

TIN MAKERS AND HORSE BREAKERS

Insiders on the outside: the Travelling People of Tìree

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INTRODUCTION

“They were like aliens from another planet!”

This is how one islander remembers these visitors to the island. They were welcomed for their craftsmanship and company, occasionally looked down on – and often feared for their magical powers. Over a hundred and twenty years small groups of Travelling People came to Tiree in the summer. Making tin utensils, dealing in horses and bartering at every door, the same families returned every spring to the same campsites, as regular as the cuckoo, part of the island’s calendar. But by the 1960s the economy of the Travelling People dried up as horses were replaced by tractors, and tin basins were replaced by cheap factory imports. Their visits eventually stopped around 1970. The islanders and their visitors had more in common than they thought, but their attitude to property was very different.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout this piece I have been keen to allow the words of the Travelling community to be heard as well as the voices of islanders. I have therefore liberally used material from three wonderful books and a wonderful website. These are *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, by the well-known story teller Duncan Williamson, who was related to the ‘Tiree MacDonalds’ on his mother’s side; *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, by Betsy Whyte; the various contributors to *The Summer Walkers*, Canongate Books, 1996, by Timothy Neat; and the recordings of *Tobar an Dualchais* made by the School of Scottish Studies. I would particularly like to thank all those who have shared their knowledge with me over the years.

NAMES

What shall we call these people? On Tiree they were usually known by their Gaelic name, *Na Cèardan*, but many islanders of an older generation still use the word 'tinkers'.

*Tinkie, Tinkie, tarry bags / Go to the well and wash your rags. That was what the children sang when first we went to school. I've even sung it myself! It was a little school called Kilmore – three miles out of Oban.*¹ Eddie Davies

However, years of discrimination on the mainland have forged a new sense of identity amongst this small community.

*The name 'Tinker' has become a term of abuse and is not used within the group. Originally it did describe one aspect of the group's historical work – they were itinerant metalworkers, tinsmiths, but the word has become a label of contempt and as Alec John Williamson says, "If someone calls me a Tink today – that's fighting talk!"...Today all like to be known as 'the Travelling People'.*²

THEIR ORIGIN

There are, and have been, a number of travelling peoples in Scotland. Commoner in the south of the country, the Romanies or Gypsies are one. This community traces its origin to a people that migrated from north India, arriving in Europe in the 14th Century. New Age Travellers went on the roads of Britain following the music festivals of the 1970s. There have also been a number of single men on the road since the Middle Ages: pilgrims, itinerant tradesmen, salesmen and tramps.

*Tramps are in no way like travellers, except for their wandering on the roads. Whereas travellers love to be in company, tramps were almost always alone.*³ Betsy Whyte

But the Travelling People who came to Tiree were insiders on the outside: Stewarts, MacDonalds and MacAllisters – culturally Gaels and full-blooded Highlanders.

The Travelling People – the Tinkers, hawkers and horse dealers who, for centuries, have passed through their villages buying, selling and entertaining. These Scottish

¹ Eddie Davies, *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 28

² Timothy Neat, *The Summer Walkers*, Canongate Books, 1996, p viii

³ *The Yellow on the Broom*, Betsy Whyte, Birlinn, 2001, p 181

*nomads are not Gypsies. They are indigenous, Gaelic speaking Scots who, to this day, remain heirs of a vital and ancient culture of great historical and artistic importance.*⁴

*They didn't have a word of English – it was all Gaelic they spoke.*⁵ Seonaid Brown, Balephuill

*When I started school, at the age of five, I could say 'yes' and 'no' and that was all, everything else was Gaelic.*⁶ Alec John Williamson

We will never know where the Highland Travelling People came from. From their craftsmanship and their prodigious store of ancient tales, some of which go back beyond the Middle Ages, it is thought that their origins are in the wandering craftsmen of the Highlands.

It is difficult to know how many Travelling People there are in Scotland. The 2011 Census was the first to include a question about combined Gypsy/Traveller identity. By this measure there are 4200 Travelling People and Gypsies in Scotland – 8 in Shetland, 96 in Argyll and Bute, 291 in Highland and 415 in Perth and Kinross. This figure is likely to be an underestimate. Many Travellers are proud of their identity, but years of discrimination and racism have made others choose to assimilate into the settled majority.

*Generally described there are perhaps twenty thousand Travellers in Scotland.*⁷

A typical summer in the 1930s would have seen two or three family groups of Travellers, perhaps twenty people altogether, coming to Tìree.

A HISTORY OF VISITS TO TÌREE

We don't know when the first Travelling People came to Tìree. There is no mention of them in the *New Statistical Account* of 1840. The huge population of the island at that time and the poverty and famine that was the lot of many islanders make it unlikely that they visited the island in the first part of the 19th century. The first record we have comes from the writings of the Rev John Gregorson Campbell in the 1850s.

⁴ Timothy Neat, *The Summer Walkers*, Canongate Books, 1996, p vii

⁵ Seonaid Brown, Balephuill, 9/2013

⁶ Alec John Williamson, *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 53

⁷ *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p viii.

Some fifteen or twenty years ago [Black puts this at 1854-59] a party of tinkers quarreled and fought, first among themselves, and then with some Tiree villagers.⁸

CAMPSITES

Travelling People live at the edge. They were used to camping on roadsides, on common land or occasionally under the protection of a well-disposed farmer or landlord. Aware that many regarded them as a social nuisance, they made their camps in rough, unused places, so that crofters and farmers would not resent their presence. On Tiree this was often in old gravel pits and cattle fanks and was the same every year.

- Down in a hollow at the shore at Skippinish, Ruaig
- At the Coalree, or coal store, at the Scarinish end of Gott Bay (the site of the present silage pit)
- Behind the garage at Gott Bay pier
- In the fank in Balinoe, *Fang a' Mhachaire* otherwise known as *Fang a' Bhaile Nodha*.
- In *Glac na' Smeur* on the Balephuill *sliabh*.⁹
- In the two gravel pits north of Heylipol Church. These were smaller before the excavations of World War Two.
- In the gravel pits on the Balevullin *sliabh*

The one exception were the MacAllisters, who had a small boat that needed attention. They camped on the Scarinish *machair* above the remains of the *Mary Stewart*.

A number of place names on the island commemorate other sites where Travelling People stayed. There is a hint in these older names that the first visitors were men travelling alone.

⁸ *The Gaelic Otherworld*, Ronald Black, Birlinn, 2005

⁹ David McClounnan, Balephuill, 3/2007

- A shelter *Uamh Chaluim Chèaird*, the cave of Calum the tinker, and the rock *Cathair a' Cheàird*, the chair of the tinker, both on the Ruaig *sliabh*.
- A Neolithic rock tomb at the base of Kenavara now known as *Uamh Chaluim Chèaird*
- The remains of a hut on the Balevullin *sliabh* known as *Bothag Norris*, the bothy of Norris.¹⁰ The 1891 Census lists James Norris, 70, a traveling 'tinker' from Mull, with his wife Ann Norris, aged 68, from Thurso, Caithness living in Scarinish. Both spoke Gaelic and English.
- A square sand dune on the boundary between Crois, Kilmoluaig, and Balevullin called *Bothag a' Chèaird*, bothy of the tinker.¹¹

A WAY OF LIFE

For the Highland Travelling People winter often meant bunkering down on the mainland in empty houses, tents deep in the woods or even caves. Summer meant the freedom of the road.

*Now the villagers of Furnace [Argyll] knew the time had come, that Daddy had burned his barricade and we were going for our summer trip. 'Oh,' they said, 'there'll no be many eggs stolen again for a while!'*¹² Duncan Williamson

Eric Cregeen asked Hector Kennedy, Heylipol, when the Travelling People would arrive on Tiree. He replied,

*In the spring time, when the cows would be starting to calve. You would get cans, a tankard for the milk, basins for the milk.*¹³

Later that summer they would leave, but very occasionally a family would stay on the island all year.

¹⁰ Iain Chaluim MacKinnon. Kilmoluaig, 10/1996

¹¹ Lachlan MacLean, Kilmoluaig, 4/1997

¹² Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 5

¹³ *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.093

Generally in the spring. Oh! I've seen one of the tinkers staying on Tiree all the year round. And his family and wife. He had a camp over there [in] Heylipol.¹⁴ Donald Sinclair, West Hynish

Tents

The winter tents, known in Argyll as barricades, were large enough to stand up in.

[The barricade tent] was huge in comparison with the [summer] bow tent...the most important difference was the inside fire, built right on the ground inside the door of the tent. There was no chimney to contain the reek or smoke. But the main compartment of this barricade was peaked to draw the smoke. For light we had a wee cruise, a home-made lamp. My father used to screw a bit cloth into it, made a wick out of a bit cotton. It had a wee handle on it and he hung it up inside the tent. It just burned the open flame, but it made a good light.

On either side of the fire were smaller, lower tented compartments. These were the sleeping areas. My mother and father had one tent, the older lassies had theirs. The central area was like a big chamber. This was the kitchen, the living room. We had no carpets. The floor was like concrete, swept for years! Hard packed. The fire in the centre was built with stones and a hole in the top of the tent drew the smoke...

You had to build the barricade tent, help Daddy get the sapling boughs for the frame, patch the covers, collect stones for the base to hold the covers tight...It took two weeks.¹⁵ Duncan Williamson

But in the summer they used the smaller, lighter bow tent that was easier to carry on the road.

But travellers were very poor before they had ponies. They couldn't do much for themselves...Their camping stuff was as light as they could carry on their backs...Some carried the sticks for the tent, some carried the tent canvas, some carried the cooking utensils and some carried the bed clothes in our family. Everybody had their own thing.¹⁶ Duncan Williamson

¹⁴ Donald Sinclair, West Hynish, talking to Eric Cregeen, SA1971.091

¹⁵ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 34

¹⁶ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 2

Pre-formed hoops of hazel were set in a row and secured with a long pole at the ridge. Tarpaulins were stretched over the top, held down with a row of large stones.

My father built a simple bow tent to sleep in, a traditional construction for the summer and my father carried eight camp, or tent, sticks with him, usually hazel, five foot each and peeled of their bark. He also carried a riggin stick, which was bored with holes to hold the camp sticks in place at the top of the tent. The snottum, home made from iron, was probably the most important piece of camping equipment. It was used to hold kettles and pots over the fire, for cooking or boiling the tea; and it was used to bore holes in the ground for tent sticks.¹⁷ Duncan Williamson

Everything was very well organised in a bow-tent: with us a bow-tent was a home from home. The sleeping would be at the two ends. The older folk would have a tartan curtain across, and at the bigger end the youngsters would 'make do'...We'd take dry straw across with us for bedding if the site was wet we'd lay down bracken or heather, then a blanket or maybe a ground sheet. Sleeping for us was no bother for us like; it was gaye comfy, especially if there was a big blow. Rain was no problem, a good canvas was waterproof for years. Smoke would keep the midges out!...Big tarpaulins we had – fifteen feet by fifteen feet...we'd tie the boughs and drape the tarpaulins over, with the stove and the door in the middle. The chimney would come through the roof and we'd put a wee mesh of chicken wire down to stop sparks holing the canvas. The horse harness, the tool box, the stake and all that would be put in behind the tartan with the old folk.¹⁸ Gordon Stewart

These tents are likely to have been the same design as were used by the first hunter-gatherers to come to Tiree after the last Ice Age, 9000 years ago. They were remarkably strong.

The men helped each other to put up the tents with the long hazel sticks which they had cut. They newsed, cracked, joked and played games as they worked; making bets with each other as to who could carry the heaviest boulders to put around the tents on top of the tarpaulins. These bow tents were very cosy and could withstand the toughest gale that ever blew.¹⁹ Betsy Whyte

Only once on Tiree was there a story of a tent blowing away in a gale. A group of Travelling People, including an eleven day old baby, were camped in Scarinish down by the *Mary Stewart*. During a terrific storm their tent blew away along with everything in it, even the kettle. Everyone inside was unharmed and they were

¹⁷ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 34

¹⁸ Gordon Stewart, *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 92

¹⁹ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 48

sheltered in a thatched house by a Mairi MacFadyen until new canvasses arrived on a cargo boat from Gourock.²⁰ Mary MacDonald

Beds were grass, covered with a blanket.

*We learned how to pick good dry grasses for our beds.*²¹ Duncan Williamson

In the 1930s a group of Travelling People came off the cargo boat from the Outer Isles at 2am with a pony and cart. They asked Lachie MacKinnon, Brock, the pier master at the time, if they could camp for what remained of the night at the head of the pier, where the car park is today. He agreed. Before he packed up for the night he went to check their tent. There were six children asleep in a row wrapped up, he said, "like mummies."²² Alasdair Sinclair

Originally an open fire was built at the front of the summer tent, but a more efficient inside stove was introduced in the 20th century.

*After the [First World] war the travellers who came from Skye introduced the chimney, the fire can or 'tank and lum' inside the tent... The gelly, so called for its shape like a ship's upturned galley, came into use – a straight tent, lower and longer with less room than the barricade. It caught less wind, had less headroom and the chimney came up through the centre.*²³ Duncan Williamson

The tents were still often smoky. Angus Munn remembers, as a policeman in Argyll, going into the tent of *Cleamag*, Clementine MacDonald. As he went in she told him to "Coorie doon under the reek!" [bend down under the smoke]. Alasdair Sinclair, Balinoe, says he loved going into the tents as a boy. "Everything was black as the ace of spades".²⁴ Alasdair Sinclair, Balinoe

When the group moved on they were usually careful to leave the site tidy for the next arrivals.

Out on the road, it was always an inside fire that we had, a stove inside the tent, no open fire. I like an outside fire, but my father used to say 'Look at this – a big hole in the ground!' And he'd make sure we'd leave each camping place just as we found

²⁰ Mary MacDonald, one of the Travellers, 4/ and 9/2007

²¹ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 13-4

²² Alasdair Sinclair, Brock (Lachie's nephew), 6/2004 and 9/2007

²³ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 69

²⁴ Alasdair Sinclair, Balinoe, 6/2004

*it...Turfs would be cut where the stove was to stand and be placed back when the Travellers moved on.*²⁵ Eddie Davies

*We just made our bed o straw and covered it up wi' a bit cover. The next morning we packed up the tent, set fire to the straw and the place was as clean as the day we came.*²⁶ Duncan Williamson

Washing

*You could smell the smoke on [the Travelling People] if you met them on the road.*²⁷
Lachie MacFadyen, Caolas

As anyone who has been camping will know, washing on the road is a challenge. But keeping clean was an important skill of life on the road.

*Father was particularly strict about [cleanliness]. You had a bag for all the old rubbish, and when a bag was full it went down to the midden. And for sanitation you could always dig holes up and make toilets for yourself...Their personal cleanliness was something they did look after...You were told no excreta should be left open on the ground. Flies could swoop down. They would say, "Leprosy would start!"...You had a basin for your dishes and you had your pail for your water, you had a basin for washing your hands and your face. You didn't use the same basins...And your food was kept in a box for the purpose, spotlessly clean. They were very clean with their food.*²⁸ Unknown informant

*We always managed to retain our modesty, no matter how many people were in one tent. We put on or off our clothes under a blanket or cover. I have often seen travellers who have been in houses for years, and who by then had a room of their own, still dress in this way.*²⁹ Betsy Whyte

*There were a couple of children at school in Balemartine [when I was there] Jings! They were clean! Cleaner than some of the island people.*³⁰ Nan McClounnan, Balephuill

²⁵ Eddie Davies in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 37

²⁶ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 61

²⁷ Lachie MacFadyen, Caolas, 9/2013

²⁸ Unknown informant talking to Barbara McDermitt, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1981.086

²⁹ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 67

³⁰ Nan McClounnan, Balephuill, 10/2013

A family staying in the gravel pits at Heylipol had their baby baptised at Heylipol Church. His mother told him how surprised the islanders were at the cleanliness of the family and the whiteness of their clothes.³¹ Angus MacKechnie, Crossapol

Food

*At home our cooking was all open fire cooking. It was soups, stews, potatoes, tea we lived on. The potatoes were boiled in their jackets, summer and winter and the skins fed to the dogs with scraps. We boiled the kettle on a hook. There was a cauldron and iron saucepans suspended from hooks above the fire.*³² Essie Stewart

*It was a hard life but we had good times. Out on the road we'd eat a lot of oatmeal, porridge, brose, skirly – that's oatmeal and onions, fried. You leave the onions till they're golden brown and then you put your oatmeal in, it's like a mealie pudding, a white pudding, very good. In the spring the tatties would be poor, or gone, and you'd have to wait for summertime to get the new potatoes from the crofts out in the west.*³³ Alec John Williamson

*The skirlie was nearly always made with the dripping off the sootie pork [salted pork hung in the rafters] - and was delicious.*³⁴ Betsy Whyte

Travelling People are known for their dogs, which were an important source of food on the road.

*This dog Sandy had...it was a lurcher, between a collie and a greyhound....You just stood and said, 'Go on Jack!' And away he went, scented the rabbit out, just killed it, brought it back and dropped it at your feet...So we never wanted for rabbits along the way. And pheasants! He stood with his nose pointing at pheasants and then he dived. He snapped at the pheasant, gave it a shake and that was that. And hares – he was great on hares.*³⁵ Duncan Williamson

³¹ Angus MacKechnie, Crossapol, 10/2013

³² Essie Stewart in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 14

³³ Alec John Williamson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 55

³⁴ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 51

³⁵ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 48

*Sandy just skinned them right away, when they were warm...and put them in the pot right away.*³⁶ Duncan Williamson

*When working hard harvesting or whatever in the hot sun, we were never allowed to drink water which did not have a handful of oatmeal thrown into it. This prevented the cold water from harming our sweating, overheated bodies.*³⁷ Betsy Whyte

Smoking using clay pipes was very common among Travelling People, including women and older children.

School

*One thing not many people ever refer to is we often had what they call itinerant children, those whose parents were tinkers or whatever. They camped down at Scarinish harbour and they came to school. They were more or less obliged to. They came into the island, just for a few weeks at a time. They had to walk all the way round. They maybe had a pony if they were lucky.*³⁸ Grace Campbell, Tullymet

The 1872 Education Act had made school attendance in Scotland compulsory from the ages of 5 to 13.

*We had to have two hundred attendances at school by law. This was a hundred days.*³⁹ Betsy Whyte

*We did not stay off school...The only reason we went was to get two hundred and fifty attendance marks, each of us, so that we could get away with our daddy and mammy for the summertime. We got two attendance marks per day, and we did about five months in school, from October to February. Once our Daddy knew we had got our attendance quota, he knew we could take off.*⁴⁰ Duncan Williamson

Children caught not attending school could be taken away by the authorities.

³⁶ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 57

³⁷ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 51

³⁸ Grace Campbell, Tullymet, talking to Liz Lapsley in 1998, AC25

³⁹ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 13

⁴⁰ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 11

*But there was also the law that children were taken away from their parents if they did not attend school...You never saw your parents again, never...I had cousins that were taken away.*⁴¹ Duncan Williamson

Travelling children went to school in Scarinish, Balemartine and Heylipol.

*There was one in Heylipol School called Sine Chèard.*⁴² Unknown informant

Colin MacDonald was born in 1945. He came to Tiree as a boy and went to school for a while in Scarinish.⁴³ Colin MacDonald

On the mainland Travelling People had a fear of authority, those we would now call 'Social Workers'.

*Soon we were all back into the float [cart] and covered with the tarpaulin. We couldn't risk anyone seeing us in such a mess. They would more than likely send the Cruelty after us if they did, thinking that we were being neglected.*⁴⁴ Betsy Whyte

A TRAVELLING ECONOMY

Until the Second World War the Travelling People that came to Tiree played an important part in the economy of the island, buying and selling horses and making tin cans and dishes.

*Every one that would come to the island in my young days, they had a spring cart and a pony, perhaps two ponies. They were selling them, and they would buy them....They would put handles on syrup tins, treacle tins, for a penny or two. They would put soldering on any stable lantern or storm lantern. They would sort it!*⁴⁵ Hector Kennedy, Heylipol

⁴¹ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 13

⁴² Unknown informant, 9/2013

⁴³ Colin MacDonald, Montrose but visiting Tiree, 7/2013

⁴⁴ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 67

⁴⁵ Hector Kennedy, Heylipol talking to Dr Margaret MacKay, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1974.145

Making things

Before tinsmithing, the Travelling People, mainly the menfolk, made things that country people needed.

*It was horn that was the big thing with us, before the tin came in. Tinsmithing came in the nineteenth century with electro-plating; before that it was all horn – spoons, powder horns, drinking horns. And before that it would have been the old metal-work, copper, bronze, pewter, blacksmithing.*⁴⁶ Alec John Williamson

*I helped Daddy look for the carlin heather, which is the only kind suitable for making besoms or pot scrubbers. It was not of course in bloom but I recognised it as its roots are much thicker and longer. So I pulled it when I came on a clump, and Father cut it the proper length. He then tied a wire around a tree and pulled it straight, and commenced to make the reenges [pot scourer] - pulling the wire tightly round them with the aid of the tree round the other end of the wire, snipping off the wire with pliers as he finished each scrubber.*⁴⁷ Betsy Whyte

*My father was a tradesman. He was a basket maker and tinsmith ...he could make pots, he could make pans, he could make toasters, he could make baskets, he could make everything. And he cut his wands for baskets from wild willows in the woods...he knew every bush, he knew every tree...he made scrubbers for the pots from the carlin heather... traveller men were always busy.*⁴⁸ Duncan Williamson

They made and sold clothes pegs out of wood.⁴⁹ Nan McClounnan, Balephuul

*Travellers were great at making leather laces...the travellers used to go the old dumps, old places where they collected all these old boots, maybe in the old shoemaker shops...They cut these round circles off the side of the boot, spun them out and made leather laces with them.*⁵⁰ Duncan Williamson

⁴⁶ Alec John Williamson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 48

⁴⁷ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 68

⁴⁸ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 18

⁴⁹ Nan McClounnan, Balephuul, 9/2013

⁵⁰ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 106

On Tiree the tails and manes of working horses used to be kept short and were cut in the spring to the end of the tailbone.⁵¹ The crofters would keep the horsehair and the Travelling People were keen to buy or barter for it. They used it to make *sùgain*, leather horse collars, stuffed with horsehair or barley straw to make them padded. They had to be the right size for the horse, like a man's shirt collar, so they were almost made to measure. Horsehair also had a ready market as a mattress filler.⁵²

Travelling People got to know their Tiree 'customers'. Wood was always in demand on the island. 'Dykes' MacAllister, from Tobermory, brought hazel wood from Mull to Tiree. This was used to make the *buailtean*, the moving part of the flail, or *sùist*, used to thresh corn.

*They were taking in buailteanan, old MacAllister, for thrashing the corn. He was taking them in from Mull. Not every kind of wood will do. It will break. That's another thing he would be taking home for my father. They were great pals. Sticks, walking sticks, crooks! He would do them himself... My father had a lot of sticks that McAllister was taking home. Yes! He was a very nice man.*⁵³ Hector Kennedy, Heylipol

And some Travelling People just collected the 'rubbish' crofters were throwing out, hoping to find a buyer on the mainland.

*[McAllister] He had a boat himself and he was coming to the old pier down at Scarinish. He would take hare skins, wool, horse hair, anything he would get, and old racks... They were sending them for paper. He would gather them. And whenever a cart would be going to Scarinish they would take them over free of charge. It was the same all over the island.*⁵⁴ Hector Kennedy

*In my time, when all the travellers camped together, I saw six or seven of us at home at the camp. We would sit at home and make baskets or flowers, or else go out with the pony and gather old stuff (non-ferrous metals) gather rags and scrap and that.*⁵⁵ Duncan Williamson

⁵¹ Hugh Campbell, Garraphail, 10/2013

⁵² Tommy MacKinnon, Vault, 9/2013

⁵³ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1973.088

⁵⁴ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, SA1973.088

⁵⁵ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 105

Working on crofts

On the mainland Travelling People would take agricultural work - thinning turnips, harvesting or berry picking – wherever they could get it. On Tiree there was less work available as the land holdings were small and there was more labour available.

EC: *Did the tinkers work in the fields for the farmers at all?*

HK: *Yes! ...Tommy Stewart, from Skye, a wee man! He used to come to island every year with his wife, and Samuel MacDonald. He would buy a few horses. If you wanted them to give you a hand in the autumn time, they would come.*⁵⁶ Hector Kennedy

Tinsmithing

EC: *What were they doing on Tiree?*

HK: *They were selling cans and tankards.*

EC: *Were they making these?*

HK: *Yes! They were selling them. They were getting a whole lot of tin home. They used to have a wee pony and a trap, a spring cart, to go around. Yes!*⁵⁷ Hector Kennedy

It was working with tin that defined Travelling People – and made them most useful to the islanders.

*There wasn't a croft on Tiree that didn't have their tins and cans.*⁵⁸ Alasdair MacDonald, Balephetrish

Commercial tin production coincided with the arrival of the Travelling People on Tiree. Tinning is the covering of thin steel plate with a layer of tin to prevent it rusting. It was introduced into England from Germany in 1670, but it was only after 1830 that it became mass-produced. By 1890 Britain led the world, manufacturing 2 million boxes a year.

The tinsmith would make crofters what they wanted but the most popular items

⁵⁶ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, SA1975.069

⁵⁷ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, SA1971.093

⁵⁸ Alasdair MacDonald, Balephetrish, 10/2013

were big flat basins for settling the cream out of milk, *miasan* for skimming the cream, cans for lifting water from the well and funnels for pouring paraffin into lamps.

*Six years I was a tinsmith on the road... The first things I made were the cups the crofters would leave beside the well. And I used to make mugs for the children, from the Tate and Lyle syrup tins, green and gold, with the lion and the bees all around. I'd just turn the lip and fit a handle on.*⁵⁹ Gordon Stewart

The price on Tiree for a 'tinnie' between the wars was six old pence to a shilling.

By the age of twelve...the women folk started selling everything I made. One day the orders would come in, the next day the women would take the orders back. We made three different kinds of milking pails, we made big pails for water, small pails, skimmers, milk basins, creaming bowls, steamers for cloutie dumplings, sieves, basins, baths for babies and washing clothes. Those were the big things. Then we made jugs, cups, ladles, spatulas for frying pans. I've known us at it from half past seven in the morning till late in the evening, when a rush was on. Work like that was hard on the eyes.

*A tin-working anvil [called a stake] is like a three legged pick axe and you just stake it in the ground to work on it...March was the new year for us like – we'd get fresh tin...and hit the road. A box of eighty sheets of tin, three foot by two, would weigh about a hundredweight...There was a profit to be made in tin in those days. We worked long days and we made money at the tin. We had to. It had to see us through the winter...Out in the west if we ran low, we'd share things out or we'd send a letter down to Greenock for tin and it would come by train.*⁶⁰ Gordon Stewart

Tinsmithing was a summer job.

*When we came home at the back end [autumn] all the smithing gear was polished, greased and put away for the spring. Tin was never a winter job – the damp would eat into the iron and rust off the tin. Everything we sold was newly made as orders came in on the road. You needed the warm weather to make a go of the tin.*⁶¹ Alec John

The plates of tin were glued together with a brass soldering iron and *ròisin*.

⁵⁹ Gordon Stewart in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 94-5

⁶⁰ Gordon Stewart in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 94-5

⁶¹ Alec John Williamson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 96

*They did beautiful soldering. I don't know how they did it. All they had was an open fire.*⁶² Neil MacArthur, Moss

Gilleasbuig Kennedy, West Hynish, tells this story. One year the handle of one of their tin jugs fell off and his father, who was “knacky”, soldered it back on the jug himself. When the Travelling People came back the next year his mother showed them the tin. One of them said, “It wasn't a tinker that soldered that!”⁶³

Their skill in making tin goods was their main earner, and they were not going to give master classes to their customers – many of whom were practical country people. One day Hector Meek, Caolas, was passing Somhairle MacDonald, who was camped in the gravel pit by Heylipol Church. A great craftsman himself, he saw the smoke from the fire curling up and he was interested to see how the tinsmith put the bottoms on the tin cans. He ducked down to go into the tent, but Somhairle turned away from him – he wasn't going to show anyone his secret!⁶⁴

But by the Second World War the writing was on the wall for local tinsmiths.

*The tinmaking finished just as the war started. Tin was very scarce to get and that stopped all the tinsmiths.*⁶⁵ Duncan Williamson

*Until the mid-1940s when the demand for tin dishes fell away with the coming of aluminium goods to the market. Before the end of the Second World War my father buried all his tinmaking tools which had belonged to his father. He wouldn't show us where he'd buried them because he felt they were too precious to be lost or destroyed.*⁶⁶ Duncan Williamson

⁶² Neil MacArthur, Moss, 10/2013

⁶³ Gilleasbuig Kennedy, West Hynish, 9/2013

⁶⁴ Seonaid Brown, Balephuil, 2/2009 and 9/2013

⁶⁵ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 93

⁶⁶ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 18

Horses

When Duncan Williamson was growing up in mainland Argyll in the 1920s, many Travelling families were too poor to own a horse. They walked everywhere with their possessions and tents in an old wheelbarrow or pram. But a 'yoke', a horse and cart, opened new horizons. This was becoming a horse-powered world.

*From the First World War until after the Second World War was the heyday of horses in Scotland. There were horses in the coal pits, the pig men had horses, the fruit men, the fish merchants, the rag and bone men, the scrap men, the horse dealers. This was the horses' time. And I'm not counting the horses on the farms...After the 1914 war all the young men came back from the Army who had been using horses, pulling guns and that. When they came back to their way of life, they made sure they were going to have horses, and this is when horses really got among the travellers.*⁶⁷ Duncan Williamson

A Traveller family with a horse and cart could travel much further to sell their wares and seek work. Coming to Tiree with the whole family for the summer became easier. This was especially true after the Gott Bay pier was completed in 1915 as the horse and cart could be off-loaded directly onto the quayside, instead of into a small boat dancing on the waves off Scarinish.

Travelling People have a reputation for not looking after their horses, but the opposite was usually true. Their horses were too important to them. What they lacked was their own land to let them loose on and any good horses tended to be sold to raise cash. Sometimes the Travelling People would barter for some hay or corn to feed their beasts.

*Going through the houses, milk and eggs would always come your way. And sometimes we'd be given oatmeal instead of money. We needed oatmeal for the horses. We'd steep the oats in a bucket of milk – maybe for about two hours – then we'd boil a kettle and mix the water in. That was very good for a horse – we called it the 'White Drink'. All Traveller horses got it. It had to be steeped and you had to get hot water on it. Then it was cooled with cold water.*⁶⁸ Alec John

The horses were grazed *air feiste*, on a tether, at the campsite and this rarely seemed to bother the crofters on Tiree. One crofter in Balinoe is said to have chased them away from the common grazing when they ranged too widely.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 270

⁶⁸ Alec John Williamson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 56

⁶⁹ Alasdair Sinclair, Balinoe, 9/2013

Mary MacDonald's family often came to Tiree in the summer. Her grandmother was a famous visitor called *Cleamag*, and her uncle, James was nicknamed 'The Pony'. Once they were loading a horse into a horsebox and the animal refused to go in, so he took hold of it and lifted it in bodily!⁷⁰

As well as being a 'beast of burden', the horse was a unit of currency that could be bought, sold or exchanged. Travelling People would buy young and difficult horses on Tiree that the bigger horse dealers didn't want and take them away at the end of the summer.

*What the traveller horse dealers especially liked was buying young horses, you know, colts. They went to the islands, like Skye and the islands off the west coast. They bought these unbroken horses in the crofts and farms, and they broke them in, fetched them back.*⁷¹ Duncan Williamson

*The usual thing for the Stewarts was 'buy in the west, sell in the east'. I've seen us go out with one horse and come back with five or six.*⁷² Gordon Stewart

*When I was a young boy in Scarinish School [in the 1930s] what I would call the Travelling People, tinkers, bought horses here and they broke them in on Silversands and Baugh beach. These people, although they were obviously poor, they were expert handlers of horses...They took about fifty horses away from here each summer.*⁷³ Angus Munn, Heanish

Their skill was to control these wilder horses.

*They were great with horses. You'd see them taking a young stallion over the Reef, nothing on its mind but sex, tugging at the bridle. In the evening it would be walking home quite the thing.*⁷⁴ Angus Munn

The travellers liked to break a big horse, they liked a difficult horse nobody else could handle. They like a horse that would make a story run for year! We took a kick or two....You know the Travellers have the cant language? Well up here we had the

⁷⁰ Mary MacDonald, 4/2007 and 9/2007

⁷¹ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 266

⁷² Gordon Stewart in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 98

⁷³ Angus Munn on Hector MacPhail, AC 41, 1997

⁷⁴ Angus Munn, Heanish, 9/2013

*Beurla Reagaird as well, so all the old Travellers had their secret words of command for the horses. That was alright for them like – but when the horses were sold onto the crofters there could be problems.*⁷⁵ Gordon Stewart

*Some travellers the week before had bought a horse, a young horse in the market. They broke it in, made it work and brought it back to the market to sell, swap or deal it away a week or two later. If they were kickers or biters, or they were lame, travellers fixed them up in the best way they could.*⁷⁶ Duncan Williamson

These horses were often sold in the mainland cities where demand was high.

*In 1943 when I was there in Dundee there must have been at least, close on four hundred horses on the street...The cooperative had horses for the delivery of milk. Then there were the coalmen, there were people selling brickets, people selling firewood. There were rag and bone men.. And it was nothing to see, going into a rag store in the evening, fifteen, sixteen, eighteen horses yoked up, lined up nose to tail waiting to get served...This is what brought all the travellers here. Because it didn't matter what kind of horse you took to Dundee, you could have a deal before you went back that night.*⁷⁷ Duncan Williamson

They were skillful wheelers and dealers.

*They were the ones up to all the tricks of the trade. And they could outwit any non-traveller dealer.*⁷⁸ Duncan Williamson

The deal was struck in a particular way.

To make the deal, you'd barter – then a big spit on the hand, a shake of the hands and 'good luck' we'd say, or 'good luck to you and the horse!' Then the money would be passed. Whatever the deal was – exchange, part exchange or straight cash, whether I was selling or you were selling – they'd always have to cross our hand with silver. It would be half a crown then, a florin or a two shilling piece. And do you know where the Travellers used to put that? The silver from the deal that moved the horse? They'd put it in the lining of their bonnet or their cap. The 'luck penny' it was

⁷⁵ Gordon Stewart in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 99

⁷⁶ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 74

⁷⁷ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 96

⁷⁸ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsie Man: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 267

*called...After the handshake there was no comeback – that was the deal done, that was the guarantee.*⁷⁹ Gordon Stewart

But as well as buying and selling, horses were often swapped between Travellers, sometimes on a daily or weekly basis. The horse itself was their walking bank account.

*If it wasn't for the horse or a pony, the traveller would never have survived so long...In these times there was no social security. They only depended on a few shillings they could make, a few shillings they could get for a deal, swapping and dealing [horses]. And there were people who had horses who swapped and dealt every day.*⁸⁰ Duncan Williamson

*But the horses were the most important...As long as a traveller had a horse he was never broke, never stuck. But the thing was, he would never sell it outright. But he would swap, swap to anything that could walk on two legs. Because he knew there was always somebody who would give him one that was worse than his. And he would always have to get some money along with it, money to boot.*⁸¹ Duncan Williamson

Sometimes they would swap with an islander. Gilleasbuig Kennedy from West Hynish, tells this story. A party of Travelling People came to his father's croft and asked him if he wanted to swap horses. His father was quite interested because the horse he had was a bit too lively for him, whereas the Travellers' horse was standing quietly in the traces. They wanted £18 to complete the swap, so his father went into the house to consult with his wife who had grown up with horses and had a good eye. She came out to have a look and as she went past the horse's head she flapped her apron up and down. The horse stayed quite calm. "*Tha mi an dochas nach eil sibh a chuir droch shùil air an each, A' Mhairi,*" the Traveller said [I hope you're not putting the evil eye on my horse]. But she explained she was trying to see if the horse was excitable. They agreed the swap and went their separate ways. The Travellers' horse was fine for his father for three days, but after that became just as excitable as the old one. In contrast, their own horse seemed to become quiet and well-behaved when they saw it on the road over the summer!⁸²

⁷⁹ Gordon Stewart in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 97-8

⁸⁰ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 263

⁸¹ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 93

⁸² Gilleasbuig Kennedy, West Hynish, 9/2013

*Did you ever hear how the Traveller men would test if a mare was in foal? 'Take a small quantity of water and pour it into an ear. If she's in young she'll shake her head, if not, she'll shake her whole body. Easy!'*⁸³ Gordon Stewart

Like tinsmithing, horse dealing went rapidly downhill in the 1950s as the 'Little Grey Fergie' became the tractor of choice on the island and the city draught horse was replaced by lorries.

Magic and curses

*They could put a curse on you, guidheachan, if you didn't buy things from them!*⁸⁴
Mairi Campbell, Corrairigh

Having ancient roots and living closely with nature, the Travelling People had a reputation for magical powers. Their curses, known as *guidheachan*, were feared by islanders.

*They were blamed for the evil eye, the tinkers. They would put spells and crosses on you. Aye! They were blamed for that too.*⁸⁵ Donald Sinclair

*And I'll tell you this – when our people first came to the mainland it was thrown at them by the other Travellers that they were witches and wizards and all that kind of thing. Living out in the open, cooking on a trenny, that's a cauldron with three legs, people would think we had witchcraft.*⁸⁶ Alec John Williamson

This was even emphasized in the earliest account of Travelling People on Tiree, dating from 1854.

In the excitement a tinker wife threw off her cap and allowed her hair to fall over her shoulders in wild disorder. She then bared her knees and falling on them to the ground, in a praying attitude, poured forth a torrent of wishes that struck awe into all who heard her. She imprecated: "Drowning by sea and conflagration by land: my you never see a son to follow your body to the graveyard, or a daughter to mourn

⁸³ Gordon Stewart in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 97-8

⁸⁴ Mairi Campbell, Corrairigh, 6/2004

⁸⁵ Donald Sinclair talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.091

⁸⁶ Alec John Williamson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 170

*you death. I have made my wish before this and I will make it now, and there was not yet a day I did not see my wish fulfilled.”*⁸⁷

Nancy Brown, Balephuill, remembers, as a young girl in the 1940s, locking the front door of her house when her parents were out because the Travelling People were in and she had heard so many stories about their spells.⁸⁸

Cleamag Mhòr used to camp on the Balevullin *sliabh* in the 1940s.

JH: *Did you go up to their camp?*

DAB: *No! We were frightened from them!*⁸⁹

*If you're born of the old type Traveller, I don't know what it is...if you believe in a thing, things seem to follow you.*⁹⁰ John Stewart

Bobby MacLean was riding an old bike up and down the Ruaig playground when he was at school. Some Travellers went past and he shouted something cheeky to them. Minutes later he went flying! The bicycle frame had cracked in half!⁹¹

But Alasdair Sinclair, Brock, told this story. One day a woman Traveller came to the door of his uncle William's house in Brock asking for fish. There were two men hanging back and William refused, thinking the men could perfectly well go fishing themselves. The woman put a curse on him but William said, "I'm not frightened of your curse. *Iseabal Friseal* [said to be the Queen of the Tinkers] blessed me two days ago!"⁹²

Hawking

Selling their tins, clothes pegs and scourers door to door was an essential skill for Travellers.

The cèard was bred a salesman, you see. He had to be – a travelling salesman is what he was. Going round the houses, talk was half of everything we did. I had the Gaelic

⁸⁷ *The Gaelic Otherworld*, Ronald Black, Birlinn, 2005

⁸⁸ Nancy Brown, Balephuill, 10/2013

⁸⁹ Donald Archie Brown, Balevullin, talking to John Holliday, 10/2013

⁹⁰ John Stewart talking to Barbara McDermitt, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1978.131

⁹¹ Tommy MacKinnon, Vaul, 9/2013

⁹² Alasdair Sinclair, Brock, 6/2004 and 9/2007

*and speaking to the wifies, pleasing them was bred in us; the knowledge how to please was what we had.*⁹³ Gordon

*They were punching [tin] as well as they could. If there was anything to be punched, they would punch it. They would be coming round selling cans and tin dishes and all. They were buying off them too, but before they would leave they would ask for this and ask for that, and they were loaded going away. But some of them was very nice, all the same.*⁹⁴ Donald Sinclair

Selecting the right house, where there was a choice, was important.

*I scanned the houses as I went, looking for the most likely ones. Houses that were very spick and span, without a weed in their lawn or garden, were seldom occupied by people who would waste their time boiling water for a tinker. Houses with curtains drawn almost to meet were usually occupied by rather reserved, timid people, some of whom were afraid of tinkers. So I chose a house which was homely looking. Not really untidy, but with odds and ends lying about outside.*⁹⁵ Betsy Whyte

It was said on Tiree that Travelling People left a mark outside a house to show others what sort of reception they were likely to get.⁹⁶ “Taking to the doors” was more often the work of women and children.

*Traveller women vied with each other when they took the doors, making themselves proper beasts of burden. I have seen some of them with a big child in their arms, a bag of old clothes, rags or what have you on their backs; likewise another bag with oats for the pony, a large square basket and a can of milk, tightly lidded between their teeth. The basket might be packed with heavy dishes, together with all the food they could come by. They would walk home thus laden for miles.*⁹⁷ Betsy Whyte

Fresh customers meant better sales.

It was best for the Travellers to move in small groups. Selling goods – you needed to cut fresh ground, not follow on too close behind others in a similar trade. There was only so much trade to be had! We had to turn our hand to anything that paid – but one thing we did, we still kept ourselves to ourselves. That’s what people up here

⁹³ Gordon Stewart in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 94

⁹⁴ Donald Sinclair talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.091

⁹⁵ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 166

⁹⁶ Mairi Campbell, Corrairigh, 9/2013

⁹⁷ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 47

wanted – to be left alone. We knew where we were wanted, what was wanted, and how to behave.⁹⁸ Alec John Williamson

Mary MacDonald was from the last generation of Travellers that came to Tiree in the 1960s. She remembers that they never went to a shop – they bartered everything or were given butter, meal, crowdie and *cnapan buntata* (a boiling of potatoes).⁹⁹

As the years went by mass-production of household goods meant that the Travelling People turned to industrial dusters, Kirby grips, pins and ‘Vim’ cleaner instead of their craft made goods.

Tiree people would almost always buy something from the Travelling People at their doors for fear of being cursed.

We would never refuse them [for fear of being cursed].¹⁰⁰ Seonaid Brown, Balephuill

Willie MacLean, Balinoe, told this story. *Eògan* the tinker was camped down at the Heylipol gravel pit. He was selling tins to *Alasdair Ruadh*, Alasdair MacKinnon, the grandfather of Donald the Plumber. Alasdair refused to buy another tin cup because the last one he had bought had had a leak. “I’ll mend it for you,” said *Eògan*. “No, you’ll charge me a *tasdan* [a shilling],” said Alasdair. “I’ll put a spell on you, then!” replied *Eògan*. “OK, OK, I’ll buy two cans!” said Alasdair. He was so frightened of the *buideachd* [black magic].¹⁰¹

Gilleasbuig Kennedy remembers Travelling People coming to the door in the mid-1950s. His mother would always buy something from them, after which they would give her a ‘blessing’, “*Theid a’ bhliadhna mhath leat, a’ Mhairi.*” [The year will go well with you]. They had great memories and would always remember your name.¹⁰²

Cleamag, one of the MacDonald Travelling families, was at Alec MacLean’s house in Cornaigbeg. His mother was from Barra and was refusing to buy anything. “*Nach tu dh’ fas cruaidh on phos thu Tirisdeach!*” [haven’t you become mean since you married a Tiree man], said *Cleamag*. Alec’s mother went through to get her husband.

⁹⁸ Alec John Williamson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 54

⁹⁹ Mary MacDonald, 4/2007 and 9/2007

¹⁰⁰ Seonaid Brown, Balephuill, 8/2013

¹⁰¹ Willie MacLean, Balinoe, 5/2007

¹⁰² Gilleasbuig Kennedy, West Hynish, 9/2013

He got the same. “*Nach tu fas cruaidh on phos thu ban-Bharrach!*” [haven’t you grown mean since you married a Barra woman].¹⁰³

Begging

As well as hawking goods from house to house, Travelling People would often also ask for food or clothes.

*My mother called the houses, sellt her scrubbers, begged a puckle tea and sugar and a puckle tatties, maybe some herring...and she got our clothes for us, things from the houses. But they wouldn’t give her any money. You couldn’t expect the folk to give her money, because the non-traveller men were only working for a wage themselves.*¹⁰⁴ Duncan Williamson

*But the women still went to the houses. And if they got good clothes when they were collecting, if the clothes suited their family or suited their man, they brought them back. They would never sell anything that was good for their family.*¹⁰⁵ Duncan Williamson

Occasionally on Tiree Travelling People would ask for clothes and then leave them in a ditch if they weren’t suitable for their family.¹⁰⁶ This was presumably because it was not worth taking ‘rags’ to the mainland to sell. The story is still told on the island of how the Free Church minister MacKay, gave some Traveling Women his wife’s wedding dress. She is said not to have been too pleased when she found out!¹⁰⁷

Their reception varied from house to house.

*We approached the door and I knocked. Whenever I looked at the face of the woman who opened the door I knew I was going to be disappointed. She had a narrow face with eyes to match, which darted here there and everywhere...anywhere except straight at us.*¹⁰⁸ Betsy Whyte

¹⁰³ Alec MacLean, Cornaigbeg, 6/2004

¹⁰⁴ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 36

¹⁰⁵ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 105

¹⁰⁶ Flora MacPhail, Ruaig, 6/2004

¹⁰⁷ Mairi Campbell, Corrairigh. 3/2009

¹⁰⁸ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 56

The Travelling economy depended on tin making and horses, and large, extended family relationships. Begging is likely to have increased as the Travellers' way of life became more difficult from the Second World War. But this is the part of their lifestyle that is often remembered on the island today. *Cleamag* MacDonald was a skilled practitioner. Seonaid Brown, Balephuill, remembers *Cleamag* coming to her mother's house in Heylipol saying "*Tha mi 'g iarraidh deur beag boinne airson an leanabh.*" [I would like a spot of milk for my baby] pointing to a tightly wrapped bundle of blankets under her arm.¹⁰⁹

One of the children in her family had heart disease and is still remembered on the island as 'The Blue Baby'. He later had an operation in Edinburgh and lived for many years.¹¹⁰

John Donald MacLean, Crossapol, tells this story. A Traveller and her son came to the door of a Tiree house and asked for some butter. The woman of the house said she had none, but the Traveller asked again. The woman repeated that there was no butter in the house: the cows had run dry. The Traveller's voice was raised. "My child is burnt," she said, "She needs butter to treat it." The child looked fine to the woman and she asked where she was burned. The Traveller replied, "*Eadar feadan a' mhuin agus an exhaust*", and the pair walked off, cursing the woman over their shoulders.¹¹¹

In an unusual story Duncan Grant, Ruaig, remembers apparent ingratitude. His great aunt Elizabeth MacLeod gave some buttered scones for some Travelling People that came to her door asking for food. She saw the scones later thrown in the ditch. She was quite upset, because they were cottars and had little enough themselves. It was felt in the family that the visitors had "wanted something more".¹¹² Times between the wars were difficult. If the Travelling People had little, the Tiree crofters did not have much more in terms of money and food.

But essentially the Travelling People were knocking on an open door. The culture of the Highlander was to be instinctively generous to others.

Many of the folk just gave us out of the goodness of their hearts...There were hundreds of travellers who would never have survived but for the generous goodness

¹⁰⁹ Seonaid Brown, Balephuill, 2/2009

¹¹⁰ Colin MacDonald, 8/2013

¹¹¹ John Donald MacLean, Crossapol, 9/2013

¹¹² Duncan Grant, Ruaig, 12/2012 and 7/2013

*of the warm-hearted Scottish people. Hay and corn for the horses, and milk, flour, oatmeal and even eggs were given by many farmhouse folk.*¹¹³ Betsy Whyte

CULTURE

The Highland Travelling People may have looked poor to the settled population of Tiree in the 1930s, but they carried in their heads a huge store of ancient stories, songs and tunes. And theirs was an often Gaelic culture, a culture that had been largely lost by the settled population of Tiree.

*When we were children, when I was a child, we lived in very poor circumstances. We didn't have a television. Sometimes we would get to the pictures if we was lucky. Normally what would happen is... my mother used to sit and tell us stories every night. And my grandpa, he was an old, old man, he sat and told us stories all the time, ken? We all used to tell each other stories that we kent. It was just a case that your repertoire built up a' the time...The best stories was when you were in the country. Maybe biding in an old road...the travellers used to sit in a circle. It was just like Indians. The bairns just sat very quietly and you listened to every word. You just sort of luxuriated in every word, you ken, that was said... They didn't just tell you the creepy ones. We liked them the best. But they[also] used to tell you of their adventures.*¹¹⁴ Stanley Robertson

*My father could sit there, start at six in the morning and finish at six [the next] morning, telling different stories...Father's brother once told a story and it lasted three months...That's right! My grandfather, old Willie Stewart.*¹¹⁵ Jeanie and Andrew Stewart

Hamish Henderson worked for the new School of Scottish Studies, part of Edinburgh University. In the 1950s he discovered the Travelling People held this rich seam of Scottish traditional culture and started to record them. A particularly famous storyteller was Alexander Stewart, *Ailidh Dall*, from Sutherland. In latter years he was almost blind.

¹¹³ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 183-4.

¹¹⁴ Stanley Robertson talking Barbara McDermitt, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1979.029

¹¹⁵ Jeanie and Andrew Stewart talking to Hamish Henderson, SA1955.151

*The first song I recorded from Ailidh Dall 'The Sweet Sorrow, Am Bron Binn, is one of the oldest songs in Europe...To start at the beginning is good but to start in 500 AD was the stuff of dreams!*¹¹⁶ Hamish

He was astounded to find such treasure among an overlooked group of marginal people.

*A third great zone of Scottish folk culture exists among the Travelling People – Scotland's indigenous nomads. Indeed at that particular moment in the early nineteen fifties, the oral literature and song of the Travelling People was, probably, not only the most substantially ancient but also the most vital of all Scotland's various, towering folk traditions.*¹¹⁷ Hamish Henderson

On Tiree only *Dòmhnall Chaluim Bhàin*, Donald Sinclair, West Hynish, could rival *Na Cèardan* for ancient stories.

Travelling People were also known on Tiree as great pipers.

HK: *They [the Travelling People] were getting a great entertainment from the old folk.*

EC: *They would probably be bringing lots of stories and songs?*

HK: *Yes! They were good at singing, the tinkers! And playing the bagpipes!*¹¹⁸ Hector Kennedy

Donald MacIntyre, Gott, remembers walking home from Scarinish School in the 1920s. A family of Stewarts was camped in the coal store at the head of the beach and the father was playing the pipes. He apologised for not being a better player, but said "one hand was shorter than the other!"¹¹⁹

They were camped down there [at Heylipol Church]. Peter Stewart. We were in and out of that camp all them time. And he was good at playing the pipes. And I mind of a few pipers on the island used to come down there playing the pipes along with Peter Stewart. There were two down in Barrapol, beside the road, cousins, there

¹¹⁶ Hamish Henderson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 65

¹¹⁷ Hamish Henderson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 73

¹¹⁸ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.093

¹¹⁹ Donald MacIntyre, Gott, 6/2004

were two brothers up in Sandaig, and there was two down in Kilkenneth. They would be learning tunes from him.¹²⁰ Hector Kennedy

The Travelling People had their own language called Cant. This allowed them to talk privately among themselves in front of the settled population or authority figures like policemen.

Buck: a person who has only one parent of traveller stock

Country hantle: settled people

Eechie nor oiche: silent

In-aboot: into the general area of the camp

Plank!: hide!

Shan: bad

Snottum: hook to hang cooking pot

Manishee, mort or culloch: a woman

Sweetnie: sugar

Smout: butter

Carnish: all meat (ham, mutton, beef - no separate name for beef)

Jerrum or yerrum: milk

Yarris: eggs

Slab: tea

Peeve: drink

Peevin kain: pub

Scrivein: read, write

Stripach: whore

Chova: shop.

In addition to cant Highland Travelling People used a language known as *Beurla Reagaird*, which contains old Gaelic words that have dropped out of modern Gaelic, words like *caineag*, a hen.¹²¹

With little access to modern medical care Travelling People relied on a rich store of traditional medical beliefs.

No doctor, no nurse. Just a visit from a doctor cost half a crown, or five shillings – where were we going to get that kind of money? We made use of nature, Old Mother Nature...Whooping cough and diphtheria – they were killers when I was young. My brother Jimmy, he was seven years younger than me, he got bad whooping cough when he was less than one year old and he was cured by a trout in the mouth. Cough, cough, cough! For days the bairn was coughing and getting very weak and very bad. So mother finally said to me – “Duncan, go down to the stream and guddle a small trout; and bring it back as fast as you can.” A she gave me a jimmy jar. And under a stone I soon guddled a wee fish and brought it back, and she was stood there,

¹²⁰ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.093

¹²¹ Timothy Neat, *The Summer Walkers*, 1996, Canongate Books, p 228

*rocking the bairn in his shawl – very feeble, cough, cough, cough! And now I swear, on my mother’s grave and that I’ll never smoke this cigarette if I tell a lie, that my mother than took the trout from the jar and held it by its tail, just above wee Jimmy’s mouth until the wee rout was dead. Then she said to me, “Take it back to the burn where you found it, and throw it in, and something will eat it.” Next day I woke up and I heard no coughing. The coughing was gone, and wee Jimmy’s alive to this day – he’s sixty one.*¹²² Duncan Williamson

A prominent figure in the world of Travelling People was the ‘burker’. These were men who travelled the countryside after dark looking for Travellers to capture, murder and sell for dissection. This tradition relates to the case of Burke and Hare who murdered sixteen people (no Travellers) in Edinburgh in 1828 and supplied their corpses to the University’s anatomy department. Alec Stewart from Blairgowrie gives this vivid account from the 1930s.

*I was about seventeen or eighteen at the time and I used to go round and hawk my wares. It was pot lids I was selling and basins. And I was at Edinburgh. And there was a cousin of mine with me, a Davy Stewart too. “Come with me”, he said,” and we’ll have a go round by Inverkeithing all these places and we’ll try and sell our wares.” I said, “Alright.” So we went away. And about ten or twelve miles out of Edinburgh and it was getting kind of dark. I said, “We’ll have to get some sort of place. It’s not very good this road. They say the burkers’ coach comes out this way. “Well he says, we’ll try and get some place. And we heard a machine coming, two lights. I said, “It might be the burkers.” “Come on he says, we’ll run!” So we run into this steading in a farmyard, and there were four or fives stacks of hay, and one of them was half taken away. “Come on”, I says, “We’ll get to the top of this half stack and we’ll hide in there.” “He says, alright”. So I made a hole in this stack and I made a hole in the side of this stack so that I could see. So this machine comes trotting in and this was two men and four dogs. And they let the dogs out. “The dogs’ll get them out, the dogs will scent them out. And the dogs were trying here and trying there. And they came round the stack and they were going round the stack and round the stack. And I said, “I it stops there any longer, they’ll find us.” So I put my hand in my pocket and I got the knife out and I put my hand out of the hole and the dog was going by and I caught the dog by the tail. And I cut the tail clean off the dog. And the dog’s away yowling over the fields and the dogs after him. I had the tail in my hand. And I went to the farm and the farmer says. “What’s wrong?” I says, “The burkers is after us!” He says, “What are you doing at this time of night?” I says, “We were stuck on the road.” “Where was you?” he says. “In that stack there.” He says Come on in, so we lay in the house till morning. And he says, “I’ll take the tail and give it to the police.” But I never went back to that house.*¹²³

¹²² Duncan Williamson, *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 166

¹²³ Alec Stewart talking to Prof Kenneth Goldstein, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1969.195

Religious beliefs and superstition

Many Travelling People were happy to combine Christianity and quite pagan beliefs.

*One wood we never used was rowan, a rowan tree must be left to stand in the ground where it grew. The Travellers would never cut rowan boughs for a bow-tent; hazel or ash, yes, but not for us the rowan tree. It's a superstition, goes way back. It's a beautiful tree.*¹²⁴ Eddie Davies

*Their way was to put babies into a bucket of cold water when they were born.*¹²⁵ Tommy MacKinnon, Vault

*There was an unusual custom among the Travelling People in the old days. When a baby was delivered, straightaway they would take it to water, not in a pail inside but to the nearest loch, even if they had to break the ice in the middle of winter. They would wash the baby in the loch water. It was amazing that the baby didn't catch it's death of cold, but they didn't.*¹²⁶ Rev Norman MacDonald

*Although he couldn't read Daddy always slept with the Bible under his pillow. If any of us was ever troubled with nightmares, he would put it under our heads.*¹²⁷ Betsy Whyte

*Well, some travellers - who have been living in towns for a generation or so - have taken up a special religion but before that we didn't have any specific religion [denomination]. However, we did have a very strong belief in God and feared him.*¹²⁸ Betsy Whyte

*I mind of a minister that was here [on Tiree] a few years ago. He was from Skye. MacInnes. And there were tinkers down at the church there. And he would go there as well as anywhere else. Yes!*¹²⁹ Hector Kennedy

¹²⁴ .¹²⁴ Eddie Davies in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 111

¹²⁵ Tommy MacKinnon, Vault, 9/2013

¹²⁶ Rev Norman MacDonald talking to Calum MacLean [translated by JH], *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1953.023

¹²⁷ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 44

¹²⁸ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 158

¹²⁹ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, SA1971.093

*On Sundays we never worked, not even women's work, except what was absolutely necessary. Sunday's food was prepared on the Saturday nights. Children were bathed early, the grown-ups cleaned themselves up too for Sunday coming.*¹³⁰ Betsy Whyte

Moral code

Travelling People had a strict moral structure, which placed generosity above everything else.

*Our whole code was always to put others before ourselves. Even strangers. We believed if we were selfish with anything we would have no luck with it...All the family would refuse to eat until the food was shared equally...Women would walk all day looking for food, but not one morsel would pass their lips unless they knew there was food at home for the rest of the family...Travellers also believed if they did wrong they would be punished for it...No matter what evil befell them, they thought it was a punishment for something they had done wrong. Doing good is rewarded by God sending good luck to us all and all evil is punished by bad luck. It is a simple code which really works...The worst evil was to be selfish...Don't think that I am making out that travellers were angels. Far from it. They cursed and swore a lot, drank a lot of spirits and fought amongst themselves. [But] even travellers who were complete strangers would give their last penny to help anyone ill or bereaved.*¹³¹ Betsy Whyte

*Father was not materialistic either, but he loved to give pleasure and happiness to others, helping anyone who was down. His worst fault was that he forgot that charity begins at home. He would buy a yoke for one of his brothers, give another money to tide him over a bad patch, and so on – leaving mother with the heavy end of the stick to carry when the money was done.*¹³² Betsy Whyte

*Neither do they want anything belonging to the dead. Everything of theirs is burnt. Not money of course: it is given to those who have most need of it. Sometimes a ring or earrings is kept, but only by those who loved the deceased...Few travellers put much value on any material thing. They like to have them as well as anyone else, but don't worry one bit if they are taken from them or if they lose them.*¹³³ Betsy Whyte

At the same time they saved almost nothing. Tomorrow would take care of itself.

¹³⁰ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 93

¹³¹ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 158

¹³² Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 33

¹³³ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 139

*And we just lived one day at a time...Never putting anything in front of us, not making any plans for the future.*¹³⁴ Betsy Whyte

This combination of a refusal to plan for the future and a compulsive generosity is similar to that found in many nomadic hunter-gatherer cultures, like the Aboriginal people of Australia. This was in contrast to the settled population of Tìree, where hard work, thrift and saving to 'get on' were widely admired characteristics. When a Travelling Person asked a crofter for some milk, she was instinctively given it, in the same way that any neighbour on the island would be helped. But many crofters must have occasionally felt that the Traveller would do better to buy their own cow: there was a fundamental misunderstanding between those who had settled and those who travelled.

But in fact, far from being primitive or feckless, the Travellers' way was supremely well adapted to a nomadic life. Saving was impossible when you had to carry your entire possessions on your back and you could be robbed at any time. So you gave away anything you had in the knowledge that when you needed something, it would be given 'back' to you.

Stealing

Travelling People had a reputation for stealing. The English headmaster of Garrnamonie School in South Uist describes a scene there in the 1890s.

*The island market!...For more than a week before this event, heterogeneous sets of passengers landed at the pier by the different steamships calling there, both mail and cargo boats – cattle dealers, drovers with their dogs, itinerant Jews with their wares, tinkers and gypsies...I saw the tents of some gypsies pitched by the hillside road...These latter people were rather a nuisance, in our district at least, with their importunity to buy their wares, and their begging; the native people were very suspicious of them, and kept a wary eye on their fowl, locking them up for security.*¹³⁵

*For every gypsy comes to toon / Twa hens will go amissin' soon. That's the Gypsy People! I've taken a peat or two, I've even taken a salmon or two, for the pot but the travelling people here in Sutherland were always very law-abiding, very proper, very religious, very strict – they got on well with local people. We had to. That was our business.*¹³⁶ Eddie Davies

¹³⁴ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 138

¹³⁵ FG Rea, *A School in South Uist, Reminiscences of a Hebridean Schoolmaster, 1890-1913*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, p 104

¹³⁶ Eddie Davies in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 36

Murdoch MacLean, Kilmoluaig, was cooking *sgadan* [herring] and potatoes for himself and his brother John who was out collecting seaweed. A group of Travelling People came asking for eggs and Murdoch went to collect some in the stackyard. When he came back to the kitchen the *sgadan* and potatoes had gone!¹³⁷

*And of course we used to steal a few apples from people's gardens and we stole a few vegetables. And if we came across a nest of eggs by a hen, we took them! Because the wintertimes were very hard.*¹³⁸ Duncan Williamson

Elsie MacKinnon, Kirkapol, had eight foster children around 1967. They had clothes, including underwear, from the Glasgow Corporation. It was wash day and eight pairs of regulation underwear were hanging on the line. Some Travelling People came up to the house and took all the clothes that were hanging outside. Elsie was furious because she had to explain to the Corporation why some of their charges' clothes had gone missing.¹³⁹

*Now in these days ...there were stacks of hay all over the place...they would go to another farm where they weren't working at night time and help themselves to as much as they wanted – steal it! And feed their horses. Oh, I've done it myself!*¹⁴⁰ Duncan Williamson

Travellers had a reputation on Tiree for being able to take a sheaf from the stackyard without leaving a gap showing where it had been.

They were widely blamed for stealing coal from the *machair* in Balinoe after the puffer had been in. James MacArthur, *Seumas Alasdair*, helped his brother, *Doan* the Balemartine coal merchant when the puffer came in on Soroby beach. He would write down who had what loads of coal. To save time the crofters would collect a cart load of coal and dump it on the *machair* nearby instead of going all the way back home. A local man, Neil Campbell, remarked to *Seumas Alasdair* that the piles on the *machair* were not all a full measure. "What do you mean?" replied Seumas, starting to get hot under the collar. Neil explained that every time a certain crofter went past some of the piles, he would get off his cart and throw some lumps on his own cart! Of course the Travelling People got the blame!¹⁴¹ Angus MacKechnie, Crossapol, and Neil MacArthur, Moss

¹³⁷ Doris MacLean, Lochside, 6/2004

¹³⁸ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 4

¹³⁹ Fiona MacKinnon, Kirkapol, 9/2013

¹⁴⁰ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 95

¹⁴¹ Angus MacKechnie, Crossapol, and Neil MacArthur, Moss, 10/2013

*This always infuriates me: the assumption that all travellers are thieves. How this idea originated I don't know. Real travellers take too much pride in their ability to get what they need without stooping to stealing. By outwitting a farmer or businessman in a deal- yes, the men take pride in that, but stealing?*¹⁴² Betsy Whyte

*I never heard of any harm coming from them.*¹⁴³ Colin MacKinnon, Kilkenneth

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE TWO COMMUNITIES

*You know that old saying about the Travellers, 'We chieles and cuckoos are alike in any respects, but especially in character, everybody speaks ill of us both – but everyone's glad to see us again!'*¹⁴⁴ Eddie Davies

In general the settled community in Scotland looked, and still looks, down on the Travelling People.

*My father didn't have a regular job because in these days a tinker was looked down upon, as someone who was socially unfit to work among the common folk. But my father being settled in the one part [Furnace], and putting us to school, the stigma of being a tinker naturally passed us by as most folk came to know and understand us...My father was respected because he'd served his time in the war...when a traveller did these things and showed that he tried to make himself part of the community – he gained a little respect from the local folk.*¹⁴⁵ Duncan Williamson

This was also true, to some extent, on Tiree. Hector Kennedy told this story about a 'tinker's' reputation. The 'hero' is John MacLean, *Bàrd Bhaile Mhàrtainn*, who lived from 1827 to 1895.

The bard was going to Scarinish one day, and who caught him on the road but Jimmy Norris, a tinker that was coming to the island and his wife. And he had cans and tankards. The bard gave them a lift over to Scarinish. He was sitting in the fore part of the cart. When he reached over to the shop, where the Cooperative is today, there was a man there from Caolas. He had the post office and the shop, Eoghann a' Mhuilleir. He asked the bard where did he pick up the 'cargo'. And the bard had to

¹⁴² Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 56.

¹⁴³ Colin MacKinnon, Kilkenneth, 10/2013

¹⁴⁴ Eddie Davies in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 36

¹⁴⁵ Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 3

*take the back end out of the cart so they would get in and he put it underneath them, and he put it in the side of the cart. "Wherever I picked it up, this is where I'm going to put it down", he says. And he jumped off the forepart of the cart and the cart couped and they [Norris and his wife] were on the road! He tumbled out the pair of them! The bard was too smart for him!*¹⁴⁶ Hector Kennedy

There is another's story, still told on Tiree, about an old man on the island.

When *Lachainn Chailein*, the father of Colin MacPhail, was in Crossapol an old 'tinker' asked him for shelter as the Traveller was unwell. Lachlan said he could stay in the byre next to the house. Days turned into weeks and Lachlan became a little tired of having to provide hospitality. When the old Traveller was well enough to leave he was bundled into a cart and, as he left, he waved and shouted, "*Ta, Ta! Lachainn Chailein.*" Lachlan replied under his breath, "*Ta, Ta! Mhic na Galla / Mhic an Diubhail! Nach tig an latha a thilleas tu!*" [Bye, Bye! Son of a bitch or the devil. May the day never come when you return]. "*Ta, Ta, Lachainn Chailein!*" became a popular phrase amongst Lachlan's neighbours when they wanted to tease him.¹⁴⁷

The mottling of the legs caused by sitting next to a fire is called in Gaelic *breac an teine*, and in rude English 'tinkers' tartan'.

Another story about the Balemartine Bard suggests a similar underlying sense of superiority. (But with the bard's mischievous wit, you are never quite sure whether he is playing a game of double bluff).

*The minister was outside the house one day and who was going down the brae at the monument there but the Bard Balemartine. And he was always sitting in the front of the cart: he never sat in the box at all and his legs out the bar. And the minister noticed him, and he knew it was the bard. And he said to him, "How was the bard today?" And the bard said, "Middling, Meadhanach". "There's no such a thing, John, as that [said the minister, trying to make a clever theological point]. There's only two things, good and bad." "Well" says the bard, "Will you answer my question?" "Yes, if I can." "Are you so good as the Apostle Paul?" "No" the minister says. "Well, are you as bad as the tinker Jimmy Norris?" "No, No!" he says. Well there must be more than the two things, the bard says. And the bard went away. The bard knew fine!*¹⁴⁸
Hector Kennedy

It may be significant that most of these more hostile accounts above come from the end of 19th century, when times were harder. But in general the Travelling People

¹⁴⁶ Hector Kennedy talking to Dr Margaret MacKay, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1974.141

¹⁴⁷ Mairi Campbell and Lachie Campbell personal communication, 12/2012

¹⁴⁸ Hector Kennedy talking to Dr Margaret MacKay, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1974.141

seem to have been met with less prejudice on Tiree than on the mainland. This was especially true by the 1930s, in the memory of living islanders.

*They were thinking the world of him [the Traveller Stewart] on Tiree. They were a decent crowd. They were not beggars at all. I've seen other tinkers, MacDonalds. They were beggars. But the Stewarts were a very nice crowd.*¹⁴⁹ Donald Sinclair

Hector Kennedy from Heylipol backs this up.

HK: *John and Robert Stewart, they were great pipers. And Mairi, his daughter, too.*

EC: *They would be quite popular, the tinkers?*

HK: *Yes! There would be a crowd down there, dancing at the camp down there.*¹⁵⁰

And again.

EC: *Did the children get to play with the tinker children?*

HK: *Yes! But they were not forced in these days to go to school at all. But [the tinker children] are forced now to go to school.*¹⁵¹ Hector Kennedy

*And I can tell you this – most people liked us – they liked us coming round – we were useful, we were company, we were honest.*¹⁵² Alec John Williamson

The *New Statistical Account* for Tiree, written in 1840, described the character of the islanders on Tiree.

*They are...kind and hospitable to strangers and uncommonly humane and charitable to the poor.*¹⁵³

I always found them [the Travelling People] very pleasant. They were very polite, coming to the door. There was no thieving. There was not a croft on Tiree that didn't

¹⁴⁹ Donald Sinclair talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.091

¹⁵⁰ Hector Kennedy, Heylipol, talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1975.069.

¹⁵¹ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1975.069

¹⁵² Alec John Williamson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 53

¹⁵³ NSA, p 210

*have tins for milking, buckets. If I saw the children on the road I would always speak to them.*¹⁵⁴ Alasdair MacDonald, Balephetrish

Children bring strangers together. Nan McClounnan, Balephuill, remembers the visits of the Travelling People in the 1940s. "It was great," she says, when the travellers came in the summer. The island children would go up to the Travellers' camp in Balinoe in the school lunch break. They would be offered tea from a tin mug, but the hot rim burnt your lips. They were also asked if they would like something to eat, "*A bheil thu 'g iarraidh pìos?*" They were tidy and "very clean". She remembers an old man lying half in the tent with his head cupped in his hands, saying, "Isn't it great to be lying half in your home, half on the Balinoe *machair*." ¹⁵⁵ Chrissie MacKechnie, Kilmoluaig, remembered as a girl often visiting *Eògan* and *Annag's* tent on the Balevullin *sliabh*. Neil MacDonald, Balevullin, had a sister who played with Mary Stewart, both in her tent at Heylipol and the house in Balemartine.

*We looked forward to them coming.*¹⁵⁶ Neil MacArthur, Moss

Mary MacDonald, a granddaughter of *Cleamag*, says that her family was well treated on Tiree, unlike their experience on the mainland, and she became a fluent Gaelic speaker.¹⁵⁷ Colin MacDonald, her cousin, backs this up: he says he liked the Tiree people and he never had discrimination from them.¹⁵⁸ There was also considerable personal kindness. Julie Anna at Balinoe Post Office gave the Traveling People free stamps.¹⁵⁹

The young people from both 'camps' would have found each other interesting.

*There were two girls one day in the store, and some of the Tiree men were round about and they started joking with them, having fun. And one of them said to the young, unmarried girl, "You'll have to get a crofter before you leave the island". And the other one chimed in, "She'll do nothing of the kind! She'll marry a tradesman as her mother before her."*¹⁶⁰ Agnes Mackenzie

As if to back this up, an old Gaelic proverb runs,

¹⁵⁴ Alasdair MacDonald, Balephetrish, 10/2013

¹⁵⁵ Nan McClounnan, Balephuill, 9/2013

¹⁵⁶ Neil MacArthur, Moss, 10/2013

¹⁵⁷ Mary MacDonald, one of the Travellers, 4/2007 and 9/2007

¹⁵⁸ Colin MacDonald, Montrose but visiting Tiree, 7/2013

¹⁵⁹ Alasdair Sinclair, Balinoe, 9/2013

¹⁶⁰ Agnes Mackenzie talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.095

Is math gum fohain nighean gobha do dho' ogha cèaird. A blacksmith's daughter is a good match for a tinker's grandson. ¹⁶¹

The children may have seen no barriers but their parents were more alert. As a child Gilleasbuig Kennedy would rush out to meet the Travellers in the road in West Hynish, but his mother would say, "*Fanaibh a-staigh!*" [stay inside!]. ¹⁶²

Behind that instinctive kindness of the islanders there was little understanding or communication between the Travellers and the settled population of Tiree. John Neil, the pier master at the time, was one of the few islanders who used to go over to the Travellers' camp in Scarinish to swap stories.

You sold them your wares. You bought eggs and cheese and that. That as more or less how you earned your living. You read fortunes and that. But they never mingled...In my experience they were strangers in their own country. Country people, there were some nice country people, real jewels of folk, they very seldom came to your campsite...The little children would come and play because children don't know divisions, and the [parents] didn't mind, but they themselves didn't come...But I will say there were lots of kindly folk among them, but what you don't know you don't understand. ¹⁶³ Unknown informant

Nancy Brown remembers growing up in Balemartine in the 1940s. "We were intrigued. Word would go round, 'The tinkers are in!' They were like aliens from another planet. Wee red-heads [children]" At the school break Nancy and her class mates would run from Balemartine School to the corner at the graveyard at Soroby. There is a small rise there and the children could just see the top of the Travellers' tents at the fang in Balinoe. ¹⁶⁴

Alasdair Sinclair, Brock, told this story. It was a wild evening and a family of 'tinkers' came to the house of Rachel MacArthur in Brock, *Taigh Raonaid*. They just walked in without a word and settled down for the night. When Rachel got up the next morning they were gone! ¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ *Gaelic Proverbs*, ed. Alexander Nicolson, Birlinn, 1996, p 307

¹⁶² Gilleasbuig Kennedy, West Hynish, 9/2013

¹⁶³ Unknown informant, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1981.086

¹⁶⁴ Nancy Brown, Balephuill, 10/2013

¹⁶⁵ Alasdair Sinclair, Brock, 6/2004 and 9/2007

TIREE'S TRAVELLING FAMILIES

EC: *Did you have tinkers coming to Tiree?*

AM: *Yes. Every summer. McAllisters and Stewarts and MacDonalds. Tinsmiths. That's all they did...They were very honest.*¹⁶⁶ Agnes Mackenzie

From at least the 1930s four families came to Tiree: Stewarts, two families of MacDonalds and the MacAllisters.

*Stewarts mostly, and MacDonalds. But the Stewarts were more plentiful. They were a very decent crowd of tinkers. They were coming to Tiree before I was born [1885], some of the Stewarts.*¹⁶⁷ Donald Sinclair, West Hynish

Stewarts

*That's another thing they were looking for when I was young at this time of the year – the tinkers coming, for cans, and tankards and basins, for milk. There was the Stewarts...there John, George, Peter their father, but the lads were growing up, they would be sixteen or so, and every one of them would play the pipes. And old Peter himself would be marching down there with the pipes. They were good with the pipes. There was two girls too. They were at the pipes. And the old fellow would sort the pipes to suit the girls. And a whole crowd of people that was down in Barrapol there came up to hear the pipes. John Hamilton. He was a piper and all. He never wore a cap but a deep sea cap, and he was never at sea in his life, unless it was between Tiree and Glasgow! And he would play the pipes too.*¹⁶⁸ Hector Kennedy

Hugh and Ann MacDonald

Eògan and Annag were well known on Tiree in the 1930s. They would often camp at Balinoe and were very hospitable to local people and children. Alasdair Sinclair, Balinoe, used to “look forward to them coming every summer. They knew all our names.” When *Eògan's* children came round to the house to ask to play he went at once, although his mother shouted after him not to go into the tents because he would come back dirty. Alasdair ignored her. “The tent was lovely and warm” with the stove going.¹⁶⁹ Duncan MacPhail, Balephuil, remembers the couple as “nice people” and he was often in their tents at Balinoe. These were quite big and he

¹⁶⁶ Agnes Mackenzie talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.095

¹⁶⁷ Donald Sinclair, West Hynish, talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.091

¹⁶⁸ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1973.088

¹⁶⁹ Alasdair Sinclair, Balinoe, 9/2013

could stand up in one as a boy. *Eògan* was renowned for training horses. *Eògan* sold a couple of “nice wee beasts” to Alec MacNeill and John MacPhail, Balephuìl.¹⁷⁰ *Eògan* was also a piper and often played an old chanter in camp.

Cleamag Mhòr and Somhairle MacDonald

Well-known visitors to the island from the 1930s were ‘Clementine’, or *Cleamag*, MacDonald and her husband Sam. She is said to have been born in Uist or Skye and was a fluent Gaelic speaker. As a child she spent at least one year on Tìree and went to school here.¹⁷¹ *Cleamag* was a presence at every door on the island, rarely taking no for an answer. She was often accompanied by her son Archie, who had a heart problem and was known locally as the ‘Blue Baby’. Archie later had surgery in Edinburgh and did well.

“Gypsies/Travellers are arguable among the most excluded and disadvantaged groups in our society”



© Colin Clementine MacDonald
— traditional family who follow the wheelks
Spring to Autumn from Angus to West
Highlands

Cleamag was going round the houses between Kilmelford and Kilmartin, on the road to Lochgilphead, when she crossed a stream swollen by winter rain. She slipped off the wet boards of a footbridge and was drowned. She was 59. Her family still regularly visits Tìree.

Donald, ‘Dykes’ or ‘Doiks’, MacAllister

*The McAllisters’ headquarters were in Tobermory. They had a house there. Their children went to school there.*¹⁷² Agnes Mackenzie

¹⁷⁰ Duncan MacPhail, Balephuìl, 6/2004

¹⁷¹ Mary MacDonald, grand daughter, 4/2007 and 9/2007

¹⁷² Agnes Mackenzie talking to Eric Cregeen, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.095

The greatest 'character' of all the Travelling People that came to Tiree was 'Dykes' MacAllister. He told several people he had been born on the Scainish machair and would point to the spot. He also said he had been born in Skippinish, Ruaig. However, his birth certificate says that he was born in 1911 at a house called 'Dovecot', Tobermory, the tenth of the family. His father was a 'tinsmith' and his mother Effie Johnston.¹⁷³

*McAllister was at whelks in the winter time, and they would be at lobsters. And McAllister would come to Scarinish, himself and the wife and his children, in his own boat. And they would set up a big camp in front of the hotel...He was sending them to Billingsgate and Glasgow too. They were only coming here in the summertime for holidays. He was a good boatman...My father would be giving him potatoes when he went away.*¹⁷⁴ Hector Kennedy

The family were settled and had a house in Tobermory. He had been in the Merchant Navy and was said to have got his Master's Ticket but he drank too much and he had to leave the sea.¹⁷⁵ 'Dykes' and his wife Agnes (which he pronounced 'Ag-uh-nes') sailed out every summer in his 13 foot dipping lug sail boat to Tiree. His wife is remembered as always walking a few paces behind him.

He was an expert sailor and won so many races at the Tobermory Regatta that he was barred by the Tiree committee from sailing in the Tiree Regatta.¹⁷⁶ He had a large metal plate in the bottom of one of his boats so he could have a small fire going during the trip.¹⁷⁷ He had Donald Archie MacDonald, Skippinish, put a Bradley motor in one of his boats in the 1930s.¹⁷⁸

*'Dykes' was the sort of man who'd say he was broke with a £100 in his pocket!*¹⁷⁹
John McAllister, Crossapol

They usually camped on the *machair* in Scarinish above the *Mary Stewart*, presumably so he could keep an eye on his boat. He would wheel his possessions

¹⁷³ Scotlands People

¹⁷⁴ Hector Kennedy talking to Dr Margaret MacKay, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1974.145

¹⁷⁵ Colin MacDonald, Montrose but visiting Tiree, 7/2013

¹⁷⁶ Donald MacIntyre, Gott, 6/2004

¹⁷⁷ Alasdair Sinclair, Brock, 6/2004 and 9/2007

¹⁷⁸ Duncan Grant, Ruaig, 6/2005

¹⁷⁹ John McAllister (a cousin from Campbeltown), Crossapol, 6/2004

around the island in a wheelbarrow.¹⁸⁰ He would refer to his tent variously as “The Hayfields Hotel, no door, no bell!”¹⁸¹, ‘Greenfields House!’¹⁸² or ‘Canvas Cottage’. Tina MacArthur worked at the Scarinish Hotel at the time and remembers ‘Dykes’ coming to the kitchen window and asking for “A bacon sandwich. Quick!”¹⁸³

He was known on the island as a “good worker”. He collected whelks, painted the outside of houses and would work at unloading the coal puffers. He wouldn’t stop to eat until the day’s work was done.¹⁸⁴

Hector MacArthur once bought a car from Dykes. “We were in the tent with him!” remembers Tina. Hector spent a month doing it up and “it went well”.

One day in then 1950s ‘Dykes’ was in the Scarinish Hotel “as usual” and he asked the young Archie if he wanted to buy a dog. His grandmother’s dog had just died so Archie said yes. Dykes pulled this tiny black pup out of his pocket and sold it to him on the spot for £1.¹⁸⁵

These stories may give a flavor of the man. Some of them are probably true.

‘Dykes’ was in Africa in the 51st Highlanders during the war. It was a cloudless, hot day with the sun beating down. “What day is it today?” he asked his companion. On being told the date in July he said, “Well, it’s a grand day for the Tobermory Games!”¹⁸⁶

They were nice men the young McAllisters, but they were tough guys...They were taking down the [RAF] huts [on Tiree]. [‘Dykes’] was over in Scarinish. He was snowceming. He would do any work, McAllister. He would do the tankers [puffers] and all. But there was a man, John MacFadyen, who was the pier master at that time. There was an Irishman, working at [supervising] taking down the huts. And he

¹⁸⁰ Colin MacDonald, Montrose but visiting Tiree, 7/2013 and Mary MacDonald, one of the Travellers, 4/2007 and 9/2007

¹⁸¹ Babs MacIntyre, Gott, 6/2004

¹⁸² Donald MacIntyre, Gott, 6/2004

¹⁸³ Tina MacArthur, Caolas, 10/2013

¹⁸⁴ Tommy MacKinnon, Vaul, 9/2013

¹⁸⁵ Archie MacLean, Crossapol, 10/2013

¹⁸⁶ Alec McDonald, Kenovay, 9/2004

had a car or a van and he was down at the pier, where the Crofter's supply store is today. And he was hearing hammering there, where McAllister was working. "Who is in that hut over there?" MacFadyen told him. "Well, I'll soon get him out of there!" He went over. He was thinking a lot of himself, this man! He would be going about the pier and MacFadyen didn't like him at all! He knew fine what would happen to him if he would interfere with McAllister. And he was very keen to send him over. [McAllister] was putting a handle on a tin, or something. He was hammering. And he opened the door, told him to get out of the hut. And he told him about the hut, that he shouldn't be in the hut. "You come in," [McAllister] says, "Before I go out. And if you come in, you'll not be able to go out! Take your chance, if you like. The door is open. Come in and we'll see who will be out first! Don't interfere with me! If you interfere with me anywhere at all, I'll break your bones! I stood for King and country in time of war, but I don't believe you ever did. And he came over and came back. MacFadyen asked him, "What happened to you?" "Oh! He's a wild man, yon man!" "I thought you were going to put him out." McAllister was hammering every day after that and there was not a word about it!" John MacFadyen was making a sport of it. McAllister was a nice man.¹⁸⁷ Hector Kennedy

'Dykes' had advertised an outboard engine for sale and he met a man in the pub who wanted to look at it. He took him home. Unfortunately, his wife was ill in bed with flu at the time. The 'Seagull' was attached to the end of the bed but Dykes pulled the cord and the motor roared into life. His wife almost hit the ceiling!¹⁸⁸

Captain Gunn was in charge of the Tiree-Oban ferry. He was down below in his cabin when he felt the boat change course. He rushed up onto the bridge and asked the mate what was wrong. "There's a boat in distress to port, Sir!" Captain Gunn picked up the glasses. "It's 'Dykes' and he's only waving. Reset the course!" he growled.¹⁸⁹

'Dykes' was sailing out of Oban down the sound of Mull in his new, varnished clinker skiff and called in at Lochaline. He went up to the quarry working men's club for a dram. One of the men in the club was admiring 'Dykes' boat. "Well, I've got an identical one lying below the MacDonald Arms in Tobermory, a wonderful boat!" he replied "Are you thinking of selling it? You won't want two," asked the man. "Well, if you gave me £200 you could have it." The man handed over £200 to 'Dykes', whereupon Dykes turned back to Oban. The proud owner of the new boat arrived in Tobermory and went into one of the pubs by the quay, only to be told that 'Dykes' was not there and he only had one boat anyway!¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen. *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1975.069

¹⁸⁸ Alec McDonald, Kenovay, 9/2004

¹⁸⁹ Alec McDonald, Kenovay, 9/2004

¹⁹⁰ Alec McDonald, Kenovay, 9/2004

'Dykes' found a salmon on the quay by a fishing boat and took it up to the MacDonald Arms hotel. He asked the chef if he would buy it. "I've already bought that fish once!" replied the cook.¹⁹¹

'Dykes' was in a bar and trying to get into the "clique" of the conversation. He heard bits and pieces of the talk and the word "Bishopriggs." "Oh, I knew him when he was priest in Barra," chipped in 'Dykes'.¹⁹²

In those days the cargo boat coming to Tiree also had berths for 12 people. Dykes booked the last berth but there was no room for his wife, Agnes. He told her to walk on board with some cattle that were being herded on. She was so short the crew didn't notice her!¹⁹³

"'Dykes' *'Se rascal a bh' ann*". Angus MacLean was once at the Taynuilt Games visiting a cousin. He went up to the hotel afterwards for a dram and recognised 'Dykes' voice. He said to his cousin "If that's 'Dykes' I'm going." But it was too late! 'Dykes' had recognised him and came over. "Times are hard, could you lend me half a crown?" he asked. Angus gave him half a crown to get rid of him, but kept an eye on the Traveller and his circle of friends. Not long after he saw 'Dykes' nod to the barman and pull out a huge wad of notes from his jacket pocket!¹⁹⁴

'Dykes' died in Tobermory in 1993 aged 81.¹⁹⁵

THE END

By 1970 Travelling People were no longer making the summer trip over to Tiree.

EC: *You don't see tinkers on Tiree now.*

HK: *No, I don't see any of them.*¹⁹⁶ Hector Kennedy

Very, very seldom we see a tinker now [1971].¹⁹⁷ Donald Sinclair

¹⁹¹ Alec McDonald, Kenovay, 9/2004

¹⁹² Alec McDonald, Kenovay, 9/2004

¹⁹³ Archie MacLean, Crossapol, 10/2013

¹⁹⁴ Angus MacLean, Scarinish, 6/2004

¹⁹⁵ Scotlands People

¹⁹⁶ Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen in 1971, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.093

The last traditional family of Travelling People in the Highlands stopped going out on the road in 1978.

*The Ardgay Williamsons last went out with a horse and cart in 1978.*¹⁹⁸

Eddie Davies

A number of factors came together after the Second World War to squeeze the life out of days spent on the road under canvas.

*Since the 1950s, mass-production, good roads, the motorcar, the welfare state have forced rapid changes on the Traveller community. Tinsmithing is a dead craft, horse-dealing a thing of the past, hawking now done by catalogue and supermarket.*¹⁹⁹

*But in the 50s plastic came in, cars, buses, Fergi-tractors came...That was good for crofters but bad for us. Our business was horses, and tin, and bringing in what people couldn't get out to get! In the fifties our business went downhill so fast you couldn't see the smoke! It was the motor car that did for traveller life.*²⁰⁰ Alec John Williamson

Hand made tin goods were replaced by cheaper factory made goods in the 1950s and plastic came in during the 1960s.

*The family stopped coming to Tiree when plastic became common for everyday things like buckets and bowls, around 1970.*²⁰¹ Mary MacDonald

The day of the horse, too, was over.

The beginning of the sixties marked the beginning of the end of the horses, especially among the travellers. The thing that hurt the travellers worse than anything was that cars began to come in. Small cars, small lorries, and the farmers began to buy these new-fangled threshing machines, combines and things....Then your fishmen and your fruitmen and your coalmen and your pigmen whom the travellers used to get all their swaps and deals with began to buy wee cars and lorries to sell their fruit and sell

¹⁹⁷ Donald Sinclair talking to Eric Cregeen in 1971, *Tobar an Dualchais*, SA1971.091

¹⁹⁸ Eddie Davies in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 38

¹⁹⁹ Timothy Neat, *The Summer Walkers*, 1996, Canongate Books, p vii

²⁰⁰ Alec John Williamson in *The Summer Walkers*, Timothy Neat, 1996, Canongate Books, p 54

²⁰¹ Mary MacDonald, one of the Travellers, 4/2007 and 9/2007

*their fish. They could travel and hawk farther and get more done in a day.*²⁰² Duncan Williamson

Archie MacLean, Crossapol, remembers the two worlds colliding in the 1960s when he gave a party of sixteen Travellers a lift from Cornaig in the back of his van. They were camping with their horses grazing at the back of the garage in Scarinish.

Authority was also starting to bear down on a travelling life.

*After walking four more miles we were confronted with an iron gate with barbed wire along the top of it. This barred the entrance to the old road that we had been going to. A large No Camping notice had also been put up... 'Do you know the old quarry... Well, we got thereabout four o'clock the day, and pitched our tent - but we never got time to tak' tea, meat nor water. A young whelp of a policeman came and tore the tent down about us and ordered us a way. This is becoming a hard world to live in, when a body cannae even get the breadth of himself to lie down in.'*²⁰³ Betsy Whyte

*About this time (the 1930s) the authorities were beginning to close down all the camping grounds and travellers were stupidly being hunted from place to place.*²⁰⁴ Betsy Whyte

An unexpected pressure on the traditional lifestyle of Travelling People was something that was meant to help them – at least to help them to settle down and live like ‘normal’ people.

*This Welfare State - which was meant to help people - brought much suffering, confusion and unhappiness to many travellers. The middle-aged and older ones, especially, were made to go and live in houses all the time, and were given money for doing nothing, like wild birds in cages... They didn't want to be pacing the floor of a house all day doing nothing, and there was no way they could have continued their own ways of making a living while living in a council house. Many were given jobs, but this too was hell for most of them. They hated being tied and having no freedom - nothing but the same monotonous routine every day. It was not laziness. Most travellers are good workers. It was the compulsion that irked them. The women too had a very difficult time. Being quite unused to making a wage spin out for a week, they just couldn't do it. Before they had lived from day to day.*²⁰⁵ Betsy Whyte

²⁰² Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-1958*, Canongate, 1994, p 271

²⁰³ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 168-9

²⁰⁴ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 99

²⁰⁵ Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, Birlinn, 2001, p 184

CONCLUSION

No longer do the visits of the Travelling People - with their distinctive tents, their horses and carts and their door to door calls - add colour to a Tíree summer. Often facing discrimination on the mainland, they seemed to have found a welcome on the island, even if they were never really understood. The Travellers were well adapted to an unburdened life on the road: they 'saved' by giving all their possessions away knowing that they would get it back the moment they were in need. And it has only been when their way of life was almost extinguished that Scotland woke up to the beauty and wealth of the Travellers' singing and story tradition, one of the glories of national cultural life. The Gael will sympathise with this.