

YESTERDAY'S NEWS.8

TIREE AND THE NEW NEW YEAR

As we approach the summer equinox, this might seem a bit premature. Or a bit late. But this series of cuttings caught my eye this week.

There are few, if any, people on Tiree that still celebrate New Year, *Oidhche Challainn*, 'Old Style' on the night of January 13/14th.

The Julian Calendar, adopted by Julius Caesar in 45 BC, sets out 365 days in a year with an additional leap day every fourth year without exception. The more accurate Gregorian calendar was adopted by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. Very occasionally, this sometimes misses out a leap year (to make allowance for the fact that a solar year is 365 days 5 hours 48 minutes and 46 seconds). The Gregorian Calendar was quickly adopted by Spain and France, but the British did not come to the party until 1752, suspicious it was all a Catholic plot.

Long after 1752, the people of Tiree remained very reluctant to change from the 'Old Style' Julian Calendar to the 'New Style' Gregorian one. Partly this was because many people believed (and still believe) that the traditions you followed at New Year were important to your fortune the following year. But it was also because it was such a social occasion, everybody had to agree on the date. Most families didn't have the money or the time to celebrate it twice.

This is how the debate played out on Tiree, 150 years after the calendar was officially changed in London.

1901. 'Lady Victoria Campbell, who at present resides at her Lodge in Tiree, has, with her usual generosity, remembered the poor in this island by distributing parcels of tea and other luxuries among them. The New Year was observed on the island on the 14th (Old Style). Some of the people are now beginning to observe the 1st of January. A few of the young men indulged in first-footing on New Year's day, but this custom is losing hold in the island. No one was seen the worse of drink [Tiree was a dry island at this point, but you could send for jars of whisky quite legally from Tobermory or Glasgow]. A children's tea in connection with the Sabbath School was given recently in the Scarinish Hall [probably the Reading Room, today's An Iodhlann], which the children enjoyed very much. Addresses of encouragement to the children were given by Messrs Munn, D. T. Mac Kay [the Free Church minister], and Anchus, teacher. Several hymns were sung by the children during the evening.' (*Oban Times and Argyllshire Advertiser*, 26 January 1901, 6)

1903. 'Tuesday [the] 13th, New Year's Day, was observed as a holiday. Shops were shut, and there was little movement over the island. Services were held in some of the churches. There was a children's meeting at Scarinish. Some of our sailors who came home had some first-footing with the old folks of the place, but this custom is dying out. It would be more satisfactory if all kept the same day, so that we should not be burdened with two days of this kind.' (*Oban Times and Argyllshire Advertiser*, 17 January 1903, 6)

1906. 'NEW YEAR IN TIREE. Sir, Kindly allow me to second, through your most valuable paper, the change advocated in a recent issue in reference to the above subject by your Edinburgh correspondent, "A Native." The observance of the 1st of January as New Year's Day in the island was expected to take place long before now. But, like all things, until someone takes the lead, time passes, and no alteration takes place. It is hoped "A Native" will keep the matter going, as there are no obstacles in the way to hinder the change, for each and all of the islanders are unanimously in favour of the 1st of January. Although it is drawing right to the end of the year, if all the natives will put their shoulders to the wheel in time, we will have the pleasure of observing New Year's Day on the 1st of January, 1907. If the change contemplated were advertised in the leading newspapers, say by the request of the Parish Council, a good many natives would avail themselves of spending the first day of the year along with their parents and friends. Indeed, it would be a "great day" in the island, and praise is due to "A Native" for taking the lead. *Guidhidh sinn uile bliadhna mhath ur dha agus cuid mhor dhin.* I am, etc, AN ISLANDER. (*Oban Times and Argyllshire Advertiser*, 17 November 1906, 3)

1907. 'LATHA NOLLAIG AN TIRIODH. Sir, I have read with much interest the various letters which appeared in your paper recently on the above subject, and am astonished to learn that at this date, there are to be found among my fellow islanders those who prefer the old style of the New Year to the new style ... The Julian or old style is held only in the parts of Europe where the Greek church prevails. 'Eileannach' seems to be mixing matters in assuming that by keeping the old style New Year's day, we perpetuate a custom of our forefathers. Our forefathers discarded the Julian calendar 245 years ago. The Parish Council of Tiree have acted judiciously in recommending a general observance of the New Year's Day on the 1st of January. I am persuaded that those who favour the old calendar are in the minority in Tiree, and hope that in future, all will observe the 1st with one accord. TIR BHARR-FOTHUINN' (*Oban Times and Argyllshire Advertiser*, 19 January 1907, 3)

1910. 'TIREE AND NEW YEAR. Sir, Efforts are being made to obtain a uniform observance of the 1st of January as New Year's Day. The older generation are reluctant to abandon the 13th of January, but the old style is dying out all over the Highlands, and where it remains it is a cause of misunderstanding and inconvenience. The various townships in Tiree have been formally consulted, and the great majority of the people are in favour of the 1st of January. It is hoped the few who still cling to the old style will fall in with the others on this

occasion, and so avoid division on the question. This New Year falls on a Sunday, and, of course, Monday will be the holiday observed. A NATIVE.' (*Oban Times and Argyllshire Advertiser*, 17 December 1910, 3)

1912. 'Efforts are again being made to establish the observance of the 1st January as New Year's Day in place of the Old Style. While many naturally cling to the Old Style, it is felt by others that as the 1st of January is now almost universally followed, it would be well to adopt that date in Tiree, so as to be in line with other districts.' (*Oban Times and Argyllshire Advertiser*, 14 December 1912, 6)

The Times reported in 1930 that, 'January 12, New Year's Day old style, is still recognised in a few isolated districts in the West Highlands and the Hebrides. In some places both days are held as a holiday, but the tendency is to fall in line with the calendar and recognise only the first of the month. In the island of Tiree, owned by the Duke of Argyll, the old style prevailed until a very few years ago, when the majority of the inhabitants reluctantly decided to follow the neighbouring islands of Great Britain and Ireland.'

Margaret MacKinnon, Braeside, told me that her family changed from the Old New Year on 13 January in 1924; Donald MacNeill, Crossapol, told me that they changed in *The Land* in 1925; and Iain Chaluum MacKinnon said that they changed in Kilmoluaig in 1927. And Jessie MacKinnon, Battlefield said that her family changed over in Mannaal in 1935. Colin MacKechnie from Hynish came home from sea on January 6th that year expecting celebrations, and they were all over!