has been governed?

No; there was a reorganization — regionalization, it was called — introduced 20-25 years ago. Before then there were town councils and county councils; the government was far tidier, more compact. People were more familiar with what was required. Decisions were made locally rather than at a distance. Both the town councilors and the county councilors were elected, and so they

lived right in their home areas and were familiar with local problems. They were affected by them directly.

—How has that change impacted the local people?

Geographically we're a separate unit, so in some respects we're a separate community. And while we're a part of Argyll and part of Strathclyde, we're very much the people of Mull, and we know one another and we care for one another. There is a feeling of responsibility throughout the community, and that's a very valuable asset of life in a place like this.

—What about when new people move in? Does that affect the sense of community?

We get a lot of new people, and because of this our population has risen from 1700 adults in 1971 to 2900 adults in 1991. We have a census every 10 years.

—I see a lot of young people moving in, too.

When a family moves in, they're thought to be incomers until they integrate, and sometimes that's a long and painful process. What people tend to forget is that these families have children; they don't have to integrate, they're born here. They're automatically members of the community. But some people find it difficult to change, to adjust, and if they have chosen to be members of our community, then it's they that have to do the adjusting. Providing they do that, there's no problem, and most people do it. For example, there are Dr. Clegg and his two assistants — three general practitioners, all of whom were very quickly confirmed valued members of the community because they chose to come, they adjusted to our ways. If people don't adjust to our ways, they never really fit in.

—What are "your ways", then, basically?

Slow! [*Laughter*.] Yes, the pace is very slow, and the relationships are very caring, and we don't thrust our ideas on other people without listening to their ideas. And often people who fail to integrate are the ones that are not prepared to listen to what we have to say. They're so busy telling us what they want, and how things were done where they came from, that they never do fit in. And it may very well be that they didn't fit in very well where they came from, either, and that's why they moved. [*Laughter*.]

—How long do newcomers tend to last, then? Do they stay or do they move on?

If they don't fit in, they move on. They're aware of it, we're aware of it, and they move on.

—So in one sense this preserves the island culture?

Well, that's a very interesting thing. Some people feel that this constant influx from outside is diluting our culture by reducing the proportion of people who speak and understand the Gaelic language. And some people resent this, but I'd much rather see a living community here. The very fact that there is a live community in which Gaelic language is I think suffering a decline.

The decline may have been arrested now, I'm not sure, but it has certainly suffered a decline up to now. [Is that by instituting in school so that people can study?] But I'd rather see the community alive and vibrant with a declining language, if it is declining, than to see an all-out effort to preserve the language and have nobody here to speak it. Much more important that we have a vibrant and active community.

I think there has already been some evidence that there is just as much interest, and maybe more, in preserving the Gaelic language among those who have come in.

—Do you think the language even leads people here?

It may in some cases, but not mainly, I think. I think what draws people here is coming on holiday and experiencing the space and the pace, and not worrying too much if it rains every second day. Getting to feel this community relationship. And the fact that people are safe. I don't know of any adult, any elderly person, or child being physically abused or assaulted.

—Do you have any crime at all?

Yes. As long as you have deer in the hills and salmon in the rivers, you'll have crime. [*Laughter*.] It's not considered very serious, though.

—Do the police prosecute crime?

Occasionally, but there is a sort of tolerance in the community. While the police and the landowners wouldn't see it in the same light, there's almost an element of honor in being able to take, now and again, a deer from the hill or a salmon from the river. Is there serious crime? No. Petty theft, somebody borrowing someone else's car without permission, yes. That feeling of security and of care, I think, draws people to the island more than any other single aspect of it.

—Do some people who move off the island come back later, appreciating the place more?

I think it's essential that people go off the island and take their place in the big wide world and then, if they wish, come home and appreciate the circumstances here. And also I think that it's very important that they know within themselves that they can take their place in the rough and tumble of the world and not be in any way inferior. Those who haven't done it don't know that.

—Are you still the leader of the Gaelic Choir?

Yes. I will just go back to the beginning of it. Janet [MacDonald] comes into this too. In 1978, there was a National Mod. This is the Scottish equivalent of the Welsh Eisteddfod. It's a festival of Gaelic music, poetry, and storytelling, and it's open to people of all ages, from the very young to the very old. And it moves around to different places each year. In 1978, it was going to come to Oban. And it was many years since Mull had had a Gaelic Choir, and the local committee thought it would be a great pity if the Mod was so close to Tobermory and Mull made no effort to have a choir singing there. So Janet was asked to create and train a Gaelic Choir at the local Mod. The reason I was chosen was that my mother had been the organist in the Church of

Scotland. About a year after she died, we had no organist, and I took on the role of choirmaster. I was asked to do this, and my answer was that I would try to do this provided Janet would accept responsibility for the Gaelic, as I was going to accept the responsibility for the music. It was just to be for that one occasion. [*Laughter*.] We went to the Mod and we got on very well, we came home with a third in the national competition.

—How many people originally went with you as your group?

Twenty-six. So we came home and were very pleased, and we had trophies to show in the shop window; and to wind the whole thing up we would have a dinner/dance. We had the dinner and then we started the dance, and then towards the end, there were votes of thanks, of course, and everyone was getting ready to put their coats on and go home, and Dr. Jones from the States stood up and — he had worked out a phonetic system of his own for Gaelic pronunciation — Dr. Jones said, "OK, we mustn't let this thing fall to bits. Right, we've enjoyed this, we're all enthusiastic, we have a good choir and a good conductor, let's not let it all fall apart. Let's start thinking about next year's."

And it's just gone on from there. So the Mod takes place in October. We have the new music for two ladies' pieces, two mixed choir pieces, and two dance music pieces. Dance music is sung, so we have six songs. We must start work on them early in January, and we work very hard because they have to be performed without sheet music. The aim is that by the time the local Mod takes place, these pieces will be ready to be sung without props, and then we stop practicing for the summer, resume in the beginning of September, and work very hard for the last six weeks to polish them off to go to the National Mod in the middle of October. We all enjoy it; even I enjoy it. [*Laughter*.]

—When you are practicing from January to June, do you practice weekly?]

Weekly, yes.

—That's quite a commitment.

It is, when you consider that the majority of the choir cannot read music; they have to learn it by listening to tapes which Janet and I do, and about 10 or 20 of the 30 will have no previous connection to the Gaelic language. So they are learning phonetically a language that they don't necessarily understand, with sounds that they've never before encountered. It really is a lot of work.

—We were speaking with Calum MacLean, the accordionist, the other night. He played for us a hauntingly beautiful tune, which as I recall was called "Sunset on Loch Sunart," and he happened to mention that you had fitted words to his tune. And I was hoping that you could share song that with us.

He's a very gifted, very gifted man. And a very, very modest person. He's very, very well known in accordion circles on a European basis. If he weren't so modest, he'd be equally well known worldwide.

—Yes, he's a tremendous musician. Technically he's beyond anyone else I've heard on the instrument.

His music is completely self-taught. He's never had a lesson either in playing the accordion or in the music. He composes prolifically, he arranges, and his accompaniments are very exciting, very different. And I think for a long time he didn't appreciate the extent of his gift. I was listening to an accordionist on the television on Saturday night, and when he finished, I said to my wife, "He's not as good as Calum." So I wrote to the BBC pointing out that Calum was here; nobody had ever heard him on the radio and I thought he should be heard by a much wider audience.

—Well, what about "Sunset on Sunart"? Do you think you'd be up to singing it for us?

Yes, I think I would. [*DM sings "Sunset on Sunart."*]

When daylight is fading and evening descends
And the stresses of daytime are stilled,
I sit and I watch with a wondering heart
The beautiful colors God willed.

Stern and strong Ben Hiant stands
Watching o'er the tide of waters.
Shadows lengthen o'er the land
As falls the sunset on Sunart.

The blackbird sings her evening song
As the twilight silently falls
And the golden touch of the Father's hand
Pins fire on Glenborrodale's walls.

Stern and strong Ben Hiant stands
Watching o'er the tide of waters.
Shadows lengthen o'er the land
As falls the sunset on Sunart.

My hazel's turned purple, the rim's turned to gold
As the sun leaves Ben Resipol's crest,
And I marvel again at the wisdom of God
Who brings us these hours of rest.

Stern and strong Ben Hiant stands
Watching o'er the tide of waters.
Shadows lengthen o'er the land
As falls the sunset on Sunart.

The MacLeans' house looks across to Loch Sunart, and he made the tune and called it "Sunset on Sunart." The first time I heard it, I was struck by it, and then he made a tape, and as I played the tape I thought how beautiful it would be to sing if only there were words. The more I listened to it, the more I felt there *were* words if I could find them. Now Ben Hiant is a very well-defined mountain that stands at the mouth of Loch Sunart. I mentioned Glenborrodale's walls: that's Glenborrodale Castle, built of red sandstone, and when the setting sun shines on it, it's flame-colored. That's why I wrote the "golden touch of the Father's hand paints fire on Glenborodale's walls." And "Ben Resipol's crest": that's another very well-defined mountain, much higher than Ben Hiant. These are three local places mentioned in the song.

—It's fitting that the two of you should have collaborated in that way, because your own home, as I recall, has the same beautiful view overlooking Tobermory Bay and off towards Morvern and perhaps a bit of Ardnamurchan, as well. You can see Ben Hiant, can you not, from your house?

Yes. Also, my wife belongs to Ardnamurchan.

—So all of the names of the song have a very specific image in your mind.

Yes. And strangely enough, at the time that I was writing or composing these English words — I never did write them out, in fact — my brother-in-law was writing Gaelic words for the same tune, again speaking of the mountain of Ben Hiant. He's now dead, my wife's brother. He was a minister in the Free Church and had a great gift of poetry.

—The song clearly has a religious dimension, a spiritual element.

Well, yes, I felt that I wanted to acknowledge the Creator of this beautiful creation.

—But with reference to the Castle, there seems to be also an acknowledgement that somebody else has been there too. I notice as I look out at the landscapes, there are always ruins, and yet people built the walls. There is a real sense of your past.

Yes, and of that being handed down.

—Is that something else that calls you, maybe even in your writing?

Oh, I think so, yes. I'm very conscious of the fact that people have lived where these old ruins are. The laughter of children was heard in these places, and it comes through very strongly, in a very moving way.

—I was out with Jim [Halbert], the sheep shearer, and he was showing me various ruins, and as we got closer I could almost feel the presence of those who were gone. And the closer I got to those others, I felt the sense of time passing.]

Yes, that's right, yes.

—And is that typical of this whole region?

Oh, I think so. I would say certainly that people who grow up in an environment like this are very conscious of that sort of thing; I think it's something that cannot be acquired.

—Some people find Mull melancholy, in part because of the Clearances; the sense that there was once the laughter of children in certain glens or on certain slopes, often quite wonderfully beautiful locations where you have to think that people loved being there. And now those places are empty apart from these few ruins. Do you have a sense of that melancholy in the landscape?

Yes, I do. But I think that if we are realistic, we also have to realize that life was not all fun and games, then, any more than it is now. And that while we look at these old ruins in beautiful sites, we tend to romanticize the quality of life. There was a lot of hardship, too.

—What drove the people out?

Inaccessibility. The Clearances, and no roads, and it was quite a climb up to a township from the shore. So even using boats and the sea as a means of communication — which is why all these villages are located around the outer edge of the island — a settlement was still rather inaccessible, in that you had to climb quite a height up from the sea.

—It seems to key into that internal interdependence of Mull that we see so obviously.

Yes, that's right.

—And have there been hard times recently in Mull because of this interdependence?

No, not that I know of. There are lots of new industries, new buildings going up, a rising population. Our school has now a high school; it never did before. That can only be good. Although when our children went to Oban High School and came home at weekends, they found this a very useful intermediate step between being at home all the time to being away from home all the time. If they had a problem, they brought it home and sorted it out. It's an indication of prosperity and a renewed vibrancy on Mull that the school has been upgraded.

—Were you one of those who boarded in Oban?

Yes.

—And you don't regret that experience?]

I don't think that I regret it now; I hated it at the time.

—Was that true generally of your classmates?

No. I just wasn't interested in scholastic education. Not at all. And when I look back now, you see — to take history as an example — we were required to be able to recite the names of

successive rulers, sovereigns of England. The dates of their coronations and the dates of their deaths. That was of no importance then and no importance now. We were never taught about the Lords of the Isles, a hereditary dynasty that built Aros Castle, built Duart Castle, built Dunstaffnage Castle, Castle Tioram in Moidart. We weren't even told about that; it was never mentioned. And in geography, they explained in great detail about the importance of watersheds: the Pyrenees, the Alps. [*Laughter*.] Between here and Salen there is a glen; at one end it's called Glen Aros. The Aros River flows east. At the other end it's Glen Bellart. The Bellart River flows west. Nobody mentioned that watershed.

—But do you still think that the experience of being away helped you make your way in the world later on?

I think probably it did. When I went to Oban, I hated the school. I was in very good lodgings. There was no hostel for boys in Oban at that time. Parents had to find lodgings for them. There was a hostel for girls. Very fortunately, I found myself in lodgings with a farmer from here who was employed at the auction mart in Oban, so I went there at 4:00 AM and I worked there 'til 6:00, at the mart among animals. So in the mornings, very often I was out before everybody in school, and I think it saved my sanity until His Majesty required my services; and I was very ready to give up my education.

—Where did you go in the service?

Northwest Europe. I was in the First Commander Brigade, which led the advance of the British troops through to D-Day, right through to Berlin. Then we disbanded, and I went to Italy after that. Northern Italy. I was in three beautiful cities: Trieste, Padua, and Venezia. And I liked the Italian people very much.

—Duncan, we don't want to hold you longer, but maybe you might tolerate another question or two. My question is directed to your own father and your childhood here. You did not grow up speaking Gaelic, but your father was a Gaelic speaker. Could you tell us about that, and how the schools fit into this changeover in the generations from Gaelic to English?

At the time that I was young, Gaelic was not encouraged very greatly. There were teachers teaching Gaelic, but it was optional, and we were not particularly encouraged to study Gaelic rather than French, Latin or German. And I unfortunately was directed to Latin for no good reason that I can think of today [*laughter*], and it was a total disaster, both for the language and for me. It would have been far better if I had been directed to learn Gaelic at that early age. See, my father not only spoke it, but he could read and write it, which was not very common among native speakers: they learned it by rote from their mother's knee and didn't understand the grammatical constructions. They just constructed a sentence because that's the way it was done, and they didn't understand why. And there are people like that yet, and they don't like it when learning students start quizzing them about why you pronounce a word this way or that because of the genitive case. They don't know what the genitive is; they learn it from their mothers.

While my father could speak Gaelic, my mother didn't, so it wasn't spoken in the house at all. It would appear from statistics that in families where only one parent speaks it, if the father is the

parent, then only one child in five will speak Gaelic. If the mother is the parent, then four children out of five will speak it. So none of us learned to speak Gaelic at that tender age of three or four. And indeed it's fair to say that my involvement with the Gaelic Choir started my interest in learning a Gaelic song or two, and from then I went on and studied the language. And Janet [MacDonald] figured in this too, because Janet is a splendid teacher of Gaelic and I've attended her classes.

—So your father would speak Gaelic maybe to friends?

Yes, that's right. But you see, there is a thing that I don't understand yet. I was in my father's company a great deal, in any circumstances, but also when he was speaking in Gaelic with his friends. And subconsciously I must have thought, "There's no need to bother with that. If you want to know anything you can ask about it in English." Because despite the fact that I heard my father talking in conversation a lot with his friends, I never switched on to it. Subconsciously I must have come to think that for me, it was a dead language.

—Did some parents deliberately not teach their children Gaelic so that they could get ahead in life?

Yes, very much so. And that's the cut to the thing, in that when I was a boy here, there were still some people who could only speak Gaelic. I think the Gaelic speakers of that time, including my father and his friends, did not realize the value of the language, nor that it was in jeopardy. And the attitude was, "If my child is going to speak one language well, rather than two languages not very well, he's going to speak English; that's the language of schooling."

[End of interview.]