



Ruins of a medieval chapel at Kilchiaran

# Tales of Islay...and the longing to return

By Méadbh Bruce



There's a letter in the Museum of Islay Life written by a young man to his parents, just a few days before he was killed near Tunis in 1943. Corporal Alexander Williamson wrote, "I am deeply conscious of what I am fighting for and would not sit at home during this war." It is a moving declaration of love for his family and his home.

He went on to say, "the fact that I may die while I am protecting you does not appal me in the least. If I do, I shall be happy to have done what I have to preserve your way of life." He was 21.

There are hundreds of other gems like this in the museum in Port Charlotte that bring the history and culture of Islay alive. I spent a few hours taking in the exhibits and chatting to the woman at the desk. While I am reading about the 19th century land clearances, she tells me the story of a young boy kidnapped from an Islay beach and forced on to a boat bound

for Canada. His parents never knew what had become of him. Around 170 years later, one of his great-great-grandchildren made the journey back to Islay, bringing his story with her.

In the churchyard outside, I meet an elderly man searching among the gravestones for the name of his friend. They had grown up together near Kilchiaran, been in the same class at Bowmore school during the 1940s. His father had been a cooper at the Bruichladdich distillery back in the day. They thought nothing of walking for miles and miles all over their side of the island. Although he has lived on the mainland now for more than two decades, he still returns to Islay every year. "Because," he tells me, as he looks out over Loch Indaal, "this is home. I'll always be an Ileach."

I come away from the museum with a strong sense that the landscape is central to Islay's identity. The craggy headlands, sandy bays, peat bogs and moorlands, tell the island's story.

To the south of Port Charlotte, two little boys and their dad are kicking a ball about on the playing field by the loch at Port Mòr. It's early in the tourist season, but the café here is busy and the campsite already hosts several brightly coloured tents and camper vans. One of the young footballers scores a goal and his dad goes to retrieve the ball. I wonder if he knows what he is walking over. For behind the posts, among the rough grass and the wildflowers, is a pile of old stones – the remains of a Neolithic chambered cairn.

The cairn dates to around 3000 years BC, although evidence suggests a much earlier occupation on the same site. Raised above the shoreline, 100 metres or so from the sea, this spot offers panoramic views over Loch Indaal. Today, there's a strong wind coming in off the water, but the sun is shining, and the sky is unbelievably blue. It is easy to understand why Islay's earliest farmers chose this place to honour their departed.

Carry on past the Port Mòr Centre, and the long road south to Portnahaven is peppered with historical remains. Looking out from the bus window, one can see the scattered remnants of long-abandoned farmsteads and settlements. The driver waves to a woman hanging out her washing in the garden. We pass a few sheep and highland cattle, some horses.

To the right is Beinn Tart a'Mhill, the highest point of the Rhinns. Its name loosely translated means the mountain of drought, though scholars suggest it probably derived from the Old Norse Hjartafall, which means the hill of stags.

To the left there are breathtaking views towards Laggan Bay and the Oa beyond. We pass Nereabolls, where the ruins of a medieval chapel stand in ancient burial grounds. A fine collection of grave slabs was discovered here beneath a turnip plot by a local farmer. They are covered now by protective glass, which glints in the sunlight as the bus trundles by.

Portnahaven sits on the south-western tip of the Rhinns of Islay, curved around the coast, its terraces of whitewashed cottages brilliant against the blue sky and sapphire sea. On this bright summer's day, it is simply beautiful. It was developed as a fishing settlement in the early 1800s to house people forcibly cleared from the interior. The harbour is sheltered by Eilean Mhic Coinnich - Mackenzie's Isle - and the larger island of Orsay, with its lighthouse built by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1825.

I have heard of a mermaid's pool close by, and scramble over the rocks until I find it - a deep round pool with a smooth stone at its centre. Legend has it that a mermaid used to sit here. As the sun moved across the sky, she would turn to feel its warmth on her face, her tail making the circular indentation.

Other local stories tell of selkies. Here, where the land and the sea meet at the edge of the world, grey seals sunbathe on the rocks and skerries around the bay. I stay a while watching, in the hope that I might hear them sing, but I do not.

All the rocks around this coast have names. Some like Carraig Mhic Cruimein - McCrimmons Rock - were named for the families that claimed the fishing rights from these vantage points. One of the outcrops is known in Gaelic as Carraig nan



OK Corner, Portnahaven

pisegain - the rock of the kittens - which sounds charming on the face of it, but this is where the village's unwanted cats were drowned.

Overlooking the harbour is the church, shared with the residents of neighbouring Port Wemyss. Its south face has two entrance doors, historically one for each village, a segregation apparently once enforced by rival lairds. On the outer corner of the churchyard wall, painted in white, are the letters OK. It has been there for at least seventy years and is regularly repainted, but nobody can quite remember why. Some say it was to remember the Americans GIs posted on Islay during the war, who would tell the local girls to meet them "on the corner, OK?" Others claim it was to welcome home the men returning from the fighting, who would see it as the boats came ashore.

Like so many other stories of the Rhinns, the truth has been lost in time, but the landscape still carries visible reminders of this island's long history.

About four miles north out of Portnahaven on the road to Kilchiaran, lies another mystery. The Cultoon stone circle comprises 15 stones, of which only two are standing, the rest lie on the grass where, apparently, they have always lain. Excavations in the 1970s revealed that although holes were dug to receive the stones, construction was abandoned, and the remaining stones never raised. Tradition has it that two clans fell out and refused to continue working together. Apart from Stonehenge, Cultoon is the only stone circle in Britain which shows signs of never having been finished. We'll probably never know why, but we do know that the site was significant



Ruins of Neolithic chambered cairn at Port Mòr

to early people, nonetheless. Immediately north of the circle is another upright stone on a mound, which yielded evidence of ritual fire ceremony dating to around 1055 BC, and about 50 metres away lies a burial mound. This place was sacred once.

As if to remind me of this, a sea eagle makes lazy circles in the sky above. In Gaelic, its name *Iolaire sùil na grèine* translates as the eagle with eyes of the sun. I feel blessed.

A few miles further on is the settlement of Kilchiaran. The nineteenth century farm steading lies in the valley of the *Abhainn na Braid* - the River Brade. The burn runs through the steading and down into Kilchiaran Bay where it meets the Atlantic. Just below the farm lies the remains of a medieval chapel dedicated to the Irish St Ciarán. Legend has it that St Columba landed here on his way to Iona in the year 560.

The chapel dates from the early 13th century and stands, open to the elements, in a burial ground about 300 metres from the sea. It was partially restored about 50 years ago by the Islay Historic Buildings Works Group. Surviving medieval grave slabs, adorned with scrolling foliage and one with the sculpted effigy of a robed priest, were moved to shelter inside the chapel. A well-worn stone font stands at one end of the nave.

Outside, I find an ancient cup-marked stone, supposed to pre-date the chapel by 4,000 years. It is thought that people would grind a pestle in the rings in a 'wishing' rite. I can't help but run my hand over the markings and make my own private wish.

On the beach, I sit awhile beside the waterfalls that tumble onto the shingle from the rocks above, and watch the waves break on the shore. Sandpipers potter among the stones. I

think about Alexander Williamson's letter and remember the other boy taken so suddenly to Canada away from everything he knew. I wonder about my own ancestral ties to this island, the land of my great great grandmother's people, and I think I understand something of what the old man meant when he said, "I'll always be an Ileach."

Walking back to Port Charlotte, past the Gearach Forest, the crickets are vocal and so are the skylarks. It is hot and even the usually buoyant yellow flag irises look like they are wilting.

About half a mile from the village, stands the Tooth Stone. People afflicted with tooth ache used to come here to hammer a nail into the rock to dispel the pain in a ritual of sympathetic magic. There are still iron and copper nails embedded in the crannies. These people obviously believed that if you wish for something hard enough, it might just happen. Why else would they keep returning?

Later, at the Port Charlotte Hotel, an American woman is weeping loudly at the bar. Everyone is ignoring her. I ask the barman what the problem is.

"Oh, this happens all the time," he says. "It is her last night on Islay. People often cry when they have to leave."

He was right. A few days later, I wept too. But I know I'll be back - after all, I made a wish.

Learn more about the writer here:  
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