

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 55

### CAPTAIN LACHLAN MACPHAIL'S CHANTER

This chanter belonged to Captain Lachlan MacPhail, a Merchant Navy skipper from Tiree, who sailed through two world wars, a tribute to his seamanship. Captain MacPhail had an unwitting part in one of World War Two's most intriguing dramas, and also had a frequently played pipe reel written for him. The chanter was given to An Iodhlann recently by his grandson, Andy Gebbie, in memory of Lachlan's three daughters: Isabel, Cath and Margaret.

Lachlan MacPhail was born in Clachan, Cornaigmore in 1889, the son of a master tailor. Although he always wanted to go to sea, his father wanted him to become a joiner, and he agreed to serve his apprenticeship in Port Glasgow. As soon as he finished this, however, he went to sea, sailing through the First World War and winning his First's Mate Foreign-going ticket in 1922. By 1926, he was a captain in Hogarth's, also known as the Baron Line. Over half of its fleet had been sunk during the First World War, but by the start of the Second World War, Hogarth's had rebuilt to become one of the largest privately owned shipping companies in the world. With merchant shipping a daily target, a further twenty Hogarth ships were sunk between 1939 and 1945. Convoy work was unforgiving. Captain MacPhail wrote in his logbook: "This is to certify that the following members of the firemen are unable to carry out their duties as such, being utterly incompetent for maintaining steam and having no previous experience as firemen." He called the Royal Navy the 'Wavy Navy' after a convoy commanding officer once ordered MacPhail to take what he considered to be an unsuitable course. He himself had a narrow brush with death when a bullet passed through his cap while off the Spanish coast. Although the ship's boy, standing alongside, shouted out that the captain had been hit, MacPhail was unscathed. He was also once washed off the open bridge by a freak wave, only to be washed back by a second. When the first mate shouted: "I thought you were gone, Lachie!", he replied: "Captain MacPhail to you!" The *Baron Forbes* was known to be a safe boat, because its cargo from Glasgow to Spain: whisky, appreciated by the German High Command. He also sailed on the Murmansk convoys.

Unknowingly, Captain MacPhail was drawn into a plot to confuse German High Command, a plot so fantastic, it could have been dreamt up by Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, 007. It was. While Fleming was working for Naval Intelligence, he wrote a memo suggesting planting misleading documents on a corpse designed to be found by the enemy. In 1943, the Allies decided to invade Europe from the south, making their bridgehead on Sicily. Desperate to fool the

German high command into thinking the invasion would happen elsewhere, Operation Mincemeat was hatched. Seventy years on, the details of the plot remain disputed, but the generally accepted story is this.

Sourcing a body, even in wartime Britain, was more difficult than it sounds, but eventually a coroner in London was persuaded to make one available. This was Glyndwr Michael, a thirty-four-year-old homeless man who had died in 1943 after eating rat poison. The body was dressed in military uniform, provided with a new identity as 'Major William Martin', a photograph of his 'girlfriend', London theatre tickets and a hotel stub put in his pockets, and a briefcase attached to his wrist. This contained correspondence between two high-ranking generals discussing the forthcoming invasion in Greece and Sardinia. The body on ice was then driven to Holy Loch, and loaded onto the submarine HMS *Seraph*. After surfacing off the Spanish port of Huelva, the body with its briefcase was released into the sea. As the Allies had hoped, a local fisherman retrieved the body. Although Spain was officially neutral, General Franco was sympathetic to the Nazis and the local German agent was alerted. The letters in the briefcase were copied and taken to Germany, where they were taken seriously and did encourage the Germans to re-route forces to Greece rather than Italy.

The body of 'Major Martin' was released by the Spanish authorities for burial, and Captain MacPhail, whose ship happened to be tied up in port, was invited by the British Vice-Consul to attend the funeral. "When the Vice-Consul asked me to accompany him to the burial, I thought I was attending the funeral of a drowned man – and so did the Vice-Consul," Captain MacPhail said later. "You can imagine my amazement when I read years afterwards how a body had been dressed in the uniform of a British officer and apparently vital British war papers planted in the pockets." The story was made into the 1956 film *The Man Who Never Was*. Operation Mincemeat has inspired several books, and another theory is that the body was that of a sailor who died following an explosion on the converted aircraft carrier HMS *Dasher*.

Lachlan MacPhail retired as commodore of the Baron Line on Christmas Eve 1959 to his house in Scotstoun, which he had named 'Alaval' after a Tìree place-name near Clachan. The modest Captain MacPhail was also a Gaelic poet and a keen piper, and one of piping's most famous tunes was written and named for him on his retirement. Peter MacFarquhar was born in Moss in 1913. He was also at sea, but came ashore and spent most of his life in Snizort on Skye working as a postman and sub-postmaster. An accomplished piper on the competition circuit and a member of the Isle of Skye Pipe Band, he had a competition, the 'Peter MacFarquhar Star', named after him by the Skye Gathering. He was also a remarkable composer, and wrote the

pipe reel 'Captain Lachlan MacPhail of Tiree' for his old friend, a tune that is now widely played all over the world. He also wrote the popular tune 'Kenny Gillies of Portnalong'. Peter MacFarquhar died in 1979 and is buried in Portree.

This well-worn chanter has been a prized family heirloom, and An Iodhlann is very grateful to his family for donating it to the island museum.

Dr John Holliday