

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 96

NATIONAL DRIED MILK

You might think that a museum like An An Iodhlann should not be collecting rusty tins like this. But you might be wrong! Tins of National Dried Milk were a common sight on household and school kitchen shelves and in welfare clinics in the middle of the last century.

The power of the British Empire was severely tested during the Second Boer War, fought between 1899 and 1902. Subsequent enquiries into the problems troops faced shed light on the worrying fact that half the potential recruits to the infantry had been rejected because they failed the physical examination. Malnutrition of the working class in the cities was blamed, and voluntary bodies like the Destitute Children's Dinner Society stepped up their efforts. The same concerns were felt in Argyll. Lady Victoria Campbell, daughter of the eighth Duke of Argyll, wrote about her visits to the schools on Tiree: 'No one has any idea what it is to see their pale little faces, and to hear the schoolmasters say that many come miles with only a potato on their stomachs in the morning.' Lady Victoria was not one for sitting on her hands. In 1905, the factor wrote to Donald MacDonald, the Heylipol teacher: 'A soup kitchen is to be started by Lady Victoria's orders tomorrow in the home of Donald MacKinnon, Moss, for the benefit of scholars attending your school.' Milk was highly regarded as a nutritious food, and 'it was always a great grief to Lady Victoria that some children of the cottar class in Tiree and elsewhere should be allowed to grow up without an adequate supply of milk. She maintained that when she visited the schools, she could pick out those children who came from homes where no cow was kept. To give these cottar children a chance of growing up strong and healthy like their neighbours, she got the proprietor [the Duke of Argyll] to subsidise milk cows at different places'.

Building on some earlier voluntary programmes, the Milk in Schools Scheme was set up by the London government in 1934. By the start of the Second World War, half the primary school pupils were drinking a third of a pint a day. The fact that the dairy industry was on the ropes at the time was not unconnected.

Food supply was severely disrupted at the start of the Second World War. Then, as now, the country was importing much of its food, including three quarters of its cheese. Milk rationing started in 1941, with three pints of liquid milk the allowance for most people. Additional dried milk became a staple of everyday life. It came in two varieties. Skimmed 'Household Milk' from the United States was in a tin with red

stripes and a warning: 'Not to be Used for Babies'. National Dried Milk, designed for babies and children, was full fat and had added vitamin D.

After the war, the Labour Government introduced the School Milk Act to provide a daily third of a pint to all children under the age of eighteen. In April 1947, the Cornaigmore School Log noted: 'Milk in Schools scheme begins.' But because of the difficulty in supplying fresh, bottled pasteurised milk to the island, Tiree school children had to make do with National Dried Milk. The Balemartine School head teacher remarked in 1949 that 'a box of dried milk (36 tins) was received today'. Milk powder was not universally popular in a district where many families had their own milking cow. Ethel MacCallum from Ruaig remembered: 'At eleven o'clock we got that terrible National Dried Milk. These big kettles on, and huge, big jugs, and she [the teacher] mixed up the milk for us. I liked it with cocoa, but very, very rarely we got that. Some of the children liked it. I didn't. I was used to milk from the cow in the byre in the morning.'

Gordon Connell came to the school in 1962 as the free school milk programme was winding down: 'When I came at first there was the infamous powdered milk. One of the teachers had to go down at what they called the 'wee play' and supervise the ladling out of this milk to anyone who wanted it. The whole of the secondary went down and probably, on average, only about three people ever took it on a regular basis. In fact we were actually urged by Mr MacDougall to get more of them to take it. One day I said to the cook, "Can I try this stuff?" I thought: no wonder they don't like it. There's not a nice taste off it. Eventually the whole milk thing petered out. On an island full of cows it was a bit weird!' Free school milk in secondary schools was stopped in 1968, and three years later Margaret 'The Milk Snatcher' Thatcher finally pulled the plug and withdrew free milk from all children over seven. National Dried Milk continued to be produced and sold cheaply in welfare clinics until 1976. But by then more sophisticated commercial infant formulas were being heavily promoted.

In fact milk consumption on Tiree changed in the 1960s. Fewer crofters kept a milking cow, and 'just-in-time' supply chains had yet to be invented. Many islanders became quite used to the taste of UHT milk, and might not have objected so strongly to National Dried Milk.

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