



The Life and Times of Jimmy 'Tod' Macdonald

James Macdonald, a crofter's son from Habost, Lochs had a profound influence on the life of the Island of his birth in his day. He was prominent among those who were responsible for changing the course of the small Harris Tweed Industry of his youth. By campaigning vigorously for the amendment of the definition of the hand-spun Harris Tweed trademark he laid the foundation for a unique cottage industry that has been able to hold its own on a worldwide scale.

The immediate benefits resulting from the amendment of the definition in 1934 was to arrest the drift of the weaving of the cloth into the spinning mills, which had already taken place to a large extent. Also, because of the increase in the production of Harris Tweed after the amendment, the home weaving cottage industry helped to retain the population in the Island in the lean years between the World Wars.

Born at 9 Habost in 1885, he was the sixth child of a family of nine children born to Alastair Hamish Macdonald and Bella Macdonald. He was educated at the village primary school at Ravenspoint, Kershader, to the age of 14 years, which was the leaving age at that time. Then he went to work at Manor Farm, Stornoway. Later he joined the herring fishing fleet as was customary for young Lewis men at that time.

Early in the 20th century the family moved to croft 1 Habost, and at the outbreak of the First World War he joined the Royal Navy while still a teenager. He served as a Petty Officer and later became Mate of a ship in the trawler section of the Navy where he remained until the end of the hostilities. Three members of his father's family served in the First World War as follows: Calum was a sergeant in the Cameron's where he served for six years, first of all in India, before coming to the Western Front where he was killed in action in Belgium in May 1915 at the age of 28 years. Neil, like James, served in the Royal Navy.

After the war James continued at sea for a while before taking up work ashore in the Edinburgh area. While he was there he responded to an advertisement for work as a commercial traveller for a large firm of wholesale provision merchants known as J & J Tod Ltd. of Leith, which was owned by the millionaire Gilbert Archer. Having secured the agency for J & J Tod Ltd., which covered the whole of Lewis and Harris, James turned his boundless energy to making a success of the job.

From then on James was affectionately known as 'Jimmy Tod' and the partnership of James Macdonald and Gilbert Archer was to have a profound influence on the history of Harris Tweed and indeed the history of the Outer Hebrides. Back in Stornoway James started work with a bicycle visiting the shops etc., but soon he owned a car, and his success convinced his employers that the potential in the area justified the building of new purpose built premises for the sale of wholesale provisions and feeding stuff.

The new Stornoway branch of J & J Tod Ltd. was opened on the corner of Francis Street and Kenneth Street with James Macdonald as manager. The business prospered for decades until the village shops began to close owing to competition from the travelling shops and multiple stores. Eventually the firm withdrew and sold their premises to the Stornoway Gazette Ltd., who continues to use the building without any major change to the structure of the building to this day.

During the early years of James Macdonald at Lochs, the district was the main area in Lewis for the manufacture of Harris Tweed, but changes began to take place before the First World War. The age-old method of hand carding and hand spinning was tedious and slow, and in the early 20th century (about 1902) small carding machines were set up in Stornoway and Harris as well as the practice by crofters of sending their wool to mainland mills for carding only.

It was a small step for the crofters to ask the mainland mills to spin their wool as well as card it and that was what happened in the first decade of the 20th century. Then, before the end of the first decade of the 20th century a spinning plant was set up in Stornoway. Ostensibly this was in order to card and spin the crofters own wool, because by this time almost every family in Lochs and elsewhere manufactured at least one roll of tweed from their own wool every year.

The temptation to buy mill spun yarn, whether from the mainland or Stornoway depended on the market as well as the quality and price of the yarn. The market for the cloth was improving and so more and more mill spun yarn was being used. After a while the Stornoway spinner became a manufacturer of tweed in his own right, and was in a position to compete with the age-old cottage industry.

Many felt that mill spun yarn, whether mainland or Hebridean was a threat to the genuine age-old hand spun product of the cottage industry on the Islands. The next move was the process of registering a trademark in order to protect the hand spun Hebridean cottage industry from both mill spun as well as power woven imitation Harris Tweed. The possibility of a Harris Tweed trademark was first raised about 1906 but it was 1911 before the 'Orb' communal trademark was registered and ready for application to hand spun Harris Tweed made in the Hebrides of Scotland.

From then on two kinds of Harris Tweed were produced and marketed from the Hebrides. One of them qualified for the registered communal 'Orb' trademark, while the other kind was similar but manufactured from mill spun yarn.

By the 1920s fairly large quantities of mill spun yarn was used for the manufacture of Harris Tweed in the Islands, both mainland and Hebridean spun. Most of the production of tweed was by the more enterprising crofters as well as the merchants, who were usually referred to as 'small producers' in order to distinguish between them and the Hebridean mill spinning manufacturers. Production of unstamped Harris Tweed soared in the 1920s but as it was not stamped there is no record of the yardage produced.

It was during this period in the second half of the 1920s that the Lochs entrepreneur James Macdonald of Habost, Lochs, set up business in Stornoway and, being a man from Lochs, he was fully conversant with all aspects of the manufacture of the cloth. Finding that the local spinners were reluctant, or unwilling, to supply demand for mill spun yarn he turned his attention to mainland spun yarn like many of the other small producers. He set up his tweed business at the back of J & J Tod Ltd., in the building where there was a bakeshop, which is now part of the premises of Murdo MacLean's (now owned by Nazir Brothers).

Very soon Gilbert Archer and James Macdonald became partners in the Harris Tweed venture and they prepared plans for a massive expansion of their tweed business. Their first move was to acquire the empty building of Lord Leverhulme's canning factory, which was never in production as a canning factory or anything else. Then they set about building a fully integrated plant where dyeing, carding, and spinning and for the first time in the Hebrides, a finishing plant. Before that, finishing was carried out on the mainland or as 'luadh' in the crofters' homes. The name of the new mill manufacturer of Harris Tweed was 'James Macdonald Ltd.'. At that time Kenneth Mackenzie Ltd. and S. A. Newall Ltd. were also spinner manufacturers.

Now that James controlled a factory unit that could, for the first time in the Outer Hebrides, carry out all the processes of the manufacture of Harris Tweed under one roof, the pacesetter became the stormy petrel of the Harris Tweed industry by throwing his full weight and leadership into the agitation to have the definition of the 'Orb' trademark amended to allow Hebridean mill spun yarn as well as hand spun yarn to qualify for the stamping of the 'Orb Mark'.

The proposal to amend the definition of the communal 'Orb Mark' was extremely controversial and a fierce campaign raged in Lewis and Harris in the early 1930s. The traditionalists insisted on keeping the 'Orb Mark' exclusively for the cottage hand spun product. The issue was naturally seen in the rural areas as the wicked town of Stornoway versus the downtrodden rural areas. The crofters felt that their cottage industry was in grave danger of being swallowed up by the greedy capitalists of the town of Stornoway. James Macdonald was regarded as a fifth column betraying his own flock. I still remember my father ranting away at our near relative (Mac Alastair Hamish à Tabost). I felt he was in imminent danger of calling him Mac something else.

The small producer section of the industry who were used to importing mill spun yarn from the mainland were also alarmed by the Hebridean spinners' proposal to amend the definition of the 'Orb Mark' to allow Hebridean mill spun only. They vehemently resisted the proposal because that placed Stornoway spinners in a very strong position as they would hold a monopoly over the mill spun yarn supplies which alone would qualify for the 'Orb' stamp for mill spun yarn, while disqualifying the mainland mill spun yarn on which the expansion of the industry mainly depended hitherto in the 20th century.

Of course the Hebridean spinners with James Macdonald in the vanguard of the dispute vigorously took on all and sundry, on the platform and in the columns of the newspapers and on the street corners etc. They assured the crofters and the small producers that they had nothing to fear from the Hebridean spinners, as they were very willing to supply all their yarn as well as the spinning of their own wool, whereas it was very dangerous to permit mainland mill spun yarn to qualify for the 'Orb Mark'. Furthermore, they said they would install more machinery if need be and no one need import mainland yarn.

The application for the original 'Orb' hand spun Harris Tweed Certification Trade Mark was made in December 1909. It was registered in October 1910 and stamping began in early 1911. The original definition of Harris Tweed in the 'Orb' stamp regulation was as follows:

Harris Tweed means a tweed, hand spun, hand woven and dyed by the crofters and cottars in the Outer Hebrides.

That definition was silent on machine carding but prohibited mill spun or mill dying. It was also silent on the source of the wool but the cloth was to be woven by the crofters and cottars in the Outer Hebrides. The amended definition that came later was much more precise. It said:

Woven by the Islanders at their own homes.

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: The Life and Times of Jimmy 'Tod' Macdonald

Location in physical archive: Series K, File 3, Section 62

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/9/3

© Angus Macleod Archive