

*An Inquiry into the Beverage of the Ancient Caledonians, and other
Northern Nations, at their Feasts; and of their Drinking Vessels.*

COLINTON.

THE early inhabitants of the north-west part of what is now called Scotland, appear evidently not to have been far advanced in those arts which are commonly reckoned the improvements of polished life.

life. A simple race, whose principal care was herds and flocks; their dainties were procured by hunting, and their ordinary drink must have been water, which was supplied by every fountain or stream, or milk, which was procured by little labour. But, as these could only serve to answer the pressing calls of thirst, it is evident that inventive luxury had made them acquainted with some fermented liquor, which was used at festivals and grand entertainments, that dissipated their cares, elevated their spirits, and is called by their poets, *The Joy of the Shell*. But what that liquor was, of what made, or how prepared, we are left almost entirely in the dark. Nor is it peculiar to them only that the knowledge of many things, once familiar to every body, is now buried under the ruins of time. The *Orthia* and the *Poëan* of the Greeks must have been something more than our *Huzzah*; but what were the words used on these occasions, we are entirely ignorant. No author has transmitted in writing songs that every Grecian learned in his infancy. Perhaps, too, it might have been a piece of impropriety at least, if not of impiety, to repeat them but on the proper occasions. At last the fatal hour arrived, when the military spirit of the Grecians was totally crushed under the prevailing power of Rome; and the words that animated them on the glorious and important days of *Marathon* and *Plataea*, were wholly forgotten when they durst no more be used. We may, however, conjecture, that the *Orthia* had a pretty near resemblance to the *Brofnachadh Chath*, of which we have luckily one instance handed down to us. The only annals of our remote ancestors were the songs of bards, seldom, if ever written; and, as the brewing of liquor was neither so honourable nor so pleasant an occupation as the drinking of it, nor so susceptible of the ornaments of poetry, we may venture to affirm, that it was never recorded by the Gaelic muse. The want of such records renders very difficult the search in which I am now employed, to find what was the favourite beverage of the Highlanders of Scotland, in the first centuries of the Christian aera. Yet

I do not despair of success in my inquiry; for, though we have not the blazing torch of history to guide us on our way, we may discern a light beaming through the gloom, to prevent our stumbling in the dark. By careful attention to the language of every people, we may discover by the words, from what nations some customs have been derived, and from particular expressions, we may determine what were the manners of a people when these expressions were first established among them. I could give many striking proofs of the truth of this position; but I find it so well supported, and demonstrated in such a masterly manner, by Monsieur de Gebelin, in his *Monde Primitif*, that I shall pass it as a thing granted, and only give some examples relating to British antiquities, but so closely connected together, that they may all pass under one head. There is perhaps no country in the world that exceeds England in breeding plentifully cocks, hens, calves, oxen, sheep, swine: But it is very remarkable that no Englishman ever eats one bit of them; no, he eats nothing but French dishes; for when they are brought to table they must pass under the Frenchified names of fowl, veal, beef, mutton, pork. This proceeded from the oppression of the Norman conquerors, for whose lordly palate the best of every thing was reserved, the servile offices of tending the animals while alive being all that was left to the English *villicus*. I dare not use the word *villain*, for fear of giving offence, though that was English for *villicus* in those days, and is another instance of the connection betwixt manners and language. Had it not been for the consequences of the Norman conquest, the English, in all probability, would have continued to eat ox-flesh, sheep-flesh, &c. as the Dutch do at this day. But their language in this point was enlarged and refined by the oppression of their liberties.

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Before I proceed to say what was the beverage of the ancient Highlanders, it seems proper to say what it was not.

Wine is mentioned in some Gaelic poems, relating to the times, into the customs of which I am inquiring: But these are either visible modern interpolations, or compositions entirely of a later date; so that we can draw no conclusion from thence. Though vines had been in Portugal so early that the planting of them there was attributed to Bacchus, they were little known in the rest of Spain. Martial, who was a Spaniard, and apt to extoll his country, makes no mention of Spanish wine. No vines were planted to the north of the Alps and Pyrenees till near the end of the third century. Till then, Gaul and Germany were first to be supplied from the southern parts of Europe. Athenæus tells us, that in the 2d century wine was imported to Marseilles: So that, as Gaul and Germany were first to be supplied by imported wine, there would be little remaining for Britain, especially for the remotest corner of it, whose inhabitants long maintained a desperate war against the Romans. I think we may safely conclude, that even the Roman garrisons in Britain were but scantily supplied with wine, even after vines were planted in Gaul; new improvements are commonly so slow in their progress, that some centuries might elapse before they had any for exportation. We have a very strong instance by what tardy steps such things proceed, by observing what happened in Italy. The culture of vines was known in Italy at least 500 years before the foundation of Rome, yet Pliny tells us, that wine was so scarce at that time, that Romulus performed his libations with water, for want of wine; and, to prevent an unnecessary dissipation of so precious a commodity, made a law *Rogum vino ne aspergito*. So we may be convinced that the Highlanders of those days had not wine, 1st, from there being no mention of it in their language; and 2dly, because it was scarcely possible for them to procure it at any rate. Nor is it probable

probable they had any distilled liquors, because we cannot find any mention of such a thing among them till the reign of James V. Dram is an ordinary word in the Highlands at this day, evidently proceeding from the manner in which they first received spiritous liquors, having been only prescribed medicinally, and administered by drachms and scruples.

Cyder is the produce of countries where the sun is not vigorous enough to ripen the grape. I cannot find at what time the culture of orchards became so general as to make cyder grow into common use in the northern parts of Europe, nor at what time apple trees were first introduced into Britain. But if we consider the unsettled condition of these parts in the first ages of Christianity, divided into small districts perpetually at war with each other, we cannot think they would apply themselves much to the raising of apple trees, from which they could not hope for any considerable crop till after many years. Tacitus informs us, that in his time Germany was *Frugiferarum arborum minime ferax*. Inclosing ground which is necessary for the culture of apple trees, was not permitted by law in England, till the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and was not commonly used in Scotland till near a century later. So we may consider cyder as a thing unknown to the times of which we treat.

Many suppose that the ancient Scots made a liquor by bleeding birch trees, which were very common among them: But they can give no other reason for believing it was so, than only because it was possible it might be so. Others think they made a liquor fermented with honey, with which they might have been plentifully supplied by bees breeding in the woods that covered most of their country. There is indeed a very proper word in their language to express this, Atil-deoch, *i. e.* Honey-drink. But this is only a modern word, not mentioned in any of their ancient poems, which it could not have

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failed to have been, whether it had been their own manufacture or imported. Their own country is more subject to rains and stormy winds than any other part of Britain, and was not a place where bees would be tempted to take up their abode. Had they been acquainted with the apiary, bees have so many peculiarities, of swarming, clustering, &c. that the mention of them could not have escaped our Gaelic poets. All the notice we find taken of them is the humming noise they make; which can only refer to the mountain bees, whose greater strength and bulk enabled them better to resist the storms of the mountains; but they gather only small quantities of honey. I find that apiaries were not cultivated in England till after the Norman conquest.

Having said what it was that the ancient Scots did not drink, I will try to find out what it was they did drink. The method I intend to take, is to examine their descendants; and, if there be one honest man among them, he will speak truth so far as he knows; and I will write it down from his mouth. What is Gaelic for the Latin word *bibo*? The answer is, we have several words for it, but the common and most proper is *ol elmi*, I drink. I inquire no farther. I have already found out what was the favourite liquor. In the ancient Gothic, *ol* was the word to express ale; and in Iceland, where the Gothic is best preserved, ale is called *ol* at this day. In Sweden, they have the *brud-ol*, ale drunk at bridals; *graf-ol*, drunk over graves at funerals; and *hemkom-ol*, what we call house heating. Hence, I make no doubt that they learned both the liquor and the name from the Scandinavians, and that it was in high repute and used even at royal feasts. When, in process of time, they raised grain and brewed ale for themselves, they gave it a name in their own language, and called it *Loin*, which signifies provisions; a sufficient proof how much it was esteemed by them. *Lean*, another word for ale, seems to be only a dialectical difference from *loin*, as

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ale is from *ol*. It may be asked how herdsmen and hunters, who, as I have said in a former treatise, sowed no sort of grain, could be provided with ale? The answer is, they got it as we get wine, by importation. But as this must have been expensive, and not what every one could afford to purchase, it would be the business of their Chiefs to provide a sufficient quantity to entertain their followers. This, properly distributed, might have as much efficacy to determine the fate of a battle, as our modern liquors have to determine the event of an election.

Lusadh is another word to express drinking, and is of true Gaelic original, its root being *lus*, an herb, a plant. I look on this word, *lusadh*, as an undoubted proof that there was some herb or low plant from the infusion of which they made a kind of liquor; but what was the particular plant used for that purpose, we cannot easily determine. Some think it was the juniper, which grows in plenty on the Highland mountains, and from whose berries and prickly twigs, I doubt not that a fermented liquor might be made: But I am led a different way, by a tradition that is universal in the part of our country which belonged to the *Pechts*. It is by this name that I chuse to call that people, who were formerly masters of the best part of Scotland, rather than follow the blunder of Latin authors. They, more attentive to the harmony of sound than to the truth of expression, called that people *Picts*. As this word has a meaning in Latin, an opinion has prevailed that the *Picts* had their bodies all painted: Yet we have no better authority for that conceit, than some here have for believing that the present Sovereign of Rome is an old whore, in scarlet riding clothes, and mounted on a monster that has seven heads and ten horns. If the whole nation had actually painted themselves, they could never have assumed the name of *Picti* on that account, unless their language had actually been Latin. But to return from this digression, I say it is the universal tradition of the

the country, where these people dwelt, many of whose present inhabitants are descended from them, that the *Pechts* made liquor of heath. As a collateral proof of the truth of this tradition, I have observed several heaths, from which it appeared that the stones had been carefully gathered off; and, upon inquiring of the neighbouring peasants, they told me it was believed the *Pechts* had carried off the stones, for the conveniency of mowing the heather. If they who possessed a fertile coast, capable of producing every grain, used to make liquor from heath, we may justly conclude that the art would not be long a secret to the neighbouring mountaineers, where heath was the most plentiful crop they had. But, from the word *lusadh* not being so much used as *ol*, we may presume that the liquor made from heath, though probably the most common, was not so much esteemed as the other. We may even take it for granted, that it was but a very poor liquor, otherwise the custom would have been continued among us more or less. But though our Scottish ancients had no other sort of liquor but these two, luxury is inventive of means to satisfy its own appetites, and seems in this point to have found out another of a more dangerous sort, which, from the language, I take to have been a mixture of both the others.

Languages, in their infancy, had not so many vocables as are now in use. Many separate things, from some real or fancied resemblances or connections they had with one another, were called by the same name. As this must frequently have given occasion to many ambiguities, men began at first to make a small variation in the pronunciation, and afterwards in the orthography, till words that were once the same, came at last to deviate so far from one another, that it became difficult to find out which was the original root. To make this more evident, I will give but one instance of a word familiar to the English language. *Berg* is the Gothic term for a hill. It originates from the composition of two Gaelic words, *bi-erg*, a thing raised

raised or elevated, which is properly what constitutes the nature of a hill. In Icelandic, which is the purest Gothic now existing, the word is *bi-arg*, which approaches still nearer to the primitive roots. While mankind were divided into small communities, each of these was obliged to be on guard against its neighbours; therefore towns were always built on hills, as being the most advantageous situation for defence. So that, to go to the *berg* or to go to the town were expressions of the same import. But, as many hills had no buildings on them, this way of speaking must have given occasion to frequent ambiguities. To prevent these, they left the name of *berg* to the bare hill, and, to express the one that was inhabited, they varied the word by pronouncing it *borg*, *bourg*, *burg*; and some added an *b* after it. But, as the sound of the aspirated *b* would stick in the throats of some people, the English brought the word through different changes, till they made it borough, leaving mute the *g b*, which they could not utter, in the same manner as in *caught*, *taught*, *brought*, and in many other words. So that now, though a borough be built in a valley, we may find the radix of the word on the top of a hill. From these, and numberless other instances that might be given, we may presume that the Gaelic language gradually proceeded in its formation in the same manner as others did. Now, *measg*, (from whence the Latin *misceo*, *mixtus*, *mixtura*.) signifies mixture, in the language of the people of whom I am treating. But every body knows that mixing liquors is the readiest way to get drunk: So some of the Albanich, of ancient days, not contented with *ol* or *lusadb* separately, would mix both together, and when giddy headed, would call it *measg*; and afterwards, to distinguish the effects of this dangerous mixture from that of more innocent liquors, they changed the word to *meisg* or *meisge*, which now expresses drunkenness: And from thence comes *meisgach* or *meisgeach*, a drunkard. The old custom of these people exactly resembles what is sometimes practised in modern days, when a bottle

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of wine is poured into a bowl of punch, and then the liquor is dignified with the name of *Punch-royal*.

As some may doubt of the validity of proofs drawn from the use of words, it may not be amiss to mention the following note; I took it from Barom la Hontan's account of North America: In a vocabulary of the Algonkin language, he has the word *ouscouebi*, which he explains to mean drunk, a fool. Though I have copied the word exactly as it was written by a French pen, from the mouth of an American savage, can any one doubt that some Scot or Hibernian has formerly been among them and taught them the use of *usquebauch*, and the consequences of drinking above a certain quantity.

Having written so much in endeavouring to prove what were the potations used by the Albanich of former days, my task might seem incomplete if I did not give an account of the utensils by which they conveyed it to the lip. Of these, three kinds are mentioned in their poems, *slioga*, *corn*, *fuach*; that is, the shell, the horn, and the cup: of these, the horn is the eldest; and Athenaeus, in the eighth book, tells us, that the jolly god Bacchus is painted with horns, because these were the first drinking cups. People came next to use shells, when, from the banks of the Euphrates, they descended to the sea side: And the cup was the careful invention of later days. In some old humorous pieces I find mention of the horn; but the shell seems to have been of greater dignity, and used at all splendid entertainments. As people are apt to conceive not only an affection, but even an esteem for the manners to which they have been accustomed, such men as chuse not to have the trouble of serious reflection, look on the fashions of their own times as the sole standard to judge by, of what is good and agreeable. These will cast an eye of contempt on our ancients, whose side-boards were decked out only with shells and horns: Yet we may rest assured that there was neither the less drank,

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nor had the liquor the worse relish for the homeliness of the utensil. However triumphant Rome might exult in its gold and silver vessels, drawn together from the spoils of many miserable countries, the word *Cochleare* alone, is a convincing evidence that the parents of that Queen of nations had found the *cochlea* to be a very convenient piece of household furniture. In many countries husks of certain fruit were and are now used in that manner. But the barren mountains of Albion produced nothing that could serve for that purpose, except the hazle-nut; and every one may easily perceive that a nut-shell could not afford a draught sufficient to satisfy the appetite of a thirsty Celt. Providence, however, whose paternal care leaves none of its children destitute of what is requisite to supply their necessary wants, filled our northern seas with scallops, whose capacious shells were suited to the appetites of those who were to use them. An Albanic, without ransacking the bowels of the earth for gold and silver, or selling his country to slavery and his soul to damnation, at an election, to obtain those valued metals, needed only to take a walk on the seaside, at ebb tide, to pick up a scallop that would serve him for a breakfast, and afterwards he and his friends would rejoice in the use of the shell.

Horns are so suited by nature for containing liquids, that there is, perhaps, not a nation in the world where they are not used for that purpose, even at this day; by some, in their natural form, and by others formed into various shapes by art. At Guarda, in Portugal, there is a flourishing manufactory for making such utensils. But, though they are much used both in that kingdom and in Spain, the word is never uttered; all such things are said to be made of *ofs*, a bone. The very mention of the true name, *Corno*, is thought such an intollerable affront, that it has been sometimes so severely resented, as to cost the life of the unwary speaker. How horns came to be reckoned the appurtenance of a man whose wife had violated her
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nuptial vows, I cannot tell. In all the oriental tongues, the expression carries great dignity. We have many examples in holy writ, where, exalting the horn denotes the increase of wealth, power, excellence. When Horace says that wine *addit cornua pauperi*, he uses not the metaphor in our modern sense, in which it would be taken to mean the cuckolding a poor man. The esteem the old Greeks and Romans had for those honours of the head, is clearly seen by their being made the ornament of Jupiter Ammon, Bacchus, and other horned deities. But the highest mark of the veneration they had for it, appears in their painting the goddess of plenty pouring her blessings on mankind from her fruitful horn; *Pleno copia cornu*. Allow me here a short digression, to remark that the Albanic use not the word horn in a degrading sense, and have not in their language a word to express a cuckold; a certain proof that such crimes rarely happened among them.

I must not here omit one particular way of using the horn. A horn was twisted so as to go round the arm. This being filled with liquor, was to be applied to the lips, and drank off at one draught. If, in withdrawing the arm, any liquor was left, it discovered itself by rattling in the windings of the horn. Then the company called out *corneigh*, i. e. the *horn cries*; and the delinquent was obliged to drink *keltie*, that is, to fill his cup again and drink it out, according to the laws of the *Kelts*, for so ought the word *Celt* to be pronounced. We have from hence a clear proof that they were jolly toppers. Here let me observe, that, from *eigh* comes the word *echo*, so common in many languages. If the great English lexicographer had attended to the Celtic, he would have found more and juster etymologies than he could squeeze out from all other languages put together*.

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* I do not insist on the golden horns of Oldenburg and Copenhagen, as they have both been particularly described in the publications of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

The third utensil for drinking is the *cuach*, which we now pronounce *quech*, and from whence is formed the English verb to *quaff*. I need not describe the *cuach*, because there can hardly be a person in North Britain that knows it not, though it is of late much fallen into disuse. From the composition of it, by small pieces of wood being joined together, and united so closely as to contain liquids, I conclude it to have been invented before the Albanic knew the use of the turning loom, which, though more convenient and more ingenious, is much easier to put in practice. The invention has certainly been owing to the leisure enjoyed by those who had no occupation but to tend their flocks and herds; and it is owing to the same cause that first awaked the pastoral muse. I have seen several pieces of wood elegantly carved by shepherds, in the Highlands and other parts of Europe, with no other instrument but a very ordinary knife. I fancy it will not be disagreeable to my readers to be here informed that I have a remarkable proof of the ingenuity of shepherds, in a model of the ancient calamus, made by a shepherd on the mountains betwixt Spain and Portugal, where they are still in use, and are called *Gayla*, I suppose by an African name. Thus, these ignorant shepherds have preserved among them a musical instrument, about which learned critics have disputed in vain. But, to return to our cups; I presume that the *cuach* was the first thing that gave the hint that barrels, hogsheds, and other vessels of great capacity, might be made in the same way, by connecting a great number of small pieces. The *cuach* had two handles, that it might be delivered by one and received by the other. These handles were, in our Anglo-Saxon dialect, called *Lugs*; and a large vessel, that contained more than could be taken off at a draught, having larger ears, was thence called a *Luggie*. The Greeks also had drinking vessels with handles, called *Ouata*, and the name of the vessels was *Otis* or *Opotis*, words of the same import with *Lug* or *Luggie*. Nestor's bowl, mentioned in the eleventh book of the Iliad, had four lugs, made

made so, I suppose, that four boys or young maids might bring it in on occasion, one taking hold of each lug: For, Homer tells us, it was so heavy when full, that a strong man was hardly able to lift it. The earliest mention that I have met with of a *cuach*, is in a poem called the Old Bards Wish, that appears to have been composed about fourteen or fifteen hundred years ago. In one line he says, he took drink from the river, which might lead one to think, that he had nothing but pure water to drink: But, as he had said only a few lines before, that, though tempests howled and ghosts shrieked around them, there was much mirth in the joy of the *cuach*, and they slept soundly, we may take it for granted that it was not the use of plain water that could produce such agreeable effects on such a disagreeable occasion. From thence, I doubt not of their having brewed the liquor so strong, that it was necessary to qualify it with water, as the Greeks commonly did to their wine, or as we do when the punch seems too strong; and our hunters often carry strong shrub with them, which, with a mixture from the first stream or fountain, makes an innocent and a comfortable refreshment.

If readers should complain that this treatise is neither so instructive nor so entertaining as they would wish it to be, the writer must acknowledge, to his own shame, that the deficiency lies in himself, as the most malicious critic cannot accuse him of having chosen a dry subject.

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