



## Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome to this edition of *Sìl Eòlais* 'seeds of knowledge', the newsletter of *An Iodhlann*. As I write, it is not completely clear when and how the museum will be opening this summer. But it certainly looks hopeful, and we have prepared two new exhibitions. The main one celebrates the life of Pilot Officer Charles McLean, who we featured in the newsletter last year. We are in the process of publishing a book of Charles's wartime letters. These should be out in the autumn to coincide with the eightieth anniversary of his untimely death over the Channel. The second display concerns the objects that wash up on the beaches of the island – both welcome and unwelcome!

### Gott Bay Pier : Long in the Making

*'After this excursion, I found no place so practicable as the Bay of Gott ... Mr Campbell, and other persons who have frequently entered this bay, were decidedly of the same opinion; but it will require a strong pier to secure ships in all winds.'*

It was 1786, and John Knox had been commissioned by the British Society for Extending the Fisheries and Improving the Sea Coast of this Kingdom to survey the west coast of Scotland. It was to be more than 120 years until his vision was realised, with arguments about funding, arguments between engineers as to the feasibility of building foundations on sand, and arguments between local fishermen as to the most suitable site.

A century later, the owner of the Middleton kelp factory Edward Stanford chose satire as his weapon in his evidence to the 1883 Napier Commission after their visit to the island: *'I regret very much that the Royal Commission had so little time to spare in Tìre; their experience, however, was quite unique; no one has ever had to complain before of want of air in that island, and they landed far too easily. Had they remained one more day, the probability is they would not have got ashore, or having got ashore, they would not have got aboard again; and then we should have had the benefit of their powerful advocacy for what is the great want of the island, a substantial pier in Gott Bay.'*

Local agitation for a 'substantial pier' to allow the mailboat and other large vessels to berth on Tìre began in earnest in 1888. In 1890, the West Highlands Commission, appointed by the Westminster government, accepted that a pier was needed and committed funding of up to three quarters of the estimated cost of £11,500.

Matters came to a head in the autumn of 1891, when the rowing boat that ferried passengers between the pier and the steamer capsized. Lady Victoria Campbell, daughter of the eighth Duke – crippled as she was by polio and more aware than most of the difficulty of transferring between boats – wrote in her diary, *'... I was indoors until 18th [November] which was wet and stormy. I only knew afterwards, when the old pilot McDonald came to see me, that we had narrowly that day escaped a tragedy. The accident to the boat which went out to the steamer has led to fresh agitation about having the pier.'*



*The Tìre flit boat – often confusingly called the 'ferryboat' – approaching the mail steamer off Scarinish pre-1915. The passengers and cargo are together in the stern, meaning the rowers and crew needed to sit near the bow to balance the boat. It must have been blisteringly hard work for two oarsmen to row a heavy boat like this, particularly in rough weather. Onshore, the old Scarinish shop and school can be seen.*

Referring to those involved locally in the 'Crofters War', Lady Victoria went on, *'Two-thirds of the money has been promised by the Government as a grant. When at Dunstaffnage, Colonel E Malcolm asked to see me alone, and advocated the advance of the rest of the capital [by the Duke]. It is amusing, if it were not provoking, to see the implicit trust in "capital" which the people have, while they abuse those who have it. In the same way making use of the farms to buy their stock, while at the same time, in their meetings, advocating their overthrow.'*

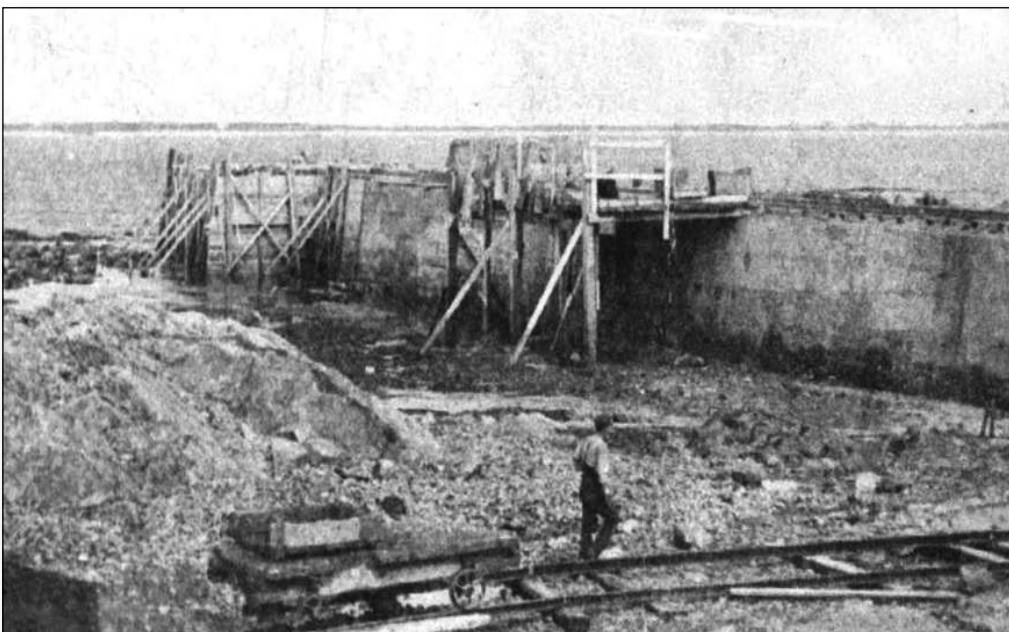
There were arguments about the best site for a new pier. Lady Victoria again: *'This pilot is a character. When asked if the men who were so desirous of a pier could give something towards it, in labour at least, he said: "No, there was no chance of unless it was at Hynish, the place which would suit the fishermen." When I said: "That is hardly a Christian view," he promptly replied: "Christian or no Christian, it is the fact. We can al' be Christians when we like." Which statement I had to acknowledge was often too true.'*

Possibly prompted by his daughter, the Duke wrote to his tenants restating his commitment to a pier and pointing out that he already put his own money into the project. However, before he went any further he needed to be convinced that any foundations would be stable on the soft sand of Gott Bay, that the costs would not go on escalating, and that pier dues would eventually allow it to become commercially viable.

In 1892, however, the Duke wrote that the latest engineer's report was unfavourable, meaning that the scheme was unviable: *'Looking to the fact that three different engineers have reported differently on this work all of competent qualification and that each of them have differed from the conclusion of his predecessor, I cannot but feel that the Enterprise is beset by unusual difficulties and must encounter unusual risks involving a large expenditure of capital that may all be lost.'* The Works Committee of the Congested Districts Board came to the same conclusion. They may well have been influenced to some extent by the difficulties encountered half a century earlier by Alan Stevenson, when his new Hynish harbour was repeatedly filled with sand.

But the pressure would not go away. In 1898, an island delegation consisting of Edward Stanford; the island's doctor Alexander Buchanan; Hugh MacDiarmid the factor; and Mr Cowan of the Perthshire Advertiser travelled to Inveraray to put the case once more to the ageing eighth Duke.

The project finally got over the line after Rev William Gillies arrived in 1906 as Church of Scotland minister for the parish of Kirkapoll. He wrote once more to the Congested Districts Board and this triggered a visit from the Board's Secretary and Engineer. Gillies was advised that the Board needed unanimity from island as to the preferred site and a commitment to raise a proportion of the funds locally. Before long, £500 had been raised from a group including Thomas Barr, Hugh MacDiarmid, John Brown and Rev T. D. MacKay from the Free Church with more raised at local meetings.



*The pier under construction. Note the small railway in the foreground for carrying stone blasted in the small quarry to the left of the picture. There is another railway along the top of the structure, some wooden scaffolding halfway down and some shuttering to hold in the poured concrete towards the end of the pier.*

Eventually, plans and costs were agreed and a funding package for £13,800 secured. The Congested Districts Board granted £10,350, the Duke £2500, while the Board of Agriculture for Scotland contributed a grant and a further loan.

The Gott Bay Pier Order, laid before parliament in 1908, established the Gott Bay Pier Trustees. These were appointed in the first instance for three years, after which there would be elections. These trustees were Hugh MacDiarmid\* of Island House, factor and county councillor; Thomas Barr\* of the Parish Council; Rev William Alexander Gillies,\* Church of Scotland minister; Robert MacDiarmid, farmer, Hynish; John Brown, tenant of the Temperance Hotel in Scarinish; Donald MacFadyen, merchant, Scarinish; Archibald MacDonald, fisherman, Milton; and Alexander MacDonald, crofter, Balevullin (\* signifies an ex officio post, to be replaced by their successors in office). Their secretary was Kenneth MacKenzie from 'Scarinish Villa'.

The trustees were given three objectives: to build a solid pier of 576 feet, an open timber viaduct going out into the bay and an access road from the pier end to the main Scarinish to Kirkapol road. The spending was to be capped at £14,000. In 1909, the trustees were sold the necessary land by the estate for £1.

Their chosen designer was the sixty-four-year-old George Woulfe Brennan. Trained as an engineer in London, he had moved to Oban in 1882 to set up practice as an engineer-architect. He designed a number of well-known buildings in the area, including The Oban Distillery, Oban Sheriff Courthouse, the West Highland Cottage Hospital and the Church of Our Lady in Castlebay.

The first sod was cut with an inscribed silver trowel on 30 September 1909 by Lord Archibald Campbell in front of a crowd of 400. After the ceremony, the entire party processed to the Temperance Hotel where they were regaled with wine and cake. The following year, Brennan advised the Trustees that the solid part of the pier needed to be 45 ft longer to cater for all states of the tide. By the end of 1910, matters had progressed to such a stage that notice had to be given to mariners that a red light was now lit at the pier end in hours of darkness.

*Lord Archibald Campbell and Lady Frances Balfour, children of the eighth Duke of Argyll, talking to blacksmith Malcolm MacIntyre from Gott during the construction of the pier. The picture was taken in 1911 by Frances's daughter Annie.*



Many local people were taken on for the four-year construction project. Two uncles of Donald MacIntyre, Gott, were hired as blacksmiths and a smiddy was built for them at the pier. Lachlan MacKinnon from Vaul, a boatbuilder, was employed to make the shuttering for the concrete casing. Somewhat over-qualified for the work, he complained to a friend that he had spent all day sharpening saws for the rest of the crew after they found out how expert he was. Donald Sinclair from West Hynish worked a labourer. He remembered it as, *'Hard work all the time: there was no such thing as concrete mixers in these days'*. Two small quarries that supplied the stone used to fill the heart of the solid pier can still be seen on the shoreline nearby.

Parallel with the building work, a landmark legal wrangle over the ownership of the foreshore was playing out in Edinburgh. The Duke of Argyll claimed ownership of the shoreline down to the low water mark based on historic custom and practice. The Board of Trade disputed this, stating that this ownership was not backed up in any legal documents. The Duke's lawyers laid down a marker at the start of the project in 1909: *'We may add that the Duke some years ago further exercised his property rights by granting permission to the County Council to lay a sewage pipe from their Hospital [in Heanish] across the foreshore so as to discharge into the sea.'* In 1912, the Duke's solicitors in Edinburgh wrote: *'We are now instructed to say that while His Grace is quite desirous of furthering Government Works in Tiree and will gladly give any stone or sand required from his shores free, he will uphold his property rights in the foreshore and will resist any attempt to deprive him thereof.'* In other words, the Duke was not trying to make money out of the building of the pier, but he did not want it used as a precedent in future cases.



Upper: The pier rails and bogey. The traces of a second railway can be seen on the left, possibly one used during construction.

Lower: On the left is one of the pier workers, Johnny 'Nonian' MacDonald of Heanish, who also kept the Scarinish lighthouse running. On the right is Hector MacKinnon (Eachann Dhonnchaidh) of Scarinish. Three young visitors are sitting on the horse that pulled the laden bogey up the pier.

The action was decided in a 1914 case at the Court of Session in favour of the Duke: *'Intimation was made of the abandonment of the action raised by the Lord Advocate on behalf of the Board of Trade and on behalf on His Majesty's Woods, Forests and land Revenues against Mr Niall Diarmid Campbell, now the Duke of Argyll, Inveraray Castle for declarator that the whole of the foreshore surrounding the Island of Tiree ex adverso of the property of the defendant, belonged exclusively to and vested in the pursuer, subject only to the rights of the public to certain uses thereof ... The defender was found entitled to expenses.'* This important legal ruling continues to be relevant today.

A small railway line was set into the long sloping pier. Along this ran a bogey, which carried cargo that had had been paid for in the pier office. This bogey rolled down to the pier end under its own steam, but was pulled back up by a horse belonging to Alan MacFadyen (*Ailean mac Dhonnchaidh*) from Gott.

Meena Knapman was a visitor to the island in the 1930s: 'I can remember in those days there was a kind of railway line up the pier, which little trucks and bogies came down on, and when you went up the pier you went through the pier house. You didn't go to the right, you went through this archway. And that was you in Tiree!'

A row of concrete foundations to the east of the pier supported a temporary jetty known as *Ceidhe Iain Thearlaich* 'the pier of Iain the son of Charles'. This was used while the pier was under construction, notably by John Lamont from Ruaig, who owned a puffer called *Tiree*.

Gott Bay pier was open for traffic in 1915. The running costs and loan repayments had to be financed by pier dues. For example, ale was charged at 6d (old pence) per 54 gallons; ship's biscuits at 1s 4d per ton; blubber at 1s per ton; scythes at 3d per dozen; people over 12 were charged 2d; while servants going with the family's luggage were not charged.

There were concerns after the opening that the pier dues would not meet the costs of loan repayments and other costs. The First World War was certainly an unpropitious time to recoup costs for a project like this. Kenneth MacKenzie had to begin work as the first pier master without pay.

The construction of Gott Bay pier was one of the most important projects in the island's modern history. From the 1920s, it opened up the island for tourism for the first time to take advantage of the island's beaches and new golf course. While not protected from a southeasterly swell, it has paid for itself many times over during its 106-year existence. And it has proved itself remarkably resilient. An early visitor, the *Dunara Castle*, was 423 tons and drew 3.7 m, while today's *Clansman* at 5499 tons draws just 3.2 m., just enough to get in at low tide.

## The Story of a House

John and Cynthia Gunderson bought 'Machair House' in Ruaig in 1988. Their first footer that New Year's Day was *Iain Mòr*, Iain MacKinnon from *Torr a' Bhaile*. He treasured many happy memories of the house from the 1940s.

That night sowed the seeds of a project to discover more about the history of the house. John has had the help of Catriona Smyth, Professor Donald Meek, surviving members of the MacLean family and the archives of *An Iodhlann*. A project like this is never finished, but he has kindly agreed to let me share it with you as it currently stands.

*The wedding of Duncan and Alix in Glasgow. The bridesmaid was Dr Ella MacDonald from Helensburgh, and the flower girl was Myra Smyth from Kirkapoll.*





The first chapter in this story is set in 1925 at the Grand Hotel, Charing Cross in Glasgow. Duncan MacLean, a thirty-nine-year-old marine engineer who had worked in Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar) married Alexandrina ('Alix') McDonald, a twenty-nine-year-old teacher. Both had Tìree connections with Duncan's father coming from Ruaig. Settling on a spot on the Ruaig machair, they commissioned Hugh MacKinnon (*Eòghann Dhòmhnail*) from Crossapol, one of several Tìree builders known as 'The Contractor'. He was assisted by Lachlan Campbell from Cornaigbeg. Hugh had previously worked in America, where he learned the technique of shuttering concrete. This was one of the first houses on the island to be built using this construction method, which came to be adopted for most of the new Tìree croft houses of the 1930s.

'Rangoon House' was completed in 1928. There was one problem. The front door of the garage had been designed to open directly onto the track leading from the beach beside the house to Caolas. The limited turning circle of the family car did not allow Duncan to drive in. 'The Contractor' had to call on another skill learned in America. He dug under the foundations of the garage, where he put round stobs, hitched up a team of Clydesdale horses and pulled the whole structure back nine feet. To this day, the original hard standing for the garage can be seen in front of the garage door.

Duncan and Alix had two daughters: Mairi was born in Glasgow in 1927, while Catriona Dunella was born two years later in Cardross. At first, the family appear to have used the house for holidays. But – possibly during the Second World War – the girls came to live on Tìree for a three-year spell. They were looked after by their mother's sister, Dr Isabella ('Ella') McDonald. Ella had graduated from Glasgow University Medical School in 1928, although she never practiced. The house rapidly became a magnet for children from the east end of the island.

One reason may have been a tennis court which was set up on the machair beside the house. The family was also extremely musical. Alix's father, Donald Duncan MacDonald from Harrapool on Skye, had been a Mod Gold medal winner and became a precentor at the Gaelic Church in Glasgow, probably St Columba's. Alix's mother, Mary MacDonald from Balemartine, was also a well-known singer, and had had songs written for her by John MacLean, the Balemartine Bard. In addition, 'Rangoon House' boasted a piano – unusual on Tìree at the time – and the girls could provide an accompaniment for singers. Mairi also played the accordion with Angus MacLean from Caolas on the pipes.

But the main attraction was a series of plays written and performed by the young cast. Ella directed operations, made the costumes, applied the make-up and fed the excited crew. Plays included 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' with Iain *Torr a' Bhaile* taking the lead part. The 'Broons Family' used characters from *The Sunday Post* and starred Tina and Bobby MacLean from *Mialum* with Iain's brother Hugh. Hugh MacLean from Salum sang the well-known Foster and Allen song 'It's Only a Beautiful Picture', while Mary Flora MacKinnon posed as the model behind an empty frame.

*The Oban Times* reported one notable wartime production. It is interesting to note that the house's name has been changed, possibly due to negative associations after the Japanese occupation of Burma in 1942:

#### *TÌREE – SUCCESSFUL PLAY BY AMATEURS*

*To augment the Prisoners of War Fund of the Red Cross, Dr Ella MacDonald, Machair House, Ruaig, decided to try something out of the ordinary run of entertainments, so she wrote a three act play, entitled, 'The Minister Comes Home,' with a typical West Highland setting, arranged the cast, and produced the play in Ruaig School on two consecutive evenings. At the first show Dr [David] Hunter, local Medical Officer, presided and gave an explanation of why this fund should be supported by voluntary contributions and not be a State responsibility. On the second evening Mr J. M. Brown, Scarinish, [Tenant of Scarinish Farm and the Temperance Hotel in Scarinish], made an eloquent appeal on behalf of the funds. Those participating in the play included Calum MacLean [Salum], who took the part of the minister. The heroine's part was ably carried out by Miss Mairi MacLean, Machair House, while her younger sister Donalda [Dunella] MacLean, was a great success as her sister 'Effie,' an old maid who knew what she wanted, and was determined to get it. The part of the mother, was*

played by Miss Mary F MacKinnon with the dignity that the part demanded. Miss Mary T MacLean [Mialum] as 'Bella' gave an effective performance, while 'Calum,' a bachelor in 'matrimonial difficulties,' was well represented by Mr Gordon Christie [possibly Manager of the Hough NAAFI]. The net result for the two performances was a handsome £73 10 shillings. [This would amount to around £3,500 in today's money.]

In her addition to her creative side, Dr Ella managed an extensive investment portfolio. She was often to be found calling her stockbroker from the phone box at Silversands, reminded periodically by the Scarinish-based operator of the need to put in more money.

Both girls were home schooled by Dr Ella during their time on Tiree. They harboured ambitions to follow their aunt into medicine, meaning that Dr Ella had to arrange for them to sit their entrance exams by post. After the war, university places in the United Kingdom were at a premium, with many places reserved for service men and women. The girls made numerous unsuccessful applications to British medical schools. They consequently made the consequential decision to apply to McGill University in Montreal and were accepted. The whole family decided to emigrate with them and they sailed in 1946. Duncan and Alix moved to a small farm in Glengarry, Ontario, while Ella settled nearby. Not long after their arrival, the girls were recorded singing Gaelic songs by Hugh McPhee from the BBC, who was making a field trip to Canada. The girls qualified in 1954. Both women went on to have distinguished careers. Mairi worked at the Queen Charlotte Hospital, White Rock, British Columbia, while Catriona Dunella finished her career leading the Hearing Disorders Programme at the Children's Hospital in the state.



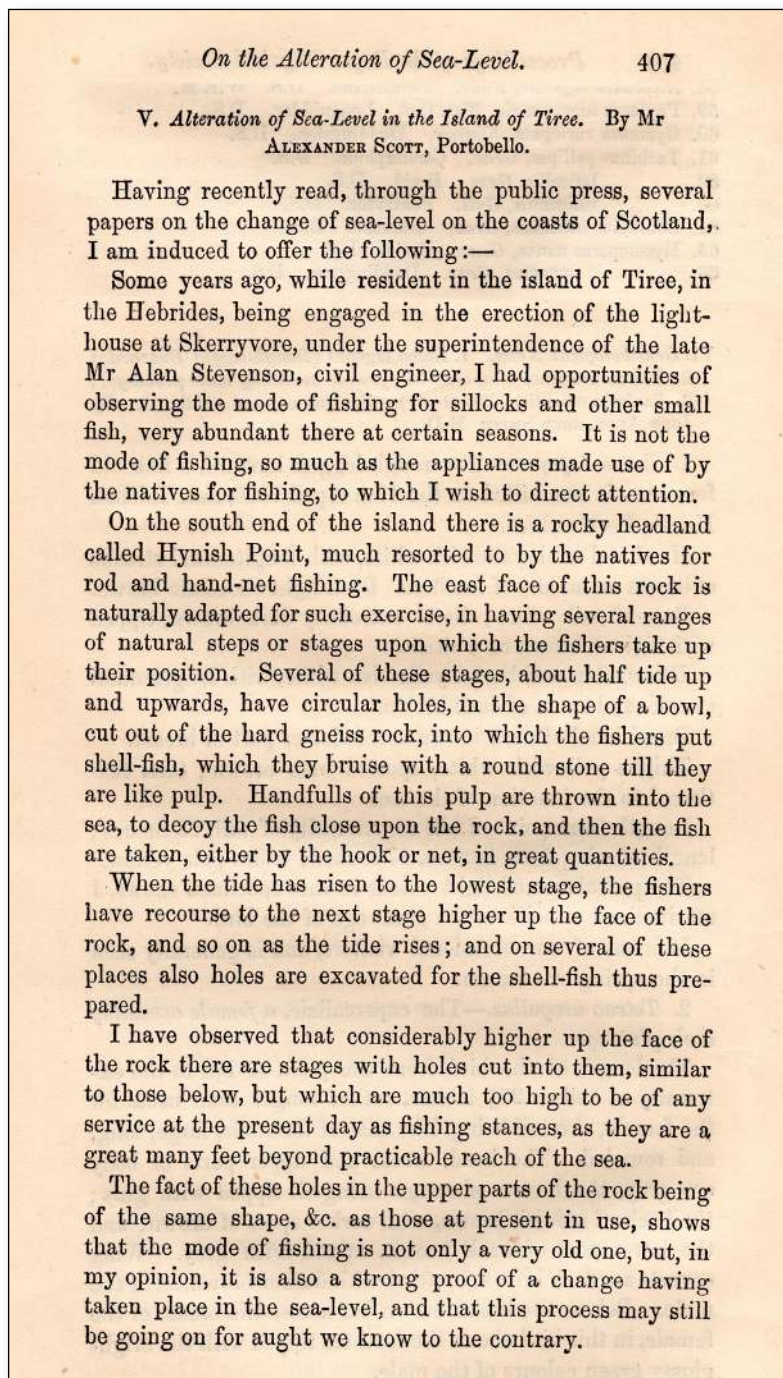
The second chapter in the house's history was its purchase by the General Post Office to provide accommodation for the island's telephone engineer. Its first resident was Donald Quintin Campbell, known as 'DQ', from Port Ellen on Islay, who came to the island in 1947 and stayed until 1968. He married Jessie MacLean Kennedy of Kilmoluaig in 1954.

I would like to thank John for sharing his research with us. It is an excellent example of a 'house history' and an encouragement to the rest of us to follow in his footsteps. If anyone can share any more details of the house and its people, please let me know.

'DQ' beside his van in on Tiree in 1950.

## Archivist's Choice

In 1862, well before the current discussions on the consequences of rising sea level, Alexander Scott published an article titled 'Alteration of Sea-level in the Island of Tiree' in the Proceedings of the Royal Physical Society. In the article, Scott – recorded as a blacksmith on Skerryvore itself in 1841 – describes the traditional fishing method of pulping fish bait in depressions in rocks at Hynish Point, and how some of these depressions could indicate a drop in sea level since ancient times. There are two aspects of Scott's article that I found particularly interesting: (1) that the debate at that time was about falling sea levels, and (2) that cup-marks in rocks were recognised as being functional rather than religious or ritualistic, as was later speculated. The full article can be read at [www.aniodhlann.org.uk/object/2021-7-3/](http://www.aniodhlann.org.uk/object/2021-7-3/)



2021.7.3 – Article written in 1862 discussing rock cup-marks and changes in sea-level

Finally, let me recommend Professor Donald Meek's superb latest book: *A Croft in Caolas*. This traces the history of his family and the story of their croft. It is available from [www.isle20.com](http://www.isle20.com)

Thank you for all your continued support for *An Iodhlann*.  
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