

Dear Friends

Following the latest edition of the Iodhlann Newsletter, you may be interested in the following items of information concerning the Balephuill Fishing Disaster of 1856.

Alan M Boyd
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1. It is worth pointing out that the boats on that day actually set out from what was at that time a part of Hynish, although it historically belonged to Balephuill. Shortly before the disaster of 1856, and subsequent to the Potato Famine of 1846, a large part of southern Balephuill was cleared of its crofting tenants and added to Hynish. It was however renamed as West Hynish at the beginning of the twentieth century when it was recrofted by descendants of those who had been cleared and dispossessed of their crofts shortly before 1856. Both the Port Mòr and Port Driseig are to the present day officially in West Hynish although culturally a part of Balephuill, and in the area generally known in Gaelic as “Na Cùiltean” (“The Sequestered Corners”). At the time of the disaster, many of the fishermen were cottars living over the border in Balephuill in the settlement known to the present day as “Am Bail’ Ùr” (“Newtown”). Duncan MacDonald (Donnchadh Bàn) and Farquhar MacDonald (no relation to one another) were both living in the Bail’ Ùr in 1856; many will remember both their former homes into the early 1960s – classic Tiree cottar houses of the mid-nineteenth century design.

Incidentally, at the time of the Clearance (prior to 1856), Farquhar MacDonald’s house was the first dwelling to be built in the Bail’ Ùr, and Duncan MacDonald’s was the second, with the other houses following on shortly afterwards (info by courtesy of the late John Brown - Iain Thèarlaich - an Sliabh, Balephuill).

2. While living in Islay over twenty years ago, I heard from the late Lachie Clark of Port Charlotte that the Tiree boat/s came ashore at Sanaigmore which, with its beach and machair, is situated in the north-western extremity of Islay. And above the beach there is still the house described by the late Donald Sinclair (Dòmhnall Chaluim Bàn) in Iain Smith’s informative article in “The Secret Island.”
3. On reaching Islay, and receiving shelter and hospitality from the lady of the house (a grand-daughter of a previous factor in Tiree), the Tireemen proceeded to procure suitable timber to make for themselves a new mast and oars for their battered boat. After a week or so, and when favourable weather permitted, they sailed back to their native Tiree. No word of Calmac Hopscotch tickets in those far-off days! (info by courtesy of the late Tèarlach MacGregor Whyte, Oban and Tiree).

4. The late Donald MacNeill (An Tàillear/Dòmhnall an Tuathanaich) of “The Land” (Lag an t-Seagail), Barrapol was born in 1856. It was said that his father (An Tuathanach) did not go out that day because his wife was having difficulty in breast-feeding their baby son. Thus we may see the hand of providence in exercise. The Tàillear himself died sometime during WW2. Info by courtesy of the late William MacNeill, Barrapol.

ALL THE FOLLOWING POINTS REFER TO INFORMATION CONTAINED ON PP. 125-126 OF NA BÀIRD THIRISDEACH (unless stated otherwise)

1. As highlighted in Iain Smith’s article in “The Secret Island”, the first boat mentioned was that of Duncan MacDonald (Bàta Dhonnchaidh Bhàin) and NOT that of Dòmhnall Bàn (which would have been Donald MacDonald) – either Hector Cameron or Hugh Kennedy slipped up on that one! On line 6 (p. 125) it should be Donnchadh Bàn MacDonald, and NOT Dòmhnall Bàn MacDonald.
2. As stated in the foregoing account, Donnchadh Bàn (MacDonald) had his son James (Seumas Bàn) with him (p 125, line 6) – I heard it said that he was a boy of 14 at the time of the disaster, so he must have been born around 1842. Seumas Bàn was the father of the late Duncan and Eilidh MacDonald of the Bail’ Ùr, Balephuill, who many of us remember well. Incidentally, Duncan MacDonald jr was also known as “Donnchadh Bàn”.
3. The veteran sailor Hugh MacArthur (p 125, lines 6 and 7), although called Eòghann Òg, was more commonly known as Eòghann Seòladair (Hugh the Sailor) in his native Balephuill. His daughter, known as Màiri Eòghainn Sheòladair, was married to Alasdair Brown, father of Hugh Brown (Eòghann Brùn) and grandfather of the late Alasdair, Hector and Donald, and also of Donald Archie, Jean and Ina.
4. I think, but cannot be certain, that Malcolm MacArthur (Moss) (p.124, lines 7 and 8) was an ancestor of the late Archie MacArthur (Eàirdsidh Chaluim) of Middleton Post Office. I heard it said that these MacArthurs first settled in Moss after coming to Tiree from Fracadail in Mull. It would appear in those days that the land in Moss was so poor that tenants got a holding there for very little rent.

5. Farquhar MacDonald (p 125, lines 10 and 11) was a brother of Alasdair Mòr MacDonald who composed the “fragment” of poetry (p 126 – Òran an Fhuadaich). Many of Farquhar’s descendants succeeded him in Balephuill and elsewhere, including his grandson, the late James MacDonald (Seumas na Cròige) who some of us remember well.

6. Archibald Maclean (An Ciobair) was the Shepherd for the large slice of Balephuill which eventually became West Hynish. The late Donald Sinclair (and family) subsequently fell heir to Taigh a’ Chìobair which is right adjacent to the Balephuill march with West Hynish.

7. Although not actually stated by Iain Smith in his article in “The Secret Island”, the crew of Donald Campbell’s boat consisted of the Maclean family known as Clann Dhòmhnail Ghreusaiche, and NOT Clann Dhòmhnail a’ Ghreusaiche. Donald Maclean, being the shoemaker himself, was Dòmhnall Greusaiche, NOT Dòmhnall a’ Ghreusaiche (!).

8. Am Marsanta (“The Merchant”) was also known as Am Marsanta Bàn, and he built the substantial dyke on the north-western shoulder of Ben Hynish that separates West Hynish from Balephuill to the present day. It must have been built sometime shortly before 1856 when, as already mentioned, the large section of south-west Balephuill was cleared and added to Hynish. Incidentally, the building of such a dyke must have been a huge undertaking for the one man, not to mention where all the stone came from! The Marsanta had a son known as Dòmhnall Bàn a’ Mharsanta who is mentioned in Colin MacDonald’s song “An tèid thu leam a Mhagaidh Chaluum?” (Na Bàird Thirisdeach, p 359). He appears there simply as Dòmhnall Bàn.

9. The sixth boat, belonging to Malcolm MacDonald (p125, lines 24-27), had MacDonald himself on board together with his two sons, Archibald and Hector. Hector was the father of the late Niall Eachainn who lived in the Sliabh in Balephuill and who died c 1956. Neil had a brother Dugald in New Zealand plus other relatives at home and abroad.

10. Neil and Hugh Kennedy (p.125, line 20) were succeeded by their brother John Kennedy who also lived in the Rubha in Balephuill where the house belonging to Brian Crawford now stands. John Kennedy was laterally blind and died c 1920. He was locally known as “Clèabhar”, being apparently named after the seventeenth century royalist “Claverhouse”!

11. Donald Maclean (Dòmhnall Cheann na Creige) also lived in the Rubha where the house belonging to Ian Atkins now stands (p 125, line 17 & 18).