

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 91

RECEIPT FROM *BÙTH CHALUIM SÀLUIM*

This 1966 receipt from Malcolm MacLean's shop in Salum for a refrigerator and gas cylinders was given to An Iodhlann by Kirsty Laird. Receipts are often full of fascinating information: this one is no exception. Mains electricity had reached the east end of Tiree in 1956, and households were increasingly acquiring 'white goods'.

Despite its small size, *Bùth Chaluum Sàluim* still crops up regularly in conversation, almost fifty years after it closed its doors. Angus MacIvor wrote this verse about it: 'And then there's Calum Salum / Whom you must not pass by, / For he's greater by far / Than your Copeland and Lye [a famous department store at the time on Glasgow's Sauciehall Street].' Calum was known for carrying a huge range of stock. Donald Meek also remembered it well: 'Calor Gas in cylinders would be lying at the door, / With pipes and tubes and bicycles, and wheels and spares galore: / Blowlamps and tobacco, spanners, hammers and much more – / No hardware merchant on this earth ever owned a better store.' It is telling that Malcolm chose a radio to be on the 'masthead' of the receipt.

The shop was known from one end of the island to the other. Alasdair MacNeill lived in Hynish in the 1950s: 'One shop which I never visited, but had legendary status in family conversations, was Calum Salum's emporium. He had the reputation of being able to supply literally any goods requested. This reputation resulted in the story, which may or not be true, but, hearing of Calum's wit, may well be true. During the war an official from Air Ministry was visiting Tiree and heard of Calum's store and decided to pay it a visit. Considering himself a bit of a joker, he asked Calum, 'Could you lay your hands on a submarine for me?' Calum thought for a few seconds and then replied, 'Can you give me a fortnight?' Many years afterwards when we were going through my late father's papers we came across a lubrication chart for a Sherman tank. Was this one order which Calum had failed to complete, thus depriving the people of Tiree of the unique sight of a field being ploughed by a war machine?' Calum became an agent for Hamilton Brothers after the firm started trading in 1946 and regularly sold their Ferguson tractors.

The shop opened in 1938, expanding after the war into an old RAF hut by the shore. An immensely sociable man, he cultivated useful contacts, as Duncan Grant remembered: 'There would be Calum sitting in his shop with a Tilley lamp. The war was on, but Calum had so many acquaintances with his [guest house] letting, he was able to get things no one else could get. Calum would issue us with chocolate

Digestives ... these were treasures to us in those days. Then we would walk home again [to Brock] under the moonlight.' Bread came unwrapped in hampers on the boat from Glasgow. The loaves 'were treated like cake', a welcome change from homebaking. The shop stayed open late into the night; the last customers were often invited into the house to share Calum's evening meal.

Despite his beautiful handwriting, Calum was not known for his meticulous organisation. A common saying of his, when asked for something in the shop was 'It's here, but where?' Jean Brown brought guides from Yorkshire for many years for a camping holiday in Salum: 'Our friend was not a tidy gentleman. He never cleaned out his old stock, or swept his floor. We did this for him every year. Seldom did he even man the shop. The till was always left open and many is the time I have gone behind the counter to serve the children with sweets ... When the day of our departure came, the grocery bill had grown to many pages. I would take out my cheque book to pay and from the 'deep litter' (his name for the clutter on his desk) he would take out the pad and flick over the pages, marvelling at the enormity of our appetites.' The shop closed on Calum's death in 1971 at the age of sixty-seven.

Calum's mother was Christina MacNeill, often known as *Ciorstaidh Mhunn*. Her family came from Heanish, where they had settled originally as ground officers for the estate. Work on Christina's house extension in Salum started in 1925, as confirmed by a sheet of paper wrapped around a coin and placed in the fabric of the building: 'Salum Tiree May 7th 1925. Commenced building this house. By Lachlan Campbell Cornaigbeg also his Brother Hector Campbell Cornaigbeg Tiree for Christina Munn McPhail & her husband Lachlan MacNeill & her son Malcolm McKinnon McLean. Good Luck.' The extension was designed as a guesthouse, and a frequent summer visitor was DO MacLean, who had been head teacher at the school in Cornaigmore. DO was a cricket fan, often arranging matches for local boys on the *machair*, and listening to the cricket commentary on the radio while washing up for other guests. He also manned the loudhailer at the Scarinish Regatta. A windmill generated electricity for the house before the electric grid reached Salum. Calum also ran an early taxi service for the east end of the island.

He was a keen piper, often playing for dances in the school halls and for the seals on the rocks by the shore. He was also a good sailor, winning the regatta with his lugsail 'Tinnie' (presumably named after his mother) several times. He was a dedicated public servant, a member of the island's Home Guard during the Second World War, and becoming the councillor for Tiree and Coll on Argyll County Council. While in office he successfully lobbied for the building of the old people's home on Tiree. He wrote the Tiree chapter for the Third Statistical Account of Scotland.

Calum was a superb teller of stories. Here are just three. Jean Brown remembered one: 'Calum was telling us one year that Tiree had been used as a garden for Iona by the monks. 'They would not have a woman on the island,' he informed us. 'I believe they would not have a cow on the island either, on account of its being a woman too. They kept their cows on another island, and I'm thinking that they would have women there to look after the animals.' His eyes suddenly began to twinkle. 'I believe the monks were very good swimmers,' he said.'

Another story concerned one of Calum's neighbours: 'He was a confirmed bachelor; at least, that's what all his friends thought. This summer, he happened to go for a jaunt to one of the neighbouring islands. He stayed away a considerable period of time, and his sister rather wondered just what had happened to him, until one day a telegram came to hand, which was very comprehensive: 'Married today. Home tomorrow. Wife to follow.' Apparently, it wasn't just convenient for her to come on the *Dunara* that night, so he sent the famous telegram. His excuse when he left home was that he was going to buy a cow, but he took a long time in its choosing, and with the cow he brought the owner back.'

The third story was set on Jura: 'This one old boy that had seen nine score Christmases in the one house. Apparently he was a wonderful old boy. Despite the fact that communications were rather slow in those days, the story of his age got round on the grapevine, and the then Duke, or it would have been the Earl of Argyll, made a point of going out to Jura to visit the old man and questioning him as to what sort of life he had led and one thing and another. And he had quite a chat with the old boy. And then he asked him what his attitude had been towards a dram. To which the old fellow gave a very good answer. He said in all his life he had never gone a step out of his way for the sake of a dram. And he said with equal firmness, 'And neither did I go a step out of my way to avoid one!'

We are mightily fortunate to have some superb shops on the island today. But I am sure they will not mind me saying that none is likely to leave a trail of stories to rival *Bùth Chaluum Sàluim*.

Dr John Holliday

Caption for photograph:

The shop in the 1950s: Bella MacLean (*Bella Mhialum*, with her elbow on the counter), *Calum Sàluim* himself, and, far right, headmaster Donald O. MacLean.

