

W H I S K I E S
G A L O R E

Whiskies Galore

*A Personal Journey
(of Sorts, and a Sort of a Journey)
around Scotland's Island Distilleries*



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Dedication

THIS BOOK is dedicated to my mother
and father, who first took me to
Scotland's islands. Not that I had any choice
in the matter, and they were conscientious
enough not to leave me there—tempted
though they no doubt were. But thanks
anyway. And to my wife, who has put up
with my usual distracted nature and inability
to engage in matters domestic while I
was writing it. I'm told that wasn't easy.

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A different sort of journey



THIS IS AN ACCOUNT OF A PERSONAL JOURNEY. Now I don't know if you want to know where I was born, and what my perfectly agreeable middle-class childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that Holden Caulfield kind of angst, but we're here to talk about malt not rye, so I won't be going into it, if you want to know the truth.

To start with, although we shall encounter whiskies galore (and a few gins for good measure), this is not your run-of-the-mill 'whisky book'. That is to say it does not catalogue histories, at least not in any consistent way; capacities and outputs are recorded only intermittently; expression after expression is not laboriously listed and detailed tasting notes made, and there are very few artful photographs of grizzled chaps rolling barrels or serious-looking coves staring moodily at a tasting glass full of liquid illuminated by

a fortuitous shaft of iridescent shimmering golden light. Grim industrial buildings have not been tastefully styled; neither have I romanticised dereliction, nor has an art director's soft-focus lens imposed spurious romance on a grimy and cobwebbed cellar. This is not whisky porn.

Why is that? Well, if what you want is detailed information on equipment, still sizes, barley varieties, output, capacities and so on and so forth, or exhaustively documented lists of 1,001 different whiskies with lengthy and baroque tasting notes, there are many places to find those doubtless fine and important things—whisky blogs, websites and books are there in splendiferous plenty, so enjoy. There seemed very little point in repeating what had already been so thoroughly well done by others, doubtless more panoptic in scope, conscientious in delivery and meticulous in presentation than me. At any event, a tasting note is only one person's opinion and an unreliable guide to the probability of your pleasure. Above all, avoid the absurdly spurious accuracy of a tasting score of 94.5 points or similar nonsense. Trust your own judgement; enjoy what you enjoy and don't let anyone else tell you otherwise.

Other people have compiled extensive lists and faithfully recorded output and so on, but when I started a similar inventory I very soon thought it pointless and unkind to impose another catalogue of such drudgery, however conscientious, on an unsuspecting world. Finally, and most importantly, that kind of book is redundant in the age of the internet. Chances are that by the time it is written, fact-checked, designed, proofread, printed and delivered to the shops it will be out of date and it will continue to get ever more out of date the longer it stays in print. The world of whisky changes very fast and this type of information is simply to be found faster and more reliably on the web.

However, I do find it interesting that in recent years Scotland's island distilleries have attained a special status in the eyes of many

drinkers, and a romantic image has formed of island life and the drams produced there. Island whiskies, and to a lesser extent gin, continue to exercise a fascination and powerful emotional draw on consumers the world over. Their remarkable combination of heritage, mystique, remote location and, of course, the highly distinctive taste of many of them is often imitated but seldom bettered: they have a unique romance and attract visitors from round the world, especially Germany and Scandinavia. What is more, I have, quite by accident, joined a wedding party who had travelled from Singapore to be married and celebrate their union on Islay, so the appeal is clearly global.

So I set off with the loosely-defined hope that I might discover what Scotland's island distilleries are really about. Are they, as their enthusiastic disciples proclaim, really so different? Is there some elusive quality involved or some spirit of place or something so remarkable about the people who distil on an island that makes their products intrinsically different and superior? Or is that a self-serving myth, merely the creation of shrewd marketing experts looking to exploit any difference in a competitive world?

In the process, what emerged was an entirely impressionistic ramble through my memories of the islands going back some fifty years and my more recent experience of Scotland's island distilleries. Some are more important than others and may receive more space, but that will depend on my personal relationship with them and their island. It is, if you will, a highly personal, whisky-fuelled journey through those islands with frequent diversions on topics which happen to amuse, interest or divert me.

Some people collect whiskies but never drink them. Some people—may they get help soon—even promote whisky as an 'investment', a trend upon which certain distillers have happily capitalised, leading to ever more elaborately packaged special bottlings of increasing cost and vulgarity and a general drift

upwards in the price of whisky. All this is to be deplored by the genuine and righteous student of whisky who understands instinctively that whisky was made to be drunk and has no meaning until the moment of its consumption.

I despair of the whisky investment hucksters and I fear the craze will end badly. However, I understand the urge of the collector: I have lots of pens; more pens than strictly speaking I ‘need’, but the difference is that I wrote this book with them. You will have to indulge me, therefore, as the pens and the ink with which I wrote this book make cameo appearances throughout the narrative that follows. This book features aficionados, collectors and obsessives; and I, in my own small way, am one of them.

While in confessional mode, I really should acknowledge that although I have spent nearly half a century visiting Scotland’s patchwork of islands, it would be wrong of me, as an outsider, to cast grand judgements upon them. Instead I offer you my thoughts, random and incoherent as they most definitely are, on Scotland’s island distilleries—to places, people and landscapes that have in common an existence, sometimes fragile, ‘on the edge’—an edge physical, geographic, cultural and economic. And so, without further delay...

Arran

Look out! Shark!



THE GREAT, GREEN-GREY MONSTER SURFACED LAZILY right by our little boat, suddenly so flimsy and unstable and the coast line so far distant. Another few feet and we would have been overturned and in all probability drowned, the behemoth by our side drifting lazily on, entirely oblivious to our cries and panic. Not waving but drowning.

But first, a few facts.¹

Arran is the most accessible of islands. It lies in the Firth of Clyde, conveniently close to Glasgow, and is served by a frequent

¹ You probably realise what I’ve just done: I open with a cunning hook to draw you in, with the promise of a subsequent juicy conclusion. What happens to Ian? Anxious to know, you read on. Actually, it’s an ancient rhetorical device, much favoured by Cicero, known as *parekbasis*, or a digression from the main topic. Boris Johnson, a great classicist (and at the time of writing our Foreign Secretary), uses it all the time. You may now proceed: there will be a pay-off for the story later, though, as you will have deduced, I didn’t actually drown.

car ferry which crosses from Ardrossan to the island's second largest town, Brodick. During the summer months, a smaller vessel travels from Lochranza in the north of Arran to Claonaig on the Kintyre peninsula. Apart from a slipway for the ferry traffic there isn't a lot to see there unless you're interested in bus shelters. I'm not, unless waiting for a bus in the rain, in which case I'm an avid enthusiast. Actually, there's also a very dramatic modern house there, overlooking the sea, owned by a thoroughly charming Swiss pension fund manager who, from time to time, invites me for tea. It's a long way to go; though, to be fair, even further from Zurich, so I have yet to enjoy his hospitality.

At 167 square miles, Arran is the largest island in the Firth of Clyde. Today, with a population of some 4,600, tourism and services to support tourism appear to be the main source of employment but, in its heyday (1821), Arran had around 6,600 inhabitants largely engaged in subsistence agriculture. However, extensive 'improvements' (aka Clearances) by the 10th Duke of Hamilton led to a significant drop in the number of inhabitants by the end of the nineteenth century. The unfortunate islanders mostly emigrated to Canada, where many had been promised land to farm. Arran's history of clearance is relatively little known compared to the more notorious Sutherland improvements, but doubtless nonetheless distressing for the victims.

Not everyone thought the Clearances a bad idea. In July 1851, *The Scotsman* wrote that 'Collective emigration is, therefore the removal of a diseased and damaged part of our population. It is a relief to the rest of the population to be rid of this part.'

No mention, you might note, of what the Canadians thought of their new would-be citizens. The migrants carried their Gaelic language and culture with them and one consequence of their removal was the effective extirpation of a Gaelic identity on Arran. James Hogg, amongst others, was heard to lament its loss. By the

2011 Census a mere 2% of Arran residents aged three and over could speak Gaelic, the last native speakers of Arran Gaelic having died in the 1990s.

One main road runs around the island and two across it, though one gains the impression that most visitors venture little further than either Lamlash or Brodick, both of which offer a slightly dilapidated tourism product, which is not without its fin-de-siècle charms. Decent coffee though, which is something relatively new and very welcome. There was little of the kind here in the mid-1980s when I was a frequent visitor to Arran Provisions' jam and mustard factory, part of an ill-fated diversification venture by my then employers, the blenders Robertson & Baxter, who seemed convinced that the glory days of whisky had passed and it was time to invest their profits in the food industry. Unfortunately, it seemed to have escaped their notice that Arran Provisions, though they manufactured food products, were in fact engaged in the gift business. In career terms, this led to considerable frustrations and not a few tears, though I got a very nice pen out of it and seldom went short of tasty preserves. Christmas gift-giving was, for a brief period, the least of my problems.

Arran enjoys a favourable climate, being sheltered from the worst western storms by Kintyre and benefiting from the Gulf Stream. However, it does rain a lot—at least it has done on the several occasions that I have been there. I feel it's probably personal.

The first occasion was in the mid-1960s when my family took a holiday on the island's west coast in a dank and dreary cottage near Pirnmill. One incident stands out in my memory. We had hired a small rowing boat to go out fishing for mackerel, only to be surprised and not a little perturbed by a large basking shark surfacing right beside the boat.

In my memory it was considerably longer than the boat, which is in fact entirely probable as a mature basking shark can measure

Jura

Burning money



I HAVE DECIDED THAT JURA IS A VERY RED ISLAND — I don't know precisely why, but it feels very red to me and so a very special effort is required, perhaps to reflect the sheer awkwardness of getting here. As I keep telling people, it's easier, quicker and a great deal cheaper to fly to New York (unless you live on Islay, obviously, when all that's required is to hop onto the small ferry from Port Askaig).

In consequence, this chapter simply cries out to be written in red ink. I'd really like it to be printed in red ink, but that would look a little odd and I don't think the publisher would agree, but try if you will to imagine these words in red. Now you may think red ink is just red ink, a negative balance on an accounting sheet somewhere or the kind of red ink that schoolmasters once used to mark your work, but you would be sadly in error.

So, what to choose? Waterman makes nice ink, but then so does Visconti (the dashing Italian, in its handsome bottle) and Monteverde and Diamine, which has been made in Liverpool for nearly 100 years and comes in some 80 different colours, and good old Parker Quink of schoolboy memory and so on.

But I've gone to Japan, to the top of the ink tree with Pilot's Iroshizuku Momiji shade, intended, according to the manufacturer, to evoke 'the bright red leaves that are iconic of a Japanese autumn'. However, not to be perverse, I can't quite agree.

No, the Momiji reminds me more of the faded red of an elderly Cardinal's clandestine galero with its elegiac air of mortality, offering such a vivid and poignant contrast to the jaunty tone set by the scarlet biretta that the monsignor would have worn in life. As the galero first fades and then crumbles to dust so the onlooker is reminded of the passing of earthly glory—not that this is an association one would expect to come easily to the mind of a Japanese ink manufacturer.

However, moving from ink to gin, let us encounter Jura gin. An exhaustive and enjoyable tour of the Jura distillery had been completed and we were happily eavesdropping on the conversation of two young and extremely earnest backpackers (yes, Americans) when a passing stranger asked me, apparently at random, if I was interested in the distillation of gin.

This startling yet strangely perceptive query was addressed to me in the Antlers Café, which is just along from the distillery on the main street of Craighouse, Jura's principal settlement. It is not a substantial or overly formal establishment but I would thoroughly recommend it for plain comfort, good value and wholesome food. I have eaten there more than once and, not expecting Michelin excellence, I have not been disappointed. But I would be disappointed if you did not care for it.

Apparently, some gin had recently been distilled on Jura. A

brief discussion revealed that it was not yet on the market. However, it had been trialled only the previous week on the happy locals, who it seems don't all drink whisky, and was shortly to go into production. If I called at the distillery perhaps some would be available to try.

An even briefer discussion revealed that the would-be distillery was to be found somewhere at the Ardlussa Estate, at the north end of the island, my informant being a trifle vague as to the exact location. This was unfortunate as Craighouse is an inconvenient eighteen miles or so distant from where the gin was thought to be located. Ardlussa is therefore nearly thirty miles from the ferry, along a less than fast single-track road. George Orwell, who lived here for two years from April 1946 in an attempt to get some peace and quiet to write his greatest work, 1984, described this as 'the most unget-at-able place'.

He wasn't wrong: we could either attempt to get at the distillery (and assume that someone was there and amenable to granting a spontaneous tour to a random stranger claiming to be writing a book) or get the last ferry back to Islay, but not both. After the very briefest of discussions, the ferry won. I was not destined to see the making of Lussa Gin.

But as this trend of the micro-distilling of gin is gathering pace almost everywhere across the UK, I was intrigued to learn more, and further enquiry established something of its story. The production is on an understandably small scale, using a Portuguese still of 200 litres capacity (if you would like a point of comparison, the stills at Jura distillery are more than one hundred times larger). These little alembics have proved extremely popular amongst the growing community who aspire to become distillers: they are cheap, easily available, simple to operate and look good. If a venture is a success and demand follows, another still can be added quickly to boost production

Mull

*Trying, not awfully hard,
to buy a Distillery*



HAVING ONCE OFFERED TO BUY THE TOBERMORY DISTILLERY, it occurred to me that I really ought to visit it.

Strangely though, my visit to Tobermory, principal town of the island of Mull in the Inner Hebrides, was shortly to lead me to a grimy industrial estate, just off the M62, about ten miles outside Hull, where I met Ronnie Lee, one of the great unsung characters of whisky.

Who is Ronnie Lee? Well, I'd seen his name discreetly engraved on a plaque on the side of Jura's malt mill and then again at Tobermory, so that's what I wanted to know. Not unsurprisingly, my guide could only guess. It wasn't, in fact, until several weeks had passed and I encountered the self-same plaque on some Speyside distilleries that I was able to track him down.

'Who is Ronnie Lee?' I asked some more whisky people,

production die-hards, as it happened. ‘Ronnie Lee,’ they answered, ‘you must know Ronnie Lee.’ Well, it turns out that, in a world of tattooed, bearded Brand Ambassadors with their hipster tweed caps, and rock-star Distillery Managers who jet from whisky show to whisky show, Ronnie Lee is a quiet hero, for he is the man who mends the mills.

At Tobermory, as in so many other distilleries, the guide paused to show us the malt mill. It’s a typical enough Porteus mill, painted in that distinctive, unshowy shade of dark red; sturdy; planted four-square in the mill room, ready to receive another load of malt, a quiet occupant of an unobtrusive corner of the distillery that just gets on with its job in a modest and understated way. A Porteus mill would never shout or draw attention to itself, you feel; happy to do an honest day’s work and then await the next consignment of malt to be turned to grist.

As is normal—you must surely have had this experience—the guide explained that the mill was quite old and that the Porteus firm had gone out of business, outlived by the durability and simple excellence of a product so good and so enduring that it broke the company. It’s not in actual fact exactly what happened but, as whisky lore rarely let facts get in the way of a good story, we’ll gloss over that and move on.

I found out a little more about Ronnie and it turned out that he is a freelance millwright, spending most of his working life in maintaining, servicing and, an occasion, restoring Porteus and Bobby mills for the brewing and distilling industry. Based in that industrial unit just off the M62, Ronnie works in surroundings as far removed from whisky’s new image of sophistication, glamour and luxury as you might conceivably imagine, yet carries out vital work. As one of an elite group of engineers who keep these vintage machines in working order he is vital to the smooth and effective running of the industry.

Tobermory, which is part of Burn Stewart Distillers, is far from his only Scottish client. He works for Diageo, Chivas Brothers, Glenmorangie, Highland Distillers and Ian MacLeod Distillers, as well as a number of independent breweries and distilleries as far flung as Sweden, Italy and even the USA. If you want a vintage malt mill, or need one restored, Ronnie Lee is the man you call.

When I met him, he made a dramatic arrival in his fabulous red Aston Martin and regaled me with stories of his weightlifting days. It turned out he had been a Welsh Champion and a real contender for a Commonwealth Games medal.

You don’t hear a lot about Ronnie Lee, which is why I’ve made this diversion to tell his story. He doesn’t give master classes, doesn’t blog and he’s definitely not part of the fashionable crowd that increasingly follow whisky these days. Yet he’s one of the most interesting people in whisky that I have met in a very long time and he plays a distinctive and individual role in keeping whisky running from the stills. He is, you might say, a unique cog in the whisky wheel. So that was something I learned from visiting Tobermory. But even before stepping inside the building I remembered something else that I learned between 2002 and 2005.

If you have pre-school children you’ve almost certainly seen Tobermory, even if you have never set foot in the place. That is because it was the setting for the 254 episodes of the BBC’s *Balamory* series.

Now I can’t say that I was a fan but I was aware of *Balamory*/Tobermory and the famous painted houses. Even if I hadn’t registered the TV series, Tobermory features on a thousand Scottish postcards and tourist brochures, so I thought that I was quite prepared for the visual impact of its scenic harbour frontage. Here’s the thing, though: remarkably, and quite possibly uniquely, Tobermory looks better in real life than it does in pictures. I was shocked, I can tell you.

Islay

Dead crabs dancing



NORMALLY, IF YOU CAN'T FLY, getting to Islay involves a lengthy and frankly tedious drive to Kennacraig. The scenery might be fine but you can't look at it while driving as you will almost certainly plunge off the tortuous road and die, probably in great pain. This has no part in a successful road trip, so I suggest you pack some decent CDs, as you won't get a signal on the radio and only your passengers will be looking at the view. Apparently, it's nice. I wouldn't know: I'm generally driving.

Kennacraig is where you'll find the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry terminal, a grandiose and overblown term for a cluster of shabby Portakabins. After checking in, you wait in an interminable queue of caravans and motor homes; hope to meet someone you know but probably won't (they having had the good sense to stay at home); buy some vile sludge masquerading as coffee; throw this

away in disgust; and eventually drive into the bowels of the ship where you abandon, if not hope, then certainly your car.

For amusement, you can stop on the way in Inveraray,¹ a town that has comprehensively sold its soul to tourism and now exists for no other apparent point than to sell knitwear, teas and coffees and provide toilet facilities to coach parties, and call in at Loch Fyne Whiskies. There, once upon a time, you could be cheerfully and imaginatively insulted by Richard Joynson, the former proprietor who possessed a unique approach to customer care. According to one highly regarded whisky writer, he used to be a fish.² This may explain much. Sadly, he has now retired and the shop has been sold to a national chain of whisky retailers. Richard is greatly missed.

Since I first went there, Islay has become incredibly fashionable in whisky circles. Some of us still view this with mild incredulity and some slight alarm. People (well, one person, Doug Johnstone, since you ask) write strangely violent novels about it, making Islay sound like a cross between a particularly inbred part of Arkansas and a lively Saturday night in downtown Baghdad.

It was ever thus. In 1777 the Reverend John McLeish of Kilcho-man Parish observed that ‘we have not an excise officer on the whole island. The quantity therefore, of whisky made here is very great and the evil that follows drinking to excess of this liquor is very visible on the island’. He regarded the island’s inhabitants as ‘wild barbarous people’.

Perhaps that’s what the hordes of visitors expect. If so, they will be strangely disappointed, though the reputation of the female

1. At least you can if you’re coming from anywhere other than Campbeltown. It would be extravagant, indeed almost perverse, to go to Kennacraig from Campbeltown by way of Inveraray.

2. According to Charles MacLean. He blames a typographical error—Joynson was actually once a fish-farmer, but sloppy editing omitted the all-important qualifier. At least, that’s what they say now...

portion of the island for casual sexual encounters (so central to Johnstone’s novel) is apparently well founded. Or so I’m told.

Perhaps it’s genetic—an eighteenth century Dutch traveller, Johannes Hertz van Rentel, writing around the time of the Jacobite rising of 1745 on ‘the excesses and intemperances of the People’, observed that ‘among the gentler sex of the lower orders of this island a wanton disregard for convention is often observed and many wallow in licentious abandon, freely coupling with any traveller. Entry to the Lists of Venus may be conveniently obtained for a measure of usquebagh, as they term the malt spirits distilled there in great quantities and to which the inhabitants are extraordinarily partial.’ (From an unpublished manuscript, which I may not have transcribed entirely faithfully; something may have been lost in translation, or perhaps he was simply a randy old Dutchman. Or perhaps I made the whole thing up.)

Many visitors do indeed come today to track down some flighty birds. There are around fifty thousand geese to be found there, mainly white-fronted, pink-footed, greylag, brent and over three quarters of the world’s barnacles (a sort of goose, not the gritty little shellfish that you find in rock pools and on the bottom of badly maintained boats). As well as the geese, you can apparently see choughs, corncrakes, hen harriers, linnets, woodcock and other small brown birds.

Not that I know the first thing about it. I just copied that list off the web. You’ll be relieved to know that that’s the end of the nature notes. If not relieved, then unfortunately you’ve bought the wrong book. You might as well hand it over to Oxfam now, because you’re not going to enjoy the rest of it.

This remarkable avian assembly and the potential embrace of the island’s womenfolk notwithstanding, most visitors are here—like me—for the drink. We’re a little like Jig in Hemingway’s *Hills Like White Elephants*—‘That’s all we do, isn’t it’, she says, ‘look at things

Islay

The yellow submarine



AFTER LOOKING AT THEM FOR A WHILE, I made a decision about all those books about Islay. I could read them for research, and they do look lovely, but that seemed like quite hard work and in the end I put them all back on the shelf. They're there now, staring rather moodily at me and emitting a sort of smoky resentment. Perhaps, like a really peaty whisky, that will fade with age.

Bruichladdich is actually quite a good place for people like me (the unpeated freaks; can't see that catching on as a nickname) to start exploring Islay whisky. Not only was it historically quite a mild-mannered dram, the recent history of the distillery provides lots of amusement. Their irrepressible MD, the ebullient Mark Reynier, could be relied upon to provide a provocative quote to fill out an article or blog. He's moved on; Bruichladdich is a little quieter

as a result, and drinks journalists have to work that much harder.

But those quotes were too good to let this pass without at least one example. For most of his tenure he enjoyed a distant and strained relationship with the rest of the whisky industry, writing a strongly opinionated blog in which he expressed himself pretty freely on all sorts of matters. I accused him once of ‘grand-standing from a position of complete and total ignorance’—which he took in pretty good part (mine wasn’t an entirely fair comment, but this is a man who enjoys a robust exchange of views)—and then suggested that he try to engage with the rest of the industry.

You have to admire the candour of his reply: ‘I have absolutely no desire to “engage” the rest of the industry, a pointless exercise as there is little I can learn from them and vice versa. Besides, I am perfectly happy “sniping from the side-lines” thank you very much.’

He once memorably summed up the Scotch whisky industry’s marketing efforts as demonstrating ‘a staggering lack of vision, insecurity, timidity, sparsity of imagination, fear of failure, [and] paucity of thought and integrity’, from which you may take it that he wasn’t overly impressed. Not much fear there, but quite a lot of loathing. It’s my impression that the feeling was mutual.

But actually, I know quite a good story about Mark and Bruichladdich.

Founded in 1881 (something of an *annus mirabilis* on Islay; as we’ve already noticed, Bunnahabhain was also built then), it passed through a bewildering variety of hands before being mothballed in 1995, not for the first time. On 19th December 2000, however, it was bought by a small independent company financed by bank loans and a group of twenty-one private individuals, some from Islay and some quite new to the place.

The team was headed by Mark and his colleagues Gordon Wright and Simon Coughlin. In their previous lives, they had been wine merchants and independent whisky bottlers. They’ve

gone on about the re-opening ever since. But here’s the story, as Mark Reynier told it to me.

Some years prior to buying Bruichladdich and with no such idea then in his mind (or so he maintains), Reynier made his first visit to Islay and drove past the distillery, the stout iron gates of which were firmly padlocked. No whisky was being made; everything was shuttered and bolted. But being possessed of a restless and inquisitive turn of mind, he stopped and looked into the courtyard where he happened to see a worker, presumably some sort of watchman.

He beckoned him over. ‘I was wondering if I could look around the distillery,’ he enquired.

‘No!’, came the reply. ‘You can fuck off.’

Shortly after his team acquired the business there were apparently a number of personnel changes. And that story, funny though it is, captures something of the anarchic Bruichladdich spirit. Right from December 2000 they cast themselves as the *enfants terribles* of the whisky industry: you were either with them, or against them. There was no fence to sit on.

Now I’m not actually sure that very many members of the industry cared all that much or, at first, even really noticed. But with the Bruichladdich team’s undoubted genius at marketing, a growing number of malt enthusiast consumers did, and the maverick approach greatly appealed to a certain rebellious streak in a decent number of drinkers.

At first, getting the distillery going was very hard work. Because the planned date for the purchase slipped back and back, the vital Christmas sales season was missed and it was necessary to return, cap in hand, to the shareholders to request more money. And then a second cash call was necessary; yet the remarkable thing is that all the shareholders supported the refinancing.

It was May 2001 before the distillery was working again. The

as favourable an omen for success and prosperity as the one I scornfully dismissed all those years ago at Kilchoman.

A good proportion of the visitors to Kilchoman are, of course, aspiring distillers in their own right, with their own hopes, plans and dreams for their own distillery. Some make a surreptitious visit, though their questions often give them away, while others are more honest and open, assuming that advice will be freely given. From the numbers involved it's evident that there are still a remarkable number of optimists left in this world. I only hope that not too many dreams are shattered at too great a cost. As any brief study of whisky's history will reveal, the past is littered with failed distillery projects, not least on Islay.

7

EVEN MORE

Islay

Unfit for human consumption



‘JUST POUR IT AWAY AND GIVE THEM THEIR MONEY BACK,’ said the portly gentleman firmly. ‘Nothing that tastes like this was meant for human consumption.’

The year was 1977 and I was standing in the Wines & Spirits cellar of the Devenish brewery in Weymouth. The speaker was Bob Carter, then Wines & Spirits Director of that business. An experienced judge of wines and spirits, and well respected in the trade for his discernment and knowledge, he was describing a bottle of Lagavulin which had been returned by one of the brewery's tied houses as ‘off’.

What was I doing there? Well, despite being a very junior member of the brewery's marketing team, I was the only Scot in the building and so had been called to give the benefit of my local

knowledge and help adjudicate on the apparently errant bottle. The general assumption was that it had been filled in error with cleaning fluid, or some such noxious liquid, but that a Scotsman would know for sure.

I had only recently left university and, whatever students drink today, undergraduates in the 1970s did not generally consume single malt whisky. However, I did have some idea what Lagavulin was supposed to taste like so, on being asked my opinion, ventured tentatively that it was okay. You have to appreciate that I was quite the subordinate and Mr Carter, as he was universally referred to, a particularly forceful character.

He was not impressed by my impertinence and promptly issued his magisterial judgement, after which I was sent back to my office in some disgrace. I do not recall my opinion being sought again. Whether the bottle was flushed down the sink or returned to the distillers I never knew. I certainly didn't enquire. Incidentally today that bottle would be worth around £1,500.

Two things stand out about that story. Firstly, that forty years ago, a serious and experienced drinks trade executive would have no idea what Lagavulin should taste like and, secondly, that that bottle—it was then a twelve-year-old expression—carried the legend 'established 1742'. I remember it very well, because the Devenish Weymouth brewery was also founded in that same year and one of my very first jobs there was to write and produce a pamphlet on the company's history, so the coincidence of the dates struck me very strongly.

The suggestion that Lagavulin was established in 1742 and that the proprietors, White Horse Distillers, were confident enough of the dates to emblazon it prominently on their packaging in the 1970s is interesting as, during 2016, the current owners lavishly celebrated the distillery's 200th anniversary. I do not require a calculator to determine that they thus believe 1816 to be the year

it was founded and that is curious, for why would anyone—other than a Hollywood actress of the old school, perhaps—wish to forget seventy-four years of their history? After all, heritage and provenance are powerful tools in the marketing of malt whisky and they could surely have waited a year to celebrate a 275th anniversary in 2017.

The 1742 date appears in Alfred Barnard's account of the distillery, but even he qualifies this as only being true to 'a certain extent'. He goes on to note that at that period there were 'ten small and separate smuggling bothies for the manufacture of "moonlight"' (i.e. contraband whisky). These clandestine operations may, in fact, be dated to 1631 or even earlier, but 1816 has the merit of being firmly and definitively the date when the first legal distillery was established by one John Johnston, whose family had other distilling interests on Islay.

It's heartening, I think, to see a little more regard for historical accuracy in whisky's marketing, albeit at the cost of some romance.

Lagavulin today is a powerhouse. Since 1989 there has been a policy to bottle it at sixteen years of age as opposed to the twelve years that prevailed previously. It's an improvement, I feel, and it seems that the locals agree: if you study the brand's promotional literature they are alleged to hold that 'time takes out the fire, but leaves in the warmth'. If it's in the promotional literature it must be true. I'm sure they say it all the time.

However, fire vs warmth was demonstrated, perhaps not wholly intentionally, during the 2016 anniversary celebrations when the most widely available commemorative bottling was of an eight-year-old expression, inspired by the experience of our old travelling companion Alfred Barnard. He apparently tried such an aged whisky at the distillery during a visit there in the 1880s and pronounced it 'exceptionally fine'. Mind you, it would have been unusually old for that time and so may have presented a favourable

And this, I think, is where I leave Islay, Queen of the Hebrides. A tantalising, frustrating place, half in love with its own image, half of which has been created for it and imposed upon it in the interests of others. I still miss the emptiness, the derelict, rusting farm equipment and the fin-de-siècle atmosphere, but will not deny I enjoy the better food, drinkable coffee and more cosmopolitan atmosphere.

Where it will all end, I have no idea. There have been booms here before, and busts, and the pattern will surely repeat. I hope for your sake that you sell your whisky collection before then and I hope for the industry's sake that someone knows what to do with the many, many warehouses full of peated whiskies if the current fashion for smoky drams ever fades.

Until then, farewell, Islay. My next trip took me to the twin islands of Harris and Lewis, and back in time some five decades.

Harris & Lewis

*A flagrant Breach of the
Fisheries (Dynamite) Act, 1877*



I HAVE SUCH INTENSE CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF THESE conjoined islands—of the memorial stone for a dead whaler's faithful dog; of my father's tense and nervous glances as his car was winched into a net and onto a ferry; of fishing with high explosive; of mother's attempts at Gaelic; of abandoned cars and rotting steadings—that the twenty-first-century reality came as a shock.

However, I had to return: there are two distilleries here now, united only in their isolation, but which could not be more different in character and approach if they were on opposite sides of the planet.

The map confirms that Harris and Lewis are one land mass, with the larger, Lewis, lying to the north and Harris making up the smaller, southern portion. In total the island is the largest in the

Hebrides and, in fact, the third largest in British Isles after Great Britain and Ireland themselves. For all that, they remain relatively little known and are only sparsely inhabited.

Visually, the boundary between the two would seem to fall where the land narrows at Tarbert but the administrative boundary actually lies between Lochs Resort and Seaforth. But why does this matter? I hear almost no one enquire.

Well, it matters here because the first distillery that we managed to see on this visit proudly sells a product labelled Spirit of Lewis (it's a new make, so not legally whisky) and styles itself as located on Lewis. In fact, great play is made of this, which is convenient, as the distillery—it's Abhainn Dearg by the way (or Red River in English)—can legitimately distance itself from the more recent Isle of Harris distillery at Tarbert, which likes to promote itself as the first distillery in Harris.

Clearly one island ain't big enough for the both of them.

I imagine that it suits them both to maintain their distance, with one in Lewis and one in Harris. Perhaps that way they imagine no one will make comparisons. Sadly though, it hasn't worked.

But the geographical distinction, though clearly important to them both, is far from the most interesting or curious thing about Abhainn Dearg. This, in fact, may be the most interesting of all Scotland's island distilleries, so read on.

However, first one has to get there. It's possible to fly to Stornoway, but in this case the trip involved the lengthy drive through Skye to Uig and another ferry crossing, this time to Tarbert on Harris. Today this is served by a modern, smooth and sophisticated ship of the Caledonian MacBrayne line.

Not so on the occasion of my first visit, again for a family holiday in the 1960s. Back then, as I persist in boring my sons by telling them, the journey was accomplished on a more utilitarian vessel that required any car to be lifted onto the foredeck from the pier

by means of a sling or net, the hazardous procedure being reversed on arrival, all of which I can now see accounted for my father's understandably stressed demeanour. The fact that the vehicle was not his but an early and prized example of the company car doubtless contributed to his anxiety levels. Explaining to your boss that the car was at the bottom of the Minch would have proved challenging.

Once on board—I am persuaded that the vessel was probably the Claymore—we children were sternly admonished not to go anywhere near the saloon, which, of course, we immediately sought out. This was inhabited by fierce-looking men and through the clouds of blue smoke we could just make out that they were drinking glasses of whisky with a strangely furious energy, or so it seemed to us, as my mother's disapproval was quite evident. As to their speech, what we caught as we peered sheepishly round the door was presumably the authentic sound of living Gaelic (as opposed to middle-class subsidised Gaelic).

Our sanctuary was the lounge, where we sheltered against the gaze of these supposed ruffians and trembled at the vicious vibration that characterised our ship, whose engine was evidently unbalanced in some way. I was convinced it would sink and this was why so much whisky was being feverishly consumed. As our vessel juddered and rolled violently, it seemed at every moment that the rivets holding the ship together would be shaken loose and we would surely be cast into the uncaring sea. Here's a tip: never travel with a child with an over-active imagination.

Some years later I came across an exhaustive account (275 large-format pages; I believe that qualifies as exhaustive) of all the CalMac ships entitled *The Kingdom of MacBrayne* by Nick Robins and Professor Donald Meek, and this explained that the Claymore had been fitted with four-cylinder engines when five- or six-cylinder versions would have ensured much smoother running. They don't say why such economy was adopted.

The ink was a problem until I discovered an unusual French product from a Paris-based manufacturer of sealing waxes and inks, J. Herbin. Their 1670 range commemorates the founding of the firm with three distinctive coloured inks, each containing very fine metallic particles, which glint as the ink dries.

I chose to work in their Stormy Grey, the austere tone of the base anthracite ink echoing the granite I saw around the island, but the metallic speckling catching the light just as elements in the stone caused sudden and unexpected glints from those slanting, rare sun-shafts.

That may seem an extravagant and fanciful notion, but this ink has a personality that reflects the quality of Harris and Lewis and the ancient stone of which they are formed. Ink as metaphor—it's an intriguing point on which to step back onto the ferry and return to tourist-crammed Skye, home to the mighty Talisker and its companion-to-be at Torabhaig, via a short diversion to the little island of Raasay, which was somewhere entirely new to me.

Raasay

Nothing to see here, says the Great Cham



IF YOU DRIVE PART OF THE WAY ACROSS SKYE on the main A87 towards Portree you will pass signs to the Sconser ferry, from where it's possible to go over the sea to Raasay, a small island just off the coast of Skye.

Unfortunately, according to the Great Cham (Dr Samuel Johnson himself), 'Raasay has little that can detain the traveller, except the Laird and his family'. However, those travel notes dates from 1773 so we decided we could disregard them and go anyway.

For the magnificent sum of £3.70, a foot passenger can make the return trip as we did, though not necessarily accompanied by a group of excited school children, en route to a field studies day on the little island. How exciting to escape humdrum, everyday Skye for the romance of Raasay—or so I presume it

must feel if Skye represents the limit of your everyday existence.

Raasay has not hitherto troubled the distillery historian. It is not recorded in H. Charles Craig's exhaustive *Scotch Whisky Industry Record*; Misako Udo's *The Scottish Whisky Distilleries* omits any mention; and though Alfred Barnard must surely have passed very close to Sconser on his visit to Skye, and his steamer stopped briefly on Raasay, he was travelling with a firm determination to make his report on Talisker and, as he tells us, was anxious about the weather (which turned out nice as it happens). Accordingly, he neglected to disembark or later make the short crossing to Raasay. In fact, he may not even have given it more than a sideways glance, as his gaze was directed to Skye's more imposing vistas. He was like that, forever looking at the unexampled grandeur, the romantic and wild mountain torrents and the sublime prospects of the desolation of a silent wilderness, after which he would frequently quote some apposite verses. Scott was a great favourite.

His unaccustomed reticence, of course, was for the very good reason that there was then no distillery on Raasay; or no legal one at any rate. However, like many a Hebridean island, there is a tradition of illicit distillation, which in this case has been recorded through a study of Gaelic place names.

In her book *Gach Cuil is Ceal* (*Every Nook and Cranny*), Rebecca S. Mackay discerns the dim history of illegal distilling on Raasay and the neighbouring smaller island of Rona that lasted until around 1850. It is written in place names such as Taigh na Poiteadh Dhubh (Home of the Black Still). That seems quite explicit and Mackay also suggested that distilling was a frequent occurrence at Screapadal where Vamha an Ochd Mhoir (the Cave of the Big Hollows) was a spot particularly favoured by topography, giving the moonshiners a clear view of any approaching excise officers. It is said too, that friendly crofters on Skye would signal to Raasay should any government men be seen drawing uncomfortably close to the island.

Detection would have been a real problem for the bootleggers for, as Mackay relates, that would have provided a hard-hearted laird with all the excuse needed to evict the miscreant tenant and put sheep in their place, not that much excuse seems to have been required. But the distillation of any spare barley or, more correctly, bere, would have been a time-honoured tradition. Some of the *uisge beatha*, taken straight from the worm (the coiled tube that acted to condense the spirit), may have been used to pay rents but, in general, the small production was for household use only—a necessary prop against the damp and cold of a black house.

On Skye, the late Sir Iain Noble honoured this tradition with his company, The Gaelic Whiskies (Praban na Linne Ltd), and would volubly maintain when asked, and even when not, that he 'would neither confirm nor deny' that his Poit Dhubh malt came from an illicit still. Like so much that flowed so freely from the irrepressible Sir Iain it was all the most frightful nonsense; not least because the Poit Dhubh was blended and bottled by the completely respectable Broxburn Bottlers, who would never have permitted a drop of contraband spirit to cross their door for fear of losing their licence and thus their whole business. Not to mention the ill-concealed *schadenfreude* of the rest of the distilling industry.

Sir Iain who, in my experience at least, was a wily and challenging fellow with whom to do business, died before he could see his dream of a traditional farmhouse distillery at the Torabhaig steading, on Skye's Sleat peninsula. But it has finally been developed in a form closely resembling his remarkable vision and it was my great pleasure to visit it later on this trip.

The Torabhaig project probably more closely represents—albeit on a larger scale—the type of artisanal distilling that would have taken place on Raasay. There was certainly never any industrial distilling here and, as Mackay surmises, the farm tradition probably

there was not left in the whole island a four footed beast, a hen or a chicken'. That's a war crime, by the way, and would be thought very bad form today.

But within a few years the MacLeods had rebuilt Raasay House and were able to entertain Boswell and Johnson on their Hebridean travels. They visited in happier and more prosperous times. Though Johnson seemed to feel there was nothing to see here apart from the laird and his family, he was generous enough to elegantly liken the hospitality he received to that extended to Ulysses in the *Odyssey* when he is shipwrecked on the island of Phæacia and meets the princess Nausicaä, surely the most gracious of compliments, though one unlikely to be found in today's Rough Guide or on TripAdvisor.

A few years later, Raasay found wider fame in the illustrations produced by William Daniell, who visited Skye and Raasay in July and August 1815, including a number of views in his best-known work, *A Voyage Round Great Britain*. His work is a reminder that the best sense of many of these islands may be gained from the sea, though at the same time these images contributed to the widespread and long-standing image of the Hebrides as a romantic playground.

And in all fairness, I should conclude that the Great Cham, Sage of Lichfield, was mistaken. There is much, as I learned in my all-too-brief excursion, to detain the traveller and I hope one day to return and report on the distillery at work.

However, after this scantiest of visits we rejoined the chattering schoolchildren and flitted gently back over the sea to Skye and on to Talisker and Torabhaig.

Skye

Shopping with tokens



IMAGINE, IF YOU WILL, that you are the energetic and entrepreneurial agent of a major landowner—let's call him John MacLeod of MacLeod—on the island of Skye. We're in the reign of King George IV and, following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, things have begun to go badly for the Hebridean kelp industry. Landlords had made huge profits from the kelp trade, while keeping their tenants in grinding poverty. But as the lucrative industry declined, the lairds needed ready cash: something had to be found to take its place. The answer was sheep, Cheviots in particular.

The only problem was the tenants who occupied the crofts and scratched a modest living from land and sea. They had to go. But few landlords cared to dirty their hands with actually removing the people, preferring to sub-contract this work to their factors or agents.

One such was Hugh MacAskill, MacLeod's tacksman (defined by Dr Johnson as 'next in dignity to the laird') who seems to have taken to his duties with some energy and zeal. According to Neil Wilson, 'In total, some 250–300 people must have been evicted by MacAskill'.

Hardly a charitable man then, though a man of his time. By 1825 he was in possession of Talisker House and shortly afterwards, working with his brother Kenneth, he obtained the feu (effectively the lease) on a twenty-acre property at Carbost and, raising finance of some £3,000, built what we know today as Talisker distillery. Incidentally, while there are a number of ways of estimating what £3,000 in 1830 is 'worth' today, a reasonable case can be made for suggesting that it would then have had the economic power of almost £12 million.

Evidently then, the MacAskills were men of considerable substance and the distillery will have created some employment in the location. However, it seems that they then sought to exercise further control over their employees, many of whom were desperately looking for work as a consequence of the Clearances, being apparently reluctant to pay them in coin of the realm.

Two small curios survive in the safe at Talisker—small, privately struck coins representing payment for a half and one day of work at the distillery. They bear the legend 'Carbost Distillery' and 'Hugh MacAskill. Tallisker' (curiously, the distillery was then spelt with a double l). These are tokens to be used to purchase goods in MacAskill's company store, a system known as 'Truck'.

Essentially, employees paid in this way became indentured to their employer who, of course, was able to set the prices in the company store. Unscrupulous employers did so to their advantage, exploiting their employees and thus profiting twice from their labour. Though there were instances of benevolent employers who set fair prices so as not to take undue advantage of this captive

market, the system was widely criticized for the widespread abuses associated with it. Even for Victorian capitalists the Truck system was unpalatable and much legislation was passed to restrict and later outlaw the practice, though it continued in some form late into the century.

Was Hugh MacAskill a benevolent or cynical employer or simply typical of his class and age? The archivists at Diageo suggest that he may have instituted the system to help control the supply of grain and that he is recorded as helping with poor relief in one or two cases. His record on the Clearances suggests otherwise, but probably the fairest verdict is that no one knows. Perhaps there was simply a coin shortage; such things did happen back then.

I do think it a shame that the tokens aren't displayed at the excellent visitor centre at Talisker. They represent a fascinating part of British social history which I suspect isn't well known or understood. The story is an interesting one and not entirely irrelevant to current employment issues—consider, for example, the debate on the rights and wrongs of zero-hours contracts.

It's not recorded how long the truck system was in operation at Talisker, and, in any event, the distillery was not a rip-roaring success for the brothers, though they expanded their holdings to some ninety-five acres, including the adjacent farm. When Kenneth died in 1854 the distillery, still then known as Carbost, was offered for sale in April the following year with an 'upset price' of £1,000—a significant loss on the original capital cost. This despite the claim by the auctioneer that the distillery was 'celebrated' and that for 'upwards of twenty years the quality of the Skye Whisky has been unrivalled'.

Not that they were the only ones to suffer losses. The whisky trade was experiencing severe disruption: consumption was declining and the large Lowland distilleries represented severe competition to rural operations, especially in Islay and

Since then, sales have grown and the range of whiskies has been greatly expanded. The visitor centre has been developed at a cost of £1 million, indicating the importance of tourism to the brand. Indeed, today the distillery can get very busy during the peak holiday season, with demand exceeding the available capacity, despite tours leaving every fifteen minutes.

Remarkably, the blenders have to get by today without access to Talisker, as the entire three million litres annual production is now reserved for sale as a single malt. It is still a fine speerit, a very fine spirit indeed—and none tastier than the cask-strength thirty-five-year-old expression that I tasted there under the watchful eye of the distillery's Stuart Harrington.

It's one of just 3,090 bottles (well, 3,089 now for sure) from the Special Release programme. It would have made a magnificent souvenir of our visit but I was forced to leave it on the shelf when Mrs B spotted the £850 price tag and most considerately pointed out that we didn't have nearly enough tokens.

So, with hardly a backwards glance, we kept on trucking and made our way off Skye.

Orkney

If stiff, wash with paraffin



I THOUGHT I'D SAVE ORKNEY UNTIL LAST. I never came here as a child, which was extraordinarily remiss of my parents, but I have come to love it. It's perhaps my favourite of the islands that I've visited, though I return happily enough to all of them and I'm aware that there's a lot of Orkney remaining for me to discover.

I also saved my Mont Blanc until last, largely because it comes with its own supply of little plastic ink cartridges. I don't normally like these. Though they're clean and quick and easy to use, and your fingers don't get inky while filling the pen, there is something of the schoolboy about them and I miss the intimacy of the ritual of refilling from an ink bottle, especially if I want to change the colour of the ink. A good twenty minutes of displacement activity can be involved in flushing out the reservoir of old ink, cleaning

the nib, choosing the new colour, filling the pen, clearing the various bits and pieces safely away, and writing a few test lines just to be happy. Writers like displacement activity; it fills time as effectively as dissertations on ink bulk out their word count. (Don't think we haven't noticed! Ed.)

But observing that the ink was called Mystery Black made this an easy decision. I do find Orkney slightly mysterious—if not particularly black—so the choice was an automatic one. Mystery Black will reveal these secrets.

Incidentally, the Mont Blanc was another gift: it's a handsome and quite subtle model (not the vulgar bankers' ostentatious favourite, the Meisterstück 149 with gold detailing; perhaps the Donald Trump of fountain pens), but a substantial enough object regardless, which the Kavalan distillery in Taiwan very kindly gave me in acknowledgement of some work. They arranged to engrave my name on the barrel in an elegant script, presumably so that I could not sell it, but thankfully refrained from embossing it with their logo, so it remains possible to use it in decent company. It is at least a discreet reminder never to order shirts monogrammed with my initials.

On my most recent visits, I've been strangely drawn to Stromness. There's no distillery there today, but there was once, and it produced some of the prettiest promotional material of any distillery for any whisky that I've ever seen. One postcard in particular, showing a couple embracing and kissing in a rowing boat (in a perfectly chaste manner), is enormously charming. The young man, who is very properly dressed in a smart white shirt and dapper red tie, holds his sweetheart with one hand whilst prudently maintaining a manly grip on the oar with his left hand. Her lovely long white dress may be in some danger though, as it falls gracefully into the bottom of the boat where in my admittedly limited experience there is generally some slimy water slopping

about, possibly with fish scales and other unmentionable detritus floating in it. I feel she may have some explaining to do when she gets home, though that would seem to be the very last thing on her mind at that moment.

As this scene is set in what I presume to be Stromness Harbour and the period is some time between the end of the First World War and the eventual closure of the distillery (the town, remarkably, voted in 1920 to go dry and that, at a time of general depression, was the beginning of the end for the little distillery), I assume their vessel to be locally made.¹ There was once a thriving boat-building community with a number of yards in Stromness, building skiffs, yoles and quills by traditional methods for the local market.

Though charming, innocent and even naïve we might find this image, I doubt that it would be permitted today. It would doubtless fall foul of the UK's stringent rules on alcohol advertising, quite possibly on two grounds. It might reasonably be argued that it links alcohol with irresponsible behaviour (not keeping a firm hand on both oars, the cad, and in the interests of health and safety both should be wearing life-jackets) and, even if that were blinked at, surely the image associates alcohol with sexual attractiveness. Such wickedness. Such sordid and debauched behaviour.

We live in such a humourless, literal age. If this advert were to be published today some grim-faced, self-appointed guardian of the public morals would fire off a condemnatory email to the Advertising Standards Authority, and probably the Portman Group as well, just to be sure. Their ponderous machinery would rumble into action; a stony-faced committee of grand industry panjandrums would sit in judgement and, in due course, their

¹ In fact, I'm reliably informed that what we see in the picture—and all eyes are surely on this—is the forrard end of an undecked South Orkney Isles Yole. The giveaway is the broad beam and angle at which the forward strokes or planks have to converge to meet at the bow. Had it been smaller we would have been looking at a quill.

behind you there's apparently some hope of a long-term residency. Perhaps one day.

12

If you build it, they will come

A P O S T R I P T



THERE IS A SENSE IN WHICH THIS BOOK CAN NEVER BE completed. Not that they are building more islands but because, even as I bring it to a close, new distilleries and products are coming thick and fast, some from islands with no tradition of (legal) distilling. It's hard to keep up. No, actually, it's next to impossible, especially as some of these concerns are little more than a penny banger in a dustbin and after some initial flurry of interest on social media will quietly disappear. To keep that firework analogy going, they're up like a rocket but down like the stick. Good luck to them all though; they're great for the drinks writing community.

Someone is planning a rum distillery on Islay. I'll have to go back for that.

There are also long-standing plans for a distillery on Barra, but

as the promoters have been trying to get this off the ground since at least 2005 without success, some mild scepticism is presumably justified. If a new whisky distillery hasn't been funded in the last decade of easy money, it's probably never going to happen. The last entry on the news page of their website is dated December 2014 and, with some relief, I notice that they are no longer soliciting cask sales of whisky as yet unmade. I think we'll have to file this under 'lost dreams'.

Much of the original *Whisky Galore!* Ealing Studios comedy was shot in Castlebay (Barra's principal settlement) in the summer of 1948, though the SS *Politician* was actually wrecked on nearby Eriskay. The film has just been remade. I don't hold out much hope for the new version, I'm afraid: it's almost bound to disappoint. Whoever imagined Eddie Izzard filling Basil Radford's shoes?

The Skye gin has now been launched, under the brand Misty Isle. It's craft-distilled in small batches, of course. Who would have guessed? So now there are three distilleries on Skye.

On Colonsay, the Colonsay Beverages folk have released the first of their Wild Island Botanic Gin. The Colonsay botanicals are hand-foraged, naturally. Actually, I went to Colonsay as a kid and remember seeing a school of dolphins herd fish into a small bay and take turns at swimming through them, taking mouthfuls at a time. You don't forget something like that.

Over on Tiree, the imaginatively-named Tiree Whisky Company Ltd was formed to preserve and promote the island's whisky heritage, with a view to re-establishing the connection the island once had with whisky. So naturally, they've launched a gin. The predominant flavour of Tyree Gin (for such is its rebellious designation) is achieved through locally foraged botanicals:

Eyebright, Ladies Bedstraw, Water Mint and Angelica collected from the island's rich and fertile machair ground.

But, let's face it, there wouldn't be terribly much point otherwise—though I do look forward to trying it and ticking another island off my 'to do' list.

Up in the very far north, Shetland Reel whisky and gin is being made on the old RAF airstrip at Saxa Vord on Unst, by Stuart Nickerson, once of William Grant & Sons and more recently noted for bringing Glenglassaugh back to life.

And there will be more. Meanwhile, my handwriting hasn't really improved and my wrist is sore. It's time to put my pens and my impressive collection of various inks to one side; to reach for glass and bottle (one from the islands, surely) and remember Compton Mackenzie's words:

'Ay, it's only when you haven't had a good dram for a long while that you're knowing how important it is not to go without.'¹

Slàinte mhath!

¹ Compton Mackenzie. *Whisky Galore*, chapter 10.

Acknowledgements

A number of people have helped bring this book together. Apart from my agent, Judy Moir, who sold the idea, my editor at Birlinn, Neville Moir (yes, they're related) has been more than patient while he waited, concealing his growing frustration (well, that's what he thinks) as deadlines slipped by.

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All of the distilleries concerned were more than kind in providing product samples where requested, for which I thank them. I apologise for the paucity of sycophantic tasting notes and promise to try harder another time (or, in other words, just keep the samples coming).

A note on the photographs

All images are ©Ian Buxton, 2017 except as indicated. Most of my photographs were taken as personal aide memoires, a reminder of a specific time or place, with no intention that they would appear in the book. However, as it became clear to me that I did not want to use the artfully photoshopped, carefully curated and PR-industry-mediated official shots that the various distilleries' marketing teams are ever anxious to provide, the very artlessness of my 'snaps' came into sharper focus and, for all their technical and compositional shortcomings, seemed to offer a more honest complement to the text and a less sanitised view of the islands. I saw something of the same quality in the third-party images.

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