Stories & Sips

WHISKEY CLUB

The History of Irish Whiskey Podcast

Episode 4

SPEAKERS
Fionnán O'Connor, Barry Chandler

Barry Chandler 00:12
There's a great show that aired on Irish television years ago called Reeling in the Years. And it would focus on just one year in Irish history. And I was always surprised just how much had happened in this one year in Irish history, whether its music economy, world affairs, things were happening globally that Ireland was perhaps affected by. And it's the same I think with this episode.

Barry Chandler 00:32
This is an episode where we're focusing on quite a short period of time compared to our other episodes, 70 year period, yet so much has happened in the 70 years that has altered the course of Irish whiskey, its trajectory, its history, its journey, what it would become, and we've allowed to squeeze in. And we're going to go straight in and start with a big seminal moment, the passing of the 1823 Act, which helped the Irish whiskey become what it is what we know today. Help us understand what led up to the creation of this act, what it was and what its impact was on Irish whiskey.

Fionnan 01:09
Yeah, I mean, more than any single piece of legislation shaped the identity of Irish whiskey shaped the identity of whiskey full stop. And it was the result of the poitin wars and you see publications like cruelties and oppressions, of the revenue. There's all kinds of stuff in circulation at this point. And it's the result of a committee you know, actually Aeneas Coffey of all people who then was working for the excise was one of the consultants on 1823,

Barry Chandler 01:36
The creator of the man who column still later on his career,

Fionnan 01:39
But originally an excise man and actually retired from the excise just after 1823. But anyway, there's, there's a whole there's a few of them kind of bundled together as acts in quick succession, but they'll get collectively referred to as 1823 reforms and there's numerous kind of detailed ones, but the big heavy hitters are the redefinition of faints and the abolition of old tax collection methods so that the whole thing about how much whiskey you can theoretically make that's all done away with that's gone.

Fionnan 02:10
And then the third and possibly even more influential than the other two is the permission not to pay tax until mature whiskey is decanted from a cask. You're creating bonded regulation where you can sit. No, you still have to pay tax down the road, but you're not obliged to pay up front. And so long term this creates much lengthier maturation as you start getting, there's a bit of a warehouse rent, but there's no real reason not to age cask or if you don't have capital, you can age cask and then sell for more and backpay, and so forth.

Barry Chandler 02:56
Was there any requirement prior to 1823 of how old whiskey had to be?

Fionnan 02:59
Not at all that actually comes very late that comes in the early 20th century. When we got the heart legislation that's under Lloyd George, it was mostly to kind of rein in the column distiller from flooding the markets or keep them under heel. But for most of history, there's no rule. And yeah, you get from the redefinition of faints is a subtle one, but an important one, because things had been defined by alcohol content before. And then when these reforms are passed, faints, as in heads and tails become anything that's not anything that's passed into a faints receiver.

Barry Chandler 04:11
Let's talk about this piece about the faints. So can you explain a little bit about what faints are during the distillation process?

Fionnan 04:18
Yeah, so when you distill it in a very basic sense, you're separating alcohol from water based on volatility. And so the most volatile stuff comes off first, it boils off first becomes the first vapor and then naturally condenses into the first liquid afterwards. And the stuff with the lowest boiling point and shared conditions comes off last. And so when stuff comes off of a still it tastes radically different from one end to the other. Now, the first stuff is toxic methanol and all that stuff. Stuff that can kill you and make you blind and do all kinds of wonderful things.

Fionnan 04:53

And that manifests itself even in illicit distilling where you have poitin distillers, throwing the first two jars over the shoulder for the fairies kind of stopped this probably is a Darwinian, you know, evolution of folklore, but people understood with ultimate stuff can taste really foul and then so that's heads. And after the toxic stuff, there's a whole kind of like nail polish remover kind of smell to a lot, but it's a very, very sharp unpleasant smell. And then you start getting like, and again, depending on mash bill, this can be changed and peating and so forth to kind of a very basic version I was once given an in double distilled malt and moving from the headsiest stuff would be kind of citrus flavors, sharper kind of horrible candies.

Fionnan 05:34
And then you get into kind of juicier citrusy stuff and jucier kind of melon, and you get more kind of plush, fatty estery fruit, you know, again, that kind of melony stuff, and then you get it all starts to get a little waxy kind of honey comb, and from honey into honeycomb. And then into kind of a more leathery kind of old house, see old leather kind of stuff. And then it starts starting to taste like tobacco, and then at the back, and it starts to taste like socks and gym shoes and all kinds of sweaty, unpleasant things. And then you get stuff that's very, very low and alcohol content as well. And more watery dregs the stuff and that'd be called the tails.

Barry Chandler 06:11
And prior to 1823, all of this was taxed, whether it ended up in the final spirit or not.

Fionnan 06:17
Yeah, as long as there's a critical mass of alcohol, and it counts as faints. And because it was all based on the development of testing alcohol, which originally again, you get gunpowder testing, and then you get the hydrometer eventually, and they get better at calculating alcohol. But that's the only way they have a means of trying to control distillers around what gets taxed and what doesn't.

Fionnan 06:36
And then yeah, it becomes very simple. There's just a living excise man who's keeping an eye on you. And as long as that's the case, you put something into a faints receiver and it doesn't go into a barrel and you don't have to pay tax on it. Within that world some distillers and I think it helps people get their head around distilling as a practice, if you take talk about taking a narrow cut, versus a wide cut, if you take a wide cut, you can end up with a very heavy whiskey and some what we call wide cuts today, or wide cuts that are within healthy parameters.

Fionnan 07:05
We're not talking about taking like noxious stuff or gym shoes, it's actually all a very narrow band now in comparison to what was going on before, but it still helps navigate, you know, where do you take the cut? And how big is the cut? Is it more from the back is it more from the front, does it cover more space. And all of that nuance that you hear distillers talk about today, again, is within a comparatively narrow band in comparison to just like mass product that was being pumped out beforehand.

Fionnan 07:33

And 1823 really facilitates the beginning of that process. And it also coincidentally allows in that system, you would never be able to triple distill. Because you're paying, you're shoving the alcohol content of the things up again, you're being taxed literally almost twice on stuff that you're not using, you're getting less product, it's just completely commercially unfeasible. So even the whole idea of triple distillation in Ireland is a delayed child of the 1823 reforms.

Barry Chandler 08:00
So the immediate effect of that portion of the act was to allow for perhaps cleaner whiskey. For us to eliminate more of those elements of heads and tails, we don't want get a cleaner cut. And whiskey now starts to improve, perhaps as we might think of it compared to what they've been served up to, then.

Fionnan 08:23
Absolutely, it becomes a different, it becomes a different drink very quickly, in terms of the spirit, commercial spirit. And the whole idea of poitin being better than or even safer to drink, than parliament was tied up with the fact above all cutting a farm distiller could make something that was relatively safe.

Fionnan 08:42
And you get some commercial proprietors who would do that, but you've got a lot of chances. And you also see a huge jump in distilleries in Ireland before or after 1823 Because that old legislation had really shoved down the number, it gets very, very low. And then it suddenly makes a jump up to about 79. You know, almost overnight almost doubles. And as the 20th century progresses, funnily enough, those distilleries the number goes down again, but the distilleries get bigger and bigger and production goes up.

Barry Chandler 09:15
Let's talk about the second aspect of the Act, which was the changing in the requirements of the size of stills, was it at the time?

Fionnan 09:23
Yeah, you get the whole idea of capacity tax goes out of the window, the idea of like, you get taxed more because of a large operation, because it's presumed you can make more whiskey. And a lot of is to do with the excise just getting more efficient, and worry less about how it's going to collect tax. And when you start getting live in excise man, and this and that.

Fionnan 09:44
And again, they've already been kind of rewarding scale for a little while, and so does the idea that there's always the idea of trimming the number of distilleries to and making them larger so they're easier to keep tabs on and that process has already been going on for a little while. Now again, the number of spikes then it relatively quickly falls down again, there's parallels that could be drawn with our own time. Not since any 1823 has there been such an immediate boom in Irish distilleries as there has been in the last 10 years. And that will be comparable to what we're seeing now, the last time that happened was 1823.

Barry Chandler 10:18

And this, I want to come back to the third aspect, which is the bonding, whiskey bonding, which is fascinating. But if we think about some big dates in Irish whiskey history, for example, the creation of Midleton, old Midleton as a distillery 1825. Are they encouraged perhaps inspired excited by the 1823 Act?

Fionnan 10:39
Yeah, they belong to that sudden rush of I mean, not everyone makes it you get distilleries, who jump in and then peter out within 10 years, but then some of them become yeah, long term players. And then some that had been around beforehand are definitely given an injection of cash and confidence.

Fionnan 10:55
And so you get the likes of again, say Bushmills is older than the 1823 act, or locks are some of these, but they're definitely stabilized by and then you get some like, Midleton, who are and you see them in Scotland as well, because at this time, we're sharing the same laws, but you look at the sheer number of distilleries that are, again, around this kind of 1810, in Scotland's case 1816 and in Ireland 1823. Whiskey is becoming an industry that resembles the modern industry, at this point,

Barry Chandler 11:24
The whiskey maturation aspect of that acts then, in terms of delaying deferring the tax due until the maturation of the whiskey. What was the thinking behind that? And what impact did that have on the changing landscape of Irish whiskey?

Fionnan 11:40
It's easier to control in one sense, if you know what's going into a bottle, you can tax that. You're able at this stage as an excise official to keep just the organization when we go all the way back to 1661. When the excise is great, they had no idea what they were doing. They had no technology for measuring alcohol, they were dealing with a hostile landscape and a novel system scattered all over the place. And then fast forward to 1823.

Fionnan 12:08
And the excise resembles a bureaucratic institution, we're seeing the fledgling years of a kind of British Empire mentality, an empire built on trade and bureaucracy, trade ships and bureaucrats. And it starts to resemble a government office, and it just looks more efficient. And so it's possible to create the systems based on keeping better tabs, it's no longer this kind of fret, and

Barry Chandler 12:32
They have more security in the security of the system or are there more confidence in the system is more contained than it's ever been from a tax perspective?

Fionnan 12:41
Yeah. And of course, if you encourage people to make more whiskey as a tax collecting office, you're going to collect more tax because there's more whiskey being made. So in a cynical perspective, it is and that was a big motivation behind 1823 was to foster industry. And that's a big part of the ethos of the times industriousness, it's a big key word of the 19th century, for better or for worse.

Barry Chandler 13:01
Is the benefit to the distillers at the time on the tax collected at bottling stage that the angel share portion is not taxed in the sense that there is a perhaps an agreed loss.

Fionnan 13:12
Yeah. And there's all kinds of measurements that get they talk about reasonable loss and things are with us to this day, spillage. Angels share this. And now there's an understanding that someone's not just funneling it as the back on again. Yeah, the idea that you're, it's all about being taxed on material liquid and not being taxed on what goes into a cask but what comes out of a cask.

Fionnan 13:32
And the angel shares a part of that. And it's better understood now that the distillers aren't just lying. It's not just all going missing. There is science behind this. And so again, a better understanding. But then, also, it's just easier to concentrate on materials on liquids, proof spirit, bottled whiskey, real tangible things, not the like possible alcohol content of a fermenting wash based on what you can assume it would do just matter.

Barry Chandler 13:58
So it's getting more accurate. It's getting more technical, perhaps in its analysis and more realistic in its tax collection. And it's creating more of a for the first time, a reliable, predictable system about distillation and tax collection.

Fionnan 14:14
Yeah, absolutely.

Barry Chandler 14:16
When we think about maturation in that era, early 1800s Are the wooden casks we think of today the we have bourbon barrels X bourbon barrels X sherry casks, x x regular wine casks. What did the landscape of wood and casks look like back in the early 1800s?

Fionnan 14:36
Pretty poor, they a lot of them were just cask aged with the whiskey itself. It was aged with a whiskey and then recycled back into the system and recycled back into the system. Even at the high Victorian era, it's a big deal to have sherry casks to later we'll get to him Alfred Barnard marks remarks on say Bandon distillery. They have a special relationship with Cadiz and they get their casks imported but it takes a while.

Fionnan 14:37
Yeah, there's a lot of the big drinks coming into Ireland in the 1700s were brandy and rum. and claret. And claret continues Bordeaux red wine continues well through the century. You're getting port, sherry. Port and sherry become the kind of specialty port the kind of drinks of the British Empire because they travel very well because they've been fortified a higher alcohol content so they can last. And Ireland

disproportionately drinks on fortified red wine, in comparison to England sometimes remarked upon that there's more sharing consumed in England,

Fionnan 15:33
but there's still plenty of sherry and port consumed in Ireland, absolutely. And so a lot of this stuff might be out there in the wild and incidentally absorbed into the system, the understanding of the superiority of sherry cask didn't come out of nowhere, but certainly this stage, you wouldn't be talking about a wood policy in the way that you would now you know,

Barry Chandler 15:56
Where would the wood have come from back then? Are we talking about European oak? Are we talking about some Irish oak or

Fionnan 16:01
To be honest, a lot of it was probably the cheapest kind of cask was a used cask and yeah, there was coopering in Ireland and of course a lot of going into the brewing industry as well, which is heavily industrialized. By this point, you start seeing the Beamish Crawford brewery, the Guinness brewery is looking more like what they do now, these big industrial facilities, but you also get a lot of it just coming from, from the wine trade in various forms. Bourbon cast dont exist in in whiskey before really World War Two, it's only kind of after that space that they're not even part of American oat is nowhere to be seen.

Barry Chandler 16:34
You mentioned triple distillation being a delayed reaction to the 1823 Act. Did the triple distillation come in, immediately after it or?

Fionnan 16:43
No, it takes a little while and it's really and it happens in different ways in different distilleries. So for instance, when Alfred Barard goes to Bow. St, he describes the distilling regimen. And he says, well, it's it's passed through to stills, and then the faints from the second distillation are redistilled and mixed. And it's not quite triple distillation in the same way of just passing it from one to the next.

Fionnan 17:05
And it's funny, we look at things that will become hallmarks of later Irish practice, faints recycling and stuff, and that they start to look a little bit more like that they start getting a bit more technical in Ireland about how distillation works. And that's as much a part of it as just three stills.

Barry Chandler 17:20
And there wouldn't have been the financial incentive to triple distill it would have been suicide.

Fionnan 17:26
Exactly. It's that triple distillation comes from the urban distilleries first. And it's when they're getting bigger, and especially seems to go hand in hand with a better understanding of things recycling and all

these industrial improvements. You know, that's another big Touchstone word of the 19th century improvements. And again, it doesn't happen immediately. It takes a while.

Fionnan 17:47
And then it's the you look again, we mentioned Bushmills adopting triple distillation, at the tail end of the century. And in echo and Coleraine, the same in echo of kind of urban developments versus say even within pot still Comber remained double distilled Monasterevin Cassidys pot still remained double distilled. So there's always more than one thing happening in one place,

Barry Chandler 18:08
Would the, one of the impacts or the effects of the manifestations of the maturation aspect of the Act have been the creation or the space for the creation of the likes of the whiskey merchants, the spirit merchants, their whiskey bonders, did they come out of this time over they have been a little bit late

Fionnan 18:28
They're a little bit later, where you start seeing like around the 1860s, and so forth, you start seeing the bonding system, which has grown up a bit or the bonded tax system start to allow for the movement of casks between warehouses under bond that becomes a thing that don't have to be in one location. And it's from that era that you start seeing at the development of third party bonding in a big way.

Barry Chandler 18:49
A little bit later on.

Fionnan 18:50
Yeah, and it's also coincidentally what helps facilitate blending but there's certainly that in principle, the possibility from the the whole idea of the 1823 setup.

Barry Chandler 19:01
When we think about Midleton today, we think about pot still whiskey. Its quintessential style. Midleton flew the flag for years when nobody else was making it. And we look at you take a wonderful old tour of old Midleton, and you will see the world's largest pot still. Surely a result of the 1823 Act on the ability to build the biggest pot still and know that it was financially lucrative to do so. We're now seeing all of the conditions for the growth and the evolution of pots and whiskey as a category in Ireland, arent we?

Fionnan 19:33
Yeah, and even the term Irish pot still is a result of the century you know, of course, when 1823 happens there was a few oddity looking stills in Europe, but in an Irish context the still is a pot still and we're starting to see the move you know, when you look at like records again, we talked about the malt rebates before but make it very easy to track what's made of a mix mash and so forth. And when you see that the original names are corn spirit and malt spirit corn, again, great grains of any kind, but the idea of the two being separated.

Fionnan 20:04

And that's already kind of in the background, when the malt taxes enforce the malt content is extremely low. Again, usually like you'd be lucky to get 25%, but usually closer to 15% kind of stuff. And then the raw barley count is very high, oak content is very high. And in the 1820s, you start seeing our first really strong surveys of different mash bills, mash bills become more of a concept and the idea of house practice becomes and still, it's not precise, they're dealing with bags, they're dealing with the open market, certainly.

Fionnan 20:39
So you see all these things growing, but even by 1823, there's this concept where, despite the fact that was mixed mash in Scotland as well, and there was a malt in Ulster, there's a concept of Irish whiskey, meaning mixed mash, when they have parliamentary debates, they're already referring to the Irish practice. And again, that's a result of the kind of messy 1700s And and so forth. And but it certainly start to become part of the identity of Irish whiskey.

Fionnan 21:08
And down the road that you see the lowland distillers will embrace the column stills that kind of makes mix mash lowland whiskey irrelevant, but they're even they when they're making it start referring it to his Irish style whiskey, its identity and provenance start to be mixed up with each other where Irish whiskey means something. And that starts with this kind of like low malt content high raw barley, high oats, a kind of a classic mash would be about 30% malt would be very high. But let's say a third each way malt raw barley, oats may be closer to something just a little south of 30% malt and a little north of a third raw barley, and then about a third oats.

Fionnan 21:48
And you see commentary on it from everyone, Daniel O'Connell to strange people, it becomes a reference point where they say yeah, Irish whiskey is roughly this, this is the meaning. And in the 1830s, there's a Dublin to excise official guy named Samuel Morewood, who writes this book called The short title is A Philosophical and Statistical History of a Inebriating Liquor. And then there's a long bit, this is like, among the diverse nations, blah, blah, blah, good Victorian titles are about four lines long. But anyway, he sets out to describe all the alcohols of the earth. And it's a very, very long book, and not entirely reliable in a lot of ways.

Fionnan 22:24
But certainly, when he's talking about Ireland, it's a little bit more of a grounding, obviously, especially when he's talking about the Irish industry around him. And he describes the mash bills, and the big ones tend to be around again, that a third each way, maybe up to 40%, oats, and then there's one says 40% wheat, they're quite high. And the malt is around 20%.

Fionnan 22:47
And that balances out over a while but again, that concept, which is a big one in Morewoods time, but he says too dangerous material to work with in large proportions. And there's some and it's funny because the ones we always hear about being a bit of a mess, are oats and rye in the American distilling scene, you always hear about people tearing their hair out, because they can't process rye. But for some reason, wheat is singled out by more but it's the one that gives people a bit of a problem.

Barry Chandler 23:12
Would this mashbill have been approximately what was used throughout the country. We know that Dublin distillers had a dim view of Cork distillers who themselves that a dim view of Dublin distillers. But would they all have been working approximately with this mash bill? or would there have been regional differences based on local availability of crops grown?

Fionnan 23:31
Yeah, so you start to see trade practices that develop so and that happens over the course of the 19th century. And so by the time you get to the high era of pot still, people definitely have more proprietary understandings. So the big one in Dublin that eventually develops and this would be the dominant mash bill into the 20th century when it comes to pot still.

Fionnan 23:53
Is this kind of tumbling order of malt raw barley by 15% oats about 5% wheat and by 2% rye. And that's the big the big thing that facilitates that last step is in 1855, the malt taxes repealed for spirits last a little bit longer for beer. And this shoots the malt content up and it's funny people often don't realize that by the time Irish pot still comes into its own the malt tax is irrelevant it was gone for spirits anyway.

Fionnan 24:21
And what's interesting is that when the malt tax isn't a factor, Irish whiskey doesn't switch to malt whiskey that it just calibrates to a certain kind of malt percentage, you start seeing the pot still have something close to 30-50% malt somewhere in that space and so say a big Dublin and its peers mashbill, the Dublin distilleries and then people like Bandon or Tullamore or people who saw themselves as every bit as fancy as a Dublin whiskey, thank you very much.

Fionnan 24:52
And again that mashbill tends to be this like 30-50% malt, Dublin really 40-50% malt and then again 15-20% oats, about 5% wheat, about 2% rye, don't ask me why that's a big research question for me at the moment and the rest is raw barley. And that's a big part of the identity.

Fionnan 25:13
Then you see a type of whiskey where it was really malt and raw barley and a smidgen of oats and seemingly uses something of a filter. What oat husk were the filter more than oats themselves. But you start to see so like cork distillers waterside distillery and dairy, something that resembles something closer really to what we would call pot still now. High raw barley content as well and then you look at say like, okay, Comber distillery would have been about 40% malt about 48%, barley and about 12% oats.

Fionnan 25:43
And so high malt content, but also only a reasonable amount of oats a small. And then you see the last is the survival of the the old protein like wallop of oats 30 each way mashbill. And those three were really the practices, the acceptable trade practices, when you see deviations, there's always a few eyebrows raised saying what is he up to what's going on there.

Barry Chandler 26:09
Around this time, so you have the increase in the size of distilleries, stills, you have a more of a standardization of mash bills. So now you're able to, you've got a whiskey that is perhaps even more enjoyable, taste wise, more palatable, cleaner, perhaps you now have more potential to make it to produce it. This seems to be the start of the rise of Irish whiskey and the growth of Irish whiskey. But there were two big factors, maybe three big factors that we'll touch on at the same time.

Barry Chandler 26:38
One is a famous priest wandering the highways and byways of Ireland telling people get away from the drink. The second is the Irish famine happens 1845. At the same time, in between 1830s and 1840s, we have the rise of exports of Irish whiskey, for the first time exports of Irish whiskey. I'd like to touch briefly on all three of those. Can we start with Father Matthew, because as Irish whiskey is growing, and there's more capacity to feed the thirst of the Irish, which is immense. Father, Matthew recognizes as well, that doesn't come without its problems.

Fionnan 27:10
Yeah, we start seeing well, no, that has its roots as early as the 17 and 1700s. You see people even before Matthew, there's a guy, William Henry in the 1700s, banging the bell, and so forth. And it's reached its culmination, with Matthew and you have Reverend Edgar up in the Presbyterian space in the north, it's coming from a number of spaces. And the original meaning of Temperance is moderation. And then you start seeing the swing toward total abstinence and take the pledge, wear a little badge.

Fionnan 27:36
And there's all these ideas, it's tied up with senses of community, as much as anything, the idea of competing attractions to drink to family picnic, something a bit more wholesome, and it's tied up, you start seeing people join societies at this point, Daniel O'Connell's political movement was based on social organization and people getting to get a special badge that says, they're a member of the Irish society that this that and and that kind of mobilization. And Matthew takes advantage of that.

Fionnan 28:08
And you get this idea of a movement to take the pledge to be a Silverman, and it's tied up with being a family man, it's tied up with employment, you get a lot of companies that only hire many drinks, companies only hire pledge takers, for obvious reasons, and the idea of dependability, and all this stuff is in the atmosphere. And there's also again, especially in urbanizing, Ireland, this idea of uncertainty, we'll touch on it the next episode, but the column still has become a reality. By the 1830s, we're starting to see booze produced on unimaginable scales, compared to what had been available before.

Fionnan 28:44
And in the same way, when we saw the industrialization of alcohol, there's a big spike, because you're no longer brewing your own beer or buying it from some small time producer, there's more access, and that goes up even higher again. And it's tied up with Victorian morality as well. There's a very different ethos in the air, you look up from the Middle Ages, for a healthy long time, there isn't the same attitude toward drink. There's a kind of understanding that it made life a bit more bearable in a pretty miserable

environment for a lot of people. And again, there's ties up with even at the top level, the Irish upper classes drank enormous amounts of alcohol as well.

Fionnan 29:22
And it was tied up with this kind of like excessive hospitality of this of that. And the start that starts to be reined in a bit to people start again. It's all to do with what sees itself as the age of reason, the age of respectability, the age of all again, all that is in the air. And yeah, Irish whiskey is astonishingly production wise, unaffected by Matthew, but certainly in terms of local consumption, it takes a hit.

Barry Chandler 29:48
So that's interesting, because we know from government records of the 1840s, late 1830s, early 1840s that when Father Matthew was at his peak and having the biggest effect on this moderation slash abstinence, the tax take of alcohol in the country seems to go down quite significantly. And that seems to be because of to your point about local, that was because of domestic consumption did go down. But the distilleries didn't stop making it. Instead, they decided to find a different market, if the whole market wasn't going to drink it in the quantities, they were producing it. They needed to find an alternative.

Fionnan 30:23
Yeah. And keep in mind, Ireland is part of the UK by this point. So it's much easier to get stuff to the next island down. And so there's already been a kind of growth, looking at least that far out. And then you start seeing the repivoting outwards. And it's funny because when we tell the story of Irish roots, he's often told us a narrative, because it's easier to tell. And so there was all these distilleries, and Matthew comes along, and there's fewer distilleries, but actually the kind of golden age of pot still is after Matthew so some of them do just but it does and the number of distilleries does go down.

Fionnan 30:52
But if you look at it, it's less related to Matthew and more related to industrialization towards scale towards, there's fewer number of distilleries, but they get bigger. And it's probably the bigger distilleries that are making life harder for the smaller distilleries. And the start, you're starting to see firms company records, this kind of thing. Gentleman proprietors, and the production keeps going up and up. And again, even pot still to production keeps going up. Even regardless, of course, there's one big new piece of machinery in the background that's responsible for this as well.

Barry Chandler 31:26
But for the first time, we're seeing the cases of Irish whiskey on the docks on the keys in Belfast, in Cork in Dublin, in Limerick. Heading west. Yeah, new world.

Fionnan 31:37
Absolutely. And it obliges distillers to look abroad to be more international. And that's tied up again, with the spirit of the age, the idea of trade of the empire, as a fundamentally global market of something and sending things out and taking shares and venture capitalism all his stuff is in the air. Certainly, Belfast was a rapidly growing city, and and again, tied up with an outward looking idea of trade.

Fionnan 32:06

But even Dublin notes it's funny because again, Ireland doesn't look like Britain in a lot of ways in the 19th century. And one of the big ways it doesn't look like England is that you still have this kind of landlord and tenant agrarian landscape, versus Manchester and Liverpool in these kind of industrialized cities. But the one exception being Ulster with flax and shipbuilding and Belfast, but industrialized, but South of that the only real manifestation you see of that is Brewing and Distilling.

Fionnan 32:35
And even brewing was going abroad. But of course, distilling, you have a naturally preserved material, it's not going to rot. So it lends itself very, very well, in the same way that port lend itself before in comparison to wine have a lower strength because port could last and spirits were a natural accompaniment to trade they were naturally outward facing

Barry Chandler 32:55
What was the effect of the devastating period of the famine. While we know its effect on population, on the course of British Irish relations, what was the effect on the whiskey industry at the time?

Fionnan 33:11
We talked about pastoralism and tillage in previous eras. And going into the Union, you had Foster's Corn Laws not to be mistaken with the Corn Laws. We'll talk about that later. But Foster's laws were encouragement for Irish tillage going to England, they were for the first time in history, Britain became a net grain importing Ireland. And it was important to create a source of that. And so Ireland smoothes very heavily into tillage. And the story of 19th century agriculture is a big move toward cereal tillage. And then after the famine, it all bottoms out. And there's this massive swing back to pasture.

Fionnan 33:52
And Ireland looks a lot more like what we see now with a lot more sheep and cattle and empty space grassland. And it just looked radically different from one end to the other, the tillage of wheat collapsed was like 8%, in 1860, what it had been in 1840. And so that bottoms out, and of course, it's always difficult to talk about Brewing and Distilling and the famine because they are cereal products. And there were accusations by people like Matthews followers of gross misuse of what should be a food. And that can be quite complicated to talk about.

Fionnan 34:22
But similarly, at the same time that you're seeing production scale up, it also starts making it more important to have security of supply lines. So one interesting aspect of that is it makes us look abroad for cereals and the start looking by the end of the 19th century going as far as the Baltic to get stuff so it's also less dependent and when you start having mash bills and the concept of I need my quarterly shipment of oats and I need to make sure I hit the right supply target. You start getting it from various places and the other way of dealing with that is having permanent contracts.

Fionnan 34:42
So like Jameson were famous for having prepayments for grain from a very early stage where as long as you're a farmer and you produce good quality barley and you send it down, we'll pay in advance. And if you send us some junk, or whatever, or don't make good, we'll look elsewhere. But for the farmer,

this is an enormous sense of security. This is, you know, a golden ticket. And so you start seeing these relationships again, like Powers had a very strong relationship with Wexford and the Southeast.

Fionnan 35:24
So again, there's all these looking outward in different ways but also becoming more secure about tillage supply lines, which in turn, feeds into regularity of mash production for a lock them. We like to think of mash bills as a purely kind of creative act, but they also become a kind of a part of standardization. And that's important for the security of the product.

Barry Chandler 35:47
Was there any alienation of these gentlemen distillers who perhaps came from a British background, who were running these large distilleries, the John Jameson descendant, the sir James Power, the were these, sir John perhaps Powers, were these men considered, like you say earlier, the complications around taking the ingredients for our bread and turning it into whiskey. Would that have played a role in that their nationality?

Fionnan 36:15
It's complex, I mean, they saw themselves as being very Irish to different kinds of Irishness. They also saw themselves as members of the empire again, this is as well and the blemishes and so the whole Brewing and Distilling class for an industry that was making alcohol, respectability becomes even more important, and respectability is tied up with Protestant unionist. Now, you know, it's funny, distilling is actually more diverse than we often have.

Fionnan 36:41
The Powers were Roman Catholic, they were very close friends of Daniel O'Connell, they lay the cornerstone of the O'Connell monument, but for them the repeal of the Penal Laws and all of this was part of becoming played up members of the establishment. It's a different kind of, it's not all to do with nationalism, so forth. And then you get the rise of the petty Catholic merchant class, to which say people like Lockes or Cassidy's would have belonged along the canals. So there's a whole set of social history there.

Fionnan 37:09
And it is diverse and it is strange, but you do get the cultivation of gentleman proprietors, gentleman distillers, and that reaches its apex with the likes of Sir Henry Road, Andrew Jemison, by the time we get the turn of the century, they were, again the powers of members of parliament. The Jameson is running the Bank of Ireland eventually, Henry Road, Lord Mayor of Dublin paid for the restoration of Christ Church Cathedral, the bit that's now the sublinear kind of Viking museum all that bit across the road is whiskey. That's not the original medieval church. If you ever look at the stonework, it looks much cleaner, even though it's appears medieval is suddenly Well, it's not the rubbery looking thing on the other side of the road, either these big civic projects.

Fionnan 37:48
And there is a certain amount of great civic works. And I'm trying the same way that Benjamin Guiness paid for St. Patrick's Cathedral, this idea of cleaning up the fact that you make alcohol for a living with

again, a public and it's funny again, a lot of them were very good to their staff, you do see the kind of company man idea, and the widows would be looked after kind of thing. So there's that there as well. I think the alienation only comes in the 20th century again, with a move toward Republicanism and so forth, they find a very unsympathetic audience. Ernest Blythe called him the dregs of landlord,

Fionnan 38:22
And there is an enormous again celebration of and you look at it, it's funny. Yeah. Again, the social backgrounds of the distilling class are actually very diverse in comparison to brewing and brewing was a little more of a monopoly. But again, they're moving toward the logical conclusion of the 1700s. The ideal of gentleman distillers of great producers not goes hand in hand with age statements and pride of mash proprietary and the idea of Irish potstill is a heritage concept on this and that.

Fionnan 38:22
but certainly at the time, they're, they're also a source of Irish pride, of the great endeavours of the content of the first it's really remarkable. I mean, our Irish whiskey stands alone, in this kind of idea of a food and drink product that has demanded a place from us girbau to single pot still have demanded a place at the top table of European food and dining. And there is a remarkability rather than certainly scotch whisky this point looks like the poor kind of backwards cousin.

Barry Chandler 39:28
By the 1850s we're starting to see very close connections to the whiskey the names that we're familiar with today and the rise of the introduction really of the whiskey bonders and the whiskey merchants Mitchell and son getting into the game of purchasing their whiskey, their spirit from the Bow street distillery Jameson, W&A Gilby, arriving in Dublin, and purchasing large stocks of spirit from the bow street distillery. Now we had this period in the 1850s 1860s where there are 1000s of barrels of whiskey that are being matured by not just the distilleries, but by the bonders recognizing the global appetite for this pot still whiskey, right?

Fionnan 40:06
Yeah, absolutely. You start seeing the development of now Ireland is way behind scotch and in this aspect and that's where Scots really races back into the tracks is branding. But certainly in the north in Belfast, you start seeing proprietor brands and and this something moving from just a commodity that was sold through the pub to something a bit more recognizable, a lot of the distilleries of this era.

Fionnan 40:32
And again, it's tied up with the gentleman distilling class, this notion of the great houses the Jameson house, the Powers house, they have notions of provenance of and they're particularly worried about other people defrauding or debasing their identity. And Jameson eventually works with certain high class wine merchants, that kind of stuff with a very selective about who they work with.

Fionnan 40:54
And again, Powers eventually putting out samples and all of this, this is what you should expect from your local public and and if it doesn't taste like this, you're being defrauded. It's funny, publicans can

talk with great nostalgia about the great old days where you get a barrel of whiskey. And there's the old pub trick of pouring a bottle of sherry into the thing to kind of jazz it up a bit and but to the distillers,

Fionnan 41:14
this was just one more example of Wheeler Dealer practice or again that was the big problem with just the bottomless barrel where you send a barrel to a pub, and it's tastes like whiskey at the start, and there's a bit more water added to give it a little more length. And then before you know what you're drinking something around 20% alcohol and doesn't have a lot of resemblance to what was going out at the gates.

Barry Chandler 41:34
But it's also the first time where we see brand names that weren't that didn't originate at the distillery, the old Pat whiskey that became the spot whiskies the red breast that we know today originated not in the distillery but with a third party.

Fionnan 41:47
Yeah, exactly. And again, like a lot of the brands of this era fade away, you walk into like the Duke of York, pub, and Beth and you see all these brands that don't exist anymore. The small time brands aren't Cowen's and all of these, but they're certainly a kind of a flourishing of this market. Now, there's also that's also tied up with blending, and with the column still and who's you but you also see the term pure pot still emerge around this time.

Fionnan 42:13
And that's in contrast to the columns, because of course, you can't have pure anything unless there's a blended and so it's funny for all the stories about the hostility, part of the prestige around Irish pot still has to do with contrast. And you start seeing these terms like pure pot still, or pure malt, in the case of Bushmills, and Coleraine. And then you see a lot of ads that just have these kinds of like women dress like shamrocks, and kind of vaguely cringy looking stuff.

Fionnan 42:37
And everything is in the advertising is meant to appeal to almost the kind of tourism toward Ireland, you see, like a picnic basket couple out on a wagon, and there's some kind of Paddy capped fella red sheet, glad to see them. Nothing wrong here, we're not seeing the rise of the Home Rule movement and the Fenians. And all of this stuff in the background.

Fionnan 42:58
It's a very gentle version of Ireland, and the Irish peasantry, and so forth and sells very well. And then on top of that, you get the move toward, again, the inevitable conflict between distilleries as concepts and third party brands. And that's to do with trust as much as anything.

Barry Chandler 43:20
This golden era of Irish whiskey then driven primarily by pot still whiskey, this pure pot still whiskey reaches a bit of a Zenith with the arrival of Mr. Alfred Bernard in 1886. Tell us who Alfred Barnard was and what he documented.

Fionnan 43:39
He is kind of the ultimate lard of the British press. He also wrote a book on brewing, but he got Harper's Weekly Gazette, to fund a jolly where he went up and down Scotland, and the handful of distilleries that were in England, and then Ireland as well. And England, of course, the gin industry was heavily monopolized by this point. But anyway, when he comes to Ireland, he's coming.

Fionnan 44:03
He starts off at the Gresham hotel, and he hasn't like a talkative cabbie. That's this kind of character that takes him to the hotel and but he talks about like he's come to the dead center of the whiskey world. And when he goes to Rose distillery, he says it reminds him of going to a chateau in the French wine countries are very different. He has lunch with the Powers family, and he's given the old family make, which is the only whiskey that I could see that he actually takes with him for the rest of the trip and kind of nurses and this is so dear to the hearts of connoisseur.

Fionnan 44:35
So by the time and you have a lot of stuff going on in the background that, again the column still blending all these kind of backfoot inducing industrial narratives, but Barnard seems relatively immune to that. He's starry eyed rocking up at the distilleries, and he does visit the column distills as well, up in Belfast, and there's one avenue that won't let him in. He talks very tersely about what's going on. I don't know why the proprietor won't let me enter the door.

Fionnan 45:01
And so you do get a holistic picture. But when Alfred comes to Ireland, there are 28 distilleries. Two of them make malt whiskey, there's a few columns. And then, more or less, everybody else is busy making the most celebrated drink in the British Empire. And, again, he goes on, it's not just Dublin when he goes, when he's in Bandon, there's a Bandon procured 'cause Bandon actually,

Barry Chandler 45:25
This is in West Cork

Fionnan 45:26
In West Cork, Allman’s dtillery. They make pure pot still for the Irish market, and then they make a pure malt which they export to Scotland. So there's this understanding of regional differences as well

Barry Chandler 45:40
Market preferences.

Fionnan 45:41
Yeah. And which is funny because again, an Irish pot still in the 1860s. Actually, the Irish pot still and Irish style whiskey was actually outselling Scotch whiskey in in Scotland itself in the 1860s was a real, ultimate blow. And you see an enormous amount of Irish style whiskey being made by opportunistic Scotch distilleries when Alfred Barn is in Scotland he goes to Cameron bridge distillery and they tell him what

Fionnan 46:05
we make grain whiskey, malt whiskey, silent malt, and pot still Irish and they say without blinking. So that it was a very very celebrated drink and a very one being eyed up other producers but when yet when he's comes to Ireland, you've ended up yes, you have these kind of gentleman proprietors but you also have the likes of Lockes or B. Daly or so forth, kind of respectable merchant distillers and there's a sense of pride there as well.

Fionnan 46:35
And again, the landscape is more diverse when he goes down to bishops water in Wexford, or cork because it's not just the drink of Dublin, Dublin presented as the drink of Dublin cork potstill has its own very, very long history that goes right back, as far as Dublin's if not further

Barry Chandler 46:52
Would his publication then when he compiled all of his his visits, and his opinions and his thoughts and his tasting notes into his book. Would that have been widely shared received within the British Empire?

Fionnan 47:05
Yes, yeah, it was. I mean, it was a major newspaper funding it. So again, it wasn't an event. And Barnard's book is quite sad in retrospect, because if you look at the Scottish section, you know, the Scots love Alfred Barnard's book as well, because it shows him what Laphroaig was like back in the Victorian times. And all these distilleries are still there. And then you look at the Irish ones, and they're all gone. It's this kind of ghost landscape.

Fionnan 47:25
And you'll get the story of what once was, and how much we've lost. And Barnard is such a representation of that lost era. And you have again, an English journalist who's just very impressed by the whole thing going around. And he has these like misadventures along the way again, starting with the cabin, it's a bit some of it is engineering base, or he just talks about the apparatus and how the corn loft works and this and that, and sometimes

Fionnan 47:49
he like when he's in Kilbeggan, he ends up there again, you have the movement toward home rule going on in the background, he ends up sort of nationalist parade is marching through the towns and having a grand old drinking Lockes. So it is those bits of it that are extremely, but again, it's a document it is certainly a kind of an Old Testament accidentally of pot still at its apex.

Barry Chandler 48:13
And while he was visiting and touring these, these predominantly pot still distilleries you mentioned there were a couple of column distillery. So the column still is something that has been in the background here for this episode, which we haven't gotten deeply into. And that I think, is our next episode because what Alfred Bernard didn't know and the distillers didn't know at the time was that an imminent threat was emerging and threatening,

Barry Chandler 48:35
and in fact, did do some significant damage, perhaps to the Irish whiskey industry. And this period of the 1870s 1880s 1890s was perhaps the golden era, the peak of Irish whiskey, things are about to change. So in the next episode, we want to look at the arrival or the adoption of the column still, we want to look at the the whiskey trial, the Royal Commission, all of these things are determined whether or not this column still could be used, and whether what had made does in fact, present itself as whiskey or not.

Barry Chandler 49:04
So that is our next episode, because Irish whiskey is about to take a turn. It's been a long time growing to its zenith and its global availability. For example, we see Power's records show up being available in Asia and Hawaii and crazy places in the late 1890s. And maybe that's about to take a little turn in the next episode, so tune in for the next episode to see where Irish whiskey is about to go on our journey through the history of Irish whiskey.