

Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Dear Member,

Welcome to another edition of *Sil Eòlais*, the newsletter that keeps you up to date with the gathering of Tiree's historical harvest. In this issue we are going to look at one man's harvest, something that might make us look again at our own attics, to see what treasures lie up there.

That one man was Alasdair Sinclair, Brock. Many of you will have known Alasdair, who sadly died last year. Engineer, Tiree and Gaelic enthusiast, historian and founder member of An Iodhlann. But above all, a collector – books, magazines, papers, maps and things. He left seven boxfuls in all. It has taken us some time to go through this collection, but I thought it might be interesting to sample a few of the things Alasdair brought together in his long life in Glasgow and Tiree.

The death of Hugh MacKinnon

Alasdair was very proud of his mother's brother, Hugh MacKinnon. In a letter he describes his uncle's last four years: "The war began in August 1914 when Hugh was 16 and working in the Union Cold Store in Glasgow. On his 17th birthday in December 1914 he went to the Cameronians' drill hall in Coplan Street and joined the army. He told his mother that by no means all the boys who were there had been accepted. They were quite particular and of course some people expected the war to be over by Christmas. He got a few days leave early in 1915 and then he was off to Palestine to fight the Turks. In 1917 he was badly wounded at Gaza. He was shipped to hospital in Cairo. One of his legs was badly poisoned and with no antibiotics or the like they just had to wait to see how the poison would progress. Things got worse and the hospital people said they would have to cut off his leg or the poison would kill him. Hugh was begging them to give it a few more days and eventually he overcame the poison and could walk again. At this stage he and some of his colleagues, also convalescent, were put aboard a ship to take them back to the UK. Once they were fully recovered they could expect some leave.



Alasdair, Iain and Nancy Sinclair with their aunt Annie MacKinnon and Annie's uncle Neil MacKinnon outside Taigh Uilleim in Brock in 1933 or 1934

It was now April 1918 and the Germans mounted a huge attack in northern France which looked like breaking through and finishing the war. This was the time of the infamous 'Backs to the Wall' order. Every soldier who could stand was being thrown into the battle. Hugh and his friends were sailing through the Mediterranean and the ship was diverted into Marseilles. They must have been put onto trains for they went straight to the north of France and into battle. The Germans were stalled and it was their last fling.

By September conditions in northern France were very fluid. Germans were surrendering here and there, and British and French soldiers were beginning to leave trenches and move east. In the midst of the confusion Hugh was wounded again. Hugh, and some others also wounded, were put into a vehicle, maybe a truck rather than an ambulance, and headed for a forward Dressing Station. The truck received a direct hit from a shell and was blown to bits with everyone in it. Hugh was posted missing.

[Six weeks later] the war ended. Grandma was working in Lizar's shop in Buchanan Street. People were dancing in the street and the shops were closing. A man called Ballantyne, who was in charge of Lizar's at that time was walking through the empty shop and noticed Grandma standing behind the counter alone. He remarked, "The war is over Miss MacKinnon, I am going to shut the shop. Everyone is going home."



All Grandma could say was, "The war is over but my brother is missing and no one will look for him now." She walked home to the saddest day for the family. Thereafter uncles Alex and John used to visit the railway stations when trains of soldiers were coming home. The Red Cross did some searching without success and the *Oban Times* printed a photograph and biography. By then in 1920 the family pretty well gave up although some items that had been in Hugh's jackets were found including an identity disc and a leave pass whose starting date had been postponed for one week!

In April 2007 Ken Welter, who is of Tiree descent and from Vancouver, visited An Iodhlann. Ken noticed the photograph of Hugh MacKinnon and knew that the Commonwealth War Graves' Commission would be likely to have information. Within a few minutes he had discovered that Private Hugh MacKinnon, 265604, 7th Battalion Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) was buried in Queant Road Cemetery, Buissay.

The family's ninety year search was over. Gran did receive a weekly pension of 6s 7d (33p), a regular reminder of her missing son, until she died in 1947."

Pvt. Hugh MacKinnon - Oban Times circa 1919

'Tiree – the Sanatorium of the West'

Alasdair loved collecting second hand books about the island, one of which was the September 1912 edition of *The Celtic Monthly*, 'A Magazine for Highlanders.' Here is part of an article about Tiree, written just before the Great War Hugh went off to fight in.

"The importance of the new pier which is in course of construction in Gott Bay at a cost of over £20,000 [£1.3 million in today's money] would be difficult to overestimate. It brings the islanders into touch with the mainland in a manner which is certain to widen and expand the industrial possibilities of Tiree and eventually raise it to the proud position which its natural and geographic position entitles it as the great health sanatorium of the Hebridean Isles.

There is already a demand for *feus* for villas and other types of houses in the neighbourhood of the pier, and within the next couple of years or so the village of Scarinish, with its undoubted attractions, will be largely superseded by a new town resplendent and beautiful on the green slopes of the eminence overlooking Gott Bay.

There is already throughout the island a reawakening, a throwing off of the lethargy of a full century, and the natives are feeling the pulsations of fresh, vigorous life...The new people who will settle from the mainland will find in Tiree the *ne plus ultra* [the best] of hospitality. The islanders have characteristics which one does not find so prominent in any of the other islands of the Hebridean group. The stranger will find them steadfast and loyal as friends, and as generous as autumn and hospitable as summer - a fine robust race, physically fearless, morally clean, and religiously free from the superstitions which are common still in neighbouring islands.

Crime is practically unknown in the island. Even the navvies employed at the new pier have been transformed by the natives, and drunkenness even among these strangers has disappeared. If you ask Mr Beattie, the constable who has under his care Tiree and Coll, when he has had course to exercise his judicial functions, he will tell you with a good humoured smile, "More than six years ago, and then it was tinklers."

A curious thing in connection with the island is that it is the only 'Prohibition' community in the teetotal sense in Scotland. It is some seventy years since the late Duke declared it 'dry', to use an Americanism, in the sense of there being no licensed house within the island....I am credibly informed, however, that the old order of things in this respect is about to disappear, and that a fully licensed hotel will be one of the most prominent architectural features of the new town at Gott Bay. [This hotel must have been planned but never built as the Lodge did not become a hotel until after the Second World War and the Temperance Hotel did not become the licensed Scarinish Hotel until the 1950s]. There is no need to fear, whatever happens in this matter, that the Tiree people will abuse any privilege granted them."

The article is written by JC. Does anyone know who this JC was?

The Gott Bay Pier Trust

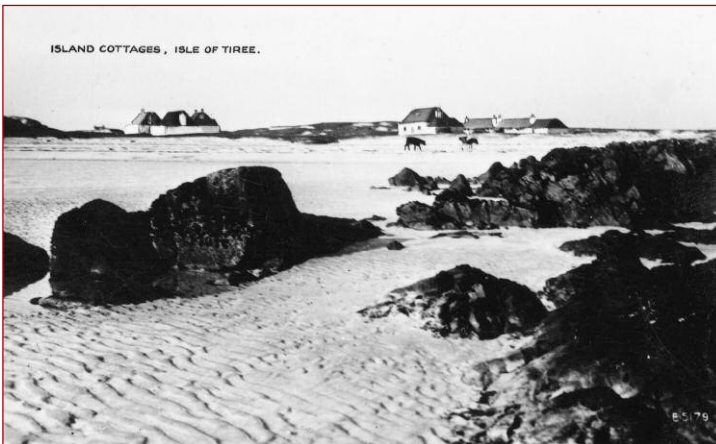
One of Alasdair's interests was the building of the Gott Bay pier mentioned above. In particular he was fascinated by a dispute between the estate and the builders for extracting gravel from the shore. He never got to the bottom of this but he did collect a copy of the accounts of The Gott Bay Pier Trust from 1935-6. This gives the costs of building the pier - £20,812, and the funding that made it possible. The Congested Districts Board gave £14,107; The Agricultural Fund loaned £3,417; the Duke of Argyll gave £2,275; the Tiree Association £250; and public collection £250. £25 was paid to Mrs MacLean as compensation for loss of land at the pier head.



Gott Bay pier in the 1950s. Note the old Church hall, since demolished, at the head of the pier.

American bottle found

In Alasdair's papers was a letter from the American Hydrographic Office dated September 1929. It is addressed to Donald MacKinnon, Ruaig: "The Hydrographic Office acknowledges with thanks the receipt of the Bottle Paper which you found and forwarded. These bottle papers are thrown overboard by officers of various vessels cooperating with this Office to aid in the determination of current drifts...The Office regrets there are no funds available for paying rewards to the finders of these papers; but a Pilot Chart covering the area in which this bottle drifted is inclosed, and it is hoped that it will be of interest to you." Signed Captain CS Kempff, US Navy.



The chart is with the letter still – a prized possession in a house in Brock for eighty years and a testament to the collecting powers of Alasdair. We are still as hungry as ever for pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. Let us know if you find anything in your attic!

Brock township, Tiree in the 1930s

Thank you once again for your membership of our historical centre. Each and every one of you is a real help. Dr John Holliday, chair, An Iodhlann.

Postscript

Have a look at www.tobarandualchais.co.uk and search for 'tiree'. At the moment you will get 219 hits but over the next few months this will expand to over 2,000. Happy listening, and yet another reason to learn Gaelic!