



Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome to the autumn 2015 edition of *Sìl Eòlais*, the newsletter of members of An Iodhlann. In this edition we focus on an Edwardian visitor to Tìree - one whose reputation, sadly, today lies tarnished.

ADA GOODRICH-FREER

Ada Goodrich-Freer was a fascinating woman whose writings, popular at the time, have now been largely discredited. She came to the island at the end of the 19th century to investigate second sight for a group of psychic researchers and wrote a well-received book on the subject. However, she was later suspected of being a fraud and quickly left the country. Recent detailed detective work by Trevor Hall and John L Campbell has exposed her as a fantasist and plagiarist.

Ada Goodrich Freer was born in Uppingham in the English Midlands in 1857. By the age of nine she had lost both mother and father and was then probably brought up by a relation, who ran a private boarding school in Yorkshire. She seems to have been an attractive, exceptionally young-looking, intelligent, hard working and utterly charming woman, convinced from an early age that she had psychic powers. These allowed her to see visions in crystal balls and hear messages in seashells. She moved to London and became a pivotal member of the new Society for Psychical Research, writing in the Society's journal under the *nom de plume* 'Miss X'. The Society had been set up in 1882 and was backed by some of the most eminent scholars of the day, including its first president Henry Sidgwick, the Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge University. The society's aim was to investigate stories of the supernatural carefully and logically, but the group inevitably also attracted less scientific adherents. It is still in existence.

In 1894 the 37 year old Freer was commissioned by the Society to travel to the Hebrides to do research for a 'Second Sight Enquiry', her trips paid for by the Society's wealthy vice-chairman, the Marquess of Bute. The islands on the west coast of Scotland were thought by the Society to be home to people who were still in touch with ancient, magical powers. Tìree was high on the list of places to visit, both because of the book *Deuterosophia (Second-Knowledge) or a Brief Discourse Concerning Second Sight* published by the island's minister John Frazer in 1707, and research by Lord Archibald Campbell for the 1885 *Records of Argyll*.



'Miss X' November 1894. The only photograph of Ada Goodrich Freer in the files of the Society for Psychical Research, by whose courtesy this copy is reproduced. From the book 'Strange Things' by John L Campbell and Trevor H Hall, 2006.

During the application process for the post Freer had written, 'I am myself of Scotch blood (Aberdeen) and belong to a family that possessed the gift of second sight for generations... I have no acquaintance with Gaelic, but have a good ear, and pick up languages pretty easily. Among other details, I might mention that my friend and I are not only good sailors, but can ourselves manage a boat.'

Most of this was untrue. She first visited Tiree with her companion, Constance Moore (the daughter of the Prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral in London), her terrier and her camera over three weeks in July 1894. Her photographs were later used as the basis for her book's illustrations. Her first sight of the island was on a lovely day during Glasgow Fair Fortnight 1894, and described the scene. 'Slowly the little *Fingal* wound herself into a long narrow creek [Scarinish harbour]. There was no pier, not so much as a 'slip'...On the rocks above us some fifty people at least were collected, and with much shouting, laughing, gesticulating, two small boats apparently already quite full of people were boarding our little vessel...The tiny mail boat heaved and tossed in the water below - it seemed as if the very letters would upset it, but in went the bags. The parcel post, a great institution in the islands, followed - could she possibly survive, we wondered, and we modestly declined when courteously asked if we would care to take our places in her, instead of waiting for the cargo boat. Being Glasgow Fair, we were told, the boats were "rather" full. The cargo boat certainly was. Large baskets, like laundry travelling-baskets, full of Glasgow bread we learnt, went in first, then some luggage including ours, then all our fellow passengers, finally half a dozen sheep. We remained modest and retiring...By-and-by the cargo boat returned, more cargo went in, but a few passengers and no sheep...The Purser advised us to take our seats, the kindly Captain shook hands with us...and we were off. We drew up at a perpendicular rock upon which some scratches were pointed out to us as steps. Many kindly hands were offered to help us to shore. The dog was hauled up, and we found ourselves standing beside our luggage in a wilderness of sand with not the faintest idea what to do next.'



Scarinish harbour with the Temperance Hotel in the background around 1880. Courtesy of Mairi Brady.

The party stayed in the Temperance Hotel in Scarinish. 'We looked around at the wilderness of rock and sand and short, scant herbage, at the group of men still shouting in a strange foreign tongue, at the funnel of the little *Fingal* disappearing in the blue distance, at some tiny huts scarcely distinguishable from the rocks among which they seemed to hide, at the 'road' a foot deep in loose white sand, at the bare legged boy driving a herd of cows, which clambered awkwardly among the rocks, and found the notion of an hotel somewhat bewildering. He would go with us, this kind young Highlander, and turning back soon conducted us to an unenclosed

house overlooking the harbour, destitute, like most Highland inns, of signboard - and being conducted on strictly teetotal principles, destitute also of everything else - open doors, loafers, sound of human life, which one associates with inns. A kindly landlady, a quiet sitting room, a clean bedroom and a welcome tea soon made us feel that home life in Tyree had begun.'

But the food in the island's only hotel at the turn of the 20th century was not to the tastes of the two Londoners. 'We have long remembered that tea; after nine hours' feast of the eye only, it was very welcome. It certainly was excellent, but we remember it the better because we sat down to its counterpart every time we called for food during our stay on the island, and after a time it palled. Good tea, good cream, good eggs, Glasgow ham, Glasgow bread (it was long time before we convinced our kind friends that we preferred their own home-made scones), Glasgow cake, and from time to time something of the nature of meat out of a tin. Our sitting room window opened onto the moor or common, that is onto unenclosed space, and the cows often looked on at our meals, sheep and fowls often came in at the door, and presumably fish swam about in the sea which lay almost at our feet; but none of these things found their way to the table except once, when we had an orgy of chops - what became of the rest of the sheep we could not discover - and once when we had a fish of species so perplexing that we tossed up who should first venture upon it. It was finally rejected by the dog and given, through the window to a cow, who apparently thought it an interesting experiment. Except for some potatoes, which we were assured were excellent, but which differed in some essentials from those which we were accustomed to, we moreover never saw either vegetables or fruit during this visit.'

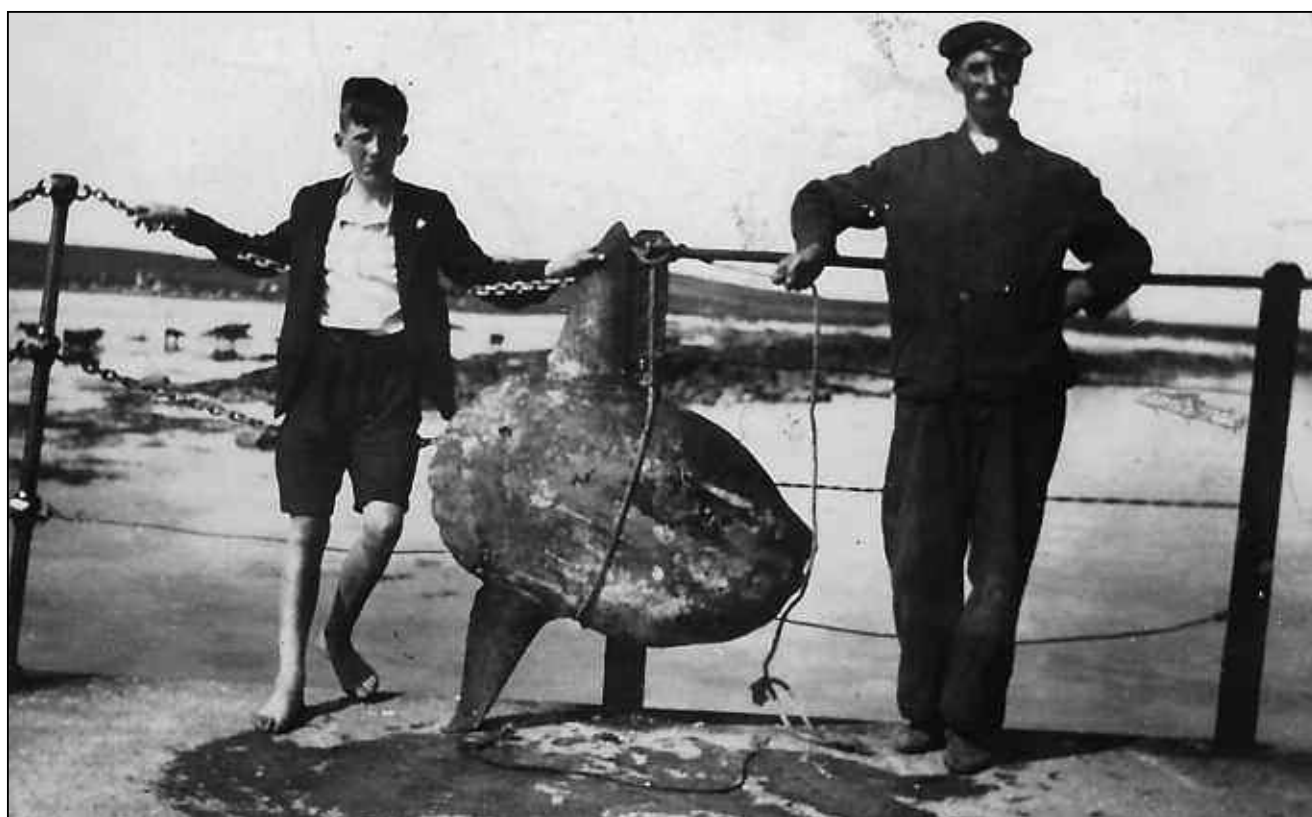
She obviously missed more than fresh vegetables. 'After we possessed that bottle of whisky we felt that we were in touch with life and not more, perhaps, than eighty miles from a lemon.'

She implied that tourism to Tiree had not taken off at the turn of the 20th century. 'With such advantages as excellent golf links, a comfortable hotel, miles of sand which are an ideal nursery for children, a happy hunting ground for the antiquarian, botanist and ornithologist, Tyree might become as Mr Stanford [the manager of the Glassary kelp factory in Middleton from 1862], who had known and loved the island for thirty years used to say, 'the sanatorium of the west''



Postcard of the golf course at Kirkapol postmarked 1923. Courtesy of Alasdair MacArthur.

Within five days of her arrival on Tiree Freer herself wrote to her sponsor, the Marquess, from her desk in the Temperance Hotel. 'I feel quite satisfied that Tiree was the right place to come to, and I feel, on the whole, encouraged as to results. I have already got into touch with the few educated people on the island, the Factor, Doctor [Dr Alexander Buchanan], Minister [Rev Hector MacKinnon], sister of a former minister [Jessie Wallace, sister of the Rev John Gregorson Campbell]...We spend all our time walking and boating - chatting with everyone we meet, and all receive us courteously. Our walking powers seem to astonish the natives and they have a way of expressing their goodwill by offering 'Tups' of milk and of rides in carts, and we never refuse anything. Two pounds of 'goodies', which I brought with me and which are not yet exhausted, have enlisted the sympathies of the children and I have a dog, of a kind unknown here, which affords an unfailing basis of conversation with the men. Most have some English and I have acquired a few phrases of Gaelic, just enough to express good feeling...Our accommodation and food are very primitive, but that does not trouble me at all as everything is clean: my companion sometimes gets hungry, as she is less used to country fare...The atmosphere of the island (using the word in its psychic sense) is, I should think, very conducive to second sight.'



John MacDonald of Heanish and his son Donald were photographed with a sunfish on Gott Bay pier in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Courtesy of Dr John MacDonald

After three weeks Freer left Tiree to continue her Highland journey. She wrote again to the Marquess. 'I did all I could (or rather I should say we, for Miss Moores was extremely popular with them) to earn their friendship, and I am proud to say we succeeded. Our lack of Gaelic stood but little in our way, for the Highlander is so courteous that someone was always ready to help us, and most of the fishermen (our best informants) have been sailors and can speak English. I think I have filled most of the pipes in Tiree, for I always had one pocket full of 'baccy' and when a [fishing] boat came in and the men sat down in the sun to dry their nets and mend their sails we used to steal in among them [as if she would not be noticed!] and get them to 'yarn' to us...As a rule their politeness obliged them to treat - at the beginning - of topics adapted to our comprehension - the Queen and Jack the Ripper being our favourite heroes. Sometimes we went out in the fishing boats and got them to sing us Gaelic songs, and so round to talk of their experiences. The old women we could

generally catch at the loom or the spinning wheel, and we have bought enough wool and blankets and petticoats to last a lifetime. We got hold of the younger folk by taking photographs of the babies and carrying sweets in our pockets for the bairns... A minor reason for leaving was that the food difficulty had come to a climax, and combined with eight or ten hours a day in the open air and often 12 to 16 miles of walking had made us both really weak and ill. A wild orgy of cutlets and fresh fruit at Bunessan on our [departure] began the work of restoration and we are almost right again.'

Despite her efforts over three weeks on this isolated island, she had little to show for her work. She kept her sponsors happy with the promise that she had created a network of sympathizers who would collect stories for her busily over the winter. The truth was that she had collected almost nothing. Characteristically, she blamed someone else, this time the Presbyterian minister from Bute who had travelled to help her. The Marquess had employed the Reverend Peter Dewar to advise the Londoner. 'Miss Freer,' Dewar wrote, 'thought she would be able to study my second sight papers...when I join her on Tiree, and then we shall set to work together. I can see she is pre-eminently qualified for the mission she has so heroically undertaken, as her powers of sympathy seem to me to be supernatural, and she will get into living, sympathetic touch with the people in the way no others can.'



Tiree children in the 1920s'. Unknown donor.

However, the admiration was not mutual. Freer wrote, '[The Rev Dewar's] arrival was a distinct check...Poor Miss Moore, who is nothing if not orthodox, had to accompany me to 'kirk' and to take tea with the Miss Baptist Ministers, and go out in a boat with the young men from the Independent Manse, all to show there was nothing invidious about Psychological Research.'

Although she returned from Scotland on this occasion empty-handed, she reported to the Society, 'I have left several intelligent, deeply-interested observers [on Tiree]...who will carry on what I have begun.'

Freer returned to London, but came back to Tiree twice more, in the winter of 1896 and again in 1901. On her second trip she went round Tiree's schools offering prizes for essays based on ghost stories. *Mairi Anna Theònaidh Mhòir*, Mary Ann Campbell (MacKinnon), Balevullin, remembered her visit in 1896 and the prize she won, when she talked to Eric Cregeen in 1969. 'She was a tall woman. I can't even tell you what colour hair she had - people's hair wasn't much coloured in those days...

She came to the school one day with a great bunch of flowers which she had gathered... She named them all and gave us a description of them and what could be done with them. Some of them were of the herbal variety. It was very interesting... She proposed to our headmaster that he would ask the senior children to write a composition on 'Ghosts', for which she would give a prize. I was considered a senior pupil, although I was only twelve years of age, because in those days you could get ahead as fast as you liked... My mother was very indignant, as such a subject was never discussed in front of the children in our house... But I said, 'It's for the school!...' When Uncle Willie came that night he was also quite indignant, and at first he wouldn't tell me, but then he started and he told me such hair-raising stories, I got a fright that I haven't been able to get rid of in all these years! I was simply frightened to go upstairs by myself! But I wrote them and I got the first prize. It was book about animals, and in it Miss Goodrich-Freer herself had a short story about two dogs.' (*Tobar an Dulchais SA1969.159*)

In her book about second sight in the Hebrides Goodrich-Freer quoted six of these stories 'word for word'. One extract reads, 'Then one of the young lads that was in lifted up his head (he was fishing that day with Dougald) and said, "By Jove, Dougald, you were in the blues when you were smashing the dogfish against the boat.'

The language of these children's essays (in English) is so sophisticated it is hard to believe they were not 're-arranged', if not entirely made-up, by Goodrich-Freer herself. Other passages in the book are probably based on a kernel of truth, but sadly cannot be relied on. She describes being shown Kenavara by an islander. 'We were wandering slowly among the long bent grass which clothes the low lying ground that slopes down to the Atlantic. We had just left the hill of Kenavara where, putting our ear to the ground, we were told to listen to the lament endlessly sung in the cave below, where the "yellow haired *Dearmaid* of women", so beautiful that every woman loved him, remained blamelessly with *Graine*, the wife of his uncle *Fionn*, but was unjustly slain and buried nearby with his two dogs.'



From a postcard of Kennavara. Courtesy of Marjory Brown.

As well as her visits to Tiree she travelled to a number of other islands over the next few years. One in particular caught her attention - Eriskay with its charismatic and scholarly priest, Father Allan MacDonald. Father Allan had collected volumes of folklore about the neighbouring islands, and embodied everything Freer was not: a fluent Gaelic speaker, loved and trusted by his parishioners, and resident full time in the Hebrides. However, like so many others the priest seems to have fallen, to some extent, under Freer's spell, so much so that he sent her a number of his field notebooks. Within months, much of their contents were copied and published under Freer's own name.

Despite her dependence on the bounty of the Marquess of Bute to fund her work, she could be quite sharp on the subject of Tiree's landlord. Talking about the lack of development on the island, she wrote, 'That a proprietor should have the power to perpetuate a state of things contrary to every elementary law of civilization is a relic of barbarism, a far greater anachronism than "black houses" or the Gaelic tongue.'

This piqued the sister of the Duke of Argyll, Lady Victoria Campbell, to reply in the pages of the *Oban Times*, calling Goodrich-Freer a 'busybody'. 'I cannot remember her asking me a single question regarding land or industry.'

Freer's book on Tiree and the Hebrides, *Outer Isles*, appeared in 1903. She was an accomplished writer with a large audience. This Australian review of the book is typical. '*Outer Isles* is a valuable contribution to the general knowledge of the Hebrides.'

During this period Freer took time off from her Scottish 'research' to become involved in a controversial investigation into the allegedly haunted Ballechin House in Perthshire. The Society for Psychical Research decided to rent this stately home in 1897 for a month's 'fishing party', with guests actually on the look-out for ghostly apparitions. Goodrich-Freer soon began to see and hear the supernatural, including a figure of a nun, whose name she discovered to be 'Ishbel' at an Ouija board session. Writing to the Marquess of Bute she describes her ghostly vision in impressive detail. 'Ishbel appears to me to be slight and of fair height. I am unable of course to see the colour of her hair but I should describe her as dark. There is an intensity in her gaze which is rare in white coloured eyes. The face, as I see it, is in mental pain, so that perhaps it is hardly fair to say that it seems lacking in that repose and gentleness that one looks for in the religious life.'

The owner of Ballechin House was furious when he discovered the Society's deception. Most other guests claimed to have heard and seen nothing and the *Times* had a long and critical correspondence about the matter. Despite these very public criticisms, in 1899 Freer and Bute wrote a book about the episode, *The Alleged Haunting of B- House*, which went on to a second edition.

In 1901 Goodrich-Freer suddenly disappeared from the London spiritualist scene and re-emerged in Jerusalem. The suspicion is that she was finally exposed as a fake medium at one of her London séances. She then lived in the Middle East (the Marquess of Bute had property in Jerusalem) where she married a much younger American missionary with similar interests in travel and the occult. She died in New York in 1931. (For more detail about this fascinating story read the excellent '*Strange Things*' by John Lorn Campbell and Trevor Hall, 2006, Birlinn. Lending copy available in An Iodhlann.)

- **A' Bhuain Tìree Homecoming 2016 | Monday 23 to Friday 27 May** is looking a fascinating week for anyone with an interest in Tìree history. Professor Donald Meek will talk about what Tìree means to him; Dr John Holliday will talk about the Viking influence on the medieval island; Catriona Smyth will lead tours to the two main graveyards; Ishbel MacKinnon from Inveraray Castle archives will talk on her treasure trove; Sharon Clayton and Ian Smith will discuss the Balephuill Fishing Disaster; Robin Campbell will look at the 'Black Factor'; and Archie Henderson will talk about his forthcoming book of transcriptions of the Tìree Kirk Minutes. Everyone, 'homecomer' or no, is very welcome. Look at the website for details as they are updated - www.tireehomecoming.com, and put the date in your diary.
- We are delighted that the full **Written in the Landscape** project to allow some access to the Inveraray archives has now been funded by HLF and other bodies. Thanks to those who donated to the Tìree part of the enterprise. The three-year project starts in January, although it will take years to sift through this treasure trove, and we have to be patient. Ishbel MacKinnon, the archivist, is now looking for volunteers with an interest in Tìree to help her at the castle. Contact archives@inveraray-castle.com
- An Iodhlann is hosting an **Archaeology Week** next year from **26 April to 2 May** with the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists (ACFA) and the archaeologist Dr Heather James and Dr Adrien Moldinado, an expert in the Early Christian sites of Scotland, currently working on Iona. There will be walks, a talk or two, and a chance to help survey some of the ruined houses and old field boundaries that cover our landscape. Do come and take part!
- We are also starting a '**Tìree in 100 Objects**' project over the next four years in conjunction with the island newspaper *An Tirisdeach*. This is an idea obviously pinched from our sister organisation, the British Museum. If any of you know of an object that could get through our front door that tells an interesting and important story about the island, do let us know. There might be another book there too!
- Edinburgh University Press has just produced an edited version of Eric Cregeen's important un-published 1973 paper 'The Creation of the Crofting Townships in Tìree', ed. Annie Tindley from Dundee University. This is available in the *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 2015, 35, 2, 155-188
- Lastly, we are delighted to announce that from 1 December 2015 you can search our catalogue of over 12,000 accessions through our new website. You'll find it at the same address as the old site www.aniodhlann.org.uk. Your feedback would be very useful, so please let us know how you get on with it. Please also send us any ideas, corrections and information about individual items. We're sure that, over the years, a few mistakes have crept in. And a big thank you to Mark Vale, computer wizard, and our Archive Manager, Janet Bowler, who have laboured long and hard over its inner workings. Enjoy!"

As always, thank you for your time, energy and support for our tiny red box.
Dr John Holliday