

Deep Roots: White Lightning
by Wilma Heberling

For a change, I thought I would tell you a story about some of MY ancestors. This took place in northeast Sutherland County, in Scotland, in a Strath, which is the Highland word for a river valley. This story is taken from written records, some of which are personal, some official.

Early on the morning of December 28, 1835, Alexander Fraser, an excise officer, walked south over the hills from his home in Strathy towards Strath Haladale. He had suspicions that “Illicit distillation of Whisky” was taking place in some parts of the Strath. Indeed, he discovered a “Smuggling Bothy” (*still*) beside a deep burn (*stream*) above the old township of Bighouse. The still- pot was right there over the fire. Joseph Mackenzie was there. He begged not to be reported, but Fraser said it was “his duty” and seized the still-pot. Mackenzie offered no resistance; in fact the report said, he did “not even make use of uncivil language.”

Fraser then proceeded along the west side of the Strath until he reached Trantlemore, where he observed smoke issuing from a place where there was no house. He had found another Smuggling Bothy. This Bothy had a “small, copper still- pot, which contained some warm water and was placed over a fire, and a small quantity of malt in a sack, and three empty casks.” Fraser emptied the still and carried it away to John Mackay’s house, in nearby Bunahoun.

Two young men appeared at the house, Angus Mackenzie and Donald Mackenzie from Trantlemore, also John Campbell a tenant at Bunahoun. They had come to see Fraser “because they heard that he was doing some mischief that day.” However, nothing more was said at the time, and they left..

After resting a while, Fraser went to cross the river Haladale, carrying the still-pots on a stick over his shoulder. In the middle of the river he was attacked by a man disguised in women’s clothing. Fraser managed to throw his attacker down in the water, and with John Mackay’s assistance, was able to rescue the still-pots which were floating down the river. They then decided to spend the night at the nearby Inn at Trantlebeg. Fraser locked the stills in a thatched-roof outbuilding of the Inn. However, the next morning, a hole was discovered in the roof, and the still-pots were gone!

During the subsequent investigation, Hugh Mackay of Bunahoun said his wife Barbara had seen “two persons dressed in women’s clothing lingering nearby.” She knew at once that they were not females, and when they passed her, she recognized them as Hugh Mackenzie, of Trantlemore, and she thought, Donald Ross.

Hugh Mackay said he had often seen the still which belonged to Hugh Mackenzie, Alexander Macdonald, and Angus Ross, the miller at Trantlebeg. The malt belonged to John MacLeod, of Strathy.

Hugh Mackay then said that he had communicated all that he knew, but he was “unwilling to be named as the informer, from a dread of ill-will towards him by the persons indicated.”

Because of a lack of proper identification, the case against the distillers of “white lightning” was dropped, and in no time at all, wisps of smoke again could be seen along the Strath. A certain beer company in its advertising claims that “It’s the water” that makes their beer special. Along Strath Haladale, the stronger liquid is known as Uisge-Beatha---the water of life!.

Air do Slainte

Wilma