

## Historical Note

# CAN'T GET OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING? TRY THE ISLE OF SKYE REMEDY

W. Watson Buchanan, MD, FRCP (Edin and Glasg), FRCPC, FACP

Emeritus Professor of Medicine, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON



W. W. BUCHANAN

Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) and James Boswell (1740-1795), his biographer, made a tour of the Western Islands of Scotland in 1773. Both published their separate accounts, which were instant best sellers, and which still make an interesting reading.<sup>1</sup> While at Coriatachan in the Isle of Skye, Dr. Johnson makes the comment:

“A man of Hebrides,  
for a woman’s diet I can give no account,  
as soon appears in the morning,  
swallows a glass of whiskey;<sup>2</sup>  
yet they are not a drunken race,  
at least I never was present at much in  
temperance;  
but no man is so abstemious as to refuse the  
morning dram,  
which they call *skalk*”

The latter is Gaelic word, *sgailc*, meaning a smart knock or blow. It can also refer to spirituous liquor taken before breakfast, ie. dram or drama<sup>3</sup> being the Gaelic for the English fluid measure, drachm, ie. 60 minims or 3.55 cc. It appears that there were four such *sgailcean* to waken one up in the Highlands.<sup>4</sup>

The first *sgailc-nid* when still in bed or nest (Gaelic *nead*, genitive *nid*). This would act as a smart blow to the taste buds to waken one up. There is an expression in Gaelic, *sgailc de’n dram*, ie. a swig of the dram, which presumably would function as a very satisfactory first wake-up.

However, more was to follow in the form of a *friochd-uilinn*. According to Dwelly,<sup>3</sup> *friochd* is the second dram, nip, or half glassful(!), after the first morning *sgailc*. *Uilinn* is the genitive of *Uileann*, the word for elbow. The genitive of this joint can

also be rendered for those interested as *uille*, *uillne*, *uilne*.<sup>3</sup> This dram, *an friochd-uilinn*, would presumably be taken in bed when the individual had woken sufficiently to support himself on his elbow.

The third wake-up drink was *deoch chas rùisgte*, ie. the drink taken bare-footed. Since *deoch* is a feminine noun, the word foot, *cas*, is lenited, ie. an “h” is inserted after the consonant “c”. This drink is the individual would take when out of bed, but not yet dressed.

Finally, there was the drink known as an *deoch bhleith*. *Bleith* means to pulverize or grind and can refer to making a meal. Presumably this dram was taken while waiting for the oatmeal to be ground to make *brochan* or *lite*, ie. porridge.

Despite this practice of four glasses of whisky on rising from bed, it is of interest that Dr. Johnson, no great lover of the Scots, did not hold the opinion that the Highlanders were a drunken race. The true Highlander takes pride in being able to hold his liquor, and not become drunk. Inebriation was, however, a feature of Highland funerals. For a detailed discussion on the role of alcohol in the Scottish Gaelic World, the reader is referred to the recently published book by Michael Newton.<sup>5</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. Chapman RW (Editor). Johnson’s Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland and Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson LLD. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
2. This spelling usually denotes the Irish form, while whisky is used in Scotland. Whisky is the anglicized form of the Gaelic for water of life, *an t-uisge beatha*.
3. Dwelly E. The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary, 7th Edition. Glasgow: Gairm Publications, 1971.
4. MacDonald R. A dictionary ramble. Scottish Language, No. 13. In: McClure JD, ed. Edinburgh: Association of Scottish Literary Studies, 1994, p. 82.
5. Newton, MA. Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World. Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2000.

**Correspondence to:** Dr. W. Watson Buchanan, 22 Jerome Park Dr., Dundas, ON L9H 6H2.