

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 52

CHRISTMAS MENU

This is the menu for the 1943 Christmas dinner at RAF 'Kilkenneth', signed by all those at the table. Creating festive cheer on a remote Hebridean island in the middle of the upheaval of a World War was important to lift the spirits of the servicemen, far from home as they were.

But what was a routine seasonal spread for the thirty-three airmen present would have been a wonderful sight to any islanders with their noses pressed to the steamy windows of the NAAFI at the intersection of the Moss and Hough roads, and not just because of wartime restrictions. Christmas Day was not a public holiday in Scotland until 1958. In 1896, John Simpson, the thirty-seven-year-old Balemartine headteacher from Glasgow, wrote in the school log: "Today is Christmas elsewhere, but not so in Tiree – at least, no one knows or cares anything about it here. We are working away as busily as on any other day." He sounds disappointed. But Christmas was indeed coming to the Hebrides. Eight years earlier in the same school, the children had been introduced to a custom that had been introduced in 1800 from Germany by Queen Charlotte, the wife of George III: "Scholars had a half-holiday yesterday to enable them to attend a Christmas tree given by Mrs McDiarmid, Island House [the factor's wife]."

By the start of the twentieth century, more Christmas traditions were starting to appear on Tiree. Before the First World War, Mabel Kennedy from Balephuill and Margaret MacKinnon from Braeside both remembered getting tiny stockings on Christmas morning, containing a few simple things like an orange or apple or a sixpenny piece wrapped in paper.

Lady Victoria Campbell, the daughter of the eighth Duke of Argyll, was a regular visitor to the island from 1886. She eventually persuaded her father to renovate an old gamekeeper's cottage on the shore of Gott Bay into 'The Lodge'. Lady Victoria, as part of her charitable work on Tiree, was determined to introduce the island's children to some of the wonders of a London Christmas. She had a model ship built, calling it the 'Ship of Good Hope' and filling it full of presents. In 1909, her last on Tiree before she died, she invited local children and sent 'At Home' cards to her friends on the island. On Christmas Eve she wrote to one of her servants on the mainland: "Ship to be lit up. Pipes, a gramophone. But at 11.15 we begin with Rev MacPherson and wife coming to a Christmas Service. Then everyone at 3.30pm. A gentleman shows the gramophone."

A decade later, another visitor had a similar ambition. Isobel Hutchison was a thirty-one year old traveller from Edinburgh, who came to Tiree in 1920 to spend the winter in Ruaig (probably at Sackhill): "In 1920 for the first time a more substantial sort of fairy, in the shape of Father Christmas, visited Tiree. Perhaps the treelessness of the island had hitherto prevented him from landing, for the first thing we had to do when we heard of his proposed visit was to send *post haste* all the way to Mull for a Christmas Tree, and much anxiety prevailed lest the weather should prevent the boat from landing it in time. Fortunately the sun was shining on a tossing green sea when the mail boat, two days before Christmas, arrived from Tobermory with a beautiful waving spruce tree, twelve feet or more high, an unusual spectacle amid the sacks of flour and wooden crates which are the boat's usual cargo. The tree was met by the minister himself, and triumphantly conveyed in his pony-trap across the three miles of glittering sand to its destination at the little chapel of Ruaig [Ruaig School had been badly damaged by fire the year before and was being rebuilt]. The scholars were in the midst of a geography lesson, and the tree arrived just in the nick of time to save the "black sheep" of the class, who either could not or would not point out Glasgow on the map of Scotland, from his daily "palmy" [strap].

"There was much excitement when the waving green tips were pushed through the doorway. Here was vegetation enough in the church to put the rhubarb to the blush indeed! The tree was carried in like a gigantic baby in the arms of three of the older boys, and deposited along the backs of the pews against the wall, where it exhaled a delightfully fresh odour of resinous sap in the stuffy little chamber ... More exciting than the arrival of the tree was the arrival of Santa Claus himself on Christmas Eve. Many of the smaller children had never heard of him before, and were struck silent with astonishment when a fine, tall old gentleman with a long white beard – who was much too burly to get down the slender chimney pipe let into the window – solemnly appeared in the doorway, bowing and smiling and evidently well-acquainted with the Gaelic! He was dressed in red robes and wore a holly crown, and he carried on his back a huge sack, for all the world like a postman's bag! The children were awestruck. "Can that man hear, do you think?" asked one little boy who had obtained his heart's desire in the shape of a box of soldiers, and he was assured that Santa had very sharp ears. He brought just enough gifts to go round; what is more, he actually remembered the "black sheep" who could not be asked to the treat because he had never been to Sunday school. This present, which was a glittering new knife with two blades, was presented next morning during lessons (the Tiree children do not all get a holiday on Christmas Day), and a wave of incredulous red swept over the owner's face, which it would have done Santa Claus good to see, though it was just as well he was not a witness of the unhappy sequel. For what can one do with a new knife

but use it? Alas, the nearest wood at hand was the spongy surface of the bookboard and pew in front, and here the “black sheep” proceeded instantly and energetically to carve his initials. Scarcely had the glistening blade whittled out the first shapely semi-circle, however, when vengeance descended. Sacrilege is a serious crime, especially in the Highlands, but not even the usual punishment of six “palmies” could quite wash out the gleam in the culprit’s eye when he felt the bulge in his trouser pocket where the knife reposed.”

The huge RAF base on the island from 1941 brought an influx of servicemen and women from all over the world, bringing their seasonal traditions with them. Janet MacIntosh from Caolas was a young girl at the time: "We thought of wartime being an exciting time because there were pictures [cinema] and they used to give us Christmas parties and there were a lot of a people around." Joe Sylvester remembered: "The RAF Embarkation Unit at Scarinish had created their own little pub from a Nissen hut which they called the 'Pier Arms'. It had a proper bar and a few chairs and tables and was cosy and warm. The beer was no better than ours, but the surroundings were a lot nicer. On Christmas Night 1943, several of us walked the few miles from the airfield to the 'Pier Arms' only to be turned away as the place was crowded."

Today, the 'English' Christmas has been wholeheartedly adopted on the island. But next issue we will talk about Tiree's real mid-winter festival: *Oidhche Challainn*, Hogmanay. And how one sailor from Hynish missed it. Thank you for reading this column over the year, and for all your suggestions and comments. It's been a fascinating journey for me!

Dr John Holliday