



## Digital Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

After the Far Eastern glamour of the Hongs of Ruaig, we are back on Tìree and Mull for a failed horticultural experiment, a boy orphaned by the sea and, in these days of increasing fuel poverty in this part of the world, peat stealing.

### *Haarlem of the North*

The envelope was plain and the note inside simply read, "On behalf of the British Heart Foundation I empty the book bank at the Fort William Recycling Centre. I recently found this, which may be of interest to you."

'This' did indeed interest us: a beautifully bound copy of a student thesis for the Royal College of Nursing by Ena MacLean Percy titled *Tìree Bulbs*. Dating from around 1966, it is presumably the work of one of the family of Roger Percy, at the time the Horticultural Advisor for the West of Scotland Agricultural College in Ayrshire. In only 17 pages of text it gives a lot of useful information about the early bulb trials on the island:

*In 1953 three varieties of tulips were purchased from Bowser in Holbeach and they were planted in October. The size was 9 cm and the varieties were William Pitt, Princess Elizabeth and Golden Harvest. The harvest result proved outstanding, the size of the bulbs harvested was in the neighbourhood of 11 -13 cm...The Agricultural College decided that a large scale investigation into the production of tulips, daffodils and hyacinths should be undertaken in Tìree...*

*In October 1955 the main action plan for bulb production was put into operation, the planting of one acre of spring flowering bulbs at Hynish: 2000 hyacinth, 15 000 tulip and 30 000 narcissi bulbs...the results of the one acre plantation showed considerable promise ...and in the autumn of 1956 twenty five crofters agreed to [each] plant a sixteenth of an acre of mixed bulbs.*



*Typical bulb fields on a croft at Hynish (from a postcard)*

However, despite its promising beginnings the project was not a commercial or agricultural success. Tìree was competing with the giant Dutch bulb industry, which had started as far back as 1600, and which currently produces 9 billion bulbs a year - 60% of the world's supply.

Despite this a lasting legacy from the project has been the establishment of a hedging species which has transformed most Tìree gardens over the last 40 years. Ena wrote:

*The College realised the possible damage that could happen from spring and summer gales and decided to carry out a survey of suitable woody perennials that could be employed as hedges or shelter screens to the bulb plantations...blackthorn, escallonia, New Zealand daisy, New Zealand veronica and tamarisk.*

So it was that Mr Percy advised Mr Robert Beck, then Tìree's vet, to send for some *Olearia transversii*, another New Zealand plant, to try as hedging. This he did, and the storm-proof plants from a nursery in Redruth, Cornwall have become extensively planted on the island. This almost 'lost' thesis just shows you how much of the Tìree jigsaw remains to be found – and what has been thrown away!

### *Fuel Poverty In The 1860s*

In some ways it feels as bad as a News International phone hacking. Reading a policeman's report about a poor woman caught red-handed stealing two creels of peat on the Ross of Mull, I feel I need to redact the name to protect her privacy, even though the paper is in the public Council archives in Lochgilphead!

The estate had begun stopping islanders in most townships on Tiree cutting peat or turf around 1800, as the population rocketed towards 4000. In 1805 the estate instructed, "There is a necessity for protecting those mosses [peat cuttings]...the crofters of Balemartine...must supply themselves from the Ross in Mull. Such as are obstreperous and refuse to obey this order must be removed and sent to shift for themselves where fuel is more plenty." A less than subtle threat to evict them.

Between 1800 and the 1870s, when coal-laden puffers began to supply the beaches of Tiree, islanders therefore had to sail to the Bunessan peat banks on Mull several times a year to cut, dry and stack their fuel.

In the police report of 1860 titled 'Theft of peats' number 13, Gilbert MacDonald, a crofter from Balemartine, said, "I and others on Friday 22nd June came from Tiree and, immediately on landing in Ross, I and James MacLean went up to the Ardtun Moss to look after our peat mosses. We saw Effie Mac\*\*\*\*\* in a peat stack of mine stealing my peats. We were about 50 yards from her when she was in the act of stealing, filling a large creel. She went away with it. I followed her and overtook her. I charged her with stealing my peats. This was the second burden she carried home that day because when we were on the way towards the moss she passed us with a burden...I suspected it was my own peats in the first creel."

Three weeks later Effie pleaded not guilty in front of Sheriff Robertson sitting in Tobermory. She was found guilty and sentenced to six days imprisonment.

### *The Loss Of The Charm*

In October Janet had an email from Alastair Warrington, who farms in Worcestershire, with the tragic and remarkable story about the loss of his parents. The telegram, so often a messenger of sad news, was dated 1945 and did not waste words. "Regret to inform you that your brother Group Captain George Warrington and his wife are reported missing at sea since 8th September. Any further information received will be communicated to you immediately."



*The yacht 'Charm' in its berth in County Sligo, Ireland, in 1940s*

The *Charm*, a 46 foot Bermudan ketch, had been owned by a Sligo based, retired solicitor, Gordon McCormick, since 1939. During the war the boat's engine had to be dismantled but he sailed extensively around the Irish west coast, describing her as "a most seaworthy ship", built of oak and pitch pine with iron ribs and a two ton iron keel. Interestingly, at that time a number of spies were suspected of signalling to German U-boats offshore, and McCormick was on the books of British Intelligence to keep a look-out for them.

In the months after the war ended, the boat was seen by the Commanding Officer of RAF Aldergrove, an air force base north of Belfast, and he persuaded McCormick to sell her. Group Captain Warrington, an experienced seaman, set sail from Rosses Point, Sligo, on 8 September with the aim of sailing round the top of Northern Ireland to Belfast where the ketch could be surveyed. As crew he took his Australian wife and two RAF officers. McCormick offered to go with them but he was turned down.

They were never seen again. A storm lashed the area the next day and the boat was reported missing. Ferry crews and lighthouse keepers were alerted, while air sea rescue flights scoured that sector of the Atlantic. A few days later wreckage was washed up along the coast of Tiree between Scarinish and Hynish. Parts of the hull, a petrol tin and a red cushion came ashore. Finally a rail board with the name *Charm* was found by either the hotel keeper or postmaster (reports differ) on the island. The RAF officer sent to the scene reported that, "I gained the impression that the vessel may have been blown up by a mine." This suspicion was deepened by the finding that, "a dozen mines had been washed up in that area during the past few days." The only body recovered was on Islay, that of one of the crew, Flying Officer D McGregor, who is buried in Bowmore.



*Group Captain George Ninian Warrington and his wife Mrs Quenelda Warrington (nee Clegg), Australian*

It is said in the family that CO Warrington's brother, who lived in Glasgow and who was deaf and dumb, woke up on the night of the tragedy having dreamt that his brother was drowning off Tiree. The couple's son, Alastair, was left an orphan at the age of three.

"I was extremely fortunate," Alastair now writes, "in being taken in by a wonderful family in Shropshire, with whom my mother [who had come over from Melbourne in 1939 on a music scholarship] had spent the war helping on their farm. This family were quite remarkable having already adopted two teenage girls from Vienna who escaped the Nazis before being sent to the gas chambers with their parents. To say we were totally accepted by this fairly eccentric couple and their own four children would be an understatement."

Tiree has only a walk on part in this tragedy, and I have wandered a little distance from the footpath marked 'Tiree'. But to me it is the people and their stories that fascinate me, and I get distracted!

### *Milkit Four Times In The Day*

The subject of this year's exhibition in An Iodhlann is agriculture on Tiree. As a taster, here are two stories that I found when doing the research. The first was recorded by Hector MacPhail, Ruaig, during one of his famous talks.

*"The Tiree smacks traded all over the islands. A lot of you will remember Biddy in Scarinish. Her mother's brother, Charles MacPhail, Tèarlach Beag as he was known, his father had a smack. And his father died when he was only 14, and his uncles were running the smack, and they weren't making a very good job of it. Tèarlach Beag said, "I'm going to run this smack myself." And the first order they had was to go to a place in Uist to load cattle to take down to Oban. And he had no chart for this loch in Uist. But his grandfather sketched out a chart of the loch on the floor of his house with his walking stick and [the lad] memorised it. Six smacks left Scarinish on the same tide bound for the same loch to load cattle. Well, Tèarlach, at the age of 14 was in there, had the boat loaded and was out of the mouth of the loch before the next smack arrived from Tiree!"*

The second story is from Eric Cregeen's unfailingly fascinating book of Estate Instructions covering the period 1771 to 1805. The island's factor wrote in 1794,

*The cattle bred in Tiree are subject to a very dangerous disorder when brought to [the mainland], which entirely deters dealers from attempting to bring them to market, and only stots [bullocks] of one or two years old are sold to them as they are found to be less subject to the distemper than aged cattle... The price of both cows and stots is from one third to one fourth below what such cattle bred in Coll or Mull usually sell for, which together with the difficulty of disposing of them, discourages the tenants from paying much attention to the rearing of cattle.*

Pat Boyd, the island's current vet, has identified this "dangerous disorder" almost certainly as babesiosis. This parasitic infection of cattle, caused by *Babesia divergens*, causes destruction of red blood cells. Animals become



anaemic, jaundiced and have blood in their urine. It is transmitted through ticks, which live in long grass and heather. Cattle grazed on the short grass of Tiree are therefore not exposed to the disease, and were susceptible when they walked through the rough ground on the Ross of Mull at the start of their long walk to the markets of Falkirk. Cattle from Mull and Coll would have developed immunity by low grade infection over the years.

### *HMS Tiree*

Edward Fordrey from Wimbledon has been in touch to describe his time on *HMS Tiree* in 1948/9. This boat has been made an honorary township of the island despite having nothing to do with Tiree except the name. He takes issue with a description of the boat as being, "sturdy and reliable in all weathers." He says, "My God! Could she pitch and roll in heavy seas! She had a coal fired galley and at the order, 'Cooks to the galley!' the rating appointed to collect the food for the whole mess often never made it back with it due to taking a sea!"



*HMS Tiree at Sheerness dockyard in May 1949*

His 'patch' was from the Thames to Harwich, clearing the area of mines and wrecks. Having detected a wreck, "the *Tiree* armourers began fitting detonators and fuses to the hundred or so depth charges we had on the deck. These were then lowered on to the [boat's] cutter. Depending on the size of the wreck, our job was to blow a massive hole in the sea bed and tip the wreck into it. Very exciting! ...It was very dangerous and hard work for which we got paid an extra 1/3d a day – 7p!!"

### *Welcome To The New World, Mate!*

A recent cutting brought a smile to the republican cheeks of An Iodhlann' family history specialist, Duncan Grant. It came from the descendants of Charles MacLean. In an excerpt from the book *Wreck of the Hyderabad*, Ian Church writes:

*Another New Zealand family who can trace their origins back to the wreck [in 1878] are the descendants of the ship's carpenter, Charles MacLean, and his wife, Mary, who served as a stewardess...He had led an adventurous life since he had left his birthplace on the Isle of Tiree and had been left with smallpox in Chile.*

The *Hyderabad* was a Scottish iron three masted sailing ship. She was en route from Lyttleton, New Zealand, to Adelaide when, caught in a violent storm, the captain ran her on to Waitarere beach on North Island. No lives were lost.

The family information goes on with "a story that Charles was asked to carry one of the 'gentry' ashore from the *Hyderabad*, and sort of 'dropped him in' en route. They were in the New World now!"

## *Càth | Chaff*

- There are now 2200 Tìree tracks on the website [www.tobarandualchais.co.uk](http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk). Dip into them for some great stories and songs. We also have some copies of *Guthan Eileanan na h-Alba, Voices of Scotland's Islands* to give away. This terrific new CD contains 27 tracks of songs from the archive collection with singers from Shetland to Islay and one stand-out track from Margaret MacArthur, Caolas.
- Mike Hughes and I are putting the finishing touches to a book about Tìree during the Second World War. It should be out on the Island Books Trust imprint in the autumn.
- An Iodhlann is in the process of re-vamping its website so that a lot more of our collection will be available. Work should be finished in the autumn.
- We are about to start a cataloguing project of the stones in Soroby graveyard to the west of the island. Watch this space!
- We are readying ourselves for an important meeting on the island to celebrate the life of Captain Donald MacKinnon of Heanish, Tìree. It was he who skippered the *Taeping* to victory in the famous clipper race against the *Ariel*. He died in 1867. This talk is on 12 May and is being organised by Mary and Angus MacLean, Scarinish. We may have a report in the next issue of *Sil Eòlais*.
- In partnership with *Fèis Thiriodh*, An Iodhlann is publishing a book of twenty traditional Tìree songs, *Òrain an Eòrna, Songs of the Barley*. The book contains music, translations and notes, and will be available in June.

As always, thanks for listening, and a particular welcome to the 32 people who have become Life Members of our exclusive tribe.

Dr John Holliday



*Tìree Agricultural Show behind Scarinish School in the 1920s or 1930s*