

A Summary of *Parish of Tiry 1793*, by the Reverend Mr Archibald McColl, in *The Statistical Account of Scotland 1791-1799*

compiled by Iain Campbell

The ancient name for Tiree meaning “The Kingdom whose summits are lower than the waves” *Rioghachd bar fo thuin* is a very apt description of this low lying island of only about 11 miles in length and 2.5 miles wide. Together with the neighbouring island of Coll which is of similar size (14 miles by 2 miles) but are very different in geology; they make up only about 25000 acres.

Tiree has 5 or 6 hills that rise only 200-300 feet above sea level about half the land (50%) is arable and there are 24 lochs which cover a total area of 600 acres. These lochs contain no trout due to the “*incredible amount of eels*”. In the interior of the island about 1200 acres of previously common lands have been attached to adjacent farms and consist mostly of heath. There was a previous deep covering of soils but this has with peat cutting over time gone down to the rocks and in other areas the drifting inland of sand dunes is spoiling the ground.

Coll differs from Tiree in having a more rugged coast line; the land is also rugged and rocky being unfriendly to the plough so that only about one sixteenth is arable (6%). The land is however good for cattle and of the 48 small lochs on the island 19 abound with trout.

The ownership of all Tiree and the ends of Coll are the property of the Duke of Argyll while the middle section of Coll (comprising approx two thirds of the island) is the property of the Laird of Coll who is resident on the island. Tradition has it that both islands were descended from MacDonald of the Isles to the MacLeans who retained it by marriage until the family of Argyll obtained the rights to a large part of Mull, Morven and Tiree. The rent of the parish is £2000.

The sandy soils of Tiree produce poor crops unless the ground is well prepared with manure. If crops are sown early there is danger of wind damage and if late then of drought and two thirds of the arable land remains either too wet or too dry. As a consequence of this the returns from crops are poor.

Crop	Return Measured in feeds
Barley	4
Small Black Oats	2.5
Potatoes	5

Potatoes are the major crop and are generally worked in the lazy bed method, which is now being improved upon by planting in drills. This method has given a return of between 8 and 20 feeds and the author of the accounts says he has known a max return of 32 feeds. The light sandy soil, well manured is obviously good conditions for root crops such as potatoes.

In the years before this account was written in the 1790's the land was in better condition and the grain yields were better. At this time there was a scarcity of tenants for the land but now there has been a great increase in the population; the parcels of land are too small for the numbers working them which number 12 to 24 persons on one farm. With each person paying an annual rent of between £1 and £4-4s the consequence of this is that there is much ploughing of land, which then becomes impoverished and is seldom rested. The manure most

readily available is seaweed, which accounts for two thirds of that used. This seaweed rots down well but does little to add to a soil structure which contains little earth; the seaweeds high salt content does poison weeds but increasing soil salinity is a danger over time to plant growth and soil fertility.

Until mid-June the cattle of Tiree pasture on the corn, which prevents a better return being made on this crop. On the island of Coll the soils are better, contain more rock, but the crop returns here are better here. There have been trials made sowing *Great White Oats* but it was found that the soil was either too wet or too dry and also poor so that it did not ripen as early as the native oats and it could not withstand the storms as well. The return in terms of feed from this crop was less than the initial feed used. It is possible the results would be better if sown early in enclosed and drained plots.

It is a great disadvantage on Tiree in not having frequent changes of seeds but as seen with the trials above the expense is high and the disappointments frequent. It was suggested that an improvement would be better achieved with the introduction of peas, turnips and root crops in general with more green crops since the soil and climate are better suited to this.

The native flax reaches scarcely 18 inches long and with no way of dressing it for use in manufacture is of no economic use. There were some experiments of sowing grasses that did go well, the native grasses being red and white clover with daisy. There should in general terms be better use made of manure and dung in conjunction with improved drainage and enclosures.

Economy and People

The seasonal work on the island follows the pattern of planting of potatoes and sowing of oats between 26th March and 10th May. Barley is sown from 30th April to 20th June, which sees the harvest taking place between mid-August and 10th October.

The crops cannot be sown earlier because of the wet ground, sand blowing and trespass from cattle. The prevailing crop is barley which is labour intensive needing two or 3 ploughings and consumes much time.

The improvements now taking place are the building of enclosures which will have the following advantages:-

- 1 Allow earlier sowing of corn and hay
- 2 Provide fuel
- 3 Assist in manufacture of kelp
- 4 Allow more time for fishing
- 5 Allow for manure and other improvements to be made on the farms in summer.
- 6 Will help finish the harvest earlier and safer.
- 7 The general work rotation on the farms will become more seasonal.

The people's diet on Tiree consists of meal, feed and spirits. The spirits are home made and apart from local consumption between 200-300 gallons of scotch whisky were sold to neighbouring islands. This was produced from upwards of 30 stills, which have now been reduced to only 3 legal licensed stills.

Now there is a much higher population on Tiree and in the bad season of 1790 to 1791 there were hardly 300 bolls distilled and it was necessary to buy in over 2000 bolls of meal at very high price and feed potatoes reached 5s the barrel.

There is no fixed market on Tiree & Coll or the means of sending goods to market and so the populace suffer from poor prices in good years of plenty and high prices when harvests are bad and there is scarcity. The following items were listed and give an idea of what was produced and available on Tiree.

Crop	Units	Price
Barley	Boll	16s to £1
Small Oats	Boll	8s to 10s
Potatoes	Barrel	1s to 2s 6d
Beef	Barrel	£1-10s to £2
Sheep	Each	4s to 6s
Live cows	Each	£1-6s to £3-10s
Horse (4yr old)	Each	£2 to £5
Hens	Each	6d
Ducks	Each	6d
Swine	Each	5s to 10s
Fresh Cod	Each	3d
Fresh Ling	Each	6d
Butter / Cheese	24lb English	18s
Whisky	200 to 300 gallons	Not listed

In past times trees existed on Tiree the evidence with trunks and stumps in the bogs and peat but there are none now due to the windswept nature of Tiree and the presence of cattle. Some stunted trees exist on Coll, which is more sheltered, espaliers grow on walls and berries thrive in the shelter of gardens on Tiree. The Laird of Coll has a large garden where berries thrive but even trees do not do well and remain stunted in this climate.

The timber on Tiree is needed for housing etc and the Duke of Argyll supplies timber for his tenants *gratis* from his forests in Loch Sunnart about 60-70 miles away. This is dangerous and expensive work due to the need to hire boats, travel to and fro plus labour costs for upwards of 2 weeks but the need for timber is great. The dampness of the Tiree air and blowing sand rots the roof timbers making demand frequent and expensive.

Milling of grain on Tiree is made difficult as despite many brooks there is insufficient fall and water to operate the mills for more than 5 or 6 months of the year. This problem results in the labour intensive use of hand milling by querns and is done by the women. As an estimate the work of 50 women is lost at grinding annually, which in terms of lost labour, time and expenses amounts to several hundred pounds annually. The alternative of sending grain to the mainland for milling would involve great expense. The writer says that there is now an expectation of a windmill, which will improve this aspect of life greatly.

The minerals of Tiree are mainly hard whinstone but frequent outcrops of ironstone and granite occur. There is also a source of limestone and marble and there are hopes expressed

that the marble might be marketed. It comes in white, white/red and white/green as well as variegated forms. On Coll there is a lead mine at Crossapol.

On the west side of Tiree the hill of *Ceanmharra* is noted for numerous large caves that are used by nesting seabirds, other caves have ravens hawks and eagles and others are where pigeons nest. In the caves where pigeons nest is another harvest of Tiree as men make a difficult descent to set fires which suffocate them in large numbers making them easy to collect.

To the west of *Ceanmharra* lie rocks, *Sceir-mhor* where large seals of between 6 to 8 feet long are killed for their skins. The wild geese that pass through these islands feed in the meadows but are wary of man remain in the open and keep a constant sentinel so are presumably more difficult to harvest. Rabbits are numerous in sand burrows on east end of Coll and a couple of hares introduced to Tiree some 7 years ago (circa 1765) have now multiplied by many hundreds.

Wild Animals Harvested

Pigeons	From caves at <i>Ceanmharra</i>
Seals	From rocks of <i>Sceir-mhor</i>
Rabbits	From east end of Coll
Hares	On Tiree
Wild Geese	On Tiree at migration times. With difficulty no doubt.

Other wildlife seen on Tiree at various times.

Swans	On the lochs
Gray Plovers	Migratory
Rails	Very numerous
Swallows	Inhabit sand banks
Cuckoo	Rarely seen

Some wildlife that is not on Tiree includes some that are surprising, i.e. frogs and toads.

Magpies and many other mainland birds	Never appear
Snakes	Never appear
Toads	Never appear
Frogs	Never appear
Weasels	Never appear
Venomous creatures of any kind	Never appear

The climate of Tiree is mild being tempered by the sea so little frost and snow for long but it is cold in winter due to lack of shelter and is rainy three fifths of the year. The sea air despite the damp keeps the island healthy and the houses are warm and dry.

The houses of common people are constructed from the earth since there is limited building stone available. The walls are an outer and inner wall of sods with the gap between them of between 4 and 6 feet being filled with sandy soils. This result in a house that is remarkably warm and dry despite the general dampness of the island, however the outdoor nature of work and damp environment causes frequent rheumatism, dysenteries and nervous fevers among

the inhabitants. It is suggested that better drainage of lochs and flat ground would improve health and well being generally. Despite this both Tiree and Coll must be healthy places to live given the great age of many people whose age profile is listed below for the year 1792.

Number of Souls in Tiree March 1792

Total = 2416
Males = 1184
Females = 1232

Age Group	Number	As Percentage
Under 10	663	27.5%
From 10 to 20	573	23.7%
From 20 to 50	737	30.5%
From 50 to 70	334	13.8%
From 70 to 80	77	3.2%
From 80 to 90	22	0.9%
From 90 to 100	9	0.4%
Above 100	1*	0.04%

** allowed to be 106 at his death in 1792*

Annual average births over 6 years = 95
Annual average marriages over 6 years = 16
Families = 467
Farmers = 270
Workmen = 66
Cottars = 131

Number of Souls in Coll, January 1793

Total = 1041
Males = 497
Females = 544

Age Group	Number	As Percentage
Under 10	322	30.9%
From 10 to 20	203	19.5%
From 20 to 50	346	33.2%
From 50 to 70	132	12.7%
From 70 to 80	26	2.5%
From 80 to 90	7	0.7%
From 90 to 100	5	0.5%
Above 100	Nil	Nil

Families = 199
Farmers = 97
Workmen = 37
Cottars = 65

As a comparison the population return by Dr Webster from Tiree in 1755 gave the population then as:-

Tiree 1509
Coll 1193
Total = 2702

An increase in population of 755 between the years 1755 and 1793 it is also recorded that the man of 106 years old on Tiree had until 7 years before his death supported himself and his wife by herding. He was apparently lively to the last not only in walking but dancing as well.

- 1 The populations of Tiree and Coll are almost exclusively natives as it is recorded that there are not 40 natives of other parishes in total on these two isles.
- 2 It is said that tradesmen are numerous but some good ones are much wanted and that the tradesmen are not distinct from the farmers which indicates perhaps an understandable need for people that are self sufficient in most things to be “Jack of all trades” but perhaps not master of one.
- 3 Many men and women work as weavers
- 4 There are very few bachelors or widowers.
- 5 The men frequently marry at ages of 19 or 20.
- 6 The population has also increased over the past 14 years (1779 to 1793) which the minister attributes to “three successful courses of inoculation”
- 7 The minister says that the parish has no resident surgeon and the poor people suffer as a result. It is not practical to send to the mainland for a surgeon since time, travel, expense and weather are against it being of any use. The minister reports seeing women dying from complications in childbirth far too often.
- 8 On occasions the community have made up a small salary for young surgeons to reside among them for a time as a temporary appointment only. The minister makes a passionate plea for public funds to allow for a surgeon to live among them permanently. He points out that at the time of the American war in one 12 month period 120 youths and that this spring (1793, Napoleonic Wars) more than 100 have left the island to serve the country and he says “Does this not merit attention in many respects?”

Another important point made by the minister Mr Archibald McColl in this statistical account of 1793 is that “There are no registers of births or burials, and the parish records preceding the present incumbent’s time have been lost”. It would be good to find out when he started on Tiree but I suspect that the clue might be that he used 6 years for his average when calculating births and marriages which would have him starting on Tiree in about 1787 or thereabouts –I.C.

Fuel on Tiree is a big problem, the best quality peats are found on Coll but at such a distance from farms that coal bought at moderate price would be cheaper. One end of Tiree can for a few years make peats but at the other end about 200 families are reduced to great distress. Removal of the shallow peat destroys the remaining soil and exposes rocks it also requires labour that in the summer season should be used for improving their farms rather than collecting fuel. Some have had to burn dried dung, straw, furniture and even the roofs of their houses when fuel is scarce.

The Minister's Plea Regarding Manufacturing Opportunities and Fishing.

The present population is too great for the land to support them all and some other employment is desperately needed. He states that between 1200 or 1500 males and females above 8 years old could be spared for fishing or other manufacturing. To do this he suggests that farm units should be larger with fewer tenants and more enclosures so that the land is better used and improved. This will never happen when numerous small individual plots are being worked; families can never thrive in these conditions. By turning the superfluous tenants into manufacturers the remaining ones would get a better living off the land and improve their families' lot considerably. Better education more produce to sell and cash coming back to the community through sale of manufactured goods would result in a village supporting most of the necessities of life. As part of this improvement and to encourage tradesmen he suggests that an enclosure of several acres should be set aside for people to work by hand planting greens root vegetables and grass seeds, an allotment system in effect.

As a suggestion for manufacture he says that:-

- 1 good flax could be sown but expertise is needed to show how this could be prepared and used in manufacture.
- 2 Superior quality of clay points to another possibility.
- 3 Kelp might be used for several purposes.
- 4 Salt required for fisheries might be made here.
- 5 Local marble might be quarried.
- 6 Other manufacturers might import materials easily to make use of the work force available in making nets, stockings etc.
- 7 Above all fishing should not be neglected in Tiree & Coll as it is one of the best stations in all the western isles being close to good grounds. From the accounts that follow it would seem the men of Tiree were not natural fishermen which is surprising.

In 1787 several "companies of natives" of little experience at a single setting of 200 – 300 hooks some 30-80 cod, ling, skate eels, dogfish etc. Also there were some "sail-fish" (basking shark?) harpooned which yielded from 5 to 8 barrels of oil. Herring frequent the bay of Gott but there are no nets on the island.

The men of Barra come across to Tiree for the fishing and are better at it catching in one sloop over a two month period between 12,000 and 16,000 cod and ling. In this year, 1793, there are four companies from Barra, one from Ayr and one from Tiree working. They commonly catch from 100 to 240 fish per day so that sometimes they do not raise all their lines at once their boats are not big enough to carry the fish.

Despite such good fishing on their doorstep, and there being 10 boats in the parish of between 3 to 14 tons and many hardy seaman to man them, they do not pursue the fishing with spirit. The reasons are obvious; they are mostly farmers having small portions of land needing daily attendance. Poor people will have a sure but sometimes starving way of supporting their families and are unwilling to risk what little they have in a new business venture such as fishing. The danger of not being successful frightens them. There is also the problem of a market, what use are 200 or 300 cod without a buyer?

The fish needs to be preserved with salt and the minister then says how the salt tax is another disincentive to investing in fishing.

- 1 If prohibited salt is used the catch is confiscated on way to market.
- 2 For small amounts of cargo it is too costly to visit the customs house to observe all the regulations regarding salt.
- 3 The rules are too complicated to understand.
- 4 Country lads he has known have been likely ruined from neglect of the forms. Even gentlemen who know business suffer much as well.
- 5 The minister appeals for someone to explain to people of “low capacities” i.e. simple folk, the regulations if they must be kept in force.
- 6 Unless something is done about a small thing such as salt it will discourage the great things that there is the potential for in fishing for improving the islander’s lot.

His suggestion is that public funds be invested in purchasing hooks, lines, nets, harpoons which would raise the spirits of the people on Tiree and that there should be an official store and source for salt on the island. This would enable a good food supply for the islander’s year long and with the opening of the Crinan Canal communications with the Clyde would be greatly improved with other markets. There would also need to be a considerable investment in improving the islands harbours and he describes these and the problems in various locations.

Sheep, Black Cattle and Horses

A few years ago (before 1793) there were at least 14,000 sheep in Tiree and Coll but the Laird of Coll banished them from his lands. The climate of Tiree was not good for them and their numbers reduced to no more than 1100 in the parish. There is not enough range for them and they do not thrive. Certain summer weeds affect them and the winter pastures are too wet. The grass is easily uprooted and the sheep dig for roots and cause erosion that allows sand to drift and ruin fields. The pasture in Tiree is already fine and sheep convert what little coarse grass even finer to the detriment of the cattle. When the cattle are moved from Tiree pasture to the mainland the change in their diet from fine to coarse grass gives them a condition of Murrain or bloody urine and their value is reduced to one third until a winter’s season on the pasture cures this. But without any sheep then wool would be unavailable at a reasonable price.

The cattle on Tiree that do not get enough good coarse pasture also suffer from this bloody urine and the solution of enclosures of coarse grass to keep sheep out helps prevent this problem. Generally the cattle and horses are in starving poor condition, this greatly affects their fertility. Many tenants keep two or three cows with hardly a calf being born in years. The cattle reared here would reach prices similar prices as the mainland if it were not for the problems of transport. They are beautiful cattle and when sent to good English pastures grow to massive size. An example given is one fed by a Mr Spearman of Northumberland in 1790 that weighed in beef, tallow and hide 117 stone 5.25 lbs. (NB 160 stone = 1 ton)

Agriculture on Tiree 1793

Animals / Items	Numbers
Horses	1400
Sheep	600
Black cattle	1800
Black cattle ferried annually	260
Black cattle slaughtered annually	70
Tons of Kelp manufacture	245
Ploughs	160

Agriculture on Coll 1793

Animals / Items	Numbers
Horses	500
Sheep	500
Black cattle	1300
Black cattle ferried annually	250
Black cattle slaughtered annually	30
Tons of Kelp manufacture	55
Ploughs	34

Agriculture

There has been a start made recently on enclosures, which as noted above is needed for improvements. Transport about the island is hampered by lack of roads and so there are only 5 carts on the whole island. For ploughing a small light Scotch plough is used, it is difficult to obtain timber and the services of a Wright (blacksmith). The method of ploughing using one man and two horses is only practiced by two in the parish; more could adopt this if they had a stronger breed of horses.

The normal ploughing method involves 4 men and 7 horses at the same furrow as follows:-

- 1 2 men and 5 horses attend the plough
- 2 2 men and 2 horses attend the Ristle or Sharp Iron which breaks the sward ahead of the plough which follows behind.
- 3 On one farm there may be between 4 and 13 ploughs going and at the same time 30 or 96 horses with creels taking seaweed from the shore to the fields plus some idle mares and foals on the farm.
- 4 It is very labour intensive work for men and horses and change (improvements) is needed. Despite being attached to the old ways when new and better ways are seen the natives will change their methods when they can.

Wages and Gratuities in 1789

Male labourer annually	£2-12s
Female servant annually	£1

Wages and Gratuities in 1793

Male labourer annually	£3-6s
Female servant annually	£1-6s

- 1 The wage rise over the 4 year period of nearly a third is due to more mobility of the workers who are going to the low country (central Scotland) so a wage rise needed to retain people on the island. In some places they can easily triple these island wages.
- 2 Another cause given is the enlistment of men into the army, particularly the fencible corps with promise of possessions to them and their friends on their return.
- 3 Workmen and their families are engaged for a fourth or fifth of the crop and grass.
- 4 Tradesmen daily rate is from 7d to 1s-2d per day plus victuals.

The Character and Customs of the People.

The common people are not very good at church going but are improving in this. They retain some Roman Catholic sayings and expletives in everyday language. They are of Protestant faith and there is no break from the established church here, the only Catholics on these islands are a few servants from Barra.

A few of the common people speak English but the first language for all is Gaelic. It is a great help for the morals of the community that there is only three licensed stills and the only public houses are the four at the ferries and harbours in Tiree and Coll.

For generations back there has been no robbery, murder or suicide on the islands. The islanders are described as not easily deceived, mannerly, lively, ingenious, very hospitable to strangers and kind to those less fortunate. Those shipwrecked have nothing to fear and have always found protection and safety with these people.

The people are of ordinary size but remarkable for agility; enjoy entertainments, singing and composing songs and hold dances at different farms in turn. They are neat, cheerful and humorous with hardly two or three people "corpulent" in either isle.

The Poor and Schools

The people are attentive to the poor in sickness and want; they rarely have cash to give but are generous with food and practical help. In 1793 it was estimated that there were 50 poor on Tiree and 34 on Coll. The Kirk Session has only about 3s for each annually but there is 5s or 6s allowed for their burial from these same funds.

Until lately education was lacking the people did not have a taste for it. There are two schools with not 10 pupils in each set up by the "Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge" but after a recent visit by the Rev. Dr Kemp more funds have been allocated and so now the teachers salary allows them to teach all pupils gratis and books have been provided as well. A new school is being set up on Coll and there are 60 to 80 pupils now in each school. The parish is in need of 4 schools on Tiree and 2 on Coll so more funds are still needed. An itinerant music teacher has been employed by the same Society to teach the congregations and the lessons are well attended by all ages. Sewing and spinning schools would be of great benefit as the women are "backward" in this respect.

Emigration

In 1792 from Coll 36 men, women and children emigrated to America but so far none from Tiree have gone although some talk of doing so. The failure of crops in 1790 and 1791 and the low price of kelp and cattle have devastated the people and they must soon go somewhere for relief unless some employment is brought to the island.

Ferries

- 1 Tiree to Coll (no direct ferry Tiree to Mull)
- 2 Coll to Mull about 8 or 12 miles

The fare for a stout boat and hands is 12s to 15s

There is a great need for a packet between the isles and Mull, especially if Tobermory (the nearest post office) increases in size. There is hope that when the Crinan Canal is finished that trade will increase with the western isles and that a ferry from Tiree to Crinan would be established that would greatly increase the islands prosperity.

Church and Stipend

Three paces of worship in the parish. Scorbie in Tiree is the mother church.

Stipends and Incomes	Remarks
Not exceeding £50 plus £16 13s 4d in lieu of manse, glebe and communion elements.	Tiree
Salary of £33 6s 3d	Assistant in Coll
Teinds of the parish	By decreets 1726,1729,1733
211 bolls victual, 2/3 bear, 1/3 oat meal, £294 5s 6d Scotch	
The tenth part stipend	Taken up as late as 1752

Advantages and Disadvantages

- 1 The islands proprietors have been good to their tenants.
- 2 The lands though impoverished are capable of improvement.
- 3 The fishing if encouraged could be profitable.
- 4 The difficulties in getting salt, falling foul of the law in this regard have discouraged the fishing when steps should be taken to encourage this industry.
- 5 The harbours need to be improved and income could be derived from this.
- 6 A resident surgeon/doctor is needed urgently.
- 7 A proper mill is needed and is a source of "heavy grievance" since it means the loss of several hundred pounds.
- 8 There is a great need for markets and better communications.
- 9 A village is needed where the superfluous labour could be employed in manufacturing.
- 10 There is a need for changes of seeds and the introduction of green crops, enclosures, drainage and subdividing of small farms.

- 11 There are tradesmen needed and more carts so that farms might be improved more easily.
- 12 A better breed of horse to expedite labour, with fewer horses on the island more black cattle could be grazed.
- 13 There is too much time spent in the summer providing fuel (peats) if the duty on coal were less then that could be used and time could be spent more productively on the farm. An appeal is made for an exemption from coal duty citing that the youth of the island are loyal and ready to serve King and country and are deserving of this consideration.

[*End of Account*]

Timeline of World Events between years 1783 to 1802

Year	Event
1783	Britain recognises US independence Loyalists settle in Canada First manned balloon flight
1784	First official mail coach in UK
1788	Britain establishes Australian colony
1789	Mutiny on the Bounty Washington is first US President French Revolution starts
1791	Death of Mozart
1792	French republic founded
1793	Louis XVI executed France declares war on UK, Holland, Spain Holy Roman Empire declares war on France
1794	Reign of Terror in France
1795	First UK settlements in New Zealand
1796	Jenner discovers smallpox vaccine
1798	Napoleon invades Egypt Irish Rebellion suppressed Nelson defeats French at Aboukir, Egypt Time of Wordsworth and Coleridge
1800	Act of Union between England / Ireland
1801	First paddle steamer in Scotland
1802	Peace of Amiens between England / France