

A Brief Outline of  
**The Churches in Tiree and Coll  
& Old Parish Registers**

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### **Introduction**

The Old Parish Registers (OPR) recording births, baptisms, and marriages were maintained by the established Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), often simply called the Kirk. In 1840 Rev. McLean reported that the oldest OPR record still surviving at that time went back to 16 January 1775. Older records had been sent to Edinburgh to settle a dispute and then were either destroyed or lost. McLean stated that the OPR seemed to be irregularly kept till 1814. It was then kept fairly regularly till civil registration began in 1855.

Since the OPR only included records for the established Church of Scotland it is helpful to know when other denominations were active on the island. As people converted to the new denominations their new family members might not be recorded in the OPR. If they converted halfway through their child-bearing years then the first half of their children might be in the OPR and the second half would likely be absent. And of course if they changed denominations before marriage, then the marriage would likely not be recorded in the OPR.

Below we see that Baptist missionaries came to Tiree as early as 1814. Then in 1831 a Congregationalist minister arrived. Both of these groups were very active on Tiree; the Baptists were active in both Coll and Tiree. The Church of Scotland began to splinter into various Presbyterian groups as early as 1732. One splinter denomination, the Secession Church, apparently made it to Tiree in the 1840s but there is little evidence that it was very active. In 1843 there was a major division of the established Church into the established Church and the Free Church. Most people and the minister on Coll changed to the Free Church whereas only a few did on Tiree. So, to conclude, a significant number of Coll and Tiree births and marriages might not have been reported in the OPR owing to the existence of these other religious denominations.

## **Church of Scotland**

### ***1790-99 Statistical Accounts***

Previous to 1560, the established church of Scotland had been Roman Catholic. In the Scottish Reformation of 1560, the Scottish Parliament made its first decision in favour of Protestantism over Roman Catholicism. Then in 1690, after many decades of religious turmoil, Presbyterianism was finally established as the national church of Scotland.

The 1790-99 Statistical Accounts of Scotland entry for Tiree and Coll was written by the Church of Scotland minister: Rev. Archibald M'Coll. M'Coll's united parish had been formed on 31 July 1618 from three separate parishes: Coll; Kirkapol (north-eastern Tiree); and Soroby (south-west Tiree).

M'Coll reported that at that time all inhabitants belonged to the established church. Therefore, Catholicism had been completely replaced by Presbyterianism on the island. However, the people did still use some Roman Catholic sayings and prayers, and occasionally some Roman Catholics from Barra visited the island. A book by Mary McHugh reveals that Catholics were on Tiree as late as 1704.

Newer evangelical Protestant denominations had not yet gained a foothold on Tiree. M'Coll reported that the common people did not pay much attention to the ordinances of religion. There were three places of worship in the parish. I believe they were at Clabhach in Coll, and Scarinish and Heylipol in Tiree.

### ***1843 – 45 Statistical Accounts***

The 1843-45 Statistical Accounts of Scotland entry for Tiree and Coll was written by the Church of Scotland minister: Rev. Neil McLean.

The Tiree parish church, at Scarinish, was built in 1776 and repaired in 1786. It seated 500 but was never full. About 400 attended in the summer and 150 to 200 in the winter. Attendance was free. The manse, at Gott, was built in 1832 and repaired in 1838. The minister had 30 acres of land with the manse. There was also another station (it was not stated where this was but suspect Heylipol) where 300 attended public worship in the summer and 200 in the winter. The minister had one paid catechist to help him. The Coll church was built in 1802 and seated 300.

The people's attendance at church services and functions was poor. The minister stated that the poor attendance could partly be explained by the distance to the churches and the people not having good clothing.

Rev. McLean stated that there were no Catholics or Episcopalians on the island. However reported that there were Dissenters. Ten or more families were of the Independent persuasion, which meant the Congregationalist Church, and four or more families were Baptists. McLean stated that Coll

has no dissenting preachers and all the people attend the established Church of Scotland. (note: This must have been written early and not revised by McLean because in fact the minister and most of the congregation left the established Church in 1843.)

### ***Topographical Dictionary of Scotland 1846***

This dictionary was written by Samuel Lewis using information he requested from the parish minister. Thus for Tiree and Coll it largely repeats the Statistical Accounts of 1840-45. However it stated that two new churches had recently been built on Tiree (I believe at Kirkapol and Heylipol). It also stated that a paid assistant minister officiates at the Coll church. It also repeated that the Established church has a paid catechist.

By 1846 there were places of worship on Tiree for members of the Baptist church, the Congregationalist Church, the Free Church, and members of the United Secession. And of course there were places of worship for members of the established Church of Scotland.

### **Baptist Church**

In 1814 Dugald Sinclair began missionary work on Tiree. Duncan McDougald, a native The Ross of Mull, settled on Tiree in 1824 as a Gaelic school teacher. From the early thirties he was aided by the Home Mission to undertake evangelistic work, and to form a Church. In 1838 he became its first Pastor. He was the means of making many converts. His Gaelic Hymns, (published in 1841) were greatly appreciated by the Highlanders. His sister, Mary (McDougall) McDonald, was also a hymn writer of note and a monument to this fact can be seen on the Ross of Mull commemorating her as the author of two well known Gaelic hymns.

In 1843 McDougald reported, "At this time a great awakening took place in Tiree; in my labour I have great encouragement, as many as ten ready to be received. I have three stations for Sabbath, one in each end of the island and one in the middle."

The Rev. John Macfarlane, a native of Tiree, followed McDougald and churches were built at Balemartine and Baugh in 1856. There were also 15 other preaching stations, such as family homes, around the island.

### **Congregationalist (Independent) Church**

Rev. Archibald Farquharson, established the Congregationalist Church on Tiree in 1831. He chose Tiree because he had been told the island was the most destitute place in Scotland. In the 1841 census his occupation was given as Minister of the Gospel, and in the 1851 census his occupation was given as Independent Minister. He built the first church at Cornaigbeg in 1856 and then a second one at Ruaig. Before 1856 Farquharson preached in small thatch covered cottage churches and in homes. He preached until his death in 1878. It appears that the church continued on without a minister until 1894 when meetings came to an end.

## **Free Church of Scotland**

### ***The Disruption***

The established Church of Scotland was the national church. In 1843, after a bitter battle, 450 ministers left the established church and formed the Free Church of Scotland. One disagreement between the two groups was that the established Church permitted patrons, such as the Duke of Argyll in Tiree, to appoint ministers. The Free Church wanted the congregation to control who was hired to be their minister.

### ***Coll***

Archibald Nicol the assistant minister to N. McLean of Tiree and most of the population of Coll left the established Church in 1843. In 1841 while still a minister in the established church Nicol lived at Grishipoll, Coll. The Coll land owner opposed the Free Church and, so, they had a problem finding a place to worship. In 1858 the congregation was still worshipping in the open air and in houses while the minister and his family lived in miserable poverty. In 1861, through the kind offices of Mr. Bouverie, M.P., a site was granted, and a Free Church and manse were completed by 1863 at Griseabull (Grishipoll). No known pre-1855 records exist.

### ***Tiree***

A few members left the Established Church at the Disruption in 1843. They had no minister until they joined with Coll in 1853. In 1862 they separated from Coll. A church at Kirkapol was built in 1880 and a manse in 1884. A second church was built at Balinoe in 1888. Membership was 182 in 1883 and 100 in 1914. No known pre-1855 records exist.

## **Secession Church**

Again this was another group that separated from the established Church of Scotland; small groups had been leaving the church of Scotland since 1732. In 1820 a couple of these groups formed the United Secession Church. Then in 1847 the United Secession Church joined with another dissident group to form the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

I haven't found any reference to this church on Tiree other than that in the Topographical dictionary. Thus it would appear that they were not extremely active on the island. However starting in 1840, the Secession Church did have a major presence in the Argyll parish of Lismore. Lismore is a small island north of Oban, Mull. Thus it is not unreasonable to think that its teachings reached Tiree and led to some conversions on Tiree.

The early establishment of the Lismore Secession Church and the Tiree Baptist and Congregationalist Churches demonstrate that the Duke of Argyll was more tolerant than the Coll landowner as demonstrated by his treatment of the Coll Free Church.

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## Appendix 1: Wee Frees after 1900

Besides the Free Church of Scotland leaving the established Church of Scotland in 1843, other groups, over time, had left the established Church of Scotland. Then after a time some denominations began to reunite. In 1900 the United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church united to form the United Free Church of Scotland (UF). A small number of Free Churches maintained their original beliefs from 1843 and refused to join the new United Free Church. The Free Church remaining after 1900 is often referred to colloquially as the Wee Free Church. Some believe that the term Wee Fees has a negative connotation, and perhaps in some cases it does. However even now Scottish newspapers, such as the Scotsman, frequently include the term Wee Free Church in articles. These articles neither state nor infer any negative meaning to the term.

Interestingly, in 1929 the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland formed a new union which reversed the original 1843 disruption. Of course not all the UF churches joined the new union and those who did not join received the nickname continuers.

## Appendix 2: Church Buildings of the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The following table lists most of the churches on Tiree and when they were built. These churches were constructed with cut stone and mortar. I believe that, at least, for the dissident denominations thatch covered stone cottages served as churches in the early years.

<u>Denomination</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Year built</u>
Church of Scotland		
Tiree	Scarinish	1776
	Kirkapol	1842
	Soroby (Heylipol)	1840
	Heylipol	1906
Coll	Clabhach	1802
	Arinagour	1907
Free Church of Scotland		
Tiree	Kirkapol	1880
	Balinoe	1888
Coll	Grishipoll	1863
	Arinagour	1884
Baptist		
Tiree	Balemartine	1854
	Baugh	1859
Coll		?
Congregationalist		
Tiree	Comaigbeg	1856
	Ruaig	?

### Appendix 3: Church Ministers and Officials in Census Records 1776-1881\*

Island	Year	Name	Age	Occupation	Dwelling	Birthplace
Tiree	1776	Charles Campbell	82	Minister	Balephetrish	-
	1841	Niel McLean	55	Minister	Gott	Argyll
		Donald McDonald	50	Gaelic Teacher	Balemartine	Not Argyll
		Duncan McDougald	40	Baptist Missionary	Upper Balephuul	Argyll
		Archibald Farquhardson	40	Minister of the Gospel	Cornaigbeg	Not Argyll
	1851	Archibald Farquhardson	50	Independent Minister	Cornaigbeg	Perthshire
		Duncan Kennedy	50	Catechist (not inhabitant)	Heanish	Ardchattan
		John McArthur	57	Church Officer	Moss	Tiree
		Niel McLean	65	Minister of Tyree	The Manse	Mull
	1881	John G. Campbell	46	Parish Minister of Tiree	Gott	Appin
		Duncan McFarlane	59	Baptist Minister	Baugh	Tiree
		John McRury	36	Minister Hylipol Parish	Mannal	Benbecula
		John McFarlane	66	Baptist Minister	Balinoe	Tiree
	Coll	1776	John Maxwell	-	Chaplain	Cornaigmore
1841		Archibald Nicol	35	Minister	Grishipoll	Argyll
		Hector McDugall	35	Minister	Cliad	Argyll
1851		Donald McKinnon	50	Gaelic Teacher	Acha	Coll
		Ann McLean	24	Minister's Housekeeper	Ballyhaugh	Coll
		James Hood	56	Gaelic Teacher	Arinagour	Petty, Inv.
		Alexander Stewart	57	Free Church Teacher	Arnabost	Perthshire
1861		Alexander Fraser	40	Minister F.C. of Coll	F.C. Manse	Urquhart, Inv.
		James McCole	27	Minister of Coll	Manseigleale	Lismore
1881		Neil McDougall	51	Minister of Coll	Parish House	Mull
	Alexander Fraser	60	Minister of Coll Free Church	Grishipoll	Glullyn, Inv.	

\* Gaelic teachers were not ministers but are included because their main job was to teach reading of the Bible  
To view the complete census records of Ministers and their families, [click here](#).