

# They Came From Tiree

by  
Gene Donald Lamont

## CHAPTER FIVE ECONOMIC WOES

### Deteriorating Conditions

Much of the history of Tiree in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is centered around the economic problems caused by the ever increasing pressure of its population. Simply put the economy of the island had not expanded rapidly enough to keep up with the prolific Highlanders. While Tiree appeared to be modestly thriving in 1764, when Dr. John Walker reported that “*its inhabitants were well clothed and well-fed, having an abundance of corn and cattle and a great variety and profusion of the finest fish*”, the population problem was judged serious in 1770 and acute by 1790.

The table below illustrates the growth in population of Tiree over the hundred or so years from 1747 to 1841. There is additional information on the inhabitants of Tiree in the Appendices.

**TABLE V - THE POPULATION OF TIREE**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Population</u>	<u>Average Population of Joint Farm</u>
1747	1500	40 max.
1768	1676	56
1776	1997	
1779	1881	59
1787	2306	
1792	2416	92
1800		100
1802	2776	
1808	3200	
1831	4453	
1841	4961	
1849	3166	
1861	3204	

Source: *The Great Highland Famine*, by T.M. Devine

The third column above illustrates most vividly the problem caused by the rise in population over the years, since it shows in 1800 the same amount of land had to feed 2½ times the number of people it had fed 50 years before. Since the islanders were unable to make any significant increase in productivity over this period, the standard of living steadily declined. The improvements that were so desperately needed were very difficult to achieve, as is discussed below. The net result was that Tiree gradually sunk to a level little better than bare subsistence even in a good crop year, and underwent much suffering and misery during a poor one.

The economy of Tiree had been based upon the production of grain since ancient times, and its relatively fertile soil and long growing season made it unique in the Hebrides. During Dr. Walker's visit in 1764 he further noted, "*Some years ago... a field (of barley) having been reaped very early in July, it was immediately ploughed and sown again with the same grain. And from this there was a pretty good crop reaped about the middle of October.*" The only instance perhaps known in Britain of two (cereal) crops having been reaped off the same land in one season."

Along with its grain production was the distilling of whisky, for which Tiree was famous. Whisky making was a highly efficient way of turning barley, one of the island's main crops, into a lucrative cash product. In ancient times whisky manufactured in the farm-based stills of Tiree was a staple throughout the Hebrides. Until the heavy license fees on distilling whisky were put in effect in 1786, each farm on Tiree commonly had one still producing whisky both for local consumption and export. It has been estimated that 200-300 gallons a year was exported and the proceeds largely paid for the rents on the island.<sup>1</sup> In 1789-90 there were two legal distilleries on Tiree, but the islanders continued to make barley into whisky illegally, because it was just too profitable to give up despite the risk. The Duke of Argyll made every effort to squash this now illicit business. He even announced his intention of accepting rent payments in kind, meaning the barley, which went into the making of whisky. This program was evidently unsuccessful, because in that same year 157 persons were convicted of illicit distilling in Tiree. He also directed his Chamberlain for Tiree to remove some of the worst offenders from the island, which this official found difficult to do in practice. In most instances it meant either exiling war veterans or leaving a family without a bread winner, which would stir up a storm of protest, and he shrank from this course of action. Nevertheless this enterprise was not stamped out, until some of the more stubborn distillers were expelled from the island.

The crops of 18<sup>th</sup> century Tiree were little changed from those planted by their ancestors, nor had the farming methods been much improved. Barley, oats, and rye were the main cereal crops, although hay and potatoes had been introduced by mid-century. Potatoes gradually assumed a more important role, as their usefulness in feeding the growing population was recognized. The islanders also found a new cash crop in salted beef, which they owed to the efforts of the Duke of Argyll and his factor.

The breeding and dealing in cattle remained a very important part of the economy of Tiree during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The island had less rain than the mainland, and the Gulf Stream insured that it had less frost as well. All this produced earlier and better grasses and such pasturage enabled the islanders to graze a large number of cattle, which were of high quality. The cattle, however, had to be transported to Mull by boat, which could only be accomplished by 'casting them down' and tying them in place. It was estimated in 1764 that Mull exported about two thousand cattle a year to the mainland, which were not only raised on Mull but came also from Coll and Tiree. Most changed hands in Mull at *Druim Tighe*, which was an open moorland in Glen Ballart where the herds could be gathered. Ever since the Middle Ages this had been the site of one of the largest fairs in the Western Highlands, and it attracted a huge crowd each year. It drew visitors not only from the Western Isles and the nearby mainland, but also from the Lowlands and even Ireland. Lairds, tacksmen, tenant farmers, merchants, cattle dealers, fishermen, pipers, jugglers, ballad singers, and pedlars could all be found in this mix. It was an important social occasion, but its primary function was as a place for the transaction of business. Taverns were the place where news was exchanged and where many a fight broke out, but bargains were sealed there as well.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the economy of Tiree labored under many severe handicaps. Although it was a major grain producer there was no mill on the island, when the fifth Duke of Argyll began his stewardship in 1770. The only mills were the hand querns known to the ancients. If these were not employed, the grain had to be transported to Mull to be ground. Indeed Tiree was most dependent upon its neighbor. Mull was the source of most of its supplies, including most of its peat and all of its timber. Several weeks in summer had to be taken from farming to cut peat and timber on Mull. This shortened the growing season on Tiree, which reduced yields at harvest time. Other factors, such as inadequate fencing, poor drainage, and sand-blows, also put a portion of the land out of production, and decreased the overall yield of the island's crop.

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates range from 50 – 100 % of the rent money was paid through the distilling and export of whisky.

The backwardness of Tiree can best be illustrated by the fact that no wheeled transport existed on the island until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Duke of Argyll sent a number of carts to the island for his tenants' use. Until that time there was no road system, with only crude paths or tracks linking the various communities. Gunpowder and crowbars, which were commonplace items of their day, were not available on Tiree, nor was there any mason living on the island. The lack of a good harbor and seaworthy boats discouraged travel between Tiree and its neighbors, as well as stifling commerce and fishing.

Epidemics were not unknown in the Western Isles, and had to run their course in the past because of the lack of medical help. The Bubonic Plague, which had devastated Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, also visited the Hebridean region and killed many people. Smallpox was always a threat in ancient times as well. A particularly virulent attack of this scourge swept over Tiree in 1756, killing 105 children. In 1792 the island's minister, bemoaning the lack of medical help, reported that the people had collected money several times in the hope of luring a surgeon to Tiree, but none had taken up permanent residence. In fact Tiree did not have a physician in residence until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, although Sir Lachlan Mòr Maclean had granted the lands of Pennycross on Mull as early as 1572 to Andrew Beaton, appointing him to the office of surgeon in his territories. Presumably Mull had some medical service from that time on, at least some of the Maclean gentry did, but it is doubtful that Tiree benefited much from this. Local midwives brought the children of Tiree into the world, and the islanders relied on the home remedies that had been handed down over the centuries to cure their ills.

The common islanders of Tiree were illiterate for most of their history, and their learning came only from oral sources, such as the poetry of their bards. In October of 1788 the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Argyll had these instructions for his Chamberlain, "*As the tenants of Kenovay have not given countenance & encouragement to the schoolmaster which he had a right to expect, I desire that you will prepare a house for him at Scarinish with a garden & croft of land, and remove him from that place and make the tenants in that quarter cut and lead home his peat's for him yearly*". It is unclear when Tiree first had schools in which the children of the small tenants and cottars could find instruction, but it is unlikely that there were any such before the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the biography of John Maclean, the celebrated bard, entitled, *Memoir of John McLean*, written by his grandson, Rev. McLean Sinclair, he tells us that the future bard learned easily and read all the books that came his way. He further stated that he went several years to school, could spell both English and Gaelic, cipher and write. Since the bard was born in 1787, we gain somewhat of an idea of what was available in the schools around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whether all children attended school is not known, but it is most unlikely. A school was evidently available at this time, however, to those who wanted to take advantage of an education and had the means of getting there.

It is not known when English was introduced into the teaching on Tiree. The Scottish Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge had itinerant schools throughout the Highlands and Islands, and they had a presence on Tiree as early as 1819. It is believed that they initially taught in English, but later had to change to Gaelic. Since little English was spoken on Tiree in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would not be surprising that most of the instruction at that time was in Gaelic.

The Gaelic Charity School became important in the education of the children of Tiree in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Duncan McDougall, the Baptist minister, taught in this school as early as 1824. Another Baptist, Donald MacDonald was named a Gaelic teacher in 1837, and it is presumed that he, too, taught in the Gaelic Charity School. Since many of the Tiree emigrants to Canada of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century could read and write Gaelic, it is likely that they took advantage of the education offered by this school.

In view of the record of the great Hebridean landowners in their treatment of their tenants it would be natural to conclude that they were responsible for the economic plight of their tenants in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. While it is true that many did little to relieve the suffering of their people, it would be an oversimplification to place the blame entirely on their shoulders. The economic problems afflicting Tiree, and indeed the entire Highland region, were endemic to the area and deeply rooted in the past and in the customs of its inhabitants. While the Campbells had proved to be vengeful foes in the past to Clan Maclean, the fifth Duke of Argyll made much more of an effort than any of his fellow magnates to ease the burden of his tenants. This particular Campbell chief, who succeeded to the dukedom in 1770 and died in 1806, was an unusual man for his time. Although he extracted almost one-half of the produce of Tiree in the way of rents, he was more moderate in this respect than most

of his kind. While he was an absentee landlord, he was far from oblivious to the problems afflicting his tenants and none worked more diligently to improve his estate. He recognized that the Highland economy must be expanded, if the region was to prosper and offer employment for its people. Such farsightedness was rare in his day, and resulted in several experiments in the establishment of light manufacturing, and the encouragement of a fishing industry in a number of locations within his huge estate. The Duke's effort in Tiree was centered around a more efficient use of the arable land, new and improved crops, better bloodstock, new roads, and better harbors. He also made several attempts at providing some training for fledgling craftsmen. The Duke also set up a flax industry, which employed 100 women; erected a windmill in Scarinish, which was unsuccessful; along with a water mill in Corraig. He gained the thanks of Tiree for allowing the islanders to cut peat in Coll and in the Ross of Mull, as well for arranging them to collect wood on Loch Sunartside. He was nettled, however, when he found that they had cut down 7000 trees in 1788 alone. Unfortunately, in spite of these efforts, Tiree slid ever deeper into poverty, although the fifth Duke did labor hard and long to arrest this trend.

Now, with the advantage of hindsight, it is apparent that the economic problems of Tiree were caused by poor planning, the lack of a large enough investment in both capital funds and labor, and the historic distrust of the Campbells by the islanders. Some of the planning failed because it was ill-conceived, not because it lacked merit. New grasses and clover were planted on one of the new leases in 1737, for example, in the hope that this would be a solution to the long-standing problem of winter feeding. At first this was successful, but in the end this experiment failed because a lack of fencing allowed livestock free access to the planted area. It was very evident that enclosure had to come ahead of such agricultural improvements, but enclosure was fought for years by the islanders as a Lowland invention.

Modern economists now understand that only a huge investment in either human labor or money could have provided the investment necessary to expand Tiree's economy to a level of moderate prosperity. Although the Duke of Argyll continued to encourage, cajole, and demand that his tenants make certain improvements, their accomplishments in this regard were minuscule compared to what was required. The tenants were at a decided disadvantage, however, in that they were only permitted to retain about one-half of the wealth they produced each year. The remainder went outside Tiree in the form of rent. Much of what was kept on the island went to provide the bare necessities of life, and very little could be spared for investments in the future.

The people of Tiree were not adverse to reform as such, and did adopt a number of improvements that were clearly to their advantage. Their resistance in this area can usually be traced to the thick wall of distrust that lay between the small tenants and their Campbell landlord. The Duke of Argyll was reluctant to grant any but short term leases, because he feared that longer ones would make an already hostile tenantry too independent. They, in turn, resisted making any improvement on their lease which might go to enrich another. The attitude of the people of Tiree can be illustrated by the saying on the island, "*Mur b'e eagal an da mhail, bheireadh Tiridhe an da bharr*", which in English is "*But for fear of a double rent, Tiree would yield a double crop.*" This became a vicious circle. The lack of improvements increased the poverty of the small tenant, caused a greater resentment on his part, and gave the Duke of Argyll more of a reason to fear any extension of the lease. Many of the difficulties Tiree found itself during the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revolved around the aversion the islanders felt for the Campbells. A century after the Macleans had been ousted from Tiree its people still perceived the Campbells as interlopers, who had usurped the rightful place of their clan chief through deceit and double-dealing. Under these circumstances it was difficult, if not impossible, for the Duke of Argyll to obtain the cooperation of his tenants. The fact that Maclean of Duart would not have treated his tenantry any better, if as well, was not at issue. What Tiree might have forgiven a Maclean was not to be forgiven a Campbell. It was in this spirit that the islanders sometimes gleefully rejoiced in the failure of some of the Duke's attempt to improve their lot.

One of the reforms that the Duke of Argyll had long hoped to make was the abolishment of the run-rig system of farming. He, along with most of his contemporaries, considered it most inefficient and the major stumbling block in the improvement of his estate. His motives were no doubt governed by his desire to increase the revenues from his land, but he also viewed this as a means to aid the people of Tiree. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Duke proposed the division

of the joint-farm into a number of separate crofts, for which a single tenant would have the sole responsibility. Care was to be taken that an adequate amount of land was allotted to each croft, and that the tenant had enough livestock to enable him to successfully farm his portion. The surplus tenants and cottars of the joint-farm were to be resettled upon the coast in small fishing villages. There they were to be given smaller crofts, provided they agreed to fish for a living.

Originally the Duke of Argyll had proposed that no croft in farming use be any smaller than 4 mail-lands to insure self-sufficiency.<sup>2</sup> This meant that there would be many surplus members of the joint-farm to be relocated, if this policy was put in place. This sweeping proposal of land reform met a groundswell of resistance from the entire island of Tiree. The old system of run-rig whatever its faults, had provided a certain security, wherein a man could provide for his kinsmen and could be expected to be provided for in turn. The 'supernumeraries', as the Duke styled the surplus population under this plan, were not merely employees of the joint-tenant, but were very likely his closest kin with a valid claim upon him according to ancient custom. At first the Duke was adamant that the joint-farms be divided into crofts as he had outlined, and that this be done as soon as possible. Little by little, however, he came to understand the fear and resentment that this land reform engendered. Instead of insisting upon the break up of the joint-farms, he turned his attention to some of the larger farms on Tiree leased to absentee lairds of the Campbell name living on Mull. These he took from the Campbell tacksmen and, forsaking the 4 mail-land concept, divided them into a number of smaller crofts for those in need of land on the island. The willingness of the Duke of Argyll to provide land for a great number of the destitute was praised by all. It was not lost on the inhabitants of Tiree that he could have easily continued to lease those farms to the larger farmers, who were in a best position to pay their rents. This action on his part began a breakdown of the hostility between Tiree and the House of Campbell. When this was coupled with the offer of long term leases to those who would undertake improvements, a new era was ushered into Tiree. After almost 120 years of Campbell ownership the small tenants of the island began to respond to the fifth Duke's proposals with a new spirit of cooperation, adopted new methods of farming, and before long even took the initiative in asking for the division of their run-rig farms into crofts. The Duke of Argyll, however, had not reversed his policy of consolidation to one of fragmentation entirely out of altruism, but because of the lure of profits in kelp manufacturing, as is evident in his directive to his chamberlain in 1799. "*As you inform me that small tenants can afford to pay more rent for farms in Tiree than gentlemen-farmers, owing to the manufacture of kelp, this determines me to let the farms to small tenants which have been and are at present possessed of tacksmen who reside in Mull.*" It was at this time that a number of very small crofts were created in Barapol, Kenovay, Scarinish, Balemartine, and Crossapol. The pressure to divide more land continued as the population continued to mount, reaching 2776 in 1802. A later Duke's decision to make land available in the 1820s to those who had joined the family regiments during the Napoleonic Wars subdivided many existing holdings and contributed to a further fragmentation of the holdings of the tenantry.

### **Kelp - Boom and Bust**

Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the economy of Tiree and the other Hebrides received a much needed boost, when kelp came into demand as an industrial alkali. Kelp was a form of processed seaweed, rich in alkali and iodine, which found its major uses in the manufacture of soap and glass. In former times the people of the Hebrides had used it in its raw form as a fertilizer for their fields, but with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Britain it jumped to a new commercial importance. This seaweed grew upon the rocks, which lined the shores of the Hebrides, and was also cast up in loose form upon the beach by the restless ocean. The growing kelp was called 'beach wrack', and was cut and collected about once in every three years. The loose kelp was termed 'tangle' and was gathered every season.

Cereal crops, such as barley and oats, had been the mainstay of Tiree's economy since ancient times, but during the first part of the nineteenth century these had to yield to the once despised potato.

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<sup>2</sup> A mail-land was a unit of land containing three 'soums' approximately. A soum was an area of grazing considered sufficient to keep one cow. There was wide variation in the size of a mail-land, but 4 mail-lands would be about 50 acres on average.

This was due to several factors, not the least of which was the rise in kelping on the part of the crofters. Since kelping required the most work from June to September, which coincided with the period of heaviest agricultural activity, the crofter had to neglect his farming in favor of kelping to pay the rent. Cereal crops required three times the acreage to produce the same amount of nourishment of the edible tuber, and this became increasingly important as the size of the crofts were reduced to accommodate the burgeoning population. Potatoes were grown in 'lazy beds', which was a misleading term since they took much effort to make them. Once decayed kelp had been used to fertilize the lazy bed, but it was replaced more and more by manure as it became more valuable. This was spread in a thick, five-foot strip on the surface of the machair down the center of what was to become the bed. The ground on each side was turned over the manure or seaweed, making a sandwich with a nourishing filling of fertilizer and decayed vegetation. Another strip was then laid parallel to the first, with a two-foot ditch to provide drainage. This, of course, was just a slight variation of the rigs employed in the cultivation of grain.

The importance of kelping in the economy of Tiree in the first years of the nineteenth century was immense and a decided departure from what had been in place in former times, when cereal crops and the raising of cattle dominated the scene. This change began on a small scale in the 1750s, when this processed seaweed, rich in alkali and iodine, found a place in the manufacture of soap and glass and brought about £2 a ton at the time. Later when the crofter found that the small size of his croft made it difficult for him to make a living on farming alone, he turned to kelping to help pay the rent. By the time of the American Revolution the price of kelp had risen to £8 a ton, and the Hebridean landlords, including the Duke of Argyll, were making huge profits at the expense of their tenants both in kelp profits and in increased rents. By 1810-12 the revenues from kelp outstripped those from agricultural income.

Kelping was a repugnant occupation, however, and one Hebridean traveler observed that the life of a Negro slave on an American plantation was paradise compared with the lot of a Highland kelper. The kelper, often including the women and children of the family, waited for low tide and then armed with a sickles waded out through the cruelly cold water to cut the weed from the rocks. The crop of most value had small bladders attached to the weed, which yielded more alkali and iodine than the rest of the growth. The cut kelp was thrown into a circular ring of heather rope, in which it became entwined. This mass of kelp settled upon the rising tide and was eventually dragged ashore, where it was bound by more rope to prevent it from floating back when the tide again turned. As soon as possible the cut kelp was creeled by the people or carried by ponies to ground above the high water mark. Here it was left to dry for several days, while the kelpers watched anxiously for any heavy rain that would leach out the precious salts and leave an unprofitable mass of weed behind. Once the kelp was dried it was collected in small ricks until it was carried to the kilns to be processed into its final form.

The kilns were long narrow trenches about two feet deep, which were lined with stones, and varied from 12 to 24 feet in length. Layers of turf were placed over the stones to minimize impurities from combining with the molten kelp, although in some sandy areas metal plates were also used to effect the same result. The kelp was fired by igniting straw or heather placed among it, and the rate of burning was closely controlled to slow the process until all the weed was reduced to a molten mass. This burning of the kelp was a critical process, which took as long as 16 hours, and more kelp was added from time if any flames appeared, since it was imperative that the weed not burn too rapidly. At the end of the burn the molten mass was stirred with long wooden poles sheathed in iron and having a hook at the ends to achieve uniformity. It was then allowed to cool and then covered with seaweed or earth to protect it from the elements. The final product was a hard, brittle, multicolored glasslike solid, which was one-twentieth of the weight of the original seaweed. After being cut into various sized chunks and collected it was shipped in specially chartered vessels to seaports in the south, such as Liverpool and even London.

The ordinary crofter of Tiree found that he had no option but to engage in kelping, no matter how hard and repulsive this work might be. His croft was much too small to be support himself and his family on farming alone, and now he found that its rent had no relationship to its value as agricultural property. He had to kelp to survive, but the Duke of Argyll held all the cards in this economic game. The shipping and distribution of the processed kelp, many miles from its final market, naturally fell into his hands, as none of his small tenants had the knowledge or resources to

undertake this for themselves. The Duke of Argyll could set the price he would pay for the kelp and also his tenants' rent. The small crofter was thus reduced to the status of a wage laborer, but his condition was worse than most wage earners, because he was also an agricultural tenant. When the kelping season was over Argyll could throw him back upon his own resources, which were based on raising a few cattle and some agricultural crops. Although the individual kelper and his family could produce as much as four tons of the processed weed in season, he never received much more than £3 a ton for his efforts. Much of this, of course, was returned to Argyll in the form of rent.

The harvesting of kelp and its preparation for sale was well-suited to the small tenant and his family, such as could be found on Tiree, rather than the larger tacksman. This was a definite factor in keeping Tiree in the hands of the small tenant, while its neighbor, Mull, was gradually given over to the large grazier of cattle and sheep.

Kelp entered a boom phase during the Napoleonic Era, when the war closed down the importation of Spanish barilla and other forms of alkali from the continent. The price reached as high as £20 a ton in 1810, and the kelp magnates enjoyed huge profits at the expense of their exploited tenants. MacDonald of Clanranald was at one time selling over 1000 tons per year, MacDonald of Sleat 1200 tons, the Earl of Seaforth 900 tons, and the Duke of Argyll, the owner of Tiree, 400 tons. These were obviously boom times for the Hebridean landowners. Rents on Tiree, which had totaled £852 in 1770, mainly from barley and whisky, had risen to £2,613 by 1806, reflecting the large proceeds from the kelp harvest.

The end of the Napoleonic Wars signaled the end of the kelp boom, although the salt excise tax kept kelp competitive in price until it was lifted in 1825. At that time Spanish barilla and other alkali from the continent drove kelp prices into a disastrous decline, from which they never recovered. By 1834 kelp was selling for £3 a ton and only small amounts were collected and processed for its iodine value. Cattle prices also sharply declined about the same time, which added to the economic woes of the crofters of Tiree. The then Duke of Argyll, along with other Hebridean landowners, was under considerable economic pressure. Most refused to meet reality and lower the rents of their tenants commensurate with the disappearance of kelping, but this did nothing to halt the severe drop in their income. One by one, beginning in the 1830s, most of the large kelp magnates went bankrupt and had to sell their estates to satisfy their creditors, including Mackenzie of Seaforth, Macleod of Harris, MacDonald of Clanranald, MacNeill of Barra, and Macleod of Raasay. The Duke of Argyll, owner of Tiree, escaped bankruptcy, because he had never been as dependent on kelp and had broader resources.

The new owners of the bankrupt estates in the Hebrides had no ties to the region and had even less interest in their tenants' welfare than the old, which is not saying much. When kelp had been hugely profitable the Hebridean magnates found it to their best interests to come, however reluctantly, to the aid of their tenants in times of poor harvests or natural disaster, because their services had a definite economic value. When economic conditions changed, however, and kelpers became a drag on their estates, the owners, in financial trouble themselves, had little or no inclination to help those dependent upon them. Most, now convinced that the profits from meat and wool would buoy the Hebridean economy, proceeded to 'clear' their estates of their now unwanted tenantry. The Passenger Vessel Act was shelved in 1827 and emigration was not only encouraged, but many proprietors used forceful eviction to clear their land of the unwanted tenantry. If persuasion or the threat of starvation did not convince the Highland crofters to emigrate, his home was often pulled down before his eyes and the thatch and couples burned. This story becomes even more repugnant, when it is realized that in some instances these crofters were betrayed by their own clan chiefs. Taught by custom to look to their chiefs or tacksmen in time of distress, these simple, unworldly people were ill prepared to resist them in the form of the oppressor. The government and church, completely in the hands of the establishment, actively assisted in the evictions if called upon to do so. The callous cruelty inflicted upon the Highland crofter during this period of history still haunts the region.

As described above Tiree underwent a huge reorganization at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the division of many of the townships into the small crofts that the people of the island had desired in order to accommodate the swelling population. This, too, worked to the advantage of the Duke of Argyll, who needed a large labor force for the then very profitable kelp manufacturing. Even in the midst of the kelp boom, however, this was no panacea for the economic problems present in the

island. The year of 1802 was one of crop failure on Tiree and the report of Maxwell of Aros, the Duke's Chamberlain for the island, was at odds with the policy of fragmentation. He informed the fifth Duke that of the 319 crofts on Tiree most were "*so small that even with better management they were inadequate to support a family*". He went on to write that the productive capacity of the estate could only support the population "*except under conditions of penury*". He used this to encourage a policy of emigration, suggesting that 1000 people should be removed from the island, and indicating that "*the people themselves have come to wish it*". Whether Maxwell was correct or not in his assessment of the desire of the people to leave Tiree, his report does indicate that even in the midst of the kelp boom many were having difficulty in making ends meet.

The situation on Tiree had not been helped by the death of the fifth Duke in 1806, who, for all his missteps, had the welfare of his tenants at heart. His successor, George Campbell, the sixth Duke was a spendthrift, who made no serious effort to find employment for his people after the collapse of the kelp boom. He allowed some kelping to continue, so that his tenants could earn a meager income from this source, but it was no answer to the very severe problems confronting the island. One of his successors to the title said pointedly, "*the restraining and regulating power of a landlord was comparatively in abeyance*" (during his tenure).

While the Duke of Argyll did all he could to encourage emigration in the decades leading up to the potato famine, there were no mass evictions on Tiree during this period, as there were in most of the Hebrides. The population of the island continued to swell during this time, however, and it became increasingly difficult to provide an adequate diet for all the people. In years of a poor harvest the Tiree crofters and their family lived at the edge of starvation. The unrealistic rent structure forced many into arrears, and those crofters lived in fear of eviction. Despondency was the order of the day, since the islanders of Tiree could see little hope of better days. This often stifled any initiative and made matter worse. Seasonal work in the Lowlands offered the only relief, and a great part of the young unmarried population, especially women, resorted to this at harvest time.

The Macleans of Duart had had little use for the rigid Calvinism of the Presbyterian Church and while they were the owners of Tiree the islanders were led by the tolerant ministers they appointed. This was not materially changed with the coming of the Campbells, who, while espousing Presbyterianism, were content to allow the islanders time to adjust to the new order. This was a gradual process, which was helped by the fact that a moderate faction won control of the Kirk in 1757 and moved away from the earlier, more rigid and less tolerant doctrine. Over the next half century most of Scotland embraced 'the enlightenment', which viewed the past practices of the Kirk as superstitious and intolerant. During the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, a strong evangelical movement swept Scotland, and found very fertile ground in the Highlands and Islands. It reached somewhat fanatical proportions in the northern Hebrides, and while less virulent in Tiree it became a significant force in the island. Evangelical teachings gave hope, consolation, and spiritual comfort to those whose world was disintegrating before their eyes. In part it was a reaction to the passive role of the Kirk, which was widely identified with the moneyed interests and had not stood up for the Hebridean crofters when they were faced with eviction. Within the Presbyterian Church there was also a powerful faction, greatly influenced by Evangelicalism pushing for reform, which gained many adherents throughout the Hebrides. This finally caused a rupture with the establishment and nearly 40% of the ministry and a third of the congregations left to form The Free and Established Church. On Tiree many of the islanders became followers of two charismatic native Gaelic speakers, Duncan MacDougall, the Baptist minister, and the Reverend Archibald Farquharson, who led the Congregational, or Independent group. They were spirited evangelists, who preached with a messianic fervor. Each composed hymns, often set to popular tunes, emphasized lay participation, and attracted large crowds.<sup>3</sup>

There was one period during these dismal times, however, when it is hoped that the spirits of Tiree rose to some extent. This was during the building of the Skerryvore lighthouse over the five years of 1837 to 1842. Eleven miles to the southwest of Tiree lie a line of reefs, of which *An Sgeir Mhòr*, the large skerry, was the most dangerous. It claimed over 30 ships during the period of 1790 and 1840, and had been a hazard to navigation for many long years. In 1834 Alan Stevenson, the 27

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<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Farquharson was related in marriage to Ann (Maclean) Lamont. The Lamonts in Canada later gave up a corner of their farm in Kincardine Township for the building of the Congregational Church.



year old son of the chief engineer of the Northern Lighthouse Board, was appointed to build a lighthouse at this location to correct this situation. He concluded that only a solid stone structure would be strong enough to hold its own against the force of the waves, since foundations could not be carved out of the Lewisian gneiss due to its hardness. Construction began in 1837 with a dock, workshops, and lodgings being built at Hynish. The lighthouse was finished in July of 1842, and was truly an engineering wonder, being a tower 138 feet tall, built of 58,000 cubic feet of granite from the Ross of Mull and weighing about 4,308 tons. In Hynish 80 stonemasons were employed to shape the blocks of granite precisely, so that they could be set in place on the rock with little need for adjustment. Tiree probably did not have the skilled labor needed in the construction of the Skerryvore Lighthouse, but the construction of it must have been of economic benefit to the island. Tiree also gained a pier at Hynish in 1843, which was used by the lighthouse vessel in going back and forth from Tiree.

### **The Rent Structure of the Island**

The social configuration of Tiree and the economic condition of the island in the years leading up to the potato famine and mass emigration can best be pictured by the rent structure of its tenantry. In about a hundred year period the population had essentially tripled and the holdings of the tenants had been undergone the fragmentation necessary to accommodate this increase. In 1841 the families of tenants paying rent directly to the Argyll Estate numbered 3123, or 63% of the island's inhabitants. Cottar families, with 1838 people, were 37% of the population. This same pattern was in place in 1850, which is shown in the chart below:

**TABLE VI - TENANT STRUCTURE IN TIREE, 1850**

<b><u>Class of Tenant</u></b>	<b><u>No. in Each Class</u></b>	<b><u>Aggregate Rental</u></b>			<b><u>% of Total Rental</u></b>
		<b><u>£</u></b>	<b><u>s</u></b>	<b><u>d</u></b>	
<£5 p.a. rental	232	706	2	5	27
£5 - - £10	96	656	9	3	25
£10 - £20	31	359	9	6	14
£20 - £50	6	194	3	11	9
£50--£100	4	348	16	11	12
£100>	2	364	5	0	13
Totals	371	2629	7	0	100

Source: *The Great Highland Famine*, by T.M. Devine

This chart above illustrates that Tiree was an estate of small tenants and cottars, who were most vulnerable to any downward movement in the food supply, such as the years of a poor harvests, as in 1836 and 1837. During those years it was estimated that the potato crop was reduced to one-quarter to one half of normal, and the oat crop one half to two-thirds of expectations throughout the Highland and Islands. Tiree was evidently not as hard hit by this near disaster as Skye and the Outer Hebrides. A government investigator of the food crisis recognized that the “*grand cause of the evil*” was that “*the population of this part of the country has been allowed to increase in a much greater ratio than the means of subsistence which it afford*”. It was now increasingly apparent that the system was near a point of complete collapse in times of even a partial crop failure. In times of shortage many in the region did not have the wherewithal to purchase alternate supplies of food, and could not survive without outside assistance. In 1836-37 the government, landowners, and Lowland charities combined to avert a calamity, but it was a harbinger of what was to come in the next ten years, when the potato crop failed completely.

Consolidation had made no inroads on Tiree, and sheep-farming had not developed by this time. The critical economic problems in which Tiree found itself were the result of its burgeoning population in the midst of reduced employment opportunities. It was not because the people had been

replaced by sheep, and forced to eke out a bare living on land unsuitable for farming, which was of the case throughout other Highland areas. The Chamberlain of Tiree reported in 1845 that two-thirds of the cottars lived in “*great poverty*”, and only those working as shoemakers, weavers, and carpentry had any security. Those crofters paying rents above £5 annually were able to live “tolerably comfortably”, but about a third of those with rents under £5 were also “*very poor*”. Most of the migrant workers were the young and unmarried of both sexes and were drawn from the cottar class and the poorer tenants. The small income they derived from work outside the island often made the difference between survival or destitution for their families,

It was ironic that those crofters with adequate means, who the estate wished to keep at home, often were most interested in emigrating, while the more destitute had no wish to leave. The Duke’s Chamberlain explained that the poor had been discouraged from leaving by reports from America that they had little chance to better themselves, unless they had some resources on which to call in the new land. If the Chamberlain was correct in his evaluation of his tenants’ condition, 1238 of the cottar class and 1041 of the poor crofter families, or just a little under 50% of the island, lived in deep poverty in the years before the potato blight hit the island. These were people who had few, if any, resources to face the calamity that was to come.