

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2012-02

By Alex Kraaijeveld

This article is brought to you by 'Malt Maniacs'; an international collective of more than two dozen fiercely independent malt whisky aficionados. Since 1997 we have been enjoying and discussing the pleasures of single malt whisky with like-minded whisky lovers from all over the world. In 2010 our community had members from 15 countries; The United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, The U.S.A., Canada, India, Taiwan, Australia and South Africa. You can find more details on: www.maltmaniacs.org.



A glimpse of taste variation in Victorian times?

Surely, several of you reading this must have wondered at least once what whisky tasted like a hundred or more years ago. How similar was whisky then to present-day whiskies? How much taste variation was there among Scottish and Irish whiskies in Victorian times? Were there clear whisky regions?

Detailed tasting notes, in the way we are so used to nowadays, are a recent development. In Victorian times tasting notes simply were not an issue. So when Alfred Barnard (**seen right**) toured the whisky distilleries of the United Kingdom in the 1880s, he described almost every nut and bolt of every distillery he visited, but kept comparatively quiet about the actual product, alas.... Barnard did, however, talk about the *fine quality* or *high repute* of some of the whiskies. He did remark on some being *richly and highly flavoured* (Balmenach, Glentarras), *delicate and smooth* (Grandtully), *clean and mellow* (Inchgower), *full-bodied* (Limerick), *rich and silent* (Langholm; whatever that may mean!), having a taste in the *Highland style* (Bankier, a Lowland distillery), or with the *ancient aroma of Irish Whisky* (John's Lane). Only rarely did he write something we would regard as a proper tasting note: whisky from the Vauxhall distillery is said to resemble *old brandy*; Glendronach's product is *like liqueur brandy*; Monasterevan (**to the left**) whisky is *fat, creamy* and we can all recognise his description of Laphroaig: *thick and pungent ... peculiar "peat reek" flavour*.



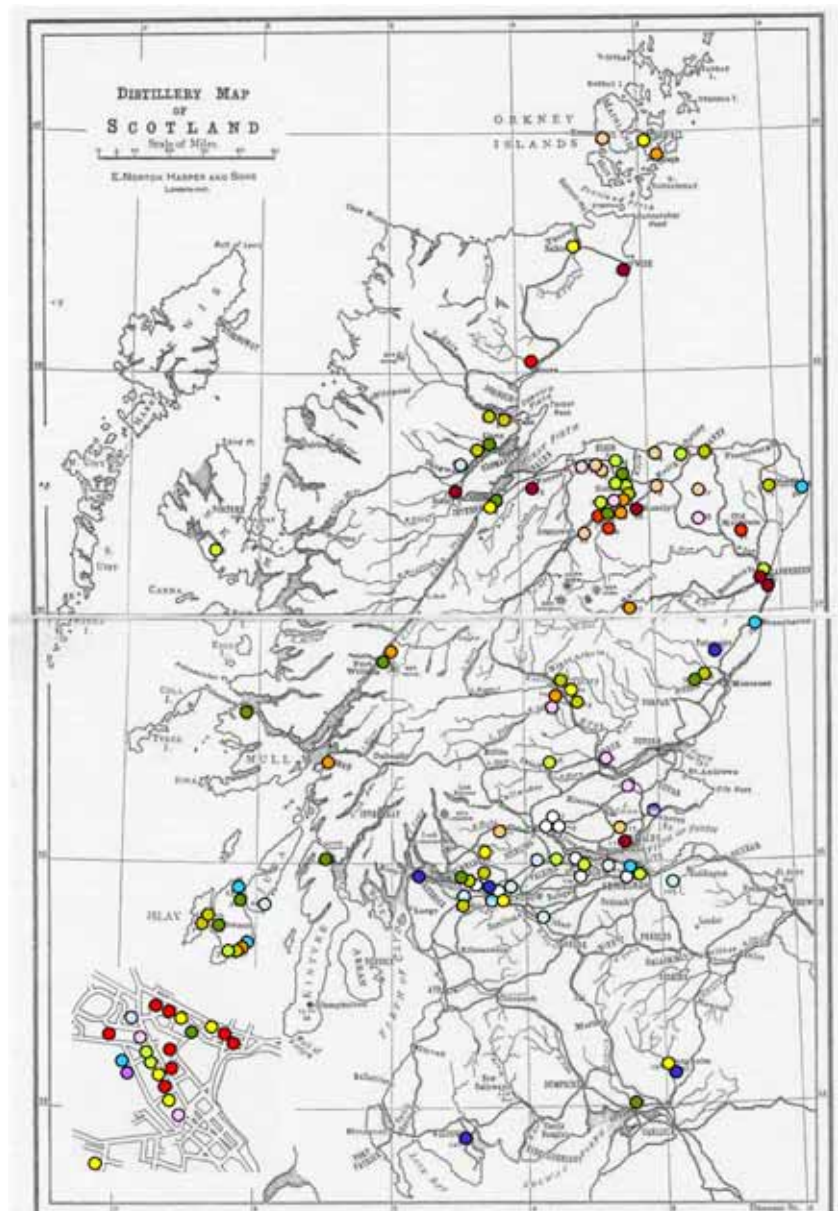
Barnard's rare tasting notes do show that there was taste variation among Victorian whiskies, but unless we find a thus far undiscovered little book from Barnard, or someone else full of tasting notes or a comprehensive

set of bottled Victorian whiskies in fine condition, we will never get more than this tiny glimpse.

Or will we? If we agree that a significant part of the taste of a whisky is the result of technical specifications (degree of peating, still size and shape, cask characteristics, etc.) there may be a way to lift the veil just a wee bit more. After all, Barnard meticulously described the technical details of the distilleries he visited. These details were definitely not the same in every distillery, so by analysing distillery specs and looking at their distribution over Scotland and Ireland, we may get a feel for how Victorian whiskies varied in taste geographically.

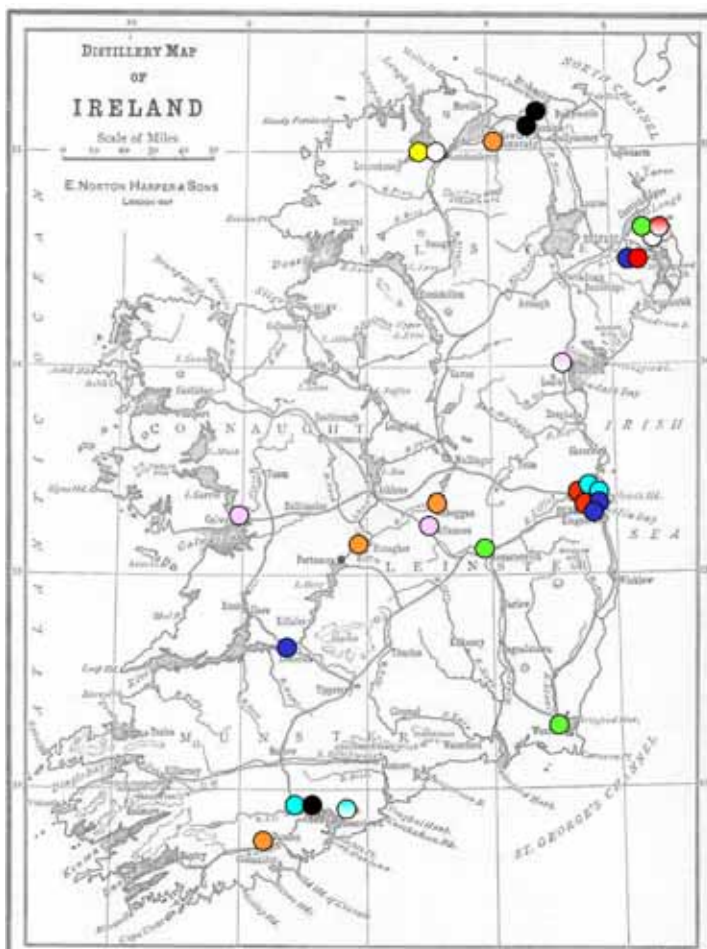
What I have done is first collect all Barnard's notes on the type of grains used, kiln, kiln fuel, mash tun and washback contents, still type and contents, number of distillations and warehouse capacity. Then I ran a cluster analysis on these data. Cluster analyses are often used in biology as a means to determine relationships between animal or plant species. Simply said, the more similar two species are in their characteristics, the closer together they appear in the analysis. Cluster analyses have been applied directly to whisky tastes by François-Joseph Lapointe & Pierre Legendre and by David Wishart (see *Whisky Magazine* 14), resulting in groups of whiskies which are similar in taste. A cluster analysis applied to Barnard's distillery descriptions results in groups of distilleries which are similar in their technical details and can therefore generally be expected to produce similarly tasting whiskies.

Analysis of Scotland's 129 Victorian distilleries leads to 5 major clusters, 4 of which are divided again in 2-4 smaller groups. The map



of Scotland (with Campbeltown blown up for clarity) gives the full picture: each distillery is represented by a coloured circle that indicates the group it belongs to. All grain distilleries come out in one cluster, indicated by white circles. The light brown / dark brown circles are one major cluster of malt distilleries; yellow / orange / red / pink circles a second major cluster; the third major cluster of malt distilleries is indicated by olive green / light green / dark green circles; and light blue / medium blue / dark blue / purple circles indicate the fourth major cluster of malt distilleries. Within each of these four clusters, distilleries indicated by the same colour are more similar in specifications than they are to distilleries indicated by a different colour. So, for instance, light blue distilleries are more similar to each other than they are to dark blue distilleries, but blue distilleries as a whole are more similar to each other than they are to green distilleries.

If there were clear whisky taste regions in Scotland in Victorian times, we would expect to see different parts of the map dominated by different colours. At a first glance, it looks as if that is not the case and that the different colours are pretty much spread out over the map. But if you look closer, there *are* some patterns visible. For instance, the majority of blue circles are found in the Lowlands, the brown circles are mainly found in the northern half of Scotland and Campbeltown alone has twice as many red circles as the whole of the rest of Scotland. This suggests that in Victorian times, we might have been able to recognise three large whisky regions:



Lowlands, Highlands and Campbeltown. Does sound familiar, doesn't it? The regions are certainly not strict: yellow circles, for instance, are found from the Orkneys to the southern Lowlands.

I did the same kind of cluster analysis for the 28 Irish distilleries that Barnard visited and it produced 5 major cluster plus a singleton. The five clusters are indicated by white circles (all the grain distilleries), black circles (all the malt distilleries), light blue / dark blue circles, green circles and finally red / orange / pink circles (all containing pot still distilleries); the singleton is Waterside distillery (again a pot still distillery), indicated by a yellow circle. There doesn't

appear to be any kind of pattern: the colours are pretty much spread all over the map.

Do we have anything to support the idea that this analysis actually offers a glimpse of taste variation rather than a meaningless scatter of coloured circles on a map? Unless we find that elusive hoard of Victorian bottles, we cannot test how accurate the maps are. There is a hopeful sign, though: in the Scottish analysis, the distilleries producing grain whisky come out as different in taste from all the other distilleries; the same happens in the Irish analysis plus that the Irish malt distilleries come out in a different group from the pot still distilleries. As we can be pretty sure that whiskies from grain, malt and pot still distilleries would have tasted differently from each other, the analyses certainly get that right.

The taste maps produced by analyzing Barnard's meticulous notes will certainly not be perfect. For instance, with a few exceptions, Barnard didn't take notes on the decisions taken by the distiller (such as the width of the cut taken), the shape of the stills, the type of casks used and the length of maturation. Arguably, cask type will have played less of a role in taste variation in Victorian times than it does nowadays. Use of bourbon casks was still half a century or more in the future, so plain wood casks (possibly used for something else first and then charred) and sherry casks, at various levels of re-fill, will have dominated.

Despite its imperfections, this analysis may offer the best glimpse that we are ever likely to get of taste variation among whiskies in Victorian times: three whisky regions would have been recognizable in Victorian Scotland, whereas there is no indication that Ireland had whisky regions in those days.



Lex Kraaijeveld was born in 1962 in The Hague, Holland, and studied biology in Leiden, where he also got his PhD. In 1994, when he had just moved to England for a research job, he was introduced to single malt whisky by way of Lagavulin 16. The rest, as they say, is history ... Besides whisky itself, he is also interested in the history of (whisky) distillation. He has now tasted close to 1,000 different whiskies, and has written for *Celtic Spirit*, *Whisky Magazine*, and *Whisky etc* (besides *Malt Maniacs*, of course!).

In real life, he is a lecturer in ecology and evolution at the Centre for Biological Sciences, University of Southampton, and his other passions include flying and making kites, bird watching, origin and evolution of chess, music, and reading.