

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 83

CRIBBAGE BOARD

This lovely hardwood and brass cribbage board or *cròthan* was given to An Iodhlann by Donald Brown, and was probably made in the boat builder's workshop in Vault in the early twentieth century. Cribbage was very popular amongst sailors.

Playing cards were invented in China at around the same time that the Vikings started raiding Scotland. The idea spread through the kingdoms of Arabia and then Egypt, reaching southern Europe in the fourteenth century. The board game of cribbage is said to have been developed from an older card game called nobby by John Suckling, a minor poet and major character. Suckling was born in 1609 into the elite: his father was Comptroller of the Household of King Charles I. After a short career as a soldier, Suckling found favour at court, and became not only one of the best players of bowls in the country, but a hugely successful card player. He travelled from one aristocratic house to another amassing a fortune. During this period, however, he was assaulted by a rival suitor in love and badly beaten. This setback had a profound effect on him and he retired to his estate to write. In 1639, he fought for the English king against the Scottish Covenanters (led, as it happens, by the eighth Earl of Argyll), raising a cavalry troop numbering one hundred. This unit, richly uniformed and equipped at huge expense, became something of a laughing stock when they proved themselves more ornamental than a fearsome fighting machine.

Cribbage is usually played by two people. Players start with six cards each and discard two into a 'crib'. The players then lay out their cards, one by one, in front of them. They must not go above a numerical score of 31, and the player who lasts the longest pegs one point. There are various other ways to score, but the idea is to move the peg up and down the two rows of sixty holes, finally reaching the 'game hole' in the centre.

Cribbage is one of the few card games permitted in pubs without a licence under the 2005 Gambling Act. The game, with its simple equipment secure in the roughest weather, also became very popular at sea. It achieved legendary status on one submarine in 1943. The USS *Wahoo* was ordered to patrol uncharted and perilous waters not far from the coast of China. As the atmosphere grew increasingly tense, the captain calmly began a game of cribbage with his second-in-command. Watched by the crew, he dealt a hand of twenty-nine – four fives and a jack – the best possible combination, and one that was taken by the men as a lucky omen. The officer signed the cards and had them framed. The patrol turned out to be very successful (from an American point of view). Although the officer, Richard O'Kane,

was later captured by the Japanese, he became a national hero on his release after the war. The original cribbage board is now passed as a lucky token in a formal ceremony to the oldest American submarine serving in the Pacific, currently the thirty-six-year-old USS *Olympia*.

Games were played on Tiree before the introduction of playing cards around the eighteenth century. Nine small flat pebbles, thought to be counters of some sort, were found in the prehistoric fort at Vaul. The Vikings later introduced their own board game they called *hnefatafl*. This was not unlike chess, using with a board with seven by seven squares, one 'king' and pieces made of bone or wood. And, yes: there is today a Hnefatafl World Championship held on the Shetland island of Fetlar and you can play online if you fancy a shot. By the eleventh century, chess or *skátafl* would have become the fireside game of choice on Tiree, exemplified by the beautiful Lewis chessmen, carved from walrus ivory traded from the Arctic. Possibly harder to play on a longship than cribbage!

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