

The Orkney Connection
by John Millen

Denman Island was once known to some as “Little Orkney” after the large group of islands just north of John o’Groats, Scotland. The connection was made evident to me about ten years ago when two slender volumes from those islands showed up at the Annual Denman Conservancy Book Sale. One is a book of sentimental poetry and the other a collection of stories of island life laced with conversation rendered in highland Scottish accents.

In *My Ain Folk* Winnifred Isbister writes:

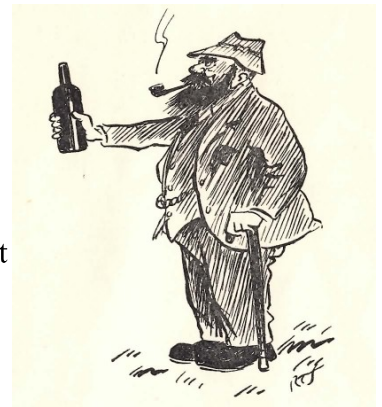
“For a time Denman was named “Little Orkney”, due to the predominance of Orkney settlers. William Baikie arrived in 1888 followed by Tom and Jack Chalmers and Mrs. J. Scott around 1898. The Corrigan and Robertson families came in 1908 and the Isbister families in 1919.”

Migration from the Orkneys to Canada has a long history. From 1702 Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) ships stopping at the port of Stromness in the Orkney Islands recruited orcadian lads to staff their fur trading operations in Canada. By 1799, of 530 employees on the Company’s overseas payroll 416 were orcadians. Few of these recruits advanced to senior positions in the Company but one Joseph Isbister did. Son of a Stromness merchant, he became Governor at Prince of Wales Fort, at Churchill on Hudson’s Bay.

When Lord Selkirk wanted settlers for the Red River Colony (at Winnipeg) in 1812 he found them at Stromness. In the late 1800’s recruitment of orcadians by the HBC diminished and in 1891 the Company’s ships stopped calling there. But emigration from the Orkneys was still strong, the population dropping about 10% per decade. At that time the first of the orcadian settlers came to Denman.

The two Orkney books I have were printed in Kirkwall, Orkney Islands and one, a collection of stories, has noted on the fly leaf: Mrs J A Isbister, 1947; the other, poetry, was published in 1951.

The lead story in *Orcadian Nights* tells of a home brew drinking contest in which a certain Vernon Isbister is a favoured contestant until he is eliminated from contention by his arrest for stealing a sheep. You could be thinking that Isbister must be a very common name in those islands. Indeed I was surprised that these two instances had resulted from my quite modest research efforts. However the name is not so common there. In the census of 1901 there are 183 Isbisters in a population of 27,731 for the Orkney Islands as a whole. That is about 0.7%. In the 19th century Isbister was never one of the top ten surnames. I chose these early dates as being representative of the family names of the original population of the Orkneys.



The poetry volume seems to reflect the memories of an exile. Eg:

“Lost in the clouds and anchorless in space,
I think of those charmed islands whence I came,
Whither I now return – the one fixed place
Where life’s calm happiness remains the same.”

If any of Denman’s Orkney Islands descendants would like to have these books, I am quite willing to part with them.