

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 56

ROBERT NISBET'S ACCORDION

From pipes to boxes. This three-row, twelve-bass, 'Orfeo' British chromatic button accordion belonged to Robert Nisbet from Heanish, who often played for dances from the 1930s onwards.

Dancing has a long tradition on Tiree: "Donald MacDonald, *Dòmhnall mac Iain Òig* [who is listed as living in Hough in 1776] ... was a bit of an idler, who could never bring his mind or body to submit to any yoke. Being an excellent player on the bagpipes, it was his habit each winter to absent himself from home and billet himself on his friends in the township of *Balameanach* [Middleton]. These visits of his were occasions of great joy to the young people about. Dancing was carried out with great gusto, for in those happy days, the Tiree people had their dancing masters and musicians and change houses [inns] – indispensable adjuncts to an enjoyable Saturnalia [the mid-winter festival] ... It is a great pity that such an excellent comic poet should have experienced the pinch of poverty in his old age ... He left his native island [Donald was a Catholic] and went to live in Barra, where he died in very straightened circumstances in 1835."

And in 1794, the minister wrote: "The Tiree man ... was allowed [thought] to be 106 at his death ... His liveliness appeared to the last, not only by walking but dancing ... Indeed, though of an ordinary size, the people are remarkable for agility. They frequently entertain themselves by composing and singing songs, by repeating Fingalian [Irish myths] and other tales, by dancing assemblies at different farms by turns. In this qualification, they are remarkably neat."

In 1921, Isobel Hutchison, who spent the winter of 1921 in Ruaig, experienced the warmth of a Tiree *cèilidh*: "The love of music is strong in the Celt, and many a kitchen in the island is enlivened during the long winter evenings by the chanter or the melodeon. A new set of pipes arrived during my visit for a skillful young musician in the neighbourhood and for many evenings afterwards there was no seat to spare in his mother's kitchen, and visitors had to be accommodated on the dresser. Sometimes these could give a tune on the pipes themselves, or, failing that, could blow the bag while the owner knelt on the floor and manipulated the chanter. A wonderful sight it was on these occasions to watch the blower, with upturned ecstatic face, his soul on fire, puffing valiantly at the windy air, but evidently executing in imagination jigs and strathspeys fit to set the angels dancing!"

The Nisbets had a croft in Heanish. Robert's sisters became much-loved teachers on the island, while he himself developed a great expertise in blackface sheep, for which the Robert Nisbet Memorial Salver is given at the Tiree Show. It is not clear how he learned the accordion, but his father was a sea captain, and many sailors took boxes on board to while away the long voyages. Before the Crossapol public hall opened in 1960, Tiree dance halls were cramped: one of the five schoolrooms or The Reading Room in Scarinish. But despite this, a man who went to dances in Ruaig School in the 1930s remembered one night when there were six sets on the floor for the eightsome reel. There were always several pipers happy to play a tune. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Donald MacKinnon, *Fidhlear Shannraig*, played the fiddle at dances. But a popular band in the late 1930s consisted of Robert Nisbet, James Campbell from Campbeltown, the teacher at Heylipol School, and Jock Graham, the gamekeeper, all of whom played the box. Robert continued to play until the 1960s, when Gordon Connell heard him; his favourite tunes were the strathspey 'Devil in the Kitchen' and the march 'Australian Ladies'. Other box players at that time were Rob Mòr Macmaster from Kenovay; Colin MacKinnon, *Cailean Eòghainn*, from Kilkenneth; and Hector Campbell, *Eachann Lachainn*, from Cornaigbeg. In the 1960s, Murray Omand on piano accordion created a full band with Stewart Langley, Gordon Connell and Lachie MacFadyen, Kenovay, the first band to be paid for playing a Tiree dance.

In Murray's band was a young teacher at Cornaig School: "I'd always wanted to play the accordion since I was a wee boy when I heard a fellow in the next village from me playing. I started playing the accordion the first winter I came to Tiree. I bought a wee twelve bass accordion from Archie MacLean, Millhouse, and I tried to learn it on my own and sprauchled away through the bass and keyboard until I could knock a tune out of it. As far as teaching the children is concerned, this happened around 1969 when there was a leisure activities programme started in what was then Cornaigmore School. One of the activities I felt I could offer, because there was a bit of an interest in it, was the accordion. I did this with one accordion among four or five pupils. Each person played their wee bit of a tune and handed it over to the next person. It was a bit time consuming because of that. Nowadays most of the children have their own accordions and there is a fair supply of accordions in the school ... Girl pupils were few and far between, although there is plenty of music in them ... My fingers are not as musical as my ear, they are not as nimble as I would like them to be!" Gordon Connell was voted Music Tutor of the Year in 2010 at the Scots Trad Music Awards, and inducted into the Traditional Music Hall of Fame in 2016.

The accordion was invented in Germany in the 1820s. This box, probably not the first accordion on Tiree, is more likely to date from the 1950s. Robert Nisbet played his

part in keeping Tiree's old dancing tradition alive into the twentieth century and providing the springboard for the explosion of musical talent we see today.

I thank Gordon Connell for helping me with the technical bits!

Dr John Holliday