

Caolas
Caoles

Eilean Thiriodh

This is an attempt to describe some of the really remarkable people whom this island produced – master mariners, ministers, doctors, poets, fisherman, crofters and many others.

Caolas, the most easterly township in Tìree, borders the Gunna Sound.

Ceardaich a' Chaolas – the Caolas Smithy

A family of MacDonalDs who lived in Balephuìl swapped crofts with a family named Sinclair from Cornaigbeg. This croft lies in the extreme southwest of Cornaigbeg. A member of this family, **Neil MacDonald (Niall Bàn)** was a blacksmith. He practised his trade for some years at Port Na Crìche, down on the shore on the border between Cornaigbeg and Kenovay. At this time, another two smithies – those of the MacEacherns and the MacCallums were operating in Cornaigbeg, so Neil MacDonald decided to move to Caolas – this would have been in the 1860's. Like most families, the MacDonalDs had more than one string to their bow – they were boatmen and did some fishing.

When the Railway came to Oban in the 1880's, this gave Tìree people access to southern markets, and **Alasdair, Son of Neil**, began commercial lobster fishing sending his catch of lobsters by steamer to Oban and on by rail to the fishmarket in Billingsgate, London.

Alasdair MacDonald's son **Calum (Caul a' Ghobhainn)** carried on this tradition, namedly some blacksmithing and seasonal lobster fishing. Calum MacDonald had the reputation of being an expert seaman and very able lobster fisherman who had an extensive knowledge of the history and heritage of his people. He also had a fierce temper and did not suffer fools gladly. He was over 90 years of age when he died in 1971 and was the last person in Caolas to remember the corn-grinding mill in Milton working.

A' Mhuilleann – The Corn Mill, Milton

Alan MacDonald, miller, was a Coll man from Bousd / Sorasdal area of Coll. The mill ceased working in the 1880's and his son **Alexander** was the last miller in Caolas. Alexander's son **Archibald (Gilleasbuig a' Mhuilleir)** and **Alec (Ailig 'illeasbaig a' Mhuilleir)** both of whom were Master Mariners serving with the Baron Line of Glasgow.

Alec was an accomplished poet, and Donald had considerable skills as a boat-builder. Their maternal grandfather, Hugh MacArthur (**Eoghan Ruadh**) had been a boat-builder in Port Loch and Air on the border between Milton and the Port Bàn croft – the ruins of this dwelling can be clearly seen to this day.

Caolas (2)

Two of the boats built by Donald MacDonald can still on the island. The 'Mayflower' in Scarinish was built herein Tìree in 1901. The other, now owned by Donald John Kennedy, Balephuìl, and which he built on the deck of the ship of which he was master, first went into the water in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He also built on his ship while away on a long voyage a 26" cabin cruiser. She was put into the water in Glasgow and sailed home to Tìree via the Crinan Canal.

This same Captain Donald MacDonald while serving as Master of the Steamship 'Baron Polworth' on 31st August 1918 did, by the expert handling of his ship, successfully frustrate a torpedo attack by a German U-boat. For his action that day, he was awarded Lloyd's Medal and received an award both from Lloyd's and the Ministry of Shipping.

Donald and Alec MacDonald's uncle Hugh MacDonald (Eoghan a' Mhuilleir) was for many years Postmaster in Scarinish.

The Cameron Family, Miodar, (Muinntir Chràignis)

In 1912, the Cameron Family from Craignish moved to Caolas when they acquired the tenancy of Miodar on the north coast of that township. They were the last family to move west of Ben Hough. The area between Kilkenneth and Craignish had been heavily populated at one time, but because of wind erosion and land-grabbing by the factor, people had moved away, the Cameron family being the last to do so. There were four brothers in this family - Duncan, John, Hector and Alasdair, and between them they had a wide range of skills including blacksmithing, tailoring, shoemaking and joinery work among many others.

While living in Craignish they had no croft and made their living entirely from the sea. Duncan (Donnachadh Chràignis) had considerable skills as a boatbuilder and at one time built a dinghy from driftwood he found on the shore. This dinghy was used by the family for over forty years.

In 1905 they owned a 40ft Herring Drifter which had bunks and a coal fire, and in that year they took this vessel and a skiff over to Earraid on the Ross of Mull. The forty foot vessel was moored in a safe anchorage and was used as living quarters while they fished lobsters with the skiff around the Torran Rocks west of Iona. This fishing was successfully prosecuted for five consecutive years 1905-1909.

During the First World War, a sudden herring fishing took place in Gott Bay. Herring buyers and herring gutters arrived on the island, and every available craft was manned for this fishing - manned sometimes by men who had never been to sea in their lives! The Cameron Family took part in this fishing highly successfully.

The MacDonald Family, Milton, Caolas (Duibh a' Chaolais)

This family were known as 'Duibh' a Chaolais and had the reputation for being quite aggressive and standing no nonsense from anybody.

John MacDonald was born in 1739, and his son Neil was born in 1765.

Neil MacDonald had a son Archibald and a daughter Mary.

Mary married Hector MacLean from Balephuill and they had five sons - Alan, Hugh, Donald, Neil and John, and two daughters - Marion and Anne.

Alan MacLean (Ailean Bàn) was the Skipper-Owner of a schooner the 'Cirrius of Rosa' for some years, and was engaged for a time by the Northern Lighthouse Board to carry building materials from Oban to Dubh Artach when a lighthouse was built on this small isolated island some 25 miles west of Iona.

In 1877, Mary MacLean (nee MacDonald) had three sons - Alasdair, Donald and Hector and two daughters - Mary and Isabel. He has three grandsons and some great grandchildren living on the island today.

Hector MacLean was a minister and spent most of his life in Skye. He had four sons - Hugh, Alasdair, William and Curdie all of whom became medical doctors.

Neil MacDonald's son Archibald, married Catherine MacFadyen in 1842. They had a family comprising Danald, Effie and Anne and at least three others.

Donald and Effie were both accomplished poets.

Donald was a joiner to trade and he worked as a building contractor, earning the nickname **An Contractor**. He will be referred to from here on as the Contractor. The Contractor, born in 1858, worked in many places including Manchester and Newcastle. In 1889 he emigrated to Toronto, Canada. After a time, he moved to New York, and during his time there founded the New York Celtic Society. He then returned to Tìree and married **Helen**, daughter of Alexander MacLean (Sandaidh Mòr), tenant of Scarinish Farm. While in Tìree, he built the Cornaigmore Church of Scotland which was completed in 1901.

He returned to Canada, and was engaged as an architect in the Public Works Department of the city of Ottawa when he died in 1919.

The Contractor's son **Alasdair (Alasdair a' Chontractor)** became an eminent lawyer in Ottawa and throughout his highly successful career there until his death in 1994, sustained a keen interest in Gaelic and his Island Heritage. This same Alasdair was the boy whom the Contractor composed the well-known song 'Am Balachan Bàn'. This along with other songs which he composed, are of such merit that they are still sung today.

The mother of the famous **Currier, Donald Lamont** - the early Nineteenth Century Bare-knuckle Prize Fighter was a MacDonald, another member of 'Duibh' a' Chaolais.

Hector MacDonald (Eachann Bàn Mac Dhòmhnail Bhig) of Coll View owned the smack 'Peace and Plenty' was also one of 'Duibh' a' Chaolais.

A Profile of the MacLean Family of Crofters, Caolas

Hector MacArthur, Sound View, Caolas, has very generously given us permission to copy a document showing the valuation, in 1905, of the estate of his great grandfather, **Hugh MacLean**. This document clearly shows the value of stock and crofting implements at the turn of the century.

The said Hugh MacLean's father, **John (Iain Bàn)**, lived in the now ruined building about 150 years west of the Croish House in Caolas. At some time, he built a new house perhaps half a mile east nearer the shore. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, his son, the already mentioned Hugh MacLean, built the two-storey house that stands some fifty years west of the house built by his father, Iain Bàn. This house is now occupied by Hugh MacLean's great hreat grandson, Hugh MacArthur.

Two of Hugh MacLean's sons, **Lachlan** and **Alasdair** were involved in crofting in Caolas all their lives. **Lachainn Mac Eoghain** had a reputation for being an exceptionally competent farmer, every inch of his arable ground being tilled, and the croft stocked with quality cattle, sheep and horses.

Alasdair Mac Eoghain was also an able farmer and was skilled at treating animals - for which he was nicknamed the 'Vet.'

Hugh Archie MacLean (Eoghan -Eardsidh Eoghain Alasdair), grandson of Alasdair MacEoghain, is the present Chairman of the Crofter's Commission.

Alasdair MacEoghain's son **John Archie**, now retired, lives on the croft, which is now being worked by his grand nephew, Ewan MacKinnon, Hillcrest, Balephetrish. **John Archie** like many Tìree men, sailed all over the world as a Merchant Seaman and lived for a number of years in New Zealand. In 1914, while serving on the Donaldson Line refrigerated ship, the 'Corinaldo' which was outward bound for the River Plate, John Archie suffered a serious accident in Trinidad, and as a result of which he was hospitalised for six months. The

'Corinaldo' was engaged in the frozen beef trade with South America and her Master at that time was **John MacInnes (Am Bàn)** of Ruaig, and the Second Mate was **John Downie** of Ruaig and Balemartine, who later became Commodore of the Donaldson Line. (I mention the above to illustrate both the strong maritime connection of the island, and the major contribution made by the seamen of Tìree to defending and feeding of the British people during both World Wars. The island's War Memorial shows the terrible price they paid for this service.)

An Acarsaid

Tìree has suffered down the centuries from the lack of safe harbour – no natural harbour of any quality exists. Caolas has within its boundaries 'An Acarsaid' - in English, 'The Harbour'. This was regarded as the safest place to moor a craft, and in winter, schooners, smacks and gabbers were laid up here. On the night of the Tay Bridge Disaster, 1879, an exceptionally high tide hit the coast of Tìree causing some craft which had been laid up to float and be swept up on rocky ground on the east side of the Harbour.

Two brothers from Kilmoluaig, **Hector and Dugald MacKinnon (Eachann agus Dìughall a' Choll)** owned a schooner called the 'Coll Castle' which they worked from An Acarsaid. On the night of the already mentioned Tay Bridge Disaster, when a ferocious gale swept right across Scotland, the 'Coll Castle' was at sea, homeward bound from the Clyde with a load of coal. The gale was of such ferocity that no one on this island believed a sailing vessel such as the 'Coll Castle' could survive such violence. By the grace of God and the maritime ability of the MacKinnon brothers, when the wind abated, they brought their vessel into the safe haven of An Acarsaid. Something which added to the doom and gloom on the island that night was the fact that Eachann a' Choll's eldest son **Calum** born, everyone believing that the born child's father was lost at sea.

Dughal a' Choll married Flora daughter of Donald MaaRthur (Dòmhnall 'ic Iain 'ic Fhearchair) tenant of the Acarsaid croft. He built the house at the head of the Harbour making use of stones from the ruined Iron Age Fort at the Dùn Mòr a' Chaolais. This house is now occupied by his grandson, **John MacKenzie**, former Scottish International Football Player.

The old adage 'Tis an ill wind that blows no good' was proved to be very true when on the 20th of November, 1895, a large steamship the '**Nessmore**' ran shore on the east side of the Gunna Sound. This vessel had a deck cargo of 520 live cattle and in her holds she had cheese, timber, reapers and other items of general cargo.

The people of Caolas, and other places, fell upon this wreck like swarming locusts, and plundered many of the cattle and much of the cheese. Reapers which were 'salvaged' are still lying about this island. Retribution came in the form of Customs Officers, and many people were hauled off to the Sheriff Court in Oban, but not before they got a godly share of this sudden bonanza.

'**Lonamar**' a cove on the east side of Caolas was used to shipping cattle out of the island. The remnants of the pier where cattle were loaded on to various types of craft can still be seen. Cattle were usually shipped to Croig on the west side coast of Mull. They were then walked across Mull to Grasspoint, shipped on other craft to Oban from whence they were walked along the ancient Drove Roads to Falkirk or Stirling to be sold. The trade continued into this century.

The Gaelic Places names sometimes give important historical information. For example, in Caolas you will find in close proximity to each other names such as Crois, Cnoc na h-Anaid, Pairc a' Chladh and Creag a' Mhanaich. These clearly indicate the importance of Caolas in a religious context in early Christian times.

Caolas Master Mariners

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|-----|------------------------------|--|
| 1. | John MacLean | Died 1893, Urbhaig (?) |
| 2. | Neil MacLean, Carnan | (Niall Neill Òig) |
| 3. | John Clark, Rosigal | (Iain Clèireach) and his nephew |
| 4. | Donald MacArthur, Rosigal | (Dòmhnall Fhearchair 'ic Iain 'ic Fhearchair) |
| 5. | Donald MacDonald, Milton | (Dòmhnall 'illeasbuig a' Mhuilleir) and his brother |
| 6. | Alec MacDonald, Milton | (Ailig 'illeasbuig a' Mhuilleir) |
| 7. | Archibald MacFadyen, Airdeas | (Gilleasbaig Neill Ailein) |
| 8. | John Alec MacArthur | (brother of Hugh Hector) |
| | | (Iain Eachainn Dhòmhnail 'ic Iain 'ic Fhearchair) |
| 9. | John MacKinnon, Acarsaid | (Iain Dhùghail a' Choll) |
| 10. | Donald MacLean | (Father of the wife of Kenneth MacKenzie, one time Pier Master.) |

Ministers

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| 1. | Hector MacLean | (Eachann Eoghain Mhòir) |
| 2. | Dugald Lamont | (Dùghal na h-Acarsaid neo Dùghal Dhòmhnail Chaluim Alasdair) |
| 3. | Hector Meek | (Ogha Eachainn Bhàin Dhòmhnail Bhig) |
| 4. | Allan MacDougall | |

Ministers

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| 2. | Donald MacLean, cooper | (Dòmhnall Cùpair) |
| 3. | John MacLean | (Iain Lachainn na h-Urbhaig) |
| 4. | Donald MacDonald, Milton | (An Contractor), and his sister |
| 5. | Euphemia MacDonald | |
| 6. | Mary Flora MacDonald, Airdeas | (Nighean Dhòmhnail Uibhisteach) |
| 7. | Alec Stewart, Mullach Nan Geall | |
| 8. | Charles MacDonald, Coll View | (Tearlach Eachainn Bhàin) |
| 9. | Lachlan MacDonald, Mull View | (nephew of Iain Mac Ailein) |
| 10. | Alec MacDonald, Milton | (Ailig 'illeasbuig a' Mhuilleir, also sea- captain) |
| 11. | Allan MacDougall, Milton (also a Minister) | |
| 12. | Neil MacLaine | (Niall an Tàilleir) |

The foregoing is but a superficial profile of the township of Caolas. The mists of time now blanket much knowledge of the past. For example, the list of Master Mariners is incomplete.