# 3
# Whisky in Scotland

Generally, the story of whisky in Scotland is a happy one. The Scots appear to have made whisky first, but the Irish quickly began out-producing the Scots. By the middle of the nineteenth century, though, Scotland was on the rise. Despite temperance movements, economic depressions and world wars, Scotch whisky in all its diverse flavours and forms triumphed and is beloved the world over.

## Early History

As we saw in chapter Two, the Scots were distilling spirits by the 1490s, and King James IV had granted Edinburgh a whisky-making monopoly soon thereafter. By 1579, distilling starchy plants into booze was widespread. The Scottish government worried that whisky-making might cause a famine as it consumed so much of the nation's grains. So authorities temporarily capped production by forbidding anyone but Earls, Lords, Barons and Gentlemen from whisky-making, and even they could only produce it for their own use. But whisky-making spread and, come 1644, the Scottish parliament saw wealth in whisky and began taxing it.

Whether whisky-making began amongst the learned in the city centres and spread outwards or vice versa is unknown. Regardless, stills were operating in the two centres of Scottish civilization, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and in remote farmlands and villages on islands to the north (Orkneys) and west (Islay). Martin Martin, author of *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1695), was taken aback by what he encountered:

> Their plenty of Corn was such, as disposed the Natives to brew several sorts of Liquors, as common Usquebaugh, another call'd Trestarig, id est, Acqu-vitae, three times distilled, which is strong and hot; a third sort is four-times distill'd, and this by the Natives is called Usquebaugh-baul . . . which at first taste affects all the members of the Body: two spoonfuls of this Last Liquor is sufficient dose; and if any Man exceed this, it would presently stop his breath, and endanger his life.

## Whisky and English Rule

Many causes have been cited for Scotch whisky's generally happy tale – the Scots' thrift and pluck, topography (good soil, plenty of peat, many fine sources of water and so on) and Scotland's early embrace of capitalism.

An under-appreciated factor is the relationship between Scotland and England. Though it took two centuries, the Scots and the English were able to learn to cooperate politically and economically. This enabled the Scots to develop a whisky industry that grew and grew over the centuries. (Chapter Four on whiskey in Ireland presents a case in contrast.)

Serious cooperation began as early as 1603, when the two countries began sharing a king. Come 1707 the Union of the

Parliaments folded the Scottish parliament into the representative body in Westminster, and formally intertwined the nations' economies. As part of this agreement, taxes on distilled spirits produced in the two countries were equalized.

Assuredly, this political cooperation of the Scots and English should not be overplayed – animosities remained. The Lowlands of Scotland were more congenial with the Crown than the Highlands (in the north). The former were Protestant and somewhat urbane, while many of the latter were Catholic and lived clan-based lives in rural areas. As an anonymous bit of doggerel put it:

> O what lies younder north of Tweed?
> Monsters, and hillmen hairy kneed!
> And music that wad wauk the deid!
> To venture there were risky O!
> The fearsome haggis haunts the snaw
> The kelpy waits your banes to gnaw
> There's nocht to eat but oatmeal raw
> But still I'm told there's whisky O!

There were many clashes between the English and the Scots. Perhaps the most famous began in 1745, when 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', Charles Edward Stuart (1720–1788), led a Highland uprising in hopes of reclaiming the throne for his family. It ended harshly – many of his kilt-wearing troops were slaughtered at Culloden the next year, and the Westminster government subsequently forbade the owning of weapons and the wearing of kilts and 'Highland dress' by the Scots. (These bans were abolished in 1782.)

And whisky taxes were a sore point between the countries. Parliament first taxed distilled spirits in 1643, and whenever England found itself at war, it looked for money in whisky.

Four late 18th-century peddlers offering 'shillelees, ballads, Bedfordshire tails, and Scotch whiskey, as delicious as cherry bounce'.

It taxed the malt used to make Scotch, the stills, the spirit flowing from the stills and so on. In 1781 Parliament banned private distillation, and excise authorities were permitted to seize stills and any items used in the production or transportation of whisky, including horses and wagons.

The London government, to its credit, did learn the error of its ways. Parliament passed the Small Stills Act in 1816 to reduce whisky duties. Over the next decades, the law was amended to further lower duties on legally produced whisky, while the penalties on the production and consumption of illicit Scotch were jacked up.

But the government was not quite ready to trust distillers. It required each licensed distillery to provide space for a resident excise man, who would determine the amount of taxes that the distillery had to pay. The excise man measured the quantity of wash going into the still and the quantity of spirit ultimately produced, and generated a tax bill for the distillery. Parliament also mandated the use of a spirit safe. This sealed glass and brass box prevented the whisky-maker from dodging taxes by diverting whisky off the still before it could be measured by the excise man.

The spirit safe at the Bruichladdich distillery, Islay, Scotland.

## Dodging the Excise Man

In his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith saw clearly the problems with many of the government's policies: they 'made that a crime which nature never meant to be so'. Many people felt that the choice to turn grain into spirit was a private matter. It is not for nothing that folks began referring to whisky as 'innocent'. Moreover, many of the policies enacted took no account of incentives. As Smith pointed out, the more one taxes the distiller, the more incentive he has to distil illicitly.

At bottom, the authorities appeared to have been of the belief that they could control distilling by passing laws that told people not to do it or by taxing them heavily if they did. Obedience was initially assumed, and when Scots thumbed their noses at the law, armed government agents, the dreaded

'gaugers' or 'excise men' were loosed. Perversely, laws designed to increase tax revenues often decreased them as legal whisky production plunged and illegal whisky soared. In Edinburgh alone there were perhaps 400 stills in operation. Stills were cleverly hidden from excise officers – under bridges, beneath a home's floor (the steam and smoke were piped up the chimney), and even in a town's clock tower. Casks and jugs were buried in yards, tucked in trees and smuggled in caskets. According to lore, farmers in Oldbury, Gloucestershire used to hide their illegal whisky from government officials by keeping it in barrels marked 'sheep dip', a poisonous chemical used to keep bugs and fungi from attaching to sheep. Thus it is that even today one can find bottles impishly labelled 'Sheep Dip' in some of the world's better whiskey shops.

Rather foolishly, the authorities sought to reduce illicit production by offering cash rewards to anyone who handed over distilling equipment. Some whisky-makers turned this policy to their advantage. They turned in their worn-out stills and used the reward money to buy the material to make new ones.

No discussion of illicit whisky would be complete without mentioning those who brought it to market – smugglers. While many writers have made light of whisky smuggling, in truth, it often was an ugly way of life. Ian MacDonald, who served as an excise man, wrote of late nineteenth-century smuggling in the Highlands: 'I know most of the smugglers in my own district personally. With few exceptions they are the poorest among the people.' The smugglers' homes went unrepaired and their fields were little tended because they spent their days sleeping, tired from their nocturnal work. This lifestyle, MacDonald claimed, wore upon them, as did the heavy whisky drinking. In *Smuggling in the Highlands* (1914) he wrote that 'Gradually their manhood becomes undermined, their sense of honour becomes deadened, and they

A Scotch whisky still and bothy, *c.* 1914.

become violent law-breakers and shameless cheats'. Smugglers frequently assaulted and killed excise men for doing their jobs – hardly heroic behaviour.

Though often at odds, distillers and excise men sometimes came to mutually agreeable accommodations. A distiller might look the other way when the excise man took more whisky than was needed from the still. In return, the excise man might record the amount of spirit produced and subject to taxation to be lower than it actually was.

Of course, both distiller and excise man could make each other's lives very difficult. The excise man could write nasty things in his official reports about the distiller. In return, the distiller might torment the excise man. Since the latter was obliged to be on the scene when the distillation process began, the distiller might drive the excise man from bed by firing up the distillery at 3 am.

Over time, though, the relationship between the authorities and the whisky-makers improved as the government

rethought its approaches to taxation and law enforcement. Newer policies employed incentives to encourage whisky-makers to carry on their trade legally rather than illegally. Incentives were altered to make licit production of whisky far more appealing than illicit production. Furthermore, the government also helped Scotch-makers collectively improve the quality of their products by mandating good manufacturing practices, such as ageing whisky in casks. It was a win-win relationship, as distillers brought legal brands to market, government got its share of tax revenue, and drinkers had hassle-free access to fine-quality Scotch for the right price.

Thus, the armed clashes between excise agents and smugglers declined, as did the seizure of illegal stills. A productive working relationship bloomed. In 1983, excise officers ceased hanging about the distilleries. The duties for taking measurements and transmitting them to the excise office were handed over to the distillery manager. Today, the spirit safe is an artefact of yesteryear; it is no longer mandated by law. In short, as lawlessness declined and trust built up, the relationship went from one of policeman and suspect to that of external auditor and producer.

## Scotch Whisky Booms and Booms

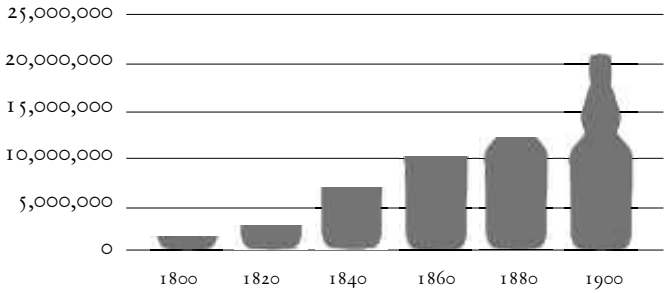
As the nineteenth century passed, the relationship between Scotland and England grew more cooperative. Some members of the English upper crust holidayed regularly in Scotland. Most famously, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert began summering at Balmoral Castle in the Highlands in 1848. There, they played at going native, sometimes wearing tartans and ordering casks of whisky from the nearby Lochnagar Distillery, which became 'Royal Lochnagar' after the Queen issued a

Going native Highland style: The Prince of Wales and the Marquess of Aberdeen, with the Duke of York and Prince Henry in the rear, *c.* 1920s.

Warrant of Appointment to John Begg, the distillery's head. (The Queen established no such residence in Ireland.)

As the British Empire expanded its global reach, Scotch whisky went with it, creating numerous converts. Production leapt as boatloads of whisky, especially blended malts, were shipped as far afield as the Bahamas, Egypt, India, Australia, New Zealand and South America. In the rapidly expanding and industrializing USA, drinkers also began to develop a taste for the slightly smoky whisky, despite America's own robust whiskey industry.

For all that, the first half of the twentieth century was brutal to the Scotch whisky industry. Lloyd George, the First World War, the Great Depression, the Second World War and subsequent rationing – these all knocked many whisky-makers out of business. The darkest days may have been in 1943, when no Scotch whisky was distilled at all.

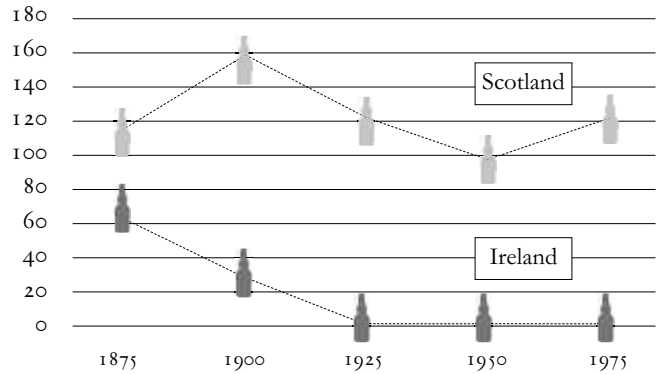



Distilled spirits produced in Scotland (US gallons).

Nonetheless, the Scotch distilleries lived on. Product diversification helped – with their continuous stills, Scotch distillers produced tens of million of gallons of industrial alcohol for the UK during both the world wars. (Ireland and England, meanwhile, had a retaliatory trade war in the 1930s, and Ireland remained neutral in the Second World War.) Additionally, the Scots benefited from their previous overseas agreements. Once the Axis powers were subdued and the world began to return to business as usual, the Scotch-makers began making and hustling their products to customers old and new. Japan represented a significant new market. Astonishingly, by the mid-1970s, over seven million US gallons (26.5 million litres) of Scotch were flowing into Japan each year.

Thus, while the Irish whiskey industry collapsed from 65 to three operating distilleries between 1875 and 1975, the number of Scottish operating plants actually grew from 112 to 122.

Ultimately, Scotch distilleries repeatedly expanded their plants to keep pace with the world's growing demand. Exports skyrocketed over the second half of the twentieth century, from 6.6 million US gallons (25 million litres) in 1950 to nearly 68 million (257 million litres) in 2000.



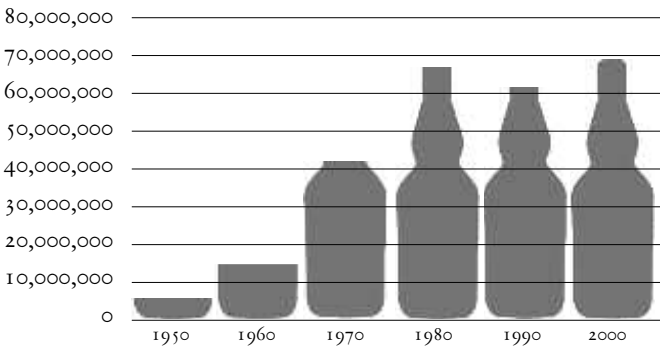

Operating distilleries.

## Scotch and 'Scottishness'

For all the nation's history, whisky has been just one of the many alcoholic beverages produced and consumed by the Scots. Beer probably came first, then brandy and liqueurs, and then whisky. Yet Scotch whisky became *the* drink of Scotland and part and parcel of Scottishness.

It is worth mentioning that were it not for bugs, Scotch might not have attained its high place in Scottish culture. Throughout what would become the UK, brandy (distilled spirit made from wine) was a very popular drink consumed by rich and poor alike until the late nineteenth century. Then Mother Nature intervened – phylloxera, a sap-sucking fly, began to blight France's vineyards in the 1860s. Wine production plunged, and brandy became very expensive and difficult to obtain. Scotch, meanwhile, was a bargain, and there was plenty to be had.

Initially, the fusion between the drink and the culture was produced by the rebellion against early parliamentary policies that targeted whisky. When the government taxed whisky and




Scotch whisky exports in US gallons.

criminalized unlicensed production, many Scots dug in their heels. What had been just a drink became a cause.

Robert Burns (1759–1796) was Scotland's most famous early whisky publicist and romanticist.

> Let other Poets raise a fracas,
> Bout vines, and wines, and drunken Bacchus . . .
> I sing the juice Scots bear can mak us
> In glass or jug.
> O thou, my Muse! Guid auld Scotch Drink . . .
> Inspire me, till I lisp and wink,
> To sing they name!

Burns politicized whisky, melding it with Scottish identity and nationalism. 'Scotland, my auld respected mither! . . . Freedom and whisky gang thegither, Tak aff your dram!'

Writer Aeneas MacDonald (aka George Malcolm Thomson, 1899–1996) had a similarly romantic view of Scotch in his 1930 classic, *Whisky*:

> [There] dawned the heroic age of whisky, when it was hunted upon the mountains with a price on its head as if it were a Stuart prince, when loyal and courageous men sheltered it in their humble cabins, when its lore was kept alive in secret like the tenets of a proscribed and persecuted religion.

The notion that Scotch whisky was part of Scottishness was further fuelled by the whisky industry's marketing. The UK government stopped charging duty on advertising in 1853, and in 1860 it authorized the sale of spirits by the bottle. The Scots took advantage of these policies and began promoting their whiskies with gusto. They portrayed Scotch whisky as a gentleman's drink, something that persons of taste and distinction consumed. Scotch whisky promotions also carried ideal depictions of Scottish life that verged on caricature – kilted Scots hunting stags, playing golf, fly fishing and carrying bagpipes. Tommy Dewar began advertising his blended whisky with a bagpipe player dressed in a kilt and Highland-type dress in 1883, a practice that continues today. Brands with names such as Clan MacGregor, Clan Campbell and the tartan-labelled MacDugan reinforced this imagery. One of the earliest cinema commercials showed four kilted men dancing in front of a Dewar's banner.

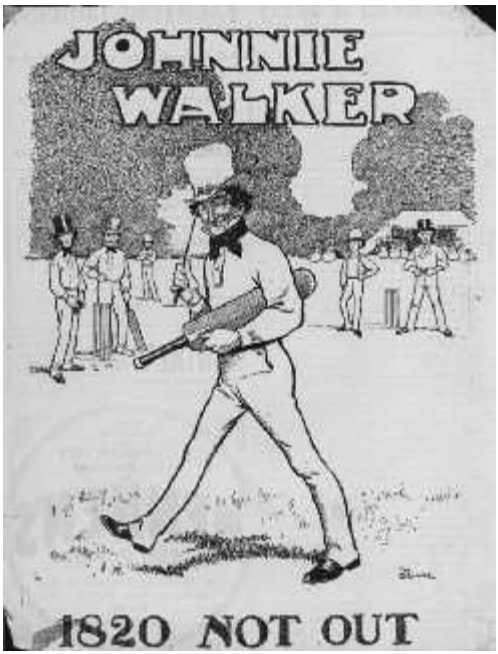
Of course, not all ads were of this type. Some touted Scotch as a health tonic. Cambus Scotch called itself a 'wholesome stimulant' that 'ministers to good health and neither affects the head nor the liver'. Other promotional activities lurched into the outright ludicrous. Pattisons Ltd took parrots to bars where they screeched 'Drink Pattisons whisky!'

As the twentieth century progressed, the portrayal of Scotch as Scottishness shifted a bit. There was less earnest pastoralism, and more wit and mirth. Some advertisements

Ludicrous promotional depiction from the 1910s of Scotsmen drinking Sandy MacDonald Scotch.

played on the old image of the wily Scot who always manages to get his dram. The hilarious 1949 movie *Whisky Galore!* offers a similar picture. After a boat is wrecked off the Scottish coast, nearby residents try to snatch up its cargo of 50,000 cases of Scotch by out-foxing the authorities. No writer's fantasy, *Whisky Galore!* was based on a true story.

Meanwhile, in recent years The Keepers of the Quaich has tried to continue the association of Scotch and Scottishness while injecting a bit of dignity into the mix. This group extols the noble roots and respectability of Scotch whisky. (A quaich is a Scottish drinking cup that looks a bit like a bowl with handles.) Whisky industry folks founded the organization in 1988, though its style is decidedly old school. It adopted a




A 1900s Johnnie Walker whisky advertisement depicting the 'striding man' at a cricket match.

coat of arms and a motto, 'Uisgebeatha Gu Brath', or 'Water of life forever'. It throws banquets at Blair Castle (in the High - lands, of course) and kilts are worn, bagpipes blasted, haggis forked and Scotch quaffed.

## Too Much of a Good Thing

Of course, there were less happy depictions of the place of Scotch in Scottish life. Thomas Crosland's *The Unspeakable Scot* (1902) is an infamous rant that disparaged Scotland for its cultural inferiority, moral corruption and overall 'mediocrity'. Crosland, who one contemporary described as a 'hysterically

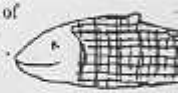
## Nae Macallan... Nae Fish.

A STORY IS TOLD of Donald, a revered ghillie in years gone by on a certain loch of our acquaintance.

It was a bad morning for trout, the water a glassy calm.

Donald toiled all morning at the oars while his cargo of two London businessmen caught nothing.

As lunchtime neared, Donald began to look forward to the lustrous sherry-gold depths of the bottle of The Macallan Malt Whisky which was the customary reward for a deserving ghillie.



But the otiose Sassenachs had other ideas.

"No fish, Donald", they cried. "Then no whisky."

Donald said nothing and ate his lunch at some remove. But the iron had entered his soul.

The wind rose. And all afternoon while every other boat on the loch was landing an almost miraculous draught of trout, Donald rowed his clients slowly up and down the one unruffled stretch of water.

When evening came, he deposited his fishless clients on the bank and surveyed them gravely as they rifled through their treasuries of insult, goggling like the trout they had so signally failed to capture.

"Nae Macallan" said Donald, at last "Nae fish."
And rowed off into the gloaming.

*The* MACALLAN. *The* MALT.

A humorous Macallan advertisement from the 1980s.

anti-Scottish' Englishman, howled at the purportedly high rates of criminality in Scotland, and claimed that the nation suffered from dipsomania. 'Scotland has become one of the drunkest nations in the world', Crosland huffed.

> Whiskey to breakfast, whiskey to dinner, whiskey to supper; whiskey when you meet a friend, whiskey over all business meetings whatsoever; whiskey before you go to the kirk, whiskey when you come out . . . whiskey when you are well, whiskey when you are sick, whiskey almost as soon as you are born, whiskey the last thing before you die – that is Scotland.

Crosland describes the typical Scot as careening violently from whisky-fuelled exhilaration to a 'dour' sobriety. 'You talk with him and get for answers grunts; he does not smile . . . He is glum, rude of tongue, and dull of mind.'

Later, less wild-eyed writers, such as George Douglas Brown, John MacDougall Hay and others, also wrote books depicting an ugly underbelly of Scotch whisky consumption – criminality, ruthless violence and personal destruction through alcoholism.

These depictions were not merely authorial fictions; wherever one finds low-priced distilled spirits in abundance one will find unsettlingly high levels of alcoholism. Just as England suffered when dirt-cheap gin flooded its urban areas, parts of Scotland similarly succumbed to whisky.

In the 1830s Scots aged fifteen and older drank about a pint of licit whisky per week, in addition to illicit whisky and other alcoholic beverages. In parts of the country, whisky became embedded in everyday Scottish life. Whatever the occasion, wee drams of whisky were lifted. A wedding? Drink! A baby born? Drink! Somebody dies? Drink!

The general patterns of whisky drinking differed dramatically. In the rural areas of Scotland, there tended to be few public houses. In Shetland, for example, there was one pub per 1,000 people. Country folks, then, took whisky at home in small amounts throughout the day. A nip of whisky at dawn, another during a work break and a bit at dusk.

Densely settled urban areas were another story. In Glasgow, for example, there was one public house for every 130 people, and this does not count the illegal shebeens where cheap, white-hot whisky often called 'kill-me-deadly' was poured. Both the dreadful urban conditions and machismo encouraged binge drinking. The rules amongst tradesmen shops could be outright baroque. Drink funds were established, and workers could be tithed for both bad and good performance. Did the fire go out while you were tending it? Pay into the drink fund! Did you earn a pay rise? Pay into the drink fund! Once the pot grew large, the workmen would binge mightily, blowing it all on whisky in a night. Fishing and mining towns were especially whisky-sodden. George Bell, a mid-century anti-alcohol advocate, decried what he saw in the slums. 'From the toothless infant to the toothless old man, the population . . . drinks whisky. The drunken drama that is enacted Saturday night and Sunday morning beggars description. The scene is terrible.'

Happily, although the quantity of Scotch whisky produced skyrocketed over the nineteenth century, the Scots' consumption of it declined significantly over time. By 1900, the average adult Scot drank barely over a half-pint of whisky per week. Come 1940, consumption was down to a couple of sips of whisky per week.

Why the drop? It is hard to say. It has been suggested that the development of sports and recreation helped people fill their hours with something other than drink. Temperance societies began cropping up in the first third of the nineteenth

The Ardbeg distillery in Islay, Scotland.

century, and they probably diverted at least a few persons from boozing. Indubitably, a general lifestyle shift occurred, and spending one's nights getting hideously drunk and making a wreck of things became viewed as dysfunctional and lower class. (This shift also has occurred in Ireland and the USA.)

Additionally, governmental action had great effects. The Forbes-Mackenzie Act of 1853 greatly curtailed the hours that pubs could be open, and the Methylated Spirits Act of 1855 increased the government's powers to bust up shebeens and illicit drinking clubs. Slowly but surely, the government's measures reduced the times of day when whisky was available and the number of places that offered it. These policies, combined with gradual tax increases over the decades, increased the costs in money, time and effort that individuals faced if they were to acquire whisky.

## Topography

Scotland is unique in the whiskey world in that its diverse topography has long made for diverse whiskies, especially those bottled as single malts. (Blended whiskies by their very nature lack these place-based differences.)

All Scotch whisky is made from water, peated barley and yeast. Yet a person who has never tasted Scotch could easily detect the difference between a Highland whisky like Glenlivet 12 Year, and an Islay whisky like Laphroaig 10 Year. The former is lightly flavoured, slightly smoky and shows floral and honey notes; the latter whisky floods the mouth and nose with smoke, iodine and seaweed flavours.

The diversity of Scotch whisky is the product of many variables, including different water sources, different types of barley, different yeast strains, different whisky recipes (mash bills), different distilling equipment and different climates in which the whisky ages. A few of these variables are local to the topography; the rest, though, are a matter of the whisky-maker's decisions. Nevertheless, the Scotch whisky industry still categorizes single malt whiskies in terms of five regions.

*Islay* whiskies tend to be the most flavourful malts and typically smell and taste of brine, iodine and smoke. Some of the most well-known Islay whiskies are Ardbeg, Bowmore, Laphroaig and Lagavulin.

Contrarily, *Lowland* whiskies, those produced south of Dundee and Greenock, tend to be mildly flavoured and rarely have any of the Islay-type flavours. Only a few Lowland distilleries remain operating – Auchentoshan, Bladnoch and Glenkinchie.

Just to the east of Islay is *Campbeltown*, once a powerhouse of whisky production. Of the 30 distilleries that once


The five Scotch whisky regions.

operated there, only Glen Scotia and the much-revered Springbank distilleries remain active. Campbeltown produces Islay-like whiskies, though they tend to be less intense, and they show other light flavours.

Some of the most famous Scotch whiskies, such as The Glenlivet, Glenmorangie and Talisker, are made in the Highlands, an area situated immediately above the Lowlands. The distilleries there make an astonishingly diverse range of whiskies. Perhaps the only characteristics that Highland whiskies share are a tendency towards fruity flavours and a generally high quality.

Approximately half of Scotland's distilleries lie in the northeast of the Highlands, an area called the *Speyside*. Some

of its enthusiasts proclaim it to be the crown jewel of the Scotch whisky industry. Indubitably, the Speyside produces many superb whiskies, including Aberlour, Balvenie and The Glen - rothes. However, it is difficult to characterize Speyside whiskies as having a character that is distinct from Highland whiskies. Indeed, Speyside whiskies themselves are remarkably diverse in character, ranging from the light and grassy Glenfiddich to the more robust and fruity Macallan.

## Scotch at the End of the Twentieth Century

Scotch triumphed over the past century. Production soared, crossing 190 million gallons at the end of the century, and the selections multiplied. A dizzying array of terrific blended Scotch whiskies are available, from the low-priced White Horse and The Famous Grouse (*c.* £11 in the UK or US$18/litre), to the high-end Chivas Regal 18 Year Old (£50 or $50), and the

Barrels of whisky ageing at the Glenmorangie distillery in Islay.

super pricy Johnnie Walker Blue Label King George v (£535 or $400). Blends also are being produced at older and older ages. Cutty Sark, known for its bargain brand that was aged just a few years (£25 or $15), now offers twelve-, fifteen-, eighteen- and 25-year-old whiskies.

After decades of obscurity, vatted Scotch whiskies have begun to appear on store and bar shelves again. And single malts, which started the century as a distant second to blends, have become unbelievably popular. Distilleries have responded by offering more variations of their single malt whiskies, releasing them at different ages. In recent years, Talisker, for example, has offered malts at ten, twelve, eighteen, twenty and 25 years. Distillers also have experimented with ageing their Scotches in different casks to produce different flavours. Bowmore distillery, to name just one, has used casks that formerly held bourbon, sherry and Bordeaux wine. All this experimentation, of course, further blurs the differences between the characteristics ascribed to the particular regions' whiskies.