

Tiree and Coll from the Statistical Accounts of 1840 by Rev. N. MacLean Minister

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Since the description of the islands and inhabitants has been covered in some detail in my previous summary of the Statistical Account from 1793 this summary will note additional information and changes that have taken place so that a comparison of improvements and otherwise can be clearly seen over the intervening 50 years.

The local marble described as both white and reddish, variegated in colour is found at the farm at Bailephetrish. A quarry was started here by “The Tiree Marble Company” in 1791 under the management of a German. A good deal of marble was cut and exported, some for the Duke of Argyll’s Inverary residence or Roseneath, but the operation closed down after 3 years as uneconomical.

There is no fish fit for use in the fresh water lochs and the presence of a great number of eels is mentioned on Tiree with what trout there is being on Coll. The fish that are of economic importance are:-

Cod, ling, skate, lythe, gurnet, saithe, turbot	Note turbot very rarely caught
Lobsters, crabs, cockles, limpets, mussels, razorfish	Collected and used in considerable quantities as main diet to support life among the poorer classes. Shells used for fertiliser and to make fine white plaster.
Basking Shark (aka Sun-Fish)	Formerly often seen 30-40 years ago now rarely seen. Formerly caught by harpoons and valuable for their liver oil. The minister recollects seeing as a boy one not thought of as large yield 8 barrels of liver oil at an estimated value of £25. Since then he has only seen one off the shore about 4-5 years ago (1835).

Parochial Registers

The Tiree parish register is back only to 1775, earliest entry dated 16th January. It appears, from written records, that all the parish records before this date were sent to Edinburgh to ascertain certain dates pertaining to a legal dispute. These records were lost to the island i.e. never returned. The parish records for Tiree do not appear to have been kept regularly until 1814.

The Coll parish register has an earliest entry date of 1732 (no day or month) and has been fairly regularly kept since that period to apparently the current date of 1840.

No register of deaths is kept for either island.

Ownership of Tiree

It fell into the possession of the family of Argyll (Campbell’s) in the year 1674 at this time the annual rent was £1565 13s 4d. Since then the Duke of Argyll has been sole proprietor. Plans and surveys in possession of “his Graces chamberlain”.

Ownership of Coll

The middle and principle part of Coll is an ancient possession granted to John Garve, first laird of Coll, by King James II. The extremities of the island were owned by the Duke of Argyll acquired at the same time as Tiree but have since been sold so Coll is now owned by 3 proprietors.

Antiquities

The minister describes what were believed to be some old Danish forts etc but notes that many that formerly existed in the previous Statistical Account 1793 are now much eroded by the inhabitants making use of them for building materials and also being lost through inundation by sand.

Modern Buildings

Mention is made of the building works taking place prior to the construction of Skerryvore (*Sceir Mhor*) lighthouse. These are accommodation for tradesmen, work sheds, smithies, boat & coal houses, pier and a signal or watch tower (now nearly completed) for communication with the lighthouse. All build in granite and other ordinary materials.

Population

There is no authentic record of the population prior to 1755 at which time the population of Tiree was stated as 1509 and that of Coll 1193.

In 1755 the population of Tiree = 1509, Coll = 1193 Total = 2702

In 1831 the population of Tiree = 4453, Coll = 1316 Total = 5769

In 1841 the population of Tiree and Coll Total = 5846

Population Statistics for Both Islands

Age Ranges/ Events	Tiree	Coll	Total	% of population
Under 15 years	1875	542	2417	39.6%
From 15 to 30	1309	358	1665	27.3%
From 30 to 50	926	313	1239	20.3%
From 50 to 70	482	150	632	10.4%
Upwards of 70	95	48	143	2.4%
Totals	4687	1409	6096	
				Population
Average Annual Baptisms	143	44	187	Growth 3.1%
Marriages	24.5	6	30.5	
Deaths	94	28	122	Decline 2.0%
Unmarried men above 50 yrs	65	9	74	

Unmarried women above 45yrs	101	21	122	Unmarried group of men & women approx = 25% of the over 50's
Number of Insane persons	8	4	12	
Blind	5	3	8	
Deaf	3	0	3	
Dumb	1	1	2	
Average children per family	4	3.5		

Language and Customs

Gaelic is universal among lower orders but is much corrupted with English words due to regular working on mainland (low countries). Until of late the people could be described as cheerful, happy and contented but poverty's iron hand (potato famine?) has hit them as it has the Highlands.

Diet

It is seldom that meat is eaten; the staple diet consists of potatoes, barley, oatmeal, milk and fish. It is noted that the potato crops failed in 1837 on Tiree, this was at about the time Ireland was affected by the potato famine and shows the blight extended beyond those shores.

A custom that is now less widespread being confined to remoter parts of the island is the drinking to excess at funerals, wakes, where to furnish the entertainments a poor family will waste what might have seen them through a year. It is seen as a point of honour to have a good send off.

The last 25 to 30 years has seen the suppression of illicit stills and some legal ones were set up to make use of surplus barley. But high duties have forced these to close as unprofitable and the minister notes there was formerly whisky smuggled into Tiree from Northern Ireland and how this had a poor effect of the morals and character of the islanders.

The minister notes that the people are intelligent and enterprising and carry on a trade with central Scotland, Glasgow in particular. This has both advantages and disadvantages in that "avarice and lucre" are apparent which leads to disputes among them. There is a fondness for intemperance among them; a consequence of the past smuggling and illicit distillation but this is improving. The amount of drink consumed now is not a quarter of that previously consumed and poor church attendance is excused in part by the minister by the distance of the church from them and lack of good clothing for the weather which deters attendance. There is good attendance for the solemn occasions such as communion and all are described as extremely civil, obliging, kind, hospitable, humane and charitable people.

Agriculture

The minister mentions many of the same problems that were accounted for in the 1793 report and are listed below.

- 1 A considerable quantity of crops are raised and exported annually.
- 2 Crops in general are light and of inferior quality.
- 3 Bear (barley) seldom exceeds 45lb per bushel

Reasons for this are given as:-

- 1 Light sandy soils
- 2 Seaweed fertiliser in simple state used, stimulates ground to produce a crop but does little to enrich and give substance to the soil.
- 3 The possessions of land are in small parcels so that several only pay £1 per annum rent and at least one croft less than a £1.
- 4 Regular crop rotation not possible and ground kept under constant tillage becoming less productive over time.
- 5 Seed of all kind is sown much heavier than elsewhere.
- 6 Seed is not changed enough to prevent it degenerating in crop quality.
- 7 The sowing season is late, especially of barley, not finished until middle of June.
- 8 The wetness of the ground is one reason for late sowing but is not the only reason.
- 9 As a consequence of late sowing, rapid growth of crop in summer it ripens too fast and grain does not fill out properly, hence poor returns.
- 10 Of late more people are taking to compound their manure and rotate seeds to good effect.

Crop	Returns
Potatoes	8
Bear (barley) & Large oats	4
Small (black) oats	2 or 3

Some farms particularly on the west and North West have been devastated by shifting and erosion of sand dunes which inundates fields making them useless for crops.

When crofts are small it is common for neighbours to join together for ploughing. The number of ploughs in use on Tiree are about 350 and on Coll 64 where the ground is less suitable for the plough and so much more is turned by hand, this results in sowing a month earlier and gives better crop returns than on Tiree.

Little is done to improve the land on Tiree but this is in part due to the nature of the island.

- 1 Drainage is difficult as the land is so flat.
- 2 Between harvest time and next sowing much of the land is common grazing for cattle, few enclosures.
- 3 Building stone is scarce without great expense of blasting in a quarry.
- 4 Wind blown sand may make the investments in land worthless overnight by sudden inundation.
- 5 Larger crofts, tacksmen, have 19 year leases.
- 6 No leases have been granted to smaller crofts in last 20 yrs (since 1820)
- 7 The security of the tenant is not great which again restricts willingness to invest for longer term.

On Coll tacksman get 19 year leases while crofters get 7 years. A Mr Campbell, tacksman of Breachacha on Coll, is mentioned as having made good land improvements and is acting as the factor for Mr McLean, Laird of Coll, who is noted as an “active and judicious Highland agriculturalist”.

Tiree Cattle

- 1 Not reckoned as good quality
- 2 No winter pasture
- 3 Difficult to keep from starving over winter and spring
- 4 Fine grass and lack of heather, cattle not very hardy and do not stand the driving to market very well.
- 5 Liable to distempers which affect value.
- 6 Cattle from Coll much better quality as reflected in prices given.
- 7 Tiree Cattle £3 to £6
- 8 Coll Cattle £5 to £8
- 9 Annual rate of grazing £1 10s to £2 per cow including winter feed.
- 10 A horse's grass is considered to be twice that of a cow.

Sheep Stocks

Lately introduced to these islands, cheviot and black faced breeds, as an experiment but too early to say how they are doing.

- 1 Annual rate for grazing a sheep 5s to 8s

Produce prices in 1840

Crops & Animals	Units	Price
Potato	Barrel	1s 6d to 4s
Bear (barley)	Per quarter	£1 to £1- 7s
Large oats	Per quarter	£1 to £1-7s
Wedders	Each	12s to 18s
Lambs	Each	6s to 12s
Pigs	Each	£1 10s to £2 10s or £3
Eggs	Per dozen	4d
Fowls	Pair	1s6d to 2s
Ducks	Pair	1s6d to 2s
Geese	Pair	5s
Butter	Per pound	10d
Cheese	Per pound	4d to 6d (note that very little butter and cheese is sold)

For some years now pigs have been reared and are profitable, exported alive to market in Glasgow for ready demand. Last spring (1839) over 500 were exported from Tiree.

Other Annual Animal Exports from Tiree & Coll

Animals	Tiree	Coll
Black cattle(including stirks)	465	300
Sheep	200	200
Horses	48	20
Pigs	500	100

Rates of Wages: Domestic and farm hired for year or half year.

Male	£6 to £8
Female	£3 to £3 10s or £4
Tradesmen	2s or 2s 6d per day plus victuals

A great number of the unmarried population leave the island for mainland employment (Low Countries) from middle of August for 6 to 8 weeks. Generally wages spent frivolously and little benefit to island plus they return with dangerous disorders that spread through the island. Small-pox, measles, typhus fever etc

Quarries

Only one quarry being worked for granite at Heynish for the Skerryvore lighthouse construction. About a hundred workers employed during the summer season on this work.

Fisheries

Most are occasional fishermen with few following it as a profession. Of the 94 skiffs in the parish only 10 are regularly employed at fishing. There are no fisheries that pay a rent and only cod and ling are cured for market. Cod is a year long fishery but ling is seasonal from end of spring to mid-summer and although shoals of herring are off the coast that fishery has never been practiced here.

In past 12 to 15 years (from 1825) some Aberdeenshire boats come for the ling fishery, April to mid-June. Their boats are of 18 tons burden and they fish 15 miles to NW of Tiree by long line. Each boat cures and carries about 10 ton of ling to market in the short season making an average of £18 per ton or £180 the season.

The smaller local boats with crews of 5 men tend to fish the more sheltered waters to east and south east of Tiree. Their equipment and dexterity do not match that of the Aberdeenshire boats. The local boats will take between 1.5 to 2 ton of ling each which is sold to home market for between £14 to £16 per ton.

Whales

Shoals of small whales, 15 to 20 feet long, sometimes frequent the bays and if one is wounded it makes for the shore of its own accord with the rest following. There is hardly one that will then escape slaughter. The blubber yields about a barrel of oil each but for some years now they have discontinued their visits.

Produce

The average gross amount of produce annually raised in the parish:

Produce	Tiree	Coll
Grain of all kinds raised in Tiree	£2582	£1250
Potatoes and other plants	£4424	£1600
Hay, whether meadow or cultivated	£215	£160
Flax, or other crops for manufactures, pasture, horses included	£2976	£1267
Wool	nil	£126
Fish cured and sold	£412	nil
Totals	£10,609	£4418

The fish cured by the Aberdeenshire fishermen is included in these figures but the fish consumed at home is not included, an estimated value for both Tiree and Coll is £960 and £192 respectively based on number of families on each allowing an average expenditure for each family of £1 5s.

Kelp Manufacture

At one time about 500 tons annually produced and on Tiree employing half the adult population in the season. At one time several farms paid their rent in kelp, the proprietor paying them a price meant that even some income was made from it. The manufacturing price for kelp was from £2 to £2 10s per ton but the quantity has gradually diminished so that in 1837 none was produced. The islanders of Coll used to produce 150 tons a year and employ 150 adults but none has been produced since about 1835 when in this last year of production only 80 tons were produced.

Shipping

1. Tiree has 4 decked vessels 20 to 40 ton burden while sometimes employed for local produce generally find work elsewhere.
2. Tiree has 20 open or half-decked boats of 6 to 20 tons chiefly engaged in ferrying cattle and fuel from neighbouring islands.
3. Tiree has 82 fishing skiffs of which only 10 are regularly employed.
4. Coll has 2 decked vessels of 18 to 20 tons
5. Coll has 3 open or half-decked boats of 6 to 20 tons
6. Coll has 12 fishing skiffs of which none are regularly employed.

Vessel Type	In Tiree	In Coll	Total
Decked vessels	4	2	6
Half-decked	20	3	23
Fishing skiffs	82	12	94

Parochial Economy

1. There is no market town in the parish, nearest would be Oban 56 miles away.
2. Markets for the sale of black cattle are held on Tiree in May, August and October.
3. There is no jail but it is reported that at times it would be desirable to have one. It is mentioned that there are two licensed inns on Tiree and one on Coll but some illicit ones have sprung up in connection with the lighthouse construction (Skerryvore) which the minister disapproves of.
4. There is no village but settlement of Arinangour in Coll with a population of 171 is nearest there is in the parish.
5. There is a sub-post office on both Tiree and Coll but no regular packet (ferry) and communications are irregular and dependant on casual boats. It would be possible to provide a packet to Tobermory for £45 to £50 a year and the Duke of Argyll used to allow £15 to assist in this and the post office was willing to allow all revenue for this purpose as well.
6. The harbours are poor with rocky approaches and between November and March boats are hauled ashore and communications with mainland are almost non existent. There is a description of these harbours.
7. The sandy beaches are good for horse and cart, the few roads on the island are often impassable and in a poor state of repair. There is need of a "resident chamberlain" to take control and direct upkeep of these roads. The road from harbour to mill is particularly bad and this is one of the most important on whole island.
8. Fuel scarcity on Tiree is a major disadvantage; families with boats must ship their own from other islands such as Mull and Coll at great expense. Out of 768 families it is estimated that 500 import fuel and a cost of this is estimated at £2000. The island of Coll has fuel (peat) to spare and the only cost is the labour to collect it.

Ecclesiastical State

The parish church was built in 1776, enlarged in 1786 and can seat 500 people, the location is not ideal being 4.5 mile from one end and 8.5 miles from the other. The manse was built in 1832 and repaired in 1838 but neither church nor manse is in good state of repair. There is another place where services are held every alternate Sunday is on Tiree.

Attendance	Parish Church	Alternative Church	Coll
Summer	400	300	600
Winter	150-200	200	300

The church on Coll was built in 1802, can seat 350 people and is in reasonable condition.

- 1 There is no Episcopalian or Roman Catholics on Tiree or Coll.
- 2 There are some dissenters, chiefly of independent persuasion.
- 3 There are a few Baptists and each of these sects has their own preacher and meeting house.

Established Church Stipends and Properties

Glebe	30 acres poor quality	£5 per annum
Bear (barley)	213 bolls, 1 firloft, 1 peck, 7/9 lippies	Per annum
Meal	70 bolls, 1 firloft, 1 peck, 1 and 1/3 lippies	Per annum
Scots money	£395 17s 6d	Per annum
Tack duty to pay to Synod of Argyll	£22 4s 5d	Per annum
Assistant in Coll	£580 2s 6d	Per annum
Bear (barley)	11 bolls, 2 firlots	Per annum
Meal	3 bolls, 3 firlots, 1 peck, 1 and 1/3 lippies	Per annum
Varying amounts of	£62 to £65	Per annum

Education in 1840

Schools	Tiree	Coll
Parochial schools	2	0
Endowed by General Assembly	1	1
Unendowed school	5	0
Supported by societies	1	2
Totals	9	3

Until 1804 when a second school opened there was only one on Tiree. The father to current Duke of Argyll supported and gave to each teacher the maximum salary and provided accommodation and this has continued to date. The current annual salary of a teacher is £22 4s plus £4 to £5 school fees. There is a Gaelic School Society that teaches the scriptures only in Gaelic and the master receives a salary of £25 with no school fees. The Committee of the General Assembly school give a salary of £20 plus fees of £2 10s to the teacher on Tiree and on Coll £25 with fees of £2 10s. There are five schools supported by the people who provide a salary of £10 to £18 per annum to a teacher, the quality and qualifications of these teachers is questioned by the minister. He makes an appeal for a further 2 or 3 schools of good quality being needed for Tiree.

On Coll the school supported by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge pays a teacher £16 with fees on £2. Also on Coll another school supported by the Glasgow Auxiliary Society pay a teachers salary of £12 with fees of £6. The Gaelic school on Coll has been discontinued from May 1839. The minister makes a case for an additional school on Coll.

Literacy in 1840

From the literacy figures below and earlier population figures I have shown that the people on Coll would appear to have only one in six of the adults over 15 years old as illiterate but that

contrasts with one in two people of Tiree over 15 years being illiterate. This is quite a contrast between adjacent islands and an interesting statistic, which perhaps agrees with the minister's view of the poor quality of teachers in Tiree schools.

Since the only total figures available for population are birth to 15 years and not between ages 6 and 15 the percentages are not a like for like comparison for this group.

Age Groups	Tiree	% of age group	Coll	% of age group
Number between 6 & 15 who cannot read or write	426	23%	84	16%
Number upwards of 15 who cannot read or write	1255	45%	150	17%

Parochial Funds

There is no specific provision for the poor and they are supported mainly by the charity of the inhabitants. The only cash source to give aid to the poor is through the church service collections, a tax on marriages and also fines imposed by the Kirk session for various delinquencies etc. The minister notes that there is no reluctance on the part of the poor to apply for aid nor to they think of it as degrading to do so.

Miscellaneous Observations

The main feature that distinguishes this parish account from the earlier 1793 account is the great increase in the population. It is this that has been a great cause of the people's poverty. The great depression that followed the last war (Napoleonic) with poor prices for produce and the collapse of the kelp industry has been a severe blow to the island as it has elsewhere in the Highlands. The employment and good wages of the kelp industry was relied upon by many proprietors and people and is now gone. The problem of over population is common to the Highlands as well as the Islands and Tiree is particularly badly affected by this. The system of crofting has accelerated the crisis by the sub-division of land, the idea was good to help accommodate poor families if the divided land was sufficient but now a croft previously intended to support one family has perhaps three on it reducing all to poverty. There is also a large increase in the number of cottars families; that is persons without any regular holding (croft), they must seek employment where they can get it. The island of Tiree has 300 such families who are seen as a dead burden on the tenantry and the minister is encouraging the proprietors of Tiree to assist with emigration or apply for government help to do so.

The lack of a permanent doctor is still a great disadvantage and lives are lost that need not be and he suggests that a salary for one might be easily raised through the rents system. This would he thinks be the only practical plan that would cause the least burden on the people and is much needed; the salary thus raised would be attractive and a doctor could be retained who would provide a service that is much needed by the populations of both Tiree and Coll.

[This Statistical Account was drawn up March 1840 by the Reverend N. MacLean and was revised in August 1843.]