Whisky: The Spirit of Scottish National Identity

By Charles Snodgrass

> ‘Whisky, no doubt, is a devil;
> but why has this devil so many worshippers?’
> — Lord Henry Cockburn, 6 April 1845[1]

Beyond the kitsch culture of kilts lies Scotland’s last, enduring, and somewhat problematic fetish: Scotch whisky. This morning I would like to argue that through a turbulent history of illegal distillation, royal rehabilitation, and now global commodification, Scotch whisky — particularly coveted Single Malt whiskies — functions as the curiously strong signifier of Scottish identity even though there remains an ambivalent acceptance of the spirit by Scots. My working analogy is that whereas whisky often produces unexpected complexities on the palette, it similarly conjures hidden contradictions of what it means to be Scottish. The production of these cultural signifiers manifests in an imbrication of the three categories of fetish (figure 1) — i.e., the anthropological, psychosexual, and commodity fetishes:[2]

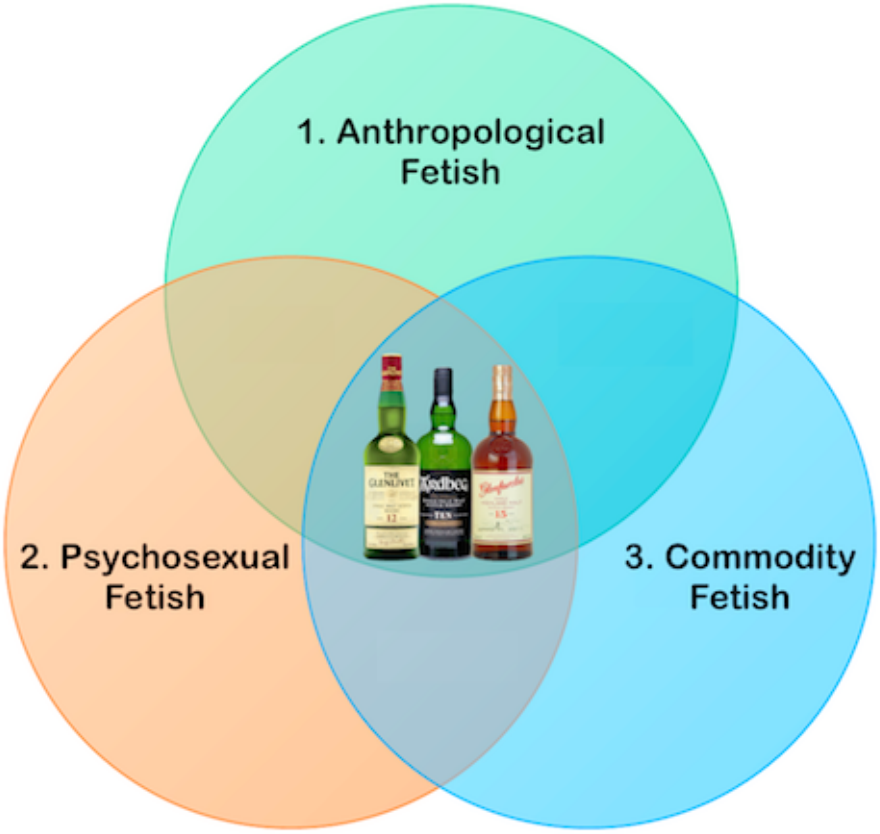

Figure 1. Diagram illustrating how whisky lies at the center of and intersects all three fetish categories.

An eighteenth-century example of the conflation of the anthropological and the psychosexual fetishes appears in Tobias Smollett's 1771 *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* in which the young Oxonian Jeremy Melford observes that, in juxtaposition to the Lowlanders' two-penny beer:

> The Highlanders, on the contrary, despise this liquor, and regale themselves with whisky; a malt spirit, as strong as geneva, which they swallow in great quantities, without any signs of inebriation. They are used to it from the cradle, and find it an excellent preservative against the winter cold, which must be extreme on these mountains — I am told that it is given with great success to infants, as a cordial in the confluent smallpox, when the eruption seems to flag, and the symptoms grow unfavourable.[3]

The psychosexual inflection here reveals itself in the strong spirit which 'they swallow in great quantities, without any signs of inebriation', thereby underscoring the Highlanders' masculinity, whereas the medicinal properties of whisky are administered to infants in allaying smallpox. Thus, whisky — whether

in its Gaelic form of *uisge beatha* or *aqua vitae* ('water of life') as the Romans translated it — often formed a fluid trajectory in a Scot's life, from birth to death. Anthropologically, it was consumed like a protective amulet for strength and good cheer to fortify an infant while it was also quaffed as magical tribute to usher the dead into the spirit-world at the graveside where, traditionally in Scotland, only men were allowed.

Although these anthropological and psychosexual spheres are worthy of further cultural analysis in their own right, my primary interest today lies with whisky as commodity fetish since that realm relies upon the other two spheres to achieve the prominence we witness today. We can see, for example, how these anthropological and psychosexual fetishes merge and then point to the commodity fetish in Walter Scott's immensely popular *Waverley* when its hero Edward Waverley rests among the company of Highlanders and whisky is served:

> The whisky came forth in abundance to crown the cheer. The Highlanders drank it copiously and undiluted; but Edward, having mixed a little with water, did not find it so palatable as to invite him to repeat the draught. […] The liquor was under strict regulation, being served out either by Donald himself, his lieutenant, or the strapping Highland girl aforesaid, who was the only female that appeared. The allowance of whisky, however, would have appeared prodigal to any but Highlanders, who, living entirely in the open air and in a very moist climate, can consume great quantities of ardent spirits without the usual baneful effects either upon the brain or constitution.[4]

Apart from the subtext of whisky being regulated as both a precious commodity in the Highlands but also legally regulated in terms of the 1784 and 1786 Wash Acts' restrictions on exporting whisky south of the Highland line, Scott suggests here that Scottish masculinity is imbued with the ability to 'repeat the [draft]' and 'consume great quantities of ardent spirits' which the English Edward cannot muster. Without imposing an over-determined Freudian reading on such a scene, that these Highland men reach for whisky as 'liquid courage' should not be overlooked: whisky is a mysteriously complex distillation inducing an intoxicating effect that allows for the replacement or substitution of genuine valour and courage with a fleeting liquid machismo.

Figure 2. Sir Edward Landseer, The Illicit Highland Whisky Still (c.1829). (c) English Heritage, The Wellington Collection, Apsley House; Supplied by The Public Catalogue Foundation

Revealing further contradiction, the illicit whisky these Highlanders quaff is of the same ilk that George IV requests specifically during the 'tartan frenzy' of his Royal Visit to Edinburgh in 1822. As Sir Edwin Landseer depicts in his c.1829 *The Illicit Highland Whisky Still* (figure 2), whisky production in the Highlands had chiefly gone underground and, thus, had become illegal due to the punitive and restrictive Wash Acts. In her *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus recounts that:

> One incident connected with this time made me very cross. Lord Conyngham, the Chamberlain, was looking everywhere for pure Glenlivet whisky; the King drank nothing else. It was not to be had out of the Highlands. My father sent word to me — I was the cellarer — to empty my pet bin, where whisky was long in wood, long in uncorked bottles, mild as milk, and the true contraband *gout* in it. Much as I grudged this treasure it made our fortunes afterwards, showing on what trifles great events depend.[5]

This 'mild as milk […] true contraband' became *The* Glenlivet when in 1824 George Smith applied for and received one of the first legal Highland distillery

licenses. Along with The Glenfiddich, The Glenlivet is now one of the most widely distributed Single Malts around the globe, thanks in no small part to a Hanoverian King rehabilitating its uncouth nature.

However, despite whisky being packaged, marketed, and sold around the globe as the iconic Scottish drink, *within* Scotland itself the spirit has received a more critical reception. For example, we can discern a sort of muted nosing, if you will, of the golden liquid in stanzas from Hugh MacDiarmid's 1926 *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*:

> 'Rabbie, wad'st thou were here — the warld hath need,
> And Scotland mair sae, o the likes o thee!
> The whisky that aince moved your lyre's become
> A laxative for aa loquacity.'
> […]
> This munelicht's fell like whisky noo I see't.
> — Am I a thingum mebbe that is kept
> Preserved in spirits in a muckle bottle
> Lang centuries efter sin wi Jean I slept?[6]

Figure 3. Ironizing image juxtaposing Arran Distillery's Robert Burns Single Malt Whisky with a popular culture rendition of Alexander Nasmyth's iconic 1787 portrait, Robert Burns, 1759-1796. Poet.

Rabbie, of course, conjures Robert Burns whose muse was often whisky, but this Ploughman Poet turned Excise Man spoke out stridently against the highly restrictive Wash Acts in poems such as 'Scotch Drink' and 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer' (both in 1786; figure 3). And when the introspective Drunk Man queries whether he is 'kept / Preserved in spirits in a muckle bottle / Lang for centuries', we cannot help but be reminded that MacDiarmid maintained that Scots and Scotland possess an inherent complex identity, and he eschewed an increasingly accepted binary notion of a schizophrenic 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' by arguing in 1931 that:

> The essential point is that all fixed opinions — all ideas that are not entertained just provisionally and experimentally — every attempt to regard any view as permanent — every identification of Scottish genius with any particular religion or political doctrine — every denial of the relativity and transience of all thought, any failure to 'play with' ideas — and above all the stupid (since self-stultifying) idea that ideas are not of prime consequence in their qualitative ratio and that it is possible to be over-intellectual — are anti-Scottish — opposed to our national genius which is capable of countless manifestations at absolute variance with each other, yet confined within the 'limited infinity' of the adjective 'Scottish'.[7]

MacDiarmid's recovery here of a Scottish identity 'capable of countless manifestations at absolute variance with each other' allows for a playful *jouissance* that manifests itself culturally in, for instance, Sean Connery acting in a series of commercials in the early 1990s advertising the Japanese Scotch Whisky Suntory.[8]

If Scotland's arguably most identifiable Scottish National Party poster-boy Sean Connery promoting a *Japanese* 'Scotch' does not smack of 'manifestations at absolute variance with each other' in terms of national identity contradictions and playfulness, little else does. It's worth noting here that in the novels (though typically not in the films), Fleming's Bond is equally fond of whisky and soda as he is of Bourbon and the 'shaken, not stirred' Martini (which were originally gin, rather than vodka).

Granted, Suntory Whisky has achieved success and desirability outwith Scotland in its own right. However, many (Scottish) whisky aficionados question whether it can rightfully be labelled a 'Scotch' whisky since a crucial ingredient

like *Scottish* peat cannot be found outside of Scotland — an integral ingredient from which the oft romanticized land *literally* produces this fetishized beverage.[9] Given my time constraints and in order to move into our own contemporary era wherein the commodity fetish of whisky approaches its zenith, I must unfortunately gloss over here the likewise contradictory conflations replete in the Balmoralization of the late nineteenth century — but which clearly continues — and the besotted buffoonery of Henry Lauder as well as Compton Mackenzie's novel *Whisky Galore* during the early twentieth century and its later film adaptation. However, not without pointing out that our — and Scots themselves' — ability to laugh at such caricatures invokes a kind of internalized schadenfraude that Schopenhauer first identified as 'a mischievous delight' in others' misfortunes so that it becomes an 'impotent cruelty' and 'the worst trait in human nature' and which later Adorno and Horkheimer harness in their discussion of laughter within the culture industry.[10]

Figure 4. The 'Last Fetish' collection of Single Malt Scotch Whiskies produced by various distilleries and labelled tellingly by Moon Import.

So in keeping with this playfulness of Scottish identity vis-à-vis its most iconic drink, several years ago a collection of six Single Malts were produced under the self-ironizing label of 'The Last Fetish' (figure 4). This collection sold in 2014 in Hong Kong at Bonhams Auction House for the cool price of USD$3,789, or roughly $630/bottle. As if these steep prices were not signal enough that whisky

is, indeed, a highly fetishized commodity, the Genoa-based bottler Moon Import chose a series of antique women's shoes — all of which are works of art themselves — to correspond to each desirable bottle and then labelled each bottle in the collection 'The Last Fetish'. Clearly, the psychosexual fetish of women's shoes and, by extension, feet invokes Freud's analysis of podophilia and gives us pause to consider whether Edward Waverley's lack of Highland machismo might be bottled up or even celebrated in this slick marketing strategy.

There are a plethora of cultural references showcasing where Scotch substitutes and stands in for a complex resonance (and sometimes playfulness) of Scottish identity; unfortunately, I don't have time to enumerate them all here today.[11] But, really: how much *would* connoisseurs or collectors pay for a bottle of rare Scotch whisky? They might drop an easy $20,000 on a bottle of fifty-year-old Glenfiddich, made all the more precious because of the 'authenticity' from 'Ancient Reserves'. Perhaps that investment is too quotidian for the quasi-pathological taste, so how about plunking down $460,000 for a bottle of sixty-four-year-old Macallan? It was a steal in 2010 at Sotheby's — not only because of its rarity, but also because the magnum's worth of this once contraband treasure was bottled in a specially-created Lalique Cire Perdue crystal decanter. However, a *true* fetish transcends clinical and cultural logics so that one would happily pay $628,205 for six liters of the Constantine 'M' blend of 25-75 year-old whiskies from Macallan in another specially handcrafted Lalique crystal decanter. By my calculations, that is $3,096 for a single shot, or for the whole bottle the current median price for a single-family home in Napa Valley.

Clearly, my talk this morning has been a visual and spirited excursion of how whisky resonates culturally, particularly for Scotland itself. And so two years ago on this same panel Caroline McCracken-Flesher, responding to Matt Wickman, asserted that:

> at times Cultural Studies has seemed not to mature but to become clichéd as it has moved to the center of critical discourse. Consequently, a literature that emerges through Cultural Studies may be no longer itself. […] But if Scottish Studies — having arisen within Cultural Studies — may not exist beyond that field, Wickman hints that for the same reason it may, by its vagaries, reform or, at the very least, inform Cultural Studies.[12]

I hope that uncorking this complexity of Scottish identity will contribute to that

reform by demonstrating how Scotch whisky intersects authors, artefacts politics, economy, and geography as well as a national psyche. In fact, whisky is not a facile or easily reconcilable fetishized cultural product. It is fraught with the weight of a traditionally Calvinist ethos against the strictures of bodily harm, and it is further complicated through its origins and trajectory of a crude drink for 'unco' folks only while simultaneously being lauded and promoted as a symbol of Scottish masculinity, entrepreneurship, and national freedom, for as Rabbie Burns sang aloud: 'FREEDOM and WHISKY gang thegither, / Tak aff your dram!'[13] *Slàinte mhath!*

References & Further Information

[1] Lord Henry Cockburn, *Journal of Henry Cockburn, Being a Continuation of the Memorials of His Time, 1831-1854*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), 2:105–106.

[2] The original Portuguese *feitiço*, meaning sorcery, during their sixteenth-century colonization of West Africa overlaid a Christian connotation of spirit, magic, or witchcraft onto pagan rituals and practices by heathen group or peoples. While later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century temperance movement slogans decried whisky as demonic and a by-product of the devil and witchcraft — e.g., and Dundee weaver William Topaz McGonagall's poem 1890 'The Demon Drink' and The Temperance Movement (founded in 1929) — a closer ethnographic association of whisky as spirit and magic manifests in the distillation process and in its healing properties. Bearing in mind that distillation in Scotland was an alchemy practice transplanted by the Irish who, in turn, learned it from Persian alchemists, the relatively simple process of transforming the simple ingredients of water and barley into a powerful intoxicant bewildered and mesmerized early Scottish distillers. We can discern a trace of distillation's magical attribute in, for example, Walter Scott's *The Talisman* when he describes how King Richard the Lionheart is 'overpowered by the potent draught' and 'most holy elixir' administered by the Moorish physician El-Hakim, or Sultan Saladin in disguise, thereby reinforcing the anthropological fetish as originating from an Orientalized landscape of the Middle East. For an excellent overview of the three categories of anthropological, psychosexual, and commodity fetishes, see Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen's *Female Fetishism* (New York University Press, 1994), pp.14-46.

[3] Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, 2nd ed., ed. Evan Gottlieb (New York: WW Norton, 2015), p.246.

[4] Walter Scott, *Waverley; Or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, ed. Andrew Hook (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.142.

[5] Elizabeth Grant, *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, ed. Andrew Tod (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1988), p.166 (emphasis in original).

[6] Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle: An Annotated Edition*, ed. Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p.57, 1:61-64; p.75, 2:281-284.

[7] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea' in *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Duncan Glen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): 56–74. p.68.

[8] See, for example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4WzUn94gBQ

[9] Due, in part, to foreign distillery investment firms — such as the giant Beam Suntory, Inc., whose whisky portfolio in Scotland alone includes Bowmore, Laphroig, Ardmore, and Teacher's Highland Cream — producing vast quantities of whiskies and then shipping them unbottled outwith Scotland to be blended with other whiskies around the globe, the Scottish whisky distillers helped to retain the unique character of their products by promoting the Scotch Whisky Regulations of 2009, which states under the section 'Movement from Scotland to another country' that:
(2) During the period until (and including) 22nd November 2012, a person must not move any Single Malt Scotch Whisky from Scotland to another country in a wooden cask or other wooden holder.
(3) On and after 23rd November 2012 a person must not move any Single Malt Scotch Whisky from Scotland to another country except in a bottle (made of any inert material) that is labelled for retail sale. (p.6)

[10] See David E. Cartwright, 'Schopenhauer's Narrower Sense of Morality', in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 252-292, p.276; and see 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', (120-167) in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Verso, 1979), p.140.

[11] Here are a few examples to shore up the cultural work whisky has been doing:

• During every Burns Night (January 25) Scotch is required to make a toast when 'piping in the Haggis'.
• In 2010 Sir Walter Scott's Waterloo Tree quaich, which was stolen from his Abbotsford House in 1994, was returned; the quaich was cut from an elm wood tree on the Battle of Waterloo from which the Duke of Wellington directed his troops.
• Because a quaich represents the Gaelic ceremonial cup of trust, friendship, and kinship, it takes a prominent role in the 2014 Season 1, Episode 4 'The Gathering' of the television adaptation of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series — filled, of course, with the finest of Dougal's whisky for the Clan Gathering.
• In 'The Red-Headed League', Edinburgh-based author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle depicts a whisky-thirsty Holmes when we are told: '"You see, Watson," he explained in the early hours of the morning as we sat over a glass of whisky and soda in Baker Street, "it was perfectly obvious from the first that the only possible object of this rather fantastic business of the advertisement of the League, and the copying of the 'Encyclopaedia', must be to get this not over-bright pawnbroker out of the way for a number of hours every day."' ('The Red-Headed League', in *The Strand Magazine*, August 1891)
• Or again, Watson recalls Holmes bemusing that '"It is very good of Lord St. Simon to honour my head by putting it on a level with his own", said Sherlock Holmes, laughing. "I think that I shall have a whisky and soda and a cigar after all this cross-questioning. I had formed my conclusions as to the case before our client came into the room."' ('The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor', in *The Strand Magazine*, April 1892)
• In the 2001 Season 1, Episode 1 of *Foyle's War* Detective Chief Superintendent Christopher Foyle shares his last — and thus quite expensive due to rationing — bottle of The Glenlivet with his son who is about to muster for World War I.
• In Ian Rankin's 1987 *Knots and Crosses*, Detective Sergeant John Rebus swallows whisky with his younger brother Michael but is secretly jealous because Michael can afford expensive single malt.

[12] Caroline McCracken-Flesher, 'Scottish Studies after Cultural Studies: A Response', in *The Bottle Imp* 15 (Supplement 1, March 2014), 1-2, p.1. See also, Matt Wickman, 'Independence for Whom? or What? Scottish Literature and the Inhuman', 15 (Supplement 1, March 2014), 1-4.

[13] Robert Burns, 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer, to the Right Honorable, The Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons', in *Poems, Chiefly in the*

Scottish Dialect (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1786), p.39.

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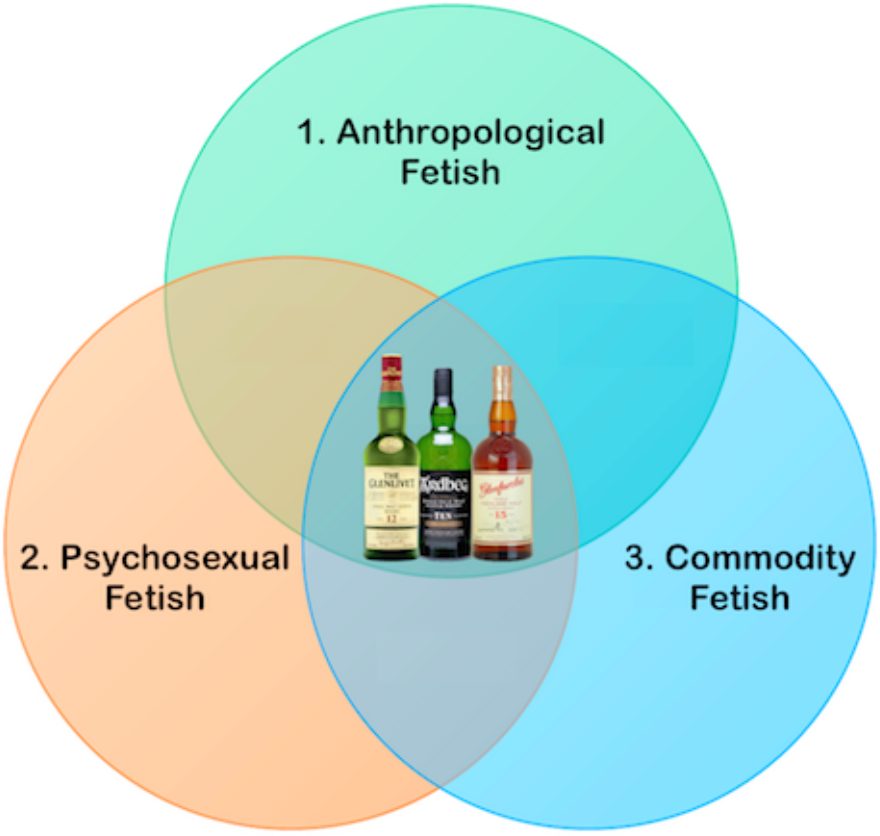

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So in keeping with this playfulness of Scottish identity vis-à-vis its most iconic drink, several years ago a collection of six Single Malts were produced under the self-ironizing label of 'The Last Fetish' (figure 4). This collection sold in 2014 in Hong Kong at Bonhams Auction House for the cool price of USD$3,789, or roughly $630/bottle. As if these steep prices were not signal enough that whisky is, indeed, a highly fetishized commodity, the Genoa-based bottler Moon Import chose a series of antique women's shoes — all of which are works of art themselves — to correspond to each desirable bottle and then labelled each bottle in the collection 'The Last Fetish'. Clearly, the psychosexual fetish of women's shoes and, by extension, feet invokes Freud's analysis of podophilia and gives us pause to consider whether Edward Waverley's lack of Highland machismo might be bottled up or even celebrated in this slick marketing strategy.

There are a plethora of cultural references showcasing where Scotch substitutes and stands in for a complex resonance (and sometimes playfulness) of Scottish identity; unfortunately, I don't have time to enumerate them all here today.[11] But, really: how much *would* connoisseurs or collectors pay for a bottle of rare Scotch whisky? They might drop an easy $20,000 on a bottle of fifty-year-old Glenfiddich, made all the more precious because of the 'authenticity' from 'Ancient Reserves'. Perhaps that investment is too quotidian for the quasi-pathological taste, so how

about plunking down $460,000 for a bottle of sixty-four-year-old Macallan? It was a steal in 2010 at Sotheby's — not only because of its rarity, but also because the magnum's worth of this once contraband treasure was bottled in a specially-created Lalique Cire Perdue crystal decanter. However, a *true* fetish transcends clinical and cultural logics so that one would happily pay $628,205 for six liters of the Constantine 'M' blend of 25-75 year-old whiskies from Macallan in another specially handcrafted Lalique crystal decanter. By my calculations, that is $3,096 for a single shot, or for the whole bottle the current median price for a single-family home in Napa Valley.

Clearly, my talk this morning has been a visual and spirited excursion of how whisky resonates culturally, particularly for Scotland itself. And so two years ago on this same panel Caroline McCracken-Flesher, responding to Matt Wickman, asserted that:

> at times Cultural Studies has seemed not to mature but to become clichéd as it has moved to the center of critical discourse. Consequently, a literature that emerges through Cultural Studies may be no longer itself. […] But if Scottish Studies — having arisen within Cultural Studies — may not exist beyond that field, Wickman hints that for the same reason it may, by its vagaries, reform or, at the very least, inform Cultural Studies.[12]

I hope that uncorking this complexity of Scottish identity will contribute to that reform by demonstrating how Scotch whisky intersects authors, artefacts politics, economy, and geography as well as a national psyche. In fact, whisky is not a facile or easily reconcilable fetishized cultural product. It is fraught with the weight of a traditionally Calvinist ethos against the strictures of bodily harm, and it is further complicated through its origins and trajectory of a crude drink for 'unco' folks only while simultaneously being lauded and promoted as a symbol of Scottish masculinity, entrepreneurship, and national freedom, for as Rabbie Burns sang aloud: 'FREEDOM and WHISKY gang thegither, / Tak aff your dram!'[13] *Slàinte mhath!*

(c) The Bottle Imp