

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 73

GAELIC PROFICIENCY BADGES

This certificate for *Fionnghal NicFhionghain*, Fiona MacKinnon, and these two badges were part of an attempt in the first half of the twentieth century to keep the language vigorous on Tiree. The certificate was signed by the long-standing secretary of *An Comunn Gàidhealach*, Neil Shaw, who "demitted office" in 1953.

An Comunn had been founded in Oban in 1891. It had been encouraged by the success of the National Eisteddfod in Wales, set up thirty years earlier. Lord Archibald Campbell, the Gaelic-speaking second son of the eighth Duke of Argyll, became its first president. Its main project was the National *Mòd*, but it was active in other ways. One of these was the so-called "Propaganda Tour". In 1912, Neil Shaw came on tour to Tiree, and it appears that he was pleased with what he found: "My first call was the island of Tiree ... Whether it be the open and cheer-inducing outlook from every point of vantage, or the restless, boisterous nature of the elements, or both combined, there is no gainsaying the fact that a cheerful view of things in general and a stalwart faith in endeavour are the prevailing moods in this stormy, sea girt isle. Consequently, one felt one's effort appreciated and buoyed on a wave of hope and expectancy. Coupled with this, there was the certainty that Gaelic here was a living force. Everyone spoke it, no one denied it. There was one exception I came across – the worthy doctor, a recent comer, but he had already been enthused by the healthy Gaelic atmosphere, and was hard mastering the language. It is with confidence, then, that I bespeak prosperity for the *Comunn* in Tiree." (Dr Alexander Buchanan, a Gaelic speaker, had died the previous year; his replacement was Dr Donald MacDougall, who had come to the island from Greenock).

Hector and Archie MacKinnon, from Cornaigmore, were pupils in Cornaig school in the 1930s, as they remembered:

Hector: "About 1935-6 they had a wee badge made. Some of them, the centre was kind of gold and the outside white and *Comunn na h-Òigridh* written on it. And this man would come and question if you had any Gaelic, and would give you this badge. And then, if you were doing quite well and give him an account of the Gaelic, you had to sign a thing: '*Bi mise nam dheagh Ghàidheal*' [I'll be a good Gael]. And then you got one with blue enamel in the middle. And then they had another one: it was like a heather mixture, a purple colour, and you then signed '*Bi mise nam shàr Ghàidheal*' [I will be an excellent Gael]. But I was quite interested, and it gave us something to think about."

Archie: "His name was Mr MacIver."

Hector: "He used to come in June, just before the school closed and give us *puirt à beul* and different tunes and that. He would come here for about a month."

Archie: "He had the big book, the Modulator: do, ray mi. When he reached up [to the highest range], he would be singing himself. His top set of teeth were false, and when he opened his mouth [for the top notes], his top teeth would fall onto the top of the other ones! They were quite coarse, false teeth then."

Hector: "'*Bodach an Doh*' [the old man of the note 'do']: we used to call him. He had a kilt on. He used to take us out onto the *machair* and give us sports, all in Gaelic, exercises."

Archie: "*Suas air na corra-biod* [up on your toes]!" I remember that well. Everybody liked him."

Comunn na h-Òigridh 'the association of youth', the young people's wing of *An Comunn*, also gave shinty sticks to the school. Allan Campbell MacDougall from Oban was head teacher in Cornaig School from 1931 to 1969. He was very keen on Gaelic, insisting the children spoke nothing else in the school grounds on boat days (Wednesdays and Fridays). He also organised public ceilidhs in classrooms 4 and 5. The 1939 school log reads: "By permission of the School Management Committee, *An Comunn Gàidhealach*, Cornaigmore, held a ceilidh in the school tonight." One islander remembered these with affection: "They were great. You went along and sang or recited. I remember once or twice I played the accordion in my early learning days. It tended to be the old songs that were sung. It was good, a real throw back to the old days. Colin Lamont [*Cailean Dhòmhnail*, from Cornaigmore], he was a great character. He had songs with goodness knows how many verses, some of which I believe he made up, although it was all in Gaelic. He was a great joke teller as well, and he had a very, very distinctive laugh. The joke itself wasn't that great, but when you heard his laugh, everybody just fell about laughing themselves!"

In 1940, *An Comunn* became active in the war effort in Balemartine School: "The girls in Primary 4 and 5 are knitting socks and scarves for the army and navy instead of their usual school knitting. Wool supplied by *An Comunn Gàidhealach*." Meetings could also be quite political. After a meeting in 1968, the year before Mr MacDougall's untimely death, the *Oban Times* reported: "Where have all Tiree's young girls gone? Cornaigmore An Comunn wants Age-Structure Probe. Concern has been expressed about the declining juvenile population of Tiree, particularly among girls." The *Daily Express* didn't beat about the bush with their headline: "No Birds (or bees) for island 'Monks'."

While one learns quickly in a small community who can and wants to speak Gaelic, it can be harder in the city. Lapel badges as a way of signifying fluency in Gaelic have

been tried at various times, with *Fáinne Óir* 'the gold ring' being one used most recently in Ireland.

Dr John Holliday