

Dr. Alexander S. Bisset of Islay

& Islay my Isle

Islay with its long history has much to offer. All over Islay can be found the remains of early settlements, most prominently probably at Finlaggan. Seen below is the almost unique church of Bowmore which is special because it is round and there are only two round churches in Scotland. Legend has it that this shape was selected so that the devil cannot hide in a corner.



The church was built from 1767 to 1769 by Daniel Campbell. A gallery was added in 1830 and the organ in 1890.



These are two of the small number of Alex MacIver's tunes where next to nothing is known why the composer named them as he did.

Islay my Isle is a pleasing two parted Slow Air (dated 16-6-81 on the original music) and Dr.Bisset is a "big" march which is seen by those whose opinions are respected as being "rather a good tune" and was included by Donald MacLeod in one of his books. Dr Bisset is dated 6-10-65 on Alex's original manuscript. We have nothing beyond the obvious in the names to link these two compositions. What we know so far about Dr. Alexander is as written in his obituary (below) which is sourced from the web site of Glasgow University.

Surgeon Lieutenant (Temporary Commission) Alexander Shanks Bisset

Alexander Shanks Bisset was born at Ardbeg on the island of Islay on 28th March 1896. He was the son of Hugh Bisset, schoolmaster of the primary school at Ardbeg, and Isabella Kenyon. After his early education at Ardbeg he attended Port Ellen School before leaving at the age of 12 to attend the High School of Glasgow. In 1913, at the age of 17, he matriculated at the University of Glasgow to study medicine. His exam results that year suggest he was struggling, and although he passed in Botany, he had to re-sit Zoology, Physics and Chemistry. He recovered quickly, however, and had a very successful undergraduate career, all the more remarkable because he interrupted his studies to serve in the Royal Navy still graduating in 1919, having taken only one extra year to complete the course. In the course of completing his degree he earned 1st class certificates in Systematic Surgery, Ophthalmology and a 2nd class certificate in the Practice of Medicine, after coming 7th equal in that class. In the session 1916-1917 Alexander matriculated in the Faculty of Medicine for examinations only, and not to attend classes.

This, it seems, was because he had other commitments. He was off to war.

Alexander's family recollects that he enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1916 and that he was fond of recalling how, on 31st May 1916, he was aboard the first ship to sail from Scapa Flow to the Battle of Jutland.

The ship, *HMS Gentian*, a fleet minesweeper, was one of several sweeping the exit from Scapa Flow for the battleships and cruisers of the British Grand Fleet sailing to battle with the German High Seas Fleet.

The Navy sent him back to finish his degree. Later, after graduating in 1919, he joined the battleship *Caesar* in the eastern Mediterranean and served as a Temporary Surgeon-Lieutenant in the Dardanelles.



HMS CAESAR

Alexander was demobilised on 1st December 1919.

After the war Alec Bisset returned to Glasgow, joining an uncle in medical practice. On his uncle's retirement, he and a colleague from university days, Dr Alexander McLachlan, set up practice in Springburn, sharing a bicycle between them for domiciliary visits. Eventually they could afford a car, but only for business use.

Midwifery and minor surgical procedures, such as tonsillectomies, were carried out routinely on kitchen tables, using chloroform as the anaesthetic.

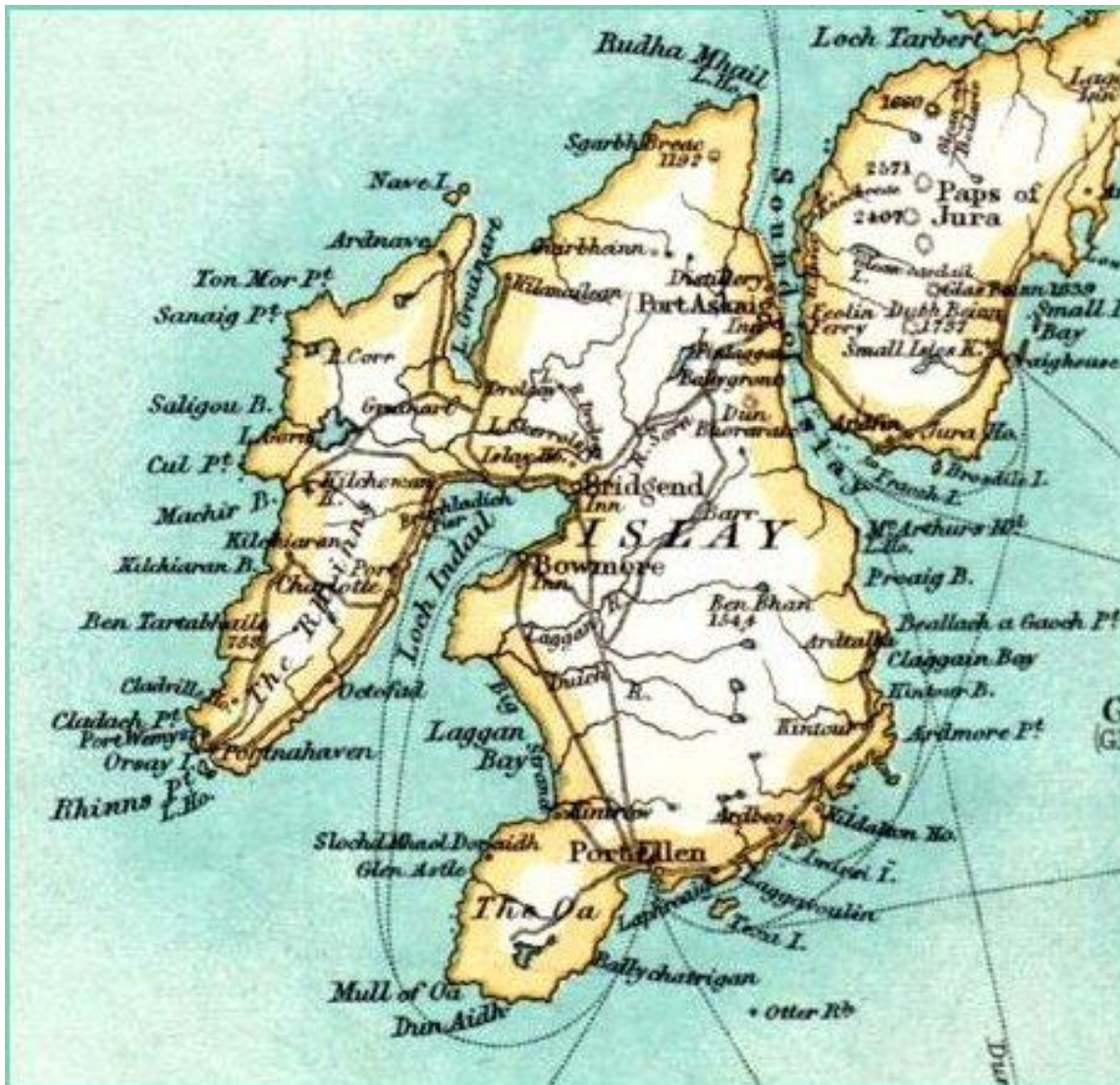
On his once-a-week afternoon off, Alex played golf and became quite proficient at it. On his 70th birthday he went round the low course at Bishopriggs in 72 and returned home very pleased with himself.

Another of his lifelong interests was shooting, over many of the estates around Glasgow, where his fellow guns enjoyed the tales of his early life in Islay, and of the sporting opportunities he had enjoyed earlier in the century. In later life he returned to his youthful haunts on the island, fishing the many trout lochs, the rivers and the sea and enjoying many rounds of golf.

Alexander Shanks Bisset, Alec to family and friends, died in June 1979, very suddenly, at the age of 83, surrounded by his friends, who were attending a barbecue at his daughter's house in Bearsden where he had been living. His cremation at Clydebank was attended by many friends, from all walks of life. His ashes lie in the family grave in Kilnaughton Cemetery on Islay, overlooking the bay where he spent so many happy hours as a boy.

Islay is the southernmost island of the Inner Hebrides of Scotland. Known as "The Queen of the Hebrides", it lies in Argyll just south west of Jura and around 25 miles north of the Irish coast. The island's capital and largest settlement is Bowmore where the distinctive round Kilarrow Parish Church and a distillery are located. Port Ellen is the main port.

Islay is the fifth largest Scottish island and the seventh largest island surrounding Great Britain, with a total area of almost 239 sq. Miles.



ISLAY and JURA

There is ample evidence of the prehistoric settlement of Islay and the first written reference may have come in the 1st century AD. The island had become part of the Gaelic Kingdom of Dál Riata during the Early Middle Ages before being absorbed into the Norse Kingdom of the Isles. The later medieval period marked a "cultural high point" with the transfer of the Hebrides to the Kingdom of Scotland and the emergence of the Clan Donald Lordship of the Isles, originally centered at Finlaggan. During the 17th century the Clan Donald star waned, but improvements to agriculture and transport led to a rising population, which peaked in the mid-19th century. This was followed by substantial forced displacements and declining resident numbers.

Today Islay has over three thousand inhabitants and the main commercial activities are agriculture, malt whisky distillation and tourism. The island has a long history of religious observance and Scottish Gaelic is spoken by about a quarter of the population. Its landscapes have been celebrated through various art forms and there is a growing interest in renewable energy. Islay is home to many bird species such as the wintering populations of Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Goose, and is a popular destination throughout the year for birdwatchers. The climate is mild and ameliorated by the Gulf Stream.

Should you know of Alex MacIver's connection with the Doctor or anything about Islay my Isle, please let us know.