

W H I S K Y

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A E N E A S
M A C D O N A L D



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Main text, Appreciation, commentary and annotations

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George Malcolm Thomson

AENEAS MACDONALD'S
WHISKY
AN APPRECIATION

Ian Buxton

A TIMELESS CLASSIC

I NEVER MET Aeneas MacDonald, though I could and should have. The author was in fact alive and well when I first encountered this little book, but as it had been published in 1930 and his name never appeared in print again I simply assumed—if I thought about it at all—that he was dead. That's what we all thought.

Secondly, there never really was an Aeneas MacDonald.

'But why should I read this book?' you ask. 'It's nearly ninety years old—why bother?'

It's not an unreasonable question: by a conservative estimate there are considerably more than two hundred books about, or mainly about, whisky, and new works are added at an ever increasing pace—a dozen or more in the last year alone. You may well feel that the world doesn't need any more books about whisky, and you

could be right. Yet this was arguably the first. Doesn't that pique your curiosity?

Yes, despite the fact that the first written record of Scotch whisky may be found as long ago as 1494 and distilling is described in the sixth century by the Welsh bard Taliesin, apparently (extraordinary omission) no one thought it of sufficient interest or importance to its drinkers to write on their behalf until 1930 when this slim volume appeared. Whisky's slow renaissance began with its publication.

So for this alone Aeneas MacDonald deserves your attention, your respect and your time.

But there's more. MacDonald still speaks to us today: his sense of what it means to be Scottish; of why whisky, especially good whisky, matters; and on how, when and why to drink whisky he is a sure-footed and certain guide. And, at its simplest, this is also a damn good read: with glass and bottle at your side you will look with new enjoyment on your dram and dawning respect at a text that, yes, is approaching its ninetieth year but remains as fresh as a new-drawn cask sample: bright, sparkling and full of rich promise.

In fact, given today's near obsessive interest in the subject, and the acknowledged importance of whisky to the Scottish psyche, national identity and economy, it seems quite remarkable that we should have waited so

long for MacDonald. As he says, 'whisky-drinkers are not yet mere soakers, in spite of the scant attention paid to their enlightenment by the trade' yet, until his work, the industry was a closed book to all but the insider. Thus, every subsequent writer on whisky, and every considered drinker, is in his debt.

THE MYSTERIOUS AUTHOR

But who was this Aeneas MacDonald? His name does not appear again and he would seem to have fallen silent after this single work, published initially by Edinburgh's Porpoise Press.

The answer is a curious one, for 'Aeneas MacDonald' was the pseudonym of a very much more prolific and long-lived Scot, who adopted a nom de plume for just this one volume. He was, in fact, George Malcolm Thomson, a Leither by birth (yet one who claimed Edinburgh as his spiritual home), Dux of Daniel Stewart's College and, after brief service as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Great War, a graduate of Edinburgh University.

Born in August 1899, Thomson had established the Porpoise Press in 1922 in partnership with his university friend Roderick Kerr and one John Gould, a sleeping partner whose investment of £5 made up the firm's

fact. But what was the condition of whisky in 1930?

The date is all the more significant, nay extraordinary, when we consider the distressed state of the industry. The name of Pattison's still echoed ominously. This Leith and Edinburgh concern had driven ten other distillers into receivership, blackened the whole name of blending, and indirectly led to a Royal Commission on Whiskey following exposure at their criminal trial of the nefarious practices of their infamous blending vat.

The Pattison brothers may have been in jail by 1901, but their malign influence cast a long and dark shadow. Then, scarcely recovered from the Pattison's blending scandal and subsequent crash, Scotch whisky faced the triple challenges of the Great War, the Great Depression and Prohibition in the U.S.A., its most important market.

Between the beginning of the century and 1930, when this little book was published, some fifty single malt distilleries were closed, many permanently (save but one was opened). The industry in Campbeltown, once the most prosperous in the country, teetered on the brink of extinction. Whisky, today such an icon of national identity, was then in unparalleled crisis.

Opposite: The Pattison brothers were indeed part of 'A Big Boom' which for them was to end in bankruptcy and imprisonment.



Before turning to *Whisky*'s continued cultural significance and contemporary importance, book collectors may appreciate a note on its somewhat tangled publishing history.

There have been five editions, though only two are generally known.

The original is the first U.K. edition, published by the Porpoise Press of Edinburgh in 1930. As described above, MacDonald/Thomson was one of the founders of the Porpoise Press but, by 1930, it had been largely transferred to Faber & Faber and this first edition was published under the supervision of George Blake and Frank V. Morley of Faber & Faber. Printing was by Robert Maclehose & Co. at The University Press, Glasgow, and the first in a long succession of Porpoise Press titles to be produced there.

Whisky was published in an edition of 1,600—large by Porpoise Press standards, with a blue linen cover, paper title-slip on the spine and an attractive two-colour jacket. This, with the character affectionately known as the 'Cask Boy' or 'Topsy' to his friends, was drawn by A.E. Taylor, who also contributed the distillery map. (Taylor also illustrated works by William Cobbett, A.A. Milne and others.)

The same character also appears, but in monotone, on the dust jacket of the 1934 first American printing, published by Duffield & Green of New York on 25th January that year. The cover is brown linen, with gold lettering stamped on the spine for title, author and publisher, together with a decorative thistle. While the dust jacket illustration is the same, the plates appear worn, and some of the finer detail has been lost; A.E. Taylor's initials and the date '30' have been removed from the illustration and the advertisements for other Scottish fiction on the rear of the jacket have been dropped.

This edition was also printed by Robert Maclehose & Co. at The University Press, Glasgow, and appears to be internally identical to the U.K. version, with the exception of the distillery map. This has been simplified and redrawn with many of A.E. Taylor's more artistic embellishments such as the fish, galleons in full sail and tiny sketches of bewhiskered kilted shepherds enjoying a dram removed. While much of the charm of the map is accordingly lost it must be conceded that it is now rather easier to read!

Judging by the comparative ease with which it is possible to find copies of the American edition, the print run was greater. With the ending of Prohibition in December 1933, interest in drinks in the U.S.A. was very high, and, despite the recessionary times, it seems

fashionable malts of Islay, the thought must inevitably occur that perhaps our whisky has changed. Perhaps we are mere boys compared to MacDonald's heroic toppers and—worrying thought—perhaps the price of whisky's world domination is that it has been rendered bland. These are deep matters to ponder, demanding the most pungent of drams to stimulate speculation.

However, while we may look with nostalgia on these long-lost peat-soaked monsters, elsewhere we find mention of some 128 blends comprising a mixture of Scotch and Irish spirit. This is a passing that cannot be lamented and, indeed, the ever reliable MacDonald trenchantly casts these headlong with two words—they are, he tells us, the 'crowning horror' of blending.

Clearly no apologist for the blender, in this as so much else, he anticipates our zeitgeist. MacDonald is a single-whisky man and a defender of the drinker against the conspiracy of silence that he describes as existing amongst blenders 'to prevent the consumer from knowing what he is drinking'. Well spoken, indeed.

His cry for clear labelling and precise descriptions is a modern one, and the industry could do worse than consider his plea that each label on a bottle ought to contain 'the names of the malt whiskies ... in the blend, and the exact percentage of grain spirit ... it should state the number of years and months that the blend and each of its constituents has matured in cask'.

Is this so unreasonable? As he notes: 'sound whiskies would only gain by it.'

A modest enough proposal, yet, I have no difficulty in prophesying, one that will be ignored before it is stoutly resisted 'by a body of men so assured of their commercial acumen as those who comprise the whisky trade'!

'Transparency' is today's watchword, and the current campaign by one smaller producer for openness on labelling is one that MacDonald would sympathise with and support with energy and feeling.

But strict E.U. regulations govern the marketing and promotion of spirits, effectively preventing the distiller from telling the consumer exactly what is in each bottle. As Compass Box Whisky say on their website:

It turns out that Scotch whisky is one of the few products where it is prohibited by law to be fully open with consumers. This is an issue that affects every corner of the Scotch world (from Single Malt distillers to blenders) and limits the ability of the producer to share pertinent information with their customers.

We believe the current regulations should change. That Scotch whisky producers should have the freedom to offer their customers complete, unbiased and clear information on the age of every component used in their whiskies. That those customers have the right to know exactly what it is they're drinking.

Does this seem familiar? Read MacDonald on

Judging, Purchase, and Care (Chapter V) and you will find exactly this argument: in effect nothing has changed since he wrote. Consumers are still pleading for the information he requested nearly ninety years ago, but at last some enlightened producers have lent their weight to the cause. Let us trust it will not be another ninety years before we are trusted with this simple information.

All this is excellent stuff and confirmation, if any is needed, that MacDonald remains pertinent today. Indeed, he also anticipates the fashion for cocktails, while disparaging the then fashionable mix of whisky and soda; his recommendations on blending your own whisky remain sound, and his championing of the drinker against the complacency of an industry then in frightening decline is both robust and relevant.

So, today the ‘Sixteen Men of Tain’ assume a symbolic importance out of all proportion to their numbers. But distilling did not go entirely unnoticed in Thomson’s two trenchant pleas for Scotland. In *Caledonia* he observes that ‘the whisky industry is in even worse plight, as a result of high taxation and American prohibition. In one important centre only one distillery out of seven is working.’

And in *The Re-Discovery of Scotland* his argument is backed up by cold statistics, chilling even today: ‘In 1925, there were 124 distilleries working in Scotland; in 1926 there were 113. The export of whisky in 1926 was

800,000 proof gallons less than in 1925, and 1,856,000 less than in 1924.’

Enough. Today whisky is in robust health. ‘Single whiskies’, or malts as we now style them, take an ever larger share of the market. Established distilleries are expanding, and independent distillers are once again opening their doors as a burgeoning ‘craft’ sector innovates and explores ever more arcane aspects of our national drink. Aeneas MacDonald may rest easy.

To the extent that pioneers such as George Malcolm Thomson built the foundations of this present success we are ever in his debt. He lit a torch that has burned brightly ever since and still illuminates our faltering steps. His is truly a great, potent and princely voice that will not be stilled.

To think that he was frightened of his own mother!

Ian Buxton
August 2016

THE NATURE OF WHISKY

OF THE history, geography, literature, philosophy, morals, use and abuse, praise and scorn of whisky volumes might be written.¹ They will not be written by me. Yet it is opportune that a voice be raised in defence of this great, potent, and princely drink where so many speak to slight and defame, and where so many glasses are emptied foolishly and irreverently in ignorance of the true qualities of the liquid and in contempt of its proper employment. For, if one might, for a trope's sake, alter the sex of this most male of beverages, one would say that there be many who take with them to the stews beauty and virtue which should command the grateful awe of men. Though, in truth, there is little of the marble idol of divinity about this swift and fiery spirit. It belongs to the alchemist's den and to the long nights shot with cold, flickering beams; it is compact of Druid spells and Sabbaths (of the witches and the Calvinists); its graces are not shameless, Latin, and abundant, but

¹ *This may strike today's reader as prophetic. While in 1930 MacDonald's was a lone voice the 'volumes' that he anticipates have indeed been written, and continue to flow from the presses in ever increasing quantities. Whether any approach the fervour and poetry of this little book I shall leave it to you to determine.*

have a sovereign austerity, whether the desert's or the north wind's; there are flavours in it, insinuating and remote, from mountain torrents and the scanty soil on moorland rocks and slanting, rare sun-shafts.

But of those who condemn it a word. We shall describe them and, according to their deserts, either bid them begone or stay and be instructed. For the enemies of whisky fall under several headings.

There has of late come into being a class of persons who have learnt of wine out of books and not out of bottles. They are as a rule to be surprised drinking cheap champagne in secret but their talk is all of vintages and districts and *clos* and *châteaux*.

These dilettantes of the world of drinking are distinguished by weak stomachs and a plentiful store of snobbery. Wine merchants make of them an easy and legitimate prey. They are apt in quotation and historical anecdote, culling these from the books which honest men have written to advance the arts of civilization and to earn money. They roll great names on their tongues as though they were heralds marshalling the chivalry of France, or toadies numbering the peers they have fawned on.

In finding those qualities of bouquet and body which their textbooks bid them seek, they are infallible, provided the bottle has been correctly labelled. They will,

indeed, discover them before they have tasted the wine.

One drinks ill at their tables; it was in the house of such an one that an impolite guest remarked to his neighbour, 'This Barsac goes to my head like wine.'

These creatures have the insolence to despise whisky. Fresh from their conducted tour of the vineyards, the smellers of corks and gabblers of names sneer when its name is mentioned. It is, they declare, the drink of barbarians, offensive to the palate and nostrils of persons of taste; above all, it is not modish. For all that is southern and Mediterranean is in the mode among us. Civilization is a Latin word and culture comes by the Blue Train.² Better a rubber beach at Monte Carlo than all the sea-shores of the north. And, of course, we must affect enthusiasm for wine; it is so European, so picturesque and cultivated. It shows one has a certain background. A cellar is like a pedigree and requires less authentication. Nor is actual experience of bibbing necessary; a good memory and the correct books will suffice. If one is actually forced to drink, one can toy for a time with the glass in one's palm, discuss the merits

² *The luxury Calais-Méditerranée Express night train was a watchword for fashionable travel between the wars. Known as the Blue Train (Le Train Bleu) after the colour of the sleeping cars, it features in novels by Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon. Wealthy playboy motorists such as Woolf Barnato and the 'Bentley Boys' famously participated in the Blue Train Races of the 1920s and 1930s. The service has now been superseded by the TGV.*



and physiological advantages: ‘It does you good’; ‘After a hot tiring day’; ‘Now that the cold weather is coming’; ‘The doctor recommends it.’⁵ This is to be deplored, for it plays

directly into the hands of those who look on whisky at its lowest, as a mere brute stimulant, who believe that one bottle of whisky resembles another very much as one packet of Gold Flake cigarettes another packet of Gold Flake cigarettes, and whose nearest approach to discrimination is to say ‘small Scotch (or Irish), please,’ instead of the still more catholic ‘a small whisky’.

As a result, there has been a tendency to abolish whisky from the table of the connoisseur to the saloon bar and the golf club smoke-room. The notion that we can possibly develop a palate for whisky is guaranteed to produce a smile of derision in any company except that of a few Scottish lairds, farmers, gamekeepers, and bailies, relics of a vanished age of gold when the vintages of the north had their students and lovers.

It may indeed be that the decline of whisky as a civilized pleasure is linked with the decay of taste in

⁵ From the 1880s onwards much whisky advertising adopted strategies similar to those noted here. The infamous Pattison brothers even had a brand known as ‘The Doctor’.



MacDonald rightly ‘deplored’ the use of quasi-medical claims. Dewar’s advertised like so many others at the time but today no distiller would consider this acceptable, even if it were not explicitly banned in marketing codes the world over.

Scotland. For it was from Scotland that first England and then the world at large acquired the beverage, though the Scots must share with the Irish the honour of being its first manufacturers. While a high standard of culture was still to be found in a Caledonia less stern and wild than to-day and whisky still held its place in the cellars of the gentry and of men of letters, who selected it with as much care and knowledge as they gave to the stocking of their cellars with claret, whisky retained its place as one of the higher delights of mankind. But when Scots opinion was no longer to be trusted, the standards of the whole world suffered an instant decline, similar to that which would befall Burgundy if the solid bourgeoisie of France and Belgium were to perish suddenly and no one was left to drink the wine but the English and the Americans.

And at last a day dawned when it became possible for the average Englishman to be ignorant of the very names of all but four or five blends of whisky (all of which stared at him in enormous letters from hundreds of hoardings) and for the average English public-house to stock no more than three or four proprietary brands. It is small wonder if, in the face of an indifference and promiscuity so widespread, the distilling firms relaxed their standards: no restaurant would trouble to lay in *Cabinett-wein* if its clients asked only for hock and would

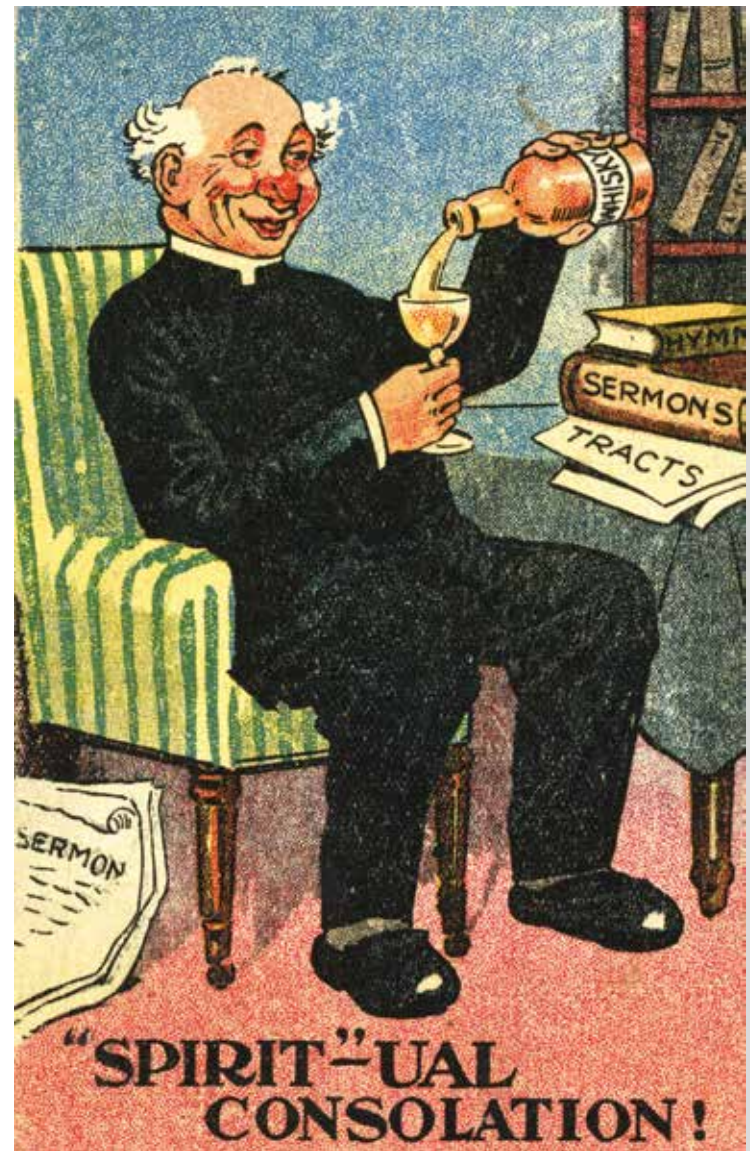
pay only one price whatever was brought to the table. Yet, at the same time, one cannot quite exculpate the whisky-makers from the guilt of having chosen the easier and more profitable path at the expense of the prestige of their own commodity. It was their duty to guard it jealously, for it cannot be maintained seriously that those who make the food and the drink of man are in the same category as mere commercial manufacturers. Theirs is a sacred, almost a priestly responsibility, which they cannot barter away for turnovers and dividends without betraying their trust as custodians of civilization. Flour and beef, wine, brandy, and whisky are not in the same category as Ford cars or safety pins. Or ought not to be.

It may be admitted, too, that there is some excuse for those who fall into the error of the whisky-swillers, who drink it because it has an infallible result, a loosening of the tongue, a dulling of the memory, a heightening of the temperature, or what not. For whisky—even inferior whisky—has a potency and a directness in the encounter which proclaims its sublime rank. It does not linger to toy with the senses, it does not seep through the body to the brain; it communicates through no intermediary with the core of a man, with the roots of his consciousness; it speaks from deep to deep. This quality of spiritual instancy derives from the physical nature of the liquid. Whisky is a re-incarnation; it is

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more accurately than to commercial shortsightedness and the failure of an educated appreciation. This age fears fire and the grand manner, and whisky may have to wait for its apotheosis until there comes to life upon the globe a race of deeper daring which will find in the potent and fiery subtlety of the great spirit the beverage that meets its necessities.

But, in the meantime, what can be done by way of persuasion and exposition to rebuild the ruined altar of whisky, let us do.



The tyranny of the pulpits!

II

HISTORY

THE ORIGIN of whisky is, as it ought to be, hidden in the clouds of mystery that veil the youth of the human race. Legend has been busy with it and has given it, like the Imperial family of Japan, an ancestor descended from heaven. Yet no Promethean larceny brought us this gentle fire; whisky, or rather the whole art and science of distillation, was the gift of the gods, of one god, Osiris. The higher criticism may hesitate to probe a myth so poetic, may be content to hold its peace and accept the evidence of those X's on casks which have been adduced as direct links with the Osirian mysteries. It is certain, at any rate, that distilling is venerable enough to have acquired a sacred character. Whether it was born in the Nile Valley or elsewhere is a question of no consequence. The Chinese knew it before the Christian era; arrack has been distilled from rice and sugar since 800 B.C.; distilling was probably known in India before the building of the great Pyramid; Captain Cook found stills in use among the Pacific islanders.

It has been held that those comparatively modern peoples whom we used to call the ancients knew nothing

of distilling, but this view overlooks a passage in the *Meteorology* of Aristotle in which the father of scientific method notes that ‘sea water can be rendered potable by distillation; wine and other liquids can be submitted to the same process.’ This seems at least to give brandy, and possibly whisky also, a place in the sun of Greek knowledge. But if lovers of whisky think to find a direct reference to their beverage in the fifth century Zosimus of Panopolis and his mention of the distillation of a panacea or divine water, they will make a mistake. Zosimus was not thinking of whisky. They may comfort themselves with the reflection that distillation from grain has normally preceded distillation from wine, as one might expect, the necessity of those who have no wine to drink being more insistent. The chances are, then, that whisky has a longer pedigree than brandy.

There is, in any case, a clearer reference to the brewing and distilling of grain liquors in the ancient world which opens the exciting prospect that Dionysos was the god of whisky before he was the god of wine. During his wars against the northern barbarians the emperor Julian the Apostate encountered and apparently tasted (and certainly disliked) a beverage made from barley. The occasion was celebrated in an epigram to this new or (as seems likelier) very old aspect of Dionysos¹ which

¹ MacDonald is here suggesting a Greek origin for the art of distillation. This

is found in the *Palatine Anthology* (ix, 368) and has been translated as follows in Miss Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*:

TO WINE MADE OF BARLEY

Who and whence art thou, Dionyse? now, by
the Bacchus true
Whom well I know, the son of Zeus, say: ‘Who
and what are you?’
He smells of nectar like a god, *you* smell of goats
and spelt,
For lack of grapes from ears of grain your
countryman, the Celt,
Made you. Your name’s Demetrios, but
never Dionyse,
Bromos, Oat-born, not Bromios, Fire-born from
out the skies.

It used to be thought that the early Thracian god, Dionysos Bromios, was connected with the loud peal of thunder, but as Julian points out, he was more probably

whole passage on the origins of whisky is perhaps more romantic than historically accurate; more recent scholarship should be consulted if the reader is concerned with establishing whisky’s genesis. Perhaps, as MacDonald suggests earlier, it is ‘a question of no consequence’ and his poetic approach contains a deeper truth than that revealed in any pedantic chronology.

who declined to allow the officers to build their houses in the vicinity. And, finally, large and fierce dogs were loosed upon any unwelcome visitors to the distillery.

The illicit distilling of Scotch whisky was not confined to the Highlands. There were 400 unlicensed stills in Edinburgh in 1777, when the number of licensed stills was only eight.²⁵ In 1815 a ‘private’ distillery of considerable size was found under an arch of the South Bridge in the Scottish capital.²⁶ The only entrance was by a doorway situated at the back of a fireplace in the bedroom of a house adjoining the arch. Water was obtained from one of the mains of the Edinburgh Water Company which passed overhead, and the smoke

²⁵ *Though frequently repeated, this figure must be considered suspect. It is derived from Hugo Arnot’s 1779 History of Edinburgh in which he writes that there are ‘no fewer than four hundred private stills which pay no duty’ in the city. However, ignored by MacDonald and all subsequent commentators, he then goes on to frankly admit that this estimate is ‘only conjecture’ and as Arnot was a fervent opponent of whisky drinking and wished to prohibit all private distilling his claim has to be treated with some caution.*

²⁶ *This wonderful tale appears in David Bremner’s The Industries of Scotland: Their Rise, Progress and Present Condition (1869) which had first appeared as a series of articles in the Scotsman newspaper.*

The chapter on distilling appears to have been an important source for MacDonald. Remember also that around this time, under his own name of George Malcolm Thomson, he was researching and writing his major polemics on the condition of Scotland. With his keen interest in economic affairs and his robustly outspoken style MacDonald/Thomson will have recognised Bremner’s earlier work as a useful basis for comparison between mid-Victorian industrial ascendancy and the distressed condition he observed in the 1920s and 1930s.

and waste were got rid of by making an opening in the chimney of an adjoining house and connecting to it a pipe from the distillery. In the mid-nineteenth century a yet more scandalous instance of the Scottish aversion from paying duties occurred in Edinburgh when a secret distillery was found in the cellars under the Free Tron Church. But by that time the battle for legalised distilling had been won. It would no longer be the case that the finest whiskies could only be obtained by dubious and subterranean means from sources which could be but vaguely conjectured.

The modern history of whisky is so intimately associated with the development of manufacturing processes, with the commercial and financial aspects of what has become almost as much a science as an art and an industry rather than either, that it may be considered more conveniently under separate headings. We leave the story of whisky at a moment when it is exchanging a past illustrious and obscure for a present infinitely more prosaic, conducted in the full glare of modern commercialism and with all the devices at the disposal of a highly-capitalized, well-organized, large-scale industry. Whisky emerges from the shadows of the hermetic arts into the harsh limelight of the age of trusts and cartels and mass-production. The blue smoke rising warily above the heather dissolves and in its place

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there rises the gigantic image of one whose monocle, scarlet coat, top boots and curly-brimmed tall hat seem strangely remote from the glens and the clachans.²⁷

²⁷ The reference, of course, is to the iconic striding man of the Johnnie Walker brand, then and now the best-selling Scotch whisky in the world.

The figure is believed to have been modelled originally from an old photograph of the real Johnnie Walker by the artist Tom Brown. His style has been followed in this advertisement by Leo Cheney.



III

MAKING AND BLENDING

Throughout the book, but particularly in this chapter, MacDonald would appear to have been heavily influenced by the work of J.A. Nettleton, in particular his pointed comments on the ‘What is Whisky?’ question and the work and findings of the Royal Commission.

*Nettleton was an important figure—perhaps the most important—in the Victorian and early Edwardian distilling industry. His lasting legacy is his book *The Manufacture of Whisky and Plain Spirit* (1913) which remained for many years the standard text on the subject and is still consulted today.*

He was utterly convinced that the Royal Commission had made a huge mistake in its recommendations and was a vehement critic of their verdict, describing it as ‘a concession to a powerful commercial syndicate interested in the promotion of a modern innovation [which] sacrifices the interests of those who had obtained a reputation built up during centuries of development and enterprise to the interests of others who cannot boast of as many decades’. By this, he meant the DCL (the Distillers Company Ltd, forerunner of today’s Diageo) who had actively promoted the cause of grain. It is strange that MacDonald does not specifically cite Nettleton’s work but a close examination of the relevant texts leaves me in no doubt that he was heavily in the latter’s debt.

*Likewise George Saintsbury, revered amongst drinks writers for his *Notes on a Cellar-Book* and one of MacDonald’s professors at Edinburgh University, regarded the Commission as an exercise in futility and ‘mischievous’. When we consider that it examined 116 witnesses over 37 days to produce a 724-page report that changed next to nothing we might concur with that verdict—other than the knowledge (with hindsight) that it was to profoundly influence the future shape and direction of the industry.*

The debate, of course, centres round whether that was for good or ill, and there is no doubt in which camp we would find Nettleton, Saintsbury and their eager student MacDonald.

SOMETHING of a noble and elegant simplicity characterizes the apparatus employed in the manufacture of whisky. Reduced to its bare essentials it consists of two main instruments, the *still* and the *worm condenser*. The still is a retort of copper with a broad, rounded bottom and a tapering neck. The worm condenser, connected to the still by a short pipe, is a spiral tube, also made of copper. There is nothing vital in the equipment of a distillery which a village blacksmith could not make and a small cottager could not buy. Moreover, no marked improvement of any note has been made in the machinery of whisky-distillation during long centuries. We can now make purer industrial alcohol, we have perfected the technique of treating the barley and making the malt, we understand something more of the chemical processes which take place when whisky is produced, we leave less to chance than our fathers did, but we have not devised a still which will make better whisky than the old pot-still which has been in use since the dawn of our knowledge of whisky, and we have not been able to construct a more practical method of condensing the



A promotional card for pure malt whisky (note age) from Sir Walter Gilbey's Glen Spey distillery. Gilbey wrote passionately in defence of the pot still.

vapour of the still¹ than the worm pipe kept cool by running water. The Highlander of the fifteenth or sixteenth century might be bewildered for a few moments if he

¹ The modern shell and tube condenser, first seen at MacDuff distillery c. 1962/63 is, of course, considered by its adherents to be a more efficient apparatus, but the worm tub continues to have its devotees, especially among the cognoscenti of single whiskies. Die-hard traditionalists are convinced of its superiority.

Interestingly, and in support of that view, there have been instances (for example at Dalwhinnie distillery) where worm tubs have been replaced by shell and tube condensers but subsequently reinstated as the spirit character was felt to have changed unacceptably.

However, MacDonald is not strictly correct as there had been experiments at Hazelburn (1837) and later at Nevis, which will feature later in these notes, with partial condensers located on the stills or lyne arms. The idea that Scotch whisky production was unchanging until some unthinking commercial vandalism destroyed the values of a sacred priesthood is an appealingly romantic one, but not one that is supported by the historical record.

were suddenly introduced into a modern malt distillery but he would speedily recognise in their larger bulk and greater elaboration the familiar instruments from which he was accustomed to obtain his beloved usquebaugh.

There are two main descriptions of whisky, depending on the raw materials used. Whisky is either made from barley malt alone (the great Scottish whiskies all belong to this class) or from a mixture of barley malt with unmalted grains of different sorts (all—or almost all—Irish whiskies come under this category). The process of distillation may best be studied by observing the manufacture of a pure malt whisky, such a whisky as will be found by the fortunate possessor of one or other of the classic brands. The essentials of the manufacture are as follows:²

The barley is brought from the farm into the barley-receiving room of the distillery where it is cleansed by being passed through screens; the smaller, inferior grains

² Though the essential principles of distillation have remained unchanged since the earliest experiments, MacDonald gives here a description of practices in the 1920s. Since then, much advanced technology has been introduced, including highly computerised process controls and mechanical handling systems.

Readers interested in a detailed description of the production techniques current when MacDonald was writing should refer to Nettleton; there are a number of contemporary texts describing the operation of distilleries in the twenty-first century.

Notwithstanding the introduction of much technology and despite the impressive scale of many of today's distilleries, I would hold, with MacDonald, that a distiller from centuries ago transported to a Roseisle or Inchbairnie would soon find the surroundings familiar.

are discarded. The selected barley is then taken in bags into a barn from which it passes into the malt house.

Here it falls into tanks called ‘steeps’ where it is soaked in water. The softened, swollen grain is spread out on a malting floor³ for about three weeks, being sprinkled with water at regular intervals and occasionally turned over. As a result of this, the barley begins to grow or germinate.

When the proper time has arrived the water supply is shut off; growth stops immediately and the grown barley is withered. In this state it is known as ‘green malt’. What has actually been happening is that the starch of the barley has been partly converted into sugar by means of the ferment whose technical name is *diastase*.

The next step in the process is that of drying in the kiln. This is a supremely important operation for it is at this time that the malt acquires characteristics of flavour which it will later on impart to the whisky. Thus the chief distinction between the two main classes of Scotch whisky, Highland and Lowland, is that the former has its malt dried by means of peat fires. The combustion

³ *Few distilleries today maintain their own floor maltings; notable exceptions to this rule being Springbank, Bowmore, Laphroaig, Balvenie, Highland Park and Kilchoman. Even for most of these, a majority of the malt used will come from external suppliers operating large drum malting machines. The observant reader will have noted that four of the above have an island location—and Springbank is both small and remote from most major centres.*

Some of the latest generation of farmhouse or boutique distilleries have announced their intention to operate floor maltings.

gases of the peat endow the whisky with that subtle ‘smokiness’ which is present, in discreet combination with other flavours, in genuine Highland whisky.⁴

The kilned malt passes into the mill room where a wire screen removes the ‘culm’ or sproutings produced during malting. The malt is ground in a mill. It is now passed into the mashing tuns where it is thoroughly mixed with warm water. Being later cooled, the resulting liquid, known as *wort*, is drawn off. The mashing process enables the diastase to convert the remainder of the starch in the malt to sugar and to *dextrine*, which dissolves in the wort. The wort passes through a refrigerator in the tun (or fermentation) room on its way to the wash backs, yeast being added to the liquor on the way. Fermentation now takes place, the sugary substance in the wort being transformed by the yeast into alcohol and carbonic acid gas. The diastase converts the dextrine into sugar, which the yeast in its turn converts into alcohol.

The wash, or alcohol-containing liquor from the fermentation room, is now introduced into the wash still. This is the crucial operation, for now the liquid, leaving the world of earthly things behind, enters the

⁴ *This represents a marked change from today’s practice where, with a few exceptions, peat (and ‘smokiness’) is not widely seen as a flavour note in other than island whiskies. It would not commonly be associated with Highland whisky in the modern era.*

protested that the spirit made in the Lowlands, and in Ireland, from unmalted grain was ‘Scotch’d spirit’, not whisky. Until quite late in the century Irish usquebaugh was a cordial made by adding cinnamon, liquorice, and other spices to grain or malt spirit. It seems possible that in Scotland aqua vitae referred to a pure malt spirit, and usquebaugh to a spiced cordial; at any rate a distinction of some sort was preserved, for in 1732 the Duke of Atholl wrote to Lord George Murray, the famous general of the ’45, complaining that ‘I have not one drop of either usquba or acquivatae in the house.’ In the early part of the nineteenth century the words ‘Scotch whisky’ had a very definite and precise meaning.¹⁷ They denoted a whisky made in Scotland from malted home-grown barley (dried over a peat fire in the case of Highland whisky), and distilled in a pot-still. At the same time Irish whisky had a similarly close and exact definition. It meant whisky made in Ireland by treble-distilling, in potstills heated by furnaces, of a wort obtained from a mash of malted barley, barley and oats, all the grain being home-grown.

¹⁷ *This may have been the case through custom and practice and the de facto case in the absence of any alternative, but there was no such legal definition while there was a problem of unknown extent with counterfeiting and adulteration at a wholesale and retail level. However, as late as 1888 the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica states that ‘malt whisky is the product of malted barley alone, distilled in the ordinary pot-still’.*



One of a set of six contemporary postcards satirising the work of the experts of the Royal Commission on Whisky. Thomson's mother was a staunch temperance advocate but, more than one hundred years on, the image bears a striking resemblance to a well-known whisky writer!

of Caithness. To the west and north of this line from the sixteenth century onwards was the ‘pale’ of the Celtic clan system and the Gaelic speech. But the Highland Line on a whisky map of Scotland is kinder to Celtic susceptibilities and includes great stretches of country which have been politically, racially, and linguistically Lowland for long centuries. If a straight line be drawn on the map between Dundee on the east and Greenock in the west it will represent the boundary between Highland and Lowland malt whiskies. Everywhere to the north of this invisible frontier is the dominion of the Highland whisky, its southern outpost in Stirlingshire on the very edge of the line. (And, indeed, as in the case of other frontiers and other outposts, there is some dispute as to which territory is the rightful owner of this distillery, whose product, of less markedly Highland character than the others, appears variously as a Highland and a Lowland malt in different trade lists.)¹³

The Highland whisky area is made up of one or two fairly distinct sub-divisions, of several scattered units which may be grouped together for convenience under county headings, and of one thronged and important core or nucleus. Ignoring this last for the moment, we shall take the Highland whiskies in rough geographical order, beginning with the most northerly.

¹³ Presumably Glengoyne.

Pomona, the main island of Orkney, forms one of the sub-divisions of the Highland area. It has three distilleries, Scapa, Stromness,¹⁴ and Highland Park, at Kirkwall, of which the last is probably the best known. Depending largely, as they do, on imported barley, much of which comes to them from the great grain-growing lands of the Lothians, these distilleries produce a whisky of strong individuality, resembling not the famous Banffshire makes but rather the Aberdeenshire group of Highland malts which are sometimes given the name of ‘North Country’ whiskies. Highland Park, the best of the three, is one of the small first class, the premiers crus, as it were, of Scotch whiskies. The distillery is the most northerly of all and one of the most ancient, having been founded in 1789 near the site of a bothy kept by one Magnus Eunson, a famous Orkney smuggler, who was beadle (*Anglicè*—verger) of the local U.P. Church and is said to have concealed his illicit spirits under the pulpit of the Church. When excisemen attended the services, not altogether for pious reasons, Eunson, we are told, used to announce the psalms in tones of exceptional unction.¹⁵ He was a true brother

¹⁴ The Stromness distillery had, in fact, closed by this date but is remembered for its charming publicity materials (see illustration over page).

Scapa is working today under the ownership of Chivas Brothers. It is notable for operating a Lomond still, somewhat modified.

¹⁵ This tale appears in Barnard, but I think it more likely that MacDonald has



A delightful promotional postcard for the Stromness Distillery's Old Orkney brand. The distillery closed in 1928 when the town voted to go 'dry'

in the spirit of that other illicit but devout distiller who, in reply to the reproaches of his minister, said, 'I alloo nae sweerin' in the still, everything's dune decently and in order.' But it is unlikely that the Orkney clergy found fault with the illegal activities of their flocks. In Hall's *Travels in Scotland* (1807) we read, 'It is a shame that the clergy in the Shetland and Orkney Isles should so often wink at their churches being made depositories of smuggled goods, chiefly foreign spirits.' Indeed, if we owe the still which has given us Highland Park to the convenient blindness of the Orkney ministers, there will be those among us who will say that churches have been put to worse uses before now.

Caithness, which in the eighteenth century was sending whisky to Skye and the Hebrides, to-day furnishes one whisky, at Wick, where the Pulteney Distillery is found. Sutherland has at Brora a distillery where the famous Clynelish¹⁶ is made. This admirable malt blends

taken it directly from promotional material issued by the distillery in 1924. The story appears in their little pamphlet, A Good Foundation, where we read "when Excisemen attended the services (from motives not unconnected with the Spirit!) he is said to have announced the psalms in tones of unusual unction".

Such was his haste in working that he has transcribed the date that the distillery was founded incorrectly! A few lines above the sentence quoted from A Good Foundation it is given there correctly as 1798; MacDonald has 1789. Such are the perils of plagiarism.

¹⁶ *The original Clynelish distillery mentioned here was renamed Brora in 1969 when the adjacent new Clynelish distillery was commissioned. The original distillery was then operated intermittently until 1983 when it was finally closed.*

KEY TO MAP OF DISTILLERIES



- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. GLEN SKIACH. † | 44. STRATHISLA-MILTON KEITH. |
| 2. FERINTOSH. † | 45. KNOCKDHU. |
| 3. ORD-GLENORAN. | 46. BANFF. † |
| 4. GLEN ALBYN. † | 47. MACALLAN-GLENLIVET. |
| 5. MILLBURN. † | 48. ABERLOUR-GLENLIVET. |
| 6. GLEN MHOR. † | 49. BENRINNES-GLENLIVET. |
| 7. BUNNAHABAIN. | 50. CONVALMORE-GLENLIVET. † |
| 8. CAOL ILA. | 51. BALVENIE-GLENLIVET. |
| 9. BRUICHLADDICH. | 52. TOWIEMORE-GLENLIVET. † |
| 10. OCHINDAAL. | 53. PARKMORE. † |
| 11. BOWMORE. | 54. GLENDULLAN-GLENLIVET. |
| 12. ARDBEG. | 55. MORTLACH. |
| 13. MALT MILL. † | 56. GLENFIDDICH. |
| 14. LAPHROAIG. | 57. DUFFTOWN-GLENLIVET. |
| 15. PORT ELLEN. | 58. TAMDHU-GLENLIVET. |
| 16. LAGAVULIN. | 59. CARDOW. |
| 17. GLENGOYNE. | 60. IMPERIAL-GLENLIVET. † |
| 18. EDRADOUR. | 61. KNOCKANDO. |
| 19. STRONACHIE. † | 62. GLENFARGLAS-GLENLIVET. |
| 20. GLENCOUILL. † | 63. DAILUAINE-GLENLIVET. |
| 21. GLENCADAM. | 64. CRAGGANMORE-GLENLIVET. |
| 22. GLENGRAGH. | 65. BALMENAUGH-GLENLIVET. |
| 23. ARDMORE. | 66. GLENLIVET. |
| 24. GLENCARDOR. † | 67. STRATHEDEN. † |
| 25. BRACKLA. | 68. CAMERON BRIDGE. |
| 26. DALLAS DHU. † | 69. AUCHTERTOOL. † |
| 27. BEN ROMACH. | 70. GRANGE. † |
| 28. GLENBURGIE. | 71. GLENOCHIL. † |
| 29. MILTON-DUFF. | 72. CAMBUS. † |
| 30. GLENLOSSIE-GLENLIVET. | 73. ROSEBANK. † |
| 31. LONGMORN-GLENLIVET. | 73a. BANKIER. † |
| 32. LINKWOOD-GLENLIVET. | 74. LITTLEMILL. † |
| 33. GLENMORAY-GLENLIVET. | 75. AUCHENTOSHAN, DUNTOCHER. |
| 34. GLENELGIN-GLENLIVET. | 76. GARTLOCH. † |
| 35. COLEBURN-GLENLIVET. † | 77. GLENKINCHIE. |
| 36. SPEYBURN-GLENLIVET. | 78. KIRKLISTON. † |
| 37. GLENSPEY. | 79. BLADNOCH, WIGTOWN. |
| 38. GLENROTHES-GLENLIVET. | |
| 39. GLENGRANT-GLENLIVET. | |
| 40. CRAIGELLACHIE-GLENLIVET. | |
| 41. GLENTAUCHERS-GLENLIVET. | |
| 42. INCHGOWER. | |
| 43. STRATHMILL. | |
| 44. AULTMORE-GLENLIVET. | |
- THE CAMPBELTOWN DISTILLERIES:
 SPRINGSIDE, † RIECLACHAN, † KINLOCH, †
 HAZELBURN, † GLENSIDE, † LOCH-HEAD, †
 BENMORE, † SCOTIA, LOCHRUAN, †
 SPRINGBANK.
- † Distilleries that are now closed

exquisitely with the Speyside whiskies. We have Professor Saintsbury's word for it that the finest whisky he ever blended had for its ingredients Smith's Glenlivet and Clynelish. Ross-shire contributes five whiskies (Glen Skiach¹⁷ is not to be found in the latest register): these are Glenmorangie, distilled at Tain, Dalmore and Teaninich from Alness on the northern shores of Cromarty Firth, and Ferintosh (prematurely mourned by Burns) from the other shore. In Glenoran to the north of Beaulieu is situated the Ord-Glenoran distillery.

Inverness-shire can scarcely be considered a natural territorial division for whisky. It contains several isolated distilleries or groups of distilleries whose products have no particular resemblance to one another. At each end of the Great Glen through which the Caledonian Canal passes is a small whisky district. Near Inverness are the three distilleries of Glen Albyn, Millburn, and Glen Mhor; at Fort William, at the southern or western end of the Glen, are the distilleries of Glenlochiel and Ben Nevis. But the Inverness whiskies¹⁸ approach the Banffshire type in character, while the Fort William products belong to a West Highland category, in which

¹⁷ *Glen Skiach closed in 1926, as did Ferintosh, bearer of a noble name. Presumably MacDonald was unaware of the closure or assumed it to be temporary.*

¹⁸ *The three Inverness distilleries are all closed and their sites cleared for housing or retail, as is the case with Glenlochiel (more usually styled Glenlochiel—either way, it is now lost).*

the fine Skye whisky, Talisker, is also to be remembered. The other Inverness-shire whiskies are more difficult to classify. Tomatin, made on the Findhorn, has a claim to be included in the inner ring of the Highland whiskies, the core to which reference has already been made. Dalwhinnie, styled a Strathspey whisky, is a native of the Central Highlands, born near the bank of that tributary of the Spey which drains sombre Loch Erich; it is more than seventy miles from the nearest of its fellow Spey whiskies.

Argyle contributes to the West Highland group Tobermory from Mull, the last of the insular whiskies, Oban, and Glenfyne¹⁹, from Ardrishaig. In Perthshire there is a grouping of distilleries along the valleys of the Tay and its tributaries, the Earn and the Tummel. At Pitlochry the Blair Atholl whisky is made with, close beside it, Edradour of the poetic name; Ballechin is distilled at Ballinluig, Aberfeldy at the charming little town of that name on the upper Tay, Glen Turret at Crieff, and Isla at Perth.²⁰ All are useful, robust whiskies, somewhat below the highest grade in delicacy.

In Stirlingshire, Glengyle just scrapes into the

¹⁹ *Glenfyne closed in 1937.*

²⁰ *Of the distilleries mentioned here Ballechin (1927), Isla (1926), Glengyle (c. 1925), Glencoull (1929), North Port (1983), Auchenblae (1926), Glenurie, later Royal Glenurie (1985), Strathdee (1938) and Glenugie (1983) are all now closed.*

gently stirred in a punch-bowl. Flavoured with nutmeg or lemon zest, this makes an admirable morning dram.

Highland Cordial is a somewhat more elaborate decoction whose foundation is a pint of white currants to which are added a bottle of whisky, the thin peel of a lemon, and a teaspoonful of essence of ginger. These are mixed and allowed to stand for forty-eight hours, when the liquid is strained. Then a pound of loaf sugar is added and given a day to dissolve. Now bottle and cork, and, in three months, begin to drink.

Highland Bitters is an extremely ancient beverage with a recipe somewhat difficult to assemble on short notice. First an ounce and three-quarters of gentian root and half an ounce of orange peel should be cut into small pieces and bruised in a mortar with an ounce of coriander seed, a quarter-ounce of camomile flower, half an ounce of cloves, and a quarter of an ounce of cinnamon stick. Now put in an earthenware jar and empty two bottles of whisky over it. Keep the jar airtight for about a fortnight and then strain and bottle.

Het Pint was once—so Scottish legend runs—made with light wine and brandy. But ale and whisky have taken the place of these exotic ingredients in the beverage which was once carried (in a copper kettle) about the streets of Edinburgh and Glasgow on New Year's Morning and was also consumed on the night

"NEAT, BUT NOT GAUDY "



"SCOTCH" AND SODA ?

This discerning whisky drinker looks askance at the soda siphon and offers it a cold shoulder—just as MacDonald recommends!



*Perhaps these hardy gentlemen are searching for the perfect blend—
which one presumes would be made by Dewar's*

before a wedding and at a lying-in. A nutmeg is grated into two quarts of mild ale and brought to boiling point. To a little cold ale add some sugar and three well-beaten eggs. This is now slowly mixed with the hot ale, care being taken that the eggs do not curdle. A half pint of whisky being added, the whole is brought to boil again and then briskly poured from one vessel to another until it becomes smooth and bright.

A simpler beverage is Caledonian Liquor, which is made by dropping an ounce of oil of cinnamon on two and a half pounds of bruised loaf sugar; a gallon of whisky—the best you can lay hands on—is added to this and, when the sugar is dissolved, the liquor is filtered and bottled.

For the serious-minded lover of whisky, however, recipes taken from antique household books will have small attraction. All his time will be devoted to that romantic, unending quest of the true participator in the mysteries of aqua vitae—the search for the perfect blend.¹³ To some men it has been vouchsafed to put lips to a glass of this legendary liquor—there was one occasion in my own life when I thought that the luck was mine—but never has a man been known to possess a bottle of

¹³ *A strange contradiction to find the search for the perfect blend concluding a book praising single malt whisky. It exemplifies the pleasure and frustration; the elusive pleasure of reading Aeneas MacDonald—first poet of whisky.*

the peerless distillation at the moment when he is—no, not describing its graces—but faintly adumbrating them by fantastic and far-fetched analogies, apologized for even as they are uttered. Most of us are content to believe that such a whisky exists—must exist—and to go on looking for it. One day before we die some unknown fellow traveller in a railway compartment, some Scots ghillie or Irish rustic, may produce a flask or unlabelled bottle and we shall find ourselves at last in the presence of the god himself, Dionysos Bromios, God of Whisky. And then our sensations, rewarded after years of disappointment and imperfect delight, may share the ecstasy of him who, in C.E. Montague's *Another Temple Gone*,¹⁴ tasted the whisky of the priestly Tom Farrell:

‘Its merely material parts were, it is true, pleasant

¹⁴ Charles Edward Montague (1867–1928) is hardly remembered today and, I daresay, not read at all. But in his day his work was both popular and critically acclaimed, with his interest in moral and philosophical problems compared favourably with that of Joseph Conrad.

Another Temple Gone is from *Fiery Particles*, a collection of short stories published in 1923 which remained in print until the early 1950s. Robert Bruce Lockhart mentions it favourably in his *Scotch: The Whisky of Scotland in Fact and Story*. Copies can be found on the web for a few pounds: it is well worth tracking one down to enjoy a superbly written tale by a fine if neglected writer.

Tom Farrell is an Irish distiller of poteen whose still is detected and destroyed, albeit reluctantly, by Maguire, a sergeant of the Gardai. Later he assists Farrell in escaping justice but not before he has tasted his whiskey. ‘Mother of God!’ the sergeant exclaimed. ‘What sort of hiven’s delight is this you’ve invented for all souls in glory?’—the very lines which preface Whisky.

enough. They seemed while you sipped, to be honey, warm sunshine embedded in amber and topaz, the animating essence of lustrous brown velvet, and some solution of all the mellowest varnish that ever ripened for eye or ear the glow of Dutch landscape or Cremona fiddle. No sooner, however, did this probable sum of all the higher physical embodiments of geniality and ardour enter your frame than a major miracle happened in the domain of the spirit: you suddenly saw that the most freely soaring poetry, all wild graces and quick turns and abrupt calls on your wits, was just the most exact, business-like way of treating the urgent practical concerns of mankind.’



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