

Memories of Cornaigmore Secondary, Tiree1952-54

The Qualifying Exam which we sat towards the end of Primary 7 (in Balemartine Primary in my case) played a major part in our educational futures. For some it meant being placed in an A class at Cornaigmore Secondary (at that time a three year secondary) where we would study Latin and Gaelic – both taught as foreign languages. For others it meant an emphasis on technical subjects e.g. woodwork or domestic science, depending on gender. Fortunately those of studying languages also had the opportunity to tackle those subjects.

Going to secondary school was, as it still is, a great adventure. We had a timetable with periods for the various subjects with different teachers and rooms, so the day was broken up by moving around the building.

My brother, John, and I cycled from Hynish to Balemartine where we parked our bicycles against the gable end of Maggie Roadside's house – on the left-hand side of the road, just past the Primary school. I never learned Maggie's name, as indeed was the way with a number of people I knew during my childhood. To me they were known either by their patronymic e.g. Tearlach Sheonie (Charles son of Johnny) or by a nickname e.g. Calum Ruadh (Red Haired Calum).

The reason we cycled to Balemartine was due to the Council claiming that there was nowhere for the bus to turn in Hynish. Possibly the argument could be also that we lived fractionally within the 2 miles limit from the Primary school the rule which applied in other counties as well and may still do so or the Mannal children have to walk to get the bus, so why shouldn't you. However, this ignored the fact that we lived considerably further away from the Secondary school.

Despite our father's efforts to have this decision overturned, we continued to cycle.

On a cold, wet day we were soaked before we joined the school bus. Perhaps it was all meant to be "character forming".

The bus was driven by Donald MacLean (Domhnull a' Mhuillin- Donald of the Mill) who was also a butcher, and whose own gentle personality may have influenced us as I cannot remember any nonsense on the bus to or from Cornaigmore. There may also have been an element of knowing what we could expect if news of any misbehaviour reached the Headteacher or home!

On arrival at school for boys there was the bonus of a game of football on a pitch with real goals instead of jackets or stones - if time allowed before the Headmaster, Alan MacDougall (as those in that position could be called before modern gender equalities required everyone to be described as Headteachers) rang the bell to bring us to the lines outside the door. I remember the day when as we stood in the lines and we were told that Johnnie MacKenzie had been selected to play for the Scottish football team – a proud day for us and Tiree. I am sure that at the next opportunity to play there were a number of would-be Johnny MacKenzies on the school pitch.

When I consider how many assemblies I addressed in my thirty years as a Headteacher it is a bit disconcerting to have to admit that I do not recall very much about those in Cornaigmore. I have a vague memory of Mr MacDougal sometimes acting as a presenter for some of the psalms or hymns and not being reluctant to comment on a pupil's behaviour over the weekend.

Mr MacDougal taught English and also took us for singing for which we used the Oxford Schools Song Book or something similar. This meant we became acquainted with such classics as Men of Harlech, My Love's An Arbutus(whatever that meant!), and The Ash Grove. Strangely I do not remember ever singing any Gaelic songs, despite his insistence that on some days Gaelic was to be the language of the playground, but I do not know if he was a Gaelic speaker.

From a pupil's point of view the Headmaster was a dominant figure with a fearsome reputation as a wielder of that Scottish instrument for punishment or correction – the famous Lochgelly- and known to make sweeps of the corridor to pick up recalcitrants who had been sent out of the classroom to stand outside the door, and be taken back to his office for some applied psychology. The sound of his approaching footsteps coming along the corridor would have the same effect as the knock on the door of a Russian dissident.

On one occasion my pal and I, his desk was next to mine, had an altercation in the Gaelic/Latin room. The teacher, Roland Robertson, sent us outside the door, although he could have belted us there and then. We quickly realised that the ice was cracking under our feet and that drastic action was required to resolve the situation i.e. get back into the classroom even if it meant instant retribution from the teacher. This would be preferable to a possible walk along to the Head's office. So we hatched this plan. The classroom door had an upper panel made up of a lower section of frosted glass with a clear glass section above it. Only our heads could be clearly seen in the clear glass panel, so we began a pretend fight where our fists could be seen through the frosted panel. On noticing this Mr Robertson brought us back into the room and dished out the "applied psychology". Although our hands were stinging we felt we had made the right decision.

As the school had no P.E. teacher, he would take us out onto the pitch to play football or sometimes to play shinty. The latter was played with curved sticks like walking sticks and not like the real sticks I was to experience in later life, but educational materials catalogues sold them as shinty sticks. With them being smooth perhaps they were less dangerous, although no doubt there were times when our teacher was putting his good looks on the line! Equally for him joining in games of football was dangerous as gangly teenagers wearing heavy tackety boots could tackle with the finesse of a wrecking ball on a building site. I suppose by playing, even a diluted form of the game of shinty, we were harking back to a time when the game was played on the island, as mentioned in the Tìree song "Lag Nan Cruachan". In it the composer refers to shinty being played on New Year's Day. In another song, John MacLean, who had emigrated to Manitoba, says that in his youth he was fond of shinty. So the game must have been played on the island in the past.

Another teacher who was involved in the games period was Jack Fletcher, who taught technical subjects. To those, like me, who were football fanatics, he was a bit special because he had played football for Hibs as an amateur. The latter term that meant when you came off the pitch you found an envelope containing your expenses in your shoes. He also did some art work with us and I still have the ink drawing with which I won the Dr Hunter Prize for art.

In second year my mother asked me if I would make a three-legged milking stool for her. There was no lathe available, so legs and round top were fashioned by hand. However when I took it home she believed it was too good for the byre. Well-varnished I still have it in my own home, but have I never felt the desire to buy a cow in order to practice the skill that should accompany it.

In secondary school we encountered a subject that was completely new to us – a world of gases, Bunsen burners, liquids called acids, and powders that changed colours or smell – Science!

Our teacher was a Mr McGillivray, who was known as Froggie. Why he was nicknamed so, I have no idea, but then, the origins of teachers' nicknames can sometimes be as easily discerned as a black hole in outer space, and I do not recall the dissection of these creatures being part of the curriculum. He always wore a light brown dustcoat whose pockets seem to have a supply of broken pieces of chalk, which he would turn over as he walked up and down between the rows of desks. This habit provided for us a hilarious event when someone managed to put a dead bird in one of his pockets. I think he also taught maths, but as this was not my favourite subject, perhaps like a traumatic experience it has been blocked from my memory.

Another teacher who lives clearly in my memory because of a poem, is Miss Mairi MacKinnon. Apparently she had taught in New Zealand and spoke with what we regarded as a "posh voice". Therefore when we recited our poems we had to do so with what we might call BBC pronunciation. One particular poem, which remains firmly embedded in my memory, is one called "The Highwayman". It began with the words "The Highwayman came riding, riding" - the latter word being ideally suited for trying to refine the Scottish *i* vowel sound.

A couple of years ago my wife and I were driving towards the City of Lancaster when, lo and behold, we came towards an inn called The Highwayman. Yes, I responded with the appropriate line!

As well as poetry Miss MacKinnon did some art with us, which consisted of attempting to copy photographs of Old Masters from a magazine. As far as I know no former pupil of that era has had his or her work displayed at the National Gallery under another name.

I remember her as a gentle, patient woman, whose patience was, I am sure, tested on more than one occasion.

Domestic Science, as it was called in those days, was taught by Miss MacEachern, who became the wife of our amiable bus-driver. The educational philosophy in vogue in Argyll at that time did not appreciate the value of cooking for boys, therefore we only

entered her domain in the run up to the school Christmas Party in order to be taught some Scottish dances. In this activity she was assisted by Mr Robertson. Unlike my Tiree forebears, whose delight in tripping the light fantastic, led to the local 18th century minister, writing in the statistical accounts of Scotland, to express the wish that his parishioners were as diligent at attending church as they were at attending dances, the pre-Christmas practices held no attraction for me. On one occasion, along with a few liked minded individuals, I decided to rebel and instead of going into the “chamber of horrors” went out onto the football pitch even although it was raining. Our rebellion did not last long as we were brought back in by Mr Robertson and given an early Christmas present a la Lochgelly !

I can't remember if it was on this occasion that, when a dance was called, I didn't rush across the room to claim a partner, but stayed rooted to the safety of my seat. However, Mr Robertson was having none of it and said to me, “Come on, MacNeill, or you'll be left with the scrap”. What a gross insult to a bunch of bonnie Tiree lassies, whose toes were no doubt being saved from damage by my tackety boots due to my reluctance to emulate Fred Astaire.

As for the Parties which I did attend I have no recollections, except an unhappy experience for one girl, who like everyone else, had probably purchased her party dress via mail order catalogue (there being no clothing shops on the island) or borrowed it from an older friend. However, Mr MacDougal thought the style was inappropriate for her age and let her know in no uncertain terms. In comparison to what I have seen in recent years in photos in the Oban Times, her dress style was, to use a Para Handy phrase, “Tumid, tumid”! No doubt like the habit of generations of boys in various parts of the country right up to the eighties the idea of a party pastime was to treat the hall floor as a temporary ice rink on which you ran and slid.

Another big event in the school calendar was the Sports Day, where all the Tiree primary schools came to Cornaigmore to compete. The day was organised by the Headteacher, resplendent in a pair of football boots polished to military perfection. From my memory as a competitor he organised the event extremely well. For athletes there was an extra incentive to do well because the Tiree team for the Argyll Schools County Sports was chosen from the best performances on the day. This meant a trip to the mainland where the team was based for the weekend in Oban High School, giving the opportunity to visit a real cinema and taste the delights of Bony's ice cream and exotic drinks like Vimto. The Sports were held in locations such as Dunoon, Lochgilphead, and Campbeltown, and were our Olympic Games, where before the events began each team paraded round the track following a banner stating who they were.

I was fortunate in my two secondary years to win a Junior Championship and be runner up for the Intermediate Championship when I moved up an age group. My brother, John, who was twice in the team with me, was also a winner at the Sports.

In those years Cornaigmore was a three year secondary school so if you were to continue your education you had to leave the island. Most pupils would go on to Oban High School, but over the years some boys had gone instead to a boys boarding school in Dumbarton. Keil School had been founded in 1915 in Southend, Kintyre, as

a technical school, but when the school building was destroyed by fire in 1924 it had found new premises in Dumbarton. It continued to attract pupils from the Highlands and Islands as well as from a wider area. When my brother completed his three years in Tiree, my parents decided he should sit the scholarship exam for Keil, and if successful go there rather than Oban High School. He did so, but while one could not fault the education he had received at Cornaigmore the Keil curriculum was different. Therefore it was felt advantageous for me to join the school at an earlier opportunity, and I duly sat and passed the Scholarship exam after completing my second year.

And so a whole new way of life and a wider involvement in sport, which three years previously had not been on my horizon, opened up for me. Instead of listening on the wireless to a strange game called rugby I was now playing it against schools whose names were equally unfamiliar, and spectating at internationals from benches set at the edge of the touchlines.

Unfamiliar subjects such as engineering drawing and dynamics meant I was having to catch up as best I could having missed the basic introductions. I suppose had my parents known about it, my brother and I could have gone there in first year, but as always it's a case of swings and roundabouts, and without doubt we also benefitted from our years at Cornaigmore.

Alistair MacNeill – North Berwick : July 2017