

Missing Records in Old Parish Registers of Tiree & Coll: 1766-1854

by
Louise MacDougall

The Old Parochial (Parish) Registers of Scotland were the result of a 1552 Presbyterian Church requirement that all its parishes record the sacraments of baptism and marriage. It was baptism, not birth, which was significant to the Church because baptism was the religious sacrament.

Over the 300 year history of the OPRs, the events usually recorded were official baptisms, banns of marriage and burials in the churchyard. Logically births and deaths became added to these. Parishes, like Tiree, who abstained from recording burials, did so on the grounds that burial was not a religious sacrament.

By comparison, beginning in 1855 the SRs (government Statutory Records) only record the civil (non religious) events of birth, marriage and death.

The earliest known OPR record is a baptism in 1553 in Errol, Perthshire. Still in existence today are 3500 original Parish Registers, held in Edinburgh by the General Register Office for Scotland (GRO).

However, the records kept by each parish varied greatly. Unfortunately, many jurisdictions did not commence their record keeping until much later than the mid 16th century. Apparently registration was not a high priority in many parishes and some of them took one or two hundred years to comply with the regulation! In some remote parishes, record keeping did not begin until the early 1800s.

The OPRs for Tiree and Coll exist from 1766, but are believed to have begun earlier. Although the Parish of Coll was annexed by the Parish of Tyree between 1618 and 1866, luckily the two islands kept separate OPRs and they have been photographed and made available to the public on separate microfilms: #1041081 for Tyree and #1041082 for Coll (for instructions on how to view or buy film images, or use the free online indexes, see the Appendix.).

Aside from the above “later starter” issue, there are several other reasons why a baptism or marriage might not be recorded in the OPRs:

- 1. Lost or destroyed records.** This apparently happened to the earlier records of Tiree, previous to 1766 (see Darryl Stout’s article *The Churches in Tiree and Coll & Old Parish Registers*).

2. Non-compulsory and non-centralized record keeping. Although the clergy were required to keep the records, they were not accountable for how they did this and they were not required to submit the records to a central authority. In addition, the general population was not required to register their various events. Also, some parishes charged a fee for the registrations—if Tiree did this, then that would definitely have been a deterrent.

3. Different denominations. Presbyterianism became the national Church of Scotland in the 16th century by Parliamentary law, but other denominations co-existed with it or broke away from it. Some adherents of these denominations did register their events in the OPRs, but many did not, choosing instead to keep their records within their own denominations. The latter process is evident in the Tiree OPRs (see Darryl Stout’s article *The Churches in Tiree and Coll & Old Parish Registers*)

4. Missing entries. A note to this effect is actually written into the Tiree OPRs, i.e. that carelessness in record keeping caused many entries to be omitted.

5. Mistakes in transcription. Probably most OPRs do contain clerical errors. The OPRs were not recorded “live” in person at the event, but written up later by clerks transcribing ministers’ notes. Mistakes were inevitable, and several are known to exist in the Tiree OPRs.

6. Poor condition or legibility. It is likely all OPRs contain some items that are not readable now, hundreds of years later. Recently, Garth M. Bray of Ottawa has observed that, on the Tiree OPR film, some baptisms and marriages “particularly the last one on many pages for the years 1766-1779, are completely unreadable...The missing bottom entry was most consistently found in the first (1766-1779) register. It appeared as if the bottom of each page had been damaged or folded.”

Of all the problems with the OPRs listed above, it was mainly their non-compulsory nature that led to their demise as the major means of registering life events in Scotland and prompted the government to step in. By 1855, registration had become so unpopular that some urban parishes had seen a drop of 70%. This was not the case for Tiree or other remote areas because the drop was the result of rapid industrialization and decreasing Church influence in the cities.

The OPRs officially were closed on 31 December 1854, though a transition period carried them forward for a while in some parishes until Civil Registration became universal. Technically, the OPRs of Tiree came to an end in 1855, and Coll in 1856.

Despite all the above problems, the OPRs for Tiree and Coll are remarkably accurate and complete, especially after 1800, and paint a detailed picture of the influence of the established Church of Scotland on these tiny islands. The OPRs also outline in broad strokes the lives of the ancestral families of “Tiree and Coll descendants” around the world, estimated to be well over two million people and counting...!

Appendix: Searching OPR records

Indexes for the Tiree and Coll OPRs can be found on these sister websites, www.tireegenealogy.com and www.collgenealogy.com. These indexes are immensely helpful because the township location is given for each event. Of course, the files offered are indexes only and entries should be verified by viewing the original photographed images.

Images of individual records photographed from the OPRs may be purchased from the Scottish Government at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk. As well, the complete sets of OPR images for each parish are available for purchase on microfilm.

Alternatively, for a small fee, these microfilms may be viewed in Edinburgh at Register House or at various archives and at Family Search Centers around the world. For Family Search Center locations and film ordering service, see www.familysearch.org. Some Family Search Centers will allow researchers to photograph the images from the films. Other Centers may have the technology for printing images from the films.

The main LDS Family Search Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, has equipment for transferring the entire contents of an OPR film to a DVD! This service is available at a minimal cost but it is self-serve, i.e. the researcher must visit the library in person and stand in line to access the appropriate copy machine.

The OPRs have also been indexed in abbreviated versions and are available for free online searching at www.familysearch.org, which is the extensive LDS (Mormon) genealogy website. Entries which have been extracted from the official OPR films are noted accordingly as "extracted". But the database being accessed (sometimes called the International Genealogical Index or IGI) also contains other records called "Patron Entries" as opposed to the "Extracted Entries". Patron Entries are those submitted by individual patrons of the LDS website or members of the LDS church.

Patron Entries are not as reliable as the Extracted Entries when citing the actual facts from the OPRs. On the other hand, Patron Entries can sometimes reveal exceedingly useful information and genealogical leads which the Extracted Entries cannot. Patrons often rely on information from personal family histories as well as government records, and therefore may enter other types of information such as location, nicknames, variant spellings, and extended ancestry. By viewing the "Batch" and "Film" groupings for such individuals, one can often see the other people that the Patron believes are relatives. Occasionally, a Patron Entry will even give the name and address of the researcher who submitted the information. Since the LDS website is constantly adding new information, it is good policy to check the IGI database about every 6 months. Often new Patron Entries will suddenly appear when doing familiar old searches..

For Tiree or Coll researchers who use the above free LDS online database or the IGI on microfilm, one crucial piece of information is available as a research aid. Due to the Scottish naming tradition prevalent during the OPR historical period, many people's names were identical. This creates a variety of problems in following specific family lines, especially when

two or more couples with identical names were having children in the same years on two different islands.

Of course entries for both islands of Tiree and Coll appear as the “Parish of Tyree”, but a researcher can determine on which island the birth or marriage occurred simply by looking at the details of the entry which will give the film number. The last digit of the number indicates the island, i.e. if the film number is #1041081 (last digit is 1) the registration happened on Tyree, but if the number is #1041082 (last digit is 2) the event was recorded on Coll.

This rule of thumb of course does not apply to Patron Entries, which will have been transcribed from other films not the official OPR films. However, quite often a Patron Entry will give other clues about the island in question. In fact some of them might outright say “Coll” or give a placename such as Ruaig, both of which would point the researcher to the proper island.

Sources:

1. www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk
2. www.familysearch.org
3. Darryl Stout, *The Churches in Tiree and Coll & Old Parish Registers*, 2011.
4. Duncan Grant, genealogist at *An Iodhlann*, Isle of Tiree: private correspondence.
5. Garth M. Bray of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: private correspondence.