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## Poitin-Making: a Response to the Industrialisation of the Whiskey Sector in Ireland?

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## ***Poitín*-making: a response to the industrialisation of the whiskey sector in Ireland?**

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The initial observation for this paper is that contrary to most, if not all, alcoholic beverages, Irish *poitín* lacks a clear definition. There is no short and satisfying answer to the basic question “what is *poitín*?”.

*Poitín*, or poteen, its English spelling, is generally considered “unique to Ireland”, the Glendalough distillery for instance labels its *poitín* as “the Original Irish Spirit” (Glendalough Distillery 2018).<sup>1</sup> This fiery spirit has commonly been described as a close relative of Irish whiskey, and more specifically as an illicit version of whiskey. Indeed, for centuries, *poitín* was “banned” in Ireland (to be more specific, its production was, a subtlety that will be further discussed in the core of this paper). In 1997 however, out of the blue, *poitín* was made “legal” again. That legalisation has since raised the question of the definition of this special beverage. Since *poitín* had been defined mostly by its illicit nature for more than two centuries, the notion of “legal *poitín*” could be considered an oxymoron; and “real” or “authentic” *poitín*, that is a spirit which is illicitly produced, is still actually banned. Interestingly – surprisingly some would say – *poitín* was commercialised for almost two decades despite the fact that the product did not have any legal or technical definition.<sup>2</sup> In spite of that oddity, the range of legally produced *poitín* expanded considerably during the 2010s. In 2018, at least nine different brands were available for purchase (Celtic Whiskey Shop 2018). A first step towards a legal definition of *poitín* was made in 2008, when the spirit was accorded a Geographical Indicative (GI) status by the European Union Parliament and Council.<sup>3</sup> The Geographical Indication implies that real *poitín* can only be produced in Ireland. But more importantly, the document stipulated that in order to validate the GI status, a technical file had to be submitted “to the Commission not later than the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2015” (Regulation (EC) No 110/2008 of the European Parliament, 2008, articles 17 and 20). What resulted was a document which is revealing of the complexity that is to properly define *poitín*. Indeed, the technical file is particularly elusive and provides a “catch-all” definition of

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1 The spelling “potcheen” is sometimes found too.

2 Apart from a minimalistic requirement of the product being a minimum of 40% alcoholic strength by volume (Irish *Poitín* Technical File 2015, p.2).

3 Along with Irish whiskey and Irish Cream, under Regulation (EC) No 110/2008 of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 January 2008.

the spirit. The document states that *poitín* can be made out of an array of raw ingredients, such as “cereals, grain, whey, sugar beet molasses and potatoes”, a particularity which is unheard of in the world of alcoholic beverages. The spirit can be flavoured or unflavoured; while processes such as maceration, or maturation up to ten weeks in wooden casks, are also allowed. While respecting that technical file, one could make spirits with the flavour profiles of vodka, gin, or any type of flavoured liquor. Yet, there is an emphasis on the “traditional” aspects of all the different processes and ingredients presented in that file (Irish *Poitín* Technical File 2015).

Thus, one may wonder how such a broad technical file came into being, and what “authentic” *poitín* should be like. To answer those questions, one has to look back to the heyday of illicit distillation, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when *poitín*-makers proliferated like never before in Ireland and gave the spirit its common, and most widespread, definition. More specifically, this paper will focus on the economic mechanisms that led to the expansion of *poitín*-making. The “golden age” of illicit distillation seems to correspond to the industrialisation of the whiskey sector in Ireland, which raises the following question: to what extent can the expansion of *poitín*-making be considered a response to that industrialisation? The first part of this paper will focus on the origins of *poitín*-making in Ireland. Then, the economic mechanisms behind the expansion of the phenomenon will be studied. Finally, the third part will highlight the fact that *poitín*-making can be analysed not only as an economic phenomenon, but also as a sociological response to the industrialisation of the whiskey sector.

### **The origins of *poitín*-making in Ireland**

Originally, *poitín* and whiskey were very close products, if not exactly the same products. The word *poitín* refers to the small pot stills in which the spirit was made. But, as pointed out by O'Connor (2015, pp.153-4), in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, small copper pot stills were the norm among Irish distillers. Therefore, it is fair to say that, at that time, *poitín* was simply another name for *usquebaugh* (a Gaelic name that was to become “whiskey”).<sup>4</sup> However, the two terms took different paths, and ended up designating two distinct products.

There are two key dates that stand out in the history of *poitín*. The first one is 1661. A date which is widely regarded as the “birth” of *poitín*. As a matter of fact, 1661 is so closely associated to the history of *poitín* that the date can be found on modern-day labels and

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4 *Poitín* was therefore a grain spirit, similar to whiskey, keeping in mind that 17<sup>th</sup>-century whiskey was very different from nowadays standards, with a more robust, smokier flavour profile, and little maturation.

bottles, and a pop-up bar that opened in 2017 in Dublin was named 1661 (*thejournal.ie* 2017). The year marked the introduction of a direct taxation on spirits in Ireland. The aim of the legislation was to collect revenues out of spirit-making, which was a fairly widespread craft in Ireland. (McGuire 1973, p.97) From that year on, people not declaring their distilling activities were therefore *de facto* producing illicit spirits. Thus, the legislation limited domestic distillation and it can be considered a step towards a professionalisation of the distilling activity. The Act of 1661 was mostly symbolic, however. The legislation was very passive, it was based on a self-declaration, controls were difficult, and a lot of exceptions remained (Ibid., pp.98-99). Nonetheless, it marked the moment when whiskey and *poitín* started to part ways. Interestingly, it can be pointed out here that technically, *poitín* itself was never banned, in the sense that no law stipulated that “*poitín*” was forbidden, but unlicensed distillation was. Any type of spirit distilled without a license was illicit. Brandy made without a license for instance would have been illicit as well, but it probably would not have been labelled as *poitín*. It shows that a certain flavour profile, associated with specific raw ingredients and specific processes, was expected from *poitín*.

The second key date is 1779 with the introduction of the so-called “Still Licence Act”, a legislation which was really at the core of the expansion of *poitín*-making in Ireland. With that act, which aimed at ensuring a minimum base revenue out of distilleries, a new form of taxation was introduced, which was “based on the estimated number of times a still could be worked off in twenty-eight days” (Ibid., p.127). So that new regulation was not based on the spirits that were actually produced, but on the capacity of the stills and, more importantly, on their theoretical throughput. There was however an obvious loophole in that new system: if a producer could charge his still more times than he was theoretically supposed to, then the impact of the still licence duty on the overall production was significantly lessened. Thus, that regulation was indirectly encouraging distillers to charge their stills as many times as they could, working as fast as possible. The excise authorities quickly notice the distillers' ploy and raised the minimum number of charges a year later. Thus began a race between the whiskey producers and the excise authorities. The former finding innovative ways to work faster and the latter increasing the minimum number of charges expected from the distillers, based on higher theoretical yields of the stills. As highlighted by McGuire (1973, pp.127, 131), if that minimum was fairly low at first, and distillers could easily cop with the regulation, as soon as the number of charges was raised, “the effect was immediate and a quarter of the legal distilleries ceased”. Indeed, one of the many consequences of that system

was that larger quantities of spirits had to be produced to lessen the impact of the duty, which was a problem for distillers in rural areas, with sparse population, and therefore small markets. Those distillers could simply not keep up with the frantic pace of production resulting from the ill-designed legislation. They were either stifled by seemingly ever-increasing taxes or stuck with large quantities of whiskey they could not sell off. Adding up to the Still Licence Act, the use of larger stills was also encouraged, through rebates of the still licence duty on larger stills. It was even made mandatory at some level: in 1758 a minimum size of 200 gallons was fixed, in 1791 the minimum size for new stills was raised to 500 gallons. Those measures aimed at concentrating the production, making controls easier. (Ibid., pp.108, 130, 134). That unsustainable situation led to the gradual but steady migration of many distillers with no substantial markets from their legal activities to the illicit production. Since they had both the equipment and the skills to produce quality spirit, many small-scale rural distillers simply pursued their activities outside the legal system, thus becoming “professional illicit distillers”. As a consequence, the late 1780s and 1790s witnessed the massive expansion of *poitín*-making in Ireland. Illustrating the “professional” dimension of the illicit activity at that time, in 1789, a clandestine distillery containing five stills and “several thousand gallons of pot-ale and singlings” was raided (Connell 1968, p.38). In the two decades that followed the introduction of the Still Licence Act, stills of considerable sizes, between 200 and 500 gallons, were detected (McGuire 1973, p.149), indicating that former professional distillers had recently stopped their legal activities and were now distilling illicitly. Sometimes, *poitín*-making was conducted by small illicit companies, composed of three individuals: an owner, a maker and a carrier, a structure very close to that of small legal businesses (*Select Committee on Illicit Distillation* 1816, pp.30, 43). The phenomenon was particularly widespread in the north-west region of Ireland. The barony of Inishowen, in County Donegal, was infamously known as a *poitín*-making area; an officer claimed that he detected 100 stills in 36 hours (Dawson 1977, p.282) in that barony, where a military camp was established in 1814 for the object of suppressing of illicit distillation (*S.C. on Illicit Distillation* 1816, p.76).

Given the extent of the issue at that period it is fair to say that it is also when *poitín* got its mainstream reputation and its most common definition. First of all, the term “*poitín*” was now clearly referring to an illicit spirit, and this illicit nature was to play an important part on the characteristics of the product itself. Indeed, ageing the spirits for instance represented a risk, as *poitín*-maker could not afford to stock large quantities of illicit alcohol, therefore

*poitín* was generally unaged, so it was a clear and raw spirit. Given that many *poitín*-makers were former professional whiskey distillers, the use of malted barley remained the norm. In accordance to the general taste of rural populations, it was a very high-proof spirit. Finally, *poitín* was often smoky and peaty, due to the use of readily available turf in the west and north-west of Ireland. (Donovan 1830, p.255; Wakefield 1812, p.729; McGuire 1973, p.24). It can be noted that if *poitín* was essentially an unaged whiskey made in a pot still, then any licensed distiller, at any given time, had everything readily available to market *poitín*. And since, technically, as pointed out above, *poitín* itself was never banned, nothing really prevented them from doing so. It highlights the fact that the illicit nature of the production was a central aspect in the definition of *poitín*.

The phenomenon that has been described so far is almost purely economic: small distillers were pushed out of business by poorly designed laws, and turn to the illicit production for lack of better options. If one was to stop here, the massive expansion of *poitín*-making could be considered as a mere side-effect of the 1779 Still Licence Act, and not necessarily as a reaction to it. But strikingly, that legislation had another notable consequence: a dramatic evolution of the whiskey production in Ireland. *Poitín* heyday seems to correspond to a rapid industrialisation of the distilling sector in Ireland, a process which had many negative consequences on rural Ireland.

### ***Poitín*: a response to the industrialisation of the whiskey sector**

To quote McGuire (1973, p.127): “change in an industry is usually a slow process. Even when the cause is known it is not always possible to fix a point when the change began. The Irish distilling industry in the last two decades of the eighteenth century was a remarkable exception”. He goes on, mentioning the 1779 Still Licence Act has a trigger to that change. If, as explained above, the Still Licence Act pushed small distillers out of legal business, it also indirectly encouraged those who could afford it to work faster and therefore to produce larger quantities of whiskey. To that end, distillers had to improve both their skills and their equipment. The shapes of the stills were changed to enhance their productivity, and coal, which was considered to be more efficient than peat, became the main source of fuel. Large productions of spirits however could only happen in areas where the markets for whiskey were substantial. Thus, the industry naturally concentrated around larger cities, Dublin and Cork primarily. Not only did these cities had substantial markets, but as ports, they also offered an easy access to coal imported from Great Britain, and they allowed distillers to buy their raw material at the best price, importing it when necessary, thus avoiding any shortage.

Entrepreneurs invested in larger plants equipped with bigger stills, which required substantial capitals. Most of the largest stills in Ireland, between 1,000 and 2,000 gallons, were found in Dublin and Cork (McGuire 1973, pp.131, 167-9, 172). Thus, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a rapid and dramatic transformation of the sector. In 1770, 800,000 gallons were distilled in Ireland, in 1790, the production rose to 3 million gallons and by 1812, it had reached 6.5 million gallons. Meanwhile, the number of distilleries kept decreasing: in 1780, there were 1228 distilleries in Ireland, in 1790, there were only 246 left. (Malcolm 1986, pp.112-3; McGuire 1973, pp.127-8, 151, 207). The emergence of a modern distilling industry, with fewer plants producing larger quantities of spirits, was undeniable.

Mass-produced disembodied whiskey, however, didn't sit well with rural populations. It did not correspond to the traditions and customs of rural Ireland. First of all, access to what was then referred to as "parliament whiskey" was limited in many of the remote areas in the west and north-west of Ireland, both in terms of price and availability. Means of communication were poor in those regions and transporting whiskey from other areas of Ireland, such as Dublin or Cork for instance, was long and difficult, and therefore expensive, which ultimately impacted the price of the product. In some parts of Ireland, there were therefore many small markets with a lot of demand for cheaper local *poitín*. In addition, "parliament whiskey" was also generally considered unpalatable by the population of those areas. The feeling was shared among all classes: in the *Report from the Select Committee on Illicit Distillation* (1816, p.87), a witness stated that "*poitín* was consumed in preference [to whiskey]" and that "there [was] a taste acquired for the illicit spirits which [was] not easily given up [...], more considerably on the middle ranks than on the lower". Another witness added: "in a very considerable degree, the better sort of people won't drink the public-distilled whiskey when they can get the private" (Ibid., p.137). The reason was simple: with the legislation pushing distillers to work as fast as they could, favouring large quantities, little attention was paid to the quality of the produced whiskey. In 1816, a witness claimed that "it was impossible to make a wholesome spirit" within the legal system (Ibid., p.54). *Poitín* was therefore often deemed superior to and more palatable than the so-called "parliament whiskey".

But more than a matter of taste, the expansion of *poitín*-making in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century is revealing of a conflict between two different worlds within Ireland: a rural, peasant society, attached to traditions and small-scale economy, against a more modern, "urban" society that was then emerging. *Poitín* was a significant part of the rural economy in the west and north-

west of Ireland. Agriculture – cereal crops in particular – partly depended on the local distilling industry. With no legal local distilleries left to buy barley, *poitin*-makers offered a welcomed outlet for farmers (Ibid., pp.25-6, 69, 78). Indeed, if transporting parliament whiskey from the east side of the country to the north-west was expensive, conversely, transporting barley from areas such as Donegal to Dublin or Cork would have been complicated as well. Testimonies claim that the price of barley remained high in notorious *poitin* counties only because of illicit distillation. In his statistical account of Culdaff, County Donegal, Mason (1816, pp.151-72) claimed that the economy of the whole district rotated almost exclusively around illicit distillation. *Poitin* had its own market, and the illicit spirit was sold quite openly in some areas of Ireland. By-products of *poitin*-making could be used to feed cattle, and farmers and *poitin*-makers often worked hand in hand. (Connell 1968, pp.5-6). Small mills and kilns also worked with illicit distillers, so did many (if not all) unlicensed public houses, the infamous shebeens (Wakefield 1812, p.729; *Select Committee on Constabulary Functions* 1854, pp.30-2, 66; Mason 1816, p.156; *S.C. on Illicit Distillation* 1816, pp.86, 89, 114). In 1854, Colonel Brereton claimed that “there [was] no ten square miles of Ireland that have not a shebeen house”, and most of those establishments were said to sell *poitin* almost exclusively (*S.C. on Constabulary Functions* 1854, pp.13, 56). That large number of shebeens exemplifies the fact that people in the rural areas of the west and north-west of Ireland seemed to be attached to the traditional local economy and to reject large-scale production and the modernisation that was emerging in Ireland. A noticeable lack of initiative or economic ambition resulted from the tenement system, with small lands offering little possibility of expansion. Tradition was the norm and change of any kind was frowned upon (Mason 1816, p.163). The industrialisation process went against the small-scale local economies that prevailed in rural Ireland, and the case of the whiskey sector is a good illustration: its industrialisation, which pushed small distillers out of business, was a direct threat to the whole economic pattern of the rural western parts of Ireland. And the issue was not only economic, rural traditions and customs were seldom compatible with large-scale industry and modern economic patterns. Mason (1816, p.635) reported that in the Sligo area “when any person [died] in a village, all work and labour [was] totally suspended”, a situation which would be unthinkable in areas where the industry was more developed. Local *poitin* was used in many ceremonies, from births to weddings to funeral wakes. Commercial transactions often involved a bottle of illicit whiskey and so did conflict settlements. Otway (1839a, p.266) mentioned the case of man who “used to settle differences amongst the neighbours by taking the parties at variance by the nape of the neck, and battering their heads



together, until they consented to shake hands and drink a pint of potteen”.

Thus, *poitín* can be considered a rural response to the industrialisation of the whiskey sector, it allowed some sort economic stability (even though that economy was stale and illicit distillation was a key component of a vicious circle which prevented any positive economic development or initiative), and it was regarded as a local and traditional staple by people who rejected “parliament whiskey”. The expansion of *poitín*-making at the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century was the expression an attachment to rural traditions, but one also needs to take into consideration of the “political” dimension of the phenomenon.

### ***Poitín* as a symbol of rebellion and resistance**

It must be pointed out that the period between 1780 and 1850 was particularly agitated, it witnessed the rise of the United Irishmen, and the subsequent Irish Rebellion of 1798, the Act of Union, the struggle for the repeal of the Penal Laws, the Tithe War. To some extent, the impulse behind the industrialisation process of the whiskey sector in Ireland can be attributed to the British authorities, in the sense that the Still Licence Act of 1779, which triggered the change, resulted from the British will to model the Irish economy on that of Great Britain. Indeed, the legislation was based on the idea of assimilating the collection of Irish distillery revenues to that of Great Britain. There was also a will to harmonize the spirits legislations of the two countries. But Ireland, and especially the western and north-western parts of the country, were not yet compatible with the British economic model (Connell 1968, p.36; *Revenue Arising in Ireland* 1823, pp.3, 110). It could be argued that, to some extent, *poitín*-making and *poitín* consumption expressed a rejection of the occupying British authority. Already in 1661, when direct taxation on spirits was introduced in Ireland, the spirit duty was considered a “hereditary duty” and was granted permanently to the King, meaning that the Irish Parliament had no authority over the duty. And it was said to have been introduced by King Charles II to raise funds following the English Civil War, which did not sit well with the Irish population (McGuire 1973, p.100). For many people, buying “Parliament whiskey” meant to indirectly pay taxes to an alien power. There was a form of pride in consuming *poitín* rather than whiskey. In 1854, a witness claimed that some people would “give more for poteen than the best legitimate whiskey” and that “in Ireland there [was] a sort of fancy gentlemen [had], a sort of pride, in saying 'I will give you a drop of the mountain dew'” (*S.C. on Constabulary Functions* 1854, p.49). Parliament whiskey (the nickname itself is also revealing) may have been perceived as “British” whereas *poitín* (which kept its Gaelic name, even though it was sometimes anglicized) has always been considered “authentically” Irish.

In that regard, *poitín*-making and *poitín* consumption were not merely responses to the industrialisation of the whiskey sector, they were also acts of defiance, of rebellion against British rules and oppression. There was a political dimension to *poitín*; whether it was conscious or unconscious is harder to determine.

If parliament whiskey and taxes were unpopular, so was a much-contested measure of repression introduced to suppress illicit distillation, the “town-land fining” system. The principle behind that system, which was introduced in 1783, was that if an unlicensed still, whether complete or fragmented, was detected, the whole area was fined. The fine was initially levied on the property on which the detection was made, but if the tenant could not, or did not, pay, the whole town-land was liable for the payment. The idea was to encourage the whole population to act against illicit distilling. But the system was perceived as particularly unfair and innocent people felt robbed by the authorities. In areas where *poitín*-making prevailed extensively, such as County Donegal, the amount of fines was so important that it could not be paid and was not collected for two years (*S.C. on Illicit Distillation* 1816, p.40). The soundness of the town-land fining system is largely discussed in the *Report from the Select Committee on Illicit Distillation in Ireland* (1816). If witnesses were divided on the subject, all admitted that it penalised innocent people and had a negative impact on the spirits of the population, while the illicit distillers were not really bothered. Aeneas Coffey, though a fervent advocate of the system admitted that innocent people suffered from it (*Ibid.*, p.121). Because of that measure, many people started to develop an aversion to the law and the authorities, and sympathised with the *poitín*-makers. Cheating the Excise authorities was perceived as an act of bravery (*Ibid.*, p.35). The system created a climate of violence in the most affected areas and it united the population against the authorities. It failed to suppress illicit distillation and was abandoned in 1820.

In that context, the *poitín*-maker quickly became a symbol of resistance among the Irish rural population. Numerous songs and stories have been written about that character. Notorious examples include *Bob Pentland; or, the Gauger Outwitted* and *Condy Cullen; or, the Exciseman Defeated* by William Carleton, in which the illicit distiller is depicted as a romantic, witty, Robin-Hood-like character. Even though the reality of *poitín*-making was often far from the romantic depiction of those stories – Otway (1839b, pp.42) described two illicit distillers as “two of the filthiest of human beings, half-naked, squalid, unhealthy looking creatures, with skins encrusted with filth, hair long, uncombed, and matted” – the romantic and picturesque representation has remained. Conversely, the perception of the

excise men or “gaugers” speaks volumes about the political, some might say “colonial”, dimension of the issue. The stories mentioned above almost systematically portrayed the gauger as a villain, who was outsmarted and ridiculed by the illicit distiller. The excise men represented the oppressive alien power, they were the physical embodiment of the “enemy”. Those fictional stories reflected an actual reality in some part of Ireland. Chichester (1818, p.84) claimed that killing a revenue man was seen as an act of heroism in the barony of Inishowen. Gaugers were perceived as oppressive characters, bringing misery by fining the parishes. As a result, the population often supported the *poitín*-makers, warning them when excise men approached, or misleading the latter with false information (*S.C. on Illicit Distillation* 1816, pp.22, 116; Connell 1968, p.10). Some landlords, who either had personal interest in *poitín*-making, or had seen their properties fined repeatedly, were said to be particularly hostile to the excise officers (McGuire 1973, p.407; *S.C. on Illicit Distillation* 1816, p.118). Even members of the clergy, especially before the Temperance movement that emerged in the 1830s, sometimes had sympathy for the *poitín*-makers and would let the inhabitants ring the church bell to warn them of the coming of excise officers (*S.C. on Illicit Distillation* 1816, p.116). Physical aggressions towards the officers were frequent. Actions against them went from signalling to trapping them, and could go as far as kidnapping and even killing (*S.C. on Illicit Distillation* 1816, pp.111, 144-6, 118; Otway 1839b, pp.51-9). The sociological side of *poitín*-making may explain why the phenomenon continued, although to a lesser extent, long after the economic issues mentioned above were fixed. It may also be the reason why *poitín* has remained rooted in Irish popular cultures, as the stories and legends outlived and eventually overshadowed the economic dimension of the phenomenon. Finally, that aspect of the issue is key in understanding the resurgence of the product in the 2000s, since what *poitín* represents seems to be more important than what it is made of.

## Conclusion

The idea of assimilating the collection of Irish revenues to that of Great Britain was ill-designed as Ireland had inferior capital and poorer infrastructures than Great Britain. Wakefield (1812, p.586) stated that “the great deficiency” in Ireland was the want of industry. He opposed the Irish peasants to the English farmers who, according to him, understood the importance of capital and industry. But, as Connell (1968, p.36) pointed out, “Irish problems sometimes needed Irish remedies”, and the case of the distilling industry may be the perfect illustration of that issue. A considerable part of the Irish population rejected the forced

industrialisation of the whiskey sector by clinging on to local economy and traditions through the means of *poitín*. In that sense, *poitín*-making can be analysed not only as an economic response to the industrialisation, but also as a political and sociological one.

By 1823, the authorities had to face the fact that the Still Licence Act system was a failure, and that it caused more problems than it solved: not only did fraud continue to a considerable extent in the legal industry but it led to the dramatic expansion of a parallel illicit industry. Consequently, a more effective and reasonable taxation system was adopted. Soon, producers went back to using smaller stills, and they could focus more on quality rather than quantity. Communication to remote areas of Ireland also started to improve. Therefore, people in the north-west and west of Ireland had access to a cheaper and more palatable “parliament” whiskey. Adding to that, more effective measures of repression regarding illicit distillation were adopted. Thus, *poitín*-making naturally started to decrease. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the phenomenon was almost eradicated, or at least, was reduced down to a marginal problem for the authorities. As the number of illicit distillers decreased, their skills were also less transmitted and got lost. The “traditional” approach to *poitín*-making, which required time and significant skills, was steadily replaced by simpler and faster methods, using more readily available, easier to work with, ingredients. Thus, testimonies started to mention *poitín* made out of beetroots, potatoes, molasses, or even plain sugar.<sup>5</sup> By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the raw ingredients (which is generally one of the most important elements of any spirit's definition) was not really a key feature in the popular definition of *poitín*. The infamous Irish spirit was therefore reduced down to the following features: an illicit high-proof unaged spirit. However, *poitín* has kept its fiery aura of rebellion, based on stories, legends and songs.

The catch-all definition made in 2015 reflects the history of *poitín*, a history of constant adaptation and resilience. There cannot be a clear and simple answer to the question: what is *poitín*? The definition of this drink is by nature changing, it has constantly adapted to economic situations, to the tastes of its time, to the raw material available, etc. In that regard, it should not come as a surprise that nowadays *poitín* is designed as a beverage fitted for cocktails and mixed drinks.

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5 In its booklet entitled *Traditional Food Skills*, Bord Bia (2010, p.26) mentions that “a sugar-based variety of *poitín*, which took nine to ten days to make, was the most popular. A treacle-based variety took about the same time but was not as pleasant tasting (treacle would have been more widely available than sugar at the time)”.

**Sylvain Tondeur** is a full-time English teacher, he is currently registered on a PhD, a “co-tutelle” established between the Université de Lille and the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies (TU Dublin – Tallaght Campus). His research focuses on the contemporary renewal of Irish distilleries and on the influence of alcohol on Ireland's cultural identity. His research interests also include the phenomenon of illicit distillations in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland and the Irish drinks industry's history as a whole. His most recent publications include a chapter entitled “A New Phenomenon: Whiskey Tourism in Ireland” in *Voyages between France and Ireland: Culture, Tourism and Sport* (2017).

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