

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 37

***FIODHAN* or CHEESE PRESS**

This wooden cheese press or *fiodhan* was an important piece of equipment on many crofts on Tiree. Preserving the food value of milk by removing much of the water and adding salt, producing butter and cheese, is something that has been done since prehistoric times. In 1695, the traveller Martin Martin reported that on Tiree: "The natives for the most part live on barley bread, butter, milk, cheese, fish, and some eat the roots of silverweed. There are but few that eat any flesh [meat]."

Much of the dairy work was done by young girls at the summer shieling or *àirigh*, on *sliabh* or hill. Goat and sheep milk was also popular. After Tiree was set out into crofts around 1800, these shielings were abandoned, and cows would usually be brought back to the byre by the herdboy or *buachaille* to be milked every evening. After standing, to allow naturally present bacteria to convert some of the lactose in the milk to acid, rennet was added to separate the liquid milk into curds and whey. Latterly, this would come from a bottle, but before this was available the stomach of a calf, or even the gizzard of a chicken was used. The mixture then went into a muslin bag and hung to strain out the whey. The thin whey was very nutritious, and was used for baking or fed to pigs. Slices of the curds with a touch of salt could be eaten straight away as crowdie. But to keep the cheese over the winter, more water had to be removed. It takes a gallon of milk to produce a pound of hard cheese. The curds inside a muslin bag were put in a cheese press such as this and progressively squeezed by heaping heavier and heavier stones on the top. During the nineteenth century, the screw-operated cheese press became popular.

Coll is quite different to Tiree. The Stewart landlords there cleared much of their estate in the 1850s, bringing in dairy farmers from Ayrshire. Coll's cheese became nationally famous, until production slumped after the First World War. Men from the east end of Tiree often sailed to Coll in the summer to buy a large Coll cheese. Although Tiree had less ground that was suitable for dairy farming, the eighth Duke of Argyll was keen not to be outdone: "When the large farm of Balephetrish became vacant some twenty two years ago [in 1864], I instructed my factor to look out for a tenant from the low country [the Lowlands] who should be a dairy farmer. The disadvantages of residence in a remote island, the character of which was little known in the low country, made this a matter of some difficulty, and involved a very considerable outlay in buildings adapted for the purpose." Tom Barr arrived from Ayrshire to a *Taigh Bhaile Phèadrais* that had been considerably adapted to create cowsheds and a milking parlour. This project was abandoned after a few years, however, as Tom Barr discovered that horse breeding was more profitable.

Domestic cheese making remained popular on Tiree, with a class reserved for it at the Agricultural Show, at least until the 1930s. Many Tiree houses would have a row of cheeses on a shelf in the kitchen. Ishbel Maclean from Kilmoluaig, *Bell' a' Mhate*, was someone well known for her cheeses. Some added caraway seeds at the curd stage to enhance the flavour. Butter and cheese were a traditional New Year's gift for those without a milking cow. Many fishermen were superstitious taking cheese to sea with them. And it was usual to follow the men in a walking funeral party with a *cairt na cosgais* carrying a *pige* of whisky, Tobermory caraway biscuits and a round of cheese.

A *fiodhan* like this would usually be home made. This one – round and staved – was made by Donald MacLean, Whitehouse. Others were square.

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