

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 99

### KETTLE

With the Tiree mains electrical grid only coming on stream in 1956, cast iron kettles like this were a familiar sight in island homes two generations ago. Web might not give them a second thought, but the story of kettles can tell us quite a lot about the everyday lives of our forebears and, indeed, the class system.

The word kettle comes from the Latin *catillus*, which developed into the Viking word *ketill*. This was an iron bowl for cooking food, rather than what we call a kettle today, with its handle and spout. The development of these features was driven by a demand for hot water, and in particular the need for small amounts of boiling water several times a day. This kettle dates from the early twentieth century. Its predecessors in the island's thatched houses would have hung on a *slabhraidh* chain over an open fire on an earthen floor. But as hotter coal replaced peat on Tiree from the 1850s, the soot-blackened kettle moved to sit atop the cast iron range at the gable end.

The hot drinks we turn to so unthinkingly today only came into common use in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1695, the traveller Martin Martin noted on Tiree that 'the natives [islanders] ... for the most part live on milk ... and the servants use water-gruel [water with a pinch of oatmeal] often with their bread. In plentiful years, the natives drink ale [beer] generally.' Not only does this observation of 'natives' and 'servants' remind us that Tiree in the old days was less egalitarian than we might like to think, but that hot drinks were unknown.

The tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, originated in southwest China. The first evidence that tea was the drink of Chinese emperors comes from a tomb dated to 200 BC, roughly the date that foundations for the broch at Vaul were being laid. A Chinese physician, writing four hundred years later, remarked that 'to drink bitter t'u constantly makes one think better'. By the time that Viking raiders were sailing up and down the Minch, tea drinking in China had become popular outside court circles, and the practice had spread to Japan. The practice of drinking coffee began in the Horn of Africa somewhat later, in the fifteenth century, spreading initially to the Arab world.

In 1660, the famous diarist Samuel Pepys in London wrote 'I did send for a cup of tee (a China drink) of which I never had drank before'. Catherine of Braganza was a Portuguese princess who married the English king Charles II in 1662. It was she who popularised the custom of drinking unsweetened black tea in court. The first Scottish

coffee house opened in Glasgow in 1673. Tea became even more popular after sugar, another expensive import, this time from the West Indies, and milk were added to mask the bitterness of the tea infusion. At first, high prices meant that only the wealthiest could afford it. Afternoon tea, served in fine china with dainty sandwiches became fashionable with the English aristocracy after 1840.

As a luxurious and mildly addictive item, tea was seen as an ideal source of revenue for the government. The first tax on tea appeared in 1660: eight pence for every gallon sold. Before long, duties rose to as high as fifty per cent. Smuggling became a major industry. By the 1780s, more tea was entering the country at dead of night through smugglers' coves than was imported legally. In 1784, after the humiliation of the Boston Tea Party in 1773 and the loss of the American colony, the government backed down and slashed the tea tax.

By the nineteenth century, with increased production in China and falling taxes, tea had become cheaper than beer. At last working people could afford it. But they drank it for different reasons and with different rituals. The boiled water (unlike much of the water available at the time) was safe to drink, the stimulant effect and the sugar boost helped the new factory workers through their shifts, it was quite palatable even when there weren't many tea leaves to go around, and the habit was encouraged by the temperance movement as an alternative to alcohol. The plantation of thicker-leaved and stronger varieties of tea in India from the 1840s encouraged these trends.

It is difficult to know when tea drinking became popular on Tìree. No doubt sailors home from sea, soldiers home from the battlefield and emigrants returning to the island brought with them packets of this strange black powder. One such must have been Captain Donald MacKinnon from Heanish, who skippered the tea clipper *Taeping* to victory in the 1866 Great Tea Race. But it was when Glasgow took over from Canada as the main destination for Tìree emigrants in the 1870s that tea drinking really took off on the island. John MacLean, *Bàrd Bhaile Mhàrtainn*, was born in 1827 and died in 1895. He wrote two poems about tea, suggesting that it was a new custom in his lifetime. In one of them, 'Dì-Moladh na Tea [Dispraise of Tea]', the bard pokes fun at the new habit. 'Men that are well travelled / Come and explain to me something that's been going on for a while / Where is the young girl that is like an old woman? / They are shrivelled with the leaves of Tea ... You can see old hags sitting over their glowing coals / A flannel around their jaw complaining of toothache / She will rarely give you a polite answer / And she will continue to be unpleasant until you give her tea ... Although milk become available at the first signs of summer / The old women stick to the winter's habits / They don't have a healthy tooth in their head / Their stumps as black as Tea'.

In 1879, the Church of Scotland minister of Tiree, John Gregorson Campbell, wrote a humorous song hitting back at the Free Church minister of the time who had asked his congregation to give up tea and save the money to build a new church for his congregation: 'I understand, this is the order of the priest, / that he has imposed on the housewives of the island. / You and me are no better than dogfish / Lachie, since we gave up tea. / Little Anne, put the kettle on the fire / My darling, my head is ringing! / Run Iain, get a chair for your father. / We won't survive much longer without tea.' Tiree would probably grind to a halt today, too, without its morning cuppa.

Today, over 95% of all the tea we drink in this country comes in bags, and some of the rituals of what you might call the Highland tea ceremony have been lost. But the sight of this kettle will bring back memories to many people of ceilidhs past, with a cup of tea in one hand, and a scone with home made butter and cheese in the other.

And the world's greatest tea drinkers? The Turkish people, by a country mile, followed by the Irish.

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