

Tiree: A History

Part 1 - Pre-history to 600AD

*Bent grass, rushes and wild water-cress
Are in secret hollows where the thrush sings.
Often we found honey in the banks
From the restless, russet-brindled humming bee.*

(John Maclean, the Balemartine Bard)¹



Neil MacKinnon of Tiree c.1568

Billy Clelland 2001, Revised 2009

¹ TB p3

About the author

Billy Clelland was born in South Lanarkshire, Scotland in 1935. His great grandparents were MacKinnons of Balemartine, Tiree. His maternal grandmother, although not born in Tiree, always maintained Highland traditions and a Sunday afternoon during World War 2 often resembled a ceilidh in that she and her six daughters would sit around the old kitchen table singing Gaelic songs in turn solo and together. Everyone had to participate. Thus he was raised with a smattering of 'the Gaelic' and a keen interest in the island of Tiree. His father, a joiner and typical Presbyterian Lowlander, was involved in construction of the airport at The Reef, Tiree, and was a frequent guest of his MacKinnon in-laws. Lacking the tongue he was annoyed that they occasionally lapsed into Gaelic during his visits.

In 1952 the family emigrated to South Australia where Billy and his brother, Tommy, were welcomed into the Port Adelaide Caledonian Society Pipe Band as experienced although young bandsmen. Billy graduated as an actuary and followed a career in computer science principally in the mining industry. This career allowed him with his family to travel widely and their journey to Scotland enroute to Africa in 1972 was when he made his first visit to Tiree.

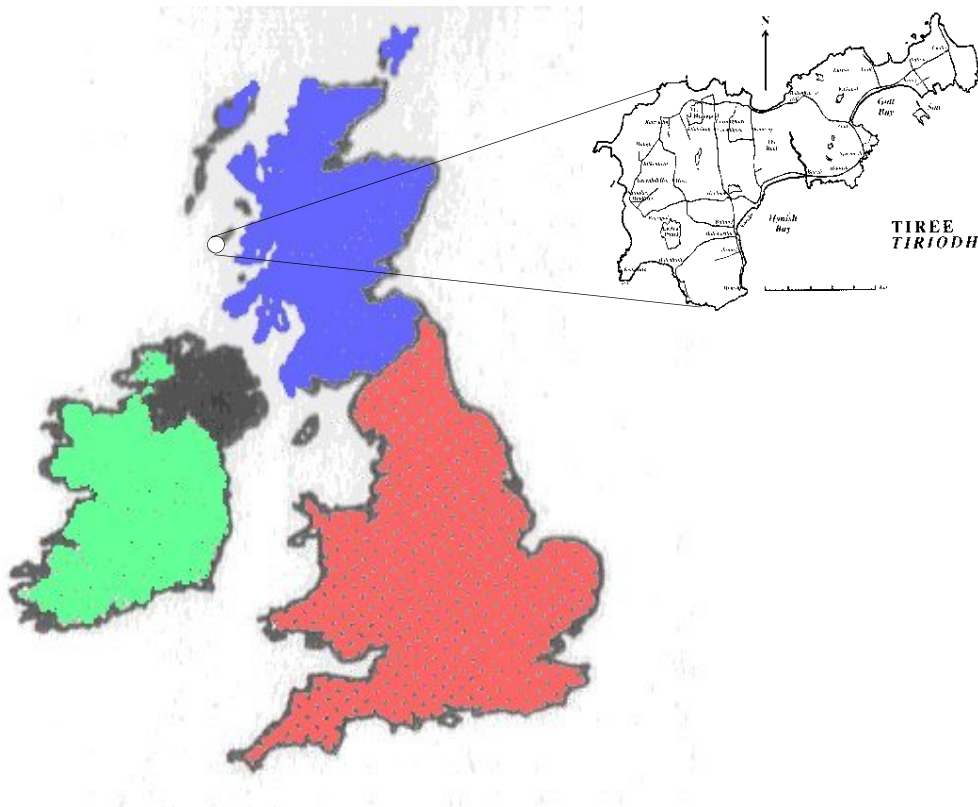
Subsequent visits in 1988, 1990, 1992 and 2000 were frustrated by the lack of readily-available documentary evidence of the history of the island. When he began to compile a family tree in 2001, including of course his Tiree ancestors, he found it necessary to start from scratch by building his own 'history of Tiree' as background to the family story. The work was never intended to be published, being simply notes for his Tiree ancestors' chapters to be drawn from. Nevertheless he is more than happy to allow other interested genealogists and historians free access to his research.

Part 1

Contents

Chapter One:	Origins of the name - Location - Geology - Clach a' Choire - Climate - Topography - Fauna & flora - Skerryvore - Tiree marble - Donald MacKinnon	4
Chapter Two:	Pre-history - First settlers - Archeological remains - Duns & brochs - Mythology - Roman history - Invasion of Pictland - Roman culture	9
Chapter Three:	Iron Age - Celts - Picts - Scotti - Christianity - St Columba - Sea travel - Gaelic language - Religious buildings	12
Bibliography:		15a

Chapter One: Origins of the name - Location - Geology - Clach a' Choire - Climate - Topography - Fauna & Flora - Twitchers' Delights - Skerryvore - Tiree Marble - Donald MacKinnon



Tiree is the most westerly of the Inner Hebrides islands on the Atlantic (west) coast of Scotland. Countless suggestions have been offered for the origin of its name but reputedly it is derived from the Scottish Gaelic *tir iodh* - land of corn. The name used by natives of Tiree is *tir iodh*. In olden times it was referred to as *Heth* or *Hithe* but from 1344, in charters and other records, it appears variously as - *Tyriad*, *Tyriag*, *Tyrvist*, *Tierieg*, *Tyriage*, *Tyriad*, *Tereyd*, *Tiry*, *Tyrry*, *Tyrryf*, *Tere*, *Teree*, *Tyr-yi*, *Tiriage*, *Teyre*, *Terrie*, *Tierig*, *Tiereig*, *Teirrie* and *Tieray*. Documents in English from the 18th and 19th Centuries frequently use the name 'Tyree'. St. Adamnan (625-704), the Irish monk *Adomnán* chosen as 9th Abbot of Iona in 679AD, refers to it as *Ethica Insula* and Dr William Reeves refers to it in his paper on Tiree (*Ulster Journal of Archaeology*) as *Ethica Terra*. However W J Watson (*The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, 1926) disputes this derivation and suggests the name might well be pre-Celtic. The latter could have some standing as the island is likely to have borne a name well in advance of the Celtic migration to Britain around 500BC and settlement of Argyll by the Scotti from Ireland about one thousand years later. Due to its low height Tiree has also been referred to as *tir-fo-thuinn* - the land beneath the waves.² In the Statistical Account 1791-1799 for Tiree and Coll, Parish of Tiry [sic], Presbytery of Mull,

² SI p93

Presbytery of Mull, Synod and County of Argyle, written by the Rev Archibald MacColl³, he proposes the name of the island to be derived from 'Tir-I', or the Land of Iona, commonly called 'T' [Ì] in the Gaelic language and pronounced 'ee'; it being supposed that when Tiree was in the possession of the church, it was employed as the 'granary' for the religious establishment which resided on Iona.⁴ This claim as 'the granary of Iona' is also shared by the nearby islands of Inch Kenneth and Gometra.⁵

Tiree is situated nearly in latitude $56\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ north, about 29 kilometres distant in a westerly direction from the nearest part of Mull. Its greatest length is about 21 kilometres from north-east to south-west. Its breadth is extremely various, the greatest being about 10 kilometres, and its figure very irregular. Some 7,834ha in area, it is known as a flat fertile island having a bedrock of Lewisian gneiss (pronounced 'nais', a schist known as paragneiss). A limestone outcrop known as 'Tiree marble' - pink flecked with green - was quarried from 1791 to 1794 and briefly again in 1910 at Balephetrish (NM0147) Bay (*G. baile pheadairich* - the place of the stormy petrel). It was the original source of 'Tiree marble', now sourced elsewhere. East of the quarry is *Clach a' Choire* (*G. ringing stone*) - a glacial erratic which reputedly originated on the island of Rum situated some 65 kilometres north-east of Tiree⁶. Another derivation of this name is given as 'The Stone of the Corrie', the corrie in question being named after Finn MacCoul. *Clach a' Choire* (NM0248) is covered with cup-marks and clangs eerily when it is struck. According to the late Ludovic Mann, an expert on ancient religions, these cup marks belong to a religious order that was widespread in the ancient world, an order that predates the Picts and the Druids. It is prophesied that if the stone is broken Tiree will sink 'forever beneath the waves'. The island is generally low and flat, rising only a few metres above sea level except in the west and south-western extremities. In the latter *Carnan Mor* at (141m OD) is on the summit of Ben Hynish. In the west, Beinn Hough rises to 119m OD. Over two-thirds of the island has been covered with wind-blown shell which has created a fertile, plough-deep and well-drained machair. It was this rich soil which earned Tiree the title of 'the land of corn'. Tiree is virtually unique among Scottish isles in having no extant peat-bog. Peat, an organic fuel consisting of a light, spongy material, is formed in temperate, humid environments by the accumulation and partial decomposition of vegetable remains under conditions of poor drainage. Peat deposition is the first step in the formation of coal. Dried peat burns readily, with a smoky flame and a characteristic odour. It is used for domestic heating and can be used to fire boilers. Most modern peat bogs formed in the high latitudes after the retreat of the glaciers in the mild conditions at the end of the last ice-age some 9,000 years ago. Descriptions of Tiree frequently use the term 'well-drained' and this may well explain the absence of substantial peat deposits. The most sterile piece of ground in Tiree is situated, west of Gott, at Earnal (NM0347) - from the Norse *herne-vollr*, 'field-house', or *orn-vollr*, 'sea-eagle field'.

The Reverend Archibald MacColl (born at Oban 1746, died 1814) was minister of Tiree between 1780 and 1814. He

married Flora, daughter of Coll MacDougall of Ardincaple. He was a zealous 'improver' and in 1788, submitted to the Duke of Argyll, at the latter's request, under the title —Observations on Tiree, a lengthy essay on the economy of the island and the need for improved agricultural practices and the introduction of new industries. He also is reputed to have, with the blessing of the estate, driven all the Catholics out of Tiree.

SA1791

SI p87

SI p93

Winters are mild and the rainfall is low for the Scottish west coast - 114mm to 127mm annually. Sea fogs and drizzle are common but from May to September the climate is the sunniest in the British Isles. The May average is 223 hours (7h 12m/daily) but the wind that brings the rich soil blows constantly and there is no natural shelter from it. It is also the windiest place in the British Isles with an average annual wind speed of 27kph. A gale blows one day in every eleven. In February 1961 an 186kmh wind was recorded. The island is rich in bird-life but is virtually treeless. A tree in Tiree is a rarity, and its principal enemy is the wind. It is told that once there was only a single tree on the island and it grew in the manse garden. A new minister came to the charge, saw the small struggling tree and promptly cut it down for firewood. Tiree is subject to frequent and violent gales and persistent strong winds prevent, by agitation, the roots of a tree from securing a strong and nourishing hold on the soil.⁷

Tiree has hares but no rabbits, foxes, stoats or weasels. The machair has a dense cover of meadow flowers, particularly when there is restricted access to sheep grazing. There is very little actual grass, the cover is mainly daisy, dandelion, red and white clover, buttercup, blue speedwell, hop and birdsfoot trefoil, eyebright, harebell, yellow and blue pansy, silverweed, wild thyme, and the common spotted orchid sub-species, *O. fuchsii hebridensis*. A mat of sea thrift rings the coastline with marram grass tying down the sand dunes. In spring and summer, wildfowl, waders and seabirds breed there: skylark on the machair: sedge warbler, corncrake and reed bunting in denser vegetation. Exceptional bird-watching sites are: Loch a' Phuill (NL9541): Tiree's largest loch: mute and whooper swans in autumn and winter. October to April, Greenland white fronted geese, Greylag geese all year. Widgeon, teal, mallard, pintail, shoveller, pochard, tufted duck, goldeneye, red-breasted merganser in winter. Loch Bhasapol (NL9747): Pochard, tufted duck and more. The Reef (NM0145): At the centre of the island - Greenland white-fronted geese. Balephetrish Bay (NM0147): Ringed plover, sanderling, dunlin, purple sandpiper and turnstone. Great northern diver, eider and long-tailed duck in winter. Salum (NM0548) and Vaul (NM0648) Bays: Feeding waders. Ceann a' Mhara (NL9340): Breeders: fulmar, shag, kittiwake, guillemot and razorbill. Starlings nest in the caves. Great interest for the 'twitchers' all year round.

Tiree has many fine sandy beaches the largest of which is Triàgh Mhór (NM0547) - a long beach on the eastern side of the island facing the Scottish mainland. Loch Bhasapol is in the north-west with its two crannogs, marshy fringes and wintering geese.⁸

From –The Statistical Account 1834-1845 for Tiree and Coll, Parish of Tiree, Presbytery of Mull, Synod of Argyle written by the Rev Neil Maclean: -At the middle of the island lies the plain called Reef, which is believed to have been at one time covered by the sea. It contains 1500 imperial acres, and is nearly a complete level, with the exception of a small knoll or eminence near its western extremity. On the east side of Reef there is a small inlet called the ford, or in Gaelic foadhail [An Fhaodhail (NM0145)]. A small sluggish rivulet, having its origin in

⁷ Raasay is an example of how the face of the land can be altered and improved by the judicious planting of trees. The west side of the island is covered with plantations and old trees which give shelter from the wind. The east side is bare and treeless, except for a few natural woods of birch and hazel.

⁸ SI p94

a marsh, a mile and a half inland, and forming the eastern boundary of Reef, runs into this inlet, and constitutes the two divisions of the island called the east and west end. Spring-tides frequently render the passage across the ford impractical at the usual place, and a small stone bridge has been built half a mile farther up, for the convenience of travellers. The tide, when swollen and agitated by winter storms, has sometimes, though very rarely, been known to rise so high and run so far into the land, that the sea from the south and from the north has nearly met, and thus almost separated the island into two. The division on the west side of the ford, however, is the most considerable, and contains at least two-thirds of the whole population. The craigsmen of old were wont to exercise their boldness and dexterity in catching wild fowls, and collecting their eggs, - a perilous kind of occupation now happily discontinued, or only practised occasionally by a few thoughtless boys.⁹ The bay of Heinish [Hynish (NL9839)], protected on one side by the southern headland of the island, is where a pier has lately been partly built by the Commissioners for Northern Lights, to facilitate the landing and shipping of materials for the proposed lighthouse of Skerryvore. The bays of Tiree are little frequented by shipping though vessels with good tackling might ride securely during the summer half-year. Skerryvore - from the circumstances of anchors, cables, and other ponderous fragments of wreck being occasionally found on this rock, it is conjectured, with much probability, that several vessels have been shipwrecked upon it, of which no intelligence was ever received. Here the Commissioners for Northern Lights resolved, a few years ago, to erect a lighthouse; and preparations for the work have been going on for some time on a large scale, under the direction of Mr Stevenson, civil-engineer. It is likely to prove an arduous and laborious undertaking, from the distance and difficulty of access to the rock; but it is hoped it will be finally successful, and fully answer the patriotic purpose intended. [At the southern tip of the island, Hynish has granite houses and a small pier built for the workers on the Skerryvore (*G Sgeire Mòire*) lighthouse which is ten miles [16km] out to sea to the south-west. It was built by an uncle of Robert Louis Stevenson in 1838-1843. It is 42M high and site on a rock only three metres above Mean High Water Springs. The 4,000 tons of granite used in its construction came from the Bull Hole quarry on Mull. The Skerryvore lighthouse has been unmanned since it was damaged by fire in 1954. The granite tower at Hynish was used to send signals to the lighthouse from around 1890, and is now a museum. Not a single person lost his life during the building of the lighthouse - a tribute to the genius and skill of Alan Stevenson.¹⁰] Coll was annexed to Tiree [parish] in 1618. [Climate, & etc.] It is sometimes remarked by aged people, that within their memory the climate has undergone a perceptible change, and is more rainy than formerly. Yet it may be doubted whether the supposed change has not taken place rather in their own constitution than in the weather. The temperature as a whole may be considered mild. Snow seldom lies on the ground above a few days, and there is rarely a long continuance of frost; the vapours generally descend in a more liquid form, viz. in cold sleety rain. The aurora borealis or polar lights are frequent in winter. These are often very vivid, sometimes of a reddish or purplish colour, and spread over a great of the firmament. [Lakes, & etc.] There are eight or ten fresh water lakes on this island, none of which are of much extent, the largest being perhaps somewhat upwards of a mile in length. No kind of fish are found in them, except small eels, which are never used as

⁹ SA1834

¹⁰ TE p88

food. There are no rivers worthy of notice. The springs are all perennial, and the water used for drinking in general [is] pretty good. There are three mineral springs on the north-west side of the island, which appear to be impregnated with iron. One of them is called in Gaelic, from this circumstance, *Tobar an iaruinne*, or the iron well. Coughs, colds, asthma, rheumatism, and scrofulous complaints are not uncommon, and may perhaps in some measure be ascribed to the dampness of the climate. [Rocks, Soil, etc.] I understand that [limestone found locally] was used as mortar for building the chamberlain's house [Island House (NL9843)] about the year 1748, and the church more lately, in 1776. Marble - a quarry was begun here about 1791, by the Tiree Marble Company, their operations being conducted by a foreigner, said to be a German. At the end of three years, found to be unprofitable. Some large blocks are still lying at the quarry. I understand that some pieces were wrought for the [5th] Duke of Argyle and are to be seen at His Grace's residence at Inverary Castle or Roseneath. [Zoology] Rabbits, it is said, were formerly seen on the island, but they have been for some time extinct. Hares were introduced about eighteen years ago, and were likely to multiply fast, had they not been harassed and kept down by the great number of dogs and idle fellows with guns who were constantly in pursuit of them. Cows are better milkers than Highland cattle. Sheep are of a mixed kind, chiefly Cheviot and black-faced. Pigs are reared in great numbers, but there are few or no goats. Small ponies were raised and were grazed in summer on the plain of Reef which was then used as a common. These are now totally extirpated. More than thirty years ago the people were prevailed upon to part with them and a stronger kind introduced. No fish in the lakes but the kinds chiefly caught [in the ocean] are cod, ling, skate, lythe, gurnet, saithe or grey fish, and turbot, which is rare. Shellfish deserving of notice are lobsters, crabs, partans, cockles, lampets, mussels, razor fish. These are found and used in considerable quantities. In seasons of scarcity are used to support life among the poorer classes. The shells are also converted into lime by calcinations, and make a very fine plaster. Heanish, (NM0343), where there was a small mill, derives its name from the Norse *hjá*, 'outlying', and *nes*, 'point' (*G. Hianais*) and. There is nearby a small cove called Port a' Mhuilinn (Mill Harbour) and there was once a small pier built nearby for the fishing fleet. Tiree's most famous Master Mariner, Donald MacKinnon, was born and brought up in Heanish. In 1864 he set the record for the fastest voyage from Foo-chow-foo to London and in 1866 he won the great Tea Race in the clipper *Taeping* from China to London. He accomplished the voyage in 88 days. Born in 1826, he died at sea in 1867, and was buried in Capetown, South Africa.

Appendix A lists the majority of Tiree's settlement placenames together with their origins and locations.

Chapter Two: Pre-history - First settlers - Archaeological remains - Duns & Brochs - Mythology - Roman History - Invasion of Pictland - Roman culture

The first settlers probably arrived around 7000BC, a period consistent with proven settlement of other nearby islands of the Inner Hebrides. These settlers were Paleolithic in origin, or if later, Neolithic, the people responsible for stone circles and other impressive remains. It is tempting to call these people 'indigenous' or 'ab origine', however the only humans that can be truly classified as such would be Africans. The human species, or 'homo sapiens sapiens' if you like, spread from Africa and 'settled' other parts of the Earth. Thus, with no exception, the first wave of humans that occupied the isles was either first settlers or invaders of virgin country.

Dun and broch remains (more than twenty of them), stone circles, standing stones, cairns and crannogs are scattered right across the island verifying the early settlement of Tiree. The earliest date for a rotary quern in Scotland was discovered on Tiree. Evidence of Bronze Age occupation has been found with pottery and tools dating from 800BC being uncovered at the Dun Mor broch at Vaul (NM0449) where there is a ruined broch. Along the west coast of Scotland, settlers, as yet unidentified, raised tall, circular, hollow towers of dry stone slabs between 200BC and 400AD. These brochs¹¹, as they became known, often stood in groups by harvest fields at the sea's edge and though they were possibly shelters from sudden attack, the enemy that their builders feared is still conjectural - hostile men from the southern mainland or slave galleys from Rome. Their usefulness is believed to have been brief and most appear to have been abandoned or converted into normal dwellings or farmhouses. Undoubtedly their builders were a gifted, energetic, wealthy and influential people to afford such complex and well-built structures. Following two hundred years of settlement, the inhabitants occupied wooden dwellings indicating lengthy periods of peace from attack. Eric Linklater¹² suggests that, except as artillery platforms, there is no satisfactory explanation for defensive towers so elaborately tall. If they had the technology to construct such a complex building, why not the technology to construct a primitive form of artillery such as a catapult, ballista or trébuchet?

The Dun Mor broch at Vaul was excavated in 1962-1964. It was estimated to have been 9.1M high with walls 3.6M thick enclosing a 9.9M courtyard and having four internal galleries. The remains of a broch called Dùn Heanish lie at the sea edge south-west of the township of Heanish (NM0343). On the slope of Beinn Balephetrish stood another broch but no trace of it now remains. A local rhyme says that Fionn, the Ossianic hero, left his gold at Dun Hiader - location not known.

North-west of Scarinish¹³ (NM0444, *G. Sgairinis*) and the small bay called Port na Banaich, 'The Harbour of the Weaver-wife', a short distance inland, lies a broch called Dùn an t-Sidhein, 'The Fort of the Fairy Hill' (NM0345).

¹¹ The word *broch* is derived from the Old Norse word *borg* meaning "fort".

¹² OS pp29-32

¹³ Scarinish derives its name from Norse *skári*, 'gull', and *nes*, 'point'.

The first documentary reference to the island is to be found in an ancient Irish poem by Fionn Mac Rosa Ruaidh. He says that Labhraidh Loingseach, an Irish leader, destroyed eight Pictish towers in Tir Iath around 200BC. This legend, also quoted by the Venerable Bede, cites Tiree as the first settlement of the Picts in Scotland¹⁴. The story told is that they came from Scythia to the north of Ireland and were then called the 'Agathyrsi', mentioned in Virgil's writings. They later had to leave Leinster and came east to Tiree. The 'Formorians' of Tiree were reputedly notable pirates and warriors.

The Rev Archibald MacColl included the following story, which would be considered risible today, under 'Antiquities' in the Old Statistical Account for Tiree and Coll. —There are many signs of Danish invaders having for some time possessed these islands. Among these are Fingalian and other tales repeated by the inhabitants, mentioning engagements and the names of chieftains. At this day they point out their burying places, whence the ground derives its name. Nor are their duns [sic], forts or watch-towers, less remarkable. There are 39 remains of them in the two islands, generally built on rocks, round the whole coast, and within sight of some other. They are said to have been used, when an enemy appeared, for suddenly alarming the country by the signal of fire. There are two walls without any appearance of lime or other cement. The inner is circular, and the outer often assumes the figure of the rock on which it is founded. The whole of these isles and a considerable part of the mainland were named *Infeadh-Gaul*, which signifies the isles or places of security for strangers.¹⁵

The Statistical Account 1834-1845 for Tiree and Coll, Parish of Tiree, Presbytery of Mull, Synod of Argyle, written by the Rev Neil Maclean: —I have reckoned up fourteen or fifteen duns or old forts, believed to be Danish, and seemingly intended as signal or watch towers; and it is probable that there may have been more of them. They were generally situated near the sea coast, and built of a circular form, and without cement. One of them, placed on the top of a small hill, had a well within it. The well was built with stone, having several steps descending into it, most of which still remain, but no vestige of the fortress now remains, the stones having all been removed for other purposes.¹⁶

In 81AD Agricola, the Roman Governor of Britain, despatched a fleet of ships up the west coast of present-day England and Scotland to the Orkney Islands (L. ORCADES INSULAE). At this time he was concerned about the depredations of the Scotti and other tribes from Ireland (L. HIBERNIA). A geographical account of north-west Britain given by Ptolemy in 150AD most probably derived its descriptions from the explorations made by Agricola's fleet as described by Tacitus, his son-in-law and biographer. Some of the islands and landmarks identified include Hebrides (L. EBUDAE INSULAE), Mull (L. MALAIUS INSULA) and Mull of Kintyre (L. EPIDUM PROMUNTARIUM) - the tribal 'horsefolk' of Kintyre were given the name, the EPIDII.

Rome believed that the Forth-Clyde line was too good a frontier (Antonine Wall) not to use although Agricola had hopes of conquest further north. Roman remains are found as far north as Elgin on the Moray Firth on the east mainland but in the west, Greenock on the Firth of Clyde. North of the line, Agricola could find no natural frontier and conquering the whole island and

¹⁴ AB p38

¹⁵ SA1791

¹⁶ SA1834

holding the territory won, was not to Rome's taste. No traces have been found of any Roman encampments on the western isles but overnight camps on a beach would be unlikely to leave any archeological evidence.

The above examples of Latin nomenclature of Scottish islands are convincing proof that the settlers, or the occupying tribes they had replaced, both predating the Scotti and the Norsemen, were at minimum responsible for giving names to the islands if not consistently or permanently to land features within Tiree and the other islands.

Despite four hundred years of occupation and rigid governance, the impact on Scotland and southern Britain of Roman culture was comparatively slight. Most of the achievements were subsequently lost and perhaps the legacy of Roman occupation consisted only of a few roads, a few ruins, a few genes and Christianity which was not Roman in origin.

Chapter Three: Iron Age - Celts - Picts - Scotti - Christianity - Saint Columba - Sea Travel - Gaelic Language - Religious Buildings

When Agricola ventured north into present-day Scotland, the Celtic tribes occupying northern Britain were known to the Romans as the PICTII or CALEDONII. These people were most likely descended from the Neolithic and Bronze Age people predating the Celts who did not begin settling the British Isles from Europe until around 500BC. It is generally recognised that the Picts got their Latin name —Painted Ones— from their custom of painting or tattooing their bodies but what they called themselves has never been discovered as their use of writing and the Ogam script did not occur until a few hundred years later. The Irish tribes called them *Cruithni* which translates as ‘the people of the designs’. Before 500AD they ruled as far west as the Outer Hebrides and although the Pictish heartland was centred in Tayside, Grampian and the Highland regions their symbolic stonework can still be found today in Argyll and Wester Ross.¹⁷

The Statistical Account 1834-1845 for Tiree and Coll contains a likely reference to Iron Age relics found in Tiree: —About forty years ago [c1800], a circular piece of gold, supposed to have been an ornament for the arm, was found by a person while digging a stony knoll in a farm near the ford, previously mentioned [An Fhaodhail (NM0145)]. He described it as quite circular, at least five inches in diameter, about one inch broad, so thin as to be easily flexible, and evidently to clasp or lock. Some decayed human bones were found at the same time, scattered among the earth and stones. This ancient relic was soon afterwards sent to Glasgow, and sold there for a trifle.¹⁸

The Irish tribe of Scotti and their fellow-countrymen had been raiding and/or settling the west coasts of present-day England and Scotland for centuries as witnessed by Agricola's threatening action in sailing his fleet up through their familiar seaways in 81-82AD. ‘Scot’ is reputedly a corruption of the Irish word for ‘raider’¹⁹. In their own country they were known as the *Féni* but the raiders and settlers of around 500AD of the south-western corner of the land of the Picts, Argyll (*G Ar-gael*, eastern Irish, alternatively *Earra Ghàidheal*, coastland of the Gael), were given the old Roman label for all trans-maritime Irish migrants and now best remembered as the people who gave their name to Scotland. One of the three chief tribes of Dalriada in the 7th century were the *Cenél Loarn* (Kindred of Lorn) who inhabited the isle of Colonsay, and all the islands and mainland districts to the north of these that were not held by the Picts, which included Mull, Coll and Tiree and, on the mainland, Ardnamurchan and Morvern.

Around 200AD, Origen the Alexandrian wrote that Christianity —had even reached Britain—. In his *Historica Ecclesiastica*, Bede accords the coming of Christianity to Scotland in 396AD to St Ninia or Ninian (c360-432) who studied under St Martin at Tours in France and who built *Candida Casa* at Whithorn in Galloway. The evidence of his ministry and perilous journeys into the northern land of the Picts is scanty and we must rely on legend and the later pilgrimage of

¹⁷ PG p8

¹⁸ SA1834

¹⁹ The Irish Gaelic for raider is *creachadair* thus this origin is doubtful.

kings to his shrine at Whithorn for affirmation. St Oran of Letteragh in Ireland founded a Christian community on Iona²⁰ some twenty years before St Columba. Another candidate for the role of being ahead of St Columba is St Brendan who had a retreat on the Garvelloch Island of *na h-Eileacha Naomha*.²¹

St Columba (Columcille) is a more readily recognisable historical figure largely due to the *Vita Sancti Columbae* of his biographer Adamnan [*G Adhmhnan*]. When Columba left Ireland with his twelve companions, his journey would not have been considered as an adventure into a foreign land populated by strangers. The Romans may have spoken of 'Hibernia' and 'Caledonia' but this distinction was barely discernible to the Celts of Ireland and Scotland. The seaways lying along the west coast of Britain were a familiar 'highway' to the inhabitants of the region. Protected from the violent storms of the Atlantic Ocean, Iron Age travellers elected to employ coracles although today we might consider them to be unsafe flimsy vessels. Travel by land was extremely difficult as the islands and mainland were covered with thick post-glacial forests and were, in places, almost impenetrable. A sea journey might be considered as dangerous as a land journey but it was always shorter and more straightforward to embark upon if goods or people had to be moved over any distance. The west coast of Scotland is normally visible from north-east Ireland and only a short sea journey in favourable weather. The easiest and most direct route almost anywhere at that time was by water and where forced to travel from one loch or inlet to another the light coracle could be carried overland on the rowers' backs.²² As yet there was no concept of 'nations' or 'foreign lands'. The people of the region were members of tribes or groups of tribes speaking the same or similar dialect with roots in the same Celtic language.

The language spoken by the Scotti and the Celts of Ireland is today known as Q-Celtic, a form that had developed in Ireland over the previous millennium since the arrival of those Celts from Europe whereas the Picts and other Celts of Britain spoke what is now known as P-Celtic. Similar in many respects but considered a different language.

Soon after his coming to Iona in 563AD, St Columba founded in Tiree, *in terra Hethi*, a monastery or penitential house over which presided his successor St Baithene, one of his original disciples and St Columba's foster-son. There was frequent communication between Ireland and Tiree in the 6th century. St Kenneth of Aghaboe is said to have lived for some time in Tiree, probably about the same period and certainly not later than 577AD when St Brendan died. Kilkenneth (NL4494) is named after St Kenneth. Part of the wall of the ruined chapel is extant. At the beginning of the 20th century, a copper bell was unearthed there which is now in Inverary Castle. West of the chapel, near the shore, are the remains of several cairns. Oral sources say that this was the site of a large Viking burial ground. As it is situated near Ben Hough [ON *haugr*, burial place] this may well be how the name 'Hough' originated.²³ Findchan, a contemporary of St Columba, founded a monastery at Artchain *in Ethica terra* about 565AD.

²⁰ Iona was a 'typo' for IOUA. Also written as Ì, it was reputedly also known as the Isle of the Druids (*G Innis na Druineach*) which is acknowledged as the majority of Christian holy places were established on the sites of pagan worship and veneration.

²¹ HWH p319

²² CB p28

²³ TE p54

Artchain (the Fair Cape) seems to agree with 'Ardkirknish' near Balephetrish. Soroby is the 'campus lunge' of Adamnan and the 'campus navis' or 'magh-luinge' of the Irish Chronicles.²⁴ In Columban times there was a chapel where the township of Scarinish is now situated called St. Thomas's Chapel. St Comgall, a Pict and an associate of St Columba, also founded a monastery on Tiree which was raided by Pictish warriors. Several sites have stone cross-slabs from this period, e.g. St Patrick's Chapel, Kenavara [*G Ceann a' Mhara*, head of the sea] (NL9440) and Sorobaidh or Soroby (NL9841).

St Columba once sailed into Gott Bay on his way to visit the monastery on the island founded by St Baithene at Sorobaidh in 565AD. Reputedly, on arrival, he struck a rock which nearly sank his boat, so he cursed it. Most sailors still follow this tradition.²⁵ Another St Columba 'ecclesiastical censure' story: On the *Tràigh Mhòr* on Gott Bay (NM4605), there is a small flat rock known as *Mallachdaig* (Little Accursed One). According to oral sources, St Columba, during a visit to Tiree, tied his coracle to a bunch of seaweed growing on this rock. On his return, he found the coracle adrift, the seaweed anchor having given way. So angry was the saint that he put a curse on the rock and ordained that nothing would ever grow on it. And bare it is to this day.²⁶

Another holy man, St Donnán, who died on Eigg in 617AD, left religious communities scattered throughout the western Isles.²⁷

Muir, who examined the site of the old monastery of Soroby in 1865, writes of it as follows: - *The burying-ground contains nine or ten ancient slabs embellished with the usual devices, and the shaft of a cross, decorated on one of its faces with foliage, and on the other with the figure of St Michael, Archangel, bearing a sword and shield, and trampling a dragon. Under the figure is HAEC EST CRUX MICHAELIS ARCHANGUELI DEI ANNA ABBATISSA DE Y. Under this is an ogee-headed niche, containing the figure of Death holding a spade in one hand, leading off Anna with the other. Besides these there is a ponderous pillar of granite, rising 3 feet 8 inches from a heavy plinth called Maclean's Cross. This form is curious and quite unique, each face presenting the appearance of two distinct crosses, one of them laid against the face of the other. On both faces there are slight traces of serpent-like animals and scroll-work.*²⁸

In another old burial ground on Tiree there is a tombstone to a prior named 'Fingonvs' [derived from MacFhionghuin or MacKinnon, —fair born]. Ferchar Fada was an ancestor of the MacQuarries and the MacKinnons, two important clans in Iona and Tiree.

The Rev Archibald MacColl in *The Statistical Account 1791-1799* included the following report under 'Antiquities'. —There are 15 remains of old chapels or churches, at some of which are burying-grounds and crosses still to be seen. There is at the chapel of Kileneth in Tiry [sic] a burying ground so sandy that, by blowing [winds], heaps of human bones are seen, and coffins often exposed, before half consumed. It is now surrounded by sand banks higher than the side walls: they no longer bury here. Along the coast, in many parts, are buried the remains of

²⁴ CT p36

²⁵ SI p93

²⁶ TE p112

²⁷ TI p190

²⁸ HWH p249

drowned persons cast ashore. At the hill of *Ceanmharra* [*Ceann a' Mhara*], on a very rugged declivity, is situated St Patrick's temple. The vestige of a wall encloses it in one third of an acre of land. It is 26 by 11 feet within walls; the side walls 5½ feet high; one gable six inches thicker than the other; without a roof, and ill built of stone and lime. A square altar in the east end is still 18 inches high. The cross without the pedestal, 4 feet. Within 60 yards of it, at the shore on the top of a rock, is made a hollow, 2 feet diameter and 4 deep, called by the country people St Patrick's Vat. There are 9 or 10 long stones, in different parts of the parish, seemingly erected as monuments.²⁹

Near Rosdhu House [Kenovay, NL9946] are the remains of St Finan's Chapel. Oral tradition has it that the small cemetery surrounding the chapel was a burial ground for unbaptised children. It is also said that the last burial took place about two hundred years ago.³⁰

Rev Neil Maclean in *The Statistical Account 1834-1845 for Tiree and Coll* writes —Stone chests or coffins are now and then found, made up of four stones, arranged in the form of an oblong square. I was induced to get one of these, called *‘Leac an Fhoimhear’*, or the *‘Giant's Grave’*, lately opened, - judging from the name, that it might perhaps contain something uncommon. Nothing, however, was found but human bones in a decayed state, thrown together without order, and no ways remarkable for their size. Two stone crosses, from three to four feet high, (the only two now remaining entire), are still to be seen where some of the old chapels formerly stood. They are quite plain, without any ornament or inscription, and one of them resting on a stone socket. There are two or three upright stones or pillars, six or seven feet high, having one end sunk in the ground, and bearing no device or engraving whatever. Whether these were erected as mere landmarks, or in commemoration of some remarkable events, is now not known.³¹

From the days of St Columba and possibly earlier, Tiree provided the monastic community on the island of Iona, south-east of the island, with grain. Columba approved of the Tiree granary and *‘blest it that no evil thing, snake, frog, toad or weasel, should abide there’*.³²

²⁹ SA1791

³⁰ TE p36

³¹ SA1834

³² AB p37

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