

THREE SILVER METHER CUPS FROM THE BRITISH ISLES

By Giorgio Busetto

Fig. 1. Irish mether cup, sterling with gilt interior, 2 1/8 x 2 inches, Sharman D. Neill, Dublin, Ireland, 1904. Sharman Dermott Neill, High Street, Belfast, succeeded his father in business in 1885. Described as a clockmaker, watchmaker, jeweler, diamond merchant, and goldsmith, the firm registered its mark at the London Assay Office in 1903, and was converted into Sharman D. Neill Ltd. in 1906. (Sharman D. Neill, Thomas Caldwell, Henry Hamilton, and George W. Smallwood as directors).

Fig. 1a. Irish mether cup, trefoil shaped mark with "D over SN," Sharman D. Neill hallmark, Dublin, Ireland, 1904.



Fig. 2. English mether cup, sterling, 3 x 2 3/4 inches, Skinner & Co., London, 1904. In 1897, A.E. Skinner & Co. was listed as silversmiths, goldsmiths, diamond setters, jewelers, and diamond merchants at 5 Orchard Street, Oxford Street, London. The partners were Alfred Ernest Skinner, Walter George Vaughan, and George Edward Russell.

Fig. 2a. English mether cup, rectangle mark with "S&Co," Skinner & Co. hallmark, London, England, 1904. This mark was entered at the London Assay Office on March 2, 1904, by Alfred Ernest Skinner.



A mether cup is a drinking vessel of Celtic origin used in Ireland to drink mead, an alcoholic beverage made of honey, water, and yeast. According to tradition, the cup circulated from hand to hand, each person passing the cup to his neighbor after taking a sip from a corner as a sign of friendship. Early examples found in bogs are four-sided wooden cups with three or four handles elongated at the end, so they end parallel to the base.

The best known example of an ancient mether is the Dunvegan Cup, a tenth-century wooden artifact with fifteenth-century silver ornamentation. It belongs to the Clan MacLeod of the Scottish Highlands and is preserved in the Dunvegan Castle.¹ Silver examples based on ancient wooden prototypes have been

manufactured since the eighteenth century. In their European Sculpture and Decorative Arts Collection, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, exhibits a square two-handled mether cup/loving cup made by Richard Williams with a 1772 Dublin hallmark.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the "Celtic Revival" taste and renewed research for "novelties" lead many United Kingdom makers to resume the manufacture of silver mether cups, often used as presentation cups or as a child's christening mug. The new cups, standing on four square handles with deep lobes extending down to the level of the base to form their legs, were characterized by reduced dimensions, usually not exceeding 3 inches in height. Their four handles were reputed to rep-

resent the four Provinces of Ireland: Leinster, Ulster, Munster, and Connacht.

I am lucky enough to possess three mether cups manufactured in the first decade of the twentieth century by silversmith firms having their location respectively in Ireland, Scotland, and England—that is to say in the three entities that have proudly exhibited their intertwined symbols in the Union Jack since 1801.²

The two mether cups in Figures 1 and 2, both made in 1904, have pronounced fluted edges and baluster shaped bodies reminiscent of the Art Nouveau style. Made five years later, the Scottish example in Figure 3 has a more geometrical form influenced perhaps by the ideas of Scottish architect Charles Rennie MacIntosh (1868-1928) and his Glasgow School of Art.

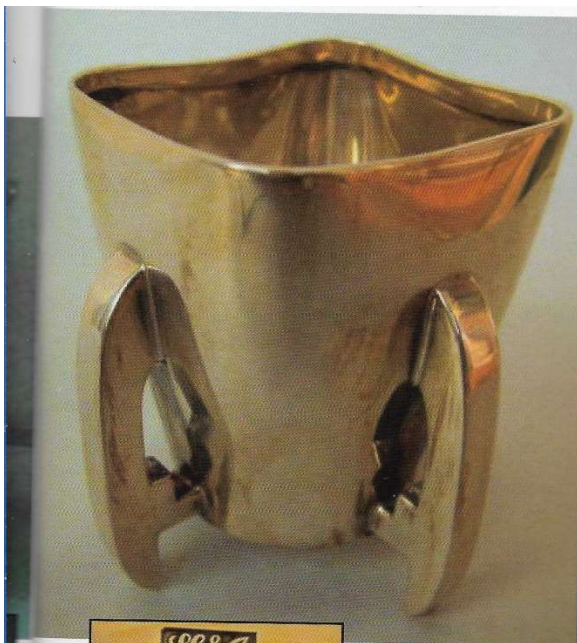


Fig. 3. Scottish mether cup, sterling, 2 3/4 x 2 1/8 inches, Hamilton & Inches, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1909. Hamilton & Inches began in 1866 as a family business and founded its silver workshop in 1896. The firm is still active and holds a Royal Warrant as Silversmiths of Her Majesty The Queen.

Figs. 3a & 3b. Scottish mether cup, rectangle mark with "H&I" in script, Hamilton & Inches hallmark, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1909.



Fig. 4. Mether cups, (left to right) Scottish, English, and Irish.

Giorgio Busetto is the founder of the Association of Small Collectors of Antique Silver (ASCAS) www.ASCASonline.org and the owner of the non-commercial website www.Silvercollection.it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Culme, John. *The Directory of Gold & Silversmiths, Jewellers, and Allied Traders, 1838-1914: From the London Assay Office Registers*, 2 vols. Suffolk, UK: Antique Collectors Club, 1987-2000.

Newman, Harold. *An Illustrated Dictionary of Silverware*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2000.

NOTES

1. The Dunvegan Cup features an inscription around the silver rim that is believed to read, "Katharina, daughter of King Neil, wife of John, grandson of Macguire, Prince of Fermanagh, had me made in the year of the Lord 1493." Traditionally

the cup belonged to Niall Glúin Dubh (Neill of the Black Knee), King of Ulster in 990, an ancestor of Katharina.

2. The Union Jack is the national flag of the United Kingdom. It is formed by

superimposing St. George's Cross of England (a red cross in a white field), St. Andrew's cross of Scotland (a white "x" in a blue field), and St. Patrick's Cross of Ireland (a red "x" in a white field).