



## Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

### *A' Bhuain 2016*

Coming to an island near you. In just over two years time to give you plenty of time to plan. By popular request. Exactly ten years after Tìree's last Gathering, the *A' Bhuain* committee has dusted down their collection of national flags and set a date for the next world meeting of the 'Children of the Barley', descendants of those who have left Tìree over the years. This wonderful week of visits, dancing lessons, plays and concerts won rave reviews from those that attended in 2006 and An Iodhlann is going to play its part in planning the next edition of what we hope will be a long-running project. 2006 saw a church service dedicated to emigration, a bird talk, a play about the Napier Commission hearing on Tìree, a visit to the graveyards, a bus tour, a visit to the school, a genealogy room and a legendary final night concert of island music in association with the Tìree Association. Feedback was unanimous: you have to do this again.



*A warm welcome from the Tìree Pipe Band and A' Bhuain Committee, 2006*

The committee has aged gracefully in those last seven years but has enough petrol in its tank to make another surge towards the finishing line. The dates set are **23-27 May 2016**. We want the week to feature what **you** want. So far Sharon Clayton and Louise MacDougall from Canada have been in touch with wonderful ideas about commemorating the Balephuil Fishing Disaster and the travels of Donald the Pilot with Bonny Prince Charlie. If you have any ideas do get in touch with me. We will keep you posted.

### *Letter From The Trenches: the human story behind land settlement on Tìree during World War I*

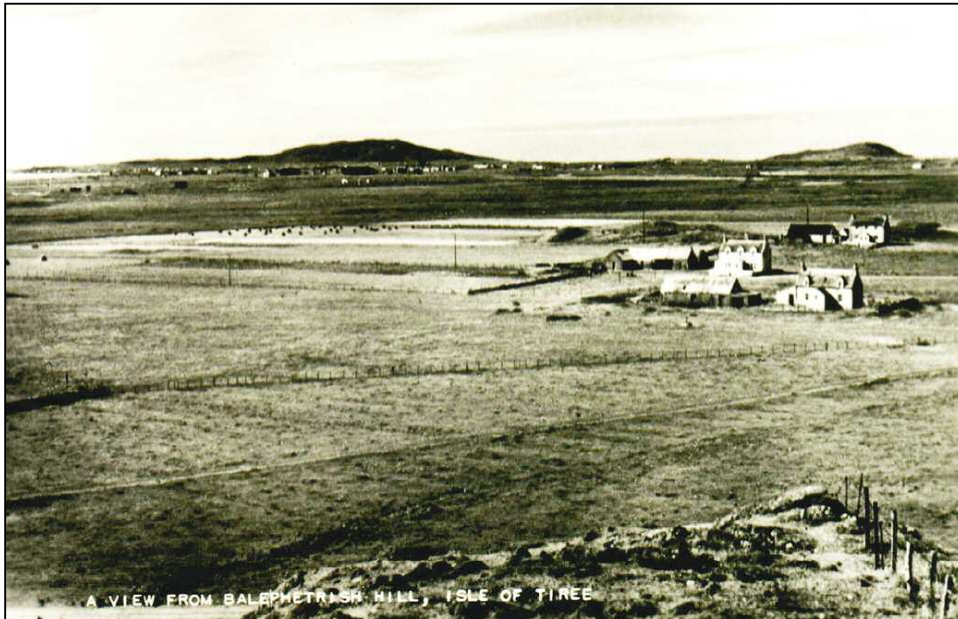
Bob Chambers, who attended the spring history conference on Tìree, has sent us this article.

After retiring in 2008, I began studying at the University of the Highlands and Islands' Centre for History for a PhD under the supervision of the crofting historian, Professor James Hunter, and emigration historian, Professor Marjory Harper of the University of Aberdeen. The subject of the research was land settlement (the formation of new crofts and the enlargement of existing ones) between the two world wars (1919-39). The study area was the Outer Hebrides, Skye and Raasay.

On completion of my PhD research I decided to study the Tìree schemes in detail in order to explore similarities and differences between them and those in the Outer Hebrides, Skye and Raasay. By good chance, the Islands Book Trust and An Iodhlann had organised a history

conference on Tiree in May 2013 – presenting me with the perfect opportunity to make a first visit to the island.

All seven of the Board of Agriculture for Scotland land settlement schemes on Tiree were approved and begun between 1912 and 1914, with the exception of the largest, at Balephetrish, which began in 1922.



*Balephetrish with Kenovay  
in the distance*

Although much has been written about the clearances, comparatively little has been published on the period of recovery afterwards during the early decades of the twentieth century. Land settlement got underway in the Highlands and Islands following the formation of the Congested Districts Board (CDB) in 1897, increasing in pace from 1912 under its successor body the Board of Agriculture for Scotland (BoAS) and peaking during the 1920s after World War I. Indeed, the war caused a massive disruption to the land settlement programme, bringing it to a virtual standstill from 1914-18. The main centres of land settlement activity after World War I were the islands chosen by me for my PhD study.

And so began the research on land settlement in Tiree. A key primary source of information has been the BoAS files from the period, which have been deposited at the National Records of Scotland (NRS) in Edinburgh. It was whilst I was examining these files that a fascinating letter came to light (on NRS file AF83/267, Balephetrish) which forms the main focus of this article. The letter is very short and simple but behind it lies a moving story. The letter writer was Gunner Archie Walker. It is written in pencil and dated 17 February 1918. He sent it from France where his address was '341899 Gunner Archie Walker, 18th Battery, C. 7. A.' Archie was serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. He was applying for a smallholding 'under the Scottish Land Holdings Act on the farm occupied by Mr Barr in the island on Tiree, Argyllshire'. He states: *I desire the maximum permitted by the act if local competition will admit. I am a native of Tiree and my parents reside their [sic]. I am serving in France in the Canadian Forces and your favourable reply will guide my future action after the war is over. I thank you in anticipation.*

And that is it. No more, no less. On the face it this is a simple, straightforward letter from someone wanting a smallholding on Tiree from a farm still to be broken up for such a purpose.

I have to confess, I found myself very moved reading this letter – to the point that I made notes to that effect immediately after putting it down. There are numerous letters in numerous BoAS files at NRS from cottars, squatters and others wanting smallholdings before and after World War I. In fact, you will find them for virtually every BoAS scheme.

So, what is so special about this one? Well, it is the first that I have discovered, in several years of research, which was written 'from the trenches' or 'the front line'. It shows (to me at least) great faith on Archie's behalf in the future and that the war would be won. And that he would survive the ordeal.



Immediately my head began to fill with numerous questions. Not least, did he get a reply? Did he survive the war? And, if so, was he successful in getting a croft? But it also made me pause to think that I was probably looking at a unique document – in the sense that this was the only one in existence in the world. It seems highly unlikely that it would have been copied – especially as it is written in pencil. Yet the letter was in as pristine and legible condition as the day it was written some ninety-five years ago. What a remarkable survival!

And it also made me realise, at that very moment, why we need to cherish and value organisations such as the NRS (and equally, for that matter, those such as An Iodhlann), which are a repository for such important but seemingly ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’ historical documents. And it reminded me why we need to ensure that these organisations are properly funded – no matter how dire the national economy.

So, what of Archie? I immediately discovered on the file that his letter had been received by BoAS in Edinburgh on 21 February 1918 – a mere four days after it had been written. This is astonishing in its own right, that a letter of so little importance to the war effort was received back in Scotland so quickly. And Archie did, in fact, get sent a reply. Instructions were given (unfortunately the writer’s signature is illegible) on 26 February 1918 to a Miss McHardy to ‘send an application form with usual covering letter’.



*1st Battalion Cameronians  
(Scottish Rifles) around 1915*

Did Archie survive the war? Yes, he did. NRS file AF83/252, Balephetrish contains a typed list of applicants recommended by BoAS official Elliot Scott for new holdings at Balephetrish. Scott was seeking approval from the Board of the names he had selected (the four-page list is dated 11 May 1922) so that he could make final arrangements in order to move the scheme forward. The name of Archibald Walker appears on that list. Scott’s short assessment states that ‘Archibald Walker, [of] Moss, served in the Canadian Field Artillery from 1 July 1916 to 5 May 1919, and was once wounded. Has £60 cash as well as some livestock’.

The £60 cash Archie had meant that he had enough to be considered eligible for one of the larger Balephetrish holdings. (The smallholdings on the scheme varied in size from three acres to twenty-five acres). So, he got his wish for a large plot and became the holder of one of the twenty-four larger holdings on the scheme. Archie occupied holding number twenty, which comprised nineteen acres of arable land and for which the annual fair rent was set at £23 (a considerable sum at that time).

My Tìree research also shows that holding number thirteen on the Greenhill smallholdings scheme, was allocated to John Walker of Moss in 1912 (NRS file AF83/154, Greenhill) [Archie’s father]. It would be fascinating to discover more about Archie’s story even though the author is no genealogist and does not have any particular interest in family history. Why, for example, was Archie serving in the Canadian Armed Forces? Had he emigrated to Canada, and, if so,

when and for what reasons? Did Archie return to Canada after the war or did he make his way straight back to Tiree in the hope of getting a croft at Balephetrish? Are there any surviving relatives of Archie on Tiree today? And has holding twenty at Balephetrish stayed in the family?

All of this from one tiny, seemingly insignificant letter tucked away in a file in Edinburgh. It has taken me on a fascinating and most enjoyable, if somewhat unintended, journey – but one I am truly grateful to have been able to travel.”

An Iodhlann loves a challenge and their crack team of genealogists has been working on Bob's questions. Archibald Walker was born in 1880 in Balephetrish. His father, John, was born in Tiree or Glasgow (the records are conflicting) in 1856 and was working as a farm servant in Balephetrish soon after Archie's birth. His mother was Ann MacDonald from Cornaigbeg. Between 1888 and 1891 the family moved to Lochs in Lewis when John found work as a farm manager, or grieve, and they had moved to Manor Farm, Stornoway by 1901. The family later returned to Tiree. The 1901 Census finds Archie as a young man working as a mason and lodged in Merkland Street, Partick.

There was no local information about how Archie ended up fighting in a Canadian Regiment during the Great War. However, we were lucky enough to find his Attestation Paper when he joined the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force in July 1916 in Montreal at the relatively senior age of 36. He had been working as a bricklayer and could have saved some money during this time. He had joined the 42nd Regiment six months earlier. His Canadian Army number was indeed 341899. He possibly emigrated from Scotland in 1909, when a shipping list contains an Archibald Walker, giving his trade as a builder and of the right age, sailing from Glasgow to New York on the Columbia.

On the croft he built a house, which still stands today, one of a line of 'Department' houses that were built in Balephetrish and Crossapol in the 1920s. No doubt his building skills, learned over 15 years in the trade in Glasgow and Montreal, came in handy. As a 58 year old, he married Effie MacDonald (Oighrig Nèill Thèarlaich), 47, from Middleton well after the war in 1938. Effie came from the house lived in by Effie MacDonald, Mairi Ann and Neil Munn today. The couple had no children. Archie is remembered as having a different accent to the local people, perhaps from his time as a child in Lewis or the period he spent in Canada. He died in 1949. Archie passed his croft, Number 20 Balephetrish, not to his wife but to his younger brother Donald, who had married Kate MacArthur, also from Middleton (where Donald and Andrea MacArthur stay today). Donald had been farming on Coll. Effie went back to Middleton to stay with her brothers, including Charles (Tèarlach Nèill Thèarlaich). Donald died in 1971 at the age of 83. Number 20 then passed to Donald's son Archie, who married Mary Bell MacRae on Coll in 1941. Their family now has an Islay connection.

Thanks to Mairi MacKinnon, Parkhouse, Mairi Campbell, Cornaigbeg, Flora MacLean, Druimfraoich, Effie MacDonald, Middleton and Duncan Grant for this research. If you have any information to contribute please let myself or Bob Chambers know. His details are: telephone 01434 605846 | email address bobc1951@greenbee.net

### *Graveyard Search Reveals Tiree Link*

An article from the *Paisley Daily Express* was recently passed to me. The town's St Columba's Gaelic graveyard is set for a clean-up and one Tiree family was used as the basis for an exhibition that ran through October at Paisley Museum. Neil McLaren and his family lived at 21 Underwood Road in the town, and four sons saw distinguished service in the Great War. Alexander sadly died in France at the Battle of Loos in 1915. Duncan worked as a carpenter with Cochrane and Keith before joining the Renfrewshire Royal Engineers and winning the DCM for gallantry. James was an air mechanic who also won a DCM for saving a wounded infantryman and collected a number of other medals. Finally Lawrence was a driver who won the Military Medal.

Anyone who recognizes the family should contact me and I will pass the details on to the Renfrewshire Historical Society.

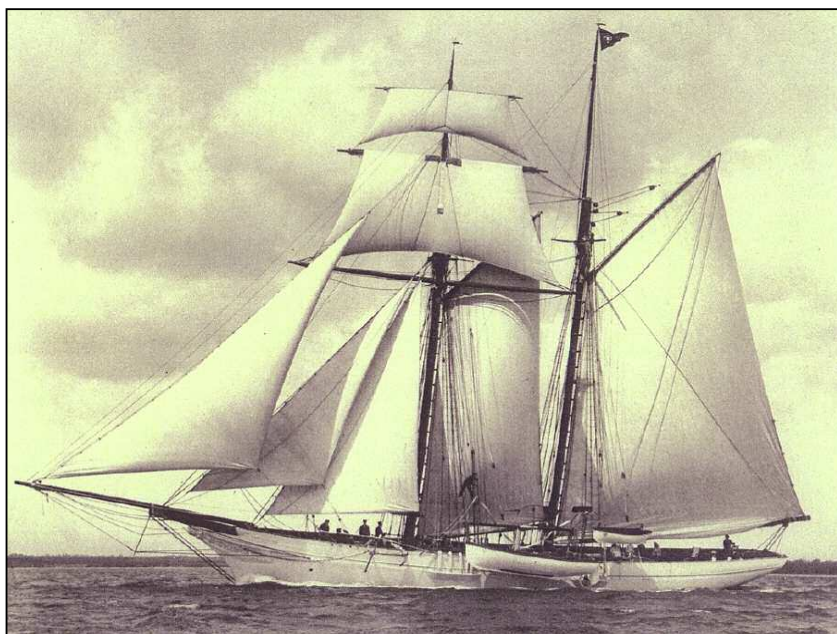


## *More Tales Of The Oceana*

Our Archive Manager, Janet Bowler, has submitted this update.

In the May 2010 issue of *Sil Eòlais* we learned about the mysterious circumstances of the stranding of the yacht 'Oceana' at Crossapol in 1949. Thanks to further information from John Campbell, the owner of Oceana in 1949 (and whose batman in the army was a Tìree man), we have now learned that the reason it was sailing near Tìree was to have the boat refitted in Sweden to enable it to make the crossing to America. The Latvian and Lithuanian crew onboard had escaped to Sweden from Russia during WWII and had asked Campbell whether he would take them back to Sweden to pick up some comrades before emigrating to the USA. The yacht became caught up in one of the worst storms in 20 years and when the crew spotted lights they thought it was another ship and sailed towards it. However, the lights turned out to be Tìree airport and the boat grounded on Crossapol beach.

There is, however, another side to the Oceana tale concerning the relationship between an earlier owner and a member of the Stevenson family who built Skerryvore Lighthouse. Thanks to additional research conducted by Anthony Vaughan (who sparked our initial telling of the Oceana story), we have now discovered fascinating links between a previous owner of the yacht, Sir Percy Florence Shelley (son of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*), and Robert Louis Stevenson of the lighthouse Stevenson family (and author of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*).



*Oceana in full sail around 1915*

It was while Robert Louis Stevenson was living in Bournemouth (in a house he named 'Skerryvore'), that he and Sir Percy Florence and Lady Jane Shelley became great friends, sharing a love of sailing and travel. Sir Percy renamed his yacht from 'Thais' to 'Oceana' as a tribute to his friend when Stevenson set off for the South Seas. Stevenson in return dedicated his novel *The Master of Ballantrae* to Sir Percy and Lady Shelley. Such was the physical likeness between Sir Percy's father (the poet) and Stevenson, it seems that Lady Shelley was convinced that her husband's father had been reincarnated in Stevenson, and that Stevenson was actually **her** son – much to the irritation of Stevenson's real mother.

When Sir Percy died in 1889, Lady Shelley gave Stevenson a gift from the Oceana. He wrote to thank her: "I can't think of anything that would have given me greater pleasure than the revolvers from the Oceana. Lloyd has had them all marked with my name and the name of the donors. They shall stand in my house I hope forever, and as long as any of us continue to go in and out, they will call to mind far away places and loved faces."

It seems somehow fitting that a yacht with so many Tìree connections ended its days on a Tìree shore.





*Remains of the Oceana at the east end of Crossapol beach in 2012*



*Tiree Pipe Band in An Talla, A' Bhuain 2006*