HOLY WATERS

Searching for the sacred in a glass

by
Tom Morton

WATKINS
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<Imprint page>

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"Questa e la vera acqua santa!"

("This is the real holy water!")

Pope Francis, on being presented with a
bottle of Oban Single Malt Whisky

Before We Begin: Advice on Drinking and Reading at the Same Time

Just before you settle down to absorb this text, may I suggest a quick visit to the local off-licence, bottle shop, supermarket or your favourite online beverage dealer? Because if we are to search for the sacred in a glass, it may be necessary, even advisable, to take our liquid salvation in our own hands. And fill that glass right up.

What we're going to do in this book is go on a journey. I know, I know. That word "journey" has been terribly demeaned by hundreds of TV talent shows, but nevertheless, that's what we're doing: travelling.

We're going to investigate the connections between religion and alcohol: the attempts faith has made to prohibit or moderate its consumption or to harness it to a particular belief's purpose; the uses it has been put to within worship, and the many divine and very human legends and stories associated with it.

We will be moving, sometimes a little unsteadily, across the planet – from Scotland to India, Japan, the USA, Europe, Africa, the Caribbean – and encountering God, gods, goddesses, witches, warlocks, demons and every conceivable drink from cider to mead from Norse spittle. Not all of these libations will be delicious.

It will be interesting. It will be fun. And if you drink as you read, it could even be … spiritually enlightening.

Please do drink and read. Or not, depending on the circumstances you find yourself in with this book. Maybe you're driving and listening to the audio version, in which case the consumption of alcoholic liquids would be both ill-advised and illegal. However, what could be more conducive to literary appreciation or the enjoyable absorption of information than

the occasional sip of a suitable libation? Perhaps you're reading and quaffing by a roaring fire or even a gently whirring air conditioner? Something internally warming or cooling, or vice versa, would surely be appropriate.

Each chapter in this book is preceded by a short list of drinks either mentioned in the text or that could, in this author's opinion, highlight, reinforce or simply enhance what is written about. A small measure of each will suffice and there is no requirement to consume all or any of the drinks mentioned. I have, however, tried to make each chapter's "flight" (a technical term borrowed from the esoteric world of malt whisky appreciation) an informative and enjoyable progression of tastes.

I love the stories associated with drinks; they nearly all reflect the places and personalities that brought them into being and the ideologies, the beliefs, the moments in history when they were first made. I've never been so sure about so-called "tasting notes", which tend to vary wildly depending on the taster, their level of sobriety, what they had for breakfast, lunch or dinner and whatever form of prose, poetry or gobbledygook they were last exposed to. I write this as a regular World Whisky Awards judge who has been nosing and tasting whiskies professionally for 40 years.

Better by far to come to your own conclusions about a drink. Give it a chance, even if you don't initially like the taste. Then, at the end of each chapter, you will find my attempt to describe my own reactions to the drams or tipples mentioned at the start – and that will, for the most part, be in the traditional format: colour, nose or smell, palate or mouthfeel and aftertaste or finish. Drink it neat, or in the case of spirits, with enough water to bring the alcohol content down past the point of burning your mouth. Water will release some aroma too, but don't drown it.

Sniff. Don't heat the glass with your palm. I like straight glasses – tumblers – but I appear to be unique in this. Some say you should hold a spirit in your mouth for the number of

seconds it is years old, if that figure is available. Let it rest until you taste it thoroughly. Swallow and enjoy the afterlife.

We are dealing in these pages with the links between alcoholic drinks and religion, and occasionally I may make claims for the spiritual insights induced by specific concoctions. Often these sensations or insights will be about memory, history, the people I associate with particular liquids or the places they come from. I will be telling stories. My story. I believe religion is about story. The tales we tell each other that explain the world and how we live in it. How we ought to live. How we'd like to.

There is a fashion in the international spirits industry to portray hustlers and salespeople tasked with flogging their favoured booze as "brand evangelists". "Evangel" is from the Greek *euangelion*, which means "good news". The good news about the best alcoholic drinks – and with certain exceptions, the drinks I have chosen for these holy flights are the best I could find – is that, in moderation, they can illuminate, relax, provide conviviality and seal friendship. And consumption leads, always, to the telling of, and listening to, stories. At least I believe so.

Should you feel that my descriptions of the sensations associated with said drinks are somehow pretentious or fanciful, I apologize. And offer you the following lines as one rather addled professional drinks taster's thoughts on the matter.

The Guided Tasting

There's vanilla, sherry, oak, molasses
But there nearly always is
There's coconut and lemongrass
Or perhaps I didn't wash the glass
Because – and I do have a little guilt –
I had a Malibu and Lilt
To freshen up my nosing skills
A residue may linger still

I'll rinse out this receptacle
And use my strongest spectacles
To read the label – oh, I see
Distilled in 1953
A fine year for this lovely dram
And warehoused, I see, in Amsterdam …
I do apologize, I'm wrong
It was aged in Glasgow all along
Made three years past, in Glen Aldi –
A lovely spot, you will agree.
At any rate, let's have a sniff
Aha! you see! Sea! Seaweed! Salt! We're on a cliff
Breakers down below are breaking
Oceanic shakers of sea salt are shaking
Now, swirl it round your mouth – don't spit
You really need to swallow it
To gain the cosmic realization
The truly marvellous sensation
Of life, and rediscovered youth
It's almost 50 per cent proof
It's like being hit with a fencing mallet
It's removed a layer from my palate
I'm getting … mildew, smoking tyres
A waste disposal plant on fire
My mother's burned raspberry jam
Perhaps my friend Archie's dear old nan
Whose imminent incontinence
Entire rooms could always sense
But really, that is quite enough
This is incandescent stuff
Still, I should warn you to take care
Of Glen Aldi amateurs must beware
I'll give it five stars out of four
As long as I can have some more
A case or two will be just fine
I'll get a decent price online

Now, that's enough from me, I think
It's time to have a proper drink …

The Holy Flights

Nearly all of these drinks are available worldwide at what I consider a reasonable price, though customs regulations may prevent imports into some countries. If you go to my personal blog at thebeatcroft.com you will find a list of online retailers who should be able to supply most, if not all of the drinks mentioned. Some retailers will supply "sample" size single-drink versions and of course in a good bar you will be able to get the single or double measure you want or need. At thebeatcroft.com you will also find updates with extra essays, and news of the *Holy Waters Live* show, which will include guided tastings, music and readings. Not to mention a possible appearance of "the God Helmet" (see Chapter 3).

The Holy Flights

1. Introduction

Highland Park Viking Honour 12-Year-Old Single Malt Whisky
Cutty Sark Blended Malt Whisky
Arbikie Haar Vodka

2. Chapter 1

St Columba Garden Gin
Bushmills Black Bush Irish Whiskey
Ledaig 10-Year-Old Isle of Mull Single Malt Whisky
Graham's 10-Year-Old Tawny Port

3. Chapter 2

Lindores Abbey New Make Spirit Drink 2021 (63.5 per cent alcohol)
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INTRODUCTION

WIDE-EYED AND LEGLESS

Holy Flight

– *Highland Park Viking Honour 12-Year-Old Single Malt Whisky*
– *Cutty Sark Blended Malt Whisky*
– *Arbikie Haar Vodka*

Alcohol is a psychoactive substance that also affects the body, and in religion it serves two purposes: it is both a gateway drug and a crucial piece of symbolism. How it works and how it is made feed into the theatrical power of its ritual use, so it's worth delving into both the chemistry and the history.

The alcohol we find in the liquids we commonly consume – wine, beer, gin, absinthe, whisky, whatever – is ethanol, though in most cases this is not pure ethanol (chemical formula C2H6O) as the brewing and distilling process throws up a number of different alcohols. Pure ethanol can be produced by petrochemical processes but for the most part it comes from fermentation and subsequent distillations. In other words, it's all about the rot.

According to Professor David Nutt, a man whose job title is longer than most –neuropsychopharmacologist – and who has combined, at various times, the treatment of alcoholics with owning a wine bar, alcohol "has glamour and history, and our art and culture are steeped in it. It's thought to be nearly as old as human society. There's a theory that the roots of agriculture

weren't in the search for food but in the cultivation of crops to make alcohol."[1]

At its most basic, once fruit or grain begins to rot in liquid, the presence of yeast – wild or cultured – will produce ethanol and some other not so palatable organic compounds that need not concern us here, but which, in the form of congeners, are responsible for much suffering in the form of hangovers.

John Barleycorn Must Die

This is where the chemistry leaches into holy symbolism. Let me introduce you to my friend John Barleycorn. Who, as many know, will die.

Aged seven, I arrived in the school system of Ayrshire, Scotland, straight from a private prep school in Glasgow where the concern was to hammer us into polite shape and get us to speak "proper". Miss Kemmet belted us (the tawse, a seasoned leather bludgeon traditional to Scots schools, first met my hands when I was six in punishment for running in the girls' playground). Miss Fountain nurtured our plosives and fricatives in elocution ("p-p-p-p-p-p … *please* speak clearly"). I was parachuted into a state (public), Protestant primary school dressed in my green (indicative of Catholicism in the west of Scotland) St Ronan's blazer (spat upon) and cap (stolen). And then I was forced to begin memorizing the work of Robert Burns, laureate of Ayrshire and southern Scotland, lover of whisky, women, mice and haggis.

"Tam O' Shanter", first published in 1791, is an enormous poem, and as an adult I can appreciate its humour, pace, poise and power. But as a child, I was all but overwhelmed by its immense length, and terribly impressed that one of my classmates, Evelyn, had memorized all 228 lines of it. It is a poem about drink, domestic strife, witchcraft, religion, hallucination and a horse called Meg. It was "Tam" who helped make John Barleycorn what he is today – a synonym for booze.

[1] Nutt, Professor D, *Drink,* Yellow Kite, London, 2020, p.5

Inspiring bold John Barleycorn!
What dangers thou canst make us scorn!
With ale, we fear no evil
With whisky, we'll face the devil!

The term "John Barleycorn" had been used for centuries previously and is the title of a traditional English song going back to Elizabethan times. But Burns, a man whose tippling caused him no end of bother and whose expertise in matters alcohol-related led to his later career as a customs officer, brought John into common usage. Not just through Tam O'Shanter but in his version of the song:

There was three kings into the east,
Three kings both great and high,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn must die.

They took a plough and plough'd him down,
Put clods upon his head,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn was dead.

But the cheerful Spring came kindly on'
And show'rs began to fall.
John Barleycorn got up again,
And sore surprised them all.

The sultry suns of Summer came,
And he grew thick and strong;
His head well arm'd wi' pointed spears,
That no one should him wrong.

The sober Autumn enter'd mild,
When he grew wan and pale;
His bendin' joints and drooping head

Show'd he began to fail.

His colour sicken'd more and more,
And he faded into age;
And then his enemies began
To show their deadly rage.

They took a weapon, long and sharp,
And cut him by the knee;
They ty'd him fast upon a cart,
Like a rogue for forgerie.

They laid him down upon his back,
And cudgell'd him full sore.
They hung him up before the storm,
And turn'd him o'er and o'er.

They filled up a darksome pit
With water to the brim,
They heav'd in John Barleycorn.
There, let him sink or swim!

They laid him upon the floor,
To work him farther woe;
And still, as signs of life appear'd,
They toss'd him to and fro.

They wasted o'er a scorching flame
The marrow of his bones;
But a miller us'd him worst of all,
For he crush'd him between two stones.

And they hae taen his very hero blood
And drank it round and round;
And still the more and more they drank,
Their joy did more abound.

John Barleycorn was a hero bold,
Of noble enterprise;
For if you do but taste his blood,
'Twill make your courage rise.

'Twill make a man forget his woe;
'Twill heighten all his joy;
'Twill make the widow's heart to sing,
Tho' the tear were in her eye.

Then let us toast John Barleycorn,
Each man a glass in hand;
And may his great posterity
Ne'er fail in old Scotland![2]

What we have here is the process of planting, growing, flourishing, harvesting, threshing, malting and brewing barley. It is the cycle of agriculture, of rural life, of death and rebirth. The poetic character of John is so ancient that he probably goes back into the pagan era of British history, but the cycle of death and rebirth he symbolizes is crucial to many religions, not least and most obviously perhaps, Christianity. The death and rebirth of the Messiah is, as Jesus himself says in John 12:24, necessary for salvation and just like Johnny B: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."[3]

It was James Frazer in his seminal 1890 book *The Golden Bough*, who popularized the notion that the so-called "dying-and-rising god" was central to religion in the widest sense. Osiris from Egypt, Dionysus and Adonis from Greece, Tammuz from Mesopotamia and of course Christ. However, some scholars since have argued that the idea is not universal. Some gods just, well, die, notably in Viking mythology, where the warfare

[2] http://www.robertburns.org.uk/Assets/Poems_Songs/john_barleycorn.htm

[3] John 12:24

culture is perhaps a bit blunter: Poor old Baldur – gone, and an inadequate number of tears shed to restore him. A blind brother shoots one mistletoe-tipped arrow and the gods are doomed! Pass me some mead (or in fact, beer, which was the liquid of sustenance on those long Viking voyages).

Death and rebirth is a central theme in all religions and a psychological trope most famously analysed and mused upon by Carl Gustav Jung. Here he waxes poetic, though not perhaps with the same versifying verve as Burns:

> *The moon is dead.*
> *Your soul went to the moon, to the preserver of souls.*
> *Thus the soul moved toward death.*
> *I went into the inner death and saw that outer dying is better than inner death.*
> *And I decided to die outside and to live within.*
> *For that reason I turned away and sought the place of the inner life.*[4]

Jung was a big fan of Osiris, linking Egyptian mythology to Christianity in a way that still infuriates some Evangelical Christians. The explicit linking of Osiris to the rebirth of vegetable crops in agriculture led those who participated in the Osiris festivities to "experience the permanence and continuity of life which outlasts all changes of form".[5] Jung argued that it was through Osiris that the Christian concept of the soul emerged.

Instep with Persephone, Ishtar and many other deities, John Barleycorn stalks the Earth, and so the death/rebirth cycle you can see so explicitly rendered on the malting floor of a traditional distillery becomes central to religious thought. The malting of barley for whisk(e)y production is not just one of the most beautiful and indeed spectacular aspects of the whole

[4] Jung, C G, *The Red Book*, p.267

[5]

distillation process, it is also, in its most old-fashioned form, my favourite. Go if you can to Highland Park Distillery in Orkney, Scotland or the Hillrock Distillery at Ancram NY, USA, and take in the (literally) breath-taking business. What happens is this: grains of barley, harvested and dried, are spread out in an even layer on an open space. They are dead. Water is sprayed on the floor – not a lot, just enough to dampen the grain, which is left until each individual grain begins to sprout. This massively increases the sugar content, which is the whole point. For brewing and distilling, germination provides that extra sugar, so you can actually extract the alcohol.

However, you don't want the grain to keep sprouting or else you'd end up with a field of whitish-green indoor stalks. You need to stop the growth process at the optimum point for sugar production. This you do in a small-scale, old-school malting operation by shovelling the sprouted barley into a kiln, where a combination of heat and smoke stops the germination. I was going to say stops it dead, but the really life-restoring magic is yet to happen. It's after the kilning that the malt is brewed with yeast to turn it into beer and then, if you're going the whole hog, it can be distilled into spirit.

And there you have the water of life. It's like magic, it's elemental and it's a truly wonderful experience to see even a small malting in production. At Highland Park, the one I know best, and indeed one in which I have both shovelled malt and stoked the peat furnace, the smells are overwhelming: the cereal flavours of damp barley; the deep, oily smokiness of burning peat. And later, as you process through the production chain, the pungent reek of the wort as malt and water brew, and the high, zingy alcoholic whiff of new-make spirit as it runs like a miniature waterfall through the spirit safes.

So there is religious symbolism here in the way that alcohol is produced, which is similar in grape-based drinks. Brandy is essentially distilled wine and the death/rebirth cycle in wine production is even more pronounced. First witness for the prosecution (of anyone done for being drunk in charge of a human

body): Dionysus, Greek, then Roman god of winemaking, wine, drinking, ecstasy (the condition not the substance) fertility and ritual madness. He is also known as Bacchus. This is where we get the notion of Bacchanalian rites and festivals, though by all accounts these were not the dissolute orgies we sometimes see portrayed in movies or TV series, such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*; *I, Claudius;* or *Asterix and Obelix Go to the Colosseum*. Although wine was seen according to the cult of Dionysus as the manifestation of the god himself on Earth, its consumption was a form of worship and a means to enlightenment, not oblivion. The notion of "divine madness" was completely different from being blind, blazing drunk.

Incidentally, the words used for drunkenness are many, each language having dozens of them, especially English. This is a poem from the show I wrote and performed for several years, *The Malt and Barley Revue*, and it contains as many wordsas I could find in English for the variations of inebriation:

Full of Loudmouth Soup: An A to Z of Drunkenness

Ankled, banjaxed, bladdered bleezin'
Why? Do I really need a reason?
I'm cabbaged clobbered, Chevy Chased
But not a broken vein upon my face
Despite being thoroughly Dot Cottoned
Sobriety almost forgotten
I'm etched – egregiously and completely
That creme de menthe went down so sweetly
So now, I'm fleemered and I'm flecked
So many snifters have been necked
That guttered, sweaty, ganted, howling
I'm wearing shirts made out of towelling
Inebriated, kaed up, jaxied
I've been ill in every single taxi
In every city kiboshed, kaned
Bernhard Langered, legless, debrained

Dhuisg, it is in Gaelic, mottled
(I must recycle all my bottles)
I'm Newcastled, out of my tree
There's really not much wrong with me
On the skite, overly refreshed
I swear I'd still pass my driving "tesht"
For drink improves pronounciation
Adds sparkle to enunciation
Predicting earthquakes, kissing pavements
Quite quoited, rubbered, I've made arrangements
To remain forever snobbled
Sleeping on tarmac or on cobbles
Thora Hirded, trousered, trashed
I've spent great lakes of liquid cash
Unca' fou, marocced, it's easy
Discombobulated, queasy
My wobbly boots are on, I'm wellied
But only very slightly smelly
Xenophoned, Yorkshired as a skunk
Zombied
But not even slightly drunk.

Holy Flight – Tasting Notes

Highland Park Viking Honour 12-Year-Old Single Malt Whisky

In my opinion, one of the best-value whiskies you can buy. Normally available at an entry-level price, I know from frequent visits to the distillery that it is one of the most carefully and thoughtfully produced whiskies on the market. Highland Park is also, as I write, the northernmost distillery in the UK and its location in Kirkwall in the Orkney Islands is a beautiful and historic small town full of fascinating charm. St Magnus Cathedral is my favourite church, its warm red sandstone glowing with welcome. It's a church that does not intimidate

but somehow nurtures even the most casual visitor.

There are various bars in Kirkwall selling obscure and often very expensive bottles of the local whiskies (there are two distilleries in Orkney: Highland Park and Scapa) but my favourite is Helgi's Viking-themed pub on the Kirkwall waterfront. Often very busy, if you can get a seat it offers flights of whisky that will take you to Valhalla – the hall of the gods slain in battle – and back again. The food is excellent, too.

The distillery malts some of its own barley using peat from its own moorland banks on Orkney itself. As a visitor experience, it is second to none. This whisky has a mild peatiness that never overwhelms what is a complex and rewarding dram and is balanced by the oaky, winey notes from the used sherry barrels made of wood from distillery-owned forests. They treat the barrels with sherry, too. Heather or clumps of very heathery peat goes into the malting furnace, and you can taste it.

Colour: Red-gold, the shade of Orcadian sunsets or a longboat going up in flames.

Nose: Spicy and controlled, fragrant and fruity with just a hint of smoke.

Palate: Smooth, sweet and with overtones of citrus fruit and that vegetal smoke. Malty.

Finish: Long and warming, with the smoke coming through more strongly, but never dominating. A superb whisky for what is a very moderate price in most markets.

Cutty Sark Blended Malt Whisky

A blend originally made by the London company Berry Brothers and Rudd, named for the the tea clipper *Cutty Sark*, once the fastest ship of her time and now a visitor attraction at the Royal Museums in Greenwich.

The ship was built in Dumbarton, Scotland, launched in 1869 and named after Tam's delighted shout in Burns' poem "Tam o'Shanter", as he watches witches, warlocks and demons dance in the old Alloway kirk:

And thought his very een enrich'd;
Even Satan glowr'd and fidg'd fu' fain,
And hotch'd and blew wi' might and main:
Till first ae caper, syne anither,
Tam tint his reason a' thegither,
And roars out, "Weel done, Cutty-sark!"
And in an instant all was dark:
And scarcely had he Maggie rallied,
When out the hellish legion sallied.

A "cutty sark" was a short nightdress. The ship, as portrayed on the label of every bottle of Cutty Sark whisky, was painted by Swedish artist Carl Georg August Wallin. The whisky itself does not really match up to the wild and uproarious events experienced by Tam, but it is deceptively smooth enough to seduce the careless drinker into a state where he or she may find themselves seeing things they perhaps had not anticipated … holy or unholy.

Colour: Buttery-yellow, a summer field of barley in a warm wind.

Nose: Fairly light and mildly caressing. The pungency comes with sweet floral notes and just a bit of graininess, with touches of citrus.

Palate: Barley to the fore with orange peel and a hint of vanilla pods

Finish: Malty with a lengthy afterglow

Arbikie Haar Wheat Vodka

Arbikie Estate is a family-owned working farm on the east coast of Angus in Scotland. They plant, sow, tend and harvest the fields and the drinks made on site use those crops. So, this is wheat vodka (there's also one made from potatoes), the true product of the land itself. It really is a product of the whole process from field to bottle.

The soil is red from the local sandstone, and the effect of the sea – the farm faces Lunan Bay – is obvious. The distillery

was made from an old barn, and the family make everything from rye whiskey to gin here. Arbikie Haar Vodka is named after the rolling and chilly coastal fog that frequently envelops the distillery.

This is vodka in an old-school Russian sense, only very Scottish. And if you're going to drink alcohol, this is as pure an expression of it, both in its clarity and purity and its journey from crop to glass, as you will find.

Colour: Crystal clear, as it should be.

Nose: Wild honey, croissants, a bakery in early morning as the bread is just coming out of the oven.

Palate: You can taste the sea and the land. There's a graininess coming from the wheat, the spicy bursts of alcohol and a custardy undercurrent, too.

Finish: Warming, but clean and not too aggressive.

CHAPTER 1

BURIED ALIVE BY A WARRIOR MONK

Ireland, Scotland (Iona, Mull, Ayrshire)
Gin, whiskey, whisky and port

Holy Flight

– *St Columba Garden Gin*
– *Bushmills Black Bush Irish Whiskey*
– *Ledaig 10-Year-Old Isle of Mull Single Malt Whisky*
– *Graham's 10-Year-Old Tawny Port*

St Columba, Colum, Columcille in Gaelic. Irish warrior monk of royal descent, miracle worker, bringer of Christianity to Scotland, whence his followers spread the word throughout the whole of Britain and eventually beyond to most of mainland Europe.

Picture him if you can, though descriptions after more than 1,500 years are understandably vague. Charismatic, a natural leader, physically strong, imposing. A prince by birth and temperament, rough monk's robes or not. Haunted, perhaps by his past, but full of determination, passion and strength. Given the hygiene limitations of the time, probably a bit smelly. His (male) followers were fond of shaving the front of their heads, presumably in imitation of St Columba's male pattern receding hairline, and letting their hair grow long at the back, thus pioneering what we now call a "skullet", a

variation on the infamous Michael Bolton/Billy Ray Cyrus/ Mel Gibson mullet.

St Columba came to Scotland in about AD 563 with a dozen companions, bent on penance for his sins. A senior religious and political figure and also an abbot, he had royally messed up things back home, sparking off a series of tribal conflicts and many deaths due to a dispute over the copying of a Gospel manuscript. So he and his followers came first to Dunaverty on the Kintyre peninsula aboard a curragh, a leather and basketweave boat. However, they could still see the coast of Ireland from there, so Columba decreed they would land elsewhere and eventually they arrived on the island of Iona.

And with them they brought whisky. Or, coming as they did from Ireland, maybe we should say they brought whiskey with an "e". I will explain the origins of that particular spelling discrepancy in due course (see page XX).

To be completely honest, we don't know if Columba had a flask or two of firewater with him on that curragh, though one sincerely hopes he and his boys did. The North Channel can be a cold, rough and unforgiving stretch of water. But there is little doubt that whisky and the expertise needed to make it arrived in Scotland courtesy of Columba and his band of brothers.

As the Columban missionaries spread their gospel of salvation, the knowledge of distillation went with them. Ideas and the ability to produce alcoholic spirits moved hand in hand, glass to lip. Holy water and the water of life intermingled. And eventually, as folk began to move across the Atlantic to the Americas, often forced to leave their native lands on religious grounds, stills and the ability to use them went, too. When God moves, or gods move a people, the spirits that people produce also move.

Columba was a charismatic figure. Building his abbey on Iona, he supposedly discovered that its foundations would only be secure if a living person was buried beneath them. Was there a volunteer? One of his original twelve disciples, Oran, also once an abbot in Ireland, came forward and was duly interred. His

face was left uncovered until he began proclaiming that in fact there was no such place as heaven or hell, and Columba decided to quite literally shut him up. Permanently.

Columba's encounters with kings and other creatures, notably the Loch Ness Monster (Columba won that skirmish) have been dealt with in many books over the past 500 years. He worked many miracles, converted kings and chieftains. His spirit, fuelled perhaps by the spirits whose distillation techniques he brought to Scotland, haunts the world today. But for now, come with me back to Ireland, back across the North Channel near to a spot from where on a clear day you can see the Scottish coast. Indeed, there was a time when strict presbyterians of a particular denominational bent would row on a Sunday morning over to Scotland to worship. Following in Columba's oar-sweeps.

By the Rill of St Colum

Forty years of motorcycling, and I'd never fallen off once. Now here I was, in the deceptively sloping car park of Bushmills Distillery in Northern Ireland, lying underneath a Triumph Street Triple R – 675cc of rampant, hooligan motorcycle – which had just toppled with a sickening crunch onto my legs and torso.

I was on a pilgrimage. A journey of the spirit. Having already blended a whisky using the products of distilleries at the extreme points of the compass in Scotland, I was now engaged in collecting whisky from distilleries in each of the United Kingdom's four component countries – Scotland, Ireland, England and Wales. By motorcycle. I'm sure there was a sensible reason for this. Whisky production in Wales and England was still rare, and I think myself and my travelling companions wished to contrast, compare and celebrate. Or just go for a long road trip involving bikes and ferries. At any rate, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Until that moment in the Bushmills car park.

There was no pain at first. Briefly, there had been horror, a sense of awful inevitability as, while swinging my leg over the

heavily laden bike to get off, I caught my foot on the tailpack, fell to the ground and watched the Grey Beast teeter on its dodgy kickstand and then descend toward my aged body.

Worse, there were witnesses. As I lay on the ground waiting for the inevitable agony and revelations of damage to both myself and the motorbike (brand new and borrowed, amid much dubiety about its insurance status, from the Triumph factory), I saw the horrified expression on the face of Gordon Donoghue, manager of Bushmills and a keen motorcyclist himself. Manoeuvring my bike close to his immaculate Triumph Bonneville had provoked my awkward and ultimately failed attempt to dismount. The dishonourable idea that it was all Gordon's fault flashed through my mind. I could see in his eyes he thought so, too. Or rather, that it was all the fault of Bushmills Whiskey, its manager, owners Pernod Ricard, and possibly the Protestant God who inhabits this part of Northern Ireland. The same God who makes the populace paint the paving stones red, white and blue; spreads Him- (or Her-) self among the dozens of competing churches of a Sabbath morning; and turns a blind presbyterian eye to the fact that Jameson's, that good Catholic whiskey made in Cork in the Republic of Ireland, was for years tankered north and bottled at Bushmills. By some Protestants. Although of course many Bushmills staff were Catholics, not that this is widely advertised. It's still common in parts of the USA for drinkers to affirm their Roman Catholic Irish heritage, or indeed Republicanism, by ordering Jameson's. And many remember Detective Jimmy McNulty in the TV series *The Wire* having a famous interchange with a bartender: Could he have a Jameson's? Well, no, they didn't have any. Would a Bushmills be all right? That, replied McNulty in high dudgeon, was Protestant whiskey.

Gordon had already told me that during the "Troubles", there had never been an attack by either Republican or Loyalist forces on the distillery. Some things are too important for politics.

But back to the car park, and me lying with a motorbike on my leg. In the milliseconds the whole incident took to play out,

I could see Gordon's brain turning over various considerations. After the array of Bushmills new-make spirit and finished whiskeys I had inhaled, but not drunk, that morning, had I addled my motorcycling body and brain, despite a rigid adherence to the sniff-spit-don't-swallow rule? Would there have to be a full Health and Safety inquiry into the incident? Would I sue for bad car park camber?

The answer to all of the above was, of course, no. And miraculously, I was completely uninjured, being able to withdraw my leather-clad leg without even an abrasion. The bike, though, that was another story. Three months after Triumph silently took it back, a letter arrived detailing the £1,500-worth of repairs that had been necessary. Did I wish to make a contribution to the cost?

I did not. But I was unhurt. It was a miracle.

The Real Holy Water

Miracles happen at Bushmills, as you might expect when the water of St Columb's rill is being transformed into *uisge beatha*, the water of life. It's thought that whiskey has been made on this site since the 13th century. Long, long after Columcille had become St Columba and departed for the Inner Hebrides of Scotland.

Alcohol and Christianity have always walked hand in hand. And even today, at the very top of the Roman Catholic Church, there is evidently the taste for a dram. At the Vatican in 2019, Pope Francis was presented with a bottle of Oban single malt whisky by a group of Scottish student priests. He was, it's fair to say, delighted, and he was caught on video holding the bottle up to the light and telling the young men, "*Questa e la vera acqua santa*!" "This is the *real* holy water!"

Ripples of unease spread across Roman Catholicism. Though it was recognized that the Holy Father had his tongue firmly in his cheek, he had form with whisky. The previous year, a gift of whisky from Scottish priest Father Jim Walls had provoked a

reference to holy water, and the same year Father Jim Sichko had presented him with a bottle of 23-year-old Pappy Van Winkle Bourbon. "This," said Pope Francis knowledgeably, "is really good bourbon." What he thinks of Bushmills – or Jameson's – is not recorded.

And that would be Irish whiskey, not whisky. The additional 'e' applies in most of the USA and all of Ireland, but not in Canada. It depends where the majority of settlers originally came from.

With or without an "e", the pronunciation is identical, and the name comes from Gaelic (pronounced "Gaylic", if we're talking in Irish), or Gaelic (pronounced "Gallic", if we happen to be in Scotland). Scots Gaelic developed from the Irish version of the language, and it seems certain that the magical recipe for whisky came from there too. *Uisge beatha*, in Scots Gaelic, *Uisce beatha* in Irish. Water of Life. How do you say that? How much have you had to drink? Ooshkiva! Ooooshhhkivaaah … Oosh … Ooshhka … Oooshki … Whisky.

Or, if you prefer, whiskey. Or whisky.

If you're thinking that this water-of-life stuff sounds awfully similar to the Latin aqua vitae, as in Aquavit, or eau de vie, as in Cognac, Armagnac or Calvados, then you're absolutely right. But in almost every culture and country, distilled alcohol has been seen as a life-affirming, life-giving liquid. Magical. An elixir, in fact. Of course, in large quantities, it will kill you, but its origin was as a medicine. And to go back to Gaelic (Scots) that's why it's best to moderate your intake by asking for "*te bheag*" (chay-vaik). A wee one. You can have several wee ones. Lots of wee ones. Sufficient wee ones to sink the proverbial Titanic. But stick to just a few wee ones and you'll be all right. Probably.

Alcohol, then. Distilled spirit. Did the Irish monks discover how to produce it? Some find it impossible to believe that alcohol could first have been distilled anywhere else. But no, Celts did not pioneer the hard stuff. Distilled alcohol for drinking is a Middle Eastern discovery. Beer and wine go back

to the beginnings of agriculture. Traces of a beery drink made around 13,000 years ago have been found in in Israel, and a fermented concoction of rice, honey and fruit is thought to have been made in China somewhere between 7000–6600 BC.

Distillation is what the Columbans brought from Ireland to Scotland – so-called "pure" distillation; there's been a form of it on the Indian subcontinent since AD 500. Ethanol – C2H5OH – boils at 78.4°C (173.12°F), which is lower than water. That means it comes wafting off heated, fermented liquid before watery steam does. All you have to do is condense it on something cool, and bingo: there you have it – life!

Forget all that mystical Celtic twilight nonsense about some heathery crofter accidentally boiling up beer and licking shockingly strong ethanol off the top of his curiously shaped early Superlager can. It was all happening way to the east. The basics of the technology would have been picked up by Irish monks, known for their travels in the Middle East, and brought back home. Meanwhile, Arab and Persian chemists, at the absolute cutting edge of science in their day, perfected the technology, developing processes and equipment that would be recognized and admired today, even within the hallowed precincts of Heriot-Watt University's Brewing and Distilling of Mind-Altering Liquids Department. By the AD 800s, the legend that was Persian alchemist Abu Musa Jabir ibn Hayyan was perfecting what we would recognize today as the alembic still. It's unlikely that his activities would be welcomed today in what his homeland has become – the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The word "alcohol" itself comes from the Middle East. The term appears in English in the 16th century, entering the language via French from medical Latin, ultimately from either the Arabic *al-k'ohl* or *al-ghawl*. *Kuhl* (kohl) is a powder used as an antiseptic and eyeliner then and now, and *al* is the Arabic for "the". So alcohol might take its name from eye shadow, though not because it caused a natural equivalent to occur in those who've been up all night sampling the stuff. One explanation is that *k'ohl* was seen as the essence of Indian Devilwood, the

plant it was extracted from, and it became a generic term for the essential spirit of something. Better than "Max Factor", anyway. Alternatively, the word *k'ohl* may come from *kahala*, which means to colour or stain.

Type *al-kuhl* into an internet search engine, however, and a stranger and more chilling story will come pouring out of your device. Confusion reigns between *al-k'ohl* and *al-ghawl*. You will be informed, sometimes by what appear to be authorities on the subject, that *al-kohl* is Arabic for "body-eating spirit". In fact, this is *al-ghawl*. The two terms are often confused. The argument, often but not always associated with extreme fundamentalist Christianity, then usually hops to the practice of alchemy, in which apparently alcohol is used to extract the soul of an entity. If a human being consumes alcohol, the liquid in effect extracts the very essence of the soul, allowing the body to be more susceptible to neighbouring entities, most of which are of low frequencies. Demon possession, in other words. Evil spirits. *Al-ghawl* is supposedly where the English word "ghoul" comes from.

The English-language and fundamentalist Christian arguments that boozing means imbibing demons has a lot to do with a remarkable man called Dr Walter Johnson, one of the proponents of hydropathy or water treatment. He practised around Great Malvern in England (home of the internationally famous mineral water) and was Florence Nightingale's favourite doctor. He is quoted in *The Temperance Dictionary* as believing that:

> "When the spirit (alcohol) was first discovered and had proved its infuriating power, the oriental fancy connected it with the belief in ghouls – spirits believed to assume human forms, and to feed upon the dead. Hence would come the designation *al-ghoul*, the ghoul, afterwards changed by western mispronunciation into alcohol[1]."

[1] Burns, Rev Dawson *The Temperance Dictionary*, J Caudwell, London, 1861. Volume One on Google Books at https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6pIBAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_atb&redir_esc=yv=onepage&q&f=false

The author of the dictionary, Rev Dawson Burns, was a staunch teetotaller and very much a product of the 19th-century temperance movement, which sought to ban the consumption of all forms of what Scottish comedian Norman Maclean called "the old mood-altering". Burns, however, is lofty in his dismissal of Johnson: "The theory is ingenious, but the supposed fact on which it is based is without historical support, and contrary to historical probability."[2] Certainly, the Oxford English Dictionary goes for the *al-k'ohl* etymology and English texts going back to the 17th century affirm this.

Ghoul or Kohl, an apparently magical substance, made its way from the Middle East to Ireland, and it did so because of religion. Faith was the focus and impetus of all learning in Ireland, and the monasteries sent their monks out in search of knowledge and converts. As well, of course, as Islam itself being a colonizing force. The Iberian Peninsula was under Islamic control from 711, but by that time it is arguable that distillation was already established far to the north, the skills and secrets travelling with holy men. The spirit moves. Time passes. Especially when there's drink involved.

In the Irish *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, the death of a chieftain is recorded in 1405. He perished at Christmas after "taking a surfeit of aqua vitae". As for Scotland, we have to leap forward 89 years, to 1494, for the famous entry in the Exchequer Rolls of James IV where "Eight bolls of malt" were sent "to Friar John Cor, by order of the king, to make aquavitae" – the first written record of whisky-making in Scotland. Cor's home was Lindores Abbey in Fife, and this was, interestingly, not an offshoot of an Irish monastic order but of the Tironensians, originally Benedictines from Tiron in France, who were extremely powerful in Scotland, with abbeys not just in Fife but at Kilwinning, Kelso and Arbroath. This raises the interesting question: while distilling methodology was almost certainly already in Scotland by 1405 thanks to Columba, was it French expertise that perfected it? Sacre Bleu!

[2] Ibid.

As I began writing this book, the new distillery at Lindores bottled and released its first single malt whisky. I will tell the story more fully in the next chapter, but it's worth saying here that the distillery has dubbed itself "the spiritual home of whisky". I suggest that some folk on Iona may disagree. Although there is no proof that whisky was made on the island, Maxwell Macleod, son of Lord George Macleod, who masterminded the rebuilding of Iona Abbey last century, told me of stories that the monks would race cats around the cloisters while under the influence of distilled spirits. It seems an odd enough tale to be believable.

By the mid-18th century, alcohol was solidly, indeed soberly defined in English as the "intoxicating ingredient in strong liquor". What was to become a worldwide industry worth billions began to establish itself. The world's favourite mood-altering substance gradually became more and more industrialized. Its effects became for many an escape from the grim realities of urban poverty. Cheap gin and bad booze were obvious methods of personal oblivion and social control, and the source of huge health problems in fast-developing societies. That demon, drink.

Now we are sold ethanol in a million different forms, branded to appeal to all age groups, tastes and cultures, producers inciting us to celebrate, to indulge but never, on any billboard or TV advert, to over-indulge. It's a commodity, a drug, an illusion and for many, sadly, a dependency.

But alcohol, pure, impure and diluted, is more than indulgence, more than drunkenness. It is of great symbolic importance in various faiths. It plays roles in magic and is an object of constant scientific investigation. It provides conviviality and solitary insight. It can be transformational and, yes, destructive. To those who say all forms of alcohol are the same, in that they produce the same effects … well, yes. You're right. And you're also wrong. The difference between a ferocious but deceptively smooth George T Stagg 2009 small-batch Kentucky straight bourbon, bottled at 70.7 per cent alcohol and a stunningly sophisticated Glen Rothes 1994 should be obvious

to any taster. As should that between a Bacardi Breezer and an Aftershock, a Buckfast Tonic wine and a frozen Stolichnaya.

Speaking of George T Stagg and Kentucky Bourbon, I will be discussing the uneasy but often enthusiastic relationship between alcohol and the USA in due course, but it's worth pointing out that the connection between religious missionary activity and alcohol is at the root of Kentucky Bourbon production, thanks to the activities of renegade Baptist preacher Rev Elijah Craig (note the Scottish surname) who was allegedly the first to age whiskey in charred oak barrels. And, of course, there's William Laird distilling applejack in New Jersey after he arrived from the Scottish Highlands in 1698. They came, they went to church, they made the water of life.

So many tastes, so many sources, so much spiritual comfort in a glass! But these days many call themselves connoisseurs, and the enlivening qualities of an alcoholic drink – the sheer ability to alter someone's mood – is disguised by intense discussion and description of aroma, taste, manufacturing process and that lovely French word *terroir* – meaning the land, the soil – even the cultural context a drink comes from. We can so easily get lost in our attempts to categorize and describe.

Then there is The Truth According to Hamish Henderson. Henderson was (he died in 2002) an intellectual, lecturer, folksong collector, hero of the Resistance against Hitler, pacifist, soldier (he personally accepted the surrender of Italy from Marshall Graziani) and poet, seen by many as Scotland's greatest since Robert Burns. In many ways he personifies Scotland: difficult, controversial, inspirational, charming, and that old Scots word *thrawn*, meaning intransigent. He was great company, a cheerful invader of personal space. Once, a friend of his who was involved in the whisky industry decided it would be a good idea to obtain the great man's verdict on a few rare single malts, for possible marketing purposes. After all, wouldn't the famous poet capture the grandeur and greatness of these fine spirits with words of deathless beauty, aesthetic insight and intellectual rigour?

The tasting began with due ceremony. The correct glasses, the small jug of water, the holy libations themselves. Henderson sniffed and sipped, a beatific expression on his face. Time passed. At length the poet was asked to describe the experience of drinking an excessively expensive, hugely aged dram. What, he was asked, was it like? There was a long pause. And then Henderson smiled, shook his head, and held out his glass for a refill.

"I'll tell you what it was like," he said. "It was like … whisky."

This book is about "discerning the spirits", as the Bible instructs on many occasions, perhaps most notably in 1 John 4, verse one: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." The associations of alcohol with the Divine are many, and we shall seek those connections, finding them in some perhaps unexpected places. But it's in humanity's agricultural interactions with the planet that alcohol has its origins – as does, some would argue, religion.

Put together clean water, carefully grown crops, yeast and fire, and you can produce real magic. If you have the knowledge. If you have the faith. It is a matter of the spirit. For alcohol and belief have always walked hand in hand.

Germ-free Communion and the Lost Evangelist

My first encounters with alcohol were intrinsically religious. First there was a communion or "the morning meeting", and then there was witnessing drunks.

"The silver" said my dad, "reacts with the alcohol and actually kills germs. So despite the fact that everyone is drinking from a common cup, infection cannot spread."

I believed him. But then, the wonder and mystery of the Sunday morning communion service at Bethany Gospel Hall was overwhelming for a ten-year-old. How could you not believe? There was the glint and glitter of the two big silver communion cups, a bottle of Old Tawny fortified wine in each. I knew it was

Old Tawny as my pal Stewart and I had raided the Gospel Hall bins one bored summer weekday and found the brown bottles lurking at the bottom. Empty, or we'd have had a swallow. What I have never been able to establish is whether this was "proper" old tawny port, or a cheap fortified wine masquerading as such. I have drunk all sorts of fortified wines in my post-Brethren years, including a Madeira at least some of which was originally made in the 18th century and a port that cost £55 for a small glass in the Ubiquitous Chip Restaurant in Glasgow (Scottish Television were paying). Communion on an Ayrshire Sabbath was no place for connoisseurship. It was strong. It was heady. It was Old Tawny and it was the blood of Christ.

A loaf of unsliced bread sat on a silver platter between the communion chalices, draped with a starched linen napkin. And the smell was the first thing that hit you when you entered the building. The warm, domestic embrace of the bread; the pungent, heady reek of the wine. All I wanted to do was eat and drink. At that age I was always hungry. And thirsty.

"Plymouth" (that seaport so crucial in the history of the USA) or "Christian" Brethren services were – in theory if not entirely in practice – open to anyone; (anyone male, that is) to contribute a prayer, a hymn, a sermon or to launch communion by "giving thanks for the bread and wine". There was always a failsafe fallback of senior elders who would keep things moving along if there was a lull, sometimes nudged by wives anxious about the Sunday roast sitting in the oven at home. But once the bread started moving from hand to hand, fingers tearing a piece out for consumption, the bakery aromas would send me almost into convulsions of starvation.

The wine, as the massive cup moved along the pews, could make you slightly drunk just by inhaling its aroma. There was great amusement in watching certain elderly members of the congregation swilling back a couple of massive swallows, their cheeks flushing rosy pink in holy ecstasy.

You didn't get to partake of communion in the Brethren unless you'd been baptised (full immersion, minimum age 16)

and then you had to confess your belief in front of "the meeting", or its representatives on Earth, "the oversight" – a selection of male elders. Eventually, amid a welter of adolescent doubt and desperation to belong, I was submerged and welcomed into the fellowship, and I got to taste Old Tawny myself.

"This is my body broken for you … This is my blood …" The wine, beefed up with brandy or some distillate or other, burned my throat. It was acrid and sweet at the same time, sour and sugary and thick, like treacle. As motes of dust danced in the sunlight streaming through the windows, I felt my head swimming with pride. I belonged. I was part of this. The wine was a symbol of Christ's blood, poured out at Calvary for our eternal redemption, but it was also a mysterious seal on my faith. And if you sneaked a second sip, it made you feel … good.

I remember the first time I saw a drunk, on the streets of Bellshill in Central Lanarkshire. An elderly man, falling over, stumbling and singing. He cannoned off another man, known to him, who refused to drink from the bottle of Eldorado or Lanliq he was bearing, the electric soups as they were known. Or it may have been Old Tawny.

"Have a drink, Billy! Have a drink with me!" His sober companion shook his head.

"No, Gerry, that's fine. But I'm just glad to see you so happy."

I was walking with my dad, through the winter's darkness, the ashiness of a 1960s Lanarkshire night, and he was holding my hand. We passed the pair and went on toward the Gospel Hall there, which sat between a steelworks and a pig farm: the aromas of industry and excrement.

"Happiness," Dad said, shaking his head. "Happiness. Wine that maketh glad the heart of man." And even as a child I knew that Gerry's happiness wasn't something to aspire to. I looked back as Billy gently lowered his acquaintance to the ground, placed the bottle in his lap and walked on.

After you'd been absorbed into the Assembly, as the church was called, you had a duty to spread the word, and this was where things became scary. Because that meant door-to-door

visiting of strangers, the handing out of leaflets outside pubs at closing time and the conducting of open-air Gospel meetings on street corners, again just at the time when the happily or unhappily inebriated were making their disinhibited way home. Pubs closed at ten in those far-off days in Scotland. There was a lot of liver-loading in the fifteen minutes drinking-up time; street-corner preachers needed nerves of steel and the holy patter of Billy Connolly to cope with hecklers.

And there was sometimes a physical threat. Fortunately, among the converted in the essentially working-class Brethren were usually one or two robust ex-shipyard workers or miners who could defuse the situation with their advanced social skills or the firm grasping of a biceps. Muscular Christianity.

I preached sometimes. I sang soberly into the maelstrom of a Glasgow Friday night in Buchanan Street, was propositioned, scolded, offered sips from brown-bagged bottles. There were fights, glassings, cops on horses. Ministers who later fled the country in tabloid disgrace.

And later, I would be the one staggering along the street, as half-remembered believers shouted salvation through bad PA systems. After I'd taken disbelieving communion for the final time, in a church that used Ribena (a popular British blackcurrant cordial), diluted and in individual glasses. No risk of infection. No chance of getting a taste for it.

Not like me.

Dad, Scotland and the Whole Wide Western World

Today I am remembering my father, who, as I write this, died aged 90 a few short weeks ago. One of our last conversations was about alcohol.

"When we get through this," he said, during his last struggles with illness and fatigue, "when I'm feeling better, I'm going to buy a really nice bottle of Nuits St Georges and we'll have a drink together."

Through the years, Dad had grown to take a much more liberal attitude toward alcohol than during his earlier Gospel Hall days and had become something of a wine connoisseur. He even, again in his final week, told me how much he appreciated the bottle of Berry Brothers and Rudd Sherry Cask Matured Blended Malt Scotch Whisky I'd bought him for Christmas.

But now, right now, I'm remembering him and his faith – the faith that reared and still marks me – with a glass of as near to Old Tawny as I can find: Graham's 10-Year-Old Tawny port. And as I open the bottle, the release of that heavy smell takes me back first to Bethany Hall in Troon and then unleashes all kinds of other memories: Sunday School, witnessing drunks, holidays in camper vans, including one to near Southend in Kintyre, to Dunaverty. Where Columba first landed. And then moved on. Taking his stories with him. Stories of faith and distillation, which would eventually spread throughout the western world.

Holy Flight – Tasting Notes

St Columba Garden Gin

There are many so-called "craft" gins and most, like St Columba, are made with neutral alcohol (usually, but not always, neutral grain spirit), which is then added to a mixture of neutral alcohol and water that has been re-distilled, incorporating various botanicals and herbs to flavour the finished product as required.

I'm sorry to take away from the mystique surrounding these drinks, but I regard a lot of "craft" gins with suspicion. Remember that most people will drink gin in a cocktail, often with tonic, and that most specialist cocktail bartenders favour the famous old standbys – Bombay Sapphire, Gordon's, Beefeater and Tanqueray, with those upmarket upstarts Sipsmith and Hendricks bringing up the rear. Other bars will use whatever they're paid to.

However, some small hotels and pubs have their own gins made up to reflect where they are and the atmosphere of the location. That's what's happened here. The St Columba Hotel,

Bar and Larder on Iona is set in an almost impossibly atmospheric position, right next door to the Abbey, and the herbs and botanicals used in their gin are from their own Iona garden. So, when you drink this (preferably neat), you are drinking in the spirit of Iona in a very real sense. Also, no matter where in the world you drink it, it will take you in the space of a sip right back to that beautiful and historic island. Oh, and I'm drinking it without tonic or water. Or ice.

At the moment, this gin is only available on Iona, from the hotel itself. As a substitute, you may wish to try the much more easily obtained Whitetail Gin from the nearby island of Mull. The name was inspired by the white-tailed sea eagles that nest close to the distillery – the first new distillery on the island in 220 years. It uses a selection of local flavourings such as pine needles, heather and sea-kelp from shores of Loch Scridain.

Colour: Clear as the Atlantic rain.

Nose: Sharp and cleansing, with ozone and the crisp and wintry marine zing of juniper, mint and fresh seaweed.

Palate: Slight oiliness doesn't detract from the bracing freshness. Citrus notes, all bitter lemon and with vegetal elements – sage, juniper of course and grassiness. With the sea always there in the background.

Finish: Coolness and poise turns to a long, warm embrace

Bushmills Black Bush Irish Whiskey

There are several expressions – varieties – of Bushmills you can buy, ranging from the absurdly expensive, very old bottlings that tend to end up in the hands of collectors and are destined never to be drunk, to the classic Bushmills original, a light Irish blend. Red Bush (nothing to do with the tea) is four years old and aged in once-used American oak Bourbon barrels. Black Bush is in my opinion the most characterful of the bunch – 80 per cent single malt whiskey (from a pot still, using malted barley) and aged not just in the American oak barrels, which lend a lighter finish to the spirit, but in Oloroso sherry casks, too.

Colour: Deep amber; gold verging on burned orange.

Nose: A sweet apple and grape scent followed by hints of caramel and toffee, with a ginger snap nuttiness.

Palate: Vanilla pods and cinnamon balls with an embracing oakiness and orange peel wedding cake; a well-worn leather armchair, recently cleaned.

Finish: Plum pudding with home-made sponge cake or English digestive biscuits. Also stewed "builder's" tea with sugar.

Ledaig 10-Year-Old Isle of Mull Single Malt Whisky

I could have chosen the St Columba Hotel's single malt whisky, but on Mull (you have to go through Mull to catch the ferry to Iona) the spectacularly colourful village of Tobermory houses a distillery that invites visitation. And if not in person, then in spirit.

It produces two different styles of whisky. Tobermory itself, which is unpeated, and Ledaig, which has the phenolic tang of the fuel known in Ireland as turf, and which, when barley is malted using its smoke, lends that distinctive pungency to mostly island whiskies. It's pronounced "lech-aik", by the way, which was one of the distillery's previous names. It's a smoky, fruity and very reasonably priced bottling at 10 years old.

Colour: Ripe, golden wheat

Nose: the smokiness you might expect is gentle and controlled, but the sea is ever-present in that ozone whiff. A little pine forest and some fruit-and-nut chocolate, too.

Palate: Just a touch of pepper and smoky peat, but this is not a brutal attack, face-down-in-a-bog, as you might expect from some of the Islay malts such as Lagavulin or Laphroaig. But fear not, we will get to Islay in due course. Medium-bodied with a bit of bunt oak and a wedding cake fruitiness. A good alcohol level of 46.3 per cent.

Finish: Spicy and slightly smoky, fading not too quickly.

Graham's 10-Year-Old Tawny Port

You can pay astonishing amounts of money for tawny port, and I've chosen this particular bottling as it's reasonably priced and

I think reflects what I would have drunk at communion back at Bethany Hall all those years ago. Port is from the Douro Valley in Portugal. Tawny port is made from red grapes that have been allowed to oxidise, producing a brown or tawny must or juicy mix. Distilled grape spirit (brandy without the name) is added to port and brings the alcohol content up to 20 per cent. It also stops the sugar in the original grape juice turning to alcohol – hence it tends, in most but not all cases, to be sweet.

Colour: Deep, genuinely tawny, like an autumn sycamore leaf or well-aged, cured leather.

Nose: Roast hazelnuts and almonds, with sultanas and raisins, honey and figs

Palate: Plums, prunes and brown sugar mixed with a deep alcoholic edge. You can sense the slow-moving River Douro and the *barcas* (sailing barges) taking the barrels downriver on the tide.

Finish: Long and complicated, sweet and low. But with tannins adding the bitterness necessary to provoke another swallow. Or two.