



## Digital Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

### *The Secret Island: towards a history of Tìree*

Kicking off our historical conference at the end of May is a talk 'What did you do in the War, A' Sheanair? the importance of local history and culture to a community.' It's an important question. Most people aren't much interested in any history, local or otherwise. It's left to a minority of history geeks – like you and me – to keep the flame burning. But, nevertheless, members of the Tìree 'tribe' usually want to know that the knowledge that makes them and their 'home' special is being kept safely by someone. They like to know it's there. This knowledge is set to get a boost when the three day conference, *The Secret Island: towards a history of Tìree*, gets under way on Thursday 30 May. It is being run by The Islands Book Trust together with An Iodhlann. As well as an opportunity to fill in many of the big blanks in our history jigsaw, this will be a once in a lifetime opportunity to get together with some of the top scholars in Scotland, talk over dinner and generally chew the historical cud (if that's what you do after a historical dinner). One of the most pleasing aspects of the conference is the number of local people who are giving talks. And we've got an eminent Collach speaking about that vexed question: why don't the two islands love each other more? Do try to come for at least part of the time.

Another good question is: where have all the characters gone? As each generation passes on, Tìree seems blander and less colourful. It's a big subject, and we'll return to it another time. But one big character was surely Colin MacPhail, Crossapol. He died 24 years ago but at the end of last year a remarkable discovery was made. Alasdair MacPhail, Balemartine, was tidying his sheds in Crossapol. Hidden under a tarpaulin was a box of damp, dirty old papers. When we cleaned and sorted them we found a gold mine of letters, bills and advertising from the 1920s to the 1940s. These give a fascinating insight into the life of an intelligent, go-ahead, sometimes controversial, crofter on the island between the wars. Alasdair has kindly given these papers to An Iodhlann and we are currently cataloguing and storing them. Here, then, is a brief life story of *Cailean Lachainn*, a Tìree character.



Colin MacPhail, *Cailean Lachainn Chailein* 1895 – 1989

### *Colin MacPhail, Cailean Lachainn Chailein 1895 – 1989*

A preacher who was known to use strong language, Justice of the Peace, special constable, crofter, member of the Show Committee and tea salesman: Colin MacPhail, Crossapol, was a man of many parts, a 'character' who saw almost the whole sweep of the twentieth century. He is chiefly remembered today for his 24 year stint as the island's first Station Superintendent for Tìree airport.

Colin's grandfather on his father's side, also a Colin MacPhail (*Cailean Chailein*), had come to Tìree from Salen in Mull with his young wife Flora sometime before 1841. He found work as an "agricultural labourer" on Hynish Farm. By 1851 he had moved to Balephetrish Farm with their two children, Helen and Lachlan. By 1871 he had crossed to Baugh Farm, first as a "ploughman" and by 1881 as "farm manager" there. He may have taken over what became of the family croft at that time, situated on the east of the side road between the present day Pottery and 'Dooley's'. In 1891 he was living with his unmarried daughter Helen, a wool spinner, in a thatched house now known as *Tobhta Chailein Lachainn* immediately behind the roadmen's cottage (*Taigh a' Bhochdainn*) in Baugh. He was listed in the Census of that year as being blind, "formerly a ploughman" and a Gaelic speaker with no English. His son's marriage certificate in 1892 lists him as 'Farm Grieve' or foreman. 'Old' Colin died in 1895.

Colin's father Lachlan, *Lachainn Chailein*, was born in 1839, probably in Hynish, although one Census lists him as having been born on Mull before his parents came to Tìree. He worked alongside his father as a ploughman on Balephetrish Farm. He then followed his father to Baugh Farm where he worked as a

shepherd. He left Tiree some time after 1891 for Benmore Estate a few miles north of Dunoon to work as a shepherd for Lachlan MacQuarrie, who had come from Tiree to take over the farm there. In 1892, at the age of 53, he married Isabella Munn, a 33 year old dressmaker from Tiree, in a Congregational Church in Glasgow. Isabella Munn's father, Hugh, was a crofter and fisherman in Heanish. Lachlan and Isabella then moved to Drymen, near Stirling, where Lachlan again worked as a shepherd. The couple were in Luìng by 1911, where the Census of that year lists Lachlan as a 70 year old shepherd. But by 1917 the couple had returned to Tiree, living in the shepherd's house on the road near *An Talla*, Crossapol. *Lachlainn Chailein* worked his father's croft in Baugh just to the north of the present day Pottery.

When *Lachlainn Chailein* was in Crossapol an old tinker asked him for shelter as the traveller was unwell. Lachlan said he could stay in the byre next to the house. Days turned into weeks and Lachlan became a little tired of having to provide hospitality. When the old traveller was well enough to leave he was bundled into a cart and, as he left, he waved and shouted, "*Ta, Ta! Lachlainn Chailein.*" Lachlan replied under his breath, "*Ta, Ta! Mhic na Galla Nach tig an latha a thilleas tu!*" [Bye, Bye! Son of a bitch. May the day never come when you return]. "*Ta, Ta, Lachlainn Chailein!*" became a popular phrase amongst Lachlan's neighbours when they wanted to tease him. Lachlan had a reputation as an excellent shepherd and he had a dog that could open gates and bring cattle in from the Reef by itself. His pony would simply lie down in the traces when it was tired of pulling the cart. Lachlan died in 1927 aged 88.

'Young' Colin MacPhail himself – to give him his full *sloinneadh* or patronymic he was *Cailean Lachlainn Chailein Chailein* [Colin, the son of Lachlan, the son of Colin, the son of Colin] - was born in Salum in 1895, although his parents were living at the time in Stirlingshire. His mother, a Munn, was related to the family of Malcolm MacLean, *Calum Saluim*. Colin spent most of his childhood in Luìng. For his later education he boarded in Oban and went to Oban High School, leaving at the relatively late age of 17. He was an able student and the dux of the school. After this achievement the headmaster asked Colin to come into his study and questioned him about his plans, expecting great things from his star pupil. "I want to be a shepherd," said Colin. In fact, if his parents had had greater means he could have gone to university and entered one of the professions. *He was a clever man.* Mary T MacPhee, Scarinish.

He was brought up in a Gaelic speaking household, and spoke Gaelic as his first language. His remaining papers contain no trace of the language, and he may not have learned to read and write it at school. His accent when speaking Gaelic was slightly different to that of Tiree because of his childhood in Luìng and possibly the Mull background of his father's family.

*'I have a fond memory of a crofter [Colin MacPhail] who also arranged bookings for islanders on the then Scottish Airways, who flew to the mainland. A Gaelic speaker, to my ear his English was the most beautiful I had then heard spoken.'* Kenneth Walker, who worked in the Sick Bay of RAF Tiree.

We don't know what he did when he left school, but he probably rejoined the family in Luìng and then Crossapol. He did join the Royal Navy on 22 August 1918, three months before the end of the war, at the age of 23. His papers record him as being six feet tall, with grey eyes and a clear complexion. He served on a converted trawler, *Attentive III*, which patrolled and mineswept the English Channel from her base at Dover. He was demobbed after less than a year, in April 1919, travelling home from Dover to Oban. He probably returned to the family croft on Tiree, but his education and war service were to play a considerable part in his life on the island.

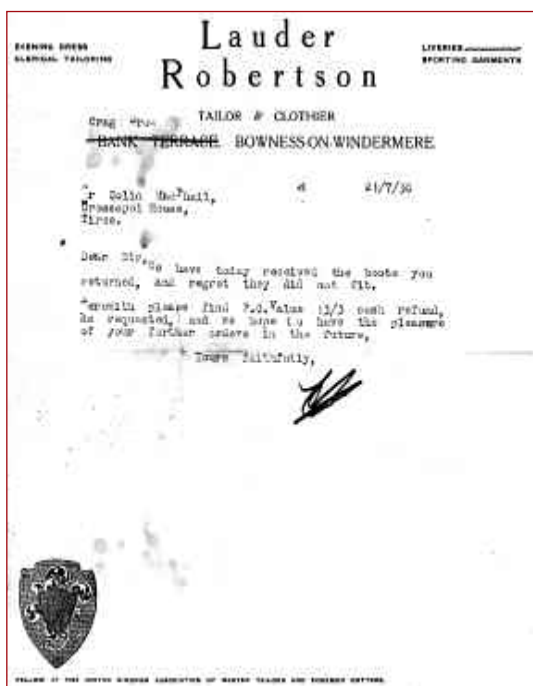
The time of the First World War was a period of turmoil in the Highlands. There was an agitation from the people for land and pressure on landlords to split up the great farms of the 19th century. One of the last Tiree farms to be broken up was that of Tom Barr, who was tenant of the townships Balephetrish, The Reef and Crossapol. Barr refused an application to give up some ground to make crofts in 1913, arguing that his farm would only be profitable in its entirety. He demanded compensation to leave of £3890, which appeared excessive to local people. In January 1918, after years of stalemate, a number of cottars took possession of a 13 acre field in what became known as the 'Balephetrish Land Raid' and started cultivating it. They were arrested and imprisoned for ten days, but soon after this Barr agreed to the release of part of his farm to create 22 crofts. In 1922 Tom Barr gave up the farm completely, moving to the mainland, and the eventual settlement saw 38 new crofts created between Balephetrish and Crossapol. There was some dissatisfaction with the second allocation as the land had been promised to returning servicemen and not all those initially given crofts had a service record. Another complaint was of absentee tenants: as one local man said, "the majority of them weren't occupying crofts at all, they were just letting them, letting the grazing and working at sea or working away from here."

Colin was allocated croft number 8, Crossapol, probably because of his Royal Navy service. There he built what he named 'Crossapol House', which stands overlooking the west end of *Tràigh Bhàigh*. He became secretary of the Balephetrish Sheep Scheme, a collective of new crofters in Balephetrish, Kenovay and

Crossapol, who had been given a government grant to buy sheep and to work them collectively. Sheep grazed in winter on the Reef. The scheme proved a source of friction with the Department of Agriculture in Edinburgh, who laid down strict rules on how the stock should be managed and insisted that expensive replacement sheep had to be bought down south. Lachie MacKinnon's father, in Parkhouse, Balephetrish was also part of the scheme, but was pleased to be out of it when the Reef was repossessed by the Department of War in 1940. The crofters "hadn't made a penny out of it." On the scheme's behalf Colin bought sheep from as far afield as Muck and sold them in the markets of Hawick.



*Letter to Colin MacPhail, Secretary of the Balephetrish Sheep Stock Club, 1930*



*Mail order returns service 1930s style*

He could be an awkward neighbour. Crofters in Crossapol had an allocation of six cows on the Reef but Colin would sometimes exceed his allowance. He also somehow occasionally managed to forget the date (May 28th) he was meant to bring his cattle in from the Reef.

In a bid to diversify he became the agent for an Edinburgh tea merchant on Tiree and Coll, and also for the local sheep and cattle sales. He sometimes acted as auctioneer himself, and could be heard making comments about the stock in front of him through the side of his mouth. He wrote to a chemist on the mainland to try to secure an agency for medicines on the island. He was an enthusiast for new things and shopped by mail order far and wide, even buying horse harness from America.

Possibly it was hard to buy clothes that fitted him locally as he was pencil thin and had extraordinarily long legs. *His trousers were always at half-mast.* Bill Innes, a pilot and frequent visitor to the island's airport.

Angus MacLean measured him once for a suit and his leg length was over 40 inches. He once bought a bicycle advertised in the Oban Times. Ex-police issue, it had to be sent down from Stornoway. It arrived at the pier and a number of people tried it out. With its huge 30 inch frame no one could sit on the saddle and reach the pedals. Eventually Colin came down looking for the bicycle. "This is built for a giant!" they told him. "I'm that giant!" replied Colin. He put the saddle up a few notches and rode off! Years later Colin offered the bicycle to David McClounnan, Balephuil, but he turned it down as he would never have been able to ride it.

He liked to dress well and had a moustache "that was worth crossing from the mainland to see." His was one of the earliest houses on Tiree to have a telephone – Crossapol 22 – even before the doctor's house, 23. This may have been put in by the airline company.

During the Second World War Colin was a special constable, and didn't always endear himself to his neighbours with his conscientious application of the blackout regulations. He also preached in the Baptist Church, and it was said of him, not necessarily as a compliment, that he "had bracelets [handcuffs] in one pocket and a Bible in the other."

Despite his church duties, Colin could use quite colourful language. Angus MacDonald used to take him to church and went up to collect him one Sunday morning. Colin had a large numbers of cats, some scrawnier than others. He was still getting ready for the service but before he left the house he tried to clear the cats out with a stick and the odd oath. As he locked the door, one cat, bolder than the others,



sneaked through his legs and back into the house. The air around Crossapol was blue that day!. He would also sometimes hire Johnny Kennedy, Crossapol, to take him to church by car. One day as he got out he caught his hand in the door of the car, but went in and gave the sermon. As he came out Johnny was waiting for him. "Robh do lamh goirt?" [Was your hand sore?] asked Johnny. "Ifrinneachte goirt!" [hellish sore] replied Colin.

During the Second World War Colin hired a nurse to look after his mother, a situation that gave rise to rumours that the new arrival was not a nurse - and not even a woman. In fact she was thought by locals to be a German spy. It was noticed that the new 'nurse' had quite manly features, wore trousers and long, brown leather boots. 'She' spent hours on the shore, where local children learnt to be wary of her. The story went round that she would flash signals from her upstairs bedroom to waiting submarines. She suddenly disappeared from Crossapol and it was said locally she had gone to Mull. Hector Campbell, the owner of one of the shops in Balemartine, happened to be on Mull at the same time for a funeral and recognised her. He tipped off the local policeman, Peter Hume, who also had Tiree connections, and the 'spy' was caught red-handed on Grass Point, transmitter in hand. There are similarities to the plot of the 1978 book *Eye of the Needle* by Ken Follett and the 1981 film of the same name starring Donald Sutherland.

After Colin's father died in 1927 his mother Isabella came to live with him in Crossapol House. One day during the war a mine was washed in below his house and everyone was waiting for it to explode. He had to leave the house and left his mother in bed covered with an old door and other pieces of wood. The mine did explode and pieces of it were found as far away as Island House. The house was quite badly damaged but his mother was safe. Isabella died in Salum in 1946.

His house was anything but tidy. It seemed as though he hardly ever threw anything away and the back room was piled almost to the ceiling with papers. His 'desk' was a pile of paperwork (not unlike that of his cousin, *Calum Saluim*, at his Salum shop). He somehow had the ability to reach inside the pile and pull out exactly the piece of paper he was looking for. Angus MacLean remembers visiting him and noticing a huge pile of used batteries stacked on the mantelpiece, almost to the ceiling. If they had fallen onto Colin he would have been killed! He also smoked continuously from morning to night.

It was possibly his position as a leading crofter on the Reef that led to his breakthrough into the fledgling airline industry. On July 1st 1936 Captain Barclay flew the first commercial flight to Tiree via Islay in a *Dragon Rapide*, a twin engine biplane that could carry eight passengers. That year Colin became the agent for Northern and Scottish Airways. Before the Second World War the airline's planes landed on the grass to the north side of the Reef road, where there was a small wooden hut. The hut's foundations can still be seen, and this became Colin's workplace where passengers were weighed before embarking. There was also a fuel drum and pump. The phone number of the 'airfield' was Scarinish 9. When Colin answered the phone it sounded as though there was an echo "Scarinish 9-er", a style of 'radio talk' still used today that he may have learned in the Navy or from the pilots.

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AIR LINER LEAVES

From: Renfrew  
 At: 17/15

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Not transferable, and available only on the day and at the time specified hereon.

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 Place of Issue: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of Issue: 1/4/36

Air ticket, Renfrew-Tiree, £2 and 7 shillings

One of Colin's other duties was to raise the airport flag to show the pilots the wind direction and strength. Captain Barclay, one of the early pilots, was always looking for the chance to play practical jokes, and would often fly in as low as he could, hiding behind the dunes of *Tràigh Bhàigh*, Baugh beach, so that Colin couldn't see him. One day Colin slept in and was late for the flight. He was pedalling furiously towards The Reef when Barclay flew up behind him and buzzed just over his head! Colin's reply was to take his handkerchief out of his pocket and hold it up as a windsock as he bicycled along!

He was described as "unflappable" by Captain Eric Starling, who retired in 1971 as BEA's most experienced pilot. *Flight of the Starling*, Iain Hutchinson.

*Colin MacPhail, a wonderful man who was the station superintendant on Tiree for many years. He was totally unfazed by anything aviation threw at him.* Bill Innes.

*Just as James MacGeachy was the face of BEA in Campbeltown, that of Colin MacPhail was indelibly linked stamped on the airline's operation on Tiree. BEA's traffic here might have been light and its aircraft diminutive, but this was MacPhail's domain. The Tiree booking office was listed quite simply as 'Colin MacPhail, Crossapol House, telephone no. Scarinish 9' [actually the business number at the Reef office which became 220 309, the Tiree airport number, today]. This was MacPhail's home where he conducted his duties for BEA outwith the time of the arrival and departure of the aircraft. MacPhail had become the representative for Northern and Scottish Airways in 1936, well before Tiree received regular visits from the airline and its successor Scottish Airways. He therefore, undoubtedly, was able to adopt a nonchalant approach to his duties from this undemanding start. The story of the arrival of Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, chairman of BEA, became part of Hebridean aviation folklore.... MacPhail was assisted by Mary Munn, who began her airline career in 1943 BEAline to the Isles, Phil Lo Bao and Iain Hutchinson.*

*It took more than a bit of authority to impress islanders. When Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, Marshall of the Air Force, became Chairman of BEA, he decided to do a trip round the Scottish islands on one of the Rapides. In due course he arrived at Tiree where he was greeted by a completely empty tarmac. As Marshall of the Air Force he had become accustomed to a bit of a parade when doing his rounds. Eventually Colin MacPhail, the Station Superintendent, appeared from a building, probably wearing a creased uniform and no cap. When he opened the door of the Rapide, the Air Marshall roared at him, "Weren't you expecting me? Colin, in his soft Hebridean accent calmly replied, "If you're Lord Douglas, I was. If not, I wasn't!"* *Flight of the Starling*, Iain Hutchinson.

He retired from the airport in 1960.

In 1953, at the age of 58, he married 37 year old Mary Duncanina ('Duncie') MacFadyen, from croft number 17, Crossapol. They had no children. He died in Oban in 1989, aged 93, with Duncie dying a few months later in Glasgow. They are both buried in Luing.

Thank you to Alasdair MacPhail and his family for their kind donation.

## *Càth | Chaff*

- The 1880s Reading Room is showing its age slightly, with foggy windows and loose boards. We plan a building renovation project after the summer rush.
- Catriona Smyth has finished her detailed, complete survey and recording of the old Soroby graveyard. The results will be on a database on the new website.
- This summer's exhibition display is about Kirkapol and Heylipol Churches and has been written by Gordon Scott.
- Our new app, 'frasan', was launched this spring with money from the first round of the Digital R&D Fund. Professor Alan Dix, Crossapol, was instrumental in getting this grant against stiff national competition from some big players like the National Piping Centre and the National Galleries of Scotland. Only six projects were funded in Scotland. The idea of 'frasan' is that you can download part of our collection onto your smartphone or iPad and then view it as you go 'mobile' round the island. We have a couple of devices for hire in An Iodhlann if you've left yours at home.
- Finally, have a look at Professor Emeritus Donald E Meek's wonderful new blog. The site contains a wealth of Caolas history and a lot of Donald's writings over the years. Check out <http://meekwrite.blogspot.co.uk> Recommended!

History's not just for dead people. There's a lot of it about on Tiree just now. Enjoy!

Dr John Holliday

# Towards a History of Tìree 3-day Conference

## PROGRAMME

### THURSDAY 30th MAY

12.30pm – 2.00pm: Registration and Buffet Lunch  
2.00pm: Welcome and Introduction – JOHN RANDALL, Chairman of the Islands Book Trust  
2.15pm: Welcome and Overview: DONALD MEEK  
2.30pm: 'What Did You Do in the War, a Sheanair?' – The Importance of Local History and Culture to a Community' – JOHN HOLLIDAY  
2.45pm: 'Tìree and Coll – Together but Different' – NICHOLAS MACLEAN-BRISTOL  
3.30pm: Tea  
4.00pm: 'Martin Martin and Tìree' – DONALD WILLIAM STEWART  
4.45 – 5.15pm: Discussion Session  
6.30 – 8.30pm: Conference Dinner  
8.30pm: 'The Gloomy Forest- Bàrd Thighearna Cholla' – ROB DUNBAR

### FRIDAY 31st MAY

9.30am: 'From Machair to Prairie- Emigration from Tìree to Canada in the 19th and 20th centuries' - MARGARET MACKAY  
10.15am: 'The Role of the Non-Established Churches in Tìree' - DONALD MEEK  
11.00: Coffee  
11.30am: 'Tìree in the '45' - RONALD BLACK  
12.15pm: Discussion Session  
12.45- 2.00pm: Lunch  
2.00pm – 2.45pm: 'Historical Aspects of Birds and their Habitats on Tìree' – IAN BOYD and JOHN BOWLER  
2.45 - 6.00pm: Conference Visit to places of interest in Tìree - including a tour of Soroby Graveyard with Catriona Smyth, the Kirkapol chapels with Robert Higham, and a visit to the gravestone of John Gregorson Campbell. There will also an opportunity for a bird-watching walk with John Bowler.  
7.00 – 8.30pm: Dinner  
8.30pm: 'Recent Tìree Poetry' – FLORA MACPHAIL, DONALD MURRAY, DONALD MEEK

### SATURDAY 1st JUNE

9.30am: 'The Rebellious Island – Unlocking the History of the Land Struggle in Tìree' – DONALD MEEK  
10.15am: 'Beveridge in Tìree – Photographer and Archaeologist' – LESLEY FERGUSON  
11.00am: Coffee  
11.30am: 'Tìree Gaelic' – AILEAN BOYD and IONA BROWN  
12.15 - 12.45pm: Discussion Session  
12.45 – 2.00pm: Lunch  
2.00pm: 'Transport to and from Tìree' – DONALD MEEK  
2.45pm: Short contributions from Tìree residents and other speakers, including:  
Gordon Scott - 'Building Faith: A Tale of Two Churches'  
Ian Smith - 'Fuadach Bhaill' a' Phuill: A Study of the Balephuill Fishing Disaster of 1856'  
3.30pm: Tea  
4.00pm: 'Current Issues and the Future of Tìree' – JOHN HOLLIDAY and DONALD MEEK  
4.45 – 5.30pm: Discussion Session and Conclusions  
5.30pm: Formal Close of Conference  
6.30 – 8.00pm: Dinner  
8.00pm: Community Ceilidh



# 'The Secret Island'

## Towards a History of Tìree

3-day Conference  
An Talla Community Hall  
Crossapol Tìree

Thursday 30 May  
to  
Saturday 1 June

Tìree is one of the most fertile Hebridean islands and has had a relatively large population since early times. One of its Gaelic names – 'Tìr ìseal an eòrna' (the low land of barley) - encapsulates its reputation for productive agriculture, while another - 'Tìr bàrr fo thuinn' (the land below the waves) - illustrates its generally very low-lying nature.

And yet, strangely, Tìree is one of the few Hebridean islands without a full-length recent book published about its remarkable history. The aim of this conference is to bring together a wide range of people, from the academic world and from the local community, with knowledge of aspects of Tìree's history from 1600 to the present day, so they can discuss their views with the ultimate objective of filling this gap. It is possible that a further book about the early history of Tìree could be contemplated at a later date.

This three day event is organised by the Islands Book Trust, based in Lewis and dedicated to furthering understanding and appreciation of the history of Scottish islands. It has been arranged in partnership with An Iodhlann, Tìree's historical centre.

Meals and overnight accommodation can be arranged as part of an all-inclusive conference price for those who wish this. Alternatively, people can come along to individual sessions on a pay-as-you-go basis.

**For more details, please phone Alayne Barton on 01851 820946 or email [alayne@theislandsbooktrust.com](mailto:alayne@theislandsbooktrust.com)**

**There are special reductions for Tìree residents and full-time students - ask John Holliday for details.**

**Price for An Iodhlann's members:  
£25 the whole conference, £5 a session and £2 a lecture  
including teas and coffees.  
You are all welcome to the evening historical dinners and  
ceilidh, which will be charged separately.  
Please come with your musical instruments!**

For more details see [www.theislandsbooktrust.com](http://www.theislandsbooktrust.com)  
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