WHAT HAPPENED AT HOUGH ? ORAL TRADITION AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE: A CASE STUDY.

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Since 1973, a small research team in the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh has been engaged in a series of projects, supported by the Social Science Research Council, studying the history and traditions of the island of Tiree, the outermost of the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland, from the middle of the eighteenth century to the early years of the twentieth. Using a combination of oral and documentary sources, investigations have been carried out into many aspects of the social, economic, cultural and religious life of this community during a period of great change, and the projects have provided valuable opportunities for assessing the nature and usefulness of oral tradition - that is, testimony orally transmitted from one generation to another - as historical evidence.

Tiree is a small, low-lying island, some fourteen by six miles in extent (22.4 km. x 9.6 km.), noted for its sandy soil, wide beaches and extensive areas of machair land, lush with grasses and wild flowers as a result of the calciferous properties of ground shell. The delicate balance of grass, sand, soil, water and wind is easily altered, and in the 1760's a surveyor reported that one eighth of the island's total area was virtually destroyed by blowing sand. The townships in the north-west corner of the island have always been subject to cycles of sand blow, and the township of Hough was particularly vulnerable, with its clustered settlement site, adjacent strips of arable land and areas of grazing located on the seaward side of Beinn Hough, one of the few eminences in Tiree, rising 388 feet (118.5 m.).

At the end of the eighteenth century the townships or farms in Tiree fell into three categories: those, like Hough, which were leased to and worked by groups of joint tenants; those leased to individual tacksmen, and worked by their extended households and farm servants; and those leased to non-resident tacksmen and worked by their sub-tenants. The tenants of Hough paid their rent from the produce of the shore, the land and the hill: kelp, barley, grown in strips or rigs of arable land which were redistributed by lot at regular intervals, and cattle. In 1803 they petitioned the proprietor, the Duke of Argyll, to carry out the improvements to the farm initiated by his factor some years earlier and paid for in advance by the tenants but never completed. There is nothing here to suggest that life in Hough was about to change dramatically.

Oral tradition tells us that early in the nineteenth century the dwellings of Hough, its supply of fresh water, its arable lands and its grazing were so badly affected by blowing sand that the residents were forced to relocate permanently in other townships, the majority in the township of Kilmoluag. Though detailed accounts of estate matters exist for most of the period covered by the Tiree studies, they do not appear to have survived for the years during which this move took place and it is oral tradition alone which refers to it and provides the clues essential for a further investigation of the Hough events. Family history and family tradition are important here. Those with information today about what happened at Hough are in the main descendants of families or individuals who participated in the move, such as Alasdair MacDonald, known in Gaelic as <u>Alasdair mac Eachainn 'ic Neill 'ic Ailein</u> ("Alexander son of Hector son of Neil son of Allan"), who resides

on the ten acre (4 hectare) croft in Kilmoluag in which his great grandfather Allan MacDonald settled after leaving Hough and where a rocky outcrop is known in Gaelic as Cnoc mhic Ailein ("the hillock of Allan's son"). It was from Alasdair MacDonald that the following account was recorded:

> It started when that place at the back of the hill there started blowing from the shore. Year after year it was coming nearer the houses, digging underneath them. It was just a desert. Well, they had to come out. They would have to go somewhere. Well, there wasn't a suitable place in the island at that time but Kilmoluag. Kilmoluag - it was only one tenant in Kilmoluag, a fellow John Maclean. And they took the place off John Maclean. They put him out of it. They were giving him a croft like the rest, where the house was. Where John Lamont is in Croish just now, that's where he was. And he was getting a croft with the house. But he felt it so bad that he had to go on a croft, taking the whole township off him, that he went away. Well, Kilmoluag then was broken up into crofts, so that these men at the back of the hill would get out of there before they would be killed or what would happen. Some of the houses collapsed in Hough before they came out of it and they had to go in with some others further up. And the sand was coming nearer them every winter and that's when Kilmoluag was broken up and it was broken

up as crofts.

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John Maclean's grandfather Donald, born about 1700, was the first of the family to be tacksman of the farm of Kilmoluag, and he was succeeded by his son Archibald, born about 1745. They belonged to a branch of an eminent Maclean family and their wives were members of Campbell families which had risen into prominence along with the chief family of Argyll. John Maclean himself, born in 1781, married in 1810 the eldest daughter of the Tiree parish minister. In the early nineteenth century the Argyll estate moved to transform the farms of Tiree into crofting townships in which individual holdings took the place of the run-rig organisation of the traditional system. When the tack or lease of Kilmoluag came up for renewal in 1796, in Archibald Maclean's time, the Duke advised that if Maclean was dissatisfied with his possession of Kilmoluag, the estate would gladly take it over for allotment to soldiers wanting lands. Archibald Maclean renewed the lease at that time, but confirmation of the eventual loss of Kilmoluag by his son John is to be found in family correspondence now in an archive in New Zealand.

The introduction of the crofting system, along with other social and economic changes in the Scottish Highlands, severed the close connection of the tacksmen class with the land and resulted in the dispersal of members of these families to new lands and to other forms of livelihood. One of John Maclean's sons, Donald, born in 1820, emigrated to New Zealand, where he eventually attained high government office and a knighthood. Like many in our own time he was curious about his family's history and he corresponded with an aunt in Scotland,

his father's sister Annabella, who supplied him with various details concerning the family, and its connection with Kilmoluag. Her letters describe the effect which the loss of the farm had on the family, confirming Alasdair MacDonald's testimony, and in one, written in 1849, she tells how it came about. Her brother took over the tack of Kilmoluag from their father when there were three years of the lease run, but he intervened to try and heal a quarrel between his brother-in-law and the factor and for this reason was not given a renewal of the lease. Tacks were regularly of nineteen years. John Maclean's lease of Kilmoluag would have expired in 1815.

Another island resident who has provided information about Hough is Hector Kennedy, a crofter in his 80's in the township of Hilipol and a noted Tiree seanchaidh or tradition-bearer. He too had ancestors who participated in the move from Hough to Kilmoluag and has details of it which have come down through a chain of transmission within the family, but in his younger days he also heard about what happened at Hough from the tailor and bard Willie MacPhail, who lived at Croish in Kilmoluag, mentioned above, and would have known those residents of the township whose parents had participated in the relocation.

When asked who left Hough, when and why, Hector Kennedy speaks of the devastation caused by the blowing sand, names the heads of several households who went to Kilmoluag including Allan MacDonald, Hugh MacDonald, Donald MacKinnon and John Maclean, and adds detailed information about each, where in the township they settled and what became of their descendants. He gives the spring before the Battle of Waterloo as the date at which the move took place and in his account always goes on to describe the visit of a press gang, conscripting men for

service in the army, at that time:

> That was the first press gang. And Hugh MacDonald we were talking about, he was afraid that they would take him away. They were picking them up whether they were ploughing or what they were doing, they were taking them away. And do you know what he did? He had an axe and he cut off the point of the thumb, to keep him out of the army. Oh! And the name they called him after that [was] Eòghann na h-òrdaig ("Hugh of the thumb"). Took the point of the thumb off!
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> SA 1974/134A

While the Argyll estate material for the period in question is not extant, the Tiree Parish Register does exist and contains a record of the births and marriages (it did not become compulsory to register deaths until 1855) which occurred in Hough and Kilmoluag at the time. An examination of these entries together with orally transmitted genealogies, a combination essential for the accurate identification of individuals in documents relating to a community such as Tiree where there were so many people with identical names, helps focus on the dates between which much of the movement must have taken place. Hugh MacDonald, Eòghann na h-òrdaig, was still in Hough when he married Mary MacKinnon there in 1819. This couple had a daughter born in Hough in 1821; the next entry for this family indicates the birth of a son in Kilmoluag in 1824.

On the basis of similar data it is evident that Donald Maclean and his wife Sybella Maclean left Hough for Kilmoluag between 1821 and 1823, Donald Lamont and Ann Kennedy between 1820 and 1823, John Maclean and Flora Maclean between 1821 and 1823, John Maclean and Catherine Kennedy between 1819 and 1821, Donald Maclean and Flory Lamont between 1819 and 1822, Coll MacDougall and Flora Maclean between 1819 and 1822, Alexander Cameron and Effy Campbell between 1818 and 1821, Donald Kennedy and Flora MacKinnon between 1821 and 1823. Four of these couples married in 1815 and these marriages may have involved soldiers returning from the Napoleonic campaigns. The Parish Register provides evidence only for couples who were marrying or producing children, but when the annual estate rentals resume for 1822/1823 they confirm the presence of further former Hough residents among those paying rents for crofts in Kilmoluag and the returns of the first full national census of 1841 include couples who had ceased producing children when the move took place such as Donald Mackinnon, mentioned by Hector Kennedy, and Marion MacDonald, who married in 1800 and Neil MacDonald and Effy Graham, who married in 1786.

Allan MacDonald and Mary MacFarlane, ancestors of Alasdair MacDonald, married in Hough in 1809, had a son there in 1820 and another in Kilmoluag in 1822. Their move from Hough to Kilmoluag and that of Neil MacDonald and Effy Graham, is mentioned in a letter of 1905 written to the Duke of the time by Grace MacDonald, Alasdair MacDonald's grandmother, granddaughter of Neil MacDonald and Effy Graham and wife of Neil MacDonald, son of Allan MacDonald and Mary MacFarlane. She encloses a part payment of her rent and asks leave to pay the remaining arrears at harvest-time as otherwise she will be

forced to sell a horse which she requires for tilling the soil. Her people were crofters in Hough eighty-five years ago, she says, and her husband's father removed to Kilmoluag at the same time: their move must have taken place ca 1820.

These dates coincide with those in which a change occurs in John Maclean's appellation in the Parish Register entries for the births of his children. In 1812 and 1813 he is referred to as "Mr. John Maclean of Kilmoluag", in 1816, 1818, 1819 and 1820 he is called "Tacksman of Kilmoluag", while from 1822 on he is "Mr. John Maclean in Kilmoluag" or simply "Mr. John Maclean, Kilmoluag". It may be that John Maclean continued to hold Kilmoluag on a yearly basis while negotiations concerning the division of the farm into crofts were in progress. There is no reference to the quarrel mentioned in Annabella Maclean's letter in the other documentary sources studied or in surviving local oral tradition; perhaps it simply provided a pretext for carrying out a long-term plan.

It is apparent that from the end of the eighteenth century Kilmoluag was, like the other Tiree townships, scheduled for division. The island's population was rising rapidly, returning soldiers were anxious for land, and the proprietor hoped that individual holdings would prove more productive than the traditional system, with its regular exchange of lands. Added pressure to divide Kilmoluag came with the need to relocate the residents of Hough as that township was rendered uninhabitable by sand. The townships south of Hough were also susceptible to sand blow and the township of Balevulin, between Hough and Kilmoluag, was, like Hough, a joint-tenant township and not as capable as Kilmoluag of accepting an influx of population.

It is likely that the move from Hough to Kilmoluag took place over a period of time; the pace may have increased after the tenants' lease of Hough expired in 1818. But it is equally likely that some catastrophic event did occur in 1815. Blowing sand can encroach on terrain remarkably quickly. It may have been in this year that the houses described by Alasdair MacDonald collapsed and temporary refuges were found to be necessary. Some may have moved out of the township as early as that year.

Some of the oral testimony concerning the Hough - Kilmoluag events shows tendencies towards telescoping and fusion which are familiar to folklorists. Events which occurred diachronically often assume a synchronic aspect through time. The investigation of the communities created in Canada by nineteenth century emigrants from Tiree, one of the projects undertaken as part of the larger Tiree study, revealed patterns of internal migration which were often perceived by informants, who were descendants of the emigrants, as single events but which in reality took place in stages over a period of time. Hector Kennedy's account of Hugh MacDonald, Eòghann na-h-òrdaig, who was involved in both the move from Hough to Kilmoluag and the visit of the press-gang, shows how several themes can gather around one dramatic event or a powerful personality. He assumes that MacDonald was already in Kilmoluag when the press-gang arrived in the island, while the evidence in the Parish Register shows that he did not in fact settle there for another five years.

Were it not for the oral tradition, however, we should know next to nothing of the events which saw Hough and Kilmoluag exchanging characteristics. In 1803 there were twenty-four tenants in Hough and

Kilmoluag was in the hands of a single tacksman. Twenty years later the picture was reversed: Kilmoluag had thirty-five tenants, while Hough had one, and a handful of farm servants.

For Hough was never completely depopulated: a few families stayed on, almost certainly establishing new dwellings on the landward side of Beinn Hough. The documents which do exist for the period show that some Hough families went to townships other than Kilmoluag, and that people from townships other than Hough came into Kilmoluag when it was broken up into crofts. But it is the oral record which indicates what to look for in the written sources as far as the depopulation of Hough is concerned, providing clues and insights vital for an accurate evaluation of the documentary evidence, which otherwise might remain obscure. Neither the oral tradition nor the written sources can tell the whole story of what happened at Hough, but used in combination each can illuminate the other and add further dimensions to the account.

Physical evidence has also played an important part in this study. In the last few months, interior renovation of the house built by Allan MacDonald when he moved to Kilmoluag has revealed roof timbers never completely exposed since the original construction which show evidence of re-use. This confirms the oral tradition that roof timbers were brought from Hough to Kilmoluag by those forced to abandon their homes. Archaeological excavation on the site of the clustered settlement below Beinn Hough may yet reveal the foundations of those stone buildings below the sand and other evidence of the nature of the pre-crofting township.

For historians of the Scottish Highlands, oral tradition provides a vital source of evidence for many aspects of life in past days. This

is not only because written documentation on these topice is often lacking, or where it does exist is often insufficiently detailed, but also because of the wealth of oral tradition in the form of family history, accounts of people and events of earlier times, knowledge of land succession, customs, practices and beliefs, place-names and songs composed by local bards, which has existed until recently in Highland communities and formed an essential part of their culture. While the oral testimony about the depopulation of Hough shows certain minor distortions, most of a type familiar to folklorists, the basic accuracy and detailed quality of the oral evidence are unquestionable.

Any responsible historian makes careful and critical use of all available sources, and it is as essential to become acquainted with the personality of a tradition-bearer and the chain of transmission through which information has reached him or her as it is to evaluate the perspective of the author of a written source and the nature and provenance of its contents. This case study is relevant not only to Tiree, revealing as it does much about a period when the population was on the increase and the crofting system was replacing the traditional joint-tenant, run-rig farms. With its positive and critical approach to oral tradition its methods and conclusions may also be applicable to other historical studies for which oral testimony may prove a potential source.