

5TRANSCRIPTION

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PHIL CAMPBELL (b. 1947, Aros, Mull), jeweller, talks about his family background on Mull, his education in London and Edinburgh, his decision to come back to live on the island, and his trade, with remarks on the island's attractiveness, the long winters, the impact of tourism (both positive and negative), the ways he obtains the silver for his studio, recent changes affecting the island, and islanders' social life. What follows is a record of the gist of the interview, not 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 8 July, 1993, by Priscilla Johnson and two other project assistants at Campbell's house on Breadalbane Street, Tobermory.]

I was born in Mull but spent my first 17 years in Essex. My father was born in Mull and was a native Gaelic speaker. He was a banker, and he moved south to London. I went to Edinburgh College of Art to get a degree in art and design, then went on to do post-graduate teacher training. One of the schools I taught in was a Junior Secondary School about the size of the Tobermory school, and I also worked for a jeweller in Perthshire. Then I had a chance of getting a house on Mull, so I came here in 1974, looking for something to do. I've been up and down Mull all my life, so I know the place very well, and the people.

—Why did you return?

I like the place; my background was here. I really didn't know what I was going to do when I came here. I had various ideas. Jewelry wasn't one of them, but it's worked out quite well.

—You spoke of a chance to get a house. Were you looking for a special kind of house?

It was actually my father's house, not this house here [his present home in Tobermory]. It was a holiday house; he was wanting to sell it. Big place, lovely situation: 13 rooms, outbuildings, 20 acres around a loch and a river. It's about 13 miles from here. So that's what started it all off. I sold it last year in October and bought this place, which is situated better, handy to work.

—When you tell people outside Mull about this place, how do you describe it to them?

Summertime is wonderful. You've got a buzz about the place with new people coming in, lots of greenery, not bad weather most of the time. Long days, light at night. I find that winters are pretty boring here because it's just the opposite. No new people here at all. It goes dark at 3:30, and it doesn't get light until 9:00 in the morning. Very severe weather: wind, rain, although you don't get very cold weather. So I spend quite a lot of time in Edinburgh during the 3 dark months. Edinburgh is very civilized; good restaurants. Mull is wonderful if you get the weather right. The scenery is unbeatable. It's important for Mull not to get overrun by tourists, though. It's difficult to control that because if you discourage people from coming, it can work in the reverse.

—The Scottish Tourist Board advertises this region of the world. Is there any movement to encourage tourism? Or do people want to leave Mull the way it is?

My own feelings are I don't want a lot of tourists coming on busses. Busses are of no use to me whatever, or to very many people on the island. The tour operator will do well, I suppose, but the visitors have no money to spend.

—So the tour busses don't generate any money for the place? People go on the tour, they look at the sights, they get off, they get a cup of tea?

And a postcard. From my own selfish point of view, it puts off the professional people, the doctors or lawyers who are not going to come here to get jostled in the street. The isle of Arran and some of the other islands near Glasgow are more accessible than here, so that way you get a lot more people and fast-food places. I wouldn't want that to happen here. I think Tobermory and Mull have got something special; we need to keep the balance just right. We want people to come here, just not hordes.

—Are most visitors here from Britain?

Mostly. A lot of people are from the north of England, Yorkshire, and Scotland. Not too many from the south of England so far this year. The Tourist Board has fairly heavy advertisements in the winter on television.

—How long have you had your silver business?

Eighteen years. Originally I had the problem of driving up and down the road every day [from his family house], which got me thinking about moving here [to Tobermory].

—What about your university education in art?

Most of my training was in design, drawing and painting. I didn't do jewelry in college. A friend of mine had this business in Perthshire that went bust a couple of years after I started working there. In Perthshire I didn't do designing, but just learned the nuts and bolts of it.

—Did you start designing when you got your own business?

Yes. At the first trade show, my one spoon sold for more than all my jewelry, so I thought "There's a wee ____ in here." [*Laughter.*] My business is in three sections: I've got the retail side here, which is good; I've got the trade side of it, which involves selling to other retailers all over the country; and I've got trade shows.

—Do you travel around during the winter?

No, I've got an agent in the south of England who does that bit for me. He's got samples. Last year I did two trade shows; before then I'd do five in a year. It was getting too much, so I cut it right down. Then there's the Edinburgh operation, which has been good for about four years. I've got a shop in Edinburgh, and the office and packaging, that side of it, is down there. I have someone to run it, so that lets me out of that side of it. I can concentrate on the manufacturing and designing side. December's a dead month; January also. I take 2-3 weeks off at the beginning of the year.

—Where do you get your ideas?

I take quite a lot of ideas from antique designs and change them a bit to make them saleable.

—Is there a particular reason why you chose to work in silver?

For some reason, retailing here is in silver. It's what sells. Gold is too expensive. I do enjoy working with silver; it's very malleable, a nice metal to work with compared to gold. I just fell into it.

—Would you do a commissioned work if asked?

Yes, if it fit into my capabilities and the tools that I have. I can do wedding rings, which I enjoy doing because it takes me out of production. Making 50 or 100 items a day is just knocking it out. But if you design something, especially for an individual person, it's nice. It's not a major part of the business, though.

I have done kilt belt buckles; big rectangular designs. Generally speaking, objects done on commission take a day or two. I've done some quite unusual things, actually. The most recent and possibly the most unusual one I've done was a pair of drinking horns. Very strange story. My shop in Edinburgh just called out of the blue, asking if I sell drinking horns; they'd like a pair. So I worked out the price and went ahead with it. It was very interesting to do because the horn is very asymmetrical, with its curves. It was a proper job fitting all the silver mounts on it, plus the stand. It's for a presentation to some society. He won't tell me which one it was; I was trying to get it out of him. One of the funny things about this story was that he called me up and asked me if the horns had been cured. I asked a friend on Arran if the horns had been cured, so he said he'd gotten them off a farmer who cut them off the beast and buried them in the ground for a while, then got them out and polished them up. So I told Dr. West, the man that bought the horns, "Well, they're actually done in a very traditional manner." [*Laughter.*] I told him how they were done, and he said that was fine: better than having these nasty heavy chemicals to cure them. He wants to use them to drink from, so it's good there's no chemicals.

—Do the locals spend money in the local shops?

It's getting better. At Christmas they're all shopping, now. It's a small town here, 1500 people, maybe. That's not enough to sustain a retail outlet without visitors.

—Where do you get your silver?

Birmingham, which is the center of the precious metal trade in the U.K. The silver is mined in Mexico, South America, South Africa. It's definitely a world market. The bullion price is set. You can't go someplace else and buy it cheaper. All the scraps generated by jewelers are recycled. Sweeps and wastes from polishing machines are collected, and someone comes up to Edinburgh every couple of months or something like that. So you give it all to him. It's resold at the bullion price. I'll collect 20 kilos of polishings. It comes out as pure silver, which you can get back. You get the equivalent amount of metal back without paying for it. It depends on how much they have to do to it, but you get your fine metal back. I weigh it myself before it goes out. You don't know what other kind of metal goes into it. A friend who does gold jewelry is very paranoid about that. It doesn't make a difference about how easy it is to work with whether it's been melted down. Depending on whether you're making

spoons or jewelry, you work with sheets or wire. You stamp it out. So you can buy it in all sorts of forms. I buy the findings and bits instead of manufacturing them. The market has been pretty steady recently. If it goes up very sharply, I adjust my prices.

—Tell me about living on Tobermory.

I like it here. I've got friends here. Winters are a bit dire. I have a friend with a ship, so we cross over quite a bit. Going to Edinburgh is a change for me, and going to Mull is a change for him. Tobermory can get a bit insular.

—What changes have you seen over the years?

Quite a lot, actually. There are much better facilities than 20 years ago, when the island was really very quiet. The ferry operators have upgraded the service. Having the ferry come in every 2 hours has made the island more accessible. The winter timetable is a lot poorer. You only get 2 ferries then, at 9:00 and 4:00. My worst nightmare is getting stuck in Oban. The ferry won't sail if there's too much wind. It's a fate worse than death getting stuck in Oban. You sleep in the car or wait in a hotel or stay with friends. This concentrates your mind about that bit of water, which in one way makes the island special, though on the other hand it can be a drawback.

—Why are there no motor-boats?

Fishing boats are sea boats. You wouldn't go out in a small boat in winter or on a lot of other days, but fishing boats get all over.

—Can you tell us about social life on the island?

This time of year it's quite good because of the visitors; there's lots more happening. Concerts in the Aros Hall, and so forth. Generally, social life revolves around pubs.

—Is there social stratification in town?

There is a certain habit locally. This is to call everyone by their Christian names, whoever they are, whether they're very wealthy or whatever. There's a tendency to equalize names. There are people with more money than others. Some of the tradesmen do very well and have quite a lot of cash. It has changed. Twenty years ago the island was known as the "Officer's Mess" because there were all these retired service captains. Some are still here, but they didn't bring anything particular to the island.

—Are there any old families here?

Oh, yes. MacLean is the big tribe here.

—How do they interact with the wealthy retired people?

Some of the people who've been here for generations have a wee chip on their shoulders. All these newcomers coming in, buying our houses, setting up businesses. But you know, the opportunities are there for everyone. Like myself; it's an open market.

—Does it make a difference that your family lived here?

It probably does, depending on the incomer's attitude. If someone comes here and puts something into the community, that's one thing. The Officer's Mess just sat back on the money. A lot of people who come here start businesses and are willing to invest in Mull; a hotel or something like that.

—How is the snow here?

Not like the east coast, but you can get snow here. In 1985 on Hogmanay there was deep snow, but that was exceptional. Hogmanay is still a big tradition. You pop around to people's houses and have a drink with them. It depends on the weather as well. Certain houses tend to be open houses.

[End of interview.]