

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 47

### GAS LIGHT

This working gas light, possibly the last on Tiree, sits in The Studio, Balephuill. Bottled gas, used for cooking and lighting, became popular on Tiree between the end of the last war and arrival of the electrical grid in the 1950s.

In 1899, the artist Duncan MacGregor Whyte was at the start of a career that was to take him to Antwerp, Paris, Canada and Australia. His connection to Tiree was via his grandfather, the Rev Archibald Farquharson, who was the long-serving Congregational minister in Cornaig from 1832 to 1878. In letters just released by the Inveraray Archive, we find that he wrote to the factor Hugh Macdiarmid in Island House: "I am very anxious to get permission to build a wee studio in Balephuill. The spot I prefer, if not already in hand, is to the left of Gilleasbuig Campbell's house at *Ceann na Creige* on a little point there at the extreme end of Traigh Vee [the beach at Balephuill]. It was at one time in someone's possession, and yet remains of a dwelling of some kind exist, perhaps *Gille Criosd* had a hand there?! as the debris is at least not prehistoric." (*Gille Criosd* may be a reference to Gilbert MacArthur, who lived at the far end of the West Hynish road above the quarry). A gifted portrait painter, MacGregor Whyte went on: "My figure things from Tiree are greatly liked, and intend carrying these into more perfection this year." But he became increasingly fascinated by the beaches and seascapes of the west end of Tiree.

He must have received permission from the estate. Having ordered the wood in Glasgow, MacGregor Whyte, whose first training had been as a joiner, built the hut himself. It was said that he found two skeletons and a gold ring while digging the foundations, and he may have been wrong when he described the site as "not prehistoric". What he went on to call 'The Studio' had a large window to the north to provide good light for painting. Two decades later and from the other side of the world, he sent a letter to his wife in Oban while working in Perth, Western Australia, in 1919: "I sent money recently to D MacArthur to get Studio tarred, and last year too, but received no answer. Guess he did not receive it. I sent you a £1 PO [postal order] but never heard more of it, and if you have not received it, then I'm too late to reclaim it. It is awful to think that cabled money should have been so long. A letter would have carried as quickly." Having returned from Australia, MacGregor Whyte came to Tiree every summer from 1921 until his death in 1953.

Gas lighting was first introduced onto Edinburgh's North Bridge in 1819; five years later, Sir Walter Scott, then at the height of his literary and commercial success, had gas lighting installed into Abbotsford, his grand home. But this gas, derived from

coal, was not an option for less wealthy, rural households. Their turn had to wait for the discovery of liquid petroleum gas in 1910, after an American chemist was intrigued that almost half a bottle of petrol he had bought had evaporated by the time he got home. LPG, a mixture of butane and propane, was a by-product of oil refining and natural gas purification. By the 1920s, a million gallons of LPG was being sold in America. Europe, however, was slower to adopt the new fuel; the Calor (Distributing) Company was set up in Britain in 1935. After the Second World War, their blue cylinders became a common sight on Tiree, mainly because the electrical grid did not cover the island until the 1950s. (Blue bottles contain butane; red bottles propane). The first outlet on Tiree to sell bottled gas was Calum Salum's shop, which opened in 1938. Neil MacDonald from Brock, known to all as *Niall a' Ghas*, distributed the gas canisters by van all over the island. (To make matters somewhat confusing, there were two other men who were also, later, known *Niall a' Ghas*: Neil MacNeill from Scarinish, and Neil MacDonald, *Niall Rob Eachainn*, who had a small shop in *Eite*, Heanish).

Other houses on Tiree were fitted with gas lighting too, including that of Donald MacKinnon, Hough, and Millhouse in 1959. When Sheila Lilley's family rented number 3, Lower Square in the 1950s: "There was no electricity in the house; everything was Calor Gas, which provided our lighting and cooking, we even had a Calor gas iron." Calum Salum's shop itself had several gas lights; there was a chain to turn the gas supply on and off, and then, presumably, a race to light the mantle with a match!

This object is not actually in An Iodhlann, but it could easily fit through its doors, and so qualifies for this series. The idea was kindly suggested by Iain Knapman, who provided me with the photograph as well as much of the information about The Studio. Ailean Boyd from Balephuill passed on his historical knowledge of the township, and Charlie MacDonald, Dunmore, nephew of the original *Niall a' Ghas*, told me about his uncle. Thanks to Douglas Hunter for repairing the gas supply at The Studio in 1978, and to Cathie MacNeill for the gas light spares that have kept it working. Any more ideas for '100 Objects' gratefully received!

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