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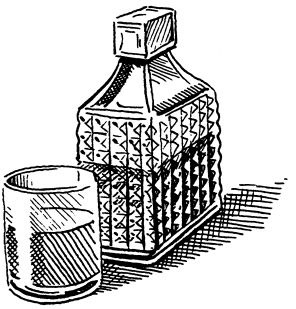
WHISKY AND SCOTLAND

A Spiritual Journey from Glen to Glass

NEIL M. GUNN

With drawings by Fred Van Deelen



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Foreword to the 1977 Edition

Grapes may hang heavy with a sun-kissed succulence. The year may be marked down as vintage, and wines pronounced impudent, discreet, domineering, provocative, even noble—but vineyard owners in their châteaux are probably savouring another drink.

For a greater 'wine', embodying in it the tempest of thunder and the sweetness of innocence, daring in its controlled smoothness, has become the one drink a French hostess cannot afford to be without.

Naturally, I refer to whisky—a work of art which is always repeated, yet always unique. Its embracing, possessive, all-round quality is wooing topers from the fiery concoctions of Chile, the sauternes of Spain and the age-old grip of the grape.

In France, where whisky was almost unknown before the Second World War, imports have spiralled upwards

and the Auld Alliance is celebrated with more whisky drinking than in any other country apart from America, where consumption now is more than the world drank in 1939.

The world's thirst for Scotch is Sahara-dry, and the whisky maturing in Scotland today is worth much more than the entire gold reserves of the Bank of England even *before* the economic and industrial crisis of the last few years.

It was James Hogg, the Etterick Shepherd, who said of his favourite whisky: 'If a body could just find oot the exac' proper proportion and quantity that ought to be drunk every day, and keep to that, I verily trow that he might leeve for ever, without dying at a', and that doctors and kirkyards would go oot o' fashion.'

His judgement on the merits of whisky is completely endorsed. Despite imitations, competition from legitimate whiskies such as Irish, rye and bourbon, Scotch is the most popular drink in the world, as truly international as that celebration of sweet parting, *Auld Lang Syne.*

* * *

Blends still dominate the boardrooms, but the clear malts are Scotland's classic whiskies, each as distinctive as a smile, and smooth as the shimmer of a leaping salmon. Yet, strange as it may seem today, it was as a medicine that whisky first achieved popularity among the Scots, being prescribed 'for the preservation of health, the prolongation of life, and for the relief of

colic, dropsy, palsy and smallpox, as well as a host of other ailments.'

Single malts must be drunk with circumspection. Contrary to the old joke about the Highlander liking two things naked, one of them whisky, malts are best drunk with a little water to bring out the aroma and flavour.

It was once explained to me by a lover of Laphroaig, an Islay malt that rolls in on you like a sea haar, that these whiskies are like an orchestra. 'The Islay malts are heavy and sombre as cellos. Highland malts are violas, Lowland the discursive violin . . .'

But what of the great whiskies? Smith's Glenlivet, from the Minmore distillery on Speyside, lays proud claim to the title of *The* Glenlivet. Others, like Milton-duff-Glenlivet or Longmorn-Glenlivet, must use a hyphen, and the addition is used in the same way as Chambertin has been added to the burgundies of Gevrey, and Musigny to those of Chambolle.

From Dufftown, a capital of malt distilling—'Rome was built on seven hills, Dufftown stands on seven stills'—comes Glenfiddich, cream-smooth on the tongue, along with Mortlach. Glenfarclas-Glenlivet, a distilled dew created at Ballindalloch, has the insistent Tomintoul-Glenlivet as a companion. From Keith, also in Banffshire, comes gentle Strathisla, and from further west in Elgin thrive a duo that deserve wider fame—Linkwood and Longmorn. The list is endless—Glenmorangie, distilled in Tain, retains a heather-honey flavour. Balmore, from Invergordon, Glenmhor at Inverness, Balblair discreet at Edderton in Ross-shire,

Cardhu, pride of Knockandow, and Clynelish out of Brora, pure as a pibroch. In Skye there is the brooding Tallisker, powerful enough to suit any man's mood, and among the Islay malts there is the mellow supremacy of Lagavulin; and at Craigellachie there is the mighty Macallan which, it is said, was offered as an alternative to cognac at a Mansion House dinner in London in honour of Kruschev and Bulganin during their 1956 visit. In Orkney, there is the polished suaveness of Highland Park, and in Stirlingshire there is Glengoyne, a Lowland malt fit to start a Trossachs trek.

At the end of 1976 there were 1,100 million gallons (8,800 million bottles) in bond, enough to supply world markets for up to eight years even if demand grew at five per cent a year, and almost half of this hip flask wealth is controlled by one company which turns out five of the best known blended labels in the business—Haig, Johnnie Walker, Black and White, White Horse and Dewar's White Label. Indeed, the group sells one out of every six bottles of Scotch consumed throughout the world.

But is the unparalleled commercial success of this century finally going to be sabotaged by successive Chancellors who keep on putting up taxation, and by governments who don't understand that Scotch—apart altogether from the bulk shipments of malt—is a unique product which needs protection? Equally disturbing is the continual harassment of the industry. Distillery companies, as distinct from brewers, have to pay excise duty *immediately* whisky is removed from bond, which means that on any day they are subsidising the Govern-

ment to between £50 and £60 million, as it takes some eight months for companies to regain their money via sales. And at Christmas and New Year this penal subsidy rises to well over the £100 million mark.

Another point of discrimination is that even on alcoholic strength, the whisky drinker is penalised by tax more than three times as much as the beer drinker!

Neil Gunn, lover of words and whisky, and a long-time friend of my father, Hugh MacDiarmid, was equally bitter about the malevolent tax: 'The discrimination against whisky is so manifestly unjust that it does have the appearance of being deliberately vindictive . . .'

He would be glad, however, that William Grant & Sons, distillers of Glenfiddich and Balvenie, as well as being blenders of Standfast, founded an Academy of Pure Malt Whisky in 1972 in response to the rapidly growing interest in malts. My father is one of the governors, and I have no doubt that Neil Gunn would have been one also if such an institution had existed when he was at the dramming, for single malts, with all their individuality, recalled to him:

'. . . The world of hills and glens, of raging elements, of shelter, of divine ease. The perfect moment of their reception is after bodily stress—or mental stress, if the body be sound. The essential oils that wind in the glass then uncurl their long fingers in lingering benediction and the whole works of creation are made manifest. At such a moment the basest man would bless his enemy.'

We would all stand and echo *Slainte!* to that sustained tribute, but Gunn, in his search for, and experience of,

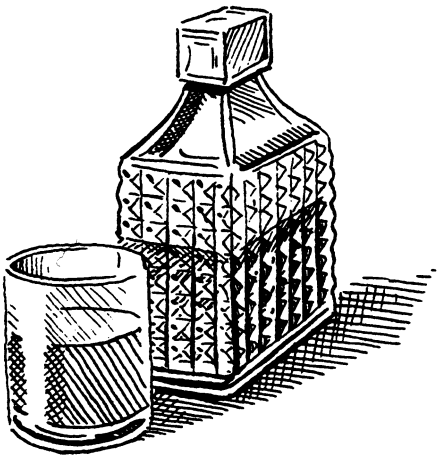
human values and experience also noted elsewhere: 'Man must for ever move like a liberator through his own unconsciousness.'

And whisky in *Whisky and Scotland* is much more than an eloquent metaphor, as he observes at the book's end: 'And when I use the word whisky I can but hope that the reader who has followed this long and devious excursion may now have some faint glimmering of what I mean.'

MICHAEL GRIEVE

PART ONE

IN THE BEGINNING



Uisgebeatha

Whisky comes from the Gaelic *uisge-beatha** meaning 'water of life'. In the curious mind this will at once rouse wonder, perhaps even a contemplative effort to surprise the ancestral thought in its creative moment. For clearly there is nothing haphazard or transitory about the designation. It was not coined for the slang or commerce of any age. Rather is it akin to one of the ultimate elements into which ancient philosophers resolved the universe. It is not a description so much as a simple statement of truth and of mystery.

Is it now possible to conceive by what process some long-dead mouth and tongue were led to breathe out the magic syllables upon the liquor's aftermath?

Down round the southern corner of the *dun* there

* *Pron.* ooshkubeha (ooshku, *whence* whisky).

was a field of barley all ripened by the sun. In a small wind it echoed faintly the sound of the ocean; at night it sighed and rustled as the earth mother thought over things, not without a little anxiety. It was cut and harvested and a sheaf offered in thanksgiving; flailed and winnowed; until the ears of grain remained in a heap of pale gold: the bread of life.

In simple ways the grain was prepared and ground and set to ferment; the fermented liquor was then boiled, and as the steam came off it was by happy chance condensed against some cold surface.

And lo! this condensation of the steam from the greenish-yellow fermented gruel is clear as crystal. It is purer than any water from any well. When cold, it is colder to the fingers than ice.

A marvellous transformation. A perfect water. But in the mouth—what is this? The gums tingle, the throat burns, down into the belly fire passes, and thence outward to the finger-tips, to the feet, and finally to the head.

The man was a bit tired, exasperated a little, for things had been going wrong (how often they must have gone wrong with the primitive experimenter!), and, for the rest—or he wouldn't have been at the job—not a little weary with the dullness of social life, including the looks of women and the ambitions of fools.

And then—and then—the head goes up. The film dissolves from the eyes; they glisten. He abruptly laughs and jumps to his feet; as abruptly pauses to look over himself with a marvelling scrutiny. He tries the muscles of his arms. They are full of such energy that

one fist shoots out; then the other. A right and left. His legs have the same energy. He begins to dance with what is called primitive abandon. Clearly it was not water he had drunk: *it was life.*

I know this is rather a poetic reconstruction, to be regarded with proper amusement, yet it is difficult to understand any history without some exercise of the imagination. What meaning can a human fact have until it is comprehended in thought and feeling? Let us pursue the method a little further.

Aware that he had achieved an 'epoch-making discovery', his first impulse would be to communicate it to his friends. Again the cynical interpreter of history may doubt this; but here even recorded fact is with us overwhelmingly. For illicit distillation today, not only in the remote wastes of our mountains and glens but in our cities, could be carried on to a very great extent without much fear of direct discovery by revenue officials, were it not that in one form or another 'information is received'. Sometimes this information is deliberately conveyed, more often it is overheard. And even when deliberately conveyed, the motive is rarely or never one of pecuniary gain, but nearly always the satisfaction of some passion, thwarted or jealous or righteous. This might be illustrated with a recent instance which has come to my knowledge. Three men are standing at the public bar of an inn in one of the wildest and remotest places of Britain. They are drinking whisky, and having paid good money for it they are disposed to be critical. For it would appear they know better stuff than this. This stuff is watered to

nothing and pretty rotten at that! They smile to each other knowingly. They wink. They ask the barman if this is the best he can do for them. Does he call this the real Mackay? They are a society getting fun out of their secret knowledge and urged to gloat over it by subtle innuendo. They give nothing directly away, of course. Indeed they would suffer any penalty rather than do that. But one traveller who is there, quietly having a drink by himself, overbears and wonders. He passes on the story and a few months later an illicit still is captured.

The first impulse, then, in the original discoverer would be to communicate with his friends. It is not impossible, however, that before actually setting off he tried his life-water again, just to make sure that he had not been a victim of some unusual form of witchery. It is even possible that as a scientist he considered it his duty to use his own body for further experimental purposes. While the poet would have arisen and gone singing through the forest at once, the scientist nobly prepares to sacrifice himself in the interests of knowledge.

Studying his reactions to a second draught, he would find that he had not been mistaken. Moreover, to the early ecstatic feelings there now supervened a state of consciousness marked by extreme mental clarity. Problems that had worried him for a long time, touching affairs of the family and the tribe, were seen in their true light, proportionately, and for what they were worth. And problems touching in particular the validity of certain religious aspects of totemic belief were seen to contain elements that were—peculiar. Decidedly

peculiar. He smiled—to the liquor, which was of the ineffable transparency of truth. Another little test wouldn't do him any harm . . . In this way, and as one of the first martyrs to science, he slowly 'passed out'.

But, like similar martyrs of a succeeding age, he would recover by-and-by, when, more than ever, he would desire to communicate with his friends, for what had been lost in initial eagerness would now be replaced with wisdom and a certain penetential awe.

His friends, his bosom cronies, would be more than taken in a little by this profound, even sad sense of experience, with its air of earnest secrecy. They had always said that one day he would go a bit too far; that some demon would possess him whom no druid could expel. Yet they liked him and so went privily with him through the woods to the small hill stream, taking care that neither Druid nor Chief saw them, and, in particular, that no scent of their intention crossed the nostrils of the Elders.

Yes, he admitted, that was the stuff, and he began to tell them how he had made it.

They scoffed. What, that well water! They drank.

Two of them revealed a rivalry which had hardly been suspected before, even by themselves. They fought. A man with a grey beard regarded a far horizon with eyes in which the light of an infinite understanding and kindliness shone. 'Stop them fighting,' he said, 'I want to talk.' But there was a man there who, though a bard, happened also to be trustworthy, and he started singing.

Meantime the Discoverer had at last helped himself,

and presently the dull ache in his head was dispelled and a prompting to dance was balanced by a divine quiescence. Carefully he carried what was left of the liquor over beside the old man. 'Would you like another little drop?' he asked. 'Well, if you make it a small one,' replied the old man, who nevertheless was so taken with this magic drink that he helped himself to a stout measure. 'Canny!' shouted the Bard at him, interrupting his song to do so. And the fighters, catching the anxiety in the Bard's voice, called each other fools in strong language and joined the Bard.

As the sun went down they swore an immortal fellowship. The two fighters pricked their little fingers and ritually sealed a blood-brotherhood. But as for the rest of the world, not a word! Hush!

The atmosphere they carried about with them, however, was thick enough to stop a poisoned arrow. And at the very next distilling, the Elders surprised them.

So this was what all the mysterious silences and looks and enigmatic boastings—and smell—had been about! This was the unholy brew!

And just here—for all this may not be entirely irrelevant—it should be made clear that this folk were founded on what they called the democratic principle; that is to say, they believed that power ultimately resided in themselves, but for the smooth working of their community in peace and war, they found it convenient to elect Elders, a religious teacher or Druid, and a leader or Chief. It will thus be seen that they were a very primitive people; indeed so primitive that they were even prepared to fight for this democratic prin-

ciple of theirs. And if that may seem obscure to many good Europeans now, still an effort should be made to understand it, were it only for this odd reason, namely, that it has persisted with an astonishing force among the elements of that folk to this day. In seeking the reason for so strange a survival, even we may find ourselves compelled to dip into the well of the water of life.

During which time the Elders had drunk.

The others, including the Discoverer, watched and waited. No one had ever seen an Elder dance. Their eyes glistened unholily.

But the eyes of the Elders batted no eyelid. True, as the life-water had gone round, each had emitted a curious lengthy sound like a half-strangled cough. In after times this sound became well known, but then it was still young and charged with humorous surprise. To offset this expression, however, the Elders' faces immediately became unusually grave. Slowly each drew his hand down his beard, while his brows ridged in thought. They sat in a sun circle, which has neither precedence nor disruption, beginning nor end. As the life-water was making its third circuit, the Bard, who was prone to impatience, asked them for their finding.

They mediated in silence yet awhile, then the oldest Elder (they had the unbiological custom of respecting age) declared they had decided to take the matter to avizandum.

'What matter?' demanded the Bard.

'This matter,' responded the Elder, pointing to the second and last jarful. Whereupon he attempted to get

up and after a little time succeeded. He looked very severe.

The other Elders concurred, with frowning glances at those around them.

'But you can't take that away!' shouted the Bard who, when not making poetry, was given to irreverence. 'I haven't had one yet!'

'You'll go without, then,' said the Elder.

'I'm damned if I will!'

'You'll be damned anyway,' said the Elder, whose eyes now had a piercing and terrible power. 'And moreover, if you speak again I'll report you to the Druid and have you up before the Session.' The vehemence in so old a man was astonishing.

'Report away!' shouted the Bard in a right fury.

The Elders began moving away with the evidence. The Bard swung round upon the others to incite them, but the Discoverer, catching his eye, winked slowly, and presently said to him in a low voice, 'I smuggled a jar round the corner.'

Looking after the Elders and noting their solemn if uncertain gait, the Bard broke into loud laughter. In a little while his companions were all dissolved in this laughter.

'You weren't very civil to him, all the same. What'll you say if we're had up?'

But the Bard was now on the crest of creation and finished his improvisation with a roar:

> '. . . civil?
> With usquebea we'll face the devil!'

Druids and chiefs, clans and federated clans, became the sport of their thought, the playthings of their wit.

But on the Seventh Day, the Druid preached from the text, 'The water of life—*and of death*', and divided his discourse under many heads. It was a cogent exhaustive piece of work, within the subtle pattern of which there began to glimmer an eldritch fire, a loch of fire growing big as a sea, convoluting and molten and tinct of brimstone. Certain of the listeners felt themselves fall in and sink—and sink—and sink . . . 'yet though you keep on sinking to all eternity you will never reach the bottom.'

On the way home, the Bard tried to persuade the Discoverer to go to the hill stream, but the Discoverer would not go with him.

'Frightened?' said the Bard. 'Humph! But I wonder how he knew so much about it?'

'It's his business to think Hell out,' said the Discoverer simply.

'Hell? Who's talking of Hell? I mean, how did he know so much about uisgebeatha? *Who drank the Elders' jar?*'

The Discoverer stopped dead, and on his face appeared evidence of the eternal dichotomy in the spirit of his tribe: wonder and fear, reverence and unholiness, wild laughter in an awful hush, saint and demon. He would put in authority those whom he would take down. For he was branded by the One God with the awful brand of the undying individualist.

'It's all right,' said the Bard. 'They would never suspect us so soon after the sermon.' And as they went on

their way he added thoughtfully, 'This is a new thing and we'll have to think it out for ourselves.'

And it seems he was right, for his tribe are still making the usquebeatha, and still thinking it out—nearly as violently as ever.

* * *

As a story, it should end there: yet it would not be quite complete if it did, and as this is rather a grave matter for all that it may seem light and fanciful to many, I must introduce the Chief to show how, despite all the divisions that arose between that people and their Elders and Druid, they were as one in the marrow of the bone.

The Chief had secret ambitions. He dreamed of Power. This was a common pastime of all leaders, of course, and amongst other tribes they were usually able to gratify their wishes and consolidate their position in a feudal or other tyranny. But it was not so in this tribe that worshipped the democratic principle.

A maddening principle to the Chief, gnawing his secret passion. How often he had thought of the folk that lived over the border, a willing compromising people! In his bones he felt he could impose on them his ultimate dream of the Divine Right of Chiefs. Here if he tried anything out of the way, they would have the law on him as soon as look at him. There he might very easily make the one and final law: the Chief can do no wrong.

Now when this heady aspiration came in contact with

the uisgebeatha, a transformation took place in the Chief's visage; as likewise in his whole body, which began to move with grace and assurance. And he was every inch a chiefly figure. The women admired him, and maids would play at putting white roses in their hair. But the Elders declared against interference with their neighbours. Their uncompromising manner so wrought upon him in anger that at last he cried out:

'Shut up! or I will clap a handful of Bishops on you!'

A tense, an awful, an enlightening silence ensued, through which came the Bard's voice: 'We prefer the Elders!'

'You what?'

'We prefer the Elders—such as they are.'

In this peculiar humour the Chief was momentarily lost, but he felt its sardonic power. He would never overcome this people. They would die, uncouth and damned, sooner; damned certainly. And by a sudden clairvoyance he saw that the uisgebeatha would help them. His dream of divine right was being filched away, smuggled away . . .

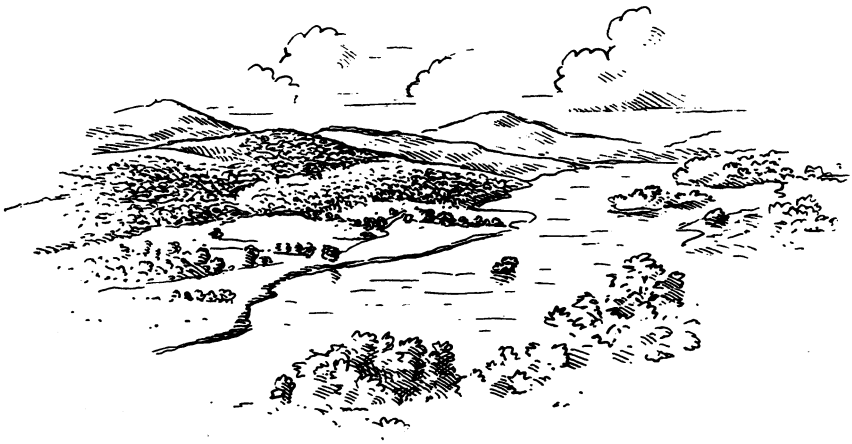
'Who amongst you is the Smuggler?' he shouted.

A man near the Bard was about to speak, but the Bard, knowing this man, stabbed him in the diaphragm with his elbow.

The Chief walked away alone.

The Bard turned towards the oldest Elder and said respectfully, 'What about—?' lifting his eyebrows at the same time in the direction of the hill stream.

'I don't mind if I do,' answered the Elder. 'We have much to talk about.' There was a fine fire in his eyes, an unyielding fanaticism, and a grave smile.



Early History

I am only too well aware that already the reader may consider I have laid too much stress on *uisgebeatha* as an original designation, as the very first 'water of life', conveniently forgetting *aqua vitae* and *eau-de-vie,* or as Mr Aeneas Macdonald in his small but excellent book on this subject of *Whiskey* says: 'There is a school which insists that *aqua vitae* is a corruption of *acquae vite,* "water of the wine". If this is indeed so, then it seems probable that in the earlier writers *aqua vitae* denotes a kind of brandy. But, on the other hand, the word "whisky" is derived from the Gaelic "*uisgebeatha*", which is "the water of life", a direct translation of the Latin *aqua vitae.*' Other modern writers have expressed the same idea.

Now I know that in this matter of whisky's antiquity (as so often of its age), there is confusion and

uncertainty. We have, characteristically, no label bearing the whole truth. But, though no research scholar, I have hunted where I could, and with proper impartiality and, on so gracious a subject, with every desire to be courteous to the stranger, I am yet compelled to the conclusion that *uisgebeatha* is not a direct translation from the Latin *aqua vitae*, but that *aqua vitae* is a direct translation from the Gaelic *uisgebeatha*.

Not that I am disposed to quarrel over it! But I should like to suggest that the time is at at last approaching when we may with reasonable manners hint, or even smilingly affirm, that we were not necessarily savage because we were not Roman. The Celtic peoples had a civilisation and were a great European power long before the Romans freed Barabbas. The historian Ephoros, in the fourth century BC, 'substituted the Celts for the Ligurians among the three great peoples on the circumference of the world, and assigned to them the whole north-west of Europe as far as the borders of the Scythians' (Hubert's *Rise of the Celts*). They attained the height of their power, in fact, at the same time as did the Latins. One of their maxims is recorded by a Greek: 'To worship the gods, to do nothing base, and to practise manhood.'

But there is another of their sayings, made direct to a Greek (or rather a Macedonian), that remains more readily in my mind. Taking all the circumstances into account, I think it about the profoundest retort in history. The occasion is that of Alexander the Great receiving Celts who had come 'for the purpose of making a treaty of friendship and mutual hospitality' (Strabo).

Alexander was friendly, and whilst they were drinking together, asked them what they feared most in the world, 'supposing they would say it was he.' But the Celts replied, 'it was no man, only they felt some alarm lest the heavens should on some occasion or other fall on them.'

The manner of delivery must have been one of considerable suavity, for Alexander remained friendly, if astonished.

* * *

Emperors or Chiefs may not need quick wits or inspiration. Power in the grand sense is probably more potent than a whole hogshead of uisgebeatha. But the ambassadors, like some of our modern statesmen, may well have taken a stimulant before going to so important a conference! Some of our greatest Scottish divines knew that conviction, zeal, inspiration, were warmed to the highest purpose by a small drop of whisky. For their arduous Sabbath duties and exhortations—beside which in cogency of reasoning and in spiritual depths the efforts of our modern pulpit men are little more than childish stammerings—their poor bodily frames had to be kept from drooping—and were so kept.

But try to imagine a great ambassador, a great statesman, or a great Scottish divine endeavouring to quicken his soul with beer or vintage port or chianti—admirable drinks in their time and place but never devised to whet the spirit sword-keen, to make it flash like Excalibur, or to give the assurance and bearing of a great protagonist.

Some of our finest modern political orators have found aid in champagne or brandy. But though champagne has liveliness it has not the ruthlessness of life; and brandy, for all its Ciceronian power, has in it the acknowledgement, the Roman dignity, of death. Already within it is the shadow of dissolution.

This matter, then, of the antiquity of uisgebeatha should be considered with no undue prejudice against the Celtic people. The prejudice is an old affair. Mr Aeneas Macdonald speculates with some reason that Dionysos was the god of whisky before he was the god of wine. He quotes the epigram made when Julian the Apostate, in his wars against 'the northern barbarians', first encountered and disliked the barley brew. Let us extract the taunt:

'For lack of grapes from ears of grain your countryman, the Celt, made you.'

But I should like to know exactly why Julian grew so sarcastic. We do not loose our best shafts unless we are moved. Unfortunately it is not recorded what the barbarians thought of Julian and his sweetish grape-juice.

Our great difficulty indeed with these old Celts is their aversion to writing of any kind. They believed in learning by heart. The Druidic schools were severe in their standards and austere in their methods. Certain it is, anyway, that at a very remote age the Celts acknowledged a potent god in the barley.

* * *

But our real concern here is the problem of distillation. Uisgebeatha or whisky is distilled from fermented barley water. Distillation may be defined as an operation that converts a substance into vapour and then condenses that vapour into liquid form. It is essentially very simple but very important. When you hold a cold plate to the steam from a kettle, the drops that form on the plate and run together make distilled water. Now no distilling process is gone through in making beer or wine. There are brewing and fermenting processes, but never does any of the liquor get boiled off and condensed back into liquid.

It is simple enough to distil any liquid, including wine. But when you distil wine, the result is brandy or *eau-de-vie*.

Thus it may be seen that in looking for the beginning of uisgebeatha we are also looking for a knowledge of distillation.

Did Julian drink brandy? We may certainly answer No. If the old Greeks and Romans were distillers of *aqua vitae* we should have heard about it. Aristotle does mention that pure water is made by the evaporation of sea water, and Pliny describes a primitive method of distillation, but there was obviously no accepted process or art of distilling amongst them.

But these two peoples did not make up the whole of the ancient world nor comprise all its knowledge. Hundreds of years before Julian, folk were manufacturing spirits (arrack) in India. The Chinese were expert distillers in remote times.

To the primitive form of still the Alexandrians gave

a proper head, and the Arabians improved the cooling process by running cold water about a pipe that came away from the head—exactly as we do today.

How the early Celts went about it, of course we do not know, though if they devoted anything like the terrible concentration one of their young bards had to devote to learning his thousands of lines, I should not be in any way surprised to hear from some Eastern scholar that a certain adventuring Arabian brought home with him once upon a time from the fastnesses of the northern barbarians a still-head complete with worm (condensing pipe).

The earliest known reference to the preparation of spirits by distillation in Great Britain is contained in the Mead Song by the Welsh bard Taliessin in the sixth century:

Mead distilled sparkling, its praise is everywhere.

Obviously the clear distillate had a wide clientele.

Taliessin also has a Song to Ale, which shows his expert knowledge of the various stages in making a sound brew:

He shall steep it in the Llyn
Until it shall sprout.
He shall steep it another time
Until it is sodden.
Not for a long time will be finished
What the elements produce.
Let his vessels be washed,
Let his wort be clear.

Under the headings of *Malting* and *Brewing* in the third part of this book, I have done little more than amplify these lines. And, in particular, how admirable are the last two!

The poem continues:

> And when there shall be an exciter of song,
> Let it be brought from the cell,

(to prove to us that the Celts of that early century knew the value of a cellar!),

> Let it be brought before kings.
> In splendid festivals.
> Will not oppose every two
> The honey that made it.

These last two lines are obscure, as are indeed many in old Taliessin. And Skene, from whose *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* I have taken them, admits and honours the fact. But manifestly the word honey has some associative value in connection with the 'mead distilled sparkling'. Perhaps 'modern' poetry is not so modern as we suppose nor the prose of James Joyce altogether novel in its allusiveness.

This does go a little way, anyhow, towards confirming my suspicion that the Celtic bard was pretty early on the scene. The bardic tradition, like all those of ancient standing, was inclined to be academic and not at all given to innovation. Unless the Mead Song were a long-honoured theme, it would be as difficult for Taliessin to have it inscribed on the tablets of memory as it would be, say, for a young Oxonian to win the

Newdigate with an effort on Hooch to a jazz rhythm.

Verses, of course, have been attributed to Taliessin that authorities quarrel over, and amongst them the well-known lines that foretold the coming of the Saxon into the land, his oppression of the Cymry, and his passing away when the day of his destiny should come. Probably there has just been enough of the prophecy fulfilled to make ardent Welshmen wonder!

Their God they will praise,
Their speech they will keep,
Their land they will lose,
Except wild Wales.

At least this may be said, that if Taliessin's palate was as reliable as his prophetic gift, his praising of distilled mead must command our respect.

These ancient Celts, then, were 'distillers', 'kiln-distillers', 'furnace-distillers'. So much seems certain.

* * *

When we get down to the intimate detail of distilling whisky, however, we come upon a matter of delicate difficulty.

All authorities agree that whisky or uisgebeatha, as we know it today, came originally from Scotland and Ireland, but whether from Scotland first or Ireland first, no one can definitely say. The important fact of origin having been established, however, I hardly think the question of precedence is of real concern. In any case, the link between Scotland and Ireland in ancient days

was so close that in matters of vital interest there must have been pretty well spontaneous generation. The glens of Antrim and Tara Hall knew the gossip of Argyll before either Kerry or Caithness. Scholar's Gaelic—like our King's English—was common to both countries. And if Ireland comes into the picture first, it is because she was conquered first. (That last sentence may have an ambiguous ring to those who say that Scotland never was conquered. And, truly enough, Scotland never was conquered by force of arms. But it is hardly worth my while altering the sentence for all that.)

Happily for us, we know that distillation from fermented grain liquor was practised in Ireland *before* the distillation of wine was introduced. In other words, uisgebeatha preceded *eau-de-vie* so far as that country was concerned. There is an old Irish legend which credits St Patrick with having first taught the Irish the art of distillation. From the many mysteries and marvels attributed by the Irish to St Patrick, whom they made their patron saint, it is clear that he must have appeared to them as a man not only of high spiritual quality but of great knowledge and learning, a sort of superman, or visitor from 'another world'. According to some accounts, he was born near Dumbarton on the Clyde.

But whether we credit the old Irish legend or not, certain it is that at the time of the first English invasion of Ireland (1170–72), the Irish were manufacturing a spirit distilled from grain.

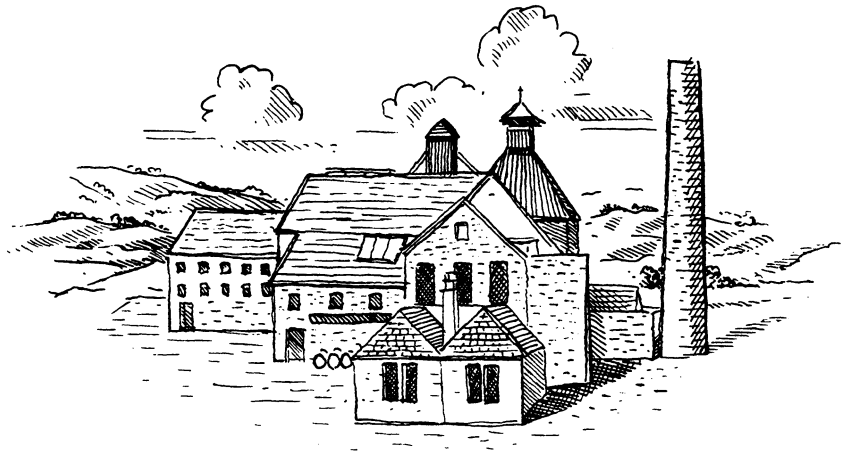
The English brought back the art with them—or brought back the Irish who knew the art—and by the

end of the century a home-produced spirit could be got at their apothecaries or vintners. The dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII resulted in many of the monks setting up in business as distillers, brewers and vinegar makers.

The attachment of the Church to the interests of the distiller is notable throughout our history. At comparatively recent date, a Scottish pulpit has been found a convenient place in which to conceal liquor from the prying eyes of the law. I remember how my schoolbooks insisted that the monasteries were the centres of learning and culture and asylums for those fleeing from the secular arm. There was one near Inverness called Beau Lieu (now Beauly) which had appropriately advanced the fruitfulness of the soil to an extraordinary degree. Its pears, apples and grain were famous. For reasons which I hope subsequently to make clear, I can have no great faith in the quality of the English liquor, but if there was a small still in operation in Beauly (in recent times the centre of a renowned smuggling area), I would give much to taste the liquor the apple-ripe monks distilled from the barley. In my time I have cast anxious eyes over the ruins of the ancient Priory, but at last and reluctantly I have given up all hope of coming on hidden treasure in a sealed jar.

As for *eau-de-vie*, the production of a spirit from wine does appear to have been known some three centuries *after* Taliessin sang in Wales; and one important authority asserts that the first effort at distilling wine in France took place in the thirteenth century. Altogether, then, distilling of the barley brew by the Celtic people

seems to have preceded by untold centuries distilling of fermented wine by Greek or Latin. In this matter of relative antiquity, uisgebeatha gets my vote. We knew the 'water of life' in the beginning.



Later History

Although whisky was thus early distilled in Ireland and Scotland, it has had right through the centuries until a mere two to three hundred years ago what might be called a very poor press. Ossian appears to ignore it. The Fingalians, we gather, drank deep of ale or mead, thereby immediately putting us up against this difficulty: what sort of ale and what sort of mead? Was the ale the famous Heather Ale, concerning which Neil Munro tells so well the legendary story? If so, it was brewed out of more than heather-tops, for though the bees suck there to make their finest honey, no purplest bloom offers in sufficient degree the necessary basis of alcohol. At any rate, such a mildly fermented drink as would have been concocted would certainly be classed today for revenue purposes as non-alcoholic. Heather ale was not so simple as all that if the Picts had a hand