ON METHERS AND OTHER ANCIENT DRINKING VESSELS.

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DEAN SWIFT, in his literal translation of "Plearaca na Ruanach," or "O'Rourke's Noble Feast," written about 1720 in the Irish language by Hugh M'Guaran, Esq., a contemporary of Carolan, calls this drinking vessel a *madder:*

> "O'Rourke's noble fare will ne'er be forgot
> By those who were there, and those that were not:
> His revels to keep, we sup and we dine
> On seven fat sheep, fat bullocks and swine;
> Usquebaugh to our feast in pails was brought up,
> An hundred at least, and a *madder* our cup."

The following lines have been quoted from an old poem of 1689, by a gentleman of reliable authority in such matters:—

> "With that the porter brought 'em out
> A *madder* which was shov'd about;
> Which though 'twas reckoned but a small one,
> Contained three *halfs* of a whole gallon."

The mether, or madder, is an ancient mead-cup, a fermented beverage still compounded in some parts of Ireland, and composed of honey boiled with water. It has been denied that this vessel was a mead-cup. The very name of the article I humbly consider a sufficient testimony of its having been used in drinking *mead*, or *metheglin*, the favourite beverage of the Celtic tribes.

It would appear, that at a very early age of the world, this liquor must have been in general use, for Hugh Miller, in his "Testimony of the Rocks," says (on the authority of the celebrated oriental linguist and antiquary, Sir William Jones), that Satyarrata (Noah, perhaps) drunk *mead*, and became senseless. The Teutones who, ages ago, inhabited northern Europe, used methers in quaffing this drink for thirty days after a marriage amongst them. My fair friends will learn that from this custom comes the curious, but familiar expression, "to spend the honeymoon." "The mether is now entirely disused, or only to be found in the remotest wilds of our country." It is generally modelled from the wood of the alder or crab tree, sometimes of sycamore or sallow, quadrangularly formed at the top, although round at the bottom. These drinking vessels are usually about eight inches high, and in circumference, about one foot outside measurement.

Some, however, much larger and smaller, have been frequently found at considerable depths in bogs or turbaries, their high state of preservation being, no doubt, owing to the bituminous quality and antiseptic properties of those deposits. Methers, having four handles, are now very rare, and are seldom seen except in museums, or, perhaps, in old families resident in remote and sequestered districts, which have escaped the vigilant researches of itinerant collectors. In the Catalogue of the Royal Irish Academy it is stated that there is in that collection thirteen two-handled, and thirteen four-handled methers, in three of which latter the handles are prolonged into feet. A large specimen, fourteen inches deep, and which would contain three quarts, was, about four years ago, discovered in a moss-bank, somewhere in the county of Fermanagh; it was filled with *adipocere*, or bog-butter, and, from the locality in which it was found, it is conjectured that it must have been buried there for centuries. It may have been intended to contain beer or butter, being too capacious to drink *aqua vitæ* out of. A well-informed writer on this subject suggests "that whiskey, which, comparatively speaking, is of recent introduction, cannot be taken draught-wise." I may be pardoned the digression if I state, on the same authority, that it was first distilled about the year 1550, amongst the English settlers in this country, "*for supplying the Irishry.*" In Queen Mary's reign, A. D. 1554, an Act was passed "prohibiting any but peers from distilling it," the restrictive powers having been vested in the Crown. According to Lodge, the Scottish Solomon (who, like most of his canny countrymen, always looked to number one) rewarded his noble favourites, doubtless for a *con-si-der-ation* (like old Trapbois), "by licensing them, not only to make *aqua vitæ* (whiskey), but to keep public houses for the sale thereof." Mr. Bell, of Dungannon, possesses an extensive collection of methers in every variety. One in his cabinet was made of horn, and, amongst the many and curious historical articles exhibited by him at Belfast in 1852, during the visit to that city of the British Association and his Excellency the Earl of Eglinton, was a mether with eight handles, the only one of the description I have seen or heard of. It is supplied with two bottoms, betwixt which are placed several small stones, which, when the vessel is raised or shaken, produced a rattling sound. Authorities too well known to require commentary or confirmation, have stated "that mether-making was at one time a respectable and profitable occupation in Ireland;" but now to say that such a great man's grandfather was a mether-maker would be considered (as Bailie Nicol Jarvie says) "a little on the north side of civility." A friend of mine told me that foreigners, who had resided at the mansions of some of the Scottish nobility, about the beginning of the present century, had assured him that there they had frequently met with methers, a few of which were clumsily made of solid silver.

As much controversy has arisen regarding the Dunvegan Cup, mention should be here made of this celebrated antique, which belongs to Macleod of Macleod, and has been sent for exhibition to the Edinburgh Antiquarian Society's Museum, and was also exhibited at the Dublin Exhibition in 1853. This cup was for centuries actively employed in the streaghs, or rounds, by which Gaelic term the rude and rollicking hospitalities of those periods were called. The following extract from the "University Magazine" of November, 1858, p. 637, has invested this subject with peculiar interest, and from which it appears that the long pending controversy has terminated:—

"We cannot omit a congratulatory observation, that the Dunvegan Cup, long claimed by antiquaries of the Land of Cakes as a sumptuous pre-historic specimen of Scotish art, and celebrated as such in the 'Lord of the Isles,' has recently been acknowledged by them as a chalice carved and set with jewels *in the fifteenth century*, at the cost of Catherine Macgrannal, wife of Maguire, Prince of Fermanagh."

It has also been shown by Mr. E. Curry, who examined the inscription upon this cup, when exhibited in Dublin, that it was of Irish manufacture (*vide* note in Wilde's "Catalogue"). The following is Sir Walter Scott's descriptive notice, in poetry and prose, of this cup, and which I print *in extenso*, as too curious and interesting to be omitted or curtailed:—

"'Fill me the mighty cup,' he said,
'Erst own'd by Royal Somerled;
Fill, till on the studded brim
In burning gold the bubbles swim,
And every gem of varied shine
Glow doubly bright in rosy wine!'

"A Hebridean drinking-cup, of the most ancient and curious workmanship, has been long preserved in the Castle of Dunvegan, in Skye, the romantic seat of Mac Leod, the chief of that ancient and powerful clan. The horn of Rory O'More, preserved in the same family, is not to be compared with this piece of antiquity, which is one of the greatest curiosities in Scotland. The following is a pretty accurate description of its shape and dimensions:—It is $9\frac{3}{4}$ inches inside depth, and $10\frac{1}{2}$ in height on the outside, the extreme measure over the lips being $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The cup is divided into two parts by a wrought ledge, beautifully ornamented, about three-fourths of an inch in breadth. Beneath this ledge the shape of the cup is rounded off, and terminates in a flat circle, like that of a tea-cup; four short feet support the whole. Above the projecting ledge, the shape of the cup is nearly square, projecting outward at the brim. The cup is made of wood (oak, to all appearance), but most curiously wrought and embossed with silver-work, which projects from the vessel. There are a number of regular projecting sockets, which appear to have been set with

stones; two or three of them still hold pieces of coral; the rest are empty. At the four corners of the projecting ledge, or cornice, are four sockets, much larger, probably for pebbles or precious stones. The workmanship of the silver is extremely elegant, and appears to have been highly gilded. The ledge, brim, and legs of the cup are of silver. The family tradition bears, that it was the property of Neil Ghlune-Dhu, or *Black-knee*. But who this Neil was, no one pretends to say. Around the edge of the cup is a legend in Latin, perfectly legible, in old English or black-letter capitals—'Ufo Johannis Mich. Magni Principis de hi Manae Vich Liahia Magryneil et sperat Domino Ihesu dari clementiam illi deae ipsa. Fecit Anno Dom. 993. Onili Oirni.'"

This, being the reading of the late Sir Walter Scott, may thus run in English—

"Ufo, the son of John, the son of Magnus, Prince of Man, the grandson of Liahia Macgreyneil, trusts in the Lord Jesus that their work (i. e. his own, and those of his ancestors) will obtain mercy. O'Neil Oirni made this in the year of God 993."

There is another reading by Dr. Wilson, author of the "Prehistoric Annals of Scotland," and which learned work contains a drawing of the Dunvegan Cup. The following is Dr. Wilson's reading, as published in the Proceedings of the Scottish Antiquarian Society:—

"Katharina mg Ryneill, uxor Johannis meg maguir, principis de Firmanach, me fieri fecit Anno Domini 1493. Oculi omnium in te sperant Domine, et tu das escam illorum in tempore opportuno."

Sir Walter's notice concludes in these words—

"The workmanship of the whole cup is extremely elegant, and resembles, I am told, antiques of the same nature preserved in Ireland."

I shall not stop to consider the contradiction contained in the date inscribed on the cup, viz., 993, with that involved in the decision which "acknowledges it to be a chalice of the fifteenth century;" nor shall I attempt to determine whether the Dunvegan Cup be a mether or a chalice; but I hope I may be permitted to say, without being charged with presumption, that I have not seen or heard of any other cup, similarly fashioned, that is *not* a mether. Many methers, too, were incised with a figure of the cross, which was, probably, considered as a safeguard, as evidenced by the following incident, contained in a narrative of a King of Meath, and which is related by some ancient fabulist. This monarch, having been proffered a mether containing aconite, placed his forefinger on one corner of the cup, and then on the other, until making the sign of the cross over the mouth. He then inquired, with a knowing

look, out of which corner he should drink, and not having been answered by the astonished *kerns*, he immediately quaffed the deleterious draught with impunity.

The mether, however, appears to have been the only form of ancient quaffing vessel used in Ireland; it then follows that their chalices have been similarly shaped, and as the Dunvegan Cup contains not only a religious inscription, but "that within the mouth the letters J. H. S. are repeated four times," we may reasonably conclude that in the holy offices of the Church it was used as a sacrificial vessel. Travellers who have penetrated into distant regions of the east and west, have there recognised wooden vessels as identical with, or which bore a marked resemblance to the Irish mether. The late Mr. Reynolds, of the Royal Navy (K. L. H.), informed me that at El-Arish, on the confines of the Holy Land and Egypt, he had seen a utensil designed for domestic purposes, which in form was not much different from our mether; and Dr. C. F. Moore assured me that, when he visited Asia Minor some years ago, he was much struck with the similarity between wooden vessels used by the inhabitants of Trebizond, Samsoon, and the adjacent country, and those ancient drinking-cups (or methers) he had examined in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy, and also in my possession. He also observed in the same localities wooden vessels, which the people call *kuva*, or *kufer*, that resemble, in some respects, the noggin still in vogue in the Irish hovels and Scottish highlands—

> "Where the bleak Celt their stormy mansions tread,
> And force a churlish soil for scanty bread;"

both being made with staves, bound together with hoops, and having a simple handle fixed on one side. Here, however, the similitude ceases, for the eastern vessel is furnished with a spout, and is of different form and dimensions,—the proportions being about ten inches high, broader at the bottom than at the top, where it is nearly ten inches in diameter, while that at the mouth is not more than seven inches.

Scott, in a subsequent portion of his popular poem, makes mention of a goblet called a mazer. Respecting this goblet, my information is meagre and scanty indeed, nor does it appear to have been known prior to the reign of James III., who was slain in battle A. D. 1488.

> "'Bring here,' he said, 'the mazers four,
> My noble fathers loved of yore;
> Thrice let them circle round the board,
> The pledge, fair Scotland's right restored.'"

Mention is made of the mazer in Thompson's "Inventories of the Treasure of James III.," thus, "Item four Masaris called King Robert the Brocis with a cover." When in Scotland I was told that the brass dish or saucer suspended at the doors of barbers' shops, and which are to be seen in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling, &c., are designated mazers, a symbol which I believe in North Britain has continued in use since the practice of blood-letting, shaving, and peruke-making was united in the profession of "barber-chirurgeon."

Dr. Samuel Johnson, in "A Journey to the Western Islands," &c., describes Rory O'More's Cup:—

"In the house is kept an ox's horn, hollowed so as to hold, perhaps, two quarts, which the heir of Macleod was expected to swallow at a draught, as a test of his manhood, before he was permitted to bear arms, or could have a seat among men."

The Kavanagh or Macmurragh Horn, deposited in the Museum of the University of Dublin, is, I presume, of a similar character with that of Rory O'More, above described. Both horns I consider to be of much more modern invention than the mether. In commenting on the Kavanagh Horn, as a fine work of decorative art, Mr. Wilde observes—

"That cups or goblets were placed beside most of the public road wells of Ireland, even in Pagan times; and it is related that in the reign of Conn of the Hundred Battles, and of his grandson, Cormac Mac Art, who flourished between the years 123 and 266 of the Christian era, so great was the wealth of this kingdom, and such the virtue of its people, as well as the administration of the Brehon Laws, that silver cups were placed at each road-side well for travellers to drink with. Brian Boroimhe, about the year 1000, revived this ancient custom, and put in force the law which sustained it; and it is to this golden age that Moore's lines of 'Rich and rare were the gems she wore,' refer."

The difference between the mether and the quagh or bicker, so well known in Scotland, is, that the latter is much smaller, and a cooper-made article with hoops and staves. There was also a drinking-vessel used in Scotland, called a *Cogue* or *Coggie*, composed of the same materials as the mether or bicker, but different from them as being destitute of a handle. The Duke of Gordon, in his *auld* song, "Cauld kail in Aberdeen," has immortalized the coggie. His Grace sings:—

"There's cauld kail in Aberdeen,
And costocks in Strathbogie;
When ilka lad maun hae his lass,
Then fye, gie me my coggie."

In comfortable Highland families small drinking vessels, or dram-cups made of silver or horn, were used, called *tassies*. From the protracted alliance between the natives of Scotia Minor and the French, it appears in the highest degree probable that this dram-cup might have been introduced into Scotland by the French, and that *tassie* is a mere corruption of the word *tasse*, which has been slightly altered by a change of pronunciation.

"I pledge wi glee my bonnie lassie,
In this last nappie, siller tassie.
O Cogue o swats, is na bad fare,
But barley bree gie me my share."

In the opening stanza of Burns' "Bonnie Mary," mention is also made of this small cup or can:—

"Go fetch to me a pint of wine,
An fill it in a silver tassie;
That I may drink, before I go,
A service to my bonnie lassie."

The Irish noggin, before alluded to, is not unlike the Scotch coggie, but of larger dimensions. The coggie differs from the bicker as being without a handle. It would seem as if the good people of Cork were familiar with the cogue about a century ago, for Jackson, the celebrated composer and performer on the Irish pipes, names one of his lively *strinkins*, or jigs, "Jackson's Cogue." The caup of Scotland and the caupin of Ireland are the same. A stoup is a kind of jug with a handle.

Methers, seventy years ago, were, in many instances, manufactured of massive silver, a few of which, I have been assured by a gentleman conversant with the habits and history of this country, are still extant; and that, about the year 1828, several were in the possession of the Earl O'Neil at Shane's Castle. By-the-by, I think the Four Masters mention, that in the olden times we had an Irish artificer who was employed in the construction of metallic methers.

The author of Waverley describes a drinking-vessel called "a tappit hen," which was formerly in common use, and contained three quarts of claret:

"Weel she lo'ed a Hawick gill,
And leugh to see a tappit hen."

"I have seen," said he, "one of those formidable stoups at Provost Haswell's, at Jedburgh, in days of yore. It was a pewter measure [a metallic methèr], the claret being, in ancient days, served from the tap, and had the figure of a hen on the lid. In later times the name was given

to a glass bottle of the same dimensions. These are rare apparitions among the degenerate topers of modern days.

"The use of the four handles in the mether appears evidently for the greater convenience of passing the cup round from one to another, and in drinking out of it you must apply one of the four corners to your mouth."

An instructive writer in "The Dublin Penny Journal," before quoted, states that the Marquis of Townsend, when he retired from the Viceroyalty of Ireland, regularly introduced methers at his dinner parties in London, when his guests usually applied the side of the vessel to the mouth, and seldom escaped with a dry neckcloth, vest, or doublet. His Lordship, however, after enjoying the mistake, called on his *fidus achates*, Colonel O'Reilly, "to teach drill, and handle the mether in true Irish style."

The following humorous anecdote I have heard narrated in the convivial circles of Dublin, a city some years past celebrated for its hospitality, sociality, and good fellowship:—

Some sixty years since, a jolly and hospitable alderman of the old "ascendancy" school, who had realized a splendid fortune from small beginnings and plodding industry, invited several of the English aristocracy (then staying in Dublin), the theatrical *artistes*, and musical *dilettanti*, to dine at his mansion in M—— square. During the repast the subject of conversation turned on the manners and customs of the metropolitan Irish, when a military *parvenu*, after indulging in several inopportune national reflections, lisped out, with true Cockney aspirations, "The Hirish society I ham accustomed to move in, practise precisely the same manners and usages as the English haristocracy in London, to which I belong." After dinner, according to custom, magnums of the richest and rarest wines were served, and Burgundy drank out of cups which few persons present had seen before. They were methers, some of which were carved from solid blocks of alder or yew-trees; others laid with argent mounting of chased silver. The English guests, in endeavouring to drink from these, instead of imbibing from the corners of the cup, applied their mouths to the sides, when two streams flowing from the aperture at each corner copiously drenched their dresses, amidst roars of laughter from the initiated topers: on which Jack Johnstone, the famous and favourite Irish actor, exclaimed, with a joyous banter and brogue peculiarly national, at the same time lustily striking with his open hand the ensanguined back of the enraged aid-de-camp, "Be the powers, captain, there appears to be a trifle of difference in the manner of drinking wine in London and Dublin!"