

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 94

SHIP PAINTING

This painting belongs to Ranald Noel-Paton, and he has kindly given a photograph to An Iodhlann. It was found tucked away in Rhum View, Vaul, a house that he bought from the family of Catriona MacKinnon.

Catriona Iain, having worked in Glasgow as a cook, came back to the island following the death of her father in 1917. Tourism was starting to develop in the 1920s following the opening of the Gott Bay pier, and she converted the small family home into a successful boarding house. As many as fourteen guests could be staying at Rhum View at any one time, with Catriona, her sister from Port Glasgow and various grandchildren catering to them from a small tin extension at the back of the house. The new golf course, opened in 1911, was a prime attraction and Catriona was in pole position.

The painting does not appear to be the work of a professional painter. Indeed, it is in a style that art experts usually call 'naive' or 'folk art', particularly the sea although the sails and rigging have been accurately painted. Who painted it, and what boat is it? The late Angus MacLean, Scarinish, saw the painting in 1994, and was able to sketch out the sail plan, naming every sail. It was his view that sailors on their long voyages would sometimes paint their ship, and sometimes the crew would sign their names on the sails. Can we shed any more light on this mystery?

Ada Goodrich Freer, a spiritualist who visited Tiree in 1894, wrote: 'There is a saying among the people that, "if Tyree does not grow trees, it grows ministers and deep sea captains"'. After the devastating potato famine that overwhelmed the island in 1846 and lasted for a decade, men looked to the Merchant Navy as a way out of poverty. Employment peaked in the 1901 Census, when sixty-four island men were registered as making their living at sea. Many more will have been away from the island on the day of the census. All the censuses make a clear distinction between 'seamen' and 'sailors': for example, in 1891 forty-one men were listed as 'seaman', while twelve are described as 'sailors'. This might be because coal boilers were increasingly taking the place of canvas. But if so, why has the last available census in 1911 almost twice as many sailors as seamen? Answers on a postcard, please.

We do not have to look very far for a sailor in Catriona's family. Her father described himself in the 1911 census as a crofter and fisherman, and her younger brother – another John – as a seaman. There may well have been other family members

ploughing the ocean waves, but John MacKinnon the younger, *Iain Iain*, looks a strong candidate to have been the painter.

The 'Golden Age of Sail' was coming to an end by the 1870s. The side-wheel paddle steamer *SS Great Western* pioneered Atlantic crossings in 1838. The new Suez Canal – easily accessed by steamships but not by sailing boats – opened in 1869, slashing 3,000 miles from the voyage between London and China. In 1871, the first Royal Navy warship built without sails was launched. The development of the screw propeller and high-pressure boiler combined to make the steamer more economic than the clipper. By the 1890s, few deep-sea commercial sailing vessels were left, although the sailing schooner *Mary Stewart* operated out of Tiree in the coastal trade until 1937. Catriona's brother John, who was born in 1884, is therefore unlikely to have had to climb a main mast to unfurl the skysail.

The vessel in the painting appears to be a clipper. These were the queens of the sea from 1843 to 1869. This one is a relatively late model, with seven sails on the main mast. The sail layout tells us it is not the *Ariel*, *Taeping* or *Cutty Sark*. But, although there are some examples of paintings done by seamen to pass the time on their long voyages, life on board a clipper was hard, with little space below deck and little time for fancy pastimes. This oil painting looks just as likely to have been done ashore, and possibly even copied from an illustration in a magazine.

As a postscript, the clipper is flying a red flag from the yard of its spanker at the stern. This may be the Red Ensign, the flag of British merchant vessels. The detail is not clear, but it looks more like the Scottish Red Ensign. This is the ensign has the saltire in the corner rather than the Union Jack, and was flown by the Scottish Navy until 1707. One of the yachts moored in Gott Bay during the music festival was flying one; there have been recent moves in the Scottish Parliament to give it official recognition.

So the mystery painting continues to be mysterious, and if anyone can shed more light on this fascinating puzzle, please let me know.

Dr John Holliday | doc.holliday@tireebroadband.com