

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 22

### CATECHU

I want to talk about sailing - and urine. This piece of hard, brown material, shown with a fragment of herring net is catechu, or cutch. It is made from acacia trees, native to India and China, by boiling their heartwood in water followed by evaporating the mixture. The dense, red wood is rich in tannins, chemicals that protect the trees from pests. Tannins are found in lots of plants and are responsible for the astringent taste of black tea, unripe fruits and red wine. The same extracts are sometimes added to liquorice pastilles to cleanse the breath, and in traditional Indian medicines to help sore throats and diarrhoea.

Commercial fishing for cod and ling was slow to start on Tiree. The lack of a good harbour meant boats had to be dragged up the beach every evening, which limited their size. But in the 1841 Census it was recorded that Tiree had forty-three fishermen; the peak year was 1881 with 171. Where there were boats there were boat builders, and in 1851, at the start of the boom, there were seven on the island. There were also sail makers, and Willie Lamont remembered one who lived in his own township of Mannal. In 1860 the Duke built a larger fishing boat called the *Duchess* as an encouragement for the island's industry. The island chamberlain, John Campbell, informed the Duke that 'I had a letter from McQuarrie informing me that the crew of the *Duchess* who were [given] Scarinish Store [also known as *Eaglais Sgairinis* down by the harbour] to keep their things in, had stolen a quantity of fine sail cloth and other articles belonging to the sloop *Dream*'. The *Duchess* was wrecked in 1871.

Sails were as important to islanders up to the 1940s as petrol is to us today. Traditionally they were made of linen, which was grown as flax and woven on Tiree. In 1662 a Tiree rental detailed a 'sail and hair taikle to a galey'. By the middle of the nineteenth century imported mass-produced (and, until 1865, slave-grown) American cotton had begun to take over. However, both these plant fibres tend to rot slowly when wet and don't like bright sunlight. To preserve precious sailcloth, the material was soaked in a tanning agent. In medieval Europe this was the bark of the oak tree, much used in leather tanning. But by the end of the nineteenth century catechu from the Indian Ocean was finding its way to Tiree with its merchant seamen, and it began to be used here to preserve sails and fishing nets. The catechu, a pound weight to a gallon, was dissolved in a cauldron of hot water. Nets were dipped into the liquid and dried in the sun, while sails were laid on the grass, wetted and then brushed, front and back, with the brown solution. In Shetland, groups of fishermen used communal 'cutch kettles', and on the mainland fishing communities

often had a 'barking shed' for the same process. The tanned sail or net would last for a decade or more before needing to be re-tanned.

There was often one other ingredient, something that was found in almost every household in the Highlands: stale urine or *maistir*. To colour a fabric, like tweed or sailcloth, you need more than a dye; you need something called a 'mordant' to stick the dye to the fabric. Stale urine contains lots of ammonia (responsible for its smell), which is very good at doing this. Ammonia is also a useful cleanser, and an important building in Ancient Rome was the laundry, or *fullonica*, where stained clothes were trampled in vats of urine collected from houses round about, before being rinsed and dried in the sun. *Maistir* was so admired as a disinfectant that it was sprinkled around Highland doorways and cattle four times a year to keep the fairies away.

This insignificant brown lump from an Indian tree was therefore an important part of a Tíree fisherman's toolkit, just as *maistir* was an important part of a weaver's workshop.

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