

Iomall a' Chogaidh

An Island on the Edge of War

In 1914 Tiree was a very different island. There were five cobblers, 700 acres of barley under cultivation, 650 horses and Gaelic was the community's language. There were no tractors or cars, no drinks licence, no running water, no electricity, no radio and no planes. News travelled by letters, telegrams and the weekly newspapers.

When the First World War was declared on 4th August, the German army was almost four times the size of the British and a huge recruitment campaign was necessary. At first this was voluntary. As Lt Dugald MacEachern of the 5th Seaforth Highlanders wrote in memory of Hector MacEachern, who fell in battle in France,

*Shall Scotland's mountain Clansmen to fiends and devils yield?
Shall Britain's Ocean children like cowards sit at home
When a brother's blood is calling from fields beyond the foam?*



11th Battalion of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders around the time of WW1. Hector MacLean of Tiree is 8th left in the back row. He was killed in action on 25/6/1916.

The Duke of Argyll's family must have written to the newspapers, encouraging islanders to enlist. A 'Patriotic Tiree Man' replied four months after the start of the war.

Lady Frances [Balfour, the Duke's sister] reminds us that Tiree sent about 400 to the field of Waterloo. Yes, about that number had to go, and several never returned. In the year of Waterloo the [island] population numbered upwards of 5,000 whereas this year it numbers about 1,850. The Duke puts the numerical diminution down to "economic" reasons, while very many hold a different opinion, and have gloomy memories of the cruellest barbarities in the shape of ruthless evictions perpetrated in Tiree not long ago. I believe about 80 Tiree men have recently joined the colours... At a time when unanimity is eminently desirable, and all controversial subjects should be avoided, I refrain from saying more. The less the Duke says about his "ancestors" and the "fiery cross" the better. Warriors they were certainly not.



ABOVE Photograph of a group of 12 soldiers of the 1st (later 1st/7th) Battalion Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) around 1915.

LEFT Photograph of a group of 20 soldiers of the 1st (later 1st/7th) Battalion Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) around 1915.

From 1916, conscription into the armed forces became compulsory for men between 19 and 41, with an appeal allowed to a local Military Service Tribunal if you were in work of national importance or a conscientious objector. Hector MacPhail told this story.

There was a committee on Tiree, which was responsible for selecting young men to go away to the First World War. Among the members were Kenneth Mackenzie [piermaster], Tom MacLean (Tòmas Dhòmhnail an Tuairneir) and Malcolm MacLean (Calum Beag Haoidhnis). Hector Graham picked up Kenneth MacKenzie, who was disabled, one day and carried him down the pier ready to throw him off the end, saying, "You're not going to send any more young men to their deaths in Flanders", before bystanders intervened.

A war savings campaign on the island and in Glasgow collected money for an aeroplane called 'An Tirisdeach'. Local women set up a canteen for servicemen at the pier.