Tìr an Èorna – Land of Barley

The history of Tiree's corn production

Tiree and Coll Gaelic Partnership, Summer 2003

Land of Barley

Tiree has been famed for its fertile, easily worked soils since the first farmers arrived in Neolithic times. A cereal crop will produce much more food than if it left to grass. The island is famous as *Tìr an Eòrna*, the land of barley, or *Eilean Ìseal an Eòrna*, low island of the barley.

The Cereals of Tiree

The word *corn* is used to describe the cereal crops grown on Tiree – *eòrna,* barley; *coirce*, oats; and *seagal*, or rye – as well as wheat. Interestingly, there is a hillock in Kenovay called *Cnoc a' Chruithneachd*, the knoll of wheat. Tiree's climate is too cool for wheat growing, but some may have been grown experimentally near there at some time.

Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) was the first grass seed to be domesticated, arriving on the island with the Neolithic farmers 4,000 years ago. The oldest variety had six rows of seed. Grains of this form were found during the excavation of *Dùn Mòr Bhalla*, the Iron Age broch in Vaul dating from 445 BC. A later variety was the four-rowed barley or bere. Modern barley (*eòrna Gallda* or Lowland barley) is two-rowed.

Oats stooks at Whitehouse in 2001.

Oats were domesticated later, reaching Scotland around 2,500 years ago. There are two varieties - the older, small black or bristle oat (*Avena strigosa*), *coirce beag* in Gaelic, and the great white, or common, oat (*Avena sativa*), *coirce mòr*. The older variety produced a smaller yield but it was believed by islanders to stand up to wind and poor soils better, and even as late as the 1950s a majority of crofters on Tiree were still using it.

Rye (*Secale cereale*) was a later crop, arriving in Scotland in Medieval times. It grows well in sandy soil.

History

In 1549 Dean Munro wrote of Tiree "*nae cuntrie may be mair fertile of corn."* At this time, much of the landlord's rent was paid in grain. In 1541 a tenth of the oat harvest and half the barley grown went to the landlord.

However, when Martin Martin visited Tiree in 1695 he recorded that although Tiree *"has always been valued for its extraordinary fruitfulness in corn, yet being tilled every year it is become less fruitful than formerly."*

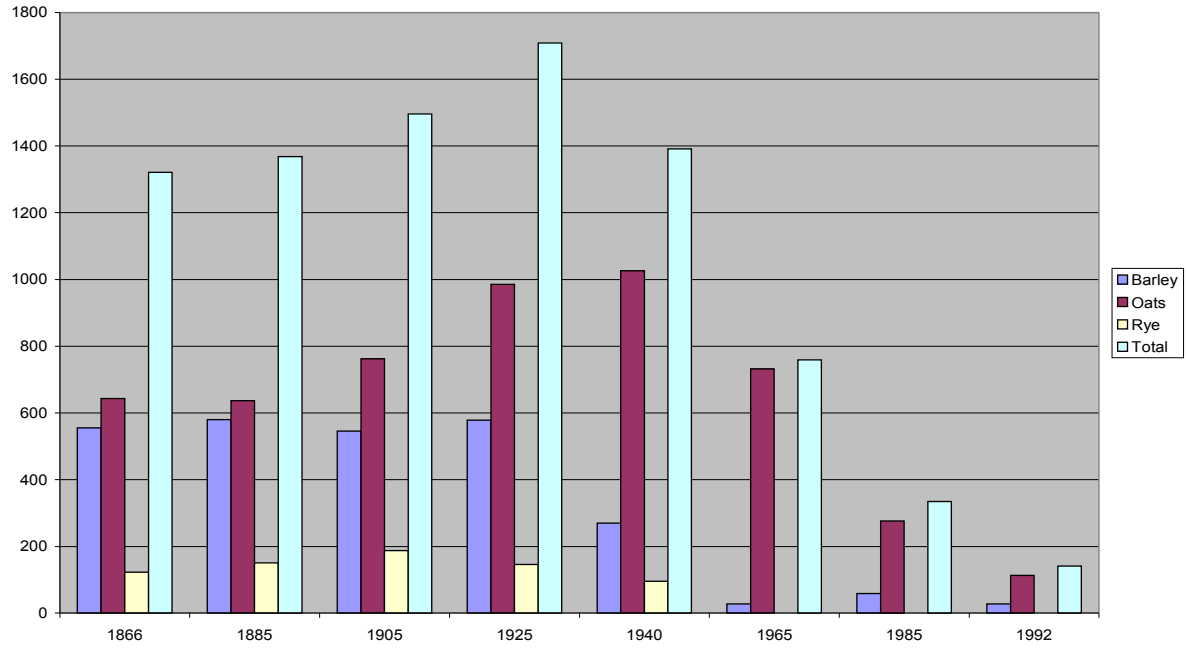
Some seventy years later, in 1768, James Turnbull was commissioned by the Duke of Argyll to survey the island: *"Barley, small oats and grain* [rye] *are all the different kinds of grain that are sown here, the greatest quantity of which is barley…A medium* [harvest] *for four years past* [is] *547 bolls…of Barley, 507 bolls…of Oats, and 16 bolls…of Rye…"*
He found the average yield at the time was an increase of three times in the seed planted. This compares to yields today on the island of twenty times.

Stooks at Ruaig in the mid-20th century.

The Rev. Dr. John Walker visited Tiree around the same time. Writing in 1771 he said of the island: *"The two rowed Barley should undoubtedly be introduced here, notwithstanding the Fears which the Inhabitants express, of its being more easily shaken* [in the wind]*, than the Square* [four row] *Barley, and therefore less fit for their climate…Their oats likewise, require as great an alteration. For they sow at present, only the small grey Oat* [coirce beag], *though both the Soil and the Climate would answer for white Oats* [coirce mòr] *as well as in most parts of Scotland…Their Soil in general is light, dry, and sandy, in which all kinds of Grain do sooner degenerate than in any other. Their Grains accordingly are of the smallest Size."*

The second half of the eighteenth century saw the population on the island rise sharply due to the booming kelp industry. By 1792 it had risen to 2,416, and the Old Statistical Account lamented the rising numbers: *"*[The people of Tiree] *tell of far superior increase in grain when the land was in good condition. There were then scarcely tenants sufficient to occupy the lands, though now they are so numerous that the ground is set in too small portions…their lands are impoverished, as they seldom get rest…Till the middle of June, the cattle are suffered to pasture on the corn, which also very much prevents a better return…The farmers cannot well begin sowing earlier, owing to wet lands, sand blowing and trespass of cattle; but they might to great advantage finish earlier. What mostly prevents it is that barley is the prevailing crop which gets two and sometimes three ploughings, and so consumes much time."*

Before the tax on whisky was increased by the 1786 Scotch Distillery Act much of Tiree's barley was made into spirits. One boll of barley was worth thirty shillings as grain, but six guineas if distilled into whisky. In 1791 it was reported that Tiree had up to recently exported two to three hundred gallons of whisky a year from thirty stills. But the Duke was determined to prevent this black market trade which was also using fast dwindling peat supplies. He licensed three coal burning stills and ordered that every tenth crofter caught making whisky should be evicted. Fourteen were, and presumably over a hundred were caught. Gaugers, or customs officers, were stationed on the island, so the islanders instead secretly shipped their barley to Donegal to be distilled.



Acreage of cereal crops on Tiree from 1865 to 1992
(Figures supplied by Robin Cameron)

The writer of the New Statistical Account in 1845 also bemoaned the poor harvests from the island: *"Though Tiree has been a good deal noted as an agricultural island, and though a considerable quantity of produce is annually raised and exported, yet the crops in general are light and of inferior quality."*

He went on to list the reasons for this:

- the soil was too light to support a heavy crop;
- seaweed alone was used as manure;
- crofts were so small that the same strip of land was used year after year for the same crop until the ground was *"quite out of heart"*;
- the seed had to be sown too thickly to compensate;
- crofters tended to use seed from their own harvest to sow the next year instead of buying in fresh, more vigorous seed;
- the sowing was done too late;
- erosion caused the sand to blow, particularly behind Beinn Hough and at the Green.

Sand blow had been a serious problem for some time. There were 1,624 acres of blown sand in 1768, due to overgrazing, ploughing the *machair* and pulling maram grass to make rope. The Duke of Argyll also forbade cutting turf to make field boundaries and houses in 1750.

As the population dwindled during the twentieth century, increasing amounts of even common foods like oatmeal were bought from the mainland. The Cornaig mill stopped working around 1930. Cereal growing on Tiree fell dramatically. In 1768, 8,240 acres had been growing corn – half the island's area. By 1992 that figure was down to 147.

Barley is often now preferred to oats. This is because the latter only ripen in October, when the deteriorating weather and increasing numbers of migrant geese reduce the crop. As far as we know no whisky is now made on Tiree and the barley is used as a high energy feed for fattening beasts.

An Early Crop

A traditional Tiree proverb goes: *Mur b'e eagal an dà mhàil, bheireadh Tiriodh an dà bhàrr /* If it were not for the fear of having to pay two rents, Tiree would produce two crops in a season.

The Rev. Dr. John Walker wrote of the island in 1771: "[Tiree's climate] *is sufficient to produce very quick and early crops. In 1762* [a field of barley]*...produced a crop in 35 days, being sown the 28th of April and reaped the 22nd of July…Some years ago there was an Instance of a double crop…A Field of Bere* [Barley] *having been reaped very early in July, it was immediately sowed again with the same Grain. And from this, there was a pretty good crop reaped about the middle of October. The only instance perhaps known in Britain of two white crops having been reaped off the same Land in the same season."*

Duncan MacPhee, Scarinish, also told this story. One summer morning the crofters from the township went to sow a field below *Beinn Got* known as *Croit Eachainn Mhic Siorraidh* with barley. When they returned home that evening they could see the green sprouts showing from Scarinish. In the old days the seed was soaked in formalin to kill blight before sowing, and it was sometimes almost sprouting before it was sown.

The Harvest Year

Fertilising

The soils of Tiree are predominantly light and sandy and need feeding with organic matter every year to keep their fertility. Fortunately huge amounts of seaweed are cast up on the shore every winter.

In January or February the ground to be sown with corn was lightly fertilised with *feamainn,* seaweed, which would be pulled from the cart with a *grapa-crom*, a bent fork, and left in *torran*, or small heaps. Sometimes seaweed was piled up in *flagais*, heaps on the shore above the high tidemark to prevent the wind taking it out to sea again.

Because of the abundance of seaweed, manure from cattle kept in the byre all winter was less used on Tiree. It was reported in 1768 that "*the people* [of Tiree] *were never in use to house their cattle in winter."*

Artificial fertiliser began to be used by the 1930s.

"*A six course rotation is practised – oats from ley* [grass], *followed by potatoes and roots* [i.e turnip]*(couch grass is a major problem on the light soil), then barley as a nurse crop for grass seed, the land being down to grass for three years."* Ronnie MacDonald, Cornaigbeg, in an address to fellow students at Agricultural College in the 1950s about farming on Tiree.

A crofter collects seaweed by horse and cart.

Freshly ploughed grassland is known as *talamh glas* or *laidir,* grey or strong – because it needs more strength to plough through the grass roots – soil, while land with a covering of stubble after corn is called *talamh cuinnlein*, literally 'nostril' land. *Talamh dubh*, or dark ground, is heavier soil in the middle of the island, while *talamh gainmheach*, sandy soil, is nearer the shore.

"There is lighter ground [at Whitehouse] *near to the shore to the east, quite light, gravely soils, and fields that are heavier to the south. The heavier ground will grow coirce mòr, but the rest only coirce beag."* Hugh Archie MacCallum talking to Margaret Campbell in 2003, translated by Dr. J. Holliday.

Ploughing (*treabhadh*)

The Old Scots wooden plough was used on Tiree until around 1800. This was blunt, difficult to pull through the ground, and only turned the soil to a shallow depth. A line of turf had to be cut with a *crann ruslaidh* or ristle, a hook pulled by horses, before this plough could get through grassland.

"*Two men and two horses* [attend] *the ristle, and two men and five horses* [side by side] *the plough…The method of ploughing by one man, two horses and long reins is used by only two in the parish…such a farm takes many hands and horses and must prove dear."* Old Statistical Account, Tiree 1791.

The newer plough, *crann treabhaidh*, referred to was the improved 'English' version, which was lighter and made of iron with a 'sharper' curved mould board. This slid through the ground much more easily.

"We started [ploughing at nine o'clock. The old boys were very rigid about time…the whistle went for you at quarter to one for what we called then dinner…it was more particular to feed the horses than then person that ploughed…stopping time was always half past five…

I've heard of one person pulling a plough, and that was a great uncle of ours in Salum, John MacLean. And there was something wrong with one of the horses…one of the brothers handled the plough and he took over beside the other horse. I don't know how long he kept it up!" Angus MacLean, Scarinish talking to Craig Lapsley and Micheal Holliday in 2000.

The wing plough favoured on Tiree in the 1930s was made by Grays of Uddingston. A crofter would spend three weeks ploughing in the spring, at the rate of half to three-quarters of an acre a day. Great care was taken to produce immaculately straight furrows, like *cìrean*, or cockscombs. You would be sure that your neighbours would take a walk past your field that evening with a critical eye!

"*I enjoyed ploughing with horses – it was great…there was great competition to see who could cut the straightest furrow…if you had the ploughed field facing a road the old boys were very particular 'Now you have to plough straight because people will be seeing from the road!'"* Angus MacLean.

The metal tip of the plough, *an soc*, would have to be taken to the smithy to be repaired (*a' glàsadh*), usually once a week. In sandy soil with numerous stones, as at *Groideagal* in Salum, this had to be done every day. If the ploughman turned up any large loose stones these were usually put in the field walls. Generally stones heat the soil and encourage earlier growth. This plough left furrows six inches apart.

John MacPhail (Iain Eacha' Ruaidh) of Balinoe and his wife Christina (Hutty Neill an Tuathanaich).

"The bulk of ploughing is done on March and early April, and sowing is done almost at once for moisture conservation reasons. On the lightest machair lands wind erosion can cause serious damage, and these lands aren't normally sown until May, usually with a rye-oat mixture." Ronnie MacDonald.

"They used to start ploughing much earlier in the old days, around the 15th of February. The sowing was always done by the 1st of April…The weather has changed, but the principal reason [ploughing is later nowadays] *is a lack of manpower…The machinery today is good, but you still need men to work them."* Hugh Archie MacCallum.

The modern plough, pulled by a powerful tractor, works the ground more deeply, leaving furrows twelve to fourteen inches apart.

Harrowing (*cliathadh*)

The ploughed ground was harrowed to break down the clods. The first harrowing, diagonal to the furrows, was called *an garbh cliathadh*, the rough harrowing, and was easier if the ploughing had been done well, leaving a level surface.

The harrow was originally a wooden frame two feet square with iron pegs. This was usually pulled by women, or tied to the tails of horses. This latter practice was considered a good way to break in a young horse. This harrow was pulled at an angle so the pegs did not follow each other. Later a pair of harrows were linked side by side together to cover more ground. An old man at *Lag nan Cruach* near the Cornaig mill was said to be too mean to buy a harrow, and instead took a gate off its hinges and pulled that behind a horse every year.

More recently metal zig-zag harrows were used. With heavy soil that had dried out the ground might have to be harrowed four times to produce a good seed-bed.

Today the disc harrow and spiked rotavator pulled behind a powerful tractor produce a much smoother seed bed for sowing.

Sowing *(curachd)*

Am fear nach chuir air là fuar, cha dean e buain air là teth / the man that does not sow on a cold day will not harvest on a hot day - Tiree proverb.

To prevent fungal blight the seed was mixed either with *Ceresan* powder (a fungicide containing mercury which is still used in India, although it has been banned in this country since the 1970s) or formalin liquid on the floor of the barn. It was then left overnight under sacks before being spread out to dry.

"Before the seed is used, a dressing is put on it to destroy coirce-madaidh [blight]. *This is usually put on three to four days before sowing, and this dressing is formalin, an old custom on this island."* Hugh Archie MacCallum.

The few days around *Là na Bealltainn* (May 13th) is often stormy, bringing seaweed onto the beaches. One variety of seaweed, *bàrr-dearg*, was prized above the others as fertiliser for barley, which was therefore usually sown around *Là na Term* (May 28).

"*Barley was never sown until the middle or end of May…until the bàrr-dearg* [a sort of seaweed] *comes on the shore…the old men were extremely particular about this…they would start ploughing that very day…there was plenty of it then, although there isn't much today."* Hugh Archie MacCallum.

The sower carried the seed either in a *peall*, an old cloth tied over his left shoulder. One hand held a corner of the cloth and the other was free to cast the seed. A later development was the kidney-shaped basket, a *basgaid churachd*, which was strapped around the waist and neck and which allowed two hands to be used. Unlike walking, the right arm is flung out as the right foot goes forward. The seed was thrown inwards towards the centre, rather than outwards. Angus MacLean, Scarinish, was finding the action difficult to master when he was told by *Dòmhnall Eachainn Bhàin*, Caolas to imagine he was "*throwing it away*".

"About three crèith [bushels] *to the acre is what I generally use…talamh cuinnlein maybe a bit more. We have a basket to sow with, called a fasganach. It has two straps over the shoulders and one round the middle. When you're sowing, it's no use unless you keep time with your steps. If you do that you can sow all day."* Hugh Archie MacCallum.

Lachie MacLean, sowing seed using a *bascaid churachd*.

Sowing was a skilled job, and not everyone could produce an even spread of seed. One old crofter, *Dòmhnall Bàn*, who lived in Balinoe where Willie MacLean stays today, was unable to walk. He was adamant his son, *Eachann*, was not up to the job. He insisted on being pushed in a barrow over the field while he sat in it and sowed the seed.

Allowance had to be made for the direction of the wind, and it was easier to cast if this was at your back. If the wind was too strong it was best to wait for another day. It had to be particularly calm for sowing grass seed as it was so light. Barley, being a heavier seed was easier to throw.

"It's not an easy job sowing corn. They do it with machinery nowadays, but in these days the word they used was broadcasting the corn [sowing by hand]. *There was a knack in the handfuls you took – you know, you could see the ones that couldn't do it, they walked down,* [and on] *the right hand side the corn was ten feet thick, the left hand side there was none! There's a great knack in sowing it evenly."* Angus Munn.

The fiddle drill, or *fidheall*, which was invented in the 1850s, was tried by some on Tiree. This was a box held with the left arm, while the seed was scattered by a disc rotated by the 'bow' pulled by the right hand.

After sowing the ground was harrowed again to hide the seed from birds, and then rolled when the *fòchann*, or shoots, were about two inches high.

"You will see yellow leaves growing at the end of May, beginning of June, of [the weed called] *sgeallan* [wild mustard]. *What we have done for a few years is put down powder to kill the sgeallan which chokes the corn and makes it harder to harvest."* Hugh Archie MacCallum.

Although the weed reduced the growth of the corn it was traditionally believed, in the days before weedkillers, that *sguab sam bith anns an robh sgeallan*, sheaves that contained *sgeallan*, would not rot. All this was done using horsepower until the end of the Second World War, when tractors replaced horses almost overnight. Jean MacCallum, Balevullin, remembers her family selling their horses in 1952.

Sowing was believed to be more fruitful if it was done at the time of *an gealach a tighinn air adhart*, or a waxing moon. The September full moon, *gealach bhuidhe an abachaidh* / the yellow moon of the ripening, and that in October, *gealach a' ruadhainn* / the moon of reddening, were believed to ripen the corn in the autumn. It was said that you could hear the corn *a' cnagail* or *a' snagail* , crackling, as it dried in the moonlight. The moon before *gealach an abachaidh* was called by some *gealach cùl a' chnoc*, or the moon behind the hill, as it was so low in the sky.

"On light ground the ripening is earlier…anyway by the first ten days of September. They were waiting for gealach a' ruadhainn. Nowadays people don't believe in it." Hugh Archie MacCallum.

'The Harvesters' by Duncan MacGregor Whyte.

Harvesting

Traditionally corn was harvested by pulling it up by the roots.

"*In some districts the incredibly lazy and wasteful method of pulling up the corn by the roots and burning the straw was usual. Duncan Forbes, who visited Tiree in 1737, wrote that barley was the main product of the island, but that 'There never was one sheaf of barley cut in Tiree since the beginning of the world'. The cattle were thus deprived of one of the few sources of winter feeding and the soil of the humus of decaying roots."* (I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways*, 1961)

The Duke tried to forbid this practice in 1750.

Martin Martin described in his account of a journey made through the Highlands and Islands in 1695 what usually happened next: *"A woman, sitting down, takes a handful of corn, holding it by the stalks in her left hand, and then sets fire to the ears; she has a stick in her right hand…beating off the grain at the very instant when the husk in quite burnt…The corn may be so dressed, winnowed, ground and baked within an hour after reaping from the ground."* This was known as graddaning.

A Tiree story shows the same methods were used here: *"The sister of* Niall Mac Iain *lived in Clachan, Cornaig 120 years ago* [about 1810]. *The rest of the family was cutting and drying peat at the back of Cnoc Bheiceapuil in Moss. They left the house in the morning leaving instructions to the girl to bring them their dinner after mid-day. Because of the time of year, the potatoes and last year's meal were finished and that season's harvest had not been completely gathered. How was she to get dinner to the peat cutters? Just as soon as the girl finished her housework, she went out and pulled up as much as she needed of barley from the field. She singed the corn above the embers, stripped the grain off, winnowed it in the breeze, ground it between the two stones of a quern, sieved the flour, baked it, and walked to the peat cuttings three miles away arriving at dinner time!* [told by Hector Cameron in *Am Measg nam Bodach* 1937].

The *corran*, or toothed sickle had been introduced to Britain in Roman times, but it was the end of the eighteenth century before it started to be used in the islands. Using one a man could cut a quarter of an acre a day.

Similarly, the scythe, or *speall*, had been developed by the Romans, but, although a man could cut one to two acres a day using one, it was not used on Tiree until around 1850, because it was believed to shake the corn too much, thereby losing grain.

Use of the scythe needed strength and skill, usually cutting from right to left into the standing corn, leaving the row resting up against the crop and so easier for those bunching coming behind. However, if the weather was wet he would cut away from the standing corn, leaving it to lie on the ground for a few days to dry.

The Whitehouse MacLeans with a horse-drawn reaper.

Horse-drawn mechanical reapers were introduced to Tiree around 1890.There were two varieties. The Wallace was a left hand cutter, coming in three grades – the City (the lightest), Thistle, and Titan (the heaviest). The Albion, a right hand cutter, was made by Harrison and MacGregor. Several of these were salvaged from the wreck of the *Nessmore*, a cargo ship which ran aground in the Gunna Sound in 1895. The grandfather of Angus MacLean (*Aonghas Dhòmhnaill Eòghainn Mhòir*) bought his first Wallace in 1909.

Two men sat on the reaper. One controlled the two horses who walked beside the standing corn, while the other divided the flow of corn over the boards into sheaf sized bundles with a foot pedal and an angled rake.

Archibald MacLean, the miller at Cornaig, and his family cutting hay.

However, corn blown down by the wind or around the entrance to the field still had to be cut by hand, and some crofters with small fields were using scythes until the 1970s.

Corn had to be well-ripened before it could be taken to the mill. Now corn is made into silage; it is better if it is cut slightly green.

Binding

Behind the man with the scythe one or two women or children would bunch, *ceangal*, and another would tie using two handfuls pulled from the sheaf to make a *bann*, or tie. One had to be more careful tying barley as the seed would come off easily.

Horse-drawn mechanical binders were introduced to Scotland around 1890. The first horse-drawn binder on Tiree, pulled by three horses, was owned by Charles MacLean (*Tearlach mac Ghilleasbuig,* or *Tearlach Mòr*), Kenovay. He had been a stud groom in the Clydesdale horse trade and often travelled to New Zealand.

Two mechanical binders powered by tractors were sent to Tiree by the Department of Agriculture in 1942 to compensate for the lack of labour caused by the Second World War. They worked on contract around the island. Willie MacLean, Balinoe, was one who worked in the gang. Hugh Archie MacCallum, White House Farm, bought his first binder in 1963.

Combines

The first combine harvesters were introduced to Scotland in 1932. Alec Hector MacPhail, Clachan brought the first combine harvester (known as a JF and pulled behind a tractor) to Tiree in 1975. Lachie MacKinnon, Hillcrest, was the first to use a self-propelled combine here around 1978.

Gathering the corn

The corn was cut and bound into a *sguab*, or sheaf, lined up into an *adag*, a short double row of six to ten sheaves. If the corn had been cut slightly unripe because of the weather, it was left in the *adagan* for some time, while the sheaves were turned every day until they ripened. The old men were very particular to line up the row of *adagan* in the field so that you could see *gobhal na h-adaig*, or the gap between the sheaves, from one end of the field to the other. Harvesting was hard, thirsty work, and a tin of *sùgh min-choirce*, cold well water mixed with oatmeal, was kept in the shade of an *adag* to provide an energy drink.

Three to fifteen *adagan* were then usually put into a *stùc*, or small stack in the field. The MacIntyres at Gott were famed for their skill in making these. *Stùcanan* could be left out if the weather deteriorated. If there was a dry spell, however, the *adagan* could be taken straight to the stackyard, as every time the corn was handled some grain was lost. The *stùc* was winched onto a low cart, or slide, before being taken to *an iodhlann,* the stackyard behind the house, where about ten to twelve of them were carefully built into a *mulan,* or corn stack.

"*There are ten sheaves in every adag…after ten days, if the weather's good and the seed has hardened, then it's put into a stùc which can stand up to the winds which are common at that time of year. After a month or so the stùcanan are gathered together and taken to the iodhlann…usually it takes six to eight stùcanan to make a good mulan. We keep the best coirce, especially that from the talamh laidir, to put on one side to sow the next year. Coirce talamh laidir is usually firmer and stronger than coirce coinnlein. The seed is better."* Hugh Archie MacCallum.

Lachie MacLean and Hector J. C. Campbell binding oats at Druimfhraoich in the mid-1980s.

Mulain were made on stone stances or old stobs to keep them off the ground. If rats were a problem, clay pipes were sometimes built into the base which could then be used for laying poison.

Four sheaves were placed upright in the centre, and then further sheaves were added around the centre, always working *deiseal* or clockwise. Although becoming more horizontal as they reached the edge, the sheaves were always kept with the seed uppermost, so that any moisture would run away from it down the straw.

The diameter of the stack was carefully measured using a special rope called *mathair shiomain*, or mother of the rope. This was either six or seven *aitheamh*, fathoms, long, marked with a knot at one end and a block at the other. The stack was re-measured every two rows to keep it straight. It was very important to keep the centre of the stack tight, a process that was called *a' bhiathadh a' mhulain*, feeding the stack. The top layer before the stack began to narrow was called *sreath a' chinn*. At about seven feet high a small eave or *calpa*, calf, was made by putting two layers of sheaves back to back. The stack was thatched with *sealasdair*, iris, or *cuilc,* reeds, or very occasionally hay. The point, or *toman*, was often finished off with a cockscomb of bound iris, or a small sheaf whose seed had been neatly removed. This was called *am boideanan.*

The Paterson family of Crossapol in 1937. The cart was used to move ricks from the field to stackyard.

When the *mulan* was finished, it was weighted down by three heavy ropes and stones for a few days to allow it to settle. Then fine *sìoman ruadh*, or sisal rope, was criss-crossed over the top, held by six stones.

A well-known crofter, Archibald MacDonald, 'Lord' MacDonald from Barrapol, once had twenty one stacks in his stackyard: *"...and when the spring came he'd bind up every single bit of thatch, and stack it in the yard for thatching the buildings...He made use of everything, he didn't waste anything."* Hector Kennedy talking to Eric Cregeen 1979.

Building a corn stack at Whitehouse.

John MacFadyen, *Baile Mhic 'Eotha'*, once had thirty *mulain* in his stackyard.

Threshing (*bualadh*)

Sheaves were taken from the stackyard into the byre where they were threshed, six at a time using a *sùist*, or flail. This consisted of a wooden handle (*lachran*, from *làmh-chrann*) joined by a leather or sheepskin thong to a hazel *buailtean*, or thresher. It was swung around the head, while two sheaves lay with their heads crossed over each other on a thick wooden floor around 7 by 4 feet in size. Once the seeds had separated from the straw, it continued to be threshed to separate the *spileagan*, or seed, from the husk.

"*The sheaves of corn were dried in stooks in the field before they were stacked in the yard. Every crofter had a thrashing board* [ùrlar fiodh bualaidh] *fitted to the floor in the barn. This was constructed of timber eight feet square. It was on this board that the corn was thrashed by hand using a flail. The corn sheaves were laid, five on each side of the board, with the ears of corn overlapping in the centre of the board. They were then thrashed with the flail to remove the seed and then all the sheaves were turned over and thrashing started again. The sheaves were then shaken to remove all the loose seed and then the seed was collected off the board and bagged. This process was then repeated until all the sheaves were thrashed. The thrashing was usually undertaken between November and March and was done mostly on wet days when it was near impossible to do any field work. The next stage was to winnow the grain, that is to separate the chaff from the seed, and this was always done on a dry windy day. The seed were then ready to be taken to the mill."* Archie MacKinnon.

John MacKinnon , Balephetrish using a flail in 1960, photographed by Eric Cregeen.

"[The threshing was done] *especially if the day was wet and stormy and they couldn't get to the shore for seaweed…they used a sùist, two working at a time very often…men that were good at threshing properly could work two together, one on each side, they wouldn't hit each other."* Hugh Archie MacCallum.

Winnowing *(càthadh)*

To remove the *moll*, or chaff, the *soran*, a special window at the back of the byre, and the opposite *dorus beòil*, or front door, were opened to create a draught through the building. The heavier barley seed was shaken through a *criathair sìol*, or riddle, while oats were shaken off a circular board called a *fasganadh*. The chaff blew away, leaving a pile of seed.

Seed was measured by volume in a container, stamped by the Crown, called a *criathair-tomhais*. Barley and rye, being heavier were levelled, but the lighter oats were rounded up into a *cruachan*.

Traditionally oats were used to feed cows that had calved, and a crofter would keep back about twenty sheaves for this purpose. Rye, on the other hand, was favoured for rearing calves. The harder barley seeds had to be soaked overnight, or bruised between two rollers, before being fed to horses or cattle. The sticky *calg* or 'beard' would get stuck in horses' mouths, and often have to be removed by hand or using a *stamh*, a soft piece of seaweed stem.

A' Chailleach

On Tiree the last sheaf of corn to be harvested was called *a' Chailleach bhuan'* (the old woman of the harvest) or sometimes *Maighdeann bhuan'* (maiden of the harvest).

This tradition is found all over northern Europe, from Russia to the west coast of Ireland, and from southern Germany to Sweden (James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1922, p400). It is likely to date from the dawn of farming in Neolithic times. The Corn-spirit was believed to live in the corn, giving it the strength to grow vigorously. As the harvest proceeded this spirit became concentrated in the remaining crop. The final sheaf to be cut was then regarded as containing its essence. In some parts of Europe a woman handling this sheaf would soon become married or pregnant. On Tiree, the *cailleach* was fed to the horses in the spring as they went to start the ploughing in the belief that the power of the Corn-spirit would be transmitted to the soil for the new year's growth.

"The last handful [of corn] *they cut, they dress it up in pretty paper. They hang it up on the wall and it stays there all year till the next year. It's good luck…and when a cow is going to calve she gets a handful of straws from the* cailleach *and that's luck on the cow…they would give it to the horses when they were going to start ploughing. Weren't they superstitious?"* Donald Sinclair, Na Cùiltean talking to Eric Cregeen in 1971.

Donald MacIntyre in Gott remembers the *cailleach* well. The last sheaf was about one third the usual size. It was divided into two, a ribbon tied around each and the pair hung either side of the fireplace over the winter. The next spring they were fed to the two horses going out to start the ploughing. The *cailleach* could be very elaborately formed with a stone for a head, grass for the hair, arms and legs, and dressed with scarves and ribbons.

But the spirits in the *cailleach* were also sometimes to be feared. In some parts of Europe the last sheaf was beaten to force the Corn-spirit away: *"In the Hanoverian district of Hadeln the reapers stand around the last sheaf and beat it with sticks in order to drive the Corn-mother out of it. They call to each other 'There she is! Hit her! Take care she doesn't catch you!'"*

In Uist at New Year they sang "*Cailleach eile 'n cùil an teine, bior 'na dà shùil, bior 'na uile / cailleach* at the back of the fire [i.e. by the fireplace], a pointed stick in her two eyes and a stick in her stomach" as a way of destroying the power of the spirit inside the sheaf (Ronald Black, *The Quern-Dust Calendar*, West Highland Free Press, 27.12.02).

The first in the township to complete his harvest would make up his *cailleach* and pass it to his neighbour who was still at work. The last man to finish harvesting had to keep its *cailleach* over the winter.

The Rev. John Gregorson Campbell, the minister on Tiree in the 19th Century described the custom:*"In harvest there was a struggle to escape being the last done with* [the harvest]*, and when tillage in common existed* [before individual crofts were formed, land was held in common in large ridged fields] *instances were known of a ridge being left unshorn (no person would claim it) because of it being behind the rest* [i.e one would rather do without the strip of corn than have to keep the *cailleach*]. *The fear…was that of having the 'famine of the farm' (gort a' bhaile) in the shape of an imaginary old woman to feed till next harvest."*

Harvests knots made by Lachie MacLean, Druimfhraoich in 2003.

The old farmers even used to say *'S fhèarr leum-iochd a's t' fhogaradh na sguab a bharrachd* / it is better to have a *leum-iochd* (a patch where no corn has grown) than an extra sheaf – i.e. so they could be finished earlier.

"Everybody was doing his best so as not to have the cailleach*. It was the last man that was finished, that man was to keep the* cailleach*…in his house, and he was to feed that* cailleach *the year round till next year…that was meaning bad luck to you*." Donald Sinclair talking to Eric Cregeen.

Neil MacArthur, Moss (*Niall Sheumais Alasdair*) tells this story, set around 1950.
Their croft in Heylipol was next to the Campbells, whose brother, *Eachann Sheumais*, had a shop in Balemartine. The Campbells were able to hire a man to come and help with the harvest, so Neil's father went out by moonlight and cut his whole crop leaving only a thin strip bordering his neighbour's croft to hide his night's work. The next morning the families got ready for the harvest, each boasting in a good-humoured way that they would finish first. But his father took up his scythe and was finished in no time, making up the last sheaf and sticking it triumphantly on the Campbell's fence!

A song, written by Duncan MacGregor-White from Balephuil, illustrates the importance attached to avoiding the *cailleach*. Singing the praises of a young girl, *'Bel Dhòmhnaill 'ic Lachainn*, he wrote:

> *'S i bhuaineadh air achadh le corran gèur claiseach*
> *Cha chumadh mac Thearlaich rithe san stàdh*
> *Ghearradh i tarsainn roimh ghillean a' bhaile*
> *Is chuir i a' chailleach air Iain MacPhàil.*
>
> She could mow the meadow with her sharp-grooved sickle
> Charles' son could not match her progress with each swaithe
> She could cut across[i.e. work better than] the village lads
> And she would cause John MacPhail to be the recipient of the Cailleach.
>
> (by kind permission of Bernard Smith, translated by Flora MacPhail).

This four thousand year old harvest tradition died out at different times in different parts of the island – before 1910 in Sandaig, in the 1920s in Balinoe, and into the 1950s in Heylipol and Bailephuil. Beliefs in the old customs were giving way to a new scientific view of the world. As even Donald Sinclair from West Hynish, a man steeped in the oldest traditions, said in 1971 of those who believed in the *cailleach,* "*Weren't they superstitious?"*

The Harvest knot

This was plaited from straw at the end of harvest, and either worn in one's buttonhole, tucked into horses' harnesses, or displayed in church. It is an old custom that seems not to have a well-known Gaelic name on Tiree. It therefore may have been imported from the Lowlands of Scotland by the groups of Tiree people who went away to the mainland harvests in the 19th century. It is also known as a True Lover's Knot, and in Ireland is worn at weddings.

Appendix

Old Scotch dry measures:

- 4 pecks in a firlot;
- 4 firlots in a boll;
- 1 peck was about 2 gallons.

A bushel was an old English measure of 8 gallons.