



Fig 7.1 The Bute Mazer.

Chapter 7

Mazer? What's a 'mazer'? **A history of the word**

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MANY modern Scots probably first became acquainted with the word *mazer* during the Folk Revival when Ewan McColl's version of the *Ballad of Gil Morris* was an integral part of the repertoire. In this song, Lord Barnard intercepts a message sent to his wife by a young man who is waiting to see her in the woods; he assumes this is a lovers' assignation, and is naturally furious.

*Then up and sprang the bold baron, and an angry man was he,
He's taen the table wi his foot and likewise wi his knee,
Till siller cup and mazer dish in flinders he garred flee.*

And immediately *he's awa' tae the gude greenwood*, to decapitate his rival and bring the head back to his wife, only to discover that the youth he has killed is not, in fact, her lover, but her son. The plot has been used repeatedly, from John Home in his wildly popular eighteenth-century play, *Douglas* ('*Whaur's yer Wullie Shakespeare noo?*' cried an ecstatic Scot in the audience) to the twentieth-century Ellis Peters (of Brother Cadfael fame) in *Black is the Colour of my True love's Heart*.¹ A dictionary indicated that *mazer* meant maple wood.

Less commonly known is that the song seems to have been based on a Scottish ballad called *Childe Maurice*,² and that the testy Lord was originally called John Stuart. When it was printed by Bishop Percy in his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* in 1765, John Stuart, the third earl of Bute, was a power in the land, and it is easy to see why both Percy, and even more so, John Home, who became Bute's secretary, felt that it was advisable to change the nomenclature. In the ballad, the baron is called Lord Barnard; in the play, Lord Randolph.

Oddly, in the version printed by Percy the word *Mazer* does not occur. The baron vents his temper on a utensil called an *ezar dish*, and it is clear that the good Bishop had no idea what the word meant. In his glossary, he opined the meaning was probably *Azure* - blue,³ which is only marginally more convincing than a modern web site of traditional song, where Leslie Nielson, 'the Contemplator',⁴ gives it as *ezar dish*, as in Czar of all the Russias.

More authoritative dictionaries were consulted: The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue,⁵ The Oxford Historical Thesaurus, and, of course, the magisterial Oxford English Dictionary, using online versions where available.⁶

The OED entry accessed was *mazer*, n.1, 'Draft Revision, Dec 2009'. The Oxford English Dictionary research is ongoing; like language itself, it is continually developing. In the past, in

the days before printing and standardised spelling, language was even less static. As it stands, the OED lists thirty four different ways in which the word has been written at different times.⁷ What seems clear etymologically, however, is that Germanic languages contained a form *mas* or *map* or *mad* (the final consonant varies) which means a scar, a spot, a swelling, an excrescence. In the forests of the north, this might apply to trees with burrs, knots, or a distinctive veining in the wood. One species which had these characteristics was called *maple* by the Anglo Saxons, *masdre* in those Old French dialects which derive from Frankish, essentially a Teutonic language.⁸ Then the word became attached to a utensil typically made from that tree,⁹ a drinking cup shaped perhaps from the hard burr,¹⁰ or from curly grained wood. Old Icelandic had both the p and s forms. In several modern European languages the form survives; in French *madre*; German *maser*; Swedish *masur*; Danish, *mase*, all carrying the notion of whorls or curly graining in wood. Many other English words were derived from the same root, but they have since become obsolete. *Maple* clearly survived in English and established itself across the Atlantic, whereas other *mase*- derived vocabulary did not, for example, *mase* meaning a freckle, and *masers*, an obsolete word for measles. It was easy to blur *maselin*, an alternative spelling for mazer, with *mesel*, meaning leprous. Since such wood is particularly hard, mazer was used not only for drinking cups but for the thin slivers of wood inserted in people's skulls to replace shattered bone, and this gave *mazard*,¹¹ a colloquial word for head which had considerable staying power. Irish English retained it in the call for tossing coins until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But the word mazer itself, if not defunct, was thoroughly archaic by the eighteenth century.

It seems reasonable to assume that the word came first into England, and thence to Scotland, with the wine-imbibing Normans. Unlike ale, medieval wine could be highly acidic, and it was safer to drink from wood rather than metal. Examples of the word survive in the language, which was called *Inglis* before 1500 (to distinguish it from Erse, or Gaelic) and Scots thereafter.¹² In fact, Irish and Scottish Gaelic already had a word *methes*,¹³ (Old Scots – *meddyr*¹⁴) for a wooden communal drinking cup. The Dunvegan Cup is one such. It is about ten inches tall and is 'quadrangularly formed at the top', in other words, it has four corners. Although it has been suggested that the name comes from the word for mead, the etymology is more likely to be derived from the concept of measuring, the corners making it much easier to pour an accurate measure of liquid or grain without spilling any.¹⁵ *Meddyrs*¹⁶ and, one presumes, *masers* might be made of yew, or alder. Similarly, in England, mazers were made from walnut, and in France from vine roots. What mattered was not botanical or etymological exactitude, but that the material was a hard impermeable wood which, properly seasoned, could hold liquids at room temperature without tainting, shrinking, furring up, or drying out and cracking, so beech, elm, or birch would probably also have been suitable.¹⁷ In later centuries, native 'maple'¹⁸ wood from the sycamore tree (called plane in Scotland) would have been available. Shaping mazers from enemy skulls seems to have been a practice restricted to the Scythians.¹⁹

As time went on the word mazer was applied differently north and south of the Border. In England, it could mean an alms bowl used, for example, by lepers. The word *mesel*, meaning leper, may account for this conflation of meaning. According to the Victoria and Albert Museum, by the end of the sixteenth century, mazers were standard inexpensive drinking vessels – a load of 200 imported into Exeter in 1493 cost only six shillings and sixpence.²⁰ In Scotland, however, mazers, either secular or religious, literal or metaphorical,²¹ stayed more

up-market. The beggars' bowl used by Henryson's leprous Cressida is called not a mazer, but a *cob*; the examples of mazers quoted in DOST usually emphasise is the value of the silver decoration. Indeed, the word is sometimes applied to 'a communal drinking cup or bowl, either silver gilt,²² or made entirely of silver'.²³ DOST makes it clear that though such bowls were 'originally made of mazer-wood', by the fifteenth century a Scottish mazer was a 'costly vessel ornamented with, or having its single foot of gold or silver', and indeed the name was applied to 'vessels of similar design made entirely of metal'. In much the same way, we use the term 'plastic glasses' and the Americans talk about 'plastic silverware'²⁴ without any sense of linguistic anomaly.

But whatever the meaning, or the value, in both Scots and English, the word mazer is pretty well obsolete by the 1700s. Not a single example is recorded in eighteenth-century Scotland; what we now call the Bute Mazer features in an early nineteenth-century description simply as an 'antique cup'. Byron, who had no qualms about drinking out of a human cranium, was never described as toping from a mazer, but from a skull cup. Probably the sole example of the word in eighteenth-century English is in Ritson's introduction to *Scotish* (sic) *Song* where that vituperative antiquarian is crowing over Bishop Percy's inability to gloss *ezar* correctly. For *ezar* seems to be the word for 'maple' preferred in eighteenth-century Scots popular culture, as exemplified in the ballads. The words are similar enough to have caused a certain confusion, but they are etymologically quite different. *Ezar* never occurs in English, only in Scots, probably as a result of linguistic borrowing during the Auld Alliance, a practice particularly common from the fifteenth to mid sixteenth centuries, when France and Scotland were allies against England. Many such words were borrowed from French and remained in Scots (*gigot*, *ashet*, *tassie*, *gardyloo* etc),²⁵ but the late medieval/early modern forms came from Central French, a Romance rather than a Germanic language. In it the word for maple is derived from the Latin *acer*,²⁶ meaning not spots or pustules or burrs, but *sharp*, referring, presumably, to the shape of the leaf, rather than the characteristics of the timber. Modern Italian is *acero*; modern French *érable*, with an acute accent on the e, indicating that an s has been lost. The older French form, therefore, was *esable*,²⁷ whence derives the Scots *ezar*, *easer*. An obvious parallel is the older French *estuver*, to steam. Modern French is *étuver* – e acute; the Scots version retained the older *estuver* form, which ultimately, in Modern Scots, became *stovies*.

And then, in late 1814, early 1815, the word *mazer* was resurrected. Credit for this must go to Walter Scott. Given that Scott was a high Tory, a unionist, an antiquarian, and an Edinburgh lawyer, his choice of the word was probably inevitable. In 1814, he was particularly strapped for cash, and chose a subject for a long poem that he thought was guaranteed to 'take': the wanderings of Robert the Bruce, culminating at Bannockburn. It was researched by a trip to the Northern and Western isles with Robert Lewis Stevenson's grandfather (who was inspecting potential sites for lighthouses), entitled 'The Lord of the Isles' to echo his blockbuster 'The Lady of the Lake' and written at frenetic speed. Although there are some stirring passages, like the part where Bruce's battle axe demolishes de Bohun,²⁸ it was not the happiest of subjects for Scott. As a Unionist he felt constrained to be somewhat apologetic to his English audience for the Scottish victory at Bannockburn; the Lord of the Isles, his name changed from Angus to Ronald (more acceptable to the educated ear) scarcely features except as part of a love story that might be described both literally and colloquially as pants, due to Scott's excessive enthusiasm for cross-dressing heroines. Bruce himself is anachronistically

sensitive and quite unconvincingly chivalrous, while the antiquarian notes and appendices are longer than the poem, and the history is distinctly suspect.

In the poem Bruce celebrates his (completely fictitious) capture of Turnberry Castle, his ancestral home, thus:

*Bring here”, he said, “the mazers four,
My noble fathers loved of yore!²⁹*

Scott does not use the Franco- Scots *ezar* form, though he could hardly have avoided knowing it. As a ballad collector, he was well acquainted with Percy’s *Reliques*, and David Herd’s *Scottish Songs* (1776), and indeed, the opinions of his quondam house guest Joseph Ritson. Moreover, the *ezar* form was in use in 1802, when the *Earl of Aboyne* ballad was first written down, and as late as 1860 in Aytoun’s *Ballads of Scotland*, where it is glossed, correctly, as ‘maple’. In the early nineteenth century, however, such colloquial Scots usages could well have been regarded by genteel society as vulgar, and less likely to ‘take’ with potential paying customers, while the republican and regicidal French and the threat of their ‘invasion, and the thunder and the shout, and all the crash of onset³⁰ had been the nightmare of the British establishment for a quarter of a century. Nor does he use the Irish term *methur*, though the Dunvegan Cup itself merits a glowing description in the poem³¹ (and seven pages of notes in the appendix), and one could hardly view the native Irish as loyal subjects of the British Crown circa 1800. Instead, Scott opts for the archaic term used by such eminently acceptable English poets as Spenser and Dryden, whose work Scott knew well, and by the Scots literati of bygone days – lawyers, churchmen and civil servants from the late medieval and early modern period.³² Scott would certainly have known Lauder of Fountainhall’s³³ use of the word in the Scots legal definition of ‘vitious intromission’. His direct source is, however, is the Scottish Treasurer’s Account of 1488, which includes the phrase: ‘*Foure masaris callit King Robert the Brocis with a couir*’.³⁴ With this as an excuse for shameless antiquarian padding, Scott includes the entire account in the appendix to the *Lord of the Isles*.

The position of the mazer couplet within the poem is thought provoking. Both Barbour’s *Brus*³⁵ and the anonymous writer of the *Life of Edward II*³⁶ emphasise the amount of booty, including valuable gold and silver plate, captured on the field at Bannockburn. A reader might very well speculate about where the four mazers in the royal treasury had originated, but it seems that Scott, the Romantic Tory, simply could not conceive that a king like Robert I would have been so lost to chivalric values as to appropriate loot from a fellow monarch’s baggage train. Thus, in a pre-emptive strike, a whole canto before Bannockburn, the four mazers are firmly emphasised as legally part of the Bruce family silver since time immemorial.

Although the poem did not make as much money as Scott had hoped – indeed, he subsequently took to novel writing instead – it was popular enough for the word mazer to go straight into literary and learned vocabulary, in which register it has stayed ever since. Thus the object under discussion is always referred to as The Bute Mazer.

The word *ezar* is now totally obsolete, and *mazer* regarded as archaic or historical, appropriate, for example, to Museum catalogues, or to C S Lewis’s imaginary land, Narnia.³⁷ On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the word mazer is still going strong and, indeed, developing. In the USA, where they seem to imagine that mazers were for drinking mead, they have a highly successful Annual Mazer Cup International Mead Competition,³⁸ where

Mazers are presented as prizes for the best brew. But these attractive utensils are not carved from maser wood or ezar wood or indeed wood of any description. Rather more hygienically, they are made of glazed pottery.

Notes

- 1 Peters, E *Black is the Colour of my True Love's Heart*. Inspector Felse series, 1988.
- 2 Percy, Thomas, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*... Dublin 1766, Vol III p77, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, University of Glasgow Library.
- 3 Percy's *Reliques*, III.– A Glossary of the Obsolete and Scottish words in Volume the third., p81.
- 4 [www.contemplator.com/folk/Child Ballads#83 Childe Maurice](http://www.contemplator.com/folk/Child%20Ballads/83%20Childe%20Maurice%20verse%2012) verse 12.
- 5 DOST www.dsl.ac.uk
- 6 OED online, accessed in February 2010.
- 7 For the sake of consistency the spelling mazer has been retained throughout. It should be noted, however, that in DOST the headword spelling is maser.
- 8 OED *Mazer*, n.1 full entry, etymology.
- 9 OED *Mazer* 1b.
- 10 McNeill, F M 1981 *The Scots Cellar*, 161. London: Granada.
- 11 OED *mazer*, 1c.
- 12 DOST on line accessed Feb 2010. *mazer* (n) 1. Variety of wood 2. A sort of drinking bowl.
- 13 OED *methet*.
- 14 DOST *meddyr*, n.
- 15 The *mazies* mentioned in A Glossary of Perthshire Cant in *The Last of the Tinsmiths, the Life of Willie Macphee*, (Douglas, Sheila, Birlinn, Edinburgh 2006, pp14–17), refer to wooden cups used by Travelling People, but given that Cant is likely to be Gaelic based, *mazie* seems more likely to derive from Gaelic, rather than Anglo Norman; like the Older Scots *Meddyr*, modern Gaelic *Measir* carries a sense of measuring. *MacLennan, Malcolm A Pronouncing and Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*. Acair 1988; see *measair*, p226.
- 16 Nineteenth-century antiquarians tended to confuse mazers, methers, and, indeed, surgical bleeding bowls. See T J Tenison, 'Of Methers and Other Ancient Drinking Vessels', *Kilkenny and south east of Ireland Archaeological Society*, 1860.
- 17 scottishwood.co.uk *All about hardwoods*. Some birch timber is 'masured'.
- 18 DOST *planetre* a 1. Note Sibbald's definition: '*acer majus –multis falso platanus.*: the great mapple, commonly yet falsly, the sycamore and plaintree'. (sic)
- 19 OED *mazer*, n.2 1555.
- 20 www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/m/mazer
- 21 DOST *mazer* 2b fig. Zachary Boyd talks of *the cuppe of salvation, the great mazer of His mercie*.
- 22 DOST *mazer* 1530.
- 23 DOST *mazer* 1570.
- 24 www.nextag.com/reflection-plastic-silverware: 'Plastic Silverware. Reflections. Silverlike plastic silverware will give you the authentic look of real silverware, 200 Soup spoons \$24.'
- 25 For an exhaustive list, see McNeil, F M 1932 *The Scots Kitchen*, appendix. Edinburgh: Blackie.
- 26 See above note 18. DOST Sibbald's definition.
- 27 DOST *ezar*.
- 28 *High in his stirrups stood the King,
And gave his battle-axe the swing...
... First of that fatal field, how soon,
How sudden fell the fierce de Boune!*
Walter Scott Digital Archive Edinburgh University, *Lord of the Isles*, E text, Making of America Books, p238.

Historic Bute: Land and People

29 Walter Scott Digital Archive, *Lord of the Isles*, p214.

30 Coleridge. *Fears in Solitude*. (A poet, it should be noted, considerably to the left of Walter Scott.)

31 Walter Scott Digital Archive, *Lord of the Isles*, p58:

*Fill me the mighty cup! he said,
Erst own'd by mighty Somerled,
Fill it, till on the studded brim
In burning gold and bubbles swim,
And every gem of varied shine
Glow doubly bright in rosy wine!*

The provenance of the Dunvegan Cup is uncertain: traditionally, the fairies are involved; more recently, and prosaically, it is described as early modern, made of yew or alder, and set with coral or glass.

32 See the definitions given in DOST for *mazer*.

33 DOST *mazer*, 1698; Fountainhall's *Decisions*, II.27.

34 DOST *mazer*; quoted also, at some length, in *Lord of the Isles*, Appendix, Note S, p346. See also the volume published by Scott's friend, Thomas Thompson, as *A collection of Inventories and other records of the Royal Wardrobe and Jewellhouse; and of the Artillery and other Munitions in some of the Royal Castles. MDCCCLXXXVII – MDCVI*, 8.

35 Duncan, A A M (ed) 1999 *The Bruce*, 502–3. Edinburgh: Canongate.

36 *Vita Edwardi Secundi*. www.deremilitari.org/resources/sources/bannockburn

37 OED *mazer*, 1951 *Prince Caspian*, xv 185.

38 www.mazercup.com