

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 53

OIDHCHE CHALLAINN

This photograph was taken in the Sergeant's Mess of RAF Tiree on New Year's Eve 1944. It was six months after D-Day, Paris had been liberated, and although the Germans had made one last push at The Battle of the Bulge, many of the servicemen here must have finally allowed themselves to feel a glimmer of hope about the future after five years of grim struggle.

Feasting at the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, has been a tradition for thousands of years on Tiree. Being one of the year's four 'quarter days', *Callainn* (from the Early Irish word *callaind* 'the Calends', the first day of the month) was believed to be a time of danger, a time when evil spirits and fairies were free to roam the island looking for victims; many people stuck carefully to their superstitions to keep their families safe.

Donald Sinclair from West Hynish was born in 1885: "You were not supposed to give anything away on New Year's Day. The head of the house was supposed to get up first ... he would go round the house three times sunwise ... I remember that custom. Some of them were keeping up the custom on the quiet ... I've heard about them going about [beating the skin of a stirk] before my time." John Gregorson Campbell was the minister on Tiree from the 1860s: "It was a practice not to be neglected to keep the fire in the house all night ... As an additional security against it going out, candles were kept burning ... If the fire went out no kindling could be got the next day from any of the neighbours. The first day of the year was a quarter day on which it was unlucky to give fire out of the house. It gave the means to witches and evilly-disposed people to do irreparable mischief to the cattle and their produce. The dying of the fire was, therefore, a serious inconvenience in days when lucifer [safety] matches were unknown."

The wind on New Year's Day was also an omen of the year ahead: "*Gaoth deas, teas is toradh / Gaoth tuath, fuachd is gaillean / Gaoth 'n iar, iasg is bainne / Gaoth 'n ear, meas air chrannaibh* [South wind, heat and produce / North wind, cold and tempest / West wind, fish and milk / East wind, fruit on trees]."

Renewal and a fresh start were also themes then, as they are today. Many women cleaned their houses from top to bottom ("every plate", in the words of one) on New Year's Eve. Strengthening the links that bound the community was also important. It was mainly the young men who went out with their bottles after midnight, often

with artificial flowers in their buttonholes. The hosts would provide a tiny glass (by today's standards), which was filled and then passed round. The next day, the women, children and older folks would visit neighbours and family. Made-up rhymes were common, and the children would sing a verse outside the door in return for sweets or pennies. This one was given to me by Mabel Kennedy from Balephuill, who was born at the start of the twentieth century: "*Nochd Oidhche Challainn Ruadh / Thàinig mi le m' uan ga reic / Thuirt am bodach 's aghaidh gruaim / "Bualaidh mi do chluas ri creag." / Thuirt a' bhean am b'fhèarr nan òr / Gum bu choir e leigeil a-staigh / Airson na dh'itheamaid do dh'im / Rudan cruinn 's rud leis.* [Tonight is Brown Hogmanay / I have come with my lamb to sell / The old man, with a cross face said: / I will crack your ear against a rock!" / His wife, who was better than gold, said / That he should let him in / For all that we would consume of butter / Something round and something with it [cheese]." (My thanks to Mabel MacArthur, Mabel's daughter, for correcting my scribbled notes and providing a translation).

Another important New Year's Day tradition on Tìree was shinty. Donald Sinclair remembered: "They used to be playing shinty on New Year's Day. Aye! It was a great game, playing shinty! Not in my time; it was in my father's time it was in full swing. Barrapol and the Balephuill people would be at shinty on New Year's Day, down on the *machair* there. Plenty of whisky, plenty of ruffians too! Wild men! Many's the time they [fought]. In my father's time, there was an old Christian man in Balephuill. And they were looking up to him to be the only good man in the village. Well, on New Year's Day, when the shinty would start, this old man would walk down among the boys and he would bless them: 'Now boys,' he says. 'See as you don't get drunk and don't be fighting!' They were believing he was a Christian man! They were obeying his orders, for years and years. A good man ... MacDonald was his name ... Six on each side. And at that time, I don't know how shinty is played today, but at that time when they were playing against one another, each man was to stand in his own place to watch the ball. They were not making a rush, the whole of them on the ball at all. Every one of the team was watching his own quarters. That's a thing of the past! My eldest sister: she remembered it well. On New Year's Day, she was going up to her granny with a bit of fresh cod. It was boiled. And she went up to see her granny with this. And they were playing shinty down on the *machair* there [around 1880]." Captain Angus Lamont from *Lag nan Cruachan* in Cornaigmore was born in 1844. He wrote the famous lines about New Year's Day on Tìree: "*'S gur iomadh fear is aithne dhomh / 'S a chaman ùr fo achlais / 'Dol dh'ionnsuidh na Cloich Ghlaise* [a level area on the Balevullin *machair*] / *Ged tha mise 'tarruing ropa* [And many of my acquaintances / New shinty sticks under their arms / Are going towards the *Clach Ghlas* / Although I am stuck here pulling ropes]."

In case you think this article is a week late, read on! The winter solstice is a constant, depending, as it does, on the way the earth spins. But men have been trying to divide it up years into months since the dawn of civilisation. The Roman Emperor Julius Caesar imposed a new calendar in 45 BC; this started the year in January, a few days after the longest night. A millennium and a half later, Pope Gregory suggested a more accurate calendar in 1582. Scotland did not change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar until 1752, when eleven days were lost overnight, going straight from Wednesday 2nd September to Thursday 14 September (the gap between the two calendars has now grown to thirteen days). This might have been the law of the land, but the Old Style calendar continued in the Highlands for centuries, and people were stubbornly reluctant to give up the customs of the Old New Year. It is unlucky to wish someone a 'Happy New Year' early. When islanders went to shake the hand of the Balephuill postman in the 1930s to wish him a happy New Year before the 13th of January, he pulled away saying: "It's not New Year yet!"

The calendars changed on Tiree in the 1920s and 30s. A newspaper article from *The Times* in 1930 described the situation: 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. Tiree, however, is "dry", inasmuch as there is no licensed house on the island for the sale of intoxicants. At this time of the year the weather is generally very boisterous, and the island, being very much exposed to the force of the gales, is very often left isolated for perhaps weeks at a time, the mail boat being unable to make a landing. The supplies of whisky [ordered by post from Tobermory or Glasgow], which are an indispensable item in the New Year celebrations, are often late in arriving, and it often happens that, in spite of the date fixed, the holding of the actual festival is dependent on the arrival of the steamer with "the goods". It has been suggested, and the suggestion often acted on, that to make sure a good supply should be laid in several weeks beforehand. This plan, however, has proved quite ineffective, as 'the whisky won't keep'."

All the families of each township had to agree to change from Old Style to New Style at the same time, but not every township changed in the same year. From talking to some of those who remembered such things, the swap occurred in 1924 in Heanish, 1927 in Kilmoluag and 1935 in Mannal. Colin MacKechnie from Hynish, who was away at sea, is said to have come ashore on the 6th January 1935 to see the New Year in at home, and all the celebrations were over!

Bliadhna mhath ùr (an t-seann nòs) dhuibh uile, nuair a thig i

Dr John Holliday