

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 67

'COLIN CAMPBELL ESQ V.D.L.'

This brass nameplate, presumably for a sea chest, was found in Caolas by Angus MacLean. It has been engraved with the name 'Colin Campbell Esq V.D.L.': a small object that packs a big story.

Colin Campbell was born on Coll around 1796, the eldest son of a wealthy family. His father was the tacksman, or large tenant farmer, of Caolas on Coll before moving to Sunipol, west of Croig and later to Treshnish, both on Mull. His wife Mary Ann was the sister of George MacLean, the tacksman of Hynish. Their mother Helen Campbell was the daughter of Major Donald Campbell, the Baillie of Tyree. Colin Campbell and Mary Ann McLean's daughter Colina Georgina Maclean Campbell was married to the well known Tiree doctor Alexander Buchanan. The title 'Esquire' originally signified a knight's attendant, someone who carried his armour; it is still sometimes used today as a common courtesy in formal correspondence. In the early nineteenth century, 'esquire' was only used in Scotland by those who considered themselves gentlemen.

In 1820, at the age of twenty-four, Colin Campbell sailed from Leith on the *Skelton*, bound for Australia. He did not travel alone. Several relations along with neighbours from Coll were on board with him. Van Diemen's Land, the name for Tasmania before 1856, was set up as a giant penal colony. At first, other settlers needed a special permit, but by 1820 wealthy immigrants were being granted land and given a team of convicts to work it. The *Skelton* berthed once at the Cape of Good Hope, with the full voyage taking five months. One of Colin Campbell's first enterprises in Van Diemen's Land was a sawmill on a property he called 'Barbreck' (named after his family's ancestral home) near Launceston. Nine years after emigrating, he returned to Scotland to attempt to persuade his father to join him in the colony. In this he was unsuccessful. Colin returned to Australia, and purchased land in a property called Glengyle in Keilor, now a suburb of Melbourne. When the potato famine hit Tiree and Coll in 1846, Campbell was again back in Scotland; the Marquess of Lorne (later the eighth Duke of Argyll) asked him if he would go to Canada to set up a welfare system for destitute emigrants from the islands, although the scheme came to nothing.

Colin Campbell returned to Scotland for the last time in 1852 at the age of fifty-six. He was a wealthy man. He bought an estate called Achnacloich between Connel and Taynult, now famous for its gardens. He was also able to restore the family fortunes. Many years before, two uncles had bought the tacks of Caolas with Crossapol in the

west end of Coll, and Cornaig at the east end of the island. (The names Caolas, Crossapol, Cornaigmore and Cornaigbeg on both Coll and Tiree can get confusing). Both The farms were passed on to their respective sons, but both became bankrupt and lost their land. Colin was able to buy both properties. He also took on the tenancy of the large Balephetrish farm, where he was known as *Fear an Ruighe* 'the tacksman or tenant farmer of The Reef'.

Aware of his good fortune, Colin Campbell appears to have been a generous landlord. In 1864, he put up the funding, together with the other landholder or 'heritor', John Lorne Stewart, to make Coll an independent parish. And three years earlier, he had allowed tenants evicted from other farms on Coll to take up land in Cornaig on Coll. The catalyst for this was said to have been his eldest daughter, Collina, who married Dr Alexander Buchanan, the islands' first regular doctor.

Colin Campbell's emigration presents a different picture to the one we are so familiar with on Tiree: the landless poor huddled on the quays of Canada following the potato famine of 1846. In contrast, Colin Campbell was the eldest son of a family with huge land holding interests. His motivation is likely to have been curiosity and ambition; his personality, a risk-taker. His grandson, James Alexander Buchanan appears to have had the same qualities; he emigrated to Brazil, then Patagonia, where he staked out a 20,000 hectare ranch, where he was known as '*Don Santiago Alejandro Buchanan*'. Despite the long journey under sail, Colin almost commuted between Australia and Scotland; this brass nameplate may have been used more than once. Something else that comes out clearly from this family's story is how easily the larger tenant farmers seemed to move between holdings on Coll, Tiree and Mull. Colin Campbell died on Coll in 1867 at the age of seventy-one and was buried there.

Dr John Holliday

Much of Colin's family history has been researched by Andrew Campbell, to whom I am grateful.

