

Old MacPhunn: New Positions

Charles MacLean

Readers of *SWR* (Issue 28, Spring 2007) will remember that my kinsman and namesake, Charles Maclean of Dunconnel, recently revived the brand name 'Old MacPhunn' for a superb single cask single malt selected for him by Lord Grist and myself.

We were delighted to see it featured in *The Erotic Review*, an organ (if that's the right word) owned by his brother Jamie. Although the connection between whisky and eroticism needs closer examination – I know of only one whisky writer who has done more than scratch the surface of this interesting topic – but it provides us with the opportunity of featuring the arresting cover of this excellent publication.



Meanwhile Charlie Dunco has just published a new thriller, *Home Before Dark*. It's a cracker...

Imagine your daughter was murdered in Florence during her gap year. A random killing; no motive, no clues. The Italian police draw a blank after a year. You become obsessed by the idea of finding her killer, trawl internet chat-rooms (she is a modern girl, and part of the horror of this book is the very contemporary nature of the plot), follow up hunches... You discover that she has left potentially vital information on a friend's lap-top, but before you can reach the friend, she has been grotesquely murdered on the Orient Express – together with her innocent cabin-mate... You follow up other clues; key informants are also slaughtered, and the psychopath is always a step ahead... It transpires that he has planted a bug in your computer which gives him access to all your correspondence, all your investigation... And then it becomes apparent that the person he ultimately wants to settle with... is you...

Like the best horror stories, it creates a stifling, claustrophobic atmosphere; it catches you up so you feel you are a player in the plot, not just an observer. It doesn't let you rest: you wake in the night and carry on reading – at least, I did! And by day you are nervous about using your computer, alerted

to the awesome wizardry of cyberspace. Who might be listening in? Are you really talking to who you think you are? Can you really trust the information you get from the internet? What are the boundaries between 'reality' and 'virtual reality'?

Good fiction has three essential ingredients: it must be imaginative, convincing and well-told. The plot of *Home Before Dark* is marvellously ingenious and unexpected. Sure, there are several useful coincidences, but none so contrived as to create disbelief. Unusually, the story doesn't rely on keeping us, the readers, in the dark, guessing. We have all the information that the protagonists have, and as more pieces of the jig-saw fall into place, we begin to see the potential horror just as the protagonists become aware of it. This is an unusual and confident fictional technique; together with the sophistication of the plot it signals an author at the height of his powers.

The book's achievement is rather summed up on its cover:

HOME BEFORE DARK
You'll wish you were.

Home Before Dark by Charles Maclean
(Hodder & Stoughton, April 2008) ■

The New Rules

Charles MacLean

As you all know, following Diageo's wicked attempt to gull poor Spaniards into thinking 'Cardhu Pure Malt' was the same as 'Cardhu Single Malt' – at least this was the view of their competitors - the SWA set up a committee to look into clarifying and tightening Scotch whisky definitions. It also happened to coincide with the revision of the EU Spirit Drinks Regulations, to provide recognition and protection of geographical indications.

The task the SWA's working party set itself was: "to improve consumer information and reduce the opportunity for imitation and fraud". A Consultation Document was published by DEFRA in December, and may be viewed on www.defra.gov.uk.

In theory you could comment on the

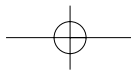
proposed changes as well (until 26th March), but from what we gather the 'Consultation' Document is a done deal - as is the way of bureaucracy. The comments of many of the so-called 'consultees' (even some SWA members we have spoken to) have not been sought and the way the questions have been set out does not permit of disagreement. This certainly seems to be the view among the huge majority whisky enthusiasts, who are particularly exercised by the replacement of the time-honoured term 'vatted malt' with 'blended malt' (see below). There was even a petition organised by John Glaser: 'Say No to Blended Malt Scotch Whisky'.

However, there is much good in the proposals. Here is a lay-mans' guide:

1) In order to be called 'Scotch Whisky' it must be wholly matured in Scotland. [Interestingly, 'Whisky' is spelled with a capital throughout – although this is not specified as being part of the definition...]. So poor old Michel Couvreur et al, who have been finishing their maturation in bat-filled caves in Burgundy for many years will no longer be allowed to do this and sell the result as 'Scotch Whisky'.

2) Further, in order to be called 'Single Malt Scotch Whisky', the whisky (or Whisky) must be bottled in Scotland. This we wholly approve of.

3) In order to make sure nobody continues to mature furth of Scotland, whisky may not



be transported in wooden casks, unless they are lined with plastic! We don't fully understand the concern about continuing maturation abroad – don't the scientists say that it makes no difference to flavour whether the whisky is matured on Islay or in the Central Belt?

Of course, any bulk transportation makes adulteration before bottling easier. Rightly, the Consultation Document flags this up in its introduction:

“Exporting whisky in bulk has, it is believed, led to a lot of adulteration and contamination when it is bottled abroad, which damages the reputation of Scotch Whisky and leaves consumers vulnerable”. Hear, hear!

It is thus mysterious that bulk transportation (in stainless steel tanker or plastic container) is still permitted... “It is recognised that Blended Scotch Whisky has been exported in bulk for local bottling for around 100 years and that bottlers in countries as diverse as the USA, Australia, Brazil and France have built up a considerable business in locally bottled Blended Scotch Whisky”. Oh, yes – and so have the (large) whisky companies who supply them!

4) For the avoidance of consumer confusion there will now be only five categories of Scotch:

Single Malt Scotch Whisky, Single Grain Scotch, Blended Malt, Blended Grain, Blended Scotch Whisky.

In short, what was always known in the trade as ‘Vatted Malt’ (i.e. a mix of malts from more than one distillery) - formerly also labelled ‘Pure Malt’ or simply ‘Malt Whisky’ - is now ‘Blended Malt Scotch Whisky’. This is in the interests of clarity for the consumer.

Mmm. We wonder. The influential consumer group Malt Maniacs (www.maltmaniacs.com) have suggested the terminology should be simply: ‘Single Malt’, ‘Single Grain’, ‘Malt’, ‘Grain’ and ‘Blended Scotch’. In reply to a Swedish whisky club, concerned about the terminology, David Williamson, Public Affairs Manager at SWA replied:

“There was indeed considerable discussion across the industry about what term to use for this category. [Oh yes!] After examining various options and widespread consultation of SWA members and non-members [oh, no there wasn't!], and following discussions with Government, it was agreed that the most appropriate description is 'Blended Malt Scotch Whisky'.

Our members [none that we have spoken to!] believe the term accurately describes what the product is, in a manner which is understandable to consumers worldwide and consistent with EU law [so far as we can tell, this is not the view of most whisky makers and consumers]”.

Ironically, the term ‘vatted malt’ was bombed out immediately by the SWA’s Committee, on the grounds that it was too obscure and would have to be explained to consumers. David Williamson’s letter continues:

“The Association would agree that, in parallel with the introduction of the new rules, there is a need to explain the full range of measures that are being introduced and to promote consumer understanding of the changes”.

5) The regions from which malt whisky originates have been defined as: Highland, Lowland, Speyside, Islay, Campbeltown. This is historical and universally understood, and there is an allowance for ‘Orkney’, or ‘Islay’, etc., where this is appropriate. Good work. Will Diageo may have to re-brand Dalwhinnie as a ‘Speyside’, since it falls within the Highland ward of ‘Badenoch & Strathspey’?

6) Finally, there are the labelling rules – again in the interests of avoiding consumer confusion. But the rules themselves are somewhat contradictory.

There shall be no use of a distillery name unless the malt comes from that distillery. So farewell ‘Stronachie’, ‘Lochindaal’ and anything with ‘-Glenlivet’ as a suffix, presumably. But stay! What about ‘Longrow’ and ‘Hazelburn’, ‘Ledaig’ and ‘Port Charlotte’? The first two are made at Springbank Distillery and have been exempted as a) having been used for years, b) “since consumers are very unlikely to know that there were distilleries called Longrow and Hazelburn, they will not be misled”. The jury’s out about the Port Charlotte, made at Bruichladdich, especially since they are building a distillery of the same name next door. Will the current ‘Port Charlotte’ have to be re-named?

And what about Adelphi Distillery, that well-respected indie bottler, whose name recalls an ex-distillery in Glasgow? Although the labels clearly state ‘Adelphi selection from x or y distillery’, the back label (as required by law) supplies the company name ‘Adelphi Distillery Ltd’. They have been told they must remove the ‘Distillery’ bit.

However, they may have a let-out in the clause which reads:

“In the case of Single Malt Scotch Whiskies sold under the name of a defunct distillery under the exemption, the name of the distillery in which the whisky is distilled should also be on the label”.

Or: “Producers concerned that the brand name may be perceived as the name of the distillery...may resolve the problem by indicating the name of the true distillery on the label”.

Now, while we support the idea of clarity in regards to declaring the producing distillery, we also sympathise with distillery owners who will not allow this – Glenfarclas, for example, which has always taken a very firm stand against anyone who uses its name – and it is after all a brand name, a piece of intellectual property.

Distillery owners are understandably nervous about unscrupulous indie bottlers who bottle casks which are, frankly, below par. I came across a 25yo Macallan, bottled for a Scottish bank two years ago, which was as pale as *vin gris* and still immature. The irresponsible person who sold them the cask should be shot.

One aspect of labelling we wholly support - and so will collectors - is the proposed requirement that where bottles bears a ‘vintage’ date of distillation, it must also state the year of bottling.

As a whole, the proposed new rules, receive our support, and we were impressed by how clearly written the Consultative Document was. It’s a bit New Labour-ish – phrases like “the benefits of tighter legislation” are surely contradictions: legislation is by definition restrictive and benefits only the legislator – and some of the recommendations seem silly (‘Blended Malt’ is surely more likely to be confused with ‘Blended Whisky’ than the traditional ‘Vatted Malt’, etc), but there is much good in it.

Whether it really will (to go back to the start) “improve consumer information and reduce the opportunity for imitation and fraud” remains to be seen. But it’s a step in the right direction.

*I am grateful to Dr. David Wishart for highlighting these areas of concern. ■

