

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 61

TOYS

Let us begin, for a change, far, far away from Tiree: on the website of the world's largest retailer, in fact. Their best-selling toy of the moment is "Lishy Squishy Jumbo Cartoon Cat Hamburger Scented Slow Rising Exquisite Kid Soft Toy". It is said that this "Helps To Keep Kids Focused, Kills Times, And Fantastic Way To Keep Children Away From Tablets And Phones."

There may well be some of these 'decompression toys' on the island as we speak. You squeeze it tight in your hand, then watch it slowly regain its shape. But up until the 1970s, Tiree was a very different place. Children's toys were simple, home-made and cheap. The toy below was typical. Made from a discarded horseshoe by Hugh MacLean in Barrapol and given to Ailean Boyd, it was called a 'Peter Dum Dick'; it made a noisy 'clack' when the wood was pulled back. Margaret MacKinnon, Braeside, told me her Christmas stockings in the 1920s contained just an apple and a sixpence wrapped in paper. Lady Victoria Campbell caused a sensation at the start of the twentieth century, when she had a large model ship set up at The Lodge and filled it with Christmas presents for the island's children.

George Holleyman, stationed on Tiree in 1941, was fascinated by the island's traditions, and he made a note of some of the toys he saw on the island. A *srannachan* (literally something making a humming sound) was described as a "rectangular piece of wood bored with two holes and threaded with string"; *ballaichean crèadha* were "clay balls or marbles dried in the sun"; *bàtaichean seileastair* were "boats made from the leaves of the yellow iris"; the *cuidheall-chnò* was made at Hollowe'en from a hazel nut pierced by a stick and whirled round with a string to imitate the sound of a spinning wheel. The Second World War brought many new opportunities to the island's children. Duncan Grant, Ruaig, found a magnet inside a decommissioned mine washed up on the shore. When he pulled the poker out of the hands of his aunt in Brock as she attended to the fire, she was not amused! The Italian prisoner-of-war in Crosapol were particularly inventive, and made toys out of tin cans.

Model boats were popular. Ann MacDonald from *Druimasadh* told me how her father had sailed them in the small inlet called *An Garbh-Phort Beag* in Heanish. John George Buchanan, a son of Dr Buchanan in Baugh and who was born in 1881, also had a model boat. One day the wind changed, and the boat sailed bravely out to sea. He feared he would never see it again, but it was found by a young girl on Barrapol's

Tràigh Bhì. It must have been a splendid boat, because the Buchanans gave her a reward of ten shillings, the equivalent today of £50. Colin MacDonald, *Cailean Fhearchair*, from Balephuill wrote the song *Òran do Bhàta Bheag a Thàinig air Tìr* 'the Song for the Boat that Came in to Land' about the episode.

Another popular toy was the *coilleach-gaoithe* 'the wind cockerel'. Lord Bannerman, later a Scottish rugby international and Liberal politician, was sent to Tìree for the summer in the first two decades of the twentieth century: "During the school holidays I was sent each year to the croft farm on Tìree where I would speak Gaelic all day to grandfather and Flora, my middle-aged aunt. There I found plenty of ways to amuse myself – like the making of the *coilleach-gaoithe*, the light-as-a-feather toy made by generations of children in the Hebrides. What a dance it led me! Stealthily I braved the dark recesses of the stable to creep up on Flora's brown hen. Then, clutching fiercely, I seized some of her wing feathers in my fingers and tugged them out as she flew screeching through the broken skylight. The next step was to stand on tiptoe on grandfather's armchair, just managing to reach with my free hand the whisky bottle on the shelf of the kitchen cupboard. But it was the cork I wanted, not the whisky. Once I had extracted it, I had the raw materials complete, and it was not long before I had constructed my first toy. The process was simple – merely to stick the quills all round the cork in a cluster, as the grey-bearded *Gilleasbuig* (the odd job man at the farm) had been at pains to show me. No toy from a shop ever held half the mischief or delight that was in this fly-in-the-wind. And how it flew! There it was, perched just out of reach on the whiskery edge of a sandy hummock, swaying too and from on its feathery legs in the fitful breeze. My homespun kilt, frayed and worn, was twisted and hanging half off. Nothing must interfere with this capture of this will-o'-the-wisp. Fly-in-the-wind jumped suddenly from her anchor of bent grass stalks and danced blithely away on feathery legs. With as near a roar as I could muster I charged after her, kilt a banner in the breeze." Sadly it flew straight into the *dùnan* 'dung heap', and, trying desperately to retrieve it, he slipped and fell in himself. I leave you to decide whether he would have enjoyed himself more with a "Lishy Squishy Jumbo Cartoon Cat Hamburger Scented Slow Rising Exquisite Kid Soft Toy".

Dr John Holliday