

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 59

TAILOR'S THIMBLE

"Bigger than a loose, and peerier [smaller] than a moose, and yet it has more windows than aa the king's hoose."

This is a riddle from the island of Yell in Shetland. Like all riddles, the answer is obvious once you know it: a thimble. This tailor's thimble was given to An Iodhlann by Donald MacKinnon, Hough, whose father served an apprenticeship with Lachlan MacKinnon. Lachie, one of two tailors in Kilkenneth in the early twentieth century, lived in the house later occupied by Angus and Flora MacDonald. He had a passion for new gadgets. He owned the first electric torch on the island. And Hector Kennedy from Heylipol remembered another: "And that's another thing the tailor had, since I remember: a Swiss Cottage. And it was on the mantelpiece in the workshop at the end of the house: a man and a woman. When it was going to rain, the man would come out with an umbrella; and when it was going to be dry, the woman would come out ... And the old people in these days were, especially at harvest time, to see how the ones that was in the Swiss Cottage, who was out. They would get hold of Lachie anywhere [and ask]: 'Who's out today?'"

The open end of a tailor's thimble allowed greater control of the cloth by the fingertip, although it demanded professional accuracy controlling the needle! By itself, this small band of metal might not grab your attention, but it opens a window onto the history of several trades on Tiree.

Today, almost all our clothes are factory-made, usually on the other side of the world. But a hundred years ago, most clothing on Tiree was made on the island, often using local fabric. In 1776, there were thirty-two weavers on the island, split evenly between men and women. By 1851 there were fifty-two, but by this time they were almost all women. But, unlike islands like Harris, Tiree was not natural sheep country, and by 1911 the number of weavers had fallen to two, as most fabric was now bought in from factories on the mainland. Duncan Grant told me that the last loom on Tiree was in the house of *Anna Mhòr* near the wind turbine in Ruaig.

Dressmakers made women's clothes. No one gave "dressmaker" as their occupation in the 1776 Tiree Census (presumably most women made their own). But by 1891 there were twenty-six on the island (all women, as you would expect). Men's clothing was made by tailors, all of whom were male, except the "tailoress" Ann Allison of Kilmoluag. In 1851, there were twenty-one tailors on the island. By 1911, this had fallen to six, as islanders increasingly bought factory made clothes from

catalogues such as Pryce-Jones, or travelling salesmen. Donald Sinclair from West Hynish knew something of the trade:

My father was a tailor to trade. [And] an uncle of his was a tailor. He learned with his uncle when he was a boy. After that, his uncle went to America ... There was a tailor here and there on the island, and, especially at some times in the year, he was kept very busy. My mother was very smart with the needle. If he would cut the suit, she would sew it in a jiffy. There was no sewing machine in my time [Donald was born in 1885] ... They would bring [the cloth] to my father's house. Even the drawers [long johns] they were wearing: it was home made. [The cloth was] locally made, most of it ... The tailor could make you a suit for seven and six.

Commissions did not always go according to plan. Hector Kennedy told this story: "The old tailor, he was making a jacket for George [Mackinnon]. He went up to the shop where the [Middleton] post office is today for a lining to put to the jacket, but there was no lining there but a red thing. It was a lining all right, but it was red. There was no any more, no other kind. So Maggie Slevin [the daughter of the kelp factory manager] wrapped it in paper and he took it home. And he told George the lining he had for the jacket. And George said to him he was not going to take that lining; he would look like a soldier! So the tailor had to take it back to [Slevin's] shop in Middleton." Having made a new piece of clothing, it brought good fortune if the tailor was the first to tell his customer: "May you enjoy and wear it." (I have this as "*Meall 's cathadh cuir dheth na luideagan e*", but I would welcome readers' advice!) If a woman complimented the new owner first, it brought bad luck.

Tailoring was a skilled trade. However, not all tailors were equal. Several men in the 1861 Census describe themselves simply as "tailors", and presumably learnt their skills informally on the island. But two "Apprentice Tailors", four "Journeymen", and ten "Master Tailors" are also listed. The Incorporation of Tailors of Glasgow was set up in 1527 as a powerful craft guild. To join, you were locked in a room and left to make a jacket, waistcoat and a pair of breeches "according to the fashion". A Master Tailor, a jealously guarded title, could take on an apprentice or unqualified journeymen and charge higher prices. The Tیره minister, John Gregorson Campbell, however, recorded an older tradition: "Tailors were looked upon with a feeling akin to that entertained in the south, where 'nine tailors made a man'. The reason probably was that in olden times, every man fit to bear arms thought it beneath him to follow a peaceful profession, and only the lame and cripple were brought up as tailors."

Like the smithy or the cobbler's workshop, old men of the township often congregated in the tailor's workshop to talk and tell tales. When the tailor, like Willie MacPhail at Croish, was a brilliant bard and wit, this was particularly so.

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