

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 24

TIREE'S SECOND LAND RAID

Seven months before the smoke cleared at the end of the First World War, a tiny but related conflict was being played out in Balephetrish. Eight Tiree men ploughed part of this farm in anger at the lack of progress giving land to those who had no croft. This full-throated pamphlet 'Tiree Food Producers Sent to Prison at the Insistence of the Duke of Argyll' was produced by the Highland Land League in their support.

The League had been founded in the 1880s with the motto '*S treasa tuath na tighearna* / The people are mightier than a lord.' Years of protest in Ireland and later the Highlands had led to the Crofters' Holdings Act of 1886. This gave existing crofters fair rents, protection from eviction, and the ability to pass their croft to family members. But the frustration of many on Tiree with no land boiled over a month after the Act had passed into law. Greenhill Farm was squatted, leading to an 'invasion' of the island by 250 marines. In 1911 the new Liberal government passed the Small Landholders Act. This created a Board of Agriculture for Scotland with the powers to buy land against landowners' wishes for new smallholdings. The Act raised the hopes of many on Tiree, and the Board was flooded with applications. However, the funds set aside for the scheme were insufficient and hearings became bogged down in paperwork. The Soldiers and Sailors (Gifts for Land Settlement) Act of 1916 also encouraged the view that the day of the big farmer was over.

One huge farm on Tiree that became the principal target for break up was that leased by Tom Barr. The Barr family had come to Tiree from Dalry in Ayrshire in 1864 in response to a challenge from the estate to create a dairy farm. The dairy hadn't lasted long but Tom Barr flourished as a farmer, taking over Kenovay and Crossapol, and grazing his cattle and horses from The Vaul boundary to Paterson's farm. In 1910, possibly seeing which way the political wind was blowing, he also took a lease on a farm in the Borders, and part of his family moved there. Between 1912 and 1914 the Board had broken the farms of Greenhill, Baugh, Hynish, Balinoe, Hough and Heylipol into new crofts. In 1913 the Board also tried to create nine new crofts in Kenovay but the compensation demanded by Barr was too high. In 1914 the Board surveyed Balephetrish Farm, divided it into lots, and even went so far as to write to cottars asking them to start the registration process for their new crofts. The largest farm on Tiree was on the verge of being returned to the people.

Nothing happened. In January 1918, after four years of stand off, eight men broke the deadlock by ploughing a thirteen-acre field in Balephetrish and sowing part of it.

In April a police sergeant and the local constable tried to arrest the eight men, but they refused to walk to the pier. By the time carriages had been arranged, five had disappeared. The three men appeared in court, but demanded to give their evidence in Gaelic and to find a sympathetic lawyer. The sheriff adjourned the case for a week. When all eight arrived in Oban seven days later they were met by a crowd of supporters and taken to a public reception. The raiders were Hugh MacPhail, 73, Cornaigmore, owner of the shop and post office there, church elder and father of seven children; Archibald Kennedy, 55, Balevullin, recorded as a kelp collector and jobbing farmer in 1911; John MacLean, 53; William MacPhail, 45, Croish, a tailor and noted bard; Hugh MacLean, 61; John MacInnes, 48, one of those labouring on Gott pier in 1911; Hector MacDougall, 73, Kilmoluaig, a retired carpenter; and Hector MacLean, 47. Two years before the Military Service Act had called up all those under 38, and there were few younger men on the island. The defendants made the point that they were simply doing what the government had asked the nation to do: grow food for the nation. Also, that they had family on the frontline. On the other hand, Thomas MacLean, Whitehouse, Inspector of the Poor on Tiree, stated that, rather than being on the breadline, the defendants were actually quite well to do, with Hugh MacPhail in particular being a prosperous shop owner. He referred to a herring boom on the island, which had begun in 1914, and had made some islanders rich.

The sheriff was sympathetic to the Tiree men, offering them a chance to go free with a nominal fine if they stopped working the land for a few weeks while further negotiations between the Board, landowner and tenant took place. The men refused to give this undertaking, saying they already had crops in the ground that they had to tend. The sheriff therefore sentenced them to ten days in prison, but with the rights of political prisoners. They were released a day early to catch the steamer back to the island and their fines were met by a subscription raised by the Land League.

The next year two further groups of returned servicemen wrote to the Board threatening to take more direct action unless Tom Barr's 3,000 acre farm was made into crofts straight away. There were 218 applications for land on Tiree, and eventually thirty-eight new crofts were let on Barr's land. Fourteen of the smaller crofts were leased without a requirement to build a house, something that saved Board further expense. Tom Barr moved to the Borders where his family still farms.

This political pamphlet is unashamedly partisan. A fuller, balanced account is given by Bob Chambers in his recent book *Twentieth-Century Crofting Schemes on Tiree and Coll*. But it drives home the point that the struggle for land did not end in 1886 - in many ways it goes on still.

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This pamphlet is available in An Iodhlann, catalogue number 2004.72.3.