

**Extract from *A Topographical Dictionary of Scotland*, by Samuel Lewis,
1846**

extracted by Keith Dash

[In the preface, the author states that The Dictionary was based, in the main, on answers to a list of written questions mailed to "the Clergy, Resident Landed Proprietors, Literary Gentlemen, and others, a copy of it being sent to each parish in the country". In this extract, the spelling and punctuation are the same as in the original text except that some of the very long paragraphs have been broken down into shorter paragraphs.]

TIREE and COLL, a parish in the division of MULL, county of ARGYLL, the one district (W.) and the other 20 (W. by N.) from Tobermory; containing 5833 inhabitants, of whom 1442 are in the island of Coll.

Tiree is supposed to have derived its name, signifying in the Gaelic language "the Country of Iona", from its having formed part of the possessions of that church in the time of St. Columba. It was granted by the Macdonalds, lords of the Isles, to the clan McLean, who retained possession of it till the year 1674, when it became the property of the Argyll family, whose descendant, the Duke of Argyll, is now the sole owner.

The island of Coll, of which the name is of unknown derivation, was given in the reign of James II to John Garve, first laird of Coll, and ancestor of the present family who still retain the central portion of the isle: the extremities, having been acquired in 1674 by the Argyll family, were lately sold by the duke to two different families, and the island consequently now belongs to three several proprietors. During the minority of the young laird of Coll, long ago, the chief of the clan McLean sent an armed force to take possession of the island, which he designed to annex to his own territories; but in these views he was opposed by Niel Mor, uncle and guardian to the laird; and a sanguinary battle took place near a small rivulet called Sruthan-nan-Ceann, in which the forces of McLean were routed with great slaughter. In resentment of his defeat and disappointment, McLean some time afterwards dispatched a party of his retainers to Mull, the residence of Niel Mor; and that disinterested chieftain, who had merely defended the property of his nephew from all attempts to wrest it from the rightful owner, was treacherously surprised and slain.

The islands of TIREE and COLL are situated to the west of the Isle of Mull, from which they are separated by the channel of the Little Minch; and are divided from each other by a narrow sound in which lies the small island of Gunna, forming also part of the parish. Tiree is about thirteen miles in extreme length, varying from three to six miles in breadth, and comprises nearly 18,000 acres; Coll is about fourteen miles in length, and three in extreme breadth, making the whole parish, including the sound, about twenty-nine miles long. Gunna is of very inconsiderable extent, uninhabited, and affording only pasture for a few cattle.

The surface of Tiree is generally low and level, rising little above the high-water mark; but towards the west and south-west are some conspicuous hills, of which the highest, Bein-Heinish, has an elevation of 500 feet above the level of the sea; and Ceann-a-Mhara, about half that height, and forming the western headland, is perforated with numerous fissures, the resort of multitudes of aquatic fowl.

The surface of Coll is rugged and uneven, and diversified with numerous hills. Few of these attain more than 300 feet above the sea; but though so low, the views obtained from the island are extensive and interesting, comprising, to the north and north-west, the isles of Skye, Uist and Barra; to the south, the isles of Jura and Islay; and to the east the mountains of Ardnamurchan, Sunart, Appin, and Lorn.

In both the islands are many small fresh-water lakes, none of which, however, either for their extent or the peculiarity of their features, are entitled to particular description; they abound with eels of small size, and in some few are found trout of inferior quality, which are taken with the rod, more for amusement than for profit. There are several perennial springs, some of which are chalybeate, and also some small streams, but none deserving the appellation of rivers.

The COASTS of Tiree are chiefly flat and sandy; those of Coll, more rocky and precipitous; and both are indented with bays. That of *Kirkapol*, near the eastern extremity of Tiree, is about two miles in width, and penetrates for nearly the same distance into the land; it is of considerable depth, and the bottom affords safe anchorage-ground for vessels of the largest burthen. The bay of *Heinish*, partly inclosed by the headland of that name, to the west of Kirkapol, is spacious and easily accessible, but from its exposure to the south-east winds, is insecure as a shelter for vessels in stormy weather. A pier was constructed here by the Commissioners of Northern Lights, to facilitate the landing of materials for the erection of the lighthouse on Sceir-Mhor. Near the bay of Kirkapol, and forming part of its eastern shore, is the small island of *Soay*, separated from the mainland by a narrow channel which is passable at half-tide; it was formerly valuable for its quantity of kelp, and is covered with verdure affording good pasturage.

The bay of *Loch Breacacha*, on the south shore of Coll, extends for nearly a mile into the land, and has good anchorage for vessels during the summer months. To the west of it is the bay of *Crosspol*, which is about two miles in width, and bounded on the north by a sandy beach more than a mile in length; but from the number of sunken rocks with which it abounds, it affords but very insecure accommodation, and is scarcely ever frequented as a harbour. Not far from the north-eastern extremity of Coll is the island *Eilean-Mhor*, uninhabited, like those of Gunna and Soay, but affording pasturage for a few sheep.

The fish taken off the coasts are cod, ling, skate, lythe, gurnet, saith, and occasionally turbot: of these, the cod and ling are cured, and sent to the different markets; the others are merely for home consumption. There are ninety-four skiffs in the parish, though seldom more than ten are regularly engaged in the fisheries. Herrings are frequently seen in shoals, but no vessels are employed in the herring-fishery. Various kinds of shell-fish are found on the shores, of which the principal are, lobsters, crabs, cockles, lampets, muscles, and razor fish; large quantities are taken by the inhabitants, and, especially during seasons of scarcity, they contribute greatly to the sustenance of the poorer classes.

The SOIL in both islands is various; for the greater part, light and sandy; in some places, a tenacious clay resting on a substratum of whinstone; in others, a deep rich loam alternated with moss and gravel. In the island of Coll, the larger portion is moorland and moss; nearly in the centre of that of Tiree is a plain more than 1500 acres in extent, affording rich and luxuriant pasture.

About 6000 acres of the whole land are arable, 11,000 moorland and waste, and more than 750 under water; the crops are oats and barley, potatoes, of which great quantities are raised, and flax, with the usual grasses. The system of husbandry is adapted to the nature of the lands, and was once confined to the spade; the farm buildings are in general of a very indifferent order; and although the lands have been partially drained and inclosed, the state of agriculture is far from perfect.

The cattle are of the native black-breed: from the want of winter pasture, those in Tiree are greatly inferior, both in size and quality, to those of Coll, and are subject to certain diseases that render them less hardy, and less capable of being driven to distant markets, than the latter, which fetch a much higher price. The sheep in both islands are of the black-faced and Cheviot breeds; but they are only of recent introduction, and it has not yet been ascertained whether the rearing of them is attended with profit. Great numbers of pigs, which have been found a remunerating stock, are reared, and sent to Glasgow and to Greenock, where they obtain a ready sale.

There are no plantations, though, from the discovery of trunks and roots of trees in the mosses, the islands appear to have been anciently well wooded.

The rocks are generally composed of whinstone and granite, and the principal substratum is primitive limestone. Marble of a variegated colour is found, and was quarried by the Tiree Marble Company for a few years; some large blocks are still lying near the quarry, but the works have been altogether discontinued. In the west of the island of Coll, a vein of lead-ore has been discovered, but it has not been brought into operation; and near the manse of Tiree, and in various other places, are indications of iron-ore, but there are no mines of any kind in the parish.

The rateable annual value of Tiree and Coll is £4473. The only gentleman's seat is Coll House, the residence of Hugh McLean Esq., erected towards the middle of last century. The parish contains no villages of any importance. There are, however, one good inn at Tiree, and one in Coll; and fairs, chiefly for black-cattle, are annually held in the parish on the Tuesday before the Mull fair in May, the Monday before Mull fair in August, and the Wednesday preceding the Mull fair in October.

Post-offices, under the office of Tobermory, have been established at Tiree and Coll; but for some years no regular packet has been stationed here, and during the interval from the end of November till the beginning of April, nearly all intercourse with other places is suspended, unless when a day of fair weather may warrant the launching of a skiff. The internal communication is also rather defective, from want of good roads; and with the exception of some of the sandy beaches, which are firm enough to allow the passage of a horse and cart, there is little opportunity of passing from one part of the parish to another. The ferry between the two islands, which is about two miles in width, and sometimes dangerous from the rapidity of the tides, is frequently impassable; the shore on each side is mostly covered with surf, and near Gunna are some sand-banks under water, which shift their position in tempestuous weather, and add greatly to the difficulty of the passage.

The ECCLESIASTICAL affairs are under the superintendence of the presbytery of Mull and synod of Argyll. The minister's stipend is £346.18.7, subject to the payment of £22.4.5, tithe due to the synod, and of £60 or £65, a stipend to an assistant minister; with a manse, and a glebe valued at £4.10. per annum: patron, the Duke of Argyll. The old church of Tiree was

built in 1776, and enlarged in 1786; it was a plain structure containing 500 sittings. In lieu of it, two new churches have been built in Tiree, of late years. The church of Coll was erected in 1802, chiefly by the proprietor of Coll, who keeps it in repair; it is a plain edifice containing 300 sittings. The assistant minister officiates in this church. A catechist in connexion with the Established Church has a small salary from the funds of the synod; and there are places of worship in Tiree for members of the Free Church, Baptists, Independents, and members of the United Secession.

There are also two parochial schools in Tiree, affording instruction to nearly 200 children; the masters have each a salary of £22.4., with a house and garden, and the fees average from £4 to £5 each. In Coll is a school supported by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, who pay the master a salary of £10, to which £5 are added by the proprietor, with a dwelling-house, and grass for a cow. Two schools, one in Tiree and one in Coll, are maintained by the education committee of the General Assembly, who pay the masters each a salary of £25. There are likewise a school supported by the Gaelic Society, who allow the master £20; one by the Glasgow Auxiliary Society, with a salary of £12; and various others, of which the masters receive salaries varying from £10 to £18 from private individuals.

Among the relics of antiquity are numerous remains of Danish forts, near the coast; and in a lake about the centre of the island, are the remains of an ancient castle, supposed to have been the residence of the original proprietor of Tiree. There are also perceptible the foundations of some religious houses: two crosses near their site are still almost entire.

Several rudely-formed coffins of stone have been discovered at various times, containing human bones in a greatly decayed state; and coins, chiefly of copper, and a small silver coin of the reign of Malcolm Canmore, were found some years since. About the commencement of the present century, an armlet of gold, about five inches in diameter and one inch in breadth, was found in a stony knoll, and near it were human bones scattered among the earth and stones; the bracelet was sent to Glasgow, and sold for a small sum.

On a farm in the west of Coll are two obelisks of stone, about six feet high, and fifteen yards asunder, and which, according to tradition, point out the grave of some Fingalian hero; and the ancient castle of Breacacha, the baronial residence of the lords of the Isles, is still tolerably entire.

The Duke of Argyll takes his inferior title of Baron of Tiree from this parish.