

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Godfrey MacDonald

Role: Founder

Museum: Museum of the Isles

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Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

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The project is based at Birkbeck, University of London. The interview recordings and associated materials are archived at the Bishopsgate Library, London.

For readability the transcript has been made using 'intelligent' transcription (removing ums, ers etc).

TB: So first of all, please could you just give me your name and date of birth, if you don't mind please.

GM: Yes, certainly. I'm Godfrey James MacDonald of MacDonald, Lord MacDonald, High Chief of Clan Donald and date of birth XX-XXX 1947.

[0:00:20]

TB: Okay, that's lovely. Godfrey, do you mind if I call you Godfrey?

GM: Please do.

TB: Okay. That's great. Were you born in, this might be a strange question, but were you born here or?

GM: I was born on the Isle of Skye, not actually in Armadale Castle, but in a house about three miles down the road.

[0:00:36]

TB: I see, okay, lovely. Well, first of all, let's just, we're particularly kind of interested in the motivations of people to set up museums and clearly this is quite a special case, isn't it, because it's involved with a very, very long history, but just in your own words, if you could just sort of tell me about how and why this amazing thing came about.

GM: Yes, certainly. Well, when my father died in 1970, the family was confronted with the most enormous amount of death duties, not just on my inheritance but on my father's inheritance, too, so the bulk of the estate had to be sold. And before it went on the open market I was approached by a number of prominent clansmen around the world, to try and set up, or for their idea to set up a charitable trust to acquire a chunk of the estate that was going on the market, to preserve Clan Donald history, but in particular, to save a chunk of land, a few thousand acres, of the original kingdom of the Isles, because this was the last sort of stronghold of the Kingdom of the Isles, which of course forfeited at the British crown, in those days the Scottish crown in 1492. So, that's how it came about. We then went and set up the charitable trust and my wife and I went on a world wide fund raising tour to see, just test the credibility or the viability of the Clan actually buying a chunk of the estate.

[0:02:11]

TB: So, when was this? In the 1960s?

GM: No, this was 1970, 1971.

TB: Right, so that was when the Trust was established.

GM: That's right, and of course, it was unique in that we were the first clan that would actually have a large portion of land, owned by the clan itself, as opposed to being owned by a chief or an individual.

TB: Oh, I see, right, that's interesting. Just tell me, how did you know who to go to, or was there already a network?

GM: Well, very, very difficult, actually. There was, in those days, when obviously communication was not what it is today, it was sitting down with a pen and paper, writing to people that had shown an interest, had communicated with the old clan historian, Donald J MacDonald of Castleton, so he gave me a list of 10 people originally, and I sat down, as I said, and I wrote in my own hand, what I thought the set-up, the trust, should be, would they be interested? Did they think it was the sort of thing that would have an appeal worldwide? Clan Donald, of course, is by far the largest of the highland clans, I mean there are various estimates of numbers around the world, ranging from 7 million up to 17 million, so it doesn't take a large percentage of people to show an interest. I mean obviously, there's only a tiny percentage of that number that would show any interest whatsoever, but the feedback was positive enough to let us know that there was, that they thought it was a viable project. And, not just acquiring the lands, but also to become the focal point for Clan Donald, worldwide, and for that to have any long term legs, so to speak, it would have to include a museum, study centre, where all the estate records, the family records and so on, could be collected in one place for people to come over, see where their forebears might have come from, that side of things. And of course, obviously, it included in that, in the museum side, are the artefacts and pieces of history that are related to the clan. That was the original concept. Within six months of my wife and I initiating the appeal, we had actually raised, or had promises of enough money, to buy the, basically most of the MacDonald estates that were on the market, the family kept a small bit, but by and large the clan acquired the bulk of what was the MacDonald estate, including, of course, the grounds of Armadale Castle, which by then, was a ruin. And, that's how it really, that's how it came into being.

[0:05:02]

TB: I see. That's amazing. So, how much, would you know off the top of your head, kind of, did it cost to buy the estate?

GM: Well, in those days, in the early '70s, the estate went on the market for £250,000, which doesn't sound a lot in present day terms, but as I said, looking back.

TB: That's millions in today's money, I'm sure.

GM: In today's money I think it's about £4 million, or something. And, we raised, or had promises of money of just about £150,000, which was enough for us to go to, in those days, to go to a

bank and say, banks were more understanding in those days. So, that's how we did it, we were able to acquire it.

[0:05:40]

TB: That's amazing. And when you went on your tour, did you, I mean, was it meetings, really, or did you have events? How did that work?

GM: Again, to go back to the original, with these 10 people I wrote to, we put together an itinerary, which really actually, only concentrated, because time was so short, in North America, the United States and Canada. We put together, with a friendly travel agent, an itinerary which took us from really all round America, into Canada, to meet these particular people, and having set out on the fundraising tour, we met people who said "oh, you must meet so and so" and it grew from that. What we learned very early in the concept of fundraising, was, if you can get two or three people to commit to a good sized donation, you could then use that to try and encourage other people. And that's exactly what happened. And to come back to the museum side of things, which was initially, wasn't really the main thing, the main thing was to actually hold the estate for in perpetuity, for clansmen and following immediately on from that, to attract people here, was to have a study centre, the genealogical side, the physical being here at Armadale, with the museum. Now, on our, one of our trips into Canada, we met David MacDonald-Stewart, who was the owner, in those days, of the MacDonald Tobacco Corporation, who had just returned from Scotland, having made a film of the massacre of Glen Coe. And he was right in the right frame of mind for good old clan history, and he was absolutely exceptional in his vision. He said "you have got to get something on the ground, as quickly as possible to make it a come-to venue." He said "I will finance" he gave us a large donation, but he said "in addition to that, I will finance the original part of Armadale Castle" which was the bit that was least ruinous, which was the bit right at the end, which was the original Armadale House. And that is what he did. He financed, he sent over his own team of workmen and put together what was then the little Clan Donald Centre, which incorporated in order of importance, in those days, the tea room, the shop and a small museum.

[0:08:09]

TB: Right, okay. So, that was the first museum then?

GM: That was the first museum and that was up in, you'll see it later up at, have you been up to the Castle?

TB: I haven't not yet, no.

GM: Oh right, yes. Well, the Castle itself is a ruin, dry rot went for that when the family moved out and the end bit is the original Armadale House. And it's a small area, but it gave us the presence, which is what David Stewart really wanted. The tragedy, in his case, was that

within four or five years of him really setting the thing going, he died. And, I think, it was a tragedy because he had, by that time, he'd sold the MacDonald Tobacco Corporation and had set up the MacDonald-Stewart Foundation. And one of his real aims, was to actually endower, with the point of view of expanding everything with money coming from Clan Donald, I mean the MacDonald-Stewart Foundation.

TB: Oh, I see.

GM: Yes. So, that rather put the brakes on things.

[0:09:12]

TB: Okay, well, before we go on, just tell me a little bit more about, were you involved in the planning of that kind of first proto kind of attraction, as it were?

GM: Well, I'm not artistic in any way, I've realised that we did need, obviously, to have a museum and the other things that went with it, and by that time we'd started acquiring people were sending in bits and pieces of interesting, historical documents. Bits and pieces for the museum and so on, but no, I stepped back and let then, it was Rob MacDonald Parker and Duncan MacInnes, who still lives on Skye, really to set up, they knew the area that was involved and how much space could be debated to this and, but it didn't in any way diminish my interest in what was going on, but I didn't actually go round with the plans and say, no.

[0:10:09]

TB: Yes. And just give me a picture, I'm presuming, was it one room in the house there, or two?

GM: No, I think it was two or three rooms that you walked through. Again, when you go up there, you'll be able to see just how limited the area was on the ground floor there, but I think, you know, we managed to get a lot in there. We had an audio visual, we had the big, what are they called, those placards?

TB: Oh, yes, like information boards.

GM: Information boards telling the, and there was such a history to tell. The Lordship of the Isles goes back many, many hundreds of years and not only was it a rival to the Kingdom of Scotland, it was a very, very well run entity, we had our own parliament down in Finlaggan in Islay, we controlled, what they say from the butt of Lewis, the northern most point of Lewis, right down to, and including the Isle of Man, that was the Kingdom of the Isles, it was administered by Clan Donald. So, there was an enormous amount of history to tell! You probably saw some.

[0:11:19]

TB: Yes, not well known. Yes, I did. So, just tell me about the stories that were told in that first museum, then. So, it was partly that, but were there any other elements to it, was it objects or mostly?

GM: The important, what we really wanted to do initially, was, we knew we were going to have to display bits and pieces, the interesting bit, but it was really to disseminate the history of the Clan from the early days of the Lordship of the Isles, right through to really, the decline of the clan system, which followed the 1745 debacle, whichever way you like to look at it. So, it was really to build through that. And, also, the effect that the clans had in those days of how they controlled the land, how they looked after their people and inevitably the clearances came in, but we were able to, I think, put the right history of the clearances. I mean you've probably heard about the highland clearances, but the statistic is that less than 2% of the immigration to the new world, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, was less than 2% of these were forcibly moved.

TB: Really?

GM: Yes, it's a tiny percentage, but it's such an emotive subject, that the way it was done, that, I think it's rather mis-tells the history. So, we were able to get these sorts of bits, rewrite, not rewriting, but, putting forward the true, historical facts of how the clans worked from being omnipotent chiefs, through to feudal landlords, and some were good and some were bad, all this, there is a big story to tell there. And, I think, you know, that's what we've tried to do there, and that's what we're trying to do right up to the present day, really.

[0:13:18]

TB: Well, that's fascinating. So, this is quite a situated history, then, and you make no apologies for that, which I think is right, if the perception is not right. So, you're trying to sort of set that right, but also to tell a story that's also maybe not known.

GM: Well, yes, I mean, there's a lot of the history that, it is such an, the history of Clan Donald, is an enormous history, I mean there's been volumes of, hundreds of books written on the lordship, right through almost to the present day. Any history of Scotland or the history after the 1707 Union, involves Clan Donald, somewhere.

[0:14:04]

TB: Yes, I see. So, it's quite hard, isn't it, to kind of pick what, you know?

GM: It is, and do you know, we were respected in this little area, but I think from then, and it's gradually moved on from the little bit that you will see into, it then moved into my, where

my mother lived until she died, in Armadale House. And it, each time it did, it expanded and then of course in the early 2000s, when this place was built, and this was built, really to accommodate the Cunningham collection, from Glengarry, a very valuable, Glengarry relics, that's how this building really came into being, because it was such a valuable collection, it either went to the National Museum, or it came to us. And we were very, very keen that it should come here.

[0:14:53]

TB: Well, so just explain, so this was a member, a clan member who wanted to donate a collection, yes?

GM: That's right, it was two sisters, the Cunningham sisters, who were the MacDonells of Glengarry and their line is dying out, but it's their, a very, very important part of the history of Clan Donald, it involves the MacDonells of Glengarry, you've probably seen quite a lot of the stuff from the Cunningham Collection there.

TB: Yes.

GM: We had, we got no Lottery funding, we got no outside grant aid.

TB: Yes, because originally that was an idea to go the Heritage Lottery.

GM: Oh, very much so. And, I don't know why, but we didn't qualify, we think there was a plan, that I wasn't terribly in favour of, of trying to restore the castle, it was a convoluted grant application and it didn't...

TB: It didn't fly.

GM: It didn't fly and we had a benefactor, Ellis MacDonald and his wife Rosa, who was actually a Dupont, even though, so one needn't say that *[laughs]* whose very generous contribution, really built this.

[0:16:08]

TB: I see, yes. Well, that is interesting, so the museum, as it is now, and it's an amazing purpose-built building, was really, well fundamentally funded financed by clan members.

GM: It was.

TB: In big donations, big gift donations.

GM: That's right, it was. Well, by really just one Clan Donald member and he was married to Rosie you see.

TB: **Right, I've got you, okay.**

GM: And he was very good with *[laughs]*.

TB: **Wow, so they not only financed the building, but also donated, or lent you the objects.**

GM: No. Sorry, no. Having got this building underway, the Cunningham sisters, then said "right, we're satisfied that it's suitable and we will donate the Cunningham Collection". I mean, it's confusing calling it the Cunningham Collection, because it was, actually, MacDonells of Glengarry, they were sisters, it was their, I don't know how they actually came into their hands, but it had.

[0:17:08]

TB: **So, someone in the family had collected, I guess.**

GM: Well, no, no, they were directly descended from the MacDonells of Glengarry.

TB: **Oh, these are family heirlooms?**

GM: Yes.

TB: **Oh, I see, okay.**

GM: So, that really acted as the catalyst and once we got that, you see, we then were able to house other important bits and pieces.

[0:17:29]

TB: **Yes. And are most of the things that you have on display, do they tend to be donations or lent from clan members?**

GM: You'll need to ask Sue, the actual breakdown, I think most of them are donations, there've been quite a few purchases, we have a museum purchase fund, not large, but I mean enough to buy little bits and pieces that we think are of historical interest and importance to the clan. But Sue will know the sort of breakdown. And we now lend things to other museums too, so, if we're well into the, and it's lovely to think that, you know, from the very, which is the bit that was really, the dream, way back in the '70s into the reality of today that we have created something. I mean we've got, probably, I think, certainly the finest genealogical collection for, of Clan related documents, probably in the world, actually, now.

TB: Wow, really?

GM: Mmm.

[0:18:29]

TB: Gosh, that's incredible.

GM: And people come and they look, to study, yes, it's everything that we wanted and coupled with that, obviously, we're large land owners, as well. We own 20,000 acres for the, but held in perpetuity for the clan.

TB: And this is the trust, we're talking about.

GM: Yes. Well, the two are together, the museum and the trust are all one. The museum is part of the Clan Donald Lands Trust.

[0:18:59]

TB: Okay, so does the income from the land, and I presume this gets rented out to people and so on, does that support the whole thing?

GM: Absolutely not. *[laughs]* You don't know much about highland estates, but highland estates don't make money, no. So, it's a constant battle to, yes, and we are reliant on continuing support from clansmen to keep the whole thing going.

TB: Really?

GM: Oh yes.

TB: Gosh, okay.

GM: I mean, obviously, we've got the beautiful gardens here, but, no, it's, it would be a downright lie to say it was in any way even approaching self-sufficiency.

TB: Right, okay. That's extraordinary. But why, with so much land, I mean, is it rented out? I don't know, how does it work?

GM: Do you understand about crofting? Have you heard?

[0:19:56]

TB: Yes, a little, but tell me, please, just explain.

GM: Well the bulk of the estate is crofting land where the crofters have complete security of tenure, they have their little bit of in-by land, they pay a tiny, very, very small rent for that, and that's historic, and that will never change. They also have a share of what we call the common grazing, which is another few thousand acres where they can graze their sheep and cattle and so on. But the rental from the bulk of the estate, which is crofting land, is absolutely miniscule, it is, yes. So, the bulk of the income that supports the Clan Donald Lands Trust, is really what we do within the Clan Donald Centre, which is the restaurant, the shop, the admissions.

TB: Yes, I see.

GM: And, I mean that goes a large way to off-setting the deficit, but when you're running a museum like this, it's lovely to have, but it's not cheap to run, I'm sure you understand.

TB: Sure, yes, you've got salaries, and you know and heating.

GM: Yes, and actually making sure that it's properly maintained and it's kept at the right temperature, all these sorts of things that come into play.

[0:21:07]

TB: Yes, I see, crikey, right. Because I was going to ask you, again going back to the very first incarnation of the museum, which was in the older, kind of house, to the side of the castle, the tea room and the gift shop, so from the beginning, you wanted to make this a public site, a place where people could come.

GM: Oh, very much so.

[0:21:24]

TB: And was that in part, so some income would start to come in?

GM: Oh definitely, yes.

TB: It was a financial thing.

GM: Yes, in those days the income from the opening, the grounds were in an awful mess, I mean my father had really turned his back on the castle, because when he inherited it, the family had moved out by then, and it was still staffed, but there was a caretaker in there, but he'd

lost interest and it was beginning to fall down, and the grounds were allowed to overgrow. So, when I inherited it in 1970 and we set up the Clan Donalds Lands Trust, it was a case of really re-opening the entire, the 60 acres of the policies and so on, and that took a good few year, but until we had something that really looked quite good, you couldn't charge very much. So, it was a chicken and egg situation. But over the years, I mean we have now created, I think, probably one of the finest gardens and certainly arboretums, certainly in the Highlands, if not in Scotland. And I'm very proud to have been a part of that. But, as I say, in those early days, it makes me go hot and cold, when we talked about the restaurant, we could do teas and coffees and we had a dear old girl who used to bake scones and things like that, but that was it, really, you couldn't go in and have a hamburger, or anything like that. And the shop was very much restricted to, they always sold good books and other bits and pieces of tartan, genuine tartan, nicely woven tartan, but it was limited in the space and so on, so it was a very modest operation, but it did, at the same time, provide what we really wanted, which was a focal point for people.

And by this time, people were beginning to be able to travel. When we started, very few people came over the north Atlantic, certainly, I think, only the rich people could afford to do it but gradually that changed, and more people came and they wanted to see - where did my ancestors come from? So, they'd come to Armadale and gradually, you see, we had the records and so on. Sadly, the record, so many people going back to the time of the immigration after the 1745 rebellion, so many people went overseas and records weren't kept, there were church records, but there was no proper compulsory list we could have, of births, or anything like that, and a lot of the church records, over the years, churches burnt or were destroyed, or, so we got, still do, masses of people coming over and saying "my name is, my ancestor John MacDonald, and I think he came from Skye, or he came from" and what do you do? Every now and again you have a breakthrough, but by and large, the uniqueness of the clan system is, you know, if you're called MacDonald or one of the sets, in your name, in case Hutchinson, you know that bearing a name like that, you have at some stage, your family has come from somewhere within the Lordship of the Isles.

[0:24:51]

TB: I see, yes. So, it's a question of kind of finding that point.

GM: Oh, it is, and people spend, take a lifetime trying to find out which part they came from, as I say, sometimes miracles happen and they do, but there's a lot, but at least they know the area they've come from and they've, it's a pilgrimage, actually. And I always think, in this day and age, when things are so uncertain, life is so uncertain, people more and more want to know where their roots are.

[0:25:20]

TB: I was going to ask you about that, because you must have met a lot of people that are very interested in that and so, kind of, what is it giving them? What is the reward and the benefit of finding someone who is, you know, pretty distant, sometimes, isn't it?

GM: Yes. Well, it's just what I said, I think people long to know where, their roots.

TB: So, what is it giving them, do you think? Just to know that.

GM: A feeling of belonging, and what is unique about the clan system is that it, it's unique actually, really. We're I think, in fact I know, we're the only ethnic group of people that has, the way the clan system is set up, in the world, the nearest to it are some of the North American Indian tribes, where they have a chief, the chief is looked on as the father of the family and it comes down from that, through the various branches, and so on. But it is the clan is like a family, and that historically goes back to in the old days, if the chief went to war in return for looking after his people as safely as he could, they would have to provide for the man to fight. It comes from that, really. And, so I say, we're unique, if you're called MacDonald and you're living in Chicago, you know that you have, at some stage, someone has come from somewhere in the West Coast of Scotland, if you're of German extraction, or Italian extraction, or, you don't really know which part of Italy you've come from, which part of Germany. People long to know. And people say that it's the clan system and the chief and all that, is it anachronistic in the 21st century? The answer is, I've found that it's not, people love to be associated with, well belonging, and Clare and I travel, not as extensively now, but overseas to Clan Donald things, and it can cross all barriers, it doesn't matter what position you hold, you are united by a common name. And people love that. It is, in this day, with everything you can get online and so on, there's still nothing like actually the physical being of either meeting your chief or coming to Scotland, it's extraordinary. I can't understand why it works, but it does. So, it is not anachronistic, it's really not.

[0:27:55]

TB: Yes. Well, there's a couple of things that occurred to me, and one is silly, and I suppose given your position in this kind of fairly hierarchical structure, is it hierarchical? I suppose it is in as much as you're at the head of it, I'm just wondering, whether, is it like the church, kind of thing, where there's a huge feeling of belonging and, you know, it's being a part of something that is bigger than yourself? Or, is it more, is it connected with status, with kind of the feeling that, you know, I come from an old kind of family, I know about my roots? Is there a class issue here?

GM: No. Class doesn't enter, this is the marvellous thing about it, actually. Class does not enter into it. If you're a MacDonald, you're a MacDonald and that's it. And as I say, it crosses all the barriers of politics, position, race, you know, all this. And, it is unique, I can't tell you why it means, why it does, but it does. And, unlike the English or the French, it is a feeling of belonging. I'm probably not putting that, but it is, it works for a lot of people. I think it's, going back to America or Australia, they have no history of their own, there is no history, I

mean the north American Indian history and the Aborigines, but all the people that went there who populated these continents, there is no history and there is a history here and it unites the two things, unites, where you've gone to and where you've come from, it's that link.

[0:30:01]

TB: Yes. I was interested in the galleries, you have brought it up to emigration, and I thought that was very interesting because it links clearly, the people who are coming here are, that's your audience, isn't it? But, just tell me a bit about how the audience has changed over the years, because I imagine in the '70s it was quite a different profile to how it is now.

GM: Oh, completely, yes. I'm glad you asked that, because having been part of it, you don't, but when you stop and think about it, it is, you're absolutely right. As I say, in the early days it was more, it was the people who had the money that could travel over and so on. But nowadays anybody can jump on a plane and come to Skye, it's so much easier, it was a nightmare trying to get to Skye in the early days. And, it is, there's a complete, first of all it is the quantity of people who are coming, many, many more people come over, it is, as I said a few minutes ago, it's a pilgrimage. They want to come, it's, unless you actually belong to it, you don't, I don't think you'll appreciate, *[laughter]* But I've spent, well, I'm 71 now, but I've spent over 50 years being Chief of Clan Donald so, I feel quite comfortable with, and proud that this number of people do want to come over here, come to Armadale, come to the Highlands to see where their ancestors came from. And they feel fulfilled, they do.

[0:31:42]

TB: Yes. Yes.

GM: And, you never, slightly getting away from the museum side of things, but I think the more important thing that people actually want to come and be able to try and pinpoint where their ancestors came from, than look at the actual pictures and things like that. I mean that place apart, but the important bit is to try and do a bit of research and just see, they kind of wander round the Highlands and islands and see where their forebears...

TB: I see, that's nice.

GM: Originated.

[0:32:13]

TB: You just mentioned quite a few things, because yes, there's the looking at the portrait, isn't there, and thinking, oh, you know, have I got the nose? There's that kind of thing.

And there's the stories as well, and understanding, I suppose, of how it all kind of panned out. But also, the feeling of place, isn't it? And, or experiencing this place and there's a lot of maps, well not a lot, but there are some maps and so on, and this is about geography isn't it? And identity.

GM: Yes, it is identity. Yep.

[0:32:47]

TB: And so, in terms of how the, your audience has changed, I suppose it's become more international, I would imagine, or there's more, it's easier now for people from other countries to get here.

GM: Oh, very much so. And, you talk about nationalities, we have French people that have, whose ancestors have come from here and gone to France, mostly as mercenaries, actually, and we were a great exporter of men to be soldiers, yes. And one of the extraordinary things is, you've probably come across it in there, Marshal MacDonald of Taranto, who was one of Napoleon's, I think he was his number two marshal, fighting for Napoleon and my ancestor, the third Lord of Donald who was a general in Wellington's army, on opposing sides.

TB: Really?

GM: Yep. So, we've got French, we've got Belgians, we've got quite a lot of, not quite a lot but we've got some Spanish, all people whose ancestors came from here. Or not from here, but the Highlands, Clan Donald territory.

[0:33:59]

TB: Well, just tell me a little bit, I mean, when you have an international organisation, you start a little bit like, sort of twinning, like that wonderful idea of populations, you know, we'll swap, we'll have a twin town, you know, and that was kind of post war, an idea of trying to create understanding and peace between people. I mean, I imagine you're symbolically going to a lot of these sorts of events, I guess, internationally, I'm just wondering if you could give me a sense of, I don't know, of what kind of activities, what things you get invited to, how they work? You're saying that...

GM: Well, they're very varied. The common theme is it's to do with names, clans, piping, dancing, the music the Gaelic culture, the poetry, these things that are associated with what was originally, the Highlands stand for, but the history and culture of the Highlands, and that's transported to over, not physically, but it's there in the highland games, Caledonian societies, the St Andrew's societies, it's all, and of course, it's very nice for people to wear a kilt.

TB: Yes.

GM: Again, unique. And it's so short and as I say, it is completely non, there's no class distinction, or anything, membership for Caledonian Society or St Andrew's Societies and it's extraordinary. Unless you've actually experienced it, I can understand it might seem strange, but it does, it works. And wherever Clare and I go, if we go anywhere in the world and you go into a highland gathering, you feel a sort of special bond immediately.

[0:36:02]

TB: Yes.

GM: It is extraordinary. And all it is, you're associated by your name and your original history of where you've come from.

[0:36:14]

TB: Lovely. And, it was just nice the things that you mentioned, like the music and the poetry and the dress, so these are all kind of cultural expressions, aren't they, of place in different ways? It was nice to see in the gallery, poetry everywhere, and that was very unexpected, I wasn't expecting that at all.

GM: Yes, no. The Gaelic culture is, again, unique, and some of the finest poetry written in the tongue of the Gael, and it's perpetuated, it's gone on, it's lasted. Largely passed down through word of mouth, like the piping, the ancient piping, long before people were able to write, it was all passed down by word of mouth, a lot of the old history was passed down through, being told as stories and so on. And it is, when you think how it's lasted to the present day, we take for granted, you dash off an email, but these, messaging and all this, it was all done by passing down word of mouth along the line, the communication terribly difficult, but communication was sort of effected.

[0:37:35]

TB: Yes, absolutely. I'm just sort of thinking, I mean, clearly, you know Scotland has gone through some tough times, you know with the decline of things like coal mining and oil declining and so on and tourism is getting more and more important, I was just sort of thinking about the role of clan museums and indeed clan culturally in driving some of that. Would you say it's quite significant in kind of bringing people?

GM: Oh, very much so. In the Highlands, yes. Most people, well I say most, a very large proportion of people venture into the Highlands with a Scottish connection somewhere. And, even if you haven't got a Scottish connection, you'll have read about Scotland and the Highlands and this unique thing called the clan system, so, yes, I think there would be very,

very few people that don't come into the Highlands that aren't aware of a clan somewhere or the name, or something like that, yes.

[0:38:44]

TB: And what about Scots people internally, kind of how does all this sit with, I mean clearly, the Scottish National Party has done brilliantly in the last couple of decades and there's an increasing feeling of nationalism, perhaps with a small "n", I don't know. But I was just wondering kind of, you know, whether it also kind of feeds into, yes, to a more sort of political ideas, really, about independence and so on.

GM: Well, I think the one thing that the Scots have always been, is pragmatic. And, I think if you're a MacDonald living on Skye, well, so what, you're a product of living on Skye and you just take it, you take your history and so on for granted. And, there's no doubt that the Highlands in the last, well 200 years, probably more than 200 years, have suffered terribly, by depopulation, I mean there was no work for anybody in the Highlands, the MacDonald's estate at one time, probably 300,000 acres, it's vast, but there was no way of supporting, there was nothing, no money coming from derived from owning that land, and people really were, if they wanted to better themselves, they went south, they went to Glasgow or even emigrated. And it's only in the last 20, 25 years that we've arrested that depopulation. People now want to come back, well with increased communication, standards of living and so on, and quality of life, people want to come back into the Highlands. So, we've reversed that. The Highlanders are very, very proud, a very proud race of people, historically they've been persecuted, after the 1745 rebellion, the word persecution is the word that I would use. King William and the Hanoverians really wanted to absolutely subjugate the people living in the Highlands we'd caused trouble, and we were going to pay for it. And, there's still that feeling of sadness of what did happen to the people.

TB: Really?

GM: Yes, I do.

TB: It's that raw still?

GM: Yep. People still feel that, and it's only, again, in the last 20 years that the Highlands have really opened up, we've got, we've got history, we've got scenery and we've got, nowadays, you know, good places to stay and it's so easy now to get into it. And they're unspoilt, there's an enormous area of land in the Highlands, it absorbs a lot of people, and it's managing that and that has transformed the economy of the Highlands. But we talk about nationalism, and it is, as far as I'm concerned, I am a Scot, I'm proud of being a Highland Scot, but again, pragmatic enough to know that Scotland really shouldn't, and can't, survive on its own. But it doesn't stop me wanting to support Scotland in everything I do, but I know that we can't do it on our own. There's strength in being part of a larger entity.

[0:42:30]

TB: Yes, I see. And just, so this amazing kind of turnaround, by the sound of it, the last 20 years, so it sounds to me like its infrastructure that's gone in, but also, well all sorts of tourism things, I suppose, like you were saying about hotels and restaurants and kind of just people I guess, coming in investing money into those things and it's kind of working, enough people coming through now.

GM: Yep. It started really, I think, probably 20, 25 years ago with people wanting, first of all, a lot of people who wanted, actually, to stay in the Highlands, they didn't want to have to emigrate south to find work, and so on, and it's really grown from that. And, of course, communication is so, so easy. When I went off to school in the '60s, it was a 48-hour journey from Skye to get down to London.

TB: Wow.

GM: Yep. And now, I don't like doing it, but I can leave here at half past five in the morning, catch the plane Inverness through London, have a virtually a day's meetings in London and be back at my own bed at night. And you know that, that's what the improved infrastructure in the Highlands has meant.

TB: Yes, that's incredible.

GM: The Skye bridge, and I totally opposed, really vociferously opposed the building of the Skye bridge when it was first mooted, because I thought it was going to wreck the island, it hasn't actually, I mean it certainly brought more people, I'm now a great supporter of the bridge, because it makes getting from A to B so much easier. But there is still a lot of work to be done. I mean, I suppose we have to talk about Brexit, or whatever it is, but the Highlands have done extremely well out of our belonging to the EEC.

[0:44:16]

TB: I was going to say, I've seen some signs by roads, and they're saying they're European funded.

GM: All these lovely roads that we have in the Highlands have been built with European money. We were designated as one of the fragile areas within the whole European Community, so that attracted a lot of investment from Europe, it didn't build the Skye bridge, but it's built a lot, like the Cromarty Firth, the Cromarty Causeway, the Dorna Causeway, the Kessock Bridge, opening up Karskew (*phonetic 0:44:48*), all these opening up the Highlands with European money.

[0:44:54]

TB: Right, so it's literally bridges that have been built.

GM: Oh, yes. And improving the roads and so on. So, I mean, I'm a democrat and realise that if we've got to implement the democrat wish of the people, but we have done the Highlands have done very well out of the European Community.

[0:45:17]

TB: I see, right, so some of it as a result of that money.

GM: Oh, completely, yes.

TB: I see, gosh. And, just in terms of infrastructure and tourism and so on, do you have much dealings with the Council or with tourist authorities, with network kind of organisations? Or are you fairly, kind of, self-sufficient?

GM: Personally, or here, Armadale or?

TB: Well, I suppose this site, really, kind of, yes.

GM: Well, you've got to work within the Council and so on.

[0:45:47]

TB: Have you had much help or advice?

GM: Well, again, I mean, sadly, the Highland Council isn't, it's not master of its own financial destiny. It's, the money that's given by central government, which is, we might just touch on this briefly, but the, Scotland is a population of 5.6 million, or something like that, of which about nearly 85% of that is populated in the central belt, so that's where the resources are situated, and it's very hard to get sufficient finance to improve our roads, not the main trunk roads, but the little, the roads that make getting around easier. Trying to get money for that, same thing, education, all these things, we're, because the population is so sparsely spread round the Highlands, the roads, and everything, we don't get enough.

TB: Oh, I see. So, it's like the Cinderella of the Councils in Scotland.

GM: Exactly, yes.

[0:46:56]

TB: I see, that makes it quite tough, doesn't it?

GM: Well, it is, so we really have to fight for everything we can get. I used to be very much involved in local government, but I'm afraid I got completely disillusioned and gave it up about 20 years ago. Well, it was fine in the days when we were given an allocation of money and we could spend it the way we wanted, and it wasn't that restricted and then you could really make a difference. Nowadays it's extremely difficult to make a difference, everything is sort of planed away and planed away, and I think one feels it more, probably, in the remote areas than you do in the cities in the south of Scotland.

[0:47:32]

TB: **Well, I'm just wondering kind of what this place has done for the area, and for Skye, and I imagine it's probably been pretty significant, actually.**

GM: It's been very significant.

TB: **Just tell me about that, yes.**

GM: It's very significant. We've got the Gaelic college, two miles up the road, it's a fine centre of higher education, it really is, so that combined with what we've achieved here, Sleat is the, which is the peninsula we're on, is really the growth, it's the success story of Skye in the last 20, 25 years.

TB: **In terms of bringing people in?**

GM: Continuity of employment, and of course attracting people, but the employment, of course, is very important. In the old days everything was seasonal, hotels and so on, you opened after Easter and then closed sort of mid-September. Now, most of the hotels stay open all the year round, I mean, we have a hotel up the road and are open 12 months of the year, now. Even though the transformation, again, it comes back to the ease of being able to get to places, but, no, what we've achieved here, I think, is significant in the...

[0:48:55]

TB: **That year-round thing is quite interesting, because if it's not seasonal, then that means people can stay through the year, doesn't it?**

GM: Yes, it does.

TB: **So, in terms of population, that's quite a big anchor.**

GM: It's a very, if you ask me, you know, what was the biggest single thing that has boosted the local economy, it is the ability of people to get here easily and at any time of the year. And people tend to think that the West Highlands in December - Oh! the snow and all that, in all

my 71 years of being here, only on two occasions have I not been able to get where I wanted to get when I wanted to get.

TB: Wow!

GM: Yes.

[0:49:36]

TB: Yes, sure. And that bridge, I'm sure, has made a really huge difference, which is awesome. Right, fantastic. Let me just quickly look at my questions and see if we've answered any of these. I'll just, in the setting up, clearly it was you and your wife and these 10 benefactors, was there anyone else involved in the setting up of the trust, I'm presuming that you had trustees.

GM: Yes.

TB: Just tell me a little bit about who they were or how they were...

GM: Well, the original thing, it was set up by the Clan Donald, again, is unique in that we're the largest clan, so we're the only clan that has a High Chief and then subsidiary Chiefs in their own right. I mean you have a chief of the Campbells and all that, but Clan Donald has a High Chief and it's also got the Chief of Sleat, Glengarry, Clanranold, Keppoch, there's five or six of them, so, to do this properly, I had the backing of the other chiefs and also, to give it the international credibility that it required, we appointed overseas trustees. And, initially, obviously the people, the people that gave the most money, that were the original trustees, but over the years, we've gradually planed that, worked that down, we still have a representative of trustees from all round the world, New Zealand, Australia, the English speaking world, really. And we have a meeting once a year, coming up in June, next month.

TB: And is that here or?

GM: Here, yes. And, that's when, basically, the policy is put to the trustees by the Executive Committee, who are the people who really make sure that the trust operates within the right charitable status, it's a protected, all that sort of thing. And it works, on the whole, it works very well, but it's very difficult, because people's understanding, if you're in New Zealand, of what they want to see happening at Armadale, or the trustee perhaps from Canada might have a different view, so you know, so it's a bit...

TB: Sure, yes, must be tricky.

GM: Like the Tower of Babel, but no, so that's why it's important to have a strong Executive Committee that can put forward the views, you know actually how things should work and

how they, but it's very important to have the overseas Trustees to spread the word to the other members, Clan Donald members, again in New Zealand, Australia, to Canada, United States, because as I said earlier, we are dependent on funding, continuing funding, from within the Clan.

[0:52:13]

TB: I see, yes. And these are, so these are appeals, or is it through membership? I don't know, how does it work?

GM: It's an ongoing, it's an open-ended appeal, I mean we're very lucky in that Ellis MacDonald and his wife Rosa, set up an endowment years ago and that funds, you know we get a big chunk of finance from them. But what we try and do, it's still effort trying to do, is not have to use that endowment to fund a deficit of running here, which is the importance of trying to maximise our revenue here and so that one can use the money from the endowment, which I think is what Ellis and Rosa really wanted, to fund the real charitable status, improve the museum, the library, all this sort of thing. That's the dream.

[0:53:07]

TB: Yes, okay, right. Yes, yes. So, you've got your trustees, and you also have members, right? Is it a membership organisation? Or do people subscribe or how does that work?

GM: We don't call them members, we call them Friends. But it's, and it's a constant battle trying to increase that number of people, but again, from when we set it up we realised it was vitally important that the people that gave, you know, £2, £5, they were as important as the people that gave £50,000, that everybody that cared about the Clan Donald Lands Trust, was given an equal say or an equal part in the...

TB: I see, yes. So, just tell me about the Friends thing, because it sounds like, in that case, if they are significant, I don't know.

GM: There's never enough of them. *[laughs]*

[0:54:02]

TB: Do you have meetings where they come? How does that work?

GM: Well, again, we have a meeting at the AGM.

TB: Oh, so Friends are invited to that?

GM: That's right.

TB: I've got you, okay. Right, I'm with you, and they pay a subscription.

GM: Yes, I should know that, I mean they do, but I'm not sure how much it is.

[0:54:18]

TB: And how many, we're talking thousands, hundreds? I don't know.

GM: Hundreds. Well, the trouble is, again, with everything, if one is associated with societies and things like that, it's terribly difficult these days to keep societies going because people, there are so many other calls on people's time and things like that. And we've got to be careful that we don't spend too much of a resource on gathering Friends and it sort of nullifies the effect of having the Friends. So, it's...

[0:54:54]

TB: Do you have, like a MacDonald's society, or almost sort of separate from this, or is it really all within your umbrella?

GM: Oh yes, no. I mean, just to draw a sort of little picture there, we have the Chiefs, we have the, coming down from that, Clan Donald Lands, which is this, then we have Clan Donald USA, Clan Donald Canada, Clan Donald Australia, you know, all the Clan Donald Lands Trust is an arm of the overall Clan hierarchy.

TB: Oh, I see. Okay, right, so these other...

GM: Clan set up, yes.

TB: Right, so the other ones have their own kind of structures.

GM: Oh, very much so, oh and they guard it very jealously too, but somewhere they all join, the Clan Donald Society, well it's not a society in America, it's Clan Donald USA, has a set within it, Clan Donald Foundation which helps fund tax deductible money to the Clan Donald Lands Trust.

[0:55:54]

TB: I'm with you. So, they might have their own Friends or members.

GM: That's right, oh they've got an enormous organisation. Sue (*whispering*). How long are we going to be?

TB: Well, another 10 or 15 minutes, would that be okay?

GM: Let's make it 10.

TB: All right, okay.

SUE: There might be people just coming in there, up and down this corridor.

GM: Don't worry Sue.

TB: That's okay, don't worry, yes. That's great, thank you, sorry, yes, we're running out of time. Okay, great, well I think, there's a couple of things. So, getting the thing started, we've talked about the money, we've talked about the location, what you had to do here, and the objects we know were donated, mostly. Did any of the objects kind of come from your own family?

GM: Bits and pieces, yes, because we've got our business up the road and people like to see the things associated with my family up there, bits and pieces here, yes.

[0:56:47]

TB: Okay, sure. So, that was something to sort of start the thing off, I suppose you could say. And, it's moved twice, why did it move to your mother's house? That was like a house in the grounds.

GM: Well it outgrew the, what we call the Summer lit rooms up there. And you'll see, when you see it, and then actually, if you do get a chance to see it, my mother's house, it's a much bigger, and we had the library there and, yes.

TB: Right, so it was just too much stuff to display really.

GM: We've done three big moves, you see. We've done from the Summer lit rooms up to my mother's house and then to here.

TB: Right, okay.

GM: Each time getting bigger.

[0:57:23]

TB: It's an impressive expansion that way, okay, great. We've talked about the stories and the narrative, there was one thing which you mentioned I'd just like you to explain, you said

that on the clearances only 2% actually emigrated and you wanted to set that story right. So, how have you, what's the...

GM: No, 2% forcibly emigrated.

TB: Forcibly, oh I see, okay. Right. So, is the idea just to put that in, to be more realistic about the impact of it, or?

GM: It's to correct, John Prebble, have you heard of John Prebble?

TB: No.

GM: Wrote a book, well he did, he wrote a book called The Highland Clearances where he turned it into the absolute destruction of the highland club, the worst thing that had happened to the Highlands, well, in certain instances, where people were forcibly, and particularly in Sutherland, where people were literally burnt out of their homes, and so on, it was absolutely devastating, devastating. But, coupled with, emotive and people used to, when Clare and I first went to, particularly to Nova Scotia, they said "oh well, we were cleared by your family" and that's not true. My family did a, there was one of two areas that they did, well I suppose one has got to use the word clearance, you know, forcibly, but it was a tiny percentage. What people don't, and what we've tried to do, I think, is say, that after the 1745 rebellion, the place was, the Highlands were hopelessly over populated, there just wasn't enough food to feed the people and a lot of the Chiefs of heads of families, my family included, actually bankrupted, literally bankrupted themselves, to get their people away from that so that they had a life overseas. And that's what the, you know, the misconception is, that it was, people didn't want to go, but if they didn't go, they would have died, it was as simple as that. Coupled with that potato famine in Ireland, the mass immigration, we had potato famines here too. But I can't remember the exact figures, but I think in about the early 1800s the population of Skye was somewhere in the region of 25,000, perhaps even more, 25,000. Today it's about 8,500, so you can imagine the impact of that, there were no roads, there were no, it was just, it was awful.

[0:59:50]

TB: Yes. So, that reorganisation or any reorganisation would have been, the depopulation would have been inevitable given the economic circumstances.

GM: Well, yes, either that, or it would have been death on a scale we wouldn't have contemplated.

TB: I'm sure, thank you, that's great. Okay, well I think we've covered, well I've got a question, why is all this important to you, personally? I can't think of an example of someone who's more personally bound up in the whole thing, but I don't know.

GM: I've been born into it, and I'm extremely proud to be Chief of Clan Donald and I love doing what I do. Over the years I've met literally tens and tens of thousands of clansmen that have, they too, are thrilled to belong to a clan. The role today is more sort of ambassadorial, quite honestly, it is. But, we're ambassadors of something that is really unique and, as I think I said earlier on, as long as there are clansmen round the world, that want, that it means something to belong to a clan, I'm doing what I want to do, what I love doing.

[1:01:10]

TB: **Yes, yes. And I imagine kind of being born into something quite like this, sometimes it's ill fitting, isn't it, and doesn't you know, it can be terribly stressful? But it seems to me you've rolled with it.**

GM: I've done it for now, 50 years, but it is, coupled with all that, one's got to earn one's living and lead a normal life, I mean I'm a chartered accountant, by profession, and we own and run Kinloch Lodge Hotel up the, in Skye, that's been our life, so, I mean, coupled with that, you know, one fits in, the clan things, but I often say how lucky, we both do, Clare and I, how lucky we are to be able to do that and to make a difference. I mean I hope my legacy, it will be, you know, what we've created here, from when I inherited in 1970, which was run down, absolutely, completely overgrown, a jungle, it employed two people that were disaffected, you know, in to what we've now created here today. That is something that I would really be thrilled to think I'm going to be remembered for.

[1:02:16]

TB: **Yes. How many people do you employ?**

GM: Well, it varies actually. I mean in the summer we take on, the gardens are overgrown, you need to check with Sue just how many people, but it's a substantial number of people.

TB: **It's in the tens.**

GM: Oh, yes, yes. Most certainly. And it's full, basically, it's a full-time job. In the old days, as I said, there used to be two people working here.

TB: **Yes, yes. And of all of your kind of involvement with the museum and, I suppose the site as well, because it's quite wrapped up in it, isn't it, but could you give me a high point and a low point and the most difficult kind of moment and the most wonderful moment for you?**

GM: I suppose the low point was when we set off overseas in May 1971, really wondering, in those days, try to think, that gosh, we've got to somehow get 200, near enough, 200,000 coupled with that the grief, I felt, over my father and all that, that was probably the low

point when we really didn't know what on earth we were going to get to or how we were going to get to it.

TB: Yes, and if that hadn't have worked out, then presumably the whole thing would have been sold off.

GM: Oh, it would have been, yes. And that opportunity would have been lost. And, I think the other high point was to realise that, you know, once we created it, just what it meant, the first and only clan still, ever to actually own our own land and it's administered by trustees on behalf of the whole clan. Any clansman that comes in, he is a stake holder in the lands here. That's probably the high point.

TB: Yes, fantastic. Lovely, thank you so much, it's been absolutely fascinating.

GM: Oh, no, it's been, I've...

TB: Fascinating, wonderful, wonderful.

Audio ends: [1:04:07]