

Tiree and the Dukes of Argyll in the age of the Clearances and Crofters' War: coercion, controversy and confrontation.

In the summer of 2013, the Islands Book Trust held a three day conference on Tiree which focused on numerous chapters in the island's modern history, or more precisely since 1674 when it came into the hands of the Campbell Dukes of Argyll. It was pointed out at the conference that Tiree had not hitherto been the subject of a comprehensive, scholarly historical study. Indeed the object of the conference was to begin to rectify that omission. It was, in Professor Donald Meek's words, 'the first steps to change' - to bring Tiree's history and culture into the light. The papers delivered then were subsequently published in 2014 and aptly named *The Secret Island. Towards a History of Tiree*. Naturally, a number of its contributors were native islanders, such as Meek himself and Dr. John Holliday. Their rich, local knowledge, aided by fluency in Gaelic, help make this collection especially valuable.

For over a year, I have been developing, when time allowed, another contribution to the history of the island under the title given at the head of this present contribution to 'Notes and Queries'. It is an ongoing endeavour. I continue to add to it and refine it as I come across more source material. The present object of this note is to take advantage of one attribute of 'Notes and Queries' by bringing this work to the attention of the Society's readership, providing something of an overview of progress to date and hopefully attracting observations which will enrich the eventual oeuvre. In that sense, this is rather what in the archaeological

world is called an interim report, or to put it more simply, I am sending out this signal of what I'm doing, where I am and looking to exchange thoughts and information with any with a common, relevant interest.

Not long after the Campbells came into possession of Tiree, they began to direct a series of changes in order to make their estates more efficient in the generation of capital. Indeed they were at the forefront of the movement to modernise the management of Highlands and Islands estates to improve productivity. This period, roughly covering the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, span the era popularly known as the Highland Clearances – perhaps the most controversial period in Scottish history. As was the case in so many other regions, the Campbells' new policies had a huge effect on the lives of the common people, a people who were imbued with the culture, practices and traditions passed down from innumerable generations. Though far from opposing change where they could perceive that change would be for their benefit, more often than not they saw that what the Campbells wanted was in conflict with their own interests.

Until c. 1841, this coincided with a period in which the island experienced what Professor Eric Richards repeatedly called an 'astonishing' growth in the population. In the main, estate policies were not calculated to cope with this: although successive factors sometimes were to lament the plight of the people and attempt what they could to alleviate it, the welfare of the teeming islanders was largely only of concern as regards their ability to pay their rents and behave compliantly.

Economic downturns, occasional poor harvests and cattle disease and estate policies turned the issue of population growth into a demographic nightmare. There were periods of extreme destitution with the inevitable consequences of illnesses and deaths. The supreme crisis, though by no means the only one, was the period of the great famine of 1846-50. Both before but especially then, desperation drove many to seek to emigrate. Others were compelled to leave as a result of estate policies. The consequence was significant population decline.

Tiree constituted an important part of the Campbells' estates. They drew substantial revenue from it, principally in the form of rents. Other income streams were also of considerable value, particularly from the kelp industry when it was in operation and from the financial rewards of raising regiments for the British army. The Campbells therefore had a material interest in looking after their island resource. However, they also had a moral responsibility as clan chiefs whose ancient traditions were based on patronage in return for their people's loyalty. How they balanced the pursuit of profit with good lordship is a principal theme of my work.

How did the islanders react to the radical changes imposed upon them? Until fairly recently, the commonly held view was that the Highlanders and Islanders mainly endured their lot stoically and in deference to their aristocratic proprietors. With a few notable exceptions in places like Sutherland, it was considered that, in the main, compliance lasted well into the second half of the nineteenth century, only collapsing in the 1880s in the so-called 'Crofters' War'.

Modern scholarship is, however, uncovering increasing evidence that from the outset there was opposition, both passive and active and that this was as true of the Campbell lands in Argyll as elsewhere. Donald Meek for example, who in 1995 edited the first collection of native, Gaelic poems of social and political unrest, stressed how these dispel the view that

Highlanders reacted tamely, if at all, to their landlords' estate policies. Robert McGeachy amplified this in his work of 2005 on Argyll, a work in which Tiree features prominently. As the second half of the nineteenth century wore on, the extent of opposition increased as the people came to question the fundamental order of things. In this, they were encouraged by developments in the UK's capitals: the growth of political movements, the coverage provided in the Press and ultimately the intervention of the government in Westminster. Like their contemporaries in other parts of the Highlands and islands, the folk of Tiree became increasingly assertive and ultimately, in 1886, came out in open rebellion against the Duke. It required a considerable force of marines, shipped up from Devonport, to bring the islanders to heel.

The drama of 1886 has been written up before in greater or lesser detail in various works, most notably by Meek in an article in Gaelic of 1980 and in his contribution to the Tiree Conference Proceedings of 2014 and also by I.M.M. MacPhail in 1989. My work in hand absorbs their studiously quarried material and goes beyond, to the aftermath, looking at the fortunes of the islanders' lot running into the twentieth century.

The written material for this study is diverse. A fine overview of the Dukes' of Argyll management of their estates, how that impacted on their people and how these people reacted as a result, is covered by McGeachy. The primary, indeed the prime source is the Argyll Papers in the Inverary Castle Archives. These document the estate's management of the island and provide much information about the tenants and others who lived, worked and died there. In 2014, the Papers were still only partly catalogued so exploring them required some dedication.⁴ How far matters may have developed since then remains to be seen. Many relating to the late eighteenth century and very early nineteenth century were edited by Eric Cregeen in the 1960s and 1970s and later drawn on by McGeachy and others.

Subsequently papers relating to the mid-nineteenth century were investigated by Professor Tom Devine for his award-winning book of 1980, *The Great Highland Famine*. Devine's use of the papers enabled him to compile detailed statistics which give penetrating insights into the management of Tiree and the circumstances of its people during the years of the potato blight and after. By then, George Douglas Campbell (1823-1900) had acceded to the dukedom. His career has been the subject of a Ph.D. thesis which draws on Devine's work for the way in which the Duke directed his interests in Tiree.

The Duke's own writings and those of his daughter Frances, reflect their chosen recollections of that period of crisis but are representatively a defence of landlord practices against the claims of the crofters and cottars, their representatives and popular opinion, all of which was galvanised in the 1880s.⁸ The Campbells' accounts are sometimes at odds with what can be gleaned from the estate papers and ultimately, the comments of the crofters themselves. These were formally given in 1883 to a Royal Commission set up under Lord Napier to investigate the condition of crofters and cottars throughout the Highlands and islands. By this time, government was sufficiently concerned with 'the Highland Problem' that it featured in parliamentary debates, climaxing in the 'Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act' passed on 25 June 1886. The drama of that year when the crofters and cottars of Tiree made their stand against the Duke was vividly reported day by day in the newspapers.

B. Clelland and G.D. Lamont have produced histories of Tiree which cover all or part of the period of the Clearances and the Crofters' War and are useful for their perspectives. These

works are to be found on a website which contains transcripts of relevant parliamentary papers, the Duke's own book of 1883 and other useful material. The Secret Island: Towards a History of Tiree mentioned above, includes several articles which have the benefit of drawing on orally transmitted recollections.

Other publications discuss what was going on in this period in other parts of Argyll, such as Morvern and Mull and indeed, via McGeachy, in Argyll as a whole. There are also numerous other works on different regions and islands further afield in the Highlands. These along with general histories are useful for understanding the broader picture. My research attempts to draw together salient aspects of this diverse reservoir of labour, in giving a fresh look at the circumstances of Tiree, drawing comparisons with what was going on in other areas, during the age of the Clearances and the Crofters' War.

In a work such as this, embracing as it does, a history of ordinary folk subjected to radical change caused by circumstance and by innovative estate policies, it is hardly surprising that one encounters controversy. There have been scholars who have defended the stance of the proprietorial élite and many more who have railed against it. It is a challenge to remain steadfast in impartiality and objectivity. However, it is also hugely stimulating to look back to a period not so very long ago, when society was very different to ours today in the twenty-first century. There are lessons to be derived from what happened in Tiree in these times. How far we have learnt from this and the parallel narratives of other parts of the Highlands and islands, is like so much from history, a matter of debate.

What follows is the current bibliography used in the research to date. I am very conscious that there is scope for taking in more, both as regards Tiree itself and with reference to other areas useful for comparative purposes. I have already received most valuable advice from the staff of the University of the Highlands and Islands as regards the general period and its scholarship. This is of course a huge subject and vast tomes have been written by those who have spent large portions of their lives studying it.

As the following list shows, some of this has in fact been used already but practicality now requires that the research stays focused on the core, that is, on Tiree itself. I should be very pleased to hear from anyone who might like to correspond with me over this project.

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