

INISHOWEN AND THE FIRST REPUBLIC

A POITIN MAKER'S HAVEN by Chris Nikkel



The Urris Hills on the Inishowen Peninsula are hidden gems in Ireland. Dominating the landscape from the dramatic military fort at Dunree to the village of Clonmany, the hills are a rocky band hemmed in by Lough Swilly as it opens up into the North Atlantic. The single break in the range is the steep and windy Mamore Gap, which goes over rather than through the rocky terrain. It is the perfect place for stunning sightseeing, hillwalking, or something more illicit: alcohol distilling.

Ireland's relationship with whisky is a long and illustrious one. Some say it is the birthplace of the drink, with its name coming from the Old Irish word *uisce beatha*, meaning 'water of life'. The actual process is likely Italian, brought back to Ireland by monks a thousand years ago. But the earliest written record of it in Ireland comes from the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, which claims that the death of a local chieftain in 1405 was due to 'taking a surfeit of *aqua vitae*', which is of course whisky in Latin. This comes some 90 years before the first record of whisky in Scotland.

Ireland can with certainty also claim the oldest licensed distillery in the world, and it is not that far from the Urris Hills—around the North Atlantic Coast is Old Bushmills, which has been making whisky since 1608. Ulster has always been a leader in whisky production, and just a few decades after Old Bushmills started distilling, the industry was booming. It would be a boom that would cause problems in the Urris Hills.

As all of us know, when an industry starts to boom, the taxman is usually not far away. With the increase in whisky production in the 17th Century, a government excise was soon levied on whisky. By the 18th century, the excise had

grown and by the Napoleonic wars in the early 19th Century the government was using whisky to help fund the campaign against the French.

While the big distillers were easily caught and had to pay, a gap in the market appeared for smaller distillers able to stay illicit and out of sight. For decades this black-market trade was overlooked, but in 1785 the government passed an Act making it illegal to produce whisky without a license.

Across Ireland a new flourishing whisky production emerged, but not traditional grain whisky—it was often too difficult to acquire the grain needed for the process. Instead, small-time producers used potato peel to create a mash to distil into alcohol. Poitin, which means 'little pot', was born.

In Inishowen, these illicit pot stills became an emblematic feature in the Urris Hills.

Initially, the government tried to shut down these distillers by tracking them down and confiscating their equipment. But because the distillers had such a simple set up, and easily moveable, the authorities often found the remnants of the stills abandoned in the hills, or the equipment quickly carried away to safety.

The government was being side-stepped, and so resorted to a new method of capture. Instead of tracking the distillers, they decided to target the entire population. They levied new fines on the township whereby any parish found with an illegal still were slapped with massive fines.

The township was now in a bind. They couldn't afford the new fines, but they also couldn't afford to lose the money



flooding into the communities through the production of Poitin. In the Urris Hills, they took matters into their own hands.

The Urris Hills had an obstacle that the distillers could use to their advantage: the landscape. A watch system of lookouts were coordinated in the hills in Autumn 1812, using burning torches as communications used to alert the distillers that the authorities were on their way. This signalling system, with the help of the entire township banding together, kept the Urris Poitin-makers in business, cutting off the authorities from shutting them down.

The infamous Poitin Republic of Urris had been born.

For three years the people of Urris held out. They blockaded the Mamore Gap, hurling down rocks at the authorities if they attempted to gain access to the hills. But the fight against the Revenue Police was too much. In 1815, a military force arrived to shut down the Republic, with some saying over a hundred shots were fired in the skirmish.

Now faced with crippling fines and destroyed businesses, the local population tried one last desperate act: they petitioned the government. The text of their petition was published in the *Freemans Journal* in 1818, stating their case clearly:

"That the petitioners are compelled to endure the most vexatious and oppressive exactions under the name of fines for illicit distillation, imposed upon the aforesaid Parish and townlands contained therein; that many persons who are guiltless or incapable of illicit distillation, have been forced to pay large portions of such fines, and that all proofs of individual innocence are rejected as reasons for exemption from payment of them; that the severity of diverse persons professing to bear excise commissions has been so great that alarming disturbances have broken out in their neighborhood and that the ordinary execution of the laws has failed in restoring tranquility."

But it was not to be. Some distilling kept on through the Irish Famine, but nothing like the industry that had emerged around 1815. Today, the beautiful Urris Hills still feel remote and indomitable—it's easy to see how an illicit distilling business lasted so long.