



### TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF AN ISLAND STACKYARD

Bill Welstead is always passing on fascinating suggestions to me. Last month it was a book called *Stories from Small Museums*. Written by Fiona Candlin, Professor of Museology (yes, me neither!) at London University, it describes her journey in a campervan around the small, independent museums of Britain: what she calls 'micromuseums'. These typically have less than 10,000 visitors a year, and are run on a shoe-string by part-time volunteers. Mull Museum, Tobermory; Easdale Island Folk Museum; and the Lismore Gaelic Heritage Centre are local examples. Micromuseums have boomed over the last half century.

They may be small, they may sometimes be less 'professional' than their larger brothers and sisters, but they tell strong local stories. We don't just have a ship in a bottle. We have a ship in a bottle made by Sam Stevenson from Scarinish. Sam once dived off the pier to retrieve a visitor's handbag from the seabed, despite being left with a wooden leg by the First World War.



LEFT  
A ship in a bottle made by Sam Stevenson.

LOWER LEFT  
The 1925 portrait of an unidentified man with Mannal connections.



Professor Candling made a particular point that set me thinking. Very often the story of the micromuseums themselves is lost when their founders retire. So, before anything happens to me, here is the tale of *An Iodhlann*. It happens to coincide with our twenty-fifth anniversary, more or less. So, this edition of *Sil Eòlais* is a check in the rear-view mirror.

It all started with Gaelic. *Co-Roinn Ghàidhlig Thiriodh's Cholla* The Tìree and Coll Gaelic Partnership was registered as a charity almost thirty years ago, in May 1994. A 2004 report from Argyll and Bute Council speaks of 'eight local Gaelic Partnerships'; four that are named are Mid-Argyll, Kintyre, Lorn, as well as Mull and Iona (which is also still going strong).

The first surviving minutes date from May 1996. Present at that first meeting were Donald MacDonald (chair), Josie Brown (treasurer), Duncan Grant (secretary), Mairi MacKinnon, Dr John Holliday, Margaret Campbell, Margaret MacKay, Angus MacLean, Alec MacArthur and Hector MacPhail. It is striking that all were Gaelic speaking. Indeed, the Partnership's minutes for the first eighteen months were written in Gaelic. And six of the ten committee members were native islanders. As you might expect, twenty-five years later only two of the present management committee are Gaelic speakers, and none come from Tìre.

But there was something else nagging away at us. All too aware that the traditions and memories of an older way of life were disappearing around us, we determined to record and collect them before it was too late.



A 2010 photograph of Professor Donald Meek with John M MacDonald from North Uist, the Gaelic teacher at Cornaigmore School 1962–3.

We were lucky. At an early stage we were able to pick the brains of a number of distinguished scholars with Tìre connections. This Advisory Council met at the Royal Society in Edinburgh in December 1996. It was made up of Morton Boyd, formerly Director of the Nature Conservancy Council (Scotland); Donald Meek from Caolas, Professor of Celtic Studies at Aberdeen University; Margaret Mackay from the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University; Hugh Archie MacLean from Salum, former chair of the Crofters Commission; and Murdo MacDonald, the Argyll and Bute county archivist. Their intellectual heft was a key ingredient of the project.

Although Tìre had been little studied at that point—indeed, a conference we held with the Islands Book Trust ten years ago was called 'The Secret Island'—the Advisory Council told us that Tìre had two important things going for it.

Firstly, Inveraray Castle houses the finest private archive in Scotland, a collection in which Tìre features prominently. Let me choose one example. Archibald Campbell of Barnacarie was the island's factor in 1745. In this extract from one of the Argyll Papers, he was ordered to go to Tìre to raise a militia to fight Bonnie Prince Charlie. He encountered a hostile reception and was forced to flee:

*After severall arguments they agreed I shou[ld] begin and go through [and] name those I thought proper for that purpose. The day following I entered upon nameing of them, made out that day [and] the next about 20 men. The third day came to the West End of the Island and as I was comeing to Kilchenich saw a number of men about 60 at a little distance. I sent two of my men to know what the matter was [and] desired that Two or Three of their Leaders shou[ld] come [and] talk w[ith] me. Accordingly Three of them came I asked what was the reason why so many of them conveened. Replied to put a stop to my naming any more Militia in that Island ... The only capitulation I cou[ld] get was to leave the Island with the first fair wind, and as the Hour did not answer. I was Wind bound for seven days thereafter. All that time I had the half of the few men I had on guard being in all but Ten in number who did not strip off a thread cloaths all that time.*

Catalogue no. PFV65/04. Transcribed by Jean L McLean, Friends of the Argyll Papers and reproduced with permission.

And secondly, the island had also been a particular focus for ethnologists from the School of Scottish Studies, who had recorded hundreds of tapes from island tradition bearers between 1950 and 1986. This was Hugh MacEachern from Cornaigbeg talking to Dr Margaret Mackay in 1974:

*Mostly they have [the funerals] at the house, inside or outside, mostly outside at the door if it's good weather ... It's much more of a public funeral now ... [but] in the olden days it was all invitation ... these were the days when they were carrying the coffin to the cemetery ... The invitation was called fios torraidh ['information of the funeral'] ... A letter was sent to every township, and the nearest relation in that township went out with the message ... [When they were carrying the coffin] the nearest relation at the head and the next nearest at the feet, four men carrying, two on each side, being relieved every so many yards. They had a man specially set apart measuring so many yards to put the men out ... He would say Seasaimh a-rithist 'stand again' ... He didn't have a special name, but he was what they called cuir a-mach na daoine 'putting the men out' ... There was one maybe special man that did it on most occasions. When I remember it was a man in Cornaigmore who did it, Donald Lamont, Dòmhnall Eachainn Mhòir ... They always had refreshment at the cemetery, after they had carried the coffin several miles they were badly needing some refreshment on a cold wet stormy day, maybe wet to the skin, maybe with snow on the ground. Sometimes they were getting more refreshments than was good for them! ... You sat beside the dyke at the cemetery on the most sheltered side. Two glasses of whisky, and some biscuits and a chunk of cheese. And if you were one of the near relations, you were taken over to the cart ... That was where the grog was kept, following behind the rest of the funeral ... I never saw women going. It wasn't easy going to the cemetery in those days ... You see more women in the cemetery now that motors have started.*



A 1955 photograph of a football team on a Malaysian plantation run by Lachie MacKinnon, Balephetrish.

The name *An Iodhlann* 'the stackyard' appears in a minute for the first time in 1997. I had coined it, based on the Gaelic name for the island, *Tir an Eòrna* 'the land of barley' and the idea that a stackyard was the place where the harvest was collected and stored.

In looking for a base on the island, the old smithy in Hynish, the ruined mill in Cornaigmore and the planned community hall in Crossapol were explored. All failed to progress for one reason or another. On 1 May 1997 the Conference Room in the Business Centre in Crossapol became what the minutes described as the 'temporary home of *An Iodhlann*'. Within just three months we had collected 30 books, 200 photographs, 4 videos, 200 artefacts and 400 papers. These lay in piles on tables.

That same year, the Weatherstone family kindly allowed us to use the Reading Room in Scarinish for our first summer exhibition. Entitled *Criomagán* 'bits and pieces', the star exhibit—loaned by the Duke himself—was an engraved silver trowel from the opening of the Gott Bay pier. Over ten weeks, we were encouraged by the fact that 722 visitors passed through our doors leaving £1000 in donations. Within a year of starting our local history project, we had five part-time researchers. Hector MacPhail from Ruaig wrote a series of township histories; John Donald MacLean from Crossapol was appointed to make field recordings; Rae MacGregor, who held a voluntary position in the Inveraray archives, was also retained to copy Tìree papers; Anni Donaldson from Glasgow scoured mainland archives for Tìree material; and we used the services of a professional researcher at the National Archives in Kew.

The Partnership also worked to encourage the use of Gaelic on the island, conducting a survey, publishing a Gaelic phone book with Tìree Community Business, organising the Gaelic evening classes at the school funded by Argyll and Bute Council's Community Education Department, and running two Gaelic immersion weekends at Alan Stevenson House in Hynish.

In 1998 Catriona Hunter was appointed as our first archivist. She started work at the Crossapol Business Centre, where our new microfiche and microfilm readers were based. By the autumn she had accessioned 2,015 items.

On 1 April 1998 the Partnership purchased the Reading Room, and I became chair.

Once the renovation work was completed by Bruce Kemp and Mark Beese, we transferred our collection from Crossapol. Our official opening was on 25 June 1999, and was attended by, among others, Iona the Duchess of Argyll.



*Hector MacPhail demonstrates the use of a cheese vat to William Walker, Archie MacArthur from Kilkenneth and Gaelic teacher Margaret MacKay at An Iodhlann's first exhibition.*



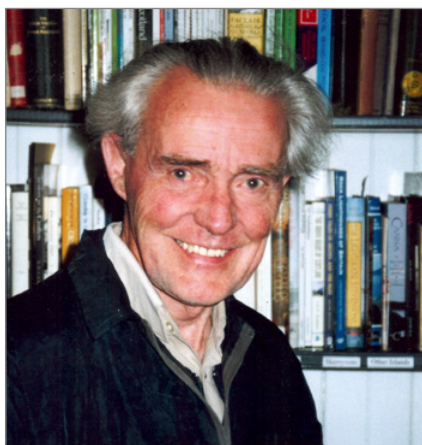
*Gaelic Unit weekend at Hynish in 1992.*

In 1999 we were approached by the School of Scottish Studies to take part in a pilot to digitise and edit their collection of Tìree sound recordings. Islanders were recruited for thirty hours work, the precursor of the full *Tobar an Dualchais* project.



*The School of Scottish Studies team visiting An Iodhlann in 2000. Jo MacDonald of the BBC; Dr Margaret Mackay, Director of the School of Scottish Studies; the Tìree Project manager Dr Martin MacIntyre; John Smith of Edinburgh University Computing Services; and Angus MacLean.*

During this period, the contributions of four committee members stand out. Duncan Grant became a self-taught genealogist. In the days before commercial websites, he sat at the microfilm reader in the corner of *An Iodhlann* three days a week, as he patiently and cheerfully answered queries from around the world. Alasdair Sinclair would make himself available at any time to show visitors around, and organised the running of the summer exhibitions. A professional engineer, he could fix anything and everything. Angus MacLean had a prodigious memory and was a tremendous help building up our store of information. And Mairi Campbell understood exactly how the island worked, and knew how to harness our early enthusiasms.



*Alasdair Sinclair, Brock, in 2008.*



*Angus MacLean, Scarinish.*



*An Iodhlann committee in 2010  
L-R: (Seated) Josie Brown, Janet MacIntosh, Duncan Grant, Gordon Scott.  
(Standing) Mairi Campbell, Mary MacLean, Dr John Holliday, Pat Campbell.*

Almost as soon as we moved into our new premises, we realised that we were going to need more room. The extension—designed by John Westwood, who was working at the time on the new community hall, and built by John MacKinnon Builders—was finished in 2001. We took on Margaret Campbell as our fieldworker, a position she held for seven years, making over 170 recordings in the process. She also travelled to Coll to record Gaelic speakers there.



Margaret Campbell: *'Why were there plates [on the carts] with the number of the crofts on?'*

Donald MacIntyre, Gott: *'That was the law of the land. If you were on the main road, the same way as with a car, if the policeman met you without your number on the cart, you could be arrested ... you didn't need to pay for them.'*

In 2005 we started to develop a new database and website with help from Edinburgh University. Progress was slow, however, and in 2007 Mark Vale began work on the current website, allowing us to put our catalogue and a great deal of content online. His design has been widely praised by other local history groups.

In 2009 Janet Bowler joined as our Archive Manager. We have been very lucky to have had two such long-standing and out-standing archivists.



TOP An early exhibition.

ABOVE An Iodhlann in the snow in 2000.

There were always projects, projects, projects.

We were partners in *A' Bhuain* The Tìree Homecomings of 2006 and 2016. Our Tìree Place-names Project has collected some 3400 names, which can be found at [www.tireeplacenames.org](http://www.tireeplacenames.org).

We have always been interested in the archaeology of the island. In 2007, along with Professor Mithen at Reading University, we sponsored Darko Maričević, whose resulting PhD was titled *Later Prehistory of Tìree and Coll, Inner Hebrides, Scotland*. In 2017 we organised a community excavation at *Cnoc an Fhoimheir* 'the giant's grave' in Kirkapol. We found a Bronze Age male skeleton, who was strongly built but only 5' 8" tall.

That same year, we helped the North of Scotland Archaeology Society (NOSAS) to record 22 panels of Neolithic rock art on the island.

And since 2016 we have been partnering the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists (ACFA) to survey *Beinn Haoidhnis*, discovering over 700 structures.

In 2017 we collaborated with Inveraray Castle archives and Argyll and Bute Council archives in a three-year project called *Written in the Landscape*. This copied many of the Tìree records held in these two important collections for *An Iodhlann*. This work is continuing, thanks in great part to Alison Diamond the Inveraray archivist. It has given us access to a treasure trove of historical

documents. Last year it resulted in a play based on traditional stories from Tìree performed by young people in a project called *Tìr Ìseal nan Òran* The Low land of Song.



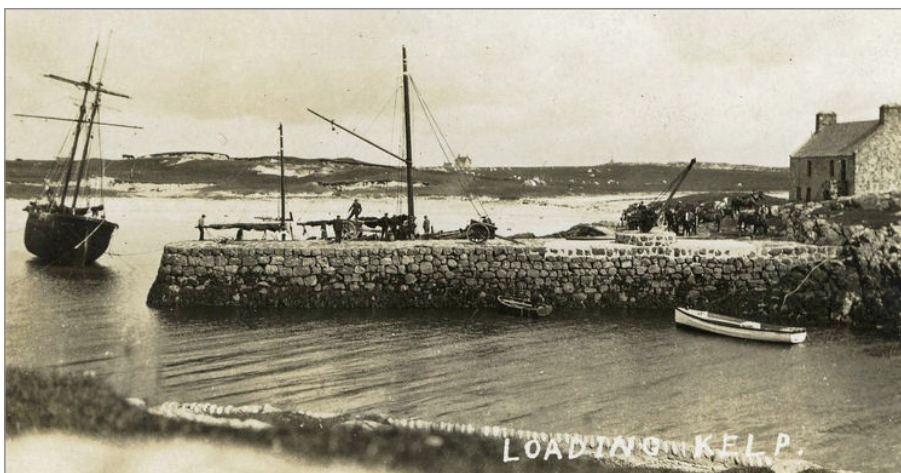
ABOVE Tertia Barnett, the project leader, counting the cups on the Ringing Stone.

LEFT A community group is shown around the Giant's Grave excavation.

People have been (and continue to be) very generous in donating material to An Iodhlann at a rate of around ten accessions per week. Our collection now stands at 11,700 items, including 4500 photographs, 1100 books, 800 artefacts, 480 sound recordings and 260 maps.

*When Dr Calvert came ... I made friends with him. He came from Manchester. He'd never lived in the country before. He said he was watching telly and he saw a cow being calved and he thought this was great. If you get a dystochia in a cow just let me know. The first case I got after that was down at Hector Meek's [in Caolas]. It was what was called schistoma reflexa, it's a monstrosity, everything outside in. An awful business. There's only one realistic way to deliver that, and that's by caesarean ... And I told Dr Calvert so he came out with me and he was quite intrigued to see this being done on a dirty byre floor. What else could you do? I did it under general with chloral hydrate, a very, very old-fashioned drug, but I found it great for cattle. Robert Beck, Ruaig, talking to Dr John Holliday in February 2011.*

To stay in contact with the huge Tìree diaspora, we have put much of our collection online. Our website is now our main window to the world, with 1400 views per month, 63% from the UK, 12% from the USA and 6% from Canada. Our two-month summer exhibition, manned by a team of volunteers, attracts around 1200 visitors.



Scarinish harbour in 1930. The Mary Stewart lies beached and Eaglais Sgairinis 'Scarinish church' can be seen. This is likely to have been one of the last, if not the last, shipments of kelp ash from the island.

*Comunn Eachdraidh Cholla* the 'Coll History Society' has been set up recently to collect material about that island. This is a wonderful project, and we have passed on those items from our collection that relate to Coll.

We have established our own publishing house, *An Iodhlann Press*. Titles to date are *Island of Two Harvests*, a short history of Tìree; *Òrain an Eòrna – Songs of the Barley*, a collection of the most popular Tìree Gaelic songs; *Longships on the Sand*, an analysis of Tìree in the Early Medieval period through its Scandinavian place-names; *Virtue Mine Honour*, the story of Charles McLean, an RAF navigator from Kenovay who died in the Second World War; and *Shore to Shining Shore*, a historical walking book around the island.

This year we changed our constitution to become a SCIO. This will give our members more of a say in the running of the archive.

When you write it all down like this, you realise how much the brilliant staff, the brilliant committee members and the brilliant volunteers of *An Iodhlann* have achieved over the last quarter century. Professor Candlin never made it to Tìree. But, as micromuseums go, *An Iodhlann* is not a bad one. It will be fascinating to see what the next twenty-five years bring.

Dr John Holliday



'Ploughing in Balevullin', a photograph taken in 1942 by the remarkable George Holleyman (1910–2004), who grew up in Brighton. He became fascinated by archaeology, helping the noted Sussex father-and-son team of archaeologists, the Curwens. In 1937 he set up as a second-hand book seller, but four years later he was conscripted into the RAF and sent to Tìree. He made full use of his two years on the island, combing the sandhills of Balevullin and Balephuill for prehistoric flints and medieval metalwork. He made a serious attempt to learn Gaelic and produced a series of magnificent glass lantern slides like this one. His collection was generously donated to *An Iodhlann* by Linda Gowans. After leaving Tìree he went on to become the librarian in charge of the RAF's collection of seven million aerial photographs. Following the war, he retrieved his books from storage and resumed his trade. His was the most noted antiquarian bookshop in the south of England. He also played a prominent role in Sussex archaeology.