

I.

NOTE ON THE EARLY USE OF AQUA VITÆ IN SCOTLAND.

BY R. SCOTT-MONCRIEFF, SECRETARY.

When first my attention was drawn to this subject a year or two ago, I was in hopes that I might be able to throw some further light on the question as to when whisky or its lineal ancestor became a common drink in this country. From what I had read, it seemed to me certain that a grain distilled spirit of some sort was in fairly common use in the northern part of Europe by the end of the fifteenth century, and in Ireland by the beginning of the sixteenth century. I therefore thought it quite likely that such a spirit might also have been in common use in Scotland by 1500. I may say at once that I have found no evidence to support such a belief, and that I leave the question as to when whisky became a common drink of our ancestors in practically the same position in which I found it. At the same time, I have collected in my researches a certain amount of information which is not without interest, and which may be of use to others who in the future may look into this matter. Hence this paper.

In the first place, I must define what liquor is covered in this paper by the word "whisky." Although the House of Lords a few years ago spent many weeks in deciding this question, I do not intend to detain you more than a few seconds over it. "Whisky" for my present purpose means any spirit distilled in the British Isles directly or indirectly from home-grown grain, and that whether termed "whisky" or "Usquebagh," whence the word is derived, or "aqua vitæ," its Latin equivalent. It may be taken that the first two terms always represent a grain distilled liquor. In regard to the last term, however, it must be remembered that though "aqua vitæ" may mean "whisky," it does not necessarily do so, as it was a generic term applied to any spirit, and that it is always a matter of proof or of more or less probable conjecture what spirit the term is used to denote. In countries where the vine does not grow, and where the term is used to denote a common drink, it may be assumed safely that the liquor meant was grain distilled.

Unlike brewing, the knowledge of distillation was unknown to the Greeks and Romans except in a very rudimentary form,¹ and it seems probable that we owe its discovery, as we owe that of the mariner's

¹ "Sea water can be rendered potable by distillation; wine and other liquids can be submitted to the same process. After they have been converted into humid vapours they return to liquids" (Aristotle, lib. ii, ch. ii.).

compass and of gunpowder, to that weird and learned race, the Chinese. In the same way as modern astronomy owes its origin to the vain hopes of our forefathers to foretell the future from the study of the stars, our modern chemistry is indebted to the alchemists of old striving, equally vainly, to discover the elixir of life.

In the hunt for this secret the Chinese are said to have embarked several centuries before the Christian era; and it was while endeavouring to find the philosopher's stone that the disciples of the philosopher Lao-Kuin, who flourished about six hundred years before Christ, boasted of having discovered a liquor which conferred immortality, and which old writers assume to have been obtained by distillation.¹ The results of their efforts did in a way confer eternal life on some of the drinkers, for three of their kings, according to Du Halde, "put on immortality after a draught of their elixir of life."

It is a long cry, however, from China to Europe, and it is not until we find the Moors in Spain that we begin to be on firm ground. As is well known, the Moslem races were amongst the earliest of outside nations to trade with China. It is therefore but natural to find that the Saracens, who in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries were pre-eminently the intellectual race of the world, should have seized on the chemical knowledge of the Chinese, and should have advanced it in a way that a conservative nation like the Chinese could never have done. It was they who are said to have invented, and they certainly named, the alembic, and their discoveries in chemistry were of the first importance. Universities and libraries were established throughout their wide dominions for the encouragement of learning, none of which were more famous than those of their Andalusian kingdom in Spain. Geber, who is said to have been born in Seville of Saracen origin, wrote a treatise on the subject of distillation certainly not later than the ninth century; and in 780 Almokanna, the veiled prophet, is reported to have drowned himself in *aqua fortis*, which, if true, denotes the existence of a considerable quantity of spirit. To Spain in the thirteenth century came Michael Scott² in pursuit of knowledge, and amongst other places studied at Toledo. No doubt he was primarily a mathematician and astrologer, but we are told that he had a knowledge of Arabic, and he must have been versed in chemistry, for he was one of those alchemists employed by Edward I. of England in transmuting, or perhaps one should say trying to transmute, baser metals into gold in order to furnish funds for an expedition to the Holy Land. Is it too fanciful to suggest that Michael Scott knew the properties of distillation, and that

¹ The liquor was termed "Tchang sing go" (*vide* Du Halde's *History*).

² See "Sketches of Early Scottish Alchemists," by John Small, vol. xi. p. 179 of our *Proceedings*.

consequently we may claim that the art was known to at least one man in Scotland by the middle of the thirteenth century?

Be that as it may, we may safely assume that the early distillers in Scotland distilled not from malt or native grain, but from wine or wine lees. It is with distillation from these that all the early treatises deal; and this is but natural, for the art had travelled from the land of the grape where the juice of the grape was the common and inexpensive drink. In countries, however, where ale and beer were the native drinks, and where wine was an imported and comparatively expensive luxury, both analogy and economy would drive the alchemist comparatively soon to experiment with native material. Curiously enough, we have no mention of the manufacture or use of spirits in Scotland in its form of spirits of wine. Our native drink bursts upon us in 1494-95 as a fully developed malt distilled liquor. The reference to this is as follows, and occurs in the Exchequer Rolls for that year (vol. x. p. 487):—"To Friar John Cor, by order of the King, to make aqua vitæ VIII bolls of malt."¹ This entry is the first of a series of nineteen occurring between 1495 and 1512 in the Exchequer Rolls and in the Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer. They are referred to in the first volume of the Lord Treasurer's Accounts (Introduction, p. ccxiii), as follows:—"On two occasions a payment was made by King James IV. to a barber in Dundee who brought him² aqua vitæ, and the word occurs frequently in the Treasurer's Accounts some years later in connection with the pretended researches in alchemy of John Damien, Abbot of Tungland. It is true that a much less antiquity has generally been assigned to the distillation of whisky in Scotland, but there is no reason to doubt that this was the liquor here referred to, for in 1494-95 the Exchequer Rolls show a delivery to Friar John Cor of eight bolls of malt to make aqua vitæ. That it was not largely manufactured nor in general use at that time is obvious from the comparative rarity of its occurrence, as well as from the manner in which, on the occasions referred to, it was furnished to the King. It was probably reckoned rather among drugs than among articles of ordinary consumption."

With the opinions expressed in the above passage I agree. I would, however, like to point out that whereas the statement that whisky or its legal progenitor was being made in Scotland by the end of the

¹ "Et per liberationem factam fratri Johanni Cor per preceptum comptorum rotulatoris, ut asserit, de mandato domini regis ad faciendum aquavite infra hoc comptum viij bolle brasii" (Lord High Treasurer's Accounts, vol. i. p. 176).

² It was the King who was in Dundee; the barber may have come from Edinburgh. The barbers of Dundee enjoyed no monopoly, nor did the barbers of any other town in Scotland so far as I can ascertain. It will be noticed that when the King was at Stirling aqua vitæ had to be sent from Edinburgh.

fifteenth century rests on positive evidence, the statement that it was not in general use rests on negative evidence, which, however probable, can hardly be regarded as final. I may therefore perhaps be allowed to refer to the entries and to this negative evidence in rather greater detail.

In the first place, it must be remembered that whisky might easily be in common use and yet no reference found to it in either the Exchequer Rolls or in the Lord High Treasurer's Accounts, neither of which took cognisance of the King's drink bills. That entries relating to whisky are found in these records is due entirely, with one medicinal exception, to the idiosyncrasies of the reigning monarch James IV., and with his death they cease to occur. Even this exception may owe its origin to his peculiar tastes. It reads: "31 Decr. 1507. Item payit to William Foular, potingair, for potingary to the King and Quene, distillation of waters, aqua vite and potingary buiks in Inglis fra the 17th day of Decr. 1506 to this day, lib 128, 2s. 10d." The purchase of "potingary buiks" by a monarch who was willing to pay one of his servants for "leve to lat him blud" him conveys a suspicion of experiment. Of the remaining eighteen entries, fourteen are in relation to the King's experiments in chemistry, although one of them has a misleadingly convivial smack about it, especially when taken in conjunction with the two succeeding entries: "Item to ane man brocht aqua vite and glasses fra Edinburgh to Strivelin, 41s." "Item that nicht to the King and the Lard of Myrtoun to play at the cartis." "Item that nicht to the King to play at the cartis with the Abbot of Tunghland, lib 6, 12s." These entries conjure up a cosy little scene; but from the mention of the Abbot of Tunghland¹ I rather imagine the glasses were retorts and not tumblers.

The four remaining entries deal with the use of aqua vitæ in the process of making gunpowder, and there is another later entry (1540) in the Treasurer's Accounts relating to the supply of aqua vitæ for the manufacture of fireworks. I am unfortunately not a good enough chemist to be able to appreciate the use to which the aqua vitæ was put; but we have been hearing a great deal lately about the use of spirits in the manufacture of high explosives, and it strikes me as a curious and interesting fact that Scotland should have been using spirits apparently for a similar purpose four hundred years ago.

There is another point in connection with these entries which is worth noticing, especially as it brings us into touch with the only other reference of that time to aqua vitæ which I have seen. The point is that out of the few names given of those supplying aqua vitæ, three are

¹ John Damien, Abbot of Tunghland, with whom the King conducted his chemical experiments.

barbers. This fact acquires peculiar significance when we find that in the Seal of Cause granted by the City of Edinburgh in 1505, and confirmed by the King in 1506, under which the Guild of Surgeon Barbers was created, a monopoly of the manufacture of aqua vitæ was conferred on these crafts in the following terms:—"That na persons man nor woman within this Burgh make nor sell any aqua vitæ within the samen except the said Masters Brethren and Freemen of the said crafts under pain of escheat of the samen but favours." Although the monopoly seems to have been confirmed on the crafts jointly, after references to it show that it was the barbers who made use of it.

I may point out *en passant* that as there can be no doubt that the knowledge of distillation originally lay in the Church with its Friar Cors and Father Damiens, so the granting of this monopoly is but another indication of the unfortunate connection between the Church and the barbers which did so much to retard the development of surgery, a matter which I have not time to go into, although I have had occasion to refer to it in a previous paper. In the present case, however, there does not seem to be the same reason for devolution. In Italy there flourished at this time a religious order¹ the members of which came to be known as the Aqua Vitæ fathers, a sobriquet which can hardly have been acquired without some foundation of fact; and there seems to be no reason why such an order should not have existed in Scotland. The granting of the monopoly is at least an indication that the right to make aqua vitæ was even then of some value.

The entries to which I have referred are the only references so far as I am aware dealing with aqua vitæ, and none of them indicate its use as a drink. We look in vain for such references in the few household books of that period extant, nor do we find any in the ecclesiastical account books of the time. It may be that in Scotland, as in Ireland, aqua vitæ was the drink of the poor, which would account for this absence of reference in books dealing with the menage of the wealthy; but this would not account for the fact that there is no mention of it in the records² of the Edinburgh Town Council, which almost annually set forth the prices to be charged for wine, beer, ale and malt. If aqua vitæ was in common use, the silence of our City Records in regard to it must be due to its having been removed from the city's jurisdiction through the monopoly already referred to.

Contemporary historians are equally silent. Even Major, who was a Scotsman, and who was always anxious to maintain his theory that what a country lacked in one thing it was compensated for in another,

¹ The order of Jesuati, founded 1360, became very secularised, and dissolved in 1668.

² These are the only City Records which go far enough back to be of use.

makes no mention of it. He had to admit that Scotland did not grow grapes and consequently could not make wine, but he maintains she was amply compensated by the quality of the ale which she produced. "No. one," he writes, "who is accustomed to this beverage will prefer another wine; it keeps the bowels open, it is nourishing, and it quenches thirst"; and he gives a detailed account of its manufacture. Surely if aqua vitæ had been in common use he would have made some mention of that also.

So much for the negative evidence, which seems to me very strong. On the other hand, it must be distinctly remembered that if we judge by other countries there is nothing inherently absurd in maintaining that spirits were in common use in Scotland by the beginning of the sixteenth century. I find it stated in a book, *In Vino Veritas*, by André L. Simon, that liquids fermented from grain appear to have been first distilled on a large scale in the fifteenth century, and it was due to this fact that the consumption of spirits "rapidly became more general, particularly so in Northern Europe, where wine was comparatively expensive and out of reach of the majority of the people." In support of this statement M. Simon refers to the publication of a treatise by Michel Schreik in 1483, and of a poem published at Bamberg in 1493, both of which clearly show that the use of alcohol in Germany had by that time ceased to be restricted to medicinal purposes. He also quotes in support of his opinion a decree of the Municipality of Nuremberg made in 1496 forbidding the "sale of distilled waters on Sundays and other holidays in private houses as well as by druggists and other merchants in their shops, in the market, in the street or elsewhere, so as to put a stop to their abuse and excessive consumption."

In Ireland, also, spirits seem to have been in common use by the beginning of the sixteenth century, although the proof is scarcely so direct. Campion in his *History of Ireland*, which was published in 1571, writes: "The inhabitants (especially new come) are subject to distillations, rhumes and fluxes for remedy whereof they use an ordinary drink of aqua vitæ." This would indicate a more or less medicinal use of alcohol; but in another passage he states that "the natives—mark you, natives—in haste and hunger they squeeze out the blood of raw flesh and ask no more dressing thereto, the rest boyleth in their stomaches with aqua vitæ which they swill in after such a surfeite by quarts and pottles." So much for Irish drinking in 1570. As to earlier drinking, he refers to a famine in 1316 which was caused by the Scots soldiers under Edward Bruce having surfeited themselves "with flesh and aqua vitæ Lent long," and also to a knight who lived about 1350, and who used to serve out to his soldiers before battle "a might draught of aqua vitæ wine or old ale."

Now I do not claim that these last two extracts are evidence of the common use of spirits in Ireland in 1316 or even in 1350, but the fact that Campion was conscious of no anachronism in making such statements seems to indicate that the use of spirits was, in his day, no new thing, and that their introduction must have taken place at least prior to the birth of his associates, which, of course, carries us back to the beginning of the sixteenth century.

As a proof that aqua vitæ was known in Ireland at least a hundred years before this, and that not altogether medicinally, I would refer you to the following entry from the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*:—"A.D. 1405, Richard Magranell, Chieftain of Moyntyreolas, died at Christmas by taking a surfeit of aqua vitæ."¹ This, I believe, is the earliest authentic Irish reference to aqua vitæ.

You may, perhaps, ask what about England at this period? Well, I do not know if they distilled from grain in the fifteenth century, but certainly the art of distillation was well understood in that country by the end of that century. There is a Sloan manuscript entitled, "The Book of Quinte Essence, or the Fifth Being, that is to say man's Heaven," which is supposed to have been written about 1460, and gives receipts for distilling from wine, the fifth essence or *quinta essencia*, which is, so to speak, the common denominator of the universe, and the uses of which stretch from practically conferring immortality to killing lice. It is a curious and interesting work, from which some striking extracts could be furnished. There is at least another work of a similar character belonging to that century. Certainly by 1559, when Peter Morwyng translated Conrad Gesner's *Treasure of Evonymous*, spirits were in use as a drink in England, but whether these were distilled from wine or malt I cannot say. But let us return to Scotland.

If whisky was not a common drink in Scotland in the beginning of the sixteenth century, when did it become so? I have already referred to the fact that Major in his history published in 1521 makes no mention of aqua vitæ. Neither does Fynes Morison, writing at the end of the sixteenth century, and referring specially as he does to the drinks then in use in Scotland, mention it as a drink. After enumerating wines, he adds, "the better sort of citizens brew ale, their usual drink (which will distemper a stranger's body)." This might be held as evidence that whisky was not then in use in Scotland, but I think I can clearly prove, both from his own writing and from other sources, that whisky was in

¹ *Ulster Journal of Antiquaries*, vol. vi. There are, however, several references to the "Red Book of Ossory," which is said to have been compiled by an Irish bishop in the fourteenth century, and which contains a receipt for making aqua vitæ out of wine. Sir James Ware, amongst others, refers to this MS. in his history published in 1654. If this MS. is genuine, it would seem to contain a still earlier reference to aqua vitæ.

very general use by this time. In another passage he writes: "The inhabitants of the western parts of Scotland carry into Ireland and neighbouring places red and pickeled herrings, sea coales, and aqua vitæ, with like commodities, and bring out of Ireland yarn or cowes hides or silver." Now nothing will convince me that a West Highlander confined his attentions in regard to aqua vitæ to the exporting thereof, and an Act of Parliament passed in 1579 clearly shows that long ere this he and others in Scotland were drinking whisky. The preamble of the Act is as follows:—

"Forsamekle as it apperis the victuall salbe skant this present yeir And understanding that thair is ane greit quantitie of malt consumit in the hail partis of this realm be making of aqua vitæ quhilk is ane greit occasioun of the derth within the samin." Therefore no one excepting Earls, Lords, Barons, and Gentlemen for their own use shall "mak brew or stell ony aquavitie." Another Act dealing with aqua vitæ places its common use still further back. By an Act passed in 1555 the inhabitants of the Western Burghs are allowed to furnish "bakin breid brown aill and aqua vitæ to the Ilis to bertour with other merchandice." From this last Act it would appear that if the Isles furnished Ireland with aqua vitæ in 1590, the mainland of Scotland furnished the Isles with it in 1555.

Nor was the use of whisky confined to the West. The Edinburgh Town Council Records—thanks to the monopoly granted to the barbers—show that aqua vitæ was in sufficient demand in Edinburgh in 1556 to make it worth while running the risk of fine for infringing the monopoly. On 20th March 1556 we read: "The bailies Alexander Barron and Allane Dikkesoun sittand in jugement ordains Besse Campbell to desist and ceis fra ony forthir making of aquavite within this burgh in tyme cumyng or selling of ony therein except on the market day, conform to the privelge granted to the barbers under the seill of caus without scho be admittit be thame thereto."

On 20th November 1561 there is another entry to the following effect:—

"The quhilk day in presence of ye provest baillies and counsall comperit Jhonne Weir at ye west porte and acted him self of his awn consent for Elizab Wier ye spous of Bartilmo Mene yat yai in na tyme cuming Suld brew top or poll ony aquavite within ye fredome of yis burgh quhilk yat yai war fre with ye barbour craft under ye pane of XLs. and escheting of ye saide acquavite and Lumes quhairwith ye sailm is brewin."

There is another conviction the following year and many thereafter.

From these Acts and entries it seems clear to me that whisky was

in common use as a drink in Scotland by the middle of the sixteenth century and probably a good many years earlier.

There are one or two other points in connection with this matter which are not without interest, and to which I would like to allude briefly. Fynes Morison, in his account of Ireland, draws a distinction between Irish and English aqua vitæ. He writes that the Irish drink largely of their "aqua vitæ, vulgarly called Usquebagh, which binds the belly and drieth up moisture more than our aqua vitæ yet inflameth not so much"; and in another passage he states: "The Irish aqua vitæ, vulgarly called Usquebagh, is held the best in the world of that kind, which is made also in England, but nothing so good as that which is brought out of Ireland; and the Usquebagh¹ is preferred before our aqua vitæ because the mingling of Raysons, Fennell seede and other things, mitigating the heat and making the taste pleasant, makes it lesse inflame and yet refresh the weake stomache with moderate heat and good relish." It is obvious from these entries that aqua vitæ was also by this time in common use in England, and that Irish Usquebagh was particularly appreciated. From the following fact I gather that the aqua vitæ made in the Western Isles was treated in much the same way as the Irish Usquebagh, and as it was wanted for a special and particular purpose, its selection indicates a preference for it over the ordinary aqua vitæ, such as would be produced by the barbers. On 17th January 1585, on the occasion of the Countess of Argyll wishing to send a present of aqua vitæ to Randolph, the English Ambassador, a reply was received from Neil Campbell, to whom she had written, saying that aqua vitæ could not be obtained from Bute on account of the "frost and inlaik of spyces."² I am indebted to Mr A. O. Curle for drawing my attention to the last-mentioned reference, and he has also pointed out to me that aqua vitæ occasionally formed part of the rent paid for Highland farms. In "The rentell of the Barranie of ffaskelie," which from the writing belongs to the end of the seventeenth century, the following is the rent paid for the "milln and millntown of Faskely":—

Pays yearly of silver dewty	lib 93 13 4
It. a pynt of aqua vity	lib 1 10 0
It. a lamb	0 13 4
It. a fed swyne	3 6 8

¹ The term Usquebagh, or at least Irish Usquebagh, seems to have implied spirits mingled with spices, and that until at least the end of the seventeenth century. A receipt for the making of "the best sort of Right Irish Usquebaugh" will be found in *Every Man his Own Gauger*, by "Philomath" (J. Lightbody), published about 1700. As a specimen of the deadly alcoholic concoctions which were made, see Gervase Markham's *English Housewife*, published 1615. The spirit in this case was distilled from strong ale and sack lees.

² Earl of Moray's family paper (Inventory, 973).

It. a dozen of pultrie half henns half capons, in all	lib 2 0 0
and the rent for the farm of Chamer- nantead is silver dewty	lib 26 13 4
It. ye presents	2 13 4
It. a quart of aqua vitæ	3 0 0
It. ane lamb	0 13 4
It. three putrie	0 10 0

Lastly, in regard to the date of the introduction of the words *Usquebagh* and *Whisky*,¹ I find the first use of the word *Usquebagh* in Fynes Morison's account of Ireland in the passages already quoted. That carries us back to the end of the sixteenth century. Campion, writing of *aqua vitæ* some twenty years earlier, does not use the word. The first use of the word *Whisky* of which I am aware occurs in a letter from Bailie John Stewart of Inverness to his brother-in-law Mr John M'Leod. The passage runs:—"Inverness, 28 Oct. 1736. But their a shock so terrible ought to guard you how to keep a sober regular dyet hereafter; and above all things that you forbear drinking that poisonous drink, I mean drams of brandie and whisky; for certainly your lait maladie has been fostered that way and by cold mixed with it."²

By the '45 the word *Whisky* was in common use. When the Prince was in Skye "he was answered that he could have no other drink but whisky or water, for there is no such thing as beer or ale of any kind to be got in all the Isle of Skye but only in gentlemen's houses, all the public houses being merely whiskie houses."

If any member knows of the earlier use of either of these words I shall be very pleased to receive the reference.

¹ The Scots Acts refer to "Cunyeak wine" in 1573, to brandy in 1673, and to rum in 1695. The word *whisky* is not used in the Scots Acts.

² I am indebted to Mr Francis Steuart for this reference.