



Welcome to another edition of *Sìl Eòlais*, the newsletter of *An Iodhlann*, Tiree's historical centre. As the fog of the pandemic clears, we welcome visitors without restrictions to the museum. We hope to see you all soon!

### John Sands: campaigner and lover of islands

Antiquarian, campaigner against the truck system, writer, journalist, illustrator and poet. An islophile who wrote 'I pant for the wild open shore', John Sands had two spells on St Kilda, which brought him to national attention. He later moved to Shetland, spending time on Foula, Vaila, Papa Stour, and at Walls. In 1880 Sands spent nine months on Tiree. Unusually for him, despite growing social unrest on the island at the time, he appears to have largely kept out of politics during his stay.

John Sands was born around 1827 in Arbroath, a North Sea port about three times the size of Oban. He was the second of eight children. His mother Christina Anderson came from Dundee, and was described in the 1851 Census as a 'Proprietor of land and Houses'. This modest family wealth may have allowed John the independence to travel extensively, although he went on to support himself from his writing.

His father John Sim Sands was a lawyer, or 'writer' as they were titled then. But he was better known locally as a journalist and author: 'In the town of Arbroath a paper is published every Saturday, called the *Arbroath Journal* the proprietor and editor of which is a Mr John Sim Sands, who, having boxed the compass of politics, and alternately supported all parties, is for the present a Tory.'

John Sim Sands appears to have been a controversialist. It was said of him: 'Many of his articles were of a most caustic and bitterly personal description, which as might be expected, made for him more foes than friends.' The four-page satirical paper was surprisingly profitable: 'It was alleged that not a few became subscribers because they enjoyed the piquancy of the articles when their neighbours' faults or failings, real or supposed, were the subjects, while others considered it to be in their interest to support the paper in order to save themselves from the lash.' Possibly as a consequence, in 1829 his position as a lawyer was challenged in court because of deficiencies in his 'moral character', although the case was unsuccessful.

Like his father, John junior appears to have begun his training as a lawyer, being recorded in the 1841 Census as a fourteen-year-old 'writer'. But his was an adventurous spirit, and he travelled to the United States and lived for a while in Buenos Aires.

It was in June 1875 that a forty-eight-year-old Sands was drawn to an Atlantic island that was to make him a very public (and divisive) figure. His journey started in Dunvegan, where he was to catch a boat sailing for St Kilda, a small island group fifty miles west of Uist with a population at the time of seventy-five. His description of the Skye inn at which he stayed shows that his writing style owed more than a little to his father: 'A rumour that fever raged on the premises caused them to be shunned by all except a few cattle-couplers [dealers], who would have had their whisky although Death himself had acted as waiter, and had brought in the stoups [flagons] and glasses on a coffin lid.'

He had started to learn Gaelic before his journey. Once on St Kilda, he 'spent the evenings in one or the other cottages, chatting with people and endeavouring to conquer the difficulties of Gaelic.' By the end of his second eight-month visit to the island, he was able to transcribe a number of traditional stories, so he must have become quite fluent. He played the pipes and also travelled with a keyed flute.



*St Kilda's Main Street in the 1920s. The zinc-roofed houses were built around 1862. This photograph was taken by Professor Thomas Stewart Patterson, and comes from the collection of Glasgow University Library*

Despite no longer being a young man, he accompanied the men on their trips to Boreray, a precipitous island nearby: 'Tied to the end of a rope, I clambered up such paths as one may see in a nightmare ... Sometimes I was indebted to my guide for a pull up some difficult bit ... A line was fastened around my waist, and a hair rope put into my hand. I was peremptorily requested to take off my shoes; and as I descended I pushed my toes into any crevice or cranny that offered, until the rock became so smooth that I could find no hold for my feet. Then I was obliged to be passive, and allowed myself to be lowered like a sack until I reached a small limpet-covered shelf on which the waves rose about knee deep. "Jump! Jump!" shout the crew; and when the boat mounts on the wave, I leap and fall in a heap amongst the fulmars – all right.'



*Lachlan MacLean from Corraigbeg went to St Kilda in 1901 as a missionary*

Sands had a keen nose for social injustice. The island had recently been taken back into the family by MacLeod of Dunvegan. The landlord bought tweed and feathers from the St Kildans, selling them at a huge profit in Glasgow. Islanders were paid not in cash but in goods like meal and tobacco which MacLeod supplied after another large mark-up. This was essentially the notorious truck system, something that the Truck Act of 1831 had been designed to outlaw. Sands wrote: 'The trade is a monopoly in his hands, and his serfs are obliged to deal with him on his own terms ... If it is right that any private individual should be allowed to possess and govern a remote island like St Kilda, surely it ought to be one who is thoroughly acquainted with the people, and who feels a deep interest in their welfare. But MacLeod has never had his foot on the island ... Where one man has absolute power, it will be a rare case if he does not abuse it. This is proverbial, and is well exemplified in the dealings of the ... factors with the natives of St Kilda.'

His first visit to St Kilda lasted seven weeks. Following this, and determined to procure a boat for the islanders so that they could trade with merchants in the Outer Isles independently of the landlord, he raised money by public subscription and returned the next year with an Ardrishaig-built boat: 'To break open the door of MacLeod's prison was the object of my second mission to St Kilda. To liberate the poor serfs who had been incarcerated and cruelly used and bring them into communication with the rest of the world was my mission ... I felt as if I had a Divine call to perform the work, and must proceed at any cost, and despite any opposition.'

Bad weather and a failure by the factor to visit the island with supplies as promised, meant that his second stay lasted eight months. The harvest was poor due to bad weather and exhausted arable ground, and the winter was a lean one. His diet became restricted: 'I took one handful [of oatmeal] for breakfast and another for supper, which I made myself into gruel. I bought milk. I had a longing sometimes for two handfuls, but was obliged to abstain. I boiled a small bit of salt mutton and six small potatoes at 4pm, but felt a craving for farinaceous [starch-containing] food.' Islanders were reduced to smoking dried moss, and Sands himself lost over two stones during his stay.

The island's meagre supplies were further stretched by the arrival of nine Austrian sailors shipwrecked on the island. Sands devised the now-famous St Kilda mailboat to appeal for help: 'I made a miniature ship and put a letter in her hold, in the hope that she might reach some place where there was a post office.' The first attempt eventually landed on the Norwegian coast, and it was not until the third mailboat – this time made of a lifebelt with an improvised sail – that a message was picked up on Birsay in Orkney and the authorities alerted.

Confined for months within this tiny, isolated community – of whom only two spoke English – at a time of food stress and blessed with a somewhat contrarian nature, it is not surprising that Sands fell out with his neighbour. The minister at the time of his visit was the fifty-eight-year-old John MacKay from Inverness. The islanders had fervently embraced the Free Church after the Disruption some two decades earlier. MacKay appears to have been welcoming to the visitor at first. Sands wrote: 'Personally I am indebted to [MacKay] for numberless acts of friendship – kindness continued from first to last. He pressed me to live in the house, and when, preferring freedom and the bagpipes, I declined his invitation, he did his utmost to render me comfortable in my own quarters. Take him for all in all, the Free Kirk has few soldiers she has more reason to feel proud of.'

But the two fell out when MacKay persuaded the islanders to continue to trade through the landlord, rather than use Sands' new boat. Perhaps influenced by this, Sands found the intense Sabbatarianism adopted by the St Kildan congregation intolerable: 'There are two services and a Bible class, to all of which everybody attends every Sunday. They occupy altogether six hours and a half ... The Sabbath is indeed a day of intolerable gloom. At the clink of the bell the whole flock hurry to the church with sorrowful looks and eyes bent upon the ground.' Sands also drew an unflattering portrait of MacKay for his subsequent book about the island, *Out of the World, Or, Life in St Kilda*.

Following the successful retrieval of the mailboat, the Navy dispatched a boat to St Kilda to leave supplies and to rescue Sands and the Austrians. He described his train journey back to Edinburgh: 'I dressed in a suit of the native cloth, and could observe by the noses of the ladies in the railway carriage that I had brought with me the strong and peculiar odour which adheres to everything in Hirta [St Kilda], and which arises from the turf smoke.' He immediately embarked on a campaign to highlight the urgency of the situation faced by the St Kildans with a flurry of interviews and articles. His anti-landlord position attracted plenty of supporters but also some weighty opposition. He may have been oppositional, but he was not a narcissist. 'Fame is a lady who looks best at a distance,' he wrote.

His campaign raised the profile of St Kilda, and was instrumental in persuading the shipping companies that there was a market for regular trips to the island. This brought a considerable amount of cash into the St Kildan economy, but arguably also hastened the day when the island would be evacuated.

Four years after his second trip to St Kilda, he spent nine months on Tiree, 'with the intention ... of making antiquarian surveys'. He stayed in a vacant house belonging to the Northern Lighthouse Board in Lower Square, Hynish. Sands was the island's first excavating antiquarian. By modern archaeological standards, this was an utterly destructive process – essentially digging holes in ruined forts and chapels. Most of his finds were subsequently lost. But he had excavated prehistoric structures on St Kilda and he had a keen eye. His account is still valuable and often quoted today.



*Dùn na Cleite (on the skyline) from Dùn Shiadair*

He visited eight Iron Age duns on the island, spending 'days and weeks' digging at *Dùn na Cleite* in Hynish and *Dùn nan Nighean* in Balephuill. He found a saddle quern, boar tusks, whale bones showing signs of butchery, spindle whorls, decorated pottery and a fragment of deer antler on which was carved the sign of a cross. He was suspected by islanders of digging for treasure, as there was a tradition that gold was buried at *Dùn Shiadair*. He also visited *Teampall Phàraig* and the chapels at Kilkenneth and Kirkapol. Alerted by workmen building the road at Soroby, he also excavated there, but 'only found two cists with a little bone dust in them.' At *An Cladh Beag* 'the small graveyard' in Hynish, he claimed to have found the walls of the old chapel.

He later wrote that 'In the exploration of Tìree, I received every discouragement from those who sit in Edinburgh and profess to represent Archaeology.' Perhaps because of this rebuff, he stated that 'I am strongly of the opinion that the best Antiquarian Society is a newspaper to which everyone, irrespective of purse and position, is free to contribute.' He did, however, present several academic papers – as well as a pin, needle and twenty-two-inch sword found on Tìree – to the Society of Antiquaries in Edinburgh.

Sands was also interested in traditional stories. Ronnie Black strongly suspects that his source on Tìree was the island's then Church of Scotland minister John Gregorson Campbell, a noted folklorist. During his stay on Tìree, he allowed himself to be interviewed by a reporter from the *North British Daily Mail*. This resulted in a somewhat overblown account of 'many ancient superstitions', including houses that were haunted by fairies; a cure for jaundice involving water from 'nine waves'; and a 'rock with a hole in it through which children are passed when suffering from whooping cough or other complaints.' This last is *Clach a' Thuill* 'the stone of the hole', which can still be found between *Tràigh na Gilean* and Kenavara.

Given Sands' views and oppositional nature, it is somewhat surprising that he did not wade into Tìree politics as he had four years earlier in St Kilda and as he would later do in Foula. He did write these lines about Tìree: 'Would any donor / Make me the owner / Of that flat isle, the farms I would divide / And inanition [exhaustion] / And all sedition / Without coercion would at once subside.'

There was certainly tension in the Tìree air in 1880 as tenants struggling on six-acre crofts looked enviously at Lachlan MacQuarrie's 1200-acre sheep run on Beinn Haidhnis. The truck system in all but name was still going strong in the Middleton Glassary seaweed factory. Donald Sinclair was one of their collectors. He told the Napier Commission in 1883: 'Well, we got occasionally one or two shillings to put half soles upon our shoes, or the like of that; but we must tell what we want the shillings for before we get them.' Those insisting on cash payments also faced a reduced price for their seaweed. Fishermen faced the same problem. MacQuarrie ran the largest shop on the island in Scarinish. Sandy Campbell from Hynish told

Eric Cregeen in 1968: '[MacQuarrie] was supposed to have been a very hard man in every way. The fishing industry was in full swing ... He provided the fishermen with their lines and fishing gear and so on. Of course, he was running a shop too. They would get everything out of the shop. At the end of the season, they had to go up to get their accounts, you see. So, seemingly, strangely enough, they were as well off when it was a poor fishing season as they were after a good season. They were never getting anything [money] in return. They were always in debt! He was buying the fish and sending it to the mainland.'



*Dùn nan Nighean*

But Sands' situation on Tiree was different in a number of ways from that on St Kilda four years earlier. His main objective was 'antiquarian survey'. His neighbours in Hynish were the comparatively well-off families of lighthouse keepers rather than crofters. The Tiree branch of the Highland Land Law Reform Association (later known as the Land League) was not set up until 1884 when the tenants of a number of Tiree townships threatened to occupy the hill grazings of Beinn Haoidhnis, while the agitation that was to culminate in the Greenhill land raid and the arrival of the marines was still six years away. Compared to St Kilda, Tiree was a much more complex society and prosperous economy, with successful farmers, fishermen, crofters and shopkeepers side by side with crofters struggling on small holdings and cottars with no land at all.

Following another spell with his sisters on the mainland, Sands headed north. This time his destination was Shetland. Once again, he chose the most remote part of that archipelago, spending three months in an empty schoolhouse on Foula, a small island twenty miles west of the mainland with sea cliffs second only to St Kilda in height. Once again, he roamed the island by day with a spade; at night he campaigned against the truck system. Described by one hostile island minister as a 'renowned pen-and-ink pugilist', he wrote: 'The truck system, like a huge spider, has woven its infernal web all over the island, and every soul has become entangled in its cunning snare. All are in debt to, or dependent upon, the merchants for their daily bread. The men are all engaged to fish for a certain firm, but their dearly-won earnings are generally, on the day of reckoning, found to be balanced by provisions received from the shop of the monopolists.' He finished by hoping that the upcoming Napier Commission would 'liberate the people of Foula from their present thralldom.'

With winter coming on, he moved to the tiny island of Vaila off the west coast of Shetland. He sent a poem to the *Shetland Times*, part of which went: 'Although in these islands I am a poor stranger / I venture to take off my bonnet and give / Three cheers for the heroes who, reckless of danger / Drag food from the ocean that others may live!' This admiration appears to have been reciprocated. A Vaila fishing boat built two years later was called the *John Sands of Vaila*.



*Dùn Shiadair from the east. The green ledge visible at the top of the fort is called Leabaidh Fear Fàire 'the bed of the lookout'*

After another short stay on the tiny island of Papa Stour, Sands settled in Walls, on the Shetland mainland, where he stayed for a decade. Unable to stay on the sidelines for long, he started a long correspondence in the *Shetland Times* accusing the Walls School Board chairman of interfering too much in the running of the school. One teacher had been taken to an asylum and another had died. Sands' denunciation was strongly refuted and he was described in turn as the 'Vaila demagogue'. His lack of diplomacy appears to have led to his withdrawal from society.

Sands left Shetland in 1893, retiring to the east coast. Never married, he died in 1900 at the age of seventy-three in Dunnichen near Forfar, described as a 'retired writer'.

John Sands was a fascinating figure. Multi-talented, adventurous, and drawn to small islands and small island communities, he wrote what is still regarded as an important (if partial) book on St Kilda. Although his Tìree stay was lengthy, his legacy here was confined to a brief account of some archaeological finds. For a number of reasons, his campaigning sword remained in its sheath, no doubt much to the relief of the eighth Duke of Argyll. If he had come to Tìree six years later, the history of the island may well have been different.

I would like to thank Professor Donald Meek for his help in writing this paper. See also *The Gaelic Otherworld*, edited by Ronald Black.

Dr John Holliday

### **Discovering 'The Abandoned Boat' of the 1856 Balephuìl Fuadach**

The *Written in the Landscape* project opened up the Tìree records in archives of Inveraray Castle and Argyll and Bute Council. Many of these have been transcribed by Kirsteen Connor, and are on our website. One in particular caught the attention of Louise E. MacDougall in Canada:

One of the problems of being a historical songwriter is how new evidence can make one's current song obsolete. Luckily my songs are not cast in bronze.

The Balephuìl Monument in Tìree is not as fortunate. It commemorates the Fishing Disaster of 7 July 1856 by listing the names of the nine who perished, the six boats involved, and the twenty-two surviving fishermen. Not easy to change the names there.

Indeed, we have new names, 176 years later. I discovered them while searching *An Iodhlann's* website for Jacobites in Scarinish. Instead, I retrieved: 'A transcript of the Inventory of Precognition regarding the deaths of nine fishermen in the Balephuill fishing disaster.'

What an unexpected gift for someone who has written songs about the *Fuadach*. I knew I had struck historical gold as I continued to read: 'This document provides statements from witnesses to a great storm in July of 1856 which claimed the lives of nine men from Balephuill.' Witnesses? That meant real people who were present during the *Fuadach* itself where a boatload of my McLeans were out fishing. Sure enough, I had found a transcription of the actual Procurator Fiscal Inquiry held on 1 August 1856, which features statements by eleven witnesses as well as other testimonies in attached Notes.



*The West Hynish shepherd Duncan MacLean with his wife and sisters around 1900. Another sister lived in Islay near where one of the boats scattered during Fuadach Bhaile Phuill was blown.*

The amazing thirty-three pages are filled with fascinating details which dispel much confusion developed over the years. Yes, it was a fleet of six boats with nine lives lost. No, most of the boats were not destroyed; only one boat was abandoned to the sea when a larger boat rescued its crew. Yes, most of the fishermen are memorialized on the Balephuill monument. No, not all the boat owners and crews have been remembered correctly.

Of greatest significance, we now have all the correct names of the 'Abandoned Boat' crew. In addition to the owner, Malcolm McDonald, age 54 (1802-1889), there were:

1. Archibald McLean *A' Chiobair*, age 48 (1808-1856)
2. John Campbell, age 39 (1817-1887)
3. Robert McEachern, age 61 (1795-1867)
4. Duncan McEachern, age 20, Robert's son (1836-after 1873)

We also have a new curious mystery: why did the Inquiry record Malcolm under two different surnames – McDonald and McDougall – when all his life he was recorded as McDonald?

Many thanks to Flo Straker, genealogist at An Iodhlann, for verifying the new crew along with a new Niel McKinnon (aged 28, 1828-1912) in a different boat. It has been a thrill to share the discovery with other researchers:

'Another occasion that proves that just because something is written down, we can't assume what is written is correct! I'm very impressed with your sleuthing skills.'

Sharon Clayton, Coordinator of the Balephuill Commemoration Project and Facebook Group

'Pleased to see that more of the facts of the *Fuadach Bhail' a' Phuill* story have come to light and delighted they have been an inspiration for one of the pieces of the *Tir Ìseal nan Òran* Tapestry.'

Catrina Smyth, Friends of the Argyll Papers, *Tir Ìseal nan Òran* Project 2022

'Glad to hear that you're progressing with your research on *Fuadach Bhaile Phuill*!  
Alan M. Boyd, Author-Contributor to *The Secret Island* (2014)

But now I need to go and fix my songs.

Louise E MacDougall

## A New Book on Caolas

Since completing *A Croft in Caolas: A Tìree Holding and its People, 1770-2020*, detailing the MacDonald and Meek families of 'Coll View', Professor Donald Meek has widened his research to embrace the whole community of Caolas from 1700 to 1900.

Donald states: 'I began this project in the autumn of 2018, intending to document the transition of the township from a joint-tenancy farm worked in "run-rig" to crofts laid out by the Caolas tenants themselves in 1804. In 2019, however, Alison Diamond and her team brought a selection of Argyll papers to Tìree, and I realised to my delight that I might be able to fulfil my "impossible" dream of providing a much fuller, more detailed account of Caolas and its tenants.'



Drawing on the evidence of rentals, maps and early censuses held in the Argyll Estate Archives, and also papers and photographs in *An Iodhlann*, Donald's book will provide summary 'histories' of individual crofts and their occupiers. This will offer a useful picture of Caolas and its people (including cottars) across two centuries and more, as well as their changing ways of life.

'I have learned an immense amount in the course of this project,' says Donald. 'I am now checking the full first draft, and I hope it will be available as a book by the end of this year.'

## Archivist's Choice, May 2022

There are two reasons why I find this advert thought-provoking. Firstly, it is incredible that even as recently as 1951, the Tìree community, whose homes, families and lives formed part of the land itself, are mentioned in the advert merely as a source of income to potential buyers - "agricultural subjects", and that the game shooting appears of greater interest. And secondly, if the island had been sold to who knows who living where, the life and culture here may have become very different, and all the wonderful Tìree-related documents held in Inveraray Archives may not have been as available to *An Iodhlann* as they are now (assuming *An Iodhlann* existed).

Janet Bowler, Archive manager

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