

# ”Original and Best”? How Barr’s Irn-Bru Became a Scottish Icon

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# “Original and Best”? How Barr’s Irn-Bru Became a Scottish Icon

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- 1 Barr’s Irn-Bru<sup>1</sup> plays a considerable cultural role in Scotland as an ingrained element of Scottish quotidian consumption habits as well as representing a semiotic shorthand for “authentic” Scottish identity. This has arguably been the case since the 1970s at least, but has become particularly apparent in recent times. Events such as the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow showed how a sense of Scottish particularism could be played out through the advertising of Irn-Bru, while the Independence Referendum and its aftermath gave examples of how consumption of the drink could become ideologically charged. Cans of Irn-Bru formed the structural foundations for a mock-up of the Forth Rail Bridge which featured in the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony, while AG BARR plc, one of the main sponsors of the event, launched an advertising campaign on the theme of the Scots as patriotic sports fans.<sup>2</sup> In 2014 Former Secretary of State for Scotland and future leader of Scottish Labour Jim Murphy campaigned for a No vote on a stump tour of Scotland where he spoke atop two upturned Barr’s crates and sipped Irn-Bru before journalists. Jeremy Corbyn’s first official trip to Scotland as Labour leader in 2015 involved him being hastily photographed tasting the famous beverage on the train home after his earlier refusal of a can of the drink threatened to harm his image.<sup>3</sup>
- 2 That the cultural practices which inform national identities are rooted in the world of commercial production and marketing communications does not make them any less relevant as objects of study. Without disputing the significance of such commercially-rooted practices, our understanding and reception of them is however inevitably conditioned by their historical grounding. This is important given that Barr’s Irn-Bru, through its packaging design and advertising has built up a twin discourse linking the nation and the origins of the drink. However, since it can be shown that the carbonated drink known as Iron Brew, the former name for Irn-Bru, is not innately Scottish, drinking

Barr's Irn-Bru today only means something about Scottishness if other elements of cultural mediation have come into play such as the selection, framing and foregrounding of certain discourses and images that have displaced others. By investigating the drink's true historical origins we are not challenging Scots to spurn inauthentic practices, but simply reaffirming how the cultural appropriation of markers of national authenticity always involves a degree of institutionalized forgetting. This cultural amnesia can in particular mask the confluence of the multiple sources from which such cultural constructs have emerged.

- 3 The growing body of literature on the commercial mediation of national identity, of which Kania-Lundholm provides a thorough review (2014), shows this to be a promising area of research and provides some useful methodological insights. Authors such as Billig (1995) have argued convincingly that the study of banal nationalism, which concerns itself with the daily occurrences of less ostentatious national signification—that of the unwaved versus the waved flag—should not be overlooked despite their often apparently trivial nature. Drawing from this study, Edensor (2002), with a particular focus on Scotland, shows how such “low” cultural practices can shape national identity. Brands, he notes, contribute to the physical environment of the nation thanks to the creation of a particular retail geography or through the inculcation of quotidian consumption habits as a type of national performance. A similar point that commercial consumption offers a key means to act out national identities has been made by Slater (1997, p. 132). Edensor is also interested in the sense of temporal continuity that brands offer the nation (2002, p. 110), which is important given the emphasis that theorists of the nation such as Renan (1997) or Smith (1991) have placed on the question of connecting the nation of today with its ancestral or imagined past. It is no coincidence if an author such as Holt (2004, 2006), whose important work in the field of iconic brands has criticised the limitation of studies which seek merely to criticise or rehabilitate the brand as a cultural phenomenon, reiterates the importance of scanning the trajectory of a brand over time in order to get a fuller understanding of how it inserts itself into a series of competing cultural myths.
- 4 To study such phenomena in Scotland, Barr's Irn-Bru is a pertinent case study. Not only does the drink represent an almost unparalleled example of a nationally branded product, but it also reveals the preponderance of the notions of origins, authenticity, historicity (and also superiority), in its commercial discourse. These themes are potently tied together in the tagline “Original and Best”. While not being a slogan solely associated with AG BARR plc or Irn-Bru<sup>4</sup>—thus highlighting the sensitivity of many early brands to the issue of commercial plagiarism—the term “original” was a key feature of Barr's early marketing communications for the drink and remains so today.
- 5 This article intends to briefly look at Barr's official corporate discourse surrounding the origins of their flagship drink Irn-Bru, which they sold under the name Iron Brew until this was changed to its distinctive modern-day spelling in 1948 when the drink was reintroduced on the UK market after World War II.
- 6 This will be contrasted with archive research which shows how the drink has coalesced from disparate strands in the US and then UK markets, with the different stages of the drink's development reflecting the legal and commercial environment in which it evolved. We will also consider how the post-war relaunch of Iron Brew as Irn-Bru helped to seal the notion of an original drink whose distinctive and idiosyncratic identity increasingly became associated with Scotland.

## Protecting and promoting originality

- 7 The official back story of Irn-Bru for many years has been that the aerated waters manufacturers AG Barr & Co. in Glasgow and Robert Barr in Falkirk—two family firms with a strong degree of integration, Andrew G. Barr being Robert’s son—jointly launched their “original recipe” Iron Brew in 1901. However, despite this phrasing, the firm today AG BARR plc today are clear that they were not the first to present such a drink (Grant, 2004, p. 9). The firm describes the early days of Iron Brew as a period when the name was merely indicative of a generic type of beverage and the drink was produced by a multitude of local bottlers each producing their own version of the flavour. To explain their use of the slogan “Original and Best” today, AG Barr & Co. plc indicate that it simply alludes to the fact that they continue to use their own proprietary recipe as detailed in a vintage mixing book in their possession. According to AG BARR plc, the recipe contains 32 flavouring ingredients and was first used in 1901. Thus the slogan is reportedly intended to convey a sense of continuity rather than represent a claim that Barr’s Irn-Bru was the initial or authentic drink of this category.
- 8 The slogan “Original and Best” was used by Barr’s throughout much of the 20th century. A focus on the “originality” of the drink first appeared right after the launch of Barr’s Iron Brew, when commercial branding was still in its infancy and counterfeiting or imitating popular brands to benefit from the goodwill they had accrued was still commonplace. Early bottle labels for Barr’s Iron Brew included the mention “THE ORIGINAL. NONE GENUINE WITHOUT THIS SIGNATURE” above a facsimile of the appropriate signature of “AG Barr & Co. Ltd” or “Robt Barr” respectively. After the introduction of legislation concerning the protection of “Merchandise Marks” in 1875 and 1887, manufacturers could register graphic devices as well as distinctive trade names to protect the identity of their products in the face of less scrupulous competitors. In Falkirk, the signature of founder Robert Barr had been duly registered as a legally protected trademark (“Prosecution under the Merchandise Marks Act”, 1899, p. 3) and the same would also appear to be the case for the Glasgow firm, allowing them to distinguish their products from those of their rivals and initiate successful legal action against anyone who usurped their firm’s identity. However, the name of the drink Iron Brew could not be trademarked itself as a great many soft drinks manufacturers around the UK—and particularly in Scotland—were already selling Iron Brew drinks, often with very similar packaging.
- 9 Thus the use of the term “The Original” in conjunction with the signature of the manufacturers was applied to bottles to indicate that the Iron Brew in question was not counterfeit and that it was the authentic produce of AG Barr & Co. or Robert Barr. More subtly, the term also connoted the superiority of a product liable to be plagiarized due to its implied qualities, a commercial argument in itself. Nevertheless, while prompted by the profusion of counterfeit or look-alike products characteristic of the early history of branded goods, use of the term “original”, thanks to its ambiguous semantics, also allowed the drink to be presented as a historical original, the first and hence genuine instance of such a product. Barr’s openly invited this abusive interpretation of the term in advertising which appeared in the Falkirk Herald in 1904: “Drink Barr’s Iron Brew – The original and best – Owing to the many imitations of this famous brew insist on seeing the label”. This message strongly hinted that all rival makers of similar drinks were mere

copiers attempting to unjustly reap the commercial rewards of a successful drink which was Barr’s invention. The tagline “Original and Best” has been displayed on all cans and bottles of Barr’s Irn-Bru for a number of decades now, this specific slogan being reintroduced in 1988 when the packaging was modernised.

- 10 Various other uses of the term “original” have also appeared recurrently on the drink’s packaging and advertising both before and after World War II. For example, the line “BARR’S IRON BREW / (The Original Iron Brew)” was in evidence in a Barr’s ad published in the *Fife Free Press* in 1930 (“Famous Athletes”) thus continuing to reinforce this impression of the authenticity and historical primacy of Barr’s drink, which was certainly enduringly popular and commercially successful but had no genuine claim to having distinctive Scottish origins.
- 11 Cubitt stresses how notions of temporal continuity, expressed via myths that located the legitimacy of the nation in its shared ancestral past, were particularly prominent in 19th century conceptions of national identity (1998, p. 9). From today’s perspective, Edensor, while acknowledging how evocations of past authenticity still importantly generate a sense of continuity and fixity (2002, pp. 116–7), stresses the benefits of refocusing on the role of popular and material culture in the construction of national identity. This allows us to escape the “temporal cul-de-sac” (*ibid.*, p. 17) which has been characteristic of earlier attempts to theorise the nation and which have tended to neglect the repeated, performative, mundane elements of contemporary national experience in an era of consumerism. Edensor’s premise is neatly summed up by Foster who notes that consumption of Coca-Cola “allows the past to live in the present” thus yoking tradition and continuity to modernity (1999, p. 274). But the portrayal of origins can often connote this reassuring sense of fixity and authenticity only when framed in a reductive manner which excludes the inevitable geographic and cultural interactions which have been written out of the official story. This appears to be particularly true of the brands which represent industrial mass-produced products, individual goods necessarily existing as part of a broader network of supply, production and distribution (Edensor, 2002, p. 115). In order to illustrate this point it will be useful to study the actual commercial origins of the drink that became known as Irn-Bru.

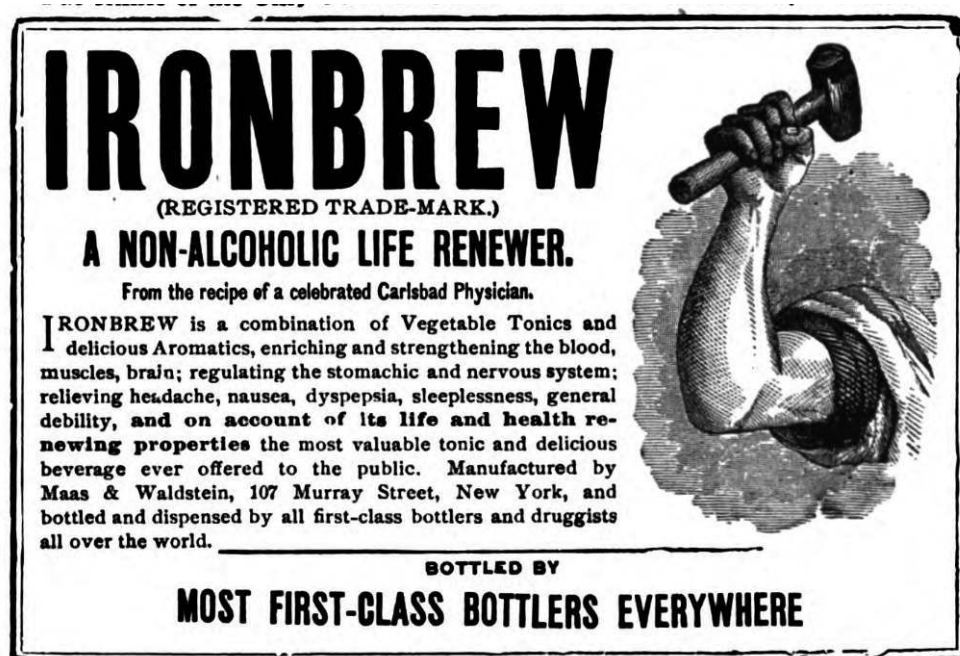
## The ideal American tonic

- 12 The earliest known ad for “Iron Brew” appeared in Kingston, Jamaica and was published in the *Daily Gleaner* on 9 July 1891 by the “Jamaica Aerated Water Coy”. The ad, little more than a trade notice announcing a change of premises and listing the flavours of beverage available, listed Iron Brew alongside the other drinks they sold. The company was run by the MacNish family and the father, having been a merchant in Glasgow, retained trading links with the whisky distributors of the same name. In subsequent ads, MacNish & Son—as the firm became known—claimed to have produced their “genuine and original” MacNish Iron Brew from their premises in Port Royal from as early as 1890. Yet, although they frequently warned customers over the next decade against purchasing inferior imitations of the drink, the Iron Brew they were bottling and promoting as their most popular product was not their original invention and was certainly not Scottish in spite of the bottler’s surname. Instead, it was mixed from a pre-prepared syrup that the MacNishes imported from the US along with other fruit flavours and essences. This was quite typical of the late 19th century market for sparkling drinks where large numbers of

small independent soda fountains and bottlers mixed, carbonated and sold drinks at a local level but depended on large specialist flavouring houses which mass-produced the standardised essences and concentrated syrups that the former used in their recipes. The manufacturer of the Iron Brew essence used to make the drink sold in Jamaica was the Maas & Waldstein chemicals company of New York. As the inventors of an innovative essence which they marketed as IRONBREW, Maas & Waldstein can be credited as the true historical originator of the carbonated drink which went on to be copied as "Iron Brew" and which we know today in the form of Irn-Bru.

- 13 The *Official Gazette of the US Patent Office* records that on 5 January 1901 Maas & Waldstein filed a trademark application for a "medical tonic" named IRONBREW. While this registration process occurred relatively late, it is the date of the first use of the trade name which is significant in the application. The filing states that IRONBREW was first used commercially on 28 August 1889, a date which is compatible with claims by the MacNish firm that they had been selling Iron Brew since 1890 and which situates Maas & Waldstein as the first to commercialise a carbonated drink with this name.<sup>5</sup>
- 14 While one side of Maas & Waldstein's business involved the production of solvents, lacquers and enamels, they also had an important line supplying independent bottlers and drugstore soda fountains with fruit essences, flavoured syrups, acids and colorants. Histories of the US soft drinks market tend to largely overlook Iron Brew, ignoring it completely (Dietz, 1973; Pendergrast, 1993) or mentioning it only in passing as an example of an early drink whose popularity quickly waned (Riley, 1958, p. 133; Tchudi, 1986, p. 20; Funderburg, 2001, p. 103). It is, however, clear from the trade press and from its advertising that Iron Brew was one of America's most well-known sodas from the mid-1890s to the 1910s, enjoying widespread popularity all across the United States.
- 15 Independent bottlers were recruited across the country and were supplied with IRONBREW essence, as well as the necessary labels, store signs and show cards which would help to market the drink by creating a distinctive visual identity.

Maas & Waldstein IRONBREW bottle label, c. 1900.





- 16 Maas & Waldstein themselves were frequent advertisers in professional publications such as the *American Bottler* magazine, often taking out double-page spreads to promote IRONBREW as their flagship brand. Bottling agreements were secured in cities far beyond its East Coast base—as well as being introduced into California at an early stage and having a strong presence in Texas, Iron Brew was also present across the mid-west and even in Hawaii. Its popular appeal all across the US meant that the drink could be presented with some pertinence as a truly national, rather than local, product:
- As an ideal American tonic Ironbrew stands in the front rank. Men, women and children all like it for its stimulating properties and fine taste. As a most healthful and nourishing drink it is sold in hotels, cafes, restaurants and soda fountains everywhere. ("Maas & Waldstein Co.", 1905, p. 72)
- 17 Maas & Waldstein underlined their role as the inventors of IRONBREW and frequently used this claim to affirm their product's authenticity and superior quality: "BEWARE of infringers and impostors and similar names. There is only one IRONBREW" ("IRONBREW: The ideal American Drink", 1906, p. 5). While, as we have seen, it was standard practice for firms of the day to exhort consumers to eschew disappointing substitutes or copycats, these arguments were here given more legitimacy by the primacy of Maas & Waldstein's product. The *Official Gazette of the US Patent Office* includes a registration filed in April 1905 under the category "medical tonics" which defined the IRONBREW visual logo as "an uplifted arm and hand grasping a hammer" (p. 1790). This device would henceforth be given legal protection alongside the brand name. Maas & Waldstein were therefore in a position to make good their threats that legal action would be taken against manufacturers who infringed their trademark.
- 18 Consequently, Maas & Waldstein successfully sued plagiarists in the US. In 1913, in a case heard in California (Maas & Waldstein Extract Co. vs. Cornelius P. Henrihy *et al.*), they objected to the adoption of the name "Iron Brew" for a product sold by the Western Bottling Co. Maas & Waldstein were successful and the ruling confirmed their status as the sole legitimate owner of the IRONBREW trade name as well as variants of this. Indeed, the court concluded that no drink could be legally sold by a rival using any other name which might be similar in "sound, appearance or suggestion". In the US at least the question of the custodianship of Iron Brew had been definitively settled.
- 19 The issue of sound-alike imitation products was particularly pertinent because as early as 1903 a drink known as "RON-BRE", a close rendering of "Iron Brew" when spoken aloud, had been marketed by the Blue Seal Supply Company of Boston, Massachusetts as a cheaper alternative to Maas & Waldstein IRONBREW.



Blue Label Supply Co. RON-BRE trade advertisement, *American Bottler*, 1906.

THE AMERICAN BOTTLER

# RON-BRE.



**RON-BRE** is in a class by itself. It makes an ideal leader and increases the bottler's profits. It is built on the plan of

**"NOT HOW CHEAP—BUT HOW GOOD."**

**RON-BRE** Sells for \$6.00 a gallon, including Labels and Show Cards. Directions on every bottle.

We want every bottler in America and Canada to order a sample gallon of

**RON-BRE** and give it a fair trial. If not satisfactory

**IT COSTS YOU NOTHING.**

Write us Today while you think of it to send you a sample gallon of

**RON-BRE**

**DO IT NOW!**

**RON-BRE** is copyrighted and the label registered. Bottlers, beware of worthless imitations.

**GET THE GENUINE.**

May we send you our Illustrated Catalogue?

A postal will bring one.



**RON-BRE CROWNS.**  
RON-BRE Crowns, Guaranteed & Extra, 24 each.



**RON-BRE LABELS.**  
RON-BRE Lithographed Labels, 2 colors, containing 2500 of each.



**DRINK RON-BRE**  
"IT TASTES GOOD"

**RON-BRE CRYSTALOID SHOW CARDS.**  
RON-BRE CRISTALOID SHOW CARDS containing 2500 of each.

**Blue Seal Supply Co.**

Importers and Manufacturers  12 Portland Street,  
Bottlers' Supplies. Boston, Mass.

This distinctive phonetic spelling—a trick the Blue Seal Supply Company also used with other products—was the basis for a successful, rival trademark application. The trademark for this “carbonated tonic beverage”, consisting of the hyphenated name RON-BRE and a logo featuring a standing bear, was duly registered on 27 March 1906 in the *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office*. RON-BRE, despite its clearly derivative nature, once again sought to position itself in the trade press as an authentic, original product: “RON-BRE is copyrighted and the label registered. Bottlers, beware of worthless imitations. GET THE GENUINE.” (“Ron-Bre”, 1906, p. 8) A similar phonetic spelling would be registered by Barr’s in Scotland in 1946 although there is no evidence they had any knowledge of the Blue Seal Supply Company’s product.

- 20 Perhaps as a result of the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906, which introduced new standards of accuracy for labelling and limited the presence of additives or harmful ingredients, the popularity of Iron Brew declined rapidly in the US. It did however retain a small regional presence in some markets such as Fredericksburg, Texas (where it remained available until the 1960s: Kirsch, 1969, p. 90), Utah (where it is sold under the name “Ironport” by Bandit Soda) and Connecticut, where Iron Brew is still bottled today by the Foxon Park soda company. Interestingly, Foxon Park, despite still using the original Maas & Waldstein logo device of a hammer held by a muscular arm, describes the drink on its website as “a unique soda that has its roots in old Scotland.”
- 21 Given the wealth of readily accessible trade publications for the US bottling industry which chart the rise and fall of the original American Iron Brew from the 1890s on, the subsequent attribution of specific Scottish origins for this drink reaffirms the ability of commercial myth to alter our understanding of the past. This is particularly the case when an apparently self-evident truth deters further serious investigation. Barr’s early

advertising strongly hinted at historical pre-eminence for their brand—the “original and best” Iron Brew which was claimed to be superior to mere imitations. Consumers from an early stage were invited to view Falkirk or Glasgow as the locus of a product whose authenticity and distinctiveness would increasingly be associated with its Scottish manufacturers, an idea reinforced by the popularity of the drink in the Scottish market and the consequent longevity of the local brand. While explicit claims of historical originality are today rejected by AG BARR plc, their “original and best” slogan fills the vacuum left by the disappearance of the drink from its initial US market. What was originally mere commercial hyperbole has helped condition our view of the drink as a seemingly sound element of national symbolism. In his study of iconic brands, Holt states that understanding the identity value of brands requires them being situated in a specific historical context and viewed as “historical actors in society” (Holt, 2004, p. 37). While pertinent, Holt’s underlying premise is that brands tend to be conservative followers rather than shapers of public opinion, merely “enjoin[ing] and embellish[ing]” existing myths (Holt, 2006, p. 372). This appears to underplay the ability of brands to shape our perception of history.

## Claiming English origins

22 With the American origins of the drink clearly lost from memory, rivalry appeared in the 1980s over whether the invention of Iron Brew could be attributed to English or Scottish producers, with attention being focused on historical soft drinks manufacturers in the Derby area. In 1983, journalist Tom Shields’ popular *Glasgow Herald* column drily recounted: “The English are now claiming they invented iron brew.” (1983, p. 8) This followed a claim made by English soft drinks producer Mandora St Clements Limited, which was based in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, that they were the original producers of Iron Brew. According to the firm, their Iron Brew had been produced in the Derby areas since the 1890s following its invention by a Belper chemist named Charles Southern whose original recipe they still used. In the article, Mandora’s operations manager John Hood was quoted as saying:

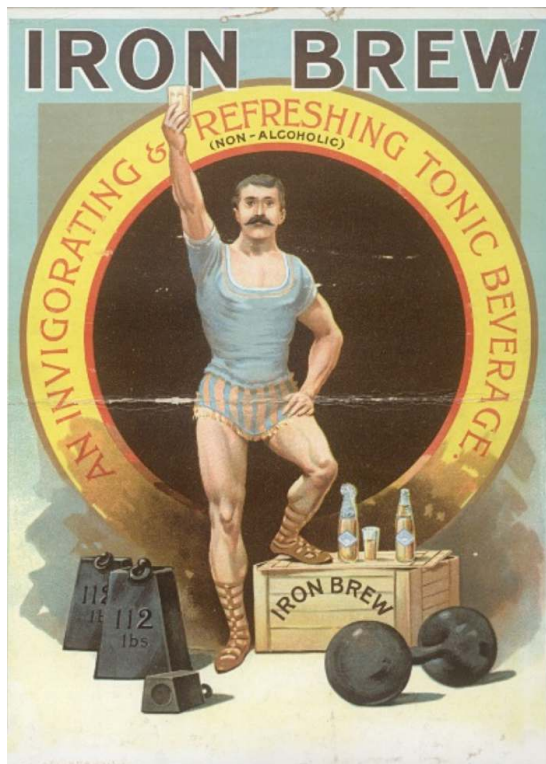
Everyone associates iron brew [sic] with Scotland. But it has always been popular in this area. I feel that since the originator comes from here and we use his recipe, we have a better claim to iron brew fame than our Scottish counterpart.

23 The reaction of Robin Barr, chairman of AG Barr from 1978 to 2009, whom Shields also quotes, was that Mandora’s claim could not be proved or disproved. Robin Barr merely reiterated the popularity of the Iron Brew that Barr’s had been producing since 1901 and acknowledged that other manufacturers had been making it before that date, stating that the drink’s origins potentially dated from before the 1890s (Shields, 1983, p. 8). Mandora, under their previous names Sturgess & Co., and later Burrows & Sturgess, had indeed been England’s most prominent purveyors of Iron Brew throughout the early 20th century. Tom Shields’ wry treatment of Mandora’s “disconcerting claim” hinted at a certain degree of cultural sensitivity surrounding the notion that Iron Brew might, in fact, have been English in origin.

24 Burrows & Sturgess certainly claimed at length and without the slightest ambiguity in their advertising that they were the historical inventors and sole genuine producers of the drink (“Christmas Drinks”, 1912, p. 3; “Spa-Ticklers”, 1920, p. 2). Prominent local advertisers for their Spa Iron Brew in the first decades of the 20th century, Burrows

& Sturgess often complained of plagiarists seeking to benefit unduly from the strong market they had created, but they were unsuccessful in their attempt to trademark Iron Brew ("Trade-marks Applied For", 1909, p. 479). This was no doubt because many other UK producers were already using the name by this point in time, a detail which in turn points to how the British market was structured.

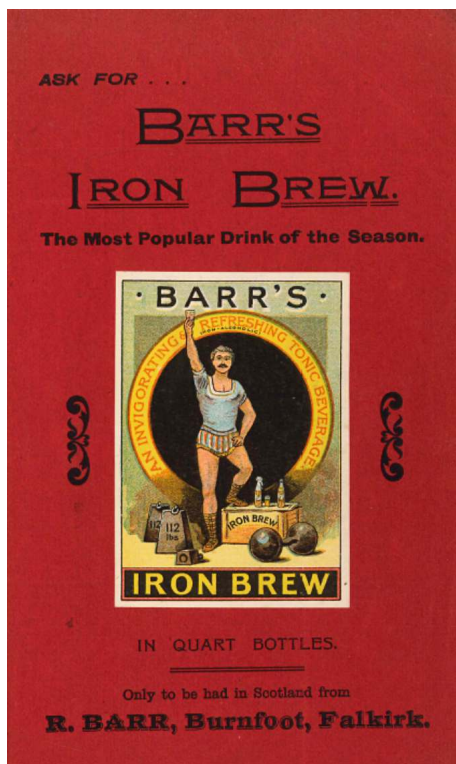
- 25 As in the US, the UK market for soft drinks featured large numbers of local carbonated drinks manufacturers who were supplied with colours, essences and fruit extracts by a collection of large, technologically innovative, national, or even international, flavour houses. One of the biggest and most well-known of these was the London firm of Stevenson & Howell (Abrash, 1982; Burnett, 1999, p. 100; Steen & Ashurst, 2006, p. 7), based in Southwark. Established in 1882 by chemists William Stevenson and Reginald Howell, the firm had agencies in the colonies as well as a branch office in Glasgow. Though not the sole UK producer of Iron Brew essence for the local bottlers who were beginning to commercialise the drink in the early 1900s,<sup>6</sup> Stevenson & Howell appears to have been the first and was certainly the most influential. Whereas the US market had grown rapidly following an initial phase of expansion in the early 1890s under the impetus of Maas & Waldstein, the introduction of Iron Brew in the UK did not take place until the launch of Stevenson & Howell's Iron Brew.
- 26 By referring to product catalogues and the trade press we can note that Stevenson & Howell first introduced their Iron Brew in 1898 ("Esencias Solubles Concentradas", 1898; "Soluble Essences", *Chemist & Druggist*, 30 July 1898). Accompanying this launch, on 15 August 1898, Reginald Howell personally filed an application for the copyright registration of a full-colour promotional showcard which had been executed for the firm. It was described thus: "Drawing of Show Card for drink called 'Iron Brew' representing 'strong man' in costume holding glass aloft in right hand." (National Archives 1 143 002)



NATIONAL ARCHIVES 1 143 002

- 27 The full-colour image showed a strongman in a short tunic sporting a large moustache. Surrounded by weightlifting equipment, he proudly holds up a glass in salute and is encircled by a ring of text stating: “AN INVIGORATING & REFRESHING TONIC BEVERAGE (NON-ALCOHOLIC)”. The Stevenson & Howell illustration is instantly recognisable as that of the muscular figure who would grace bottles of Barr’s Iron Brew for the next twenty years or so—the wording, pose, colour scheme, and accessories are all identical. The same basic illustration was then remodelled in the 1920s with a rower replacing the original athlete. This figure was used by Barr’s until the 1980s when he was replaced with a more stylised, metallic version of the athlete. Yet it was a London essence firm, rather than Barr’s themselves, which invented one of the most iconic and longstanding representations of the drink’s promotional and national identity, the supposedly archetypal “Highland” strongman.
- 28 In Barr’s company archive, a note dated 13 May 1899 in a copy letter book for Robert Barr, Falkirk, records a printing order for one million Iron Brew bottle labels to be supplied to Barr’s by the firm Stevenson & Howell. This confirms the early commercial relationship between the two firms who would continue to work closely together throughout the 20th century. Robin Barr (who retired as chairman to become Non-Executive Director in 2009, and who still personally mixes all the Irn-Bru essence sold) indicates that this very sizeable order for labels shows that the drink must already have had proven sales by this date, suggesting that it had already been on the market for some time.<sup>7</sup> This would situate Barr’s first commercialisation of Iron Brew earlier than spring 1899, allowing us to imagine it had appeared as early as the summer of 1898. However, despite Barr’s adopting Stevenson & Howell’s strongman image and using official Iron Brew promotional labels and showcards that they supplied, Robin Barr stresses that at no time did Barr’s purchase Stevenson & Howell’s proprietary brand of Iron Brew essence itself, the firm’s archives showing no record of this ever having taken place. AG BARR plc claims instead that Barr’s has always mixed Iron Brew to its own recipe using a combination of different flavours and ingredients (some of which were individually supplied by Stevenson & Howell).
- 29 The question of the identity of the “Highland” strongman is significant since Barr’s, in addition to appropriating the Stevenson & Howell image as their own, began to make it known that the illustration, used on the label, actually depicted early Scottish sportsman Adam Brown (also known as Lewis Lyon), a strongman and athlete from Shotts who performed at Highland Games events. This element of the brand’s history now features prominently as part of the “The Phenomenal AG BARR Story”, the timeline which appears on the company’s website. While this identification of the strongman as Adam Brown would appear spurious—the Stevenson & Howell figure represented a generic Victorian strongman at a time when the UK was caught up in enthusiasm for the German bodybuilder Eugen Sandow—the resemblance of the character in the illustration to Adam Brown reinforced the conception of an entirely local product championing Scottish cultural practices (Highland Games), thus channelling the attendant cultural values of strength, endurance and masculine vigour, which were already evident in the product’s name. Positioning of this sort was then reinforced from around 1904 when Barr’s began advertising campaigns which, in association with the generic strongman, featured likenesses of identifiable world champion athletes Donald Dinnie and Alex Munro.
- 30 The evacuation of Stevenson & Howell’s role in launching Iron Brew in the UK was clearly in evidence by the second half of the 20th century, with Barr’s pre-1901

commercialisation of the drink and the *post hoc* identification of the original strongman as a Scottish athlete both firmly anchored in the public’s mind from this period on. So complete was this new consensus that the management of AG BARR plc were themselves apparently unaware that the original advertising image had been created by Stevenson & Howell. AG BARR plc held commemorations in 2001 to mark the centenary of the introduction of their original recipe Iron Brew and celebrated the role of Adam Brown in a re-release of the strongman packaging in 2013. The 1901 date continues to be used on packaging, press releases and other marketing communications as the official launch date. However, Barr’s were clearly commercialising the drink before this date. The Falkirk local history archives hold the earliest published advertisement for Barr’s Iron Brew. Below the wording “ASK FOR... / ... BARR’S IRON BREW. / The Most Popular Drink of the Season,” the ad features a colour strongman bottle label.



Falkirk Archives.

- 31 The label is pasted directly onto the back page of a local cookery book which was printed as a fundraiser in advance of the St James United Presbyterian Church bazaar, held in Falkirk in October 1900.

## Post-War positioning

- 32 Another element of the origin story of Iron Brew which is significant for how the drink became predominantly associated with Scotland is the disruption in the UK soft drinks market caused by World War II. According to AG BARR plc, after the drink was forced off sale from 1942–1948 as part of the government’s wartime rationalisation of the soft drinks market, they felt compelled to rebrand their Iron Brew as “Irn-Bru” to get round new food labelling regulations which insisted that brand names should be “literally true”:



Barr’s “Iron Brew” did contain iron but it was not brewed. There appeared therefore to be no choice but to come up with a new spelling for the company’s No. 1 brand. (Barr & Jephcott, 2001, p. 28)

- 33 This version of events and their chronology is imprecise for a number of reasons, including the fact that the Labelling of Food Order (1946) did not restrict use of the word “brew” but banned unfounded “tonic” or “medicinal” claims, and specifically targeted Iron Brew drinks as an example of mislabelling over the suggested presence of healthful minerals (Ministry of Food, 1949, pp. 46–8). A small quantity of iron had been present in the drink from 1937 onwards although the addition of this mineral was halted from 1940 to 1942 in a context of wartime disruptions and shortages. In 1948 iron was reintroduced and from February 1949 the quantity was increased<sup>8</sup> to comply with the guidelines, drawn up with the help of chairman Robert Barr in person,<sup>9</sup> concerning the provisions for a minimum mineral content for such drinks (Barr, 1989).
- 34 Wartime legislation forced industry players to market only a small number of nationally standardised flavours under a common “SDI”—Soft Drinks Industry (War Time) Association—label. An advertisement for Barr’s Iron Brew published in the *Fife Free Press* on 26 December 1942 consequently announced the disappearance of Barr’s Iron Brew from 1st January 1943 onwards: “Au Revoir—But Not Good-Bye”. Iron Brew would not be in stores again until the SDI was wound up, allowing normal trading to resume on 1st February 1948 (Penn, 1948, p. 92). A Barr’s ad illustrating that Iron Brew was “NOW ON SALE” consequently appeared on 6 February 1948 and although this ad mentioned the new “registered IRN-BRU Trade Mark” that the firm had filed in July 1946, this appeared in small type below the product name “BARR’S IRON BREW”. Indeed, the old version of the name continued to be used until May of that year when it was definitively supplanted by the shorter phonetic spelling. When this new name was used in ads over the next three years, “BARR’S IRN-BRU” was followed by the line “The Original IRON BREW”. While this may have been merely to provide customers with a reassuring sense of brand continuity, it also encouraged them, by means of the ambiguous semantics of “original”, to view Barr’s as the historical originator of the drink. As the wartime disruption had led to the definitive disappearance of large numbers of rival bottlers, the hegemonic position of Barr’s was further consolidated, even though a number of small firms both in Scotland and in England began to sell Iron Brew again in the 1950s.
- 35 The official backstory of the wartime disruption also minimises the significance of Barr’s decision to maintain advertising for Iron Brew during the period when all manufacturers of what had been until then a generic flavour were forced to take the drink off sale. Using the popular Ba-Bru character that Barr’s had placed in regular comic strip ads from 1st April 1939 onwards, Barr’s had maintained near weekly ads in the local press for a full five years when the drink was off sale (1943–February 1948), urging consumers not to forget Iron Brew and to await its return. Barr’s decision to register the trade name “Irn-Bru” in 1946 was motivated by commercial concerns rather than statutory labelling requirements, in order to be able to protect the awareness and goodwill they had generated for their brand during this time. Whereas the generic name “Iron Brew” could be attributable to any number of manufacturers, Barr’s wished to ensure for themselves a legally protected, distinctive trademark which could be the basis for the brand once normal trading resumed:

Once we came back with our own names we wanted to advertise our Iron Brew which we thought would sell... now there’s no point in advertising a name which everyone else has got. So we invented “I-R-N-B-R-U”. (Barr, 1989)

36 The new name, in addition to being similar in spelling to that of their advertising mascot "Ba-Bru", was intended to sound like the original product name and is described as "the phonetic equivalent of Iron Brew" (Barr & Jephcott, 2001, p. 29). With its distinctively incongruous three-letter syllables and missing vowels, "Irn-Bru" was visually striking and immediately identifiable. Its unusual spelling has provided a visual cue for its indefinable taste which falls outwith the traditional categories of flavoured soft drinks. The brand's promotion of a maverick product identity has also facilitated its identification with the idea of a nationally ingrained iconoclastic temperament, its oddly spelt name being the onomastic expression of a thraven obduracy which has had resonance in the construction of Scottish identity. For example, this was encapsulated in the chorus of a 1988 Barr's TV ad which, shot in the manner of a big budget Coca-Cola ad, parodied US advertising tropes by using Irn-Bru's discourse of aggressive robustness to subvert images of 20th century Americana.<sup>10</sup>

Made in Scotland from girders  
 Unpronounceable too  
 Made in Scotland from girders  
 It's called Barr's Irn-Bru.

37 The transformation from "Iron" to "Irn" has been cited as a further factor which reflects the drink's identity as a distinctively Scottish product, given that the spelling is said to echo a Scottish (Barr, 1989), or more specifically Glaswegian, pronunciation of the original name (Pick, 2011, p. 16).

38 If we accept the principle that branding and marketing communications now represent a powerful vector for the articulation of national discourse, then to allow the corporate discourses which influence the construction of national identity to go unchallenged would be to allow corporations free rein over such a potent form of mythology. In Scotland, Irn-Bru consumption has become something of a cultural shibboleth and today conveys values of national authenticity. This is partly due to the fact that in the mass media as well as in specialist publications Barr's Irn-Bru is frequently discussed as having Scottish origins (Bell *et al.*, 2012; Burnett, 1999, pp. 103–4; Emmins, 1991, pp. 26–7). But since Iron Brew was invented in the US where it was first known as the "ideal American drink" and since the iconic strongman that appeared on the Barr's bottles was created in 1898 by an English essence manufacturer, it can be seen that there is little in the origin story of Iron Brew which is "innately" Scottish. Certainly the product has become Scottish over time, but this is despite, rather than because of, its national origins. More significant is the fact that it has now been produced in Scotland by a local firm for over 100 years and has enjoyed considerable popular and commercial success over this time. But the sense of the product being typically Scottish has also been the result of cultural mediation, in particular that informed by marketing communications which have reinforced the drink's status as the "original" Iron Brew. These messages have not always set out to intentionally mislead. They have nevertheless helped cloud the multiplicity of actual historical sources and origins of Irn-Bru and contributed to a form of popular amnesia whereby the public often attribute the origins of the drink to a unique (and often entirely spurious<sup>11</sup>) national source, whereas the actual process of its creation was a confluence of extraneous, pre-existing elements. An awareness of these processes of re-writing and re-framing will be of consequence in future research into the national ramifications of the brand's promotional strategies.



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## NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank Robin Barr (Non-Executive Director, AG BARR plc) and Jonathan Kemp (Commercial Director, AG BARR plc) for their invaluable assistance at various stages during the research and writing of this article.

2. For the video and a description of the campaign designed by the Leith Agency, see <[www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/irn-bru-in-blood-leith/1302001](http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/irn-bru-in-blood-leith/1302001)>.

3. The improvised tasting session was overseen by Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale who tweeted pictures of it in response to an online journalist who had filmed Corbyn's initial refusal. See <<https://twitter.com/kezdugdale/status/649602463327211520>>. The story was widely reported in the Scottish and UK press including the *Evening Times*, the *Herald*, the *Guardian*, and the *Financial Times*.

4. It is, for example, also commonly associated with Kellogg's Corn Flakes.

5. While the Maas & Waldstein essence was consistently spelt IRONBREW (all in capitals), the drink which was subsequently bottled by a multitude of local firms was variously recorded as Ironbrew (with or without capital letters), Iron-Brew or Iron Brew. Consequently, when speaking of the drink more generally in the US market I have standardised the spelling as "Iron Brew". If the role of Maas & Waldstein and the trademarked name is being discussed I have maintained IRONBREW.

6. By 1907, at least three other UK flavour houses were selling Iron Brew essence (Barnett & Foster, Duckworth & Co, and W. Meadowcroft & Son Ltd).

7. Personal interview conducted in July 2014.

8. Personal interview with Robin Barr and Jonathan Kemp, Commercial Director AG BARR plc, February 2017.

9. Robert Barr OBE (chairman 1947-1978), grandson of the founder of the Falkirk soft drinks business.

10. The ad can be viewed here: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4PxuFQCDis](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4PxuFQCDis)>.

11. One urban myth, popularised in the Irn-Bru Wikipedia entry, stated the following: "When workers from the William Beardmore and Company Steel Works in Glasgow were dying from the large amounts of beer drunk to quench their thirst from the heat of the steel works, an alternative was sought. A local soft drinks manufacturer, A.G. Barr, approached the steel works and a contract was created to provide the workers with this drink. This unnamed drink later went on to be known as Iron Brew because of its connections to the steel (and iron) works." This apocryphal tale has since been removed from the page. An archived version can be found here: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Scotland/Selected\\_article/Week\\_20,\\_2011](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Scotland/Selected_article/Week_20,_2011)>.

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## ABSTRACTS

Building on theories of banal nationalism developed by Michael Billig (1995) and Tim Edensor (2002), this paper focuses on how a major 20th century icon of popular Scottishness, the carbonated drink Irn-Bru, has depended on the question of origins in its positioning. From the start, the manufacturers, Barr's, keenly defended their product amidst strong competition by promoting authenticity over imitation. While today the firm AG BARR plc does not claim to have been the historical inventor of Iron Brew drinks (the original name for Irn-Bru) it still uses the strapline "Original & Best" which first appeared in 1904. In the second half of the 20th century the drink became widely perceived as a marker of Scottish identity. However, as recommended by Holt (2006), a more complete study of its historical trajectory as a brand shows that Iron Brew did not originate in Scotland at all. Indeed, rather than springing from a single source, the drink's development in Scotland is the result of a confluence of other earlier elements. These will be studied to illustrate the mechanisms of appropriation and rewriting underlying this popular manifestation of "commercial nationalism" (Kania-Lundholm, 2014).

En s'appuyant sur le concept de nationalisme banal exploré par Michael Billig (1995) et Tim Edensor (2002), cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont un icône contemporain de la scotticité, la boisson gazeuse Irn-Bru, se positionne commercialement autour de la question des origines. Depuis le début, son fabricant, la société Barr's, a toujours promu son produit au sein d'un marché très concurrentiel en insistant sur son authenticité face à des imitateurs. Bien qu'aujourd'hui la société AG BARR plc ne prétende pas être l'inventeur historique des boissons portant le nom d'Iron Brew (l'ancienne appellation de l'Irn-Bru), elle utilise toujours le slogan « *Original & Best* » qui est apparue pour la première fois en 1904. Depuis la deuxième moitié du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle la boisson est perçue comme un marqueur d'identité écossaise. Toutefois, une étude plus approfondie de sa trajectoire en tant que marque commerciale, comme le préconise Holt (2006), illustre que l'Iron Brew n'est pas apparu en Écosse. En effet, au lieu d'être rattachée à une seule et unique source, l'évolution de la boisson en Écosse résulte de la confluence de divers éléments antérieurs. Ceux-ci seront étudiés afin d'illustrer les mécanismes d'appropriation et de réécriture qui sous-tendent cette manifestation populaire de « nationalisme commercial » (Kania-Lundholm, 2014).

## INDEX

**Keywords:** AG BARR plc, Irn-Bru, Iron Brew, national identity, Scottishness, Scottish, branding, commercial discourse, banal nationalism

**Mots-clés:** AG BARR plc, Irn-Bru, Iron Brew, identité nationale, scotticité, écossais, marque commerciale, discours commercial, nationalisme banal

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