

WHISKEY

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Any encyclopædia will define whiskey as an alcoholic potable spirit distilled from an infusion of malted barley or other cereal. The same encyclopædia will tell you that wine is the fermented juice of the grape. And, though you have got your definitions, you are still roundly ignorant of what whiskey and wine really are. I hope to tell you a thing or two about whiskey.

The making of whiskey is a long and a quiet process. Neil Munro says that to the making of a piper go seven years of his own time and seven generations before. To the making of whiskey go seven days of man's time and seven years of its own.

If you know how and are let you can make poteen or immature spirits in seven days ; and you may drink your poteen hot from the still or, if you are a man of continence, you may wait till it cools ; for it is a peculiar fact that spirit immediately it is distilled is quite palatable, but that after one week and for the next seven years it is a vile and treacherous drink. You can get ingloriously drunk on it all right, but no sane taker of whiskey takes whiskey to get drunk on. Get sodden, body and mind, on Anglo-Saxon beer if you must, but take whiskey to lift your mind to a new plane and hold it there.

Well ! Make your immature spirit, fill a sound oak cask bung-full with it, store it away in a cool, quiet, dark place, leave it alone to its own digestive processes, and in seven years you have real whiskey. After one year it is nauseous stuff, a fiery harshness of the fusel oils, acids, esters and furfurals that in proper proportion and properly mellowed give whiskey its bouquet ; in three years the Scots say it is fit for human consumption, and they call it

whisky, we Irish call it whiskey after five years, but it is not the real article until seven years have elapsed. And, even then, it has not finished maturing. At ten years it is prime, at twelve it is about at its best, though some whiskies, notably heavy Scotch malts, go on maturing and improving up to fifteen or twenty years.

Fermentation, which is the first essential in the preparation of alcoholic beverages, is a natural process, and beer was almost certainly discovered by chance. Whiskey, in its origin, is actually a distillate of beer, but distillation is such a complicated process that I can hardly conceive its beginning as accidental. Perhaps it was an inspiration (or a revelation) but I will not say by whom, for I would hate to be the Devil's advocate. Neil M. Gunn in his fine survey of 'Whisky and Scotland' imagines its origin very reasonably.

A man was preparing the tribal tippie, mashing the grain, fermenting the infusion, finally boiling it; and as the steam came off it condensed by chance on the cold face of a boulder and trickled into a little pool crystal clear as water. It looked like water, and the man tasted it. Hell and it hot! What devil is this? It is the very angry essence of the brew. 'His gums tingle, his throat burns, down into the belly fire passes, and thence outwards to the finger-tips, and finally to the head.' Will he try it again? He will. By the great god Bel he will though the devil in it slay him in his tracks. He tries it again, the bold fellow that used to be so timid. He tries it again. He laughs. He hasn't a care in the world. He has a song in his head already, a formless sort of song full of sound and fury and high sadness, meaning nothing or everything. He remembers his friends who are sad with the wrong sort of sadness, and he hastens, but not in a straight line, to delight them. He remembers a man that once cowered him, and he joyously proceeds to put a head on that man. And thus modern poetry and romantic war started. Whiskey has a good deal to answer for—in the matter of poetry.

And the name that man called that wizardly drink was *Uisge Beatha*—Water of Life. Some hold that *uisge beatha* is a direct translation of *aqua vitae* or *eau-de-vie*, or even a false translation of *acquae vite*—water of the vine. This last would identify it with brandy, which is clearly wrong, for whiskey was known centuries before brandy. Also the Latins did not know of whiskey. In fact, as Gunn points out, *uisge beatha* is not a direct translation from the Latin *aqua vitae*, but *aqua vitae* is a direct translation from the Gaelic *uisge beatha*.

I have said that whiskey is distilled from beer, a 'barley bree' in essence, but largely freed by double or treble distillation of such deleterious impurities as 'low-wines' and feints and fusel oils. Furthermore, you will note that in swigging beer you swallow and fail to assimilate these impurities, and so the stomach and the head ultimately rebel and perish. Recall to your mind the inveterate beer swiller, swollen in body, obfuscate in head, and dying before he has achieved his years; and the choice whiskey taker prepared to discuss the First Cause with you any time in his four score years.

It would seem that I am abusing beer (which includes ale, stout and porter). I would not abuse all beers, though I may have abused some in more ways than one. Old English home-brewed ale, where fermentation was checked at an early stage and little hops (only a bitter preservative) used, was a reasonable thirst-quenching beverage in an English summer; but the commercial age and the big breweries with their tied houses killed home-brewed ale, as the big whiskey-combines killed the real Scotch malt whisky. To my mind the only beer worth drinking nowadays—if we could get it—is German or Czech lager. It is scientifically brewed, properly fined, possesses a nutty flavour evanescently touched with garlic, and it does not put a head on you—much. British lager—English or Scotch—should pour itself down a drain. It nearly killed a good friend of mine last year—a strong man and no hard drinker.

A good deal of whiskey is drunk in England—or perhaps we should say a pseudo-whisky, a thing called Scotch-and-soda ; but it is a fact that real whiskey—not the disastrous blends pushed by big business—does not taste the real thing in deep South Britain, not in summer at any rate. We Excise Officers noted that a generation or two ago. After the distilling season in the Highlands a batch of us young fellows—for our sins mostly—was transported to England for the summer leave season, to be again restored to the Highlands—again for our sins—in October. We were not drinkers, and some of us did not drink at all, but any of us that did take a drink would not touch whiskey in the deep south. We held by home-brewed, sitting on the bulge of a barrel in a cool cellar at the end of a hot day. There was nothing wrong with it. For whiskey, or whisky, is the drink of the Gael or pre-Gael—Scot or Irish—and he has made it world-famous. He brought it with him out of the East, and he has taken it with him and popularised it north, south, east and west in the cunning commercial age. Where in the East he brought it from we do not know—Arabia, Parthia, Georgia, Mongolia, or even Palestine. It has been asserted that some of the lost Tribes wandered westwards with the pre-Celt, and that might well be. Indeed I knew some Scots and Irish who could be members of any tribe deservedly lost. . . .

The old Irish did not drink their spirits harsh from the first run of the still, nor did they drink incontinently. It was not until the woeful eighteenth century of utter defeat when the Rapparees were on the hills and the poets lick-spittling their ways from ascendancy house to ascendancy house (but indeed that is not unusual with poets, for I know only three who are bold enough not to be patronised) that despairful men soused their grains and soused their brains to forget their ills in savage drunkenness. The old Irish double or treble-distilled their spirits and, if they drank them, new laced them with fruit juices, heather bloom and herb infusions. Otherwise they stored them

away in kegs in a peat hag as they stored their butter. Sometimes they forgot where they stored their butter, and we find an occasional keg to the present day, but we find no spirits, for he would be a foolish man indeed who forgot where he hid his drop of nourishment.

The secrets of the old Irish liqueurs—Heather Wine and others—are lost in Ireland, though it is certain that Celtic Missionaries carried some to the Continent, and so we have such a liquor as Green Chartreuse which is said to have twenty-four flavours, though a certain friend of mine can identify only twenty-one. The point I want to make is that not so long ago there were as many individualities amongst whiskies as amongst, say, French wines. In the Highlands alone there were one hundred and forty distilleries at work, and the product of each had its own individuality. In Ireland we had upwards of twenty. Neil M. Gunn in his book discourses on the bouquet and quality of just a few Highland whiskys : Glenlivet—the real Glenlivet—Glen Grant, Talisker, Long John, Glendronach, Lagavulin, Glenfiddich, Glenmorangie, Clynelish, Dalmore, Glenmore, Brackla, Glenburgie, Ord, Millburn, Glenlossie, Cardow, Cragganmore, etc. And he could identify twenty of them by taste alone. That means that he took care not to spoil his palate by mere drinking.

I knew one short mile of highland valley with seven distilleries along the meanderings of a clear highland river ; and though I am not a taster—as is a taster—I could identify five of the seven by flavour or bouquet. The seven used the same malt, the same peat, the same water, the same yeast and the same processes, yet each produced its own individual spirit—one good, one bad, the others medium. The best and the worst were distilled and matured within one hundred yards of each other, and no one could convincingly explain why one mellowed perfectly with age while the other retained its original fierceness. And, by the way, that one good whisky of the seven is obtainable at a few certain places in Dublin. Its distiller

held that its quality was due to the shape of his still that accelerated the passing over of the higher alcohols and oils.

You must remember that whiskey is only a portion—and not a large portion—of the second or even third distillation. The first distillation of 'the wash' (the fermented juice of the grain) produces no whiskey at all, but only a nauseating liquor called 'low-wines,' and the important thing in distillation is not only to separate the drinkable from the undrinkable but to incorporate in the drinkable certain esters and furfurals that in maturing give whiskey its individual bouquet. Some stills do their work better than others, and no man really knows why. Just as no man can really tell you why it is a vintage year in the valley of the Garonne.

The commercial age killed the individuality of Highland distillers, but in Ireland we still have two or three real craftsmen. The commercial age also killed the individuality of Scotch whisky and put more than a dozen Irish whiskies off the market. A century ago Irish whiskey was more popular than Scotch whisky in the world market. It deserved to be, and now deserves to be more than ever, for it is a very much finer product than any of the popular Scotch blends. And indeed it may regain its popularity if we can get rid of a certain conservatism—an exclusiveness—in the Irish whiskey trade.

The get-rich-quick businessmen (and are not businessmen usually so unintelligent as to be nothing else than get-rich-quickers) invented blended whisky and popularised it by the usual methods of big business; but you can take it from me that the best blend of the best whiskies has not the quality or individuality of even a medium single whiskey. (I wonder would Maurice Healy retain his equanimity if he were offered a blend of all the best clarets as the last word in claret.) Big business discovered that a raw-grain spirit could be made in a patent coffey-still at a cost of less than a shilling a gallon, that such spirit was practically odourless and flavourless, that by warehousing

in a sherry cask for three years it became quite palatable but was still flavourless and that it could be flavoured to suit the English and American palate by adding a little Highland malt whisky. And so the whisky-combines took hold, advertised 'Scotch' into world fame, and made millions. Half a dozen huge patent stills produced all the colourless grain spirit required, and three-fourths of all the Highland pot stills were silent in all the Highland valleys. Campbeltown with its two dozen distilleries was and is as dead as a doornail, and on Speyside not half a score of stills were running the full season from October to May. And the Highland distillers, with a few exceptions who would not debase their product, were set to make as impure a spirit as would be acceptable in order to flavour as large a quantity as possible of flavourless patent spirit.

And so in three years the blenders had that fairly palatable, wholly undistinguished commercial article that we call 'Scotch.' Thanks to the few exceptions that would not be bought into the combine there are still a few single whiskies procurable in Scotland by a few men in the know, but, like enough, you have never heard of them. Generally speaking when you, poor fellow, are drinking 'Scotch' you are drinking a standardised blend, no matter the name on the bottle, and there are scores of names. That is modern 'Scotch' for you, and you drink it because your education has been neglected, because it has an easy palatableness with soda-water or even ginger-beer, because you have never been taught to consider the bouquet that a whiskey should have, a bouquet for every still, for nearly every season, for even individual casks.

In Ireland we probably never had more than a score of distilleries maturing an individual product that might be compared to a vintage wine. Not so long ago eight pot distilleries were working in Dublin City. Now there are only two, even if they are the biggest in the world, and they seldom or never work a full season. Our largest distillery has about ten times the capacity of the average Highland

still. But we lack variety. In a few years there may be no more George Roe or D.W.D. to please a discriminate palate. I tasted the last Diamond J of Marrowbone Lane twenty years ago and it was a grand whiskey. In Dublin we seldom hear of Tullamore or Kilbeggan or Monasterevan, and they have fine qualities. Bushmills and Coleraine are scarcely known outside Ulster ; I have been treated to a really lovely ' Old Bush ' in Belfast. Banagher is long gone. Persse's Nun's Island in Galway is gone too, and at its best it was the finest whiskey in the world. Limerick is gone. In fact in all Munster only one pot distillery is working, and it turns out a fine and individual product at ten years old. But, when all is said and done, when you have discussed three or at most four Irish whiskies you have finished with the subject, and there's the pity.

In my opinion Irish whiskey, though limited in range, is the best whiskey in the world. It is distilled to a strict standard of purity, matured under the best warehouse conditions, and is seldom or never blended after distillation. You can't hold a good thing down for ever, and there are now signs that our Irish is regaining some of its original popularity in England and America. The commercial age was late in coming to Ireland, and our best distillers were probably too respectably conservative to push their wares with the ruthlessness of the British combine. I might remark that when at last the commercial age came to Ireland we enriched it with two or three vices all our own.

If Irish whiskey has a fault it is that it lacks the individual qualities that the great Highland malts once possessed. You may like Jameson for its forthright squareness, or Power for its seductive roundness, or George Roe for its liqueurness, or Paddy for its tang of the pot, but that thing called bouquet is not there somehow. Perhaps Irish is too pure, distilled with too much eye to purity alone, almost deserving the name of ' silent ' malt. But, of course, it is not a pure malt whiskey as the Scotch pot whisky is. The blend is done in the mash tun before distillation and is

made up of malted and unmalted barley, wheat, oats and rye in such proportions as experience has shown to give the best results. Whereas Highland pot is distilled at about 20 over-proof, and so is too impure to mature into a good single whisky, Irish is distilled at 50 over-proof and has not enough of the esters to give it a bouquet.

By the way 'proof' is more or less an arbitrary term. It was never scientifically fixed. An old Highlandman told me that proof strength was found by diluting whisky to that point that when mixed with gunpowder the gunpowder smouldered but did not flame. That is not the method used by Excise officers—or there might be a dearth of officers by external not internal combustion. The Excise officer uses a thermometer, a hydrometer and a set of tables. He will tell you that absolute alcohol (alcohol without a trace of water) is 74.5° over-proof, and he will give you a scientific definition of proof strength that will leave you cold. For the information of the layman I will define it with reasonable accuracy. By mixing an equal weight of absolute alcohol with an equal weight of water you obtain a spirit at proof strength. Add some more water in calculable proportion and you get 25° under-proof which is the bottled strength of Irish whiskey; add some more water still and you get 30° under-proof which is the bottled strength of Scotch. Experts that I respect hold that the ideal bottled strength is 21° under-proof. Before the middling small war of 1914-18 the bottled strength was 18° under-proof, and we used pay four shillings a bottle for the very best. Nowadays the water in a bottle of whiskey costs you ten shillings, which is a slightly higher rate than we dwellers in Dublin county have to pay Dublin Corporation for Vartry water.

I would like to see our very able distillers more daringly experimental. They make a very fine standard whiskey and are satisfied to stick to that standard come hell or high water. Why not experiment with an occasional run of the still in search of bouquets to please discriminate but varying palates? I often wonder what a Jameson or a Power

would taste like if distilled at, say, 40° over-proof, reduced in store to 15° over-proof, and warehoused in a sherry cask for ten years. I suppose I'll never know.

Personally I would like to see twenty pot stills again at work, each producing an individual spirit. In expressing that wish I am not advocating whiskey-soaking. Drunkenness lifted its reeling head in Ireland in the eighteenth century, became worse, because more sodden, with temperance people's advocacy of beer, and is not bettered by our limited range in whiskey. If you get used to a drink you lose appreciation of its fine qualities and take it for the sake of the kick. That's drunkenness. Given a goodly number of good whiskeys and a palate (akin to the wine drinker's) to savour them few men will take whiskey to get plain drunk on.

Maybe it is as well that I have to stop before I have really said anything about whiskey.

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