

# A Doctor for the People: Dr Ian Shine

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With excerpts from *Upon This Rock* by Ian Shine, MD

In an era gone-by, there was a doctor who lived and worked on the Island; he became part of the fabric of the Island, and it became part of him and his family. With his kindness and humility, and his non-intrusive, caring nature, he came to the Island with an open mind and an open heart. He cared for the people of the Island in a way that, to this day, still deeply moves those who remember him. This doctor is Ian Shine.

As a young, recently qualified physician in the British army, Dr. Shine responded to an advertisement from the Colonial Office in London for a junior medical officer on the island of St Helena. With a sense of adventure, within weeks of seeing the advertisement, Dr. Shine, his wife Deborah 7 months pregnant at the time, their 2-year-old daughter Anna, and Dr Shine's cousin Karin Rose, arrived on St. Helena on 5 March, 1960. Little did they know that their almost three year stay on the Island would influence the rest of their lives.

It seems impossible for anyone to describe how Dr. Shine feels about the Island and its Saints, therefore, much of the story is retold below in his own words using excerpts from his forthcoming book entitled *Upon This Rock*.

Fourteen million years ago in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean, one or two volcanoes shot up three-and-a-half miles from the ocean floor, creating an island that was discovered by the Portuguese in 1502 on the feast day of Saint Helena, mother of Constantine the Great.<sup>1</sup> The millennia of isolation enabled it to develop its own flora and fauna, but within 200 years of human occupation ... half the land had become barren, the old trees had mostly fallen, and eight species of land-shells and a multitude of insects had become extinct. Remarkable as its flora and fauna were, its people were even more remarkable. They were ideal patients, charming, talented, hospitable, and funny.

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<sup>1</sup> The date of the discovery of St Helena (historically taken as the 21 May 1502) has now been thrown into question. See article by Ian Bruce "St Helena Day" *Wirebird*, 44 (2015) pp.32-46.



**Deborah, Cathy and Anna surrounded by Saints in 1962**

When Captain James Cook stopped at the Island in 1775, he wrote: “As to the genius and temper of these people, they seemed the most honest, the most inoffensive and the most hospitable people we have ever met with of English extraction...”.

Dr. Shine felt the same. He recognized the extraordinary nature of the people who call this Island home. He cared for many Saints, he knew their names and nicknames, and who was related to whom, he learnt of their fears and beliefs. With wit and wisdom beyond his years, he took meticulous care of their aches and pains, both physical and emotional. Below are just three specific examples of his many recollections of the Saints:

The St. Helenians are extraordinary. That has come about because ordinary people are not inclined to live in such isolation. And once there, isolation burnishes them, bringing out the best qualities in the same way that it brings out the best-adapted species of plants and animals.

Most St. Helenians had many skills. They could build a house, maintain a garden, keep goats, play music, fish, mend shoes, make lace and lanterns, and make their own baking pans with fluted edges out of used 25 pound margarine tins.

While slaves and prisoners came (to the Island) involuntarily, they too had

more than normal ability: they had more intelligence and strength because otherwise they did not survive.

Dr. Shine sees no need for distinctions by class, race, gender, nor any other form of differentiation between human beings; people are people, and he treats all with respect and care. For example, when he was on the Island, he did not allow discrimination in health care to take place on his watch:

When there were two clinics in Jamestown, the Saints lined up to be examined on a wooden table in a hut behind the hospital (which doubled as a mortuary); expats and the privileged came to the front of the hospital to be examined on a comfortable examination couch inside the hospital. Once [the senior medical officer] left St. Helena, I combined the clinics requiring everyone to join a single queue for the comfortable couch. A single line was more efficient, and it did wonders for expat health. They hardly ever attended the clinic.

And Dr. Shine knew that patients should be treated with compassionate care:

The Islanders' outpatient clinics were held at Jamestown in a grubby hut behind the hospital, and in pleasant clinics at Blue Hill, Head O'Wain, Luffkins, Sandy Bay and Longwood. For people like Norzle Leo who lived at Levelwood, it was a mile or two walk to reach the nearest clinic at either Longwood or Sandy Bay—a long way when you are not well. I asked the Governor whether the Public Works Department would supply the materials to build a clinic at Levelwood if the local people would build it. He said yes and in no time it was built; everyone in Levelwood helped... The Saints



**The people of Levelwood and the clinic that they built**

held a jolly party and a dance to celebrate its completion.

Dr. Shine never hurriedly examined his patients whether at the clinics or when making home visits; he took the time to understand each person. When the senior medical officer relocated from the Island, and Dr. Shine was left alone to care for all residents (approximately 4,500 people), he writes:

There were a few more home visits, very little surgery, and only one more clinic to attend, the one in Jamestown. However, Deborah recalls that we sometimes had lunch at 4:00 p.m., with dinner then not before 11 p.m., but I do not remember that. I vaguely remember that one evening at dinner at Government House, when Mr. Bond-Taylor, the government secretary complained of exhaustion, the Governor turned to me: "You aren't tired, are you Shine?" Deborah reports that I said "No sir," and promptly fell asleep. Night calls were seldom more than once per week, although any home visits were not quite as easy as a home visit in London since St Helena is very hilly and some houses were far from the road. I typically carried a large Alpine rescue backpack in which I kept various scopes, and the usual medical equipment, a selection of drugs, and a camera with a flash. I carried a portable ECG machine in one hand and in the other a graduated 6 foot measuring pole. The pole gave me the most trouble.



**Percy Williams painting Dr Shine's Fiat registered 242. On the right Stedson George, next to an unknown lady.**

This sounds like a heavy load for a person of large stature who lifts weights and runs marathons, but for those who have seen Dr. Shine, they know that description does not fit. It is difficult to imagine Dr. Shine carrying such a load across treacherous paths on foot to home visits; however, he has determination that outmatches his size. When someone was ill, and he was needed, we went; Deborah recalls that he walked

through five pairs of shoes in the time he was on the Island.

Dr. Shine had an uncommon way while on the island of tailoring his medical approach *to* the Saints, rather than expecting *them* to conform to British medical practices. For example, when studying the rate of heart disease on the Island, he worked within the framework of the Saints:

After some preliminary mistakes, the most effective discriminating question [to determine overall coronary health] was found to be: "Can you travel up Ladder Hill or up Side Path, or from Colonel Gilpin's home to the Cathedral without stopping?" Most people walked everywhere as cars were uncommon (mine had a number plate 242, there having been 241 cars on the Island since the first one was introduced in 1928). Thus, it was easy to give a reliable answer to this question because they knew exactly how long it took them, and where they usually stopped on these journeys. Anyone who was able to climb 50 of the 699 11" steps up Ladder Hill, or its equivalent, was considered to be healthy.

Dr. Shine was fascinated by several genetic diseases that occurred with increased frequency on the Island, and appreciated the remarkable way in which the Saints had incorporated these diseases as a way of identifying their neighbours:

Nicknames were useful to supplement the limited number of surnames, and they often brilliantly caught the essence of a personality or a medical condition, such as a young woman with short stature and short fingers. The Saints beat me to it (in naming the syndrome) and called her "Little Ivy." I described a family with *Gross Unilateral Genu Valgum* (knock knees), but they beat me again; their term was "K legs." A lady with *congenital nystagmus*, (a vision condition in which the eyes make repetitive, uncontrolled movements) they called "Clock-eyes Eileen;" *Turner's syndrome*, they called "Sarah no-neck" (because that exactly describes the most common symptom).

He went on to recall that a World War II ditty had prompted a nickname: ... *bang, bang goes the farmer's gun, So run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run* resulted in an albino, whose red eye reflex and white hair was shared with rabbits, was always known as "Ebby boom-bang". The sobriquet "Handsome Hess" was also endowed on a man whose features were likened to those of Hitler's deputy.

With his signature humility, Dr. Shine would hardly take credit for the health of the community during his term as the only doctor, even though it has been recorded as the healthiest time period on the Island as deter-

mined by the low mortality rate. Instead, he deferred credit to the nursing staff:

My impression is that the quality of the nursing staff was the critical determinant in a healthy community. There were many first class nurses at this time.

and to one outstanding nurse, Edith Johns, in particular:



**L-R: Karin Rose, Edith Johns, Mrs Archie Shine (Dr Shine's mother) & Matron Grace Sim in 1962**

The Saints are very good company, very hospitable, and in every way lovely, fascinating people, but the most outstanding Saint I met was Edith Johns. We often had the opportunity to work together, and I was very appreciative of her patient appraisals, which were often better than mine. Had Edith arrived on the Island by March 29, 1960, I would have asked her to deliver our unforgettable daughter Cathy; instead, I delivered her (the Shines' daughter Catherine was delivered by Dr. Shine 24 days after they arrived on the Island). Edith's medical judgment was quite remarkable, and she had such a gentle, sweet way of disagreeing that her disagreement always received careful attention.

Although Dr. Shine was stationed on St. Helena as a physician, he became woven into the history of the Island through friendships with unforgettable people, many of whom he recalls affectionately as quoted below:

The Islanders have two weeks of vacation per year, yet they complain less and achieve more. Perhaps the hardships elicit inner reserves; everyone discovered their own ingenious survival strategy that made them very interesting and unforgettable. I cannot forget Sonny and Jay Francis, Fred Graham, Jessica and Carolyn March, Percy Williams, Mr. Richards, the man who nurtured the gardens at Luffkins, Donald and Joyce Thorpe, Norzle Leo, Maudie Peters, Fiffie Stevens (aka Jennifer Stevens with whom the Shines' daughter Catherine Jennifer shares a middle name because she was such an

amazing dancer), Mattie Bonham, Diana Dillon, Charlie Burndown (who offered to teach me to dance the “short T”), Charlie Benjamin aka “the Saint who risked all to rescue a plant”, Edith Johns, and dozens more. I did not take up Charlie’s offer to learn the Schottische, but Deborah and I were invited to a number of local dances where I learned that Cold Tea, Tin Soldier, Green Fish, Bag O’Darkness, Go Down Friday, and Cat’n Ashes were all people. I was told that Willy Strike the Rock felt thirsty one day near Wild Ram Spring, and hit the ground with a stick and water gushed forth as it did for Moses in Sinai. When I asked him if the legend were true, he said: “No, I never hit the ground, but when I was thirsty, the water just came”.

Dr. Shine has fondly and frequently reminisced with Deborah over the years:

We often recall the serenity of Mrs. Augustus, whom we always addressed as ‘Mrs. Augustus’, and Mrs. Constantine’s delicious pink fingers, whose Christmas cake recipe is the one that Deborah still uses; also Herbert Nicholls’ excellent cabinet making with fine inlay; the Gambi’s rush mats (which the Shines still use almost every day); Jessica March’s lace which she taught Deborah how to make; and the Andrews, mother and daughter, making rope from flax. We exchanged Christmas cards with Diana Dillon and above all, Edith Johns, a Saint in both senses. We are pleased that our friendship with Joyce and Donald Thorpe has continued through their son Nick. And Poppy Moss is as much fun as ever.

And he has recalled memorable people who were not born Saints, but instead made the conscious choice to become Saints.

...there have been one or two hundred thousand visitors to the Island since it was first discovered among whom there were very few who stayed, making the Island a sieve for special people. For example, there are many Harvard professors who visited, but only one, the most gifted Arthur Loveridge, who retired there. The founders of today’s population were unusual enough to prefer life on St. Helena to life in Massachusetts (George Flagg), or to life in Yorkshire (Harry Thorpe). Flagg married Elizabeth Joshua and Thorpe married Anne Easthope; both wives had slave ancestors.

When the Shines left the Island in late 1962, they were leaving with three daughters, Anna, Cathy, and Edith (aka Cookie), many wonderful memories, lifelong friends, and countless treasured keepsakes from the Island, most of which they still enjoy today. It has been said that God never laughs more than when you tell him your ten-year plan. The Shines cherished the idea of returning to the Island, but never suspected it would take 55 years, nor did they foresee the course their life would take. Two

years after leaving the Island, the Shines had a son, Thomas. The family of six followed careers across the globe, and the four Shine children grew into successful adults.

Since leaving St. Helena, Dr. Shine has practiced medicine and worked extensively in the field of genetics at many fine institutions including Oxford and Reading, England, as well as at the University of Kentucky and Albert Einstein Medical School in the US. In addition to caring for patients throughout the years, Dr. Shine's research has lead him around the world to places including the University of Hawaii, through the Appalachian Mountains, and to Interlaken, Switzerland, to name a few. He was a lecturer at Johns Hopkins Medical School, and he founded the Thomas Hunt Morgan Genetics Institute in Lexington, Kentucky. Most recently, Dr. Shine has co-founded a biotechnology company located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is transforming Dr. Shine's research into a device that will improve the diagnosis of diseases.

Even though Dr. Shine's career has taken many paths, first and foremost he is a doctor and that is how he is remembered on the Island. As Nick Thorpe recently wrote, "a lot of people have very fond memories of Dr. Ian Shine. He went into the community like no other doctor within living memory. He visited patients in remote cottages and befriended people. This was at a time when overseas people tended to be aloof or patronizing. He was genuinely interested in Islanders and their lives".

Having lived in many countries throughout his life, and now a resident of Boston, Massachusetts in the US for the last five years, no place has *replaced* the spot St. Helena holds in his and Deborah's heart; so much so that Dr. and Mrs. Shine now in their mid-eighties made the long journey back to the Island in January 2017. Along with them on this trip was Karin Rose. There is hardly a greater sparkle in his eyes than when Dr. Shine recalls the Island, the Saints, and this recent journey, shown in some photos below:

When my wife, Karin, and I returned to St. Helena in January 2017, we were asked what we thought of all the changes. There are now over 4,000 cars, a £280 million airport on Prosperous Bay Plain with cross winds that prevented large planes from landing, 300 head of cattle but no fresh milk, and a shortage of fish. I replied that the Island has not changed. That the most important part, the Islanders, were the same. They were still funny, warm hearted and lovely.



**Ian and Deborah with Fifi's granddaughter, Patsy Flagg and the Huxtables taken on their recent journey in the photo above**

At the age of 84, Dr. Shine speaks excitedly about his next trip back to the Island:

When I return to the Island, I expect that the character of the St Helenians will not have changed for their loveliness is a product of their isolation and their perfect blend of African, Asian, and European genes. And the government's white elephant on Prosperous Bay Plain will help maintain the isolation.

There is simply no reason to doubt this gentleman; we can take him for his word and look forward to reading about Ian and Deborah Shine's third trip to the Island in the next decade; I, for one, will be grateful to hear his stories and the humble wisdom he imparts following the trip.