

THE WONDERS AND DANGERS OF POTEEN

By Book Committee

Michael Weekes of Holycross is a well-known and highly regarded personality in his home parish and, indeed, much wider afield. Michael is legendary in GAA circles and in the sphere of voluntary community activity. He is an accomplished historian and writer, as well.

One wouldn't be inclined to associate Michael with a poteen story, but having told a story to us, it was decided that it would be of interest to many, and so, here it is.

Michael received a letter dated 27th March 1984 from Lars Erik Calonius, Staff Reporter, *The Wall Street Journal*, European Bureau, International Press Centre, London. The letter read as follows:

Dear Michael,

Thanks again for your wonderful hospitality during my trip to Limerick. I had a great time – thanks to you and your friends. Since then I've been back to Belfast twice, and then on to Geneva to write a story about the nuclear physics lab run there by the EEC. I hope to get back to your part of the country soon (I may have to traipse around with Reagan [*US President*]) and I'll certainly call you before I leave here so that we can have a drink together. Sincerely, Erik

The letter received by Michael was from the very same L Erik Calonius, who wrote an article for the Wall Street Journal that appeared in that lofty publication in February 1984. Extracts including headlines from the article read as follows:

Headlines

“It May Be Immoral or Illegal, But It Has Irish Friends”; *“Poteen, Ireland’s Moonshine, Is Potent and Can Be Fatal: How a Bishop Was Mised”;* *“Poteen, Irish Moonshine, Is Illegal, But Whiskey Taxes Make It Popular”.*

Extracts from Published Article (1984)

Limerick, Ireland – On a starry night, a dairy farmer stacks up the peat fire in his house, eager to tell his visitor about the magician who lives at the bottom of the lake outside.

But first he pulls down from the shelf a green bottle marked Celebration Cream Sherry. Leaning forward in his chair, he pours himself and his guest two tumblers from the bottle. “Tis a fine, clear stuff,” he declares, examining the crystal liquid against the fire. Handing a tumbler to his guest, he adds, “You treat it kindly.” Indeed, you must; for it isn’t cream sherry that has been offered, but poteen, the legendary illicit whiskey of Ireland.

Rub poteen on a fiddle, the Irish say, and it will play all the sweeter; feed it to a sick calf and by morning it will be well. But drink poteen yourself and you will quickly feel it coursing through your bloodstream like a torchlight parade, leaving you, quite possibly, with a hangover of epic proportions. “The classic test of good poteen,” says an aficionado, “is that you can tell exactly where it is in your body at all times.”

Called “the hard stuff,” “the cure,” “mountain dew,” “holy water” and “Katie Daly,” poteen has been around for centuries but has lately been enjoying a new popularity. Police in the Connemara region, where poteen is made in hidden grottos and windswept islands, estimate that production is three times what it was just a few years ago.

“It’s a year-round process now, where before it was just prior to Christmas that it was made,” says a local policeman.

Poteen’s vogue seems to be linked to the Irish Government’s steadily increasing taxation of legal liquors. Since 1970, liquor taxes have risen fivefold, pushing the price of a fifth of whiskey, for instance, to the equivalent of more than \$15.

The high price of liquor has had a sobering effect on pub life here, with legal drinking down considerably, particularly in rural areas. It has sent shoppers streaming to Northern Ireland by bus and train to buy liquor at half the price. It has provided a multimillion-dollar business for smugglers, who are sneaking truckloads of spirits across the border from Northern Ireland into the Republic. And it has increased the consumption of homemade beer and wine. At the equivalent of less than \$6 a bottle, the fiery poteen is quite a bargain.

The first tax on poteen was levied in 1661; more restrictive was a 1760 law that made private distillation, except under state license, a crime. And to



Confiscated equipment for making the ‘hard stuff’.

be licensed, it was decreed, a distillation operation would have to be of substantial size. Thus was the little man cut out and where the illegal operations began. (“Poteen,” in fact, means “little pot.”)

Since then, police and moonshiners have sought to outwit each other, sometimes at the level of Keystone Cops. In Limerick, a businessman tells this story: The local moonshiner, walking home from the creamery one day, spies a police car going over the hillside, right toward the hiding place of his still. Leaping into a ditch by the roadside, he watches as the police find the works and return to the car with the copper coil and all. They put the hardware in the trunk but can't close the lid.

Just as they are leaving, the moonshiner leaps out of the ditch and lifts the stuff out of the trunk. When the police arrive at the station, they lift the trunk lid; to their great surprise, there is nothing there.

Not that the police have an unmitigated dislike for the stuff. A policeman up in the lake country near Enniskillen in Northern Ireland recalls that after one successful raid on a still, each officer was required to taste a wee bit of the product – “you know, to be able to give evidence that it was poteen,” he says.

Well, they knew that the next day, the county supervisor would pour the stuff down the drain. And when that day came, the drain had been scrubbed, cleaned with bleach and washed out again, and a milk churn had been put at the other end. “That poteen was duly poured down the drain – and duly taken up again,” he says, laughing.

The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland also tried to cut the flow of poteen, and at times almost succeeded. In the 19th century, the Church made poteen-making a reserved sin, meaning that the maker couldn't go to his parish priest for absolution, but had to stand before the bishop himself.

But moonshiners tend to be an incorrigible lot. There is the story, for instance, of a moonshiner who decides to repent and goes to the bishop for absolution. The bishop tells the moonshiner that he must cast his still over a nearby cliff, where the ruins of others lie in a rusting heap below. The man agrees and pulls his little still to the edge of the precipice. But looking down, his eye falls on a still much finer and bigger than his own. He tosses his own still over the edge, complying with the bishop's demand – and then pulls the better one from the pile!

George O'Malley of the Wine and Spirits Association of Ireland says there is risk in drinking any poteen. “It's made by people behind the law who don't have the scientific skills to make it properly,” he says. “They claim that they know by the taste and smell of it and that they know because their great-grandfather told them. But they're making it highly dangerous.”

But seasoned poteen drinkers, who know their poteen maker as a neighbour, say good poteen is easy to discern. “It should be clear to the eye,” says the Limerick dairy farmer, adding that another test is sometimes used: “Put a bit of poteen in a bottle cap, ignite it, and look for a clean blue flame: a yellow flame indicates impurities.”

As the fire grows warmer, and so do the effects of the hard stuff, the dairyman turns the conversation back to the local magician, who, having been punished by his mother for turning himself into a black raven, now must live beneath the lake.

“He’s allowed one concession,” says the storyteller: “to come up once every seven years and ride his white steed upon the lake. The steed is shod in silver shoes, and when the silver shoes are worn thin, he’ll be allowed back to take his place as he formerly was, I think he was up two years ago. So we’ll be keeping a watch for him, riding around the lake, on his white steed with silver shoes.”

He puts down his empty tumbler and returns his gaze to the fire.

And so it was that a staff reporter from arguably one of the most prestigious and influential publications in the world visited Lough Gur and was entertained by Michael Weekes and his friends, including the dairy farmer, and subsequently wrote an entertaining article on poteen, which was published in the *Wall Street Journal*. No doubt, Erik’s partaking of good poteen at Lough Gur and his conversations with Michael and his friends influenced his decision to write the extensive article.

It is hoped that the reader enjoyed the extracts from the article.

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