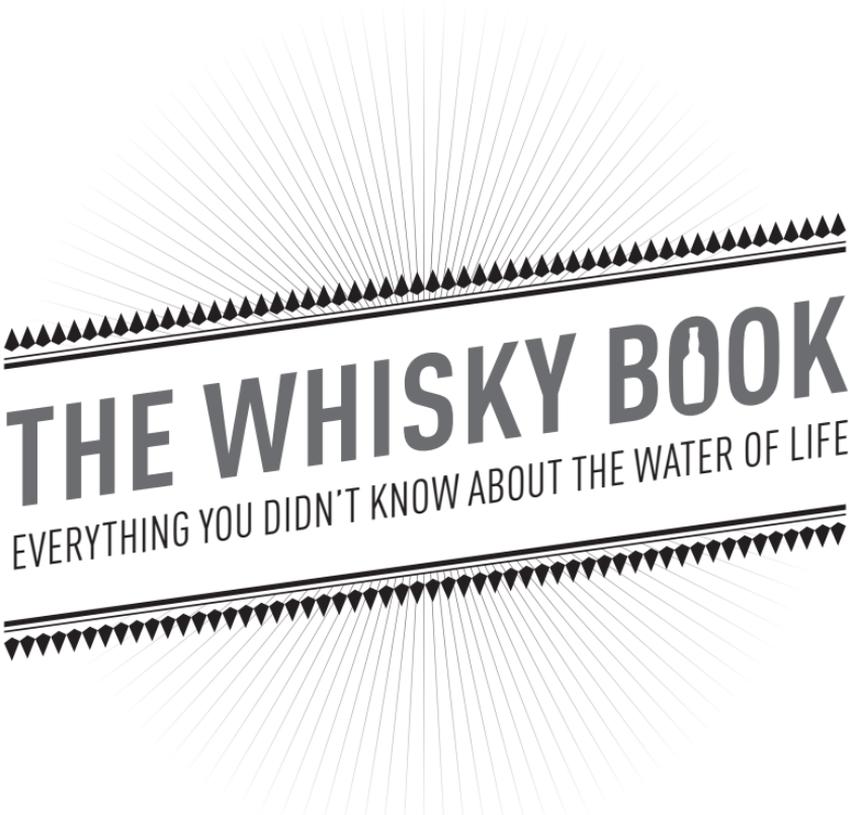




FERNAND DACQUIN



THE WHISKY BOOK
EVERYTHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE WATER OF LIFE

Lannoo





PREFACE

BY THE EARL OF ERROLL, CHIEF OF CLAN HAY,
A PATRON OF THE KEEPERS OF THE QUAICH

The author first came to my house in Sandy in 2012. I was told that previously he had been a Flemish travel journalist, with a keen interest in Scotland, Scottish history and, in particular, Scotch whiskies.

There were other people invited that day and I noticed that he was not looking to converse right away. He was more interested in exploring my house. He was taking pictures of my collection of antique whisky hip flasks, and of a chessboard where each piece carries the coat of arms of one of my ancestors on its shield. It was obvious that he was looking for little stories. I was only able to attract his attention when I showed him the whisky bar, hidden in the wall of the library.

These days there are many books about whisky. That's because there are countless tales of whisky woven through our history, in the lives of people ordinary and famous, often embedded in small events, many that have never been told. We must cherish those stories. They enrich our whisky tradition.

Fernand Dacquin travelled the world for forty years writing for a tourism magazine and for whisky magazines. Wherever he went he collected anecdotes, facts, and stories about whisky. Given its rich whisky heritage, Scotland was a recurrent theme in all of this. From his copious collection of travel notes he distilled about a hundred short whisky stories. They are bundled into this book.

When the Dutch edition was published in 2020, Charles MacLean wrote the following in his preface:

“The topics Fernand has chosen to write about in this book are staggeringly eclectic and born of his own global travels: entertaining, surprising, informative (I learned a lot!), and opinionated (in a gentle way!).” I don’t know what else can be added to that.

It is a bounteous book that you can dip into, starting and finishing on any page. Because of its compact size, an added bonus is that you always have a hand free for a wee dram.

I have no hesitation in recommending this book to every whisky lover, and especially to those who love a good yarn.

Errol



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WHISKY OR WHISKEY?

WHAT A MESS

Long ago, everything was much simpler. There was a rule that was easy to remember: countries with an 'e' in their name wrote 'whiskey' with an 'e'; countries without 'e' in their name stuck to 'whisky', without the 'e'.

Ireland? Whiskey.

Canada? Whisky.

United States? Whiskey.

Scotland? Whisky.

Simple.

But today you have to travel across the entire world map to find a country where no one produces 'whiskey'. Or 'whisky'. And those newcomers apparently really enjoy writing 'whisky' today and 'whiskey' the next day. They don't care at all!



♣ Not all whisky is whisky.

But I'm in trouble: how can I write a book about whisky if I don't know whether it's 'whisky' or 'whiskey'?

And who is responsible for this nonsense?

Time for a serious investigation.

Bring out the musty history books.

By 1965, we read, the Irish whisky industry had fallen to such a low level that only a handful of distilleries remained. They united and founded the 'Irish Distillers'. The Irish Distillers opted for the slogan 'Strong together', and to make this clear they introduced a few 'specialties' that would surprise the Scots, who were still doing well. From now on the Irish Distillers would distill three times instead of twice (the Scottish way), they would never use peat, and they would write 'whiskey' everywhere instead of 'whisky'.

So that's where it all started.

But wait, not too fast!

Let's go further back in time.

Around 1900, there was a lot of controversy around the whole 'whisky' business in the United Kingdom.

First of all: there was no law which offered a real definition of the product 'whisky' and a lot of questions arose regarding those names that were used: for example, was blended whisky also 'whisky'? So King Edward VII set up a commission. On March 2, 1908, the committee issued a report and minutes entitled 'Inquiry on Whiskey and other Potable Spirits'. Everyone in the UK was required to follow those guidelines. Whiskey was written with 'e' throughout the whole text.

Waw!

Whiskey, with an 'e'. In Scotland and in Ireland!

One year later a new release was published, and the annoying 'e' had disappeared everywhere.

Everywhere 'whisky'. No 'e' in Scotland and no 'e' in Ireland.

And since then, things went completely off track.

Some Irish kept using the 'e'. Some emigrated to America where they introduced the 'e'. But there were others already doing without 'e' because they had taken it over from the Scots and the Canadians, who adhered to the Scottish spelling: without 'e'. The 'e' slowly became more common in the States, but there are still American distillers who don't use an 'e'.

And believe me, not all are consistent in Ireland either. Paddy for example: sometimes with an 'e'; sometimes without.

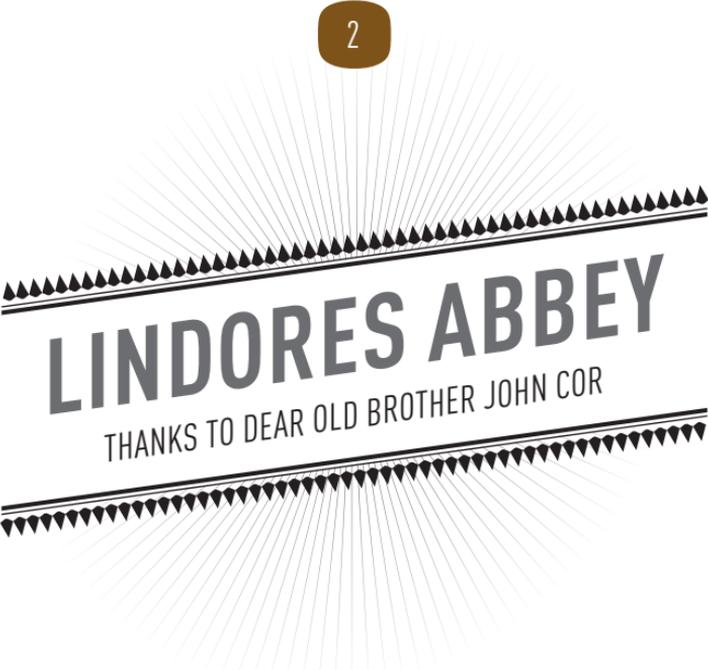
And then there are some distillers in Canada...

Enough! Stop!

We will stick to 'whisky' but switch to 'whiskey' where it is more convenient.

In Dutch, there is even a word for a small whisky: 'whiskykje'. But that is complete nonsense. Every whisky lover knows that there is no such thing. All whiskies are small whiskies.





LINDORES ABBEY

THANKS TO DEAR OLD BROTHER JOHN COR

*'By order of the king, eight bolls of malt
for Brother John Cor to make aqua vitae.'*

Had no one ever found that little phrase in the Scottish Exchequer Rolls of 1495 (the King's annual financial report), Lindores Abbey would likely have been lost in history.

By 'the King', the writer refers to James IV, who we know was a very moderate drinker. 'Brother John Cor' refers to the brewer-distiller at Lindores Abbey, and with eight 'bolls of malt', that diligent brother is said to have been able to distill about 250 litres of alcohol (according to experts): *aqua vitae*.

And that *aqua vitae*, or 'water of life', would have been called "whisky" today.

Not bad as a stock.



♣ Was Brother Cor's still here?

Founded in the twelfth century, the sprawling Abbey was on the edge of what is now the village of Newburgh in Fife. At that time, this was a wooded area on the little Pow stream which sprang from Lindores Loch and flowed through the Abbey, into the river Tay. There was plenty of water in the Abbey. Fantastic for brewing or distilling.

The twenty founders of the Abbey came from Kelso and were part of the Order of Tiron. The Abbey grew fast to just over thirty members. They were the so-called 'black' brothers, because of their black habits. In the same 'Scottish Exchequer Rolls', John Cor is referred to once more for his ordering of black fabric for making habits. Cor was seemingly important in Lindores Abbey. And not only for the booze.

The Abbey was prominent and influential. Important guests such as Kings Alexander III and Edward I stayed there. As did John Balliol, William Wallace, and Mary Queen of Scots.

In the sixteenth century, Scotland had a very turbulent history: Reformation supplanted the Roman Catholic faith and the Protestants sacked the Abbey in 1543. The monks stayed in Lindores until 1584, after which the Abbey gradually fell into disrepair. At the very end, even the Abbey bell was sold to the City of Edinburgh.

Many houses in Newburgh today are built with the stones of the Abbey, and in the pubs of Newburgh you can find fine examples of these.

In 1913, John McKenzie, a diligent farmer, was able to buy the land and farm built on the ruins of the Abbey. Lindores remained in the McKenzie family from then on, eventually falling into the hands of John's great-grandson Drew and Drew's younger brother Robbie.

While Robbie expanded the farm, Drew had other pursuits. For many years he was the head chef at Glenmorangie House, which belongs to and is located close to the distillery of the same name. For more than twenty years, however, he also worked on the realisation of his dream: bringing the Lindores distillery back to life.

The farm, next to the best-preserved part of the Abbey, has now been converted into a beautiful distillery with an attractive visitor centre.

Gary Haggart, former distillery manager of Diageo's Cragganmore Distillery, and his team now take care of production.

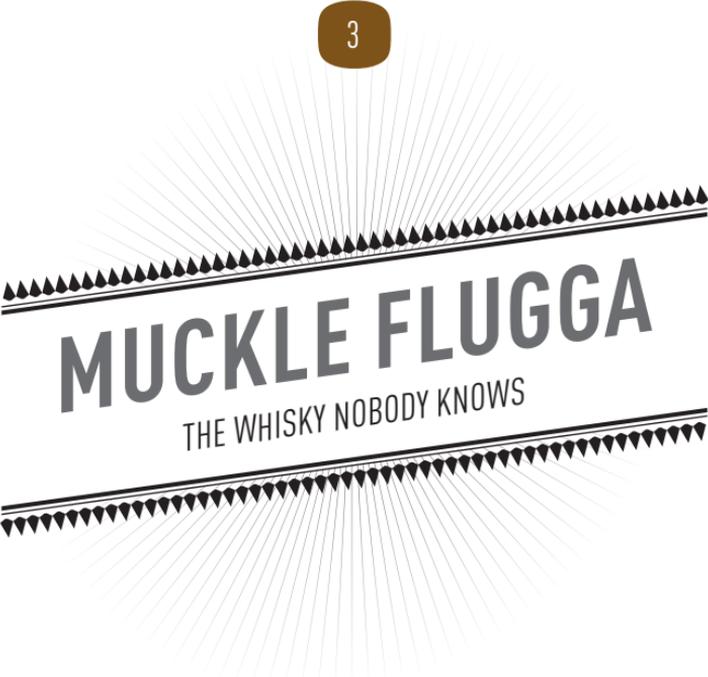
ARCHEOLOGICAL FIND?

Behind the maturing warehouses, there is a vast area that also belonged to the Abbey. There will soon be new orchards, like the ones the Abbey once had. The Order of Tiron was very skilled in agriculture and fruit growing but was also at home in the world of herbs and medicine.

Many remains of the Abbey were found during the excavation work, which was necessary for the construction of the distillery, including a dug and stone-finished ditch to ensure that water was diverted from the Pow to the Abbey. And right there, in the middle of the construction heap, the workers uncovered a large stone and clay-finished pit in the shape of a hemisphere.

Drew McKenzie: 'Archaeologists believe that this pit may have been the home of Brother Cor's still.' If this is where Brother Cor made his *aqua vitae* more than five hundred years ago, then there is no more sacred place in the whisky world than here.





MUCKLE FLUGGA

THE WHISKY NOBODY KNOWS

Standing on the most northern tip of the island of Unst, you can see a steep rock rising out of the sea in front of the coast, crowned with an elegant white lighthouse: Muckle Flugga. It's the most northern tip of the UK, if we leave out that tiny rocky outcrop, Out Stack, a little farther. Muckle Flugga means 'big crag'.

The famous lighthouse builder David Stevenson was commissioned to build a lighthouse there in the 1850s. He wrote to his client after visiting the site: 'The sea around the Shetland coast makes building a lighthouse in the area impossible, impractical, dangerous, too expensive, and any ship that takes that road is mad anyway.'

The lighthouse ended up being built four years later. In 26 days, more than forty men were able to build a temporary tower, which would be replaced four years later by a much larger one. The island lost its title of 'the most northerly inhabited island in the UK' when the lighthouse was automated in 1995.

Occasionally, the name 'Muckle Flugga' was found in the whisky world, referring to a mysterious whisky that matured on the Shetlands and that no one had ever tasted. People who asked for it were looked on with pity. Everyone knew that 'Muckle Flugga' was a myth. It was just like Santa Claus and Nessie.

I went to the Shetlands in search of a bottle, but I didn't learn anything. No one had seen it before. Nobody knew where it would be stocked. No one could explain to me why whisky had to winter in this hole, exposed to the horror of the sea.

Maybe this was all a joke: describing a whisky that is completely made up and giving it the name of an inhospitable rock: Muckle Flugga.

After a while, I met someone who knew someone who claimed to have seen the bottle and knew what it said on the label. Another islander indicated that the label on the back said 'smooth, honeyed with a hint of fruit, sherry finish'.

SHETLAND WHISKY, A JOKE?

Frank and Deborah Strang bought a large plot of land with a couple of sheds on the island of Unst in a place called Saxa Vord in 2007. You can't find Saxa Vord on any map. The Royal Air Force had an extensive base here a few years ago. The Ministry of Defence left for a better location.

If the Strangs hadn't built a resort around them, the sheds would have been dead by now. In addition, they also started a micro-brewery, Valhalla Brewery, in one of those vacant buildings. They now brew quite a nice beer there.

Yet another shed was converted into a true distillery. The space is large enough to hold ten stills, but there is only one lonely still in a corner. The still can only hold 500 litres, but it works. Just not in a hurry.



Does the whisky from the Shetlands mature here? 🍷

Stuart Nickerson, the man who restarted the Glenglassaugh distillery in Portsoy (Aberdeenshire) in 2008, was approached to come to Unst. In 2013, together with the Strang family, he immediately set up the Shetland Distillery Company. Shetland Reel Whisky was born.

They weren't the first to do so! In 2002 the Blackwood Distillers were founded in London. They planned to build a distillery in the Shetlands. They wanted a distillery in Catfirth on the main island but changed their minds and focused on Unst. In the meantime, they produced gin in England and created their own blended malt: Muckle Flugga whisky!

In 2008 Blackwood was bankrupt. The distillery was never built.

The proposed whisky plan was taken over by a new company called Catfirth. They bought all the Muckle Flugga whisky that was wintering 'somewhere'.

Cost per barrel: one thousand pounds.

Things didn't go well for Catfirth either. The company ceased to exist in 2014.

But the Muckle Flugga is still on the market. There is also a single malt on the market. Both contain malts from Speyside. But no one knows which distilleries.

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If you have any comments or questions, please contact our editors:
redactielifestyle@lannoo.com

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