THE MULL OF KINTYRE HAND-LINE FISHERY

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A single small fishery, at the Mull of Kintyre, and two fishing communities constitute the material of this paper, which is cast in the bleakest mould of social history, because the fishery has gone and the communities with it.

This paper is structured heavily on oral tradition. I shall explain why that is so, not least to answer the misgivings of many orthodox historians to this kind of historical statement. Oral history, in its popular conception, may be expressed as the people's version of events, transmitted from generation to generation ... and distorted in the process. That interpretation certainly has validity, but is hardly the whole truth.

In terms of remote events, oral history generally compares unfavourably with contemporary written accounts, should these exist. This, however, of itself, is too complex a study to enter into. I wish instead to mention some of the special values inherent in oral tradition. These values reside in the peculiar intimacy of the oral testimony, by which I mean that one may tackle a heap of published reports on – say – a localised fishery, and yet to know the reality behind the plain facts and statistics – how fish were caught, and where, and in what conditions – one will have to go to the fishermen themselves and ask them.

Now, I do not seek to diminish the importance of documentary records. These embody values which oral history manifestly cannot replace, by reason of its very weakness in matters statistical and chronological. Time is against the documentary historian, but is not against his material, which may lie for a hundred years after his absence and be opened by other hands and examined by other eyes; but time and death take away the material of the oral historian. Inexorably, the living repositories of the history which he would make one by one vanish.

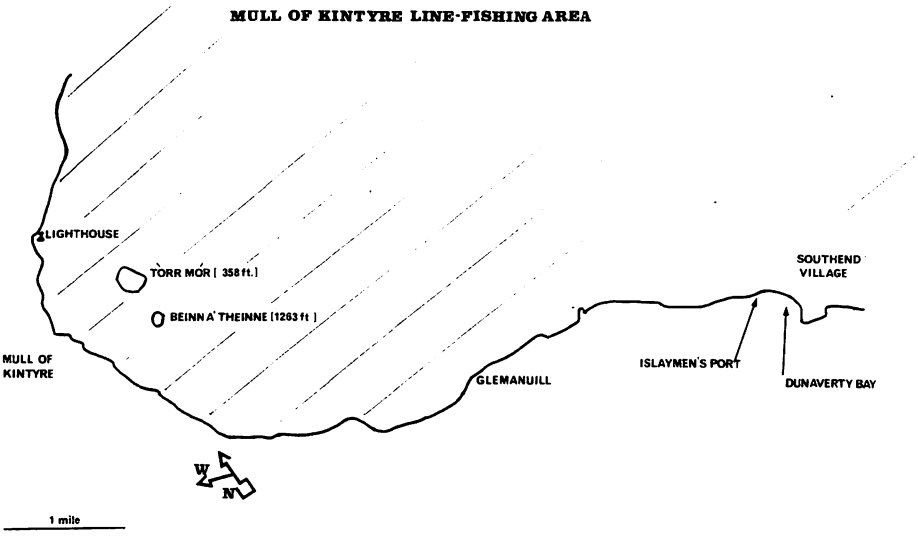

Figure 1. Mull of Kintyre Line-fishing Area.

A significant part of this paper concerns the involvement of Islay fishermen in the Mull of Kintyre line fishery, yet I have not a single scrap of direct evidence to present. While staying on Islay in 1975, I heard of an old fisherman, Neil Ferguson, who had experienced the Mull fishing as a young man. I was advised to visit him, but, having little interst then in that fishery, I declined the opportunity, and Neil Ferguson is now dead.

The Mull of Kintyre fishery was, it must be admitted, of very slight significance commercially, and this is reflected in the paucity of written references to it. More important and better documented was the long-line cod fishery from Gigha, but I consider, on balance, the Mull fishery more interesting, having been the only hand-line fishery within the sea area of south Argyll, which is the geographical setting of this paper. The explanation is one of technical necessity, dictated by actual fishing conditions. These conditions were fast-running tides and a hard sea-bottom, entirely destructive of long-lines. Long-lining, conversely, was ideally suited to the nature of the Gigha fishery, which was carried on to the west of the island on deep, clean banks.

Of the two communities concerned in the Mull fishery, one was native and the other from Rinns of Islay. These two groups were of differing cultural stock and disposition. The Islaymen were, of course, characteristically Gaelic; but the Southend men represented the rich racial mix which distinguished the population of South Kintyre from that of the upland sweep of the northern peninsula – original Gaelic stock, conjoined first with Lowland plantation stock, and later with immigrant stock from the north of Ireland, no more than fifteen miles west across the North Channel and on the clearest of days so distinct that, through binoculars, the individual fields and houses of the Antrim coast assume a startling immediacy.

I have said that the fishery was worked at the Mull of Kintyre, and here a little explanation is perhaps required to correct the popular misconception which obscures its true geographical position. The Mull of Kintyre is not simply a grand equivalent of Kintyre as a whole, as journalists have long mistakenly supposed it to be, and as Paul McCartney once and for all fixed it in popular consciousness. The Mull – or 'Moil', as the old people have it – is that bare wall of rock which forms the south-western butt of the peninsula, and beyond which lies the coast of Canada.

Around the Scottish coast few places compelled such apprehension among seamen as did the Mull. Rapid tides conflict there; an Atlantic swell lifts in unchecked between the western islands of Rathlin and Islay, an incessant lazy motion which, with rising wind, is quick to break up; unpredicatable sea-fogs mass in and obliterate the land entirely. These were the factors which earned the Mull its notoriety as a graveyard of ships – for long after the lighthouse, one of the first in Scotland, was built in 1788. That these fishermen of South Kintyre and Islay made that place their fishing ground, and fished it in the little Irish skiffs which were customary there, testifies, I think, to the quality of their seamanship.

Crews belonging to Ballycastle in the north of Ireland were said also to have fished the Mull until the declining years of the nineteenth century, and oral tradition in the Southend district affirms that one, at least, of these visiting fishermen, John McKay, brought his family from Ballycastle and settled in Southend. He enters the local register

of fishing boats as a boat-owner for the first time in 1897, with the open skiff *Rose* of Dunaverty, and disappears – at least, from these records – in 1901.

The Islay fishermen – from the twin villages of Portnahaven and Portwemyss on the Rinns – evidently began to come to the Mull fishery about 1900. The first reference in the annual reports of the Fishery Board for Scotland appears in 1902. In that year, 'Some crews tried the Mull of Cantyre, but they returned home without obtaining any good results'. The shift to the Mull grounds was forced by failure of their native saithe fishery. 'Saithe are chiefly to be found where herrings are plentiful,' the report maintained, 'so that fishermen ascribe the non-success of the fishing to the scarcity of herrings on their coast.' (FBS, 1902, 240)

In the following year, 1903, the line fishing off the Rinns again failed – the fifth successive bad season. In the minds of these Islaymen there no doubt rankled the recent and bitter memory of the collapse of the great Islay herring fishery, from which their fortunes may fairly be said never to have recovered. That fishery, which in 1886 first attracted Kintyre fishermen and which, by 1889, had become a national concern, ended suddenly in 1894. Its dramatic, if brief, history is document in *The Ring-Net Fishermen* (Martin, 1981). The popular connection of the failing line-fishery with the failed herring fishery was explicitly supported in the Fishery Board's report of 1903:

> 'Since the failure of the Loch Gruinart herring fishing, the fishing has generally declined, and there is every reason to believe that the scarcity of cod and saithe is entirely due to the absence of the herrings which used to visit the coast.' (FBS, 1903, 243)

The native island fishermen, who adhered doggedly to the traditional drift-netting method, had resented the incursion of the Kintyre crews with their phenomenally productive ring-nets. Relations between the Islaymen and the Kintyre visitors finally broke down in 1891, as one incident, reported in the *Campbeltown Courier* of 26 September in that year, will illustrate:

> '... The Islaymen had been quietly maturing a plan of attack upon their brethern from Kintyre, and resolved to treat them very much the same as Captain Cook

was treated when he attempted first to land upon the South Sea Islands. When our men proceeded to cast their nets they were vigorously pelted with stones. Moving about two miles further along the shore, they were followed (we presume in boats) and the same barbarous treatment repeated. At last one of the nine or ten pairs of Campbeltown boats shot their net, and other skiffs surrounding them afford them as much protection as possible. This crew succeeded in hauling 38 boxes of splendid large herrings in circumstances the reverse of favourable.'

In the early years of the Islaymen's involvement in the Mull fishery, eight or ten skiffs were said to have come across, but in the final years that number was reduced to two or three. The advanced ages of the latter Islaymen were remarked upon by those in Kintyre who remembered their coming, and that may well have been a factor of significance in the decline.

THE GLEMANUILL HUTS

The fishermen slept in thatched huts, built of turf and stone, on the shore of the bay marked on maps as Port Mean (Port Mìn: the Calm Port), but commonly know as Glemanuill or Glemanuill Port. There is, however, an Islay tradition – belonging presumably, to the earlier years of the fishery – that they took their boats into a bight of the coast and 'slept under the sail'. That bight was known to the Islaymen as Port na Maoile (the Port of the Mull), which is almost certainly a name which they themselves conceived, because there is no knowledge of it at all in Kintyre. Where exactly Port na Maoile was, cannot now be ascertained, but quite possibly it was one and the same with the bay at Glemanuill.

That information came from Mr Gilbert Clark, Port Charlotte, Islay. Confirmation of the Islaymen's practice of sleeping under sail at the Mull fishery reached me in a remarkable circuitous way. The Ballycastle historian, Mr Hugh Alexander Boyd, had been advising me on the Islay links with Ireland, and during our correspondence Mr Boyd quite fortuitously mentioned that in Port Ellen, Islay, he had taken notes from one of the last of the Islay fishermen who had known the Mull. These notes were few, admittedly, but in the absence of any more direct information on the Islaymen's involvement there, I was grateful to have them.

That old Islayman with whom he had spoken and whose name, regrettably, is unknown, had gone to the Mull as a boy. His duties were to keep the fire going at the shore station and to ensure that the cured fish were not spoiled by rain as they dried on the rocks. This suggests that he had no part in the actual fishing, which seems reasonable enough. He also spoke of their sleeping under sail, which would simply involve lying in the boats under cover of the canvas. This was a fairly common practice among the open boat herring fishermen of Kintyre, as no doubt of elsewhere, and co-existed with the certainly less arduous practice of camping ashore in tents and wooden huts. These customs pre-date the advent of decked skiffs, which furnished the fishermen with sleeping accommodation and cooking facilities in the boats.

A couple of the Islaymen's huts plainly remain, in fairly sound state considering the extreme crudeness of their construction. Each of these huts lies to the west of the burn. The shape of each was governed by the conformation of existing rock. The building closest to the burn has been constructed within a natural recess of rock, while that further west has as its seaward wall a rock face. The walls are formed of rough unmortared rocks, large and small together, built up with little attention to regularity of structure. Other huts there probably were, but these, if they remain, are less certainly identifiable. Some may have been predominantly of turf, and since collapsed. The necessity of some crews' sleeping under sail is apparent, because neither of these remaining huts could possibly have accommodated more than a single crew, and uncomfortably at that.

The sole scrap of written evidence of the Islaymen's huts appeared in a newspaper report of the wreck of the Glasgow cargo steamer *Pirate* at Port Mean, in October 1913, during a night of heavy fog. The crew abandoned the foundering vessel, taking ashore their belongings, which they placed 'in a hut on the shore which is used as a shelter by the Islay fishermen when they come to prosecute the cod fishing at Mull'. (CC, 14/10/13) The men evidently spent that night, at least, in the huts. Spectators from Southend saw that mounds of dry bracken had been gathered into the huts to serve as bedding. (McShannon, 20/11/81)

THE BOATS

The names and owners are known of a few of the Rinns boats which fished the Mull:

Malcolm MacNeill's *Guiding Star*, CN 593, 26 ft of keel John Turner's *Harvest*, CN 608, likewise 26 ft of keel Neil MacIntyre's *Try Again*, CN 646, 22 ft of keel	all of Portnahaven
Neil MacNeill's *Christina*, CN 566, 24 ft of keel	Portwemyss

Of Donald MacNeill's *Lily* of Portwemyss, CN 162, fuller specifications are available. She was built in 1880 at Moville in Ireland, has a keel length of 24 ft, an overall length of 25.8 ft, and was 6.5 ft of beam, and 2.1 ft of draught.

That class of line-skiff was known in Campbeltown and Dalintober as the 'Greencastle skiff', usually contracted to 'Greenie', but though the Greencastle in Donegal certainly was a boat-building centre – James McDonnell there was active into the present century – its signficance was slight in Kintyre and Islay, which together

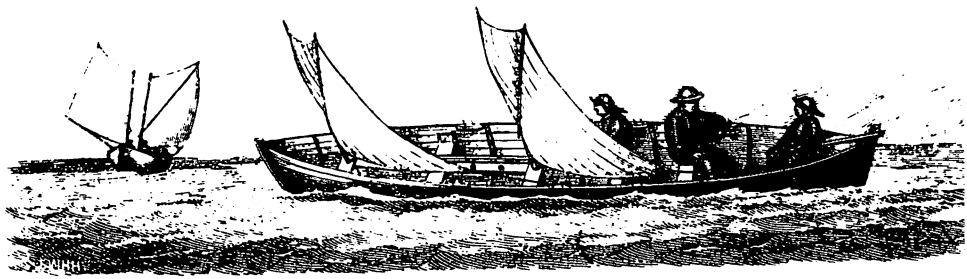

Figure 2. Greencastle yawl, Moville, County Donegal. From Holdsworth, E.W.H., *Deep-Sea Fishing and Fishing Boats* (London, 1874),393.

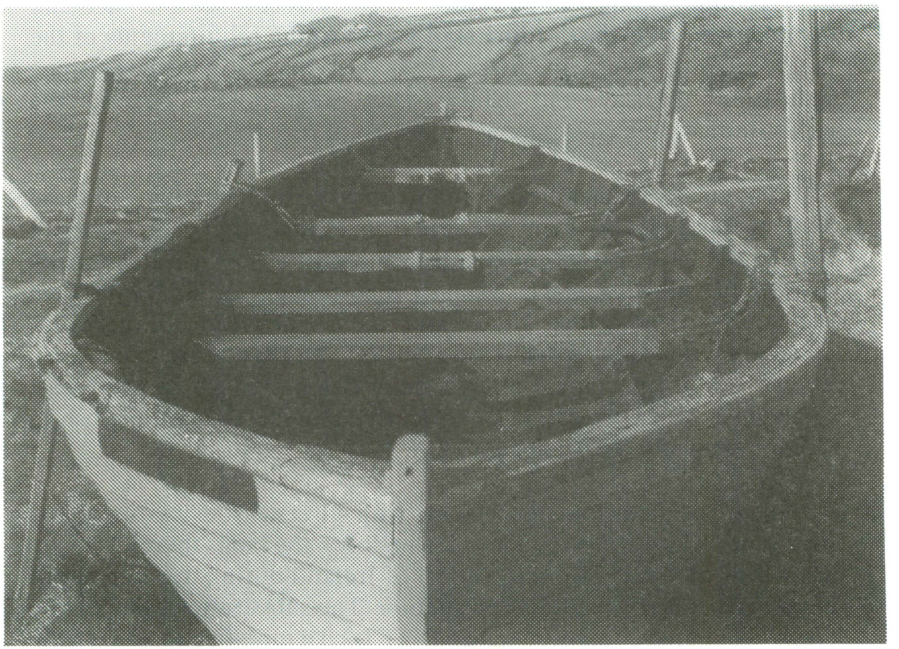

Figure 3. The 'Drutheim' *St Mary* of Shrove, Greencastle, Co. Donegal, 1981. Per Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

constituted the true geographical range of the Irish skiff's distribution in Argyll. Of a total of 36 known Irish-built skiffs registered at Campbeltown, 12 were built by James Kelly of Portrush, 8 by James Hopkins, also of Portrush, and 2 by John Kelly there. A further 8 were registered as Portrush-built, but the builders' identities were undisclosed, and one vessel was credited simply to 'Kelly, Portrush'. No fewer than 31 out of the total of 36 skiffs therefore originated in Portrush, but the inadequacy of these deductions must, however, be declared. The period which these statistics span is a circumsribed one, because the registers of fishing boats, prior to 1902, contain no information on builders or their location, and the record closes in 1926 with the delivery of the last Irish skiff, to Scalasaig in Colonsay. (RFB, Bks A & B)

As line-fishing slipped into obsolescence, so the demand dwindled for that class of line-skiff suited to the requirements of the method. The greater – and more productive – history of the line-fishing industries of Islay and Kintyre lies, regrettably, beyond the establishment of a comprehensive system of registration.

The relative insignificance of Greencastle in the building of these skiffs is apparent also in the evidence from Ireland, though in Donegal, too, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, they were nominally associated with that place. Michael McCaughan, in his informative paper *Irish Vernacular Boats and their European Connections*, comments that the 'Greencastle yawls', as they were commonly known, 'although named after a small fishing village in north-east Donegal ... were mainly built at nearby Moville and at Portrush in County Antrim'. (McCaughan, 1978, 18)

That the fallacious association with Greencastle was imported into South Kintyre along with – presumably – the boats themselves, by the waves of settlers from the north of Ireland during the nineteenth century, seems the likeliest explanation. The substitution of 'skiff' for 'yawl' would have followed naturally (if such a modification has really any claim to serious consideration), 'yawl' having been absent from the active vocabulary of Kintyre fishermen certainly by the end of the last century, and, by implication, much earlier.

The ancestry of these clinker boats was Scandinavian, as their double-ended construction – sharp at both stem and stern – evidences. Also known in Ireland as 'Norway yawls', they were imported direct from Scandinavia, and were often modified locally by the addition of one or two strakes, or planks. (McCaughan, 1978, 12)

The timber trade between Norway and Ireland seems to have facilitated the importation of these craft, possibly as deck cargoes. That Trondheim was one of the ports of their origin is attested in linguistic evidence from the Portrush area. That type of boat was known as a 'Druntin boat', and even into the present century the native version of these skiffs – which began to be introduced after cessation of the timber trade – continued to be described as 'the Drontheim build'. (McCaughan, 1978, 12 & 18)

None of these boats survives in Kintyre. Of Islay I cannot speak with certainty, but there too, I suspect, none will be found. Happily, however, a few remain in the north of Ireland, and in March, 1981, Michael McCaughan visited the Moville area and there examined four Greencastle yawls. One of these, discovered at Port Rowan, near Malin Head, was in sound and unmodified condition and has been acquired for the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

ON THE SHORE

When the prospects of a fishing became apparent – the first sign would be the appearance of gannets around the Mull (McShannon, 26/2/82) – the Islaymen would be notified by the shepherd at Glemanuill, Ronald MacAllister. (Clark, 28/12/80) He and his wife befriended the visitors and shared with them the produce of kitchen and garden. The late Alastair Beattie was a nephew of Ronald MacAllister and was accustomed, as a boy, to spending his summers at Glemanuill cottage. His regular evening errand was to carry down the glen to the 'ould Islaymen' a can of sour milk and a batch of fresh soda scones from the house. The basic diet of the Islaymen was, however, the fish which they were catching. Alastair Beattie remembered:

> 'Man, ye know, when they wid come in wi' thir boat fae the fishin they wid jeest boil a fish in a pot an when it wiz ready they jeest teemed the whole lot oot on tae the rock, and kinna clean flat bit o' rock, ye know. The water, of coorse, wid aa' run off an they jeest got round that an got at it wi' thir fingers. Right ould hardy men they were. I mind fine gan doon wi' the scones and the soor milk tae the Islaymen.'

The old Islaymen had scarcely a word of English, but that was no disadvantage to them where they were, because the MacAllisters had 'plenty o' Gaelic, both o' them'. Had the fishermen occasion to call at the house, or the MacAllisters to visit them at their rough quarters, 'they'd get at the Gaelic right away'.

The huts were entirely unfurnished, and the fishermen's bedding was a layer of bracken spread on the ground. The boat was hauled above high watermark each evening as a precaution against rising wind in the night, and Alastair Beattie, boy though he was, used to 'gie them a hand' with the beaching of that boat. (Beattie, 30/3/77)

THE FISHING

The actual fishing was confined to the period of slack water at the Mull, generally from 30 to 40 minutes, though a little fishing could be had immediately before of after slack water. But within that limited work period – no longer than an hour usually – the fishermen would be 'kept going hard'. The Islaymen went round and returned with the tides and little use of either sail or oars was required. At Glemanuill they immediately entered the strength of the ebb tide, which carried them around to the Mull; they returned on the flood with equal ease to their station. For the Southend fishermen, farther west, the distance to and from the fishing ground was greater, and the use of sail or oars was necessary to get them into a position of advantage with the tide on their passage to the ground; equally, on their return, after losing the force of the easterly current they had to carry on under their own power. The Islay men, thus, were sometimes able to take two fishings, in a single day, from the Mull grounds. (McShannon, 13/11/81)

The fishery began in June or July, and lasted about two months. Cod and saithe were attracted multitudinously by the passage of dense herring shoals eastwards around the Mull and into Clyde waters. Gannets and gulls, too, congregated there, and the spectacle was a magnificent one. Captain Hugh McShannon, born at Southend in 1901, fished the Mull as a boy under the tutelage of Dick Gillon of Southend, who befriended him and shared with him his estimable knowledge of the fishing traditions of the place. Captain McShannon, who later followed the sea beyond his native Kintyre, is the last person living who can speak, from direct experience, of that fishery. He remembered the gannets striking so densely on the herring that, on a bright day, their falling mass 'blotted out the sun'; and all the while the cliffs resounded with the cackle of their cries, as they rained unceasingly upon the shoals, shower upon shower falling. (McShannon, 13/11/81)

So dense were the herring shoals which passed below the Mull that lighthouse keepers there could, from the rocks at slack water, pull out, in a perforated bucket with rope attached, as many fish as pleased them. (Bannatyne, 17/3/77; McShannon, 13/11/81)

The catches – cod and *stainlock* (the mature saithe) – were taken

with hand-line. The initial baiting was a piece of *gleshan* (the immature saithe), but after the first catch had been secured the big hooks would be baited with a strip, seven or eight inches long, of the tough silvery underbelly of the stainlock, in Gaelic *clibean* – a dangling end. (Clark, 21/4/78; McShannon, 13/11/81) The line itself consisted of a two-foot long twine snood, attached at one end to the main line, and to the other end of which was secured the hook. The whole line was weighted with a long lead sinker.

Saithe were generally caught close to the surface, but to take cod the line had to find the bottom. Fishing would begin just off the Mull lighthouse, and the boats would be allowed to drift westward towards Rathlin on the failing run of the ebb, though there might at times be a man on the oars pulling against that drift to keep the boat over a spot where fish were taking well. With the turn of the tide the boats would begin to drift into the east; sinker and line would stream away with the force of the current; the fishing would be over. (McShannon, 13/11/81)

CURING AND DRYING THE FISH

The greater part of the catches of cod and saithe would be cured and dried. The practice was no doubt governed by the existence of traditional markets for dried fish, principally in the north of Ireland, but it is as well that its origins be examined. The practice was not the continuation of some hazy tradition – 'As our fathers did, we do'. It was, on the contrary, conceived in and perpetuated by conditions of necessity.

The fishermen working at the Mull of Kintyre, and more especially at Gigha and the Rinns, were remote from any sizeable population centre and were thus effectively without access to an adequate fresh fish market. Such fish as could be sold fresh would be sold fresh. This was certainly true of Gigha. The remainder of the catch then simply had to be cured to preserve it.

A fresh market – such as absorbed the bulk of the Campbeltown line-fishermen's catch – offered fishermen immediate sale and immediate remuneration, and without further handling of the fish. The curing and drying of catches – a prolonged and tedious operation –

was, on the contrary, plagued with uncertainty. Continual anxiety attended the drying of the fish, and the markets were distant and unpredictable. More than that, the disposal of the stock of fish was sudden and absolute, and on the dealings of a day, perhaps, was decided the success or failure of a season.

On the method of treating the Mull catches little is known, but on Gigha there remains a sufficient knowledge of the skills involved. As the method there was no doubt little different, essentially, from that employed at Mull, there follows a brief account of the curing and drying of Gigha cod, reputed to have been 'the finest caught on the West Coast'. (FBS, 1897, 228) The terminology may well have been peculiar, more or less, to that island.

At the shore station, the gutted and boned fish were first scoured in sea-water, using a small hard brush – *rubair*, or 'rubber' – fashioned of heather clumps bound with string. The cleaned fish would be place in large barrels – or *togaidean*, 'hogsheads' – and immersed in brine. Once thoroughly cured, the fish would be set up in small heaps until dry enough to place on the larger square-built *clamp* – or 'pile' – which was the progressive accumulation of the season's catch, and which was built on a firm flat foundation of stones or on a bare level rock. That clamp was protected from rain by a tarpaulin cover or sail, and at the season's end the fish would be lifted off and spread to dry thoroughly on the surrounding rocks. The fishermen were continually wary of rain, which spoiled the drying fish, and so the drying was confined to day-time. Each evening, the spread fish would be gathered into a clamp and covered, and throughout the day a watch was kept on the shore to ensure that, should heavy rain threaten, the fish could be brought under cover quickly. When sun and wind had dried the fish hard through, they would be weighed out in half- and quarter-hundredweight bales and bound securely with twine. (McDonald, 9 & 10/11/78; Henderson, 3/12/81)

The people of the Southend district could purchase a big cod for a shilling (5p), and a stainlock for sixpence (2½p). Some customers bought directly from the Islaymen at their station, but batches of dried fish would be landed at Dunaverty for sale in Southend village store. According to an earlier tradition, the fishermen would take their boats

into a narrow gullet of the shore immediately west of Dunavery Bay, and unload their fish there. That landing place was known as The Islaymen's Port. (McShannon, 13/11/81)

The Southend fishermen – in common with the majority of Kintyre fishermen outwith the large ring-netting communities of Tarbert, Campbeltown and Carradale – were committed only seasonally to fishing. Most of these Southend men earned a living during the winter months by rabbit-trapping, which they abandoned in spring to prepare for the Mull fishing, after which they turned to creel fishing for lobsters.

THE IRISH CONNECTION

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, many of these fishermen of Southend and of the southerly lying island of Sanda were of markedly Irish origin – Dempseys, Gillons, McKays, McVeys ... That strong Irish representation was parallelled in the fishing community at Campbeltown, where the Roman Catholic influx aroused among the predominatly Protestant population an antagonism which, in 1851, was vented in an uncontrollable anti-Catholic riot through the streets of the town, culminating in the vandalising of the priest's house and of the very chapel. (AD, 14 51/ 188)

In Southend itself, in 1836, a local farm-hand, John MacCoag, had died of head injuries sustained in a melee at the traitional Old New Year's Day shinty match on the Strath Mór. Squabbles and brawls were virtually the order of the day at these drunken games, but the signal for battle, in this instance, was less predictable than usual. A 'big Irishman named Robert' had interrupted play to declare that he would 'fight any Scotch (i.e. Lowland) or Highland bugger who stood on the strand'. He was warned off by a local blacksmith, James MacMillan, but no sooner had he withrawn than a fight broke out between a 'Highlandman from Mull' and another Irishman. In the ensuing free-for-all MacCoag was beaten unconscious with a shinty-stick. With his death the following day, the co-accused – Duncan MacDougall and Duncan MacMillan, both natives of the district – fled Kintyre into fugitation. They made their escape, ironically perhaps, to Ireland.

(AD 14 36/113)

The extent of the Irish influence, socially and culturally, on the native population of South Kintyre during the nineteenth century is a fascinating, if problematic, question which remains to be treated in a thorough manner. That the native population was itself just beginning to close the cultural division caused by the seventeenth century plantations of Lowlanders, demonstrates the complexity of the social fabric which awaits unravelling.

For a few of the Catholic Irish families integration was advanced – superficially at least – by the shedding of both religion and name. Thus, Nolan became Newlands, and Mullen became MacMillan, a good solid native approximation. But folk memory is persistent, and I recall sitting one day with an old Catholic fisherman while he examined a local newspaper report of the formation, in Campbeltown, of a branch of the Clan MacMillan Society. He took me through the listed members gleefully separating the bona fida MacMillans from the Irish Mullens.

The Irish link was actively maintained into the present century but has since entirely lapsed. The McKay family, for instance, crossed by fishing skiff to their native Red Bay, on the Antrim Coast, to visit friends and relatives. The last such trip recorded was in August 1914. A party of 16 representatives of the local Catholic population crossed in John McKay's *Little Flower* for the dedication of a new chapel in the village of Cushendun. (CC. 5/9/14)

Both of my own grandmothers were of Irish extraction. My paternal grandmother, Caroline Stewart, was born in Southend, in 1864, and spent her childhood there, but her parents had come over from Ardclinis in the Glens of Antrim. She had two maternal uncles who were seamen, and they occasionally sailed across from Antrim to Southend to visit. One of them wore in his ears tiny anchors of gold, and my grandmother, then a child, was fascinated by these and wanted a pair for herself. Her uncle promised to have a pair for her on his next visit, anticipating which she and a brother cheerfully pierced one another's ears with sewing-needles. But she never got the golden anchors. (McCallum, 31/10/80)

THE RINNS FISHERMEN

Popular accounts of the origins of line-fishing at the Rinns convey a wonderfully international flavour. One 'Caiptean Mór' – or Big Captain – who is supposed to have been a Campbell and a native of Portnahaven, is generally credited with having initiated the fishery. This he accomplished by introducing foreign instructors to the community of Portnahaven. Most versions of the story claim that these instructors were either Spanish or Portuguese. A house was built for them at Portnahaven, and they arrived on the island when that house was ready for occupation. Their experience of Islay was not, however, a happy one, by all accounts. They were competent fishermen and useful teachers, but they feared the Atlantic seas. Their presence in the community was of brief duration. By one version, they took their boat too far out to sea on a fishing trip and the boat was swamped and they all drowned. By another version, they had to be sent away because they were going about stealing and were 'eating the meat of the place'. By yet another version, they were prone to running away as soon as they set foot on the shore. (SSS)

Another account affirms that the nationality of these advisors was Chinese. Once again, the redoubtable Captain was reckoned to have been at the back of the business. He had spent 30 years in China, and when he returned – to Cladaville, a township adjacent to Portnahaven – he brought with him three Chinamen whom he installed in a house specially built for them. The Chinamen had, however, no desire to remain on Islay. Again, the explanation was that the waves frightened them. (SSS)

These accounts may appear, superficially, to have more comic than historic value, and yet to dismiss them would be a mistake. My own experience of oral history has persuaded me that such stories are not made up in an idle or a mischievious spirit. There are, to be sure, stories which patently are of suspect conception. These I designate 'artful lies', and a notable genre is the poaching story. These Islay accounts, however, are of a different order. They quite obviously point to a problem, and demonstrate, I think, an obvious solution to that problem. Which is to say that people are not born with fishing skills, or any other skills. These they acquire, almost invariably by observation

or by actual instruction. One of the storytellers expressed that problem very plainly. Before the village of Portnahaven had been built, he said, the people knew nothing about fishing. They were brought there from small inland crofts. Thus far, there can be no disagreement with the island tradition, but in the matter of the origin of the instructors there has to be some reservation. Were they Portuguese, Spanish, or Chinese? One cannot say, and documentary history cannot in this instance help us. The question, therefore, remains open and is probably unanswerable.

The issue may, however, be extended beyond the limitations which the oral tradition would impose. One may ask, with an altogether different emphasis: *Were* they Portuguese, Spanish, or Chinese? Advice and instruction could surely have been secured without recourse to such exotic ends! The fishermen of Campbeltown were taught long-lining by '... men from the north of Ireland, principally Port of Rush', who were engaged in the 1780s by three progressive merchants of the town, (Martin, 1981, 147-8) and that example of the constructive influence of non-native fishermen could be multiplied tediously.

The essential meaning of these Islay traditions is, therefore, I think, quite unexceptional. The learning of fishing is fundamentally what these stories are about. If the instruments of that learning – Spaniards, Portuguese, Chinamen – seem too bizarre for credibility, then these elements may be attributable to the corruption or embellishment of tradition.

These traditions may be reckoned to be fairly old. By the late eighteenth century, Portnahaven was already an established fishing centre, 'famed for its cod fishing'. (OSA, 1794, XI, 281) James Macdonald, who visited Islay in 1808, recorded 26 fishing families in the village. On 20 May in that year, he wrote, a boatload of saithe, caught off Portnahaven the previous evening, was sold out within half-an-hour at Bowmore, on the upper end of Lochindaal. Sixpence (2½p) was paid for each fish of 12 lb. weight. He remarked: 'The inhabitants of the village were furnished with fresh fish at a halfpenny a pound; and each of the fishermen cleared £2 sterling by one night's industry.' He added that the fishermen were all natives of Islay and that they

frequently ran cargoes of saithe to Ireland, where they sold them as *bradan fiadhaich* ('wild salmon'), a desception which was evidently successful. (Macdonald, 1811, 630-31)

TRADE WITH IRELAND

The north of Ireland was of singular importance, commercially, to the people of the Rinns. The trade association, and all that it entailed, both socially and culturally, was undoubtedly an old one, extending back beyond the period with which this paper deals. The Lammas Fair at Ballycastle was a major event in the Rinns people's calendar, attracting as many as 450 people annually when the custom was at its keenest. The islanders were well received in the district and attended many a ceilidh. There was evidently no language division. The Gaelic of Islay and the Gaelic of Antrim were quite compatible. Entertainment there no doubt was in plenty for the Islaymen at the Ballycastle Lammas Fair, but the real business of their being there was to sell their loads of dried fish. They were not infrequently disappointed: 'At the Lammas Fair they often had to sell their dried fish at fabulously low prices to traders who could retail at 100% profit. There was little competition among traders and the Islay men had to sell their cargoes during their stay at the fair.' (Glass, 1966, 21)

The islanders stayed in Ireland for a week or two weeks, and during that period bought up such commodities as were unavailable – or too expensive – on Islay. The fishing boats would return to the Rinns with a variety of provisions – livestock and household goods of all descriptions. The crossing time to Ireland from Islay depended on weather conditions, but a four-hour passage was not unknown. The distance between the Rinns and Ballycastle is some 40 miles, but across entirely open Atlantic.

The Islaymen crossed to the north of Ireland in their largest fishing craft, which were popularly described as 'luggers'; but whether, strictly, these vessels were true luggers remains uncertain, in the absence of ready means of identification. These 'luggers' were said to have been acquired second-hand, mainly on the East Coast of Scotland, and employed in the Barra Head cod fishery, which the Islaymen abandoned sometime before the end of the nineteenth

century. (MacArthur, 20/12/81; Clark, 26/12/81) Of the Rinns fishermen's involvement in that fishery the annual reports of the Fishery Board contain no reference, but of the decline and eventual disappearance of that fleet of 'luggers' there is ample record. In 1886, 11 first class boats – i.e., 30+ ft keel length – remained with the Rinns fishermen, 8 at Portnahaven and 3 at Portwemyss. By 1890, that fleet had been reduced to 3 boats; in 1900, 2 remained, and in 1909 the last disappeared from the record. (FBS, statistical tables)

The greatest quantity of dried fish on record as exported to Ireland was fully 305 tons, in 1897, which exceeded by 240 tons the previous year's quantity. In May of 1897, a vast shoal of saithe had appeared on the fishing ground off the Rinns, and no less than 890 tons of fish were landed in June and July, taken with hand-lines. In August, the fishermen gave up the fishery, fearing that they had already more fish than they could advantageously sell. Their fears were justified. Prices were very low: cod sold at from £12 to £15 a ton, and saithe at £6 6s. (FBS, 1897, 229 and 288) Ballycastle was not the sole market for the Islaymen's fish. These were also sold, in much smaller quantities, at Bangor, Belfast, Carrickfergus, Carnlough, Cushindall, Larne, and Coleraine. (FBS, 1897, 229; *ib.*, 1898, 229)

THE FINAL YEARS

In the final years of the Mull fishery, merely two boats from Southend were involved. The boat which Dick Gillon used for that fishery was the *Lizetta*, 25 ft long and build in 1903 by McDonnell of Greencastle. The other skiff was Archibald Cameron's 22 ft *Kate*, also built in 1904, but by James Kelly of Portrush. These boats were shipped on board the Clyde-bound Londonderry steamer and were transferred to the fishermen in the Sound of Sanda. (McShannon, 20/11/81) Hugh Shannon remembered the *Kate* as having been so meticulously varnished that every nail-head in her timbers was visible. Her sailing qualities Hugh remembered with admiration. With wind on the beam or abaft the beam, she moved swiftly and with marvellous grace and spirit. The Southend skiffs were rigged with two gaff sails, but the sail rig standard among the Islay skiffs of that class was the dipping lug.

The final reference to the Mull fishery in the reports of the Fishery Board apppeared in 1914. From the middle of June until the end of July three Portnahaven crews took a fishing there, and, having cured and dried their catch, sailed direct to Ballycastle and there sold the fish, principally saithe. The gross earnings per boat ranged from £48 to £67. (FBS, 1914, 237)

The Islaymen's involvement in the Mull fishery effectively ended in that year. In the succeeding year, 1915, they were prevented by the local policeman from occupying the huts, under the Defence of the Realm Act prohibition of lights along the coast. Remarkably, that year was the last in which the fish were known to have gathered at the Mull. The Southend men got a fishing out of that season, but thereafter the Mull was abandoned.

> 'But then the next season, again, 1916, the fish didn't come at all. There wir nothin to be seen, not a vestige of a bird or a fish tae to seen on the Mull o' Kintyre. A lot o' the locals spoke about it at the time and couldn't understand it, an there's a lot o' people said, "Well, they put away the Islaymen, an they also put away the fish". An that wiz the final of it; they wir never seen again.' (McShannon, 26/2/82)

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NB. Dates accompanying textual references refer to times of recordings or, in a few cases, of receipt of letters.

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