



Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome to another edition of *Sìl Eòlais*. Bob Chambers turns up more documents showing how islanders competed to be chosen for a croft after Tom Barr's huge farm stretching from Balephetrish to Crossapol was broken up in 1922; the myths around bog cotton; and Janet Bowler discusses the sand-blow that led to the evacuation of Hough.

GIVE US MORE LAND, AND GIVE IT TO US NOW: *demands for new crofts in Balephetrish after the First World War*

In the November 2013 issue of *Sìl Eòlais*, I wrote about the First World War gunner Archie Walker – a Tiree man serving in the Canadian army – applying to the Board of Agriculture for Scotland (BoAS) in February 1918 from the trenches in France for a croft if and when Balephetrish Farm was broken up into smallholdings. What is so special about Archie's letter is that it is the first (and still to date the only one) I have discovered in many years of researching 'land settlement' schemes (a term used to describe the breaking up of farms and estates in the Highlands and Islands into new crofts and also for the enlargement of existing crofts), which was written and sent by someone whilst he was actually in the front line.

On some subsequent visits to the archives of the National Records of Scotland (NRS) in Edinburgh, I decided to read some of the other letters from applicants for the Balephetrish land settlement scheme.

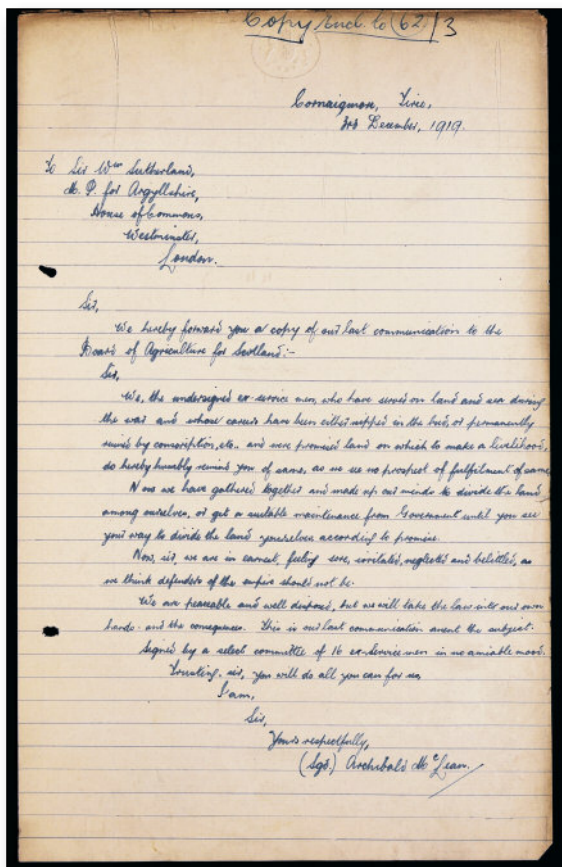
Alex (Alexander) Kennedy applied on 15 August 1919 for a smallholding at Balephetrish. He was asking for forty acres of land. Alex explained: "*I got good experience of land work. I been at it most of my days in the island of Tiree where I was born and my home is still there.*" At the time of his application, his address was c/o Donald Kerr, 48 Holms Street, Govan, Glasgow. He was away from the island due to a lack of work there: "*there's know [sic] work in Tiree for us the way things are at present.*" He states that he had been in the navy from June 1915 until demobilised in June 1919. He gives his navy details and number as "*1608, Portsmouth depot, RNRT [Royal Naval reserve Trawler Section], leading deck hand*". Again, I do not know if he was successful in getting a Balephetrish croft, and I do not have his Tiree address.

A few things strike me as being particularly noteworthy about Alex's application. First: in all probability, he would have been given a high priority for getting a croft because of his war service, though we do not know his financial position at the time (another important consideration for BoAS of applicants). Second: he gives no information about his background or any relevant practical crofting experience. Did he come from a crofting family or not on the island? Third: it is not especially unusual to come across applicants living in Glasgow but who belong to the Hebrides. They were in Glasgow for work in many cases. Was Alex, for example, a younger son in a crofting family? And it is interesting to note the lack of job opportunities for him in Tiree in 1919 – presumably that could have been a reflection on the general work situation throughout the island at the time.

There is another application – this time on 26 October 1920 – from a Tiree man, Archie Cameron, living in Glasgow at 25 Sandyford Street, Kelvinhaugh. He had lodged an application for a croft at Balephetrish shortly after being demobilised in 1919 (his letter doesn't state when). He is enquiring what has become of his application. Archie had served in the Navy from the outbreak of the First World War until the end. This, he states, should give him a "*reasonable claim for getting a piece of land*" in his "*native island*". At the time of his enquiry, Archie was at sea, a vocation for which he felt he was no longer suited due to injuries during the war. He also refers to his knowledge of "*agricultural work*" by stating "*my past experience should be sufficient to carry me through, for I have worked on my father's croft for a period extending over twelve years*".

Again, unfortunately, I do not have Archie's Tiree address and there is no further information in his letter to help us discover more about him. If he was successful for a croft there might be a few more details about him in Elliot Scott's list of recommended applicants. Was he, for example, a younger son and therefore unlikely to inherit his father's croft? Given his war service he should have been given priority in obtaining a croft provided he had enough cash behind him. He certainly had sufficient practical experience

Some of these letters come from groups of islanders. The first is from Balemartine, and the short, handwritten letter is written and signed on 4 August 1919 by John McDonald: "We, ex-servicemen, and applicants for holdings on the Farm of Crossipol, Tiree, wish to be informed by the Board of Agriculture when are we to be given possession of said farm. We have waited long enough now and if steps are not taken by the 'Board' soon, we shall take possession of it by the November term. Hoping to have a satisfactory reply at once, I am (on behalf of all), John M McDonald, RNR".



Letter from Archibald MacLean

The letter is fairly self-explanatory. It is typical of many letters I have seen to BoAS by frustrated ex-servicemen applicants, who have become impatient with what they saw as feet dragging and lack of progress by BoAS. It is short on detail, but the message is loud and clear. And many ex-servicemen did resort to land raiding after the First World War – with spectacularly successful outcomes in most cases. Obviously, we cannot tell from the letter who or how many the applicants were. Therefore we will never know this particular outcome.

Another group of sixteen unnamed ex-servicemen wrote to BoAS on 3 December 1919, copying their letter to the MP, Sir William Sutherland, making similar threats in relation to Balephetrish Farm. These men were from Cornaigmore, Middleton, Moss, Kilkenneth, Kilmoluaig and Kenovay. Their letter states: "We, the undersigned ex-servicemen, who have served on land and sea during the war and whose careers have been either nipped in the bud, or permanently ruined by conscription etc., and were promised land on which to make a livelihood, do hereby humbly remind you of same, as we see no prospect of fulfilment of same. Now we have gathered together and made up our minds to divide the land among ourselves, or get a suitable maintenance from Government until you see your way to divide the land yourselves according to promise. Now sir, we are in earnest feeling sore, irritated, neglected and belittled, as we think defenders of the empire should not be. We are peaceable and well disposed, but we will take the law into our own hands – and the consequences. This is our last communication about the subject. Signed by a select committee of 16 ex-servicemen in no amiable mood. Trusting, sir, you will do all you can for us."

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The handwritten letter is signed by Archibald MacLean of Cornaigmore. Elsewhere on NRS file AF83/267 the group goes under the name of "The Tiree Committee". Despite the threats, no land raids materialised. The depth of their frustration is crystal clear in their letter. It is difficult (at least for me) not to have a strong sense of empathy towards

The final (typed) letter is most unusual, in that it is sent (on 23 March 1922) to the Prime Minister (Lloyd George), by unnamed "ex-servicemen, Balemartin". I have come across one or two letters of the period (1900 – 1939), in my research, which have been written to a Prime Minister from folk within the crofting

(Original returned)

54/13

COPY.

Cornniegh,
Scorinish,
Tiree, Argyllshire,
21st August 1919.

Sir,

With reference to recent legislation regarding Small Holdings I beg to point out what seems to be unjust to me.

I am 47 years of age, married, and with 4 of a family, ages from 2 to 13.

In 1914 I was accepted as a suitable smallholder by the Board of Agriculture and a lot was marked out for me on Balephetrish farm in that year, but owing to the excessive compensation demanded the scheme fell through. Then the war broke out. On account of my age I did not do any service with the forces but in 1918 I was called up for medical examination and passed in Grade II. Had the war continued I would have been called to the Colours, and would, therefore, have been eligible for a small holding under the latest Acts.

I have a cow grazing on the farm which is to be broken up and if I don't get a holding there I shall lose this valuable asset in bringing up my family.

Please let me know how I stand as I think it very hard lines if I don't get a piece of land now after it was already promised to me.

I am,
Yours respectfully,
(Sgt.) Hector MacLean.

A letter from Hector MacLean asking for clarification on his claim for a piece of land

community but, on the whole, these are rare. The nature and content of the letter stand out too: "The ex-servicemen of Tiree, Argyllshire, regret that we have to trouble you by writing you to ask if the Hon. House knows that nine landholders, who sub-let part of their farms, are to get a share of the farms of Crossapol, Reef and Balephetrish in Tiree, Argyllshire. The said farms were promised to the ex-servicemen by your Rt Hon. And we have patiently waited for the last three years; lately we have heard that the men in question, who were at home during the years we were fighting for King and Country, are to get a share, and if the above facts are true we consider it a scandal for us. We have been writing to the Board of Agriculture when we heard that landholders were to get a share of what was promised to us, but so far we had no definite answer. We know from His Grace the Duke of Argyll that the choice of applicants are in the hands of the Board of Agriculture It looks out of place, if the Board can give it to landholders without giving the ex-servicemen the preference. I hope you will understand how we are placed and that your Rt Honourable will consider our case in Parliament and advise the Board of Agriculture there is no time to lose as the land is to be divided on the first week of April. If the ex-servicemen will not get their rights, it will certainly cause trouble".

The Secretary
Board of Agriculture for Scotland
345/11-29 St. Andrew Square
Edinburgh
26: 6: 19.

lands combined without any share in a common grazing.
I have ample means at my disposal that would stock this size of holding without help.

Dear Sir, RECEIVED 26905
I do hereby apply to the Board for a small holding on the farm of Crossapol at present tenanted by Mr Robert Bair, Balephetrish.
The size of holding desired like would be about twenty acres, or thereby, of arable and pasture.

I think I have every right to apply for this holding and to get it, as I have lost my husband during the war through his ship being torpedoed by enemy submarines, and I am left with one boy eight years old.
I must look to the future of this my only son - and if I am successful in getting this holding in my "Native Island" he shall have a home to look to.

I am quite capable of looking after things as I have been brought up on a holding similar to what I apply for - also I have a brother himself a small holder here, who would look after the most important things - until my own boy is old enough to look after it himself.

If I must fill up an application form please forward it to me.
Thanking you very much for your earliest and best consideration.

P. TO.

I remain
Yours Respectfully
(Mrs) Cath. J. MacKinnon
Kilkenneth
"of MacInlype" Scorinish
Argyllshire.

Letter from Catherine MacKinnon, Kilkenneth, dated 1919
She is asking for a holding in Crossapol, despite having lost her serviceman husband during the war

This reveals the tension that I have come across, between ex-servicemen applicants and civilians (who did not serve in the First World War for a variety of reasons, including in several cases their age, though often they had sons or close relatives who had fought in the war). Demand for new holdings was extremely high (as can be seen from a number of BoAS annual reports) after the war. It was impossible to satisfy the demand for new holdings and enlargements, especially within the Highlands and Islands as the supply of suitable land there was limited even if every farm and estate had been broken up for smallholdings. And as ex-servicemen applicants were given priority it was doubly difficult for civilian applicants to be successful. The tensions and resentments that this could (and did) create within some crofting communities is obvious - especially by ex-servicemen towards any civilians who might be allocated a new holding.

It was easier in terms of community cohesion (and probably more acceptable to many ex-servicemen) for civilians who were crofters, to be successful in being allocated enlargements to their existing holdings, than for civilians to be awarded new holdings over and above ex-servicemen. These enlargements were also generally in the form of additional land for common grazings rather than extensions to existing individual holdings. So, the rough grazing land was not so controversial or contested as better quality land suitable for forming individual new croft holdings.

I am also reminded of another tension not covered by this set of letters. Something I have come across only rarely relates to animosity by some ex-servicemen towards those who served in the Merchant Navy in the First World War. One unsuccessful ex-serviceman applicant for the Balephetrish scheme (a Royal Engineer), Angus McArthur, a son of the island's Baptist Minister, complained to the Prime Minister himself that the holdings had been allocated to "men that was running away to sea to earn big wages to get clear of the army and navy". He was one of over twenty applicants for five of the smaller holdings at Crossapol which were allocated to ex-servicemen who were all married and all without land. In its response to his complaint, BoAS confirmed that the definition of ex-servicemen applied "equally to all who saw service in the Navy, Army or Mercantile Marine during the war".

This perception of merchant seamen and the attitude towards them during World War I is intriguing. In both of the above cases they were regarded as having an inferior status to those who served in the army and navy in the First World War. I would find it interesting to know if this is something anyone else has come across and if so what lies behind it. Did merchant seamen, for example, get paid more money during the war than their equivalents in the navy and army?

I have been pleasantly surprised by what this small group of letters has revealed. Yet they represent only a tiny selection of similar documents available to readers at the NRS. If anyone has more information to offer on the topics they raise, do not hesitate to contact me either by email at bobc1951@greenbee.net or by telephone on 01434 605846.

I have also written and self-published a not-for-profit book about twentieth century crofting schemes on Tiree and Coll. This can be read for free on line at www.blurb.co.uk by simply going into the bookshop section where you search for my name. This (and other crofting history books by me) will 'come up' for you to read. If you wish to buy a copy you can do so off the same web site. Alternatively, An Iodhlann holds a copy in its library. I would also be very happy to try to answer any questions or help others if I can (obviously at no charge) with their own research about Tiree.

Bob Chambers

A longer version of this valuable research is available in the archive.

THE BOAT BUILDERS OF TIREE

Recently, An Iodhlann has been given a number of beautiful tools belonging to the boat builders of Vaul to add to our collection. We have some oakum (hemp soaked in Stockholm tar), together with three caulking irons (*caladh*) and a mallet, which were used to force the oakum between the planks creating a watertight seal; an adze; a wooden block plane and spokeshave; and a hand drill.

During the last war, George Holleyman found a strip of bronze rivets (An Iodhlann catalogue number 2000.91.20) on the island, tentatively ascribed by David Caldwell and Dr Colleen Batey to the Middle Ages. These could have been used for boat building. In 1802, Tiree's chamberlain let a croft in Scarinish to a "boat carpenter". Hector Kennedy, talking to Eric Cregeen (on SA1970.102) had this story:

There was an old boat builder down in Ardbeg ... [who] was building boats for the Duke of Argyll. And it was the Bàillidh Mòr that was speaking for the boat, looking after the boat, going down to see if the boat builder was nearly finished. And he got the boat. But first of all, there was some other Duke or well-to-do man. I heard the name but I cannot remember it. And he saw the wee boat fishing. When he went home to Inveraray, he asked



A caulking mallet

him: 'Who built that boat for you?' And the Duke told him that he got it built in Tiree. 'I wonder if he'd build a boat for me.' 'Certainly he would.' 'I think,' he says, 'I'll go out to Tiree and see him about it.' And the Duke said to him: 'You'd better write [sic] to the factor, Mr Campbell.' 'I'd rather go myself and see. I would like to see the place.' So he came to Tiree, and he went down to the boat builder down in Cornaigbeg, and asked him if he'd build him a small boat. Neil said he would. 'When will it be finished?' He told him. He got it finished, and it was sent away. And the boat builder put in the account. And the Duke showed the man the price Neil the boat builder charged for his own

boat. And this man was going to get the same size ... And [when] this man got the account it was far cheaper than the one the Duke had ... It was the Bàillidh Mòr that was the middleman there. He paid the boat builder, but he took the money off the Duke. That's how he got the sack.

As more islanders took up commercial line fishing for cod and ling in the first half of the nineteenth century, the demand for suitable boats soared. The classic double-ended Tiree skiff was between 22 and 26 feet long, light enough to be dragged to safety up the beach at the end of a day's fishing.

By 1841, there were seven boat builders on Tiree; in 1861, seven, in Cornaigbeg, Kenovay, Balevullin and Caolas. One site was at *Loch an Àir*, between Milton and Ardeas, where the remains of the workshop and noust can still be seen.

One of the last family of professional boat builders on Tiree lived in upper Vault: the family of Hugh MacKinnon, *Clann Eòghainn Ruaidh*, in particular his sons John (who died, aged seventy-three, in 1917) and Lachie. The last boat they built was the Joan, which belonged most recently to Lachie MacArthur, Mannal. A number of people have told me how the Vault boat builders dragged their newly completed boats overland westwards so as to allow the timbers to swell in the fresh waters of *Loch Riaghain* in Gott. These tools, worn smooth by years of expert use, are beautiful to hold, putting us in touch with the island's maritime history.

BOG COTTON

We recently received an enquiry from a student at London's Royal College of Art, about one of our accessions. This was given to us in 1997: a tablecloth said to have been made from bog cotton. *Eriophorum angustifolium* is known in Gaelic as *canach an t-slèibhe*. It is common all over the island wherever the ground is wet and dark. Fibres from the white, fluffy seed heads of this sedge were used to make wicks for *crùisgeinean* 'oil lamps', as well as bedding, as Neil McEachern from Bruichladdich on Islay remembered: "We were going to the moor in the month of July, and we were gathering the bog, it's like cotton, *canach*. And they were making pillows of it and children's beds." Bog cotton and sphagnum moss were also collected for wound



Off-white damask tablecloth. The fringes are thought to be made from spun bog cotton



Christina MacKinnon of Ard na Fuarain, Barrapol, at her spinning wheel in the 1920s. Christina was said to have been a spinner of bog cotton

dressings during the First and Second World Wars, and sent to be sterilised at the Edinburgh War Dressings Supply department, or the Oban depot of the Red Cross.

But despite its name, the short, fragile fibres prove difficult to spin on their own. A tradition collected by Alexander Carmichael in the Hebrides in the nineteenth century set young women this seemingly magical and impossible task: "*Canach an t-slèibhe: no maiden could get a man of old till she had spun and wove and sewn with her own hands a shirt of the canach. This was the marriage test!*" Bog cotton fibres can be spun if combined with other, longer, fibres like wool, linen or cotton. And to deepen the mystery, a photograph in our collection shows Christina MacKinnon, from *Àrd na Fuarain* in Barrapol, spinning in the 1920s; a note adds that she was famed for spinning *canach an t-slèibhe*. A company in Finland, Kultaturve Oy, has started manufacturing fibres from the decayed stems of the plant found in peat cuttings, combining it with wool or true cotton.

ARCHAEOLOGY

This has been a busy summer for archaeologists on Tìree. We finally got a radiocarbon date from the bones that we lifted carefully from the cist at Kirkapol last autumn. The range is 2020 to 1740 BC, putting it into the Early Bronze Age. Even more excitingly, a small piece of the skull bone has been extracted at the Natural History Museum in London and sent to Harvard University in America, where the entire DNA will be sequenced. There is a lot of interest in how a new culture and people swept through Europe from the Caucasian region at the start of the Bronze Age, and researchers are keen to find out if the Kirkapol skeleton, presumed to have been the leader of that community, came from this Central Asian stock.

Cnoc nam Putan is a small hillock in Balinoe. A sheep scrape on its side has revealed a thick peat ash midden containing charcoal, as well as a decorated bone pin thought by Professor Graham-Campbell from London to be from the Viking period. Some charcoal was taken to Glasgow for analysis, and fragments of burnt alder, birch and hazel were seen alongside burnt oats and barley grains. These have now been dated to 865 to 990 AD during the Viking Age. This is the first Viking site to be found since the eighteenth century, and it provides evidence that trees were still growing on Tìree at that time. We hope to be able to start some excavations next year.

A group from the North of Scotland Archaeology Society visited Tiree to continue their survey of the island's rock art, outcrops of rock covered with shallow cup marks. They have now found over twenty 'panels', or groups of cup markings, making the island an important centre. Fascinatingly, most of them are in a north-south line between Balemartine and Kilmoluag. Another group from the Association of Field Archaeologists returned to Ben Hynish, where they have now finished their building survey, collecting an astonishing 270 structures on the hillside. They have now started surveying the walls.



This flint (left) was found by a visitor this summer in the garden of the gamekeeper's house in Scarinish. It is an extraordinarily beautiful example of a large scraper, dated by Professor Mithen to the Neolithic or Bronze Age. The side view shows the delicate retouching done with a sharpened antler.

The garden has had some landscaping work done on it over the last few years, and this flint may have been brought to the surface from a deeper level. However, there is an interesting tradition that, at the start of the Irish potato famine in 1845, boats from Ireland came to Tiree to buy potatoes. They were in ballast with soil, which was discharged on the island. This earth was then claimed by the factor and dumped around the gamekeeper's house. This tradition may have become corrupted over the years. The first gamekeeper on Tiree was Peter Anderson, appointed in 1886, forty years after the famine. In the 1891 Census, he was recorded living in Kirkapol. The old school in Gott had been taken over by the estate as a gamekeeper's lodge, before Lady Victoria had it rebuilt as her residence in 1897. Peter Anderson next appears in the 1901 Census in Scarinish. The gamekeeper's house is not on the 1878 first edition of the Ordnance Survey, but is on the 1899 second edition.



The footings of this small hut (above left) were recently found 300m west of the 'Golf Ball', making it the highest medieval or prehistoric structure so far discovered on the island (there may have been others on the summit destroyed by the building of the radar station). It was probably used to shelter herd boys, or 'grass keepers', but the views are so uninterrupted to the north and west that it may also have been used by those manning lookout beacons.

ARCHIVIST'S CHOICE by Janet Bowler

If you look at Turnbull's map of Tiree, drawn in 1768, you can see two clusters of dwellings, Hough and Muirdat, along with cultivated strips of land, to the west of Beinn Hough, where there is no evidence of them today. An Iodhlann's Tiree Place Names Project indicates that the township of Muirdat was occupied at the turn of the century www.tireeplacenames.org/hough/kerameanoch, but by 1878, when the first Ordnance Survey maps of Tiree were surveyed, the buildings do not feature at all. It is said that the townships were buried by sand. But how and when, and what happened to the people that lived there?

A recent addition to the archive provides a fascinating insight. A paper demonstrating the importance of the study of oral tradition, written by Dr Margaret Mackay for a conference in France in 1982, tells us that in around 1815 there was a succession of years when the sand from the shore was blown ever-closer to



Section of Turnbull's map of Tiree, 1768

Beinn Hough, eventually burying the townships' wells and land, and undermining buildings, some of which collapsed. Over a period of five to ten years, the residents were forced to abandon the area and relocate, mostly to Kilmoluaig, which was divided into crofts to accommodate them. Dr Mackay's paper is available to read on An Iodhlann's website www.aniodhlann.org.uk/object/2018-66-2. It demonstrates just how important the preservation and analyses of oral tradition are to understanding past events.

An earlier addition to An Iodhlann's archive helps to explain **why** there was such a catastrophic sand-blow. In a book by Alastair Dawson giving an account of the history of Scotland's weather and climate www.aniodhlann.org.uk/object/2010-3-1, the timing of the Hough event corresponds with a period of increasing frequency and ferocity of storms that spanned the turn of the century. Climate change is often overlooked when trying to understand the course of history, but these two items from An Iodhlann's archive, the paper and the book, are a good illustration of this relationship, and help to explain details of a third item in our archive – Turnbull's map www.aniodhlann.org.uk/object/2001-19-1.

CATHADH

Joanna Rodgers recently sent me information on 'reverse genealogy'. This works 'back-to-front', tracing families today who come from a common ancestor. An Irish project, Ireland Reaching Out, or Ireland XO (www.irelandxo.com), aims to contact members of the diaspora who aren't aware of their family connection to Ireland, using a new website and local volunteers. Tiree also has a huge diaspora – hundreds of thousands of people – most of whom have never heard of this beautiful island. Reverse genealogy involves making it easier for the diaspora to trace their family connections, but also contacting people out of the blue to ask if they want to join the 'Tiree family'. What do people think?

Dr John Holliday