

## HOW ONE IRISHMAN'S GINGER BEARD HELPED LAUNCH AN ENTIRELY BOGUS STYLE OF BEER

MARTYN CORNELL

If a mediumweight French brewery had not been looking for another beer to add to its portfolio in the early 1970s, and if the owner of a drinks distribution company in County Wexford had not also owned a striking ginger beard, we probably would not now have that totally fake beer style, Irish Red Ale.

The story begins in 1974, when the Pelforth brewery of Mons-en-Barœul, near Lille, in north-east France, decided that it needed to expand its line-up of beers, and went hunting abroad for a foreign brew to make under licence. Pelforth had been founded as Brasserie Pelican in 1921 by a merger of three war-battered breweries around Lille, and owed its name to a beer invented in 1937, which its inventor, Jean Deflandre, called Pelforth 43, because it contained 43 kilos of malt per hectoliter of beer. The 'Pel' part came from 'Pelican', to which Deflandre added 'fort', the French for strong, and a final 'h' to make the name look more English. The beer became so popular that in 1972 Brasserie Pelican changed its name to Brasserie Pelforth.<sup>1</sup>

Pelforth went to England, Germany and Sweden looking for suitable 'traditional' beers to add to its portfolio, and also contacted the French embassy in Dublin to see if it knew of any Irish brewers who might be making something suitable. The embassy in turn rang G.H. Lett & Co, a beer and drinks distributor in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, 60 miles south of Dublin, which had operated as a brewery until 1956, and still kept up its brewer's licence. The then head of the firm, 48-year-old George Killian Lett – known to everybody in Enniscorthy as Bill, probably because his father and grandfather were also called George – expressed willingness to meet the people from Pelforth, who duly turned up at the Mill Park brewery to study its brewing records.<sup>2</sup>

Lett's had made three beers just before it stopped brewing: Wexford Pale Ale, Ruby Ale, and Lett's Strong Ale, the last selling for a shilling a pint. Later, revisionist history claimed it was the recipe for Ruby Ale that Pelforth took away and

turned into George Killian's Bière Rousse, a 1067° OG, 6.6% ABV, ruddy-coloured beer put into clear glass bottles, and taking Bill Lett's first two 'proper names as its own (presumably because 'George Killian' sounded more Irish to French ears than 'Lett').<sup>3</sup> Newspaper reports from the time, however, make it crystal clear that the beer Pelforth based its Bière Rousse on was Lett's Strong Ale.<sup>4</sup> In 1980, Bill Lett specifically stated: 'In 1974 members of the Pelforth brewery visited us. Eventually I sold the recipe for Lett's Strong Beer to them. They renamed it "George Killian's Bière Rousse".'<sup>5</sup>

Pelforth also used Bill Lett – under his 'proper' name, George Killian Lett – as the 'face' of Bière Rousse in its advertising, his red hair, ginger beard, dress style and very Irish-looking face clearly matching the French idea of an Irish 'gentleman Brasseur', as the advertising in France for the beer called him, as well as his hair and beard chiming with the image of a brewer of 'bière rousse', red beer. (French uses *roux/rousse* for red hair and red beer, with a sense closer to English 'russet' or 'ginger', rather than the standard word for red, *rouge*.) Lett's wife, Phoebe, told the *Irish Farmers' Journal*: 'They couldn't get over how traditionally Irish Bill looked, with his red hair and beard'.<sup>6</sup> According to the *Irish Independent*,

The French were so taken with the sheer Irishness of George, his red hair and beard, colourful tweeds and his easy cheerfulness, that they straightaway decided not only to name their new drink after him, but also to feature his comely countenance in their publicity material.<sup>7</sup>

The irony that Bill Lett was a descendant of firmly English settler stock whose Protestant ancestor had arrived as a soldier in then war-torn Ireland in the late 1640s, most likely to fight against the native Irish, almost certainly passed over their heads. Instead Pelforth's advertising for its new beer actually declared of George Killian Lett, the 'gentleman Brasseur', that '*sa barbe était rousse! Aussi rousse que sa bière ...*'

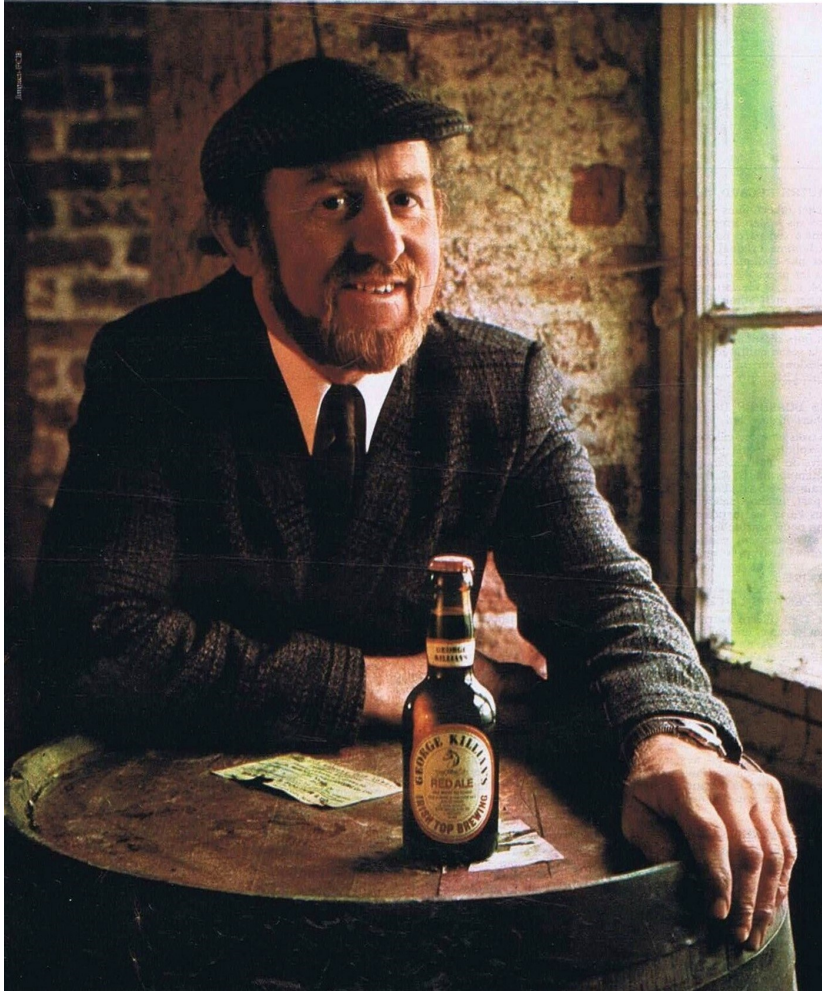


Figure 1. George Killian Lett, 1976.

In 1981, the Colorado-based brewery Coors launched its own version of Pelforth's *Bière Rousse*, as George Killian's Irish Red Ale. Later accounts claimed that Pete Coors, nephew of the company's chairman, Bill Coors, fell in love with the beer and 'convinced George [sic] to allow him to brew it in Colorado.' This is more revisionist nonsense. In fact, Pelforth approached Coors to see if it was interested in brewing *Bière Rousse* for the American market, and Coors' new head of marketing, John Nicholls, who was looking for a 'superpremium' beer for the company's line-up to compete against the Michelob and Henry Weinhard brands, persuaded the Coors board to sign up to make the beer under licence.<sup>8</sup>

The Coors version was 11% weaker than the Pelforth original, at 5.8% ABV,<sup>9</sup> because Bill Coors felt the French version was 'too bitter, too filling', but the promotion of the

Colorado-brewed beer was just as full of blarney as Pelforth's advertising. Late in 1981 Coors sent the Canadian actor Christopher Plummer to Ireland to film a series of advertisements for its version of George Killian's Irish Red Ale.<sup>10</sup> Plummer, best known for playing Baron von Trapp in *The Sound of Music*, was filmed dressed in tweed cap and jacket while standing on a hill overlooking Enniscorthy and proclaiming the excellence of the beer, in a dreadful joke of an Irish accent.

One question remains unanswered: who invented the expression 'Irish Red Ale'? It was, presumably, someone in the Coors marketing department in Golden, Colorado: Pelforth called their version '*Bière Rousse*', without adding '*Irlandaise*'. The term 'red ale' was unknown in Ireland, except, as we shall see, among scholars of Irish mythology. The name of the originator of the phrase 'Irish Red Ale' may

be hidden somewhere in the corporate archives in Golden: it would be fascinating to find out who came up with the expression.

The promotion by Coors of George Killian's Irish Red Ale as an 'authentic' beer with roots going back, supposedly, to 1864 seems eventually to have persuaded some in the now swelling American craft beer scene that there actually *was* a genuine, historic Irish beer style called red ale. The first small American brewer to make a beer in this 'style' seems to have been BridgePort, opened in Portland, Oregon in 1984, which by 1986 was brewing a beer called Paddy's Special Red Ale, 1046 OG, 4.7 ABV, made from pale two-row and caramel malts and hopped with Cluster and Bramling.<sup>11</sup>

Gradually the style spread: in 1992, for example, the Rock-bottom Brewing Co in Denver Colorado was making a self-described Irish red ale called Red Rocks Red, while the Buffalo Brewing Co, in Lackawanna, New York State, was brewing a beer it called 'Limerick's Irish Red Ale'.<sup>13</sup> In 1995 a guide to brewpubs and microbreweries in the United States, at a time when their numbers had not yet passed 500, listed some 30 'red ales', including one Irish Red Ale from McGuire's Irish Pub & Brewery in Pensacola, Florida, apparently first brewed in 1989,<sup>14</sup> that was clearly designed to beef up the pub's Hibernian ambiance, together with the corned beef and cabbage on the menu and live Irish entertainment seven nights a week.<sup>15</sup> The same year an American homebrew book offered a recipe for an 'Irish Red Ale' it called The Tomboy, 4.75% ABV.<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, as Irish Red Ale began to spread across the United States, in 1988 Coors lowered the abv of its own product to 4.9% and reformulated it so that it was now a lager, dropping the word 'ale' from the bottle label, and rebranding the product simply 'George Killian's Irish Red'.<sup>17</sup> It had been selling 100,000 (US) barrels a year in 1985, but this was less than one per cent of Coors' total sales, and the changes were meant to boost the profits from the beer. One result was that the advertising for the beer, which still tried to claim authentic Irish roots, became even more madly unconnected with historical truths, as Coors declared that 'In 1864 in Enniscorthy, Ireland, George Henry Lett brewed the first batch of a full-bodied, red-colored lager that would eventually become known as George Killian's Irish Red',<sup>18</sup> which manages to cram seven pieces of utter nonsense into less than 30 words.

With mainstream rivals such as Stroh now making 'red beers', on St Patrick's Day 1995 Coors announced that it would be launching Killian's Brown, a 5.4% ABV chestnut-brown bottled beer that would 'help Coors establish an Irish

family of brands'.<sup>19</sup> Photographic evidence of a surviving tap handle suggests there was also, at one point a 'George Killian's Irish Stout'. Killian's Brown seems to have been Coors' attempt to answer the rise in the United States of brown ales such as Pete's Wicked Ale. But with an Irish brown ale having no more credibility than an Irish red lager, Killian's Brown seems to have vanished rapidly.

In 1996 the Letts signed another deal, this time with the English brewer Greene King, which launched a 'nitrokeg' mixed gas keg beer called Wexford Cream Ale, supposedly 'brewed under licence from an old recipe acquired from the Lett family of Enniscorthy.' The launch was in response to the success of Caffrey's, one of the first of the nitrokeg 'cream ales', launched with a mock Irish heritage borrowed from the former Caffrey's brewery in Belfast, which had rocketed from zero to a million barrels a year in just 18 months.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, as the number of 'Irish red ales' in the United States grew, beer writers began to notice that those few surviving Irish ales, such as Smithwick's from Kilkenny and Macardle's from Dundalk, were generally on the ruddy cornelian end of the beer colour spectrum, and deciding that these too must be 'Irish red ales'. Michael Jackson wrote for the first time in the third edition of his *Pocket Beer Book*, published in 1991, that 'Irish ales are generally full in colour (often reddish),' having not mentioned their colour in previous editions.<sup>21</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Beer*, published in New York in 1995, included the genuinely Irish Smithwick's alongside George Killian's Irish Red Ale and McGuire's Irish Red Ale in its entry on 'Irish Ale'.<sup>22</sup>

Three years later, in 1998, Jackson gave the category his official blessing, listing six beers as 'Style: Irish Red Ale', including the Pelforth George Killian's, Macardle's, Smithwick's, McNally's Extra Ale from Alberta, Canada, and the curious Kylian (sic), from Heineken, now owner of Pelforth. Kylian,<sup>23</sup> Heineken's 6.5% ABV version of Pelforth's George Killian, was brewed at Pelforth in Mons-en-Baroeil for the Dutch market. It was tweaked so that only the yeast was the same and the rest was adapted to 'the taste of the young, innovatively-thinking beer drinker', which apparently meant men aged 20 to 35. The Irish connotation was dropped and instead the label featured a globe and a vaguely international feel, as it was a 'contemporary beer' that was 'brewed to be discovered'. According to the Dutch brewing historian Roel Mulder, 'The Heineken marketing department couldn't come up with any other argument for the consumer to buy it other than "it's brewed with Vienna malt".' Kylian was discontinued in 1999, 'probably because a lack of brand profile (where was it supposed to come from and what style was it meant to represent) and because in



Figure 2. The brewery and mill wheel, Enniscorthy.

1994 Heineken had also launched Vos, an amber-coloured Belgian-style beer that had a similar taste'.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, beers such as Smithwick's and Macardle's were firmly in the style spectrum covered by British bitter ales, and it would be difficult-to-impossible to differentiate them from the bitters brewed by, for example, the former Dorset brewer Eldridge Pope: ruddy, malt-accented, not overly bitter and lightly fruity. Irish brewers, and drinkers, generally did not use the term 'bitter' to describe or label their pale hopped ales, but stylistically they were no different from many English bitters.

Still, the mythology of Irish Red Ale has proved unstoppable, in part because there is genuine mythology for beer writers to call on. Patrick Weston Joyce, in *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, published in 1903, said that old Irish ale was 'reddish in colour, as now', the 'red ale of Dorind', in Kerry, was mentioned in a poem written in Irish in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the 'red ale of sovereignty', or *dergfhlaith* (an old Irish pun, with '*fhlaith*' meaning 'sovereignty' and '*laith*' meaning 'ale') was served to the

king by the earth goddess. Pelforth actually referenced this myth in its advertising in French newspapers in 1976, saying that the '*premier roi d'Irlande, Conn*' was met one day while riding on his white horse by the god Lug and '*une merveilleuse jeune fille qui symbolisait la souveraineté d'Irlande*.' The young girl offered Conn '*une coupe de bière rousse*,' and George Killian's red beer '*descend en droit ligne de cette bière divine*,' Pelforth claimed. These antecedents helped convince beer writers that Irish Red Ale was indeed 'a thing', leading at least one to declare in 2009: 'Red Ale has been brewed in Ireland for hundreds of years'.<sup>25</sup>

One hint to the possible origins of the 'reddish' colour that Joyce mentioned for Irish ales in 1903 comes in a description from around 1880 of the pale malt used together with roast malt in making Irish porter. This, an anonymous writer said, was 'of a darker colour than what is generally used by English Brewers,' and would 'produce a wort if mashed alone of a deep red appearance'.<sup>26</sup> If this was the regular pale malt made by Irish maltsters – and it seems likely that it was, since large quantities would have been needed by the country's porter brewers – then it seems possible that Ire-

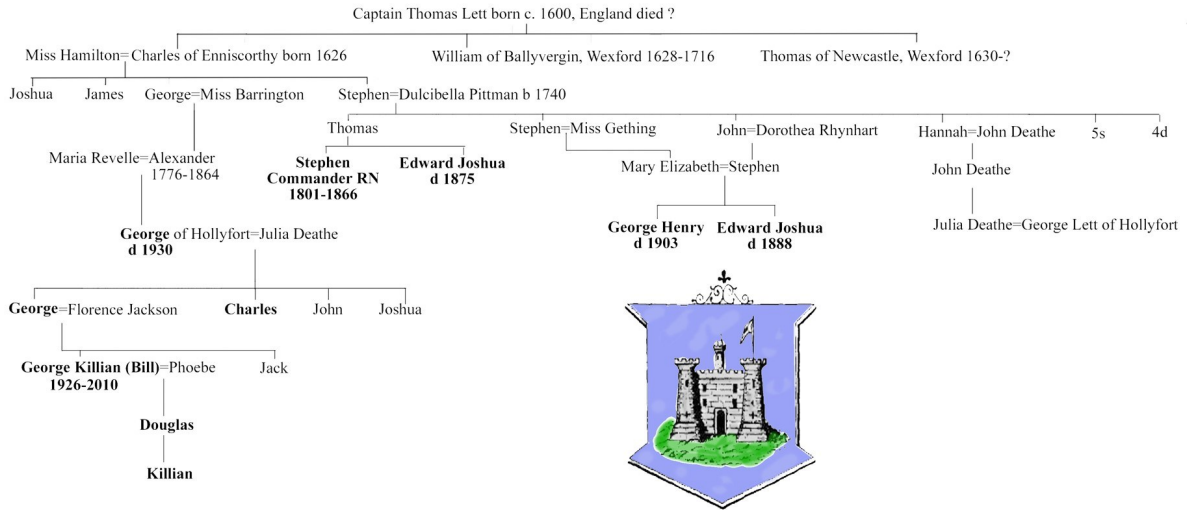


Figure 3. Simplified family tree of the Lett family, brewers of Enniscorthy, County Wexford. Brewery owners in bold.

land's brewers of ale used the same malt to make their pale ales with, thus resulting in 'red' ales. But this is at least two 'ifs', and there is no documentary evidence at all to back this speculation.

Despite Michael Jackson agreeing in 1998 that Irish Red Ale was a style, the Beer Judge Certification Program in the United States did not include Irish Red Ale in its beer style guidelines until 2004, and it only became a category in the American Homebrewers Association competition the following year.<sup>27</sup> Today the Beer Advocate website lists more than 2,100 'Irish red ales'. One may regret that some nifty early 1980s marketing has resulted in the arrival of a genuinely mythological beer style. However, the existence today of Irish Red Ale as a style does mean that an otherwise deeply obscure minor Irish brewery is still remembered.

The Mill Park brewery and flour mill was supposedly built by the Pounder family on the site of an old iron foundry in 1810.<sup>28</sup> Some sources have claimed it was in existence as early as 1798.<sup>29</sup> Against that must be set advertisements in Wexford newspapers in 1844 in which John and Thomas Pounder gave 'their sincere thanks to their Friends and the Public for them liberal support given to their Establishment for the last Twenty Years,' implying a foundation date of 1824. The Pounders in 1844 were brewing only pale ale, at 30 shillings a barrel, and ale, at 25 shillings.<sup>30</sup>

An iron mill wheel 32 feet in diameter and eight feet broad was erected in 1849, powered by water from a source four miles away at Monart. The brewing water came from a 120-

foot artesian well.<sup>31</sup> In 1863 Pounder's was brewing 'sweet ale' (the expression used in Ireland for what was called mild ale in Britain) at 1s 3d per dozen bottles and XXX porter at 1s 5d a dozen<sup>32</sup> and also porter for private families at 14 shillings to 16s the half-barrel, when Guinness porter was on sale in the town for £1 2s the half-barrel.<sup>33</sup>

A double tragedy hit the business in January 1864 when John Haughton, aged 14, son of the Pounders' head miller, Edward Haughton, fell between the bull wheel and the mill wall and became trapped. During the attempt to free the teenager from the wheel, one man, Patrick Doran, fell into the wheel himself and was struck on the head and drowned: John Haughton was finally freed, but died the next day.<sup>34</sup>

Later that same year the Pounders sold the brewery and mill to two brothers, Stephen Joshua Lett and Edward Joshua Lett, whose ancestor, Captain Thomas Lett, born 1600, had lived in Warwickshire before coming to Ireland in 1648.<sup>35</sup> Captain Lett's eldest son, Charles, had settled in Enniscorthy, and the brothers were Charles's great-grandsons via Stephen, his fourth son. Stephen Lett the brewery partner was a former commander in the Royal Navy who had entered the navy at the age of 13. He died just a few months after the purchase, in March 1866, aged 64.<sup>36</sup> His brother Edward, who had been a miller, maltster, brewer and farmer, built a four-storey stone maltings at the brewery which still stands today, albeit disused, with a stone shield on the front of the building declaring: 'Erected 1867'. Edward married Helen Cranfield, daughter of the local doctor, in Dublin in 1872,<sup>37</sup> but died in June 1875.

**Let's Drink Lett's**

Over 100 Years in the Brewing, Bottling,  
Mineral Water and Milling Trades has  
made the name

**LETT** Brewer of Porter,  
Ale and Beer

a Guarantee for the best obtainable  
from these industries.

**GEO. H. LETT,**  
Mill Park Brewery - Enniscorthy

Phone: Enniscorthy, 44.

ijk50141

Figure 4. Newspaper advertisement from 1937 for Lett's products.

The brewery and milling businesses were continued as E.J. Lett & Co under the control of the executors until 1881, when it passed to George Henry Lett and Edward Joshua Lett the younger, who were sons of two of Stephen and Edward-the-older's cousins, another Stephen Lett and his cousin-and-wife Mary Elizabeth Lett (see family tree).<sup>38</sup> The Letts, like many families, enjoyed sharing a small pool of first names across and within generations. By that time the Letts were also involved in the artificial manure business, and sending their goods away via the River Slaney and the Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford railway. In 1883 they added "aerated waters", including lemonade and ginger beer.<sup>39</sup>

Edward J. Lett the younger died in September 1888, aged 31, and the business carried on under his brother George Henry Lett, who died in December 1903, aged 52: in his honour all the businesses in Enniscorthy, regardless of religion, shut their doors until his funeral.<sup>40</sup> With neither brother having children, the brewery passed across the family tree to another George Lett, who was descended from Charles Lett's second son, George Lett of Hollyfort, Enniscorthy.<sup>41</sup> The new brewery boss was, again, doubly related to the previous owners: not only was his great-grandfather their great-great grandfather, his wife, Julia Deathe, was their first cousin once removed, via her grandmother, Hannah Lett.

The business kept George Henry Lett's name, as G.H. Lett & Co and George of Hollyfort ran it until he passed the management to his second son Charles, dying in April 1930 aged 64.<sup>42</sup> Charles and his older brother George continued

the business, which eventually passed to George's son, Bill. In the 1930s the brewery ran a competition for customers to come up with an advertising slogan for the firm, the winner being: 'Let's drink Lett's!' By now the Letts' trading area covered the counties of Carlow, Wexford, Wicklow and Kilkenny, and they also sold their beers in Dublin during the Second World War with 'considerable success'.<sup>43</sup>

The Letts stopped brewing in 1956 as the Irish beer industry changed from naturally conditioned beer in bottles to chilled and filtered beers, the company deciding that it could not afford the new machinery required for keeping up with the rest of the market. Instead, the Letts concentrated on mineral water manufacturing, and distributing beers made by other brewers.<sup>44</sup> The firm kept up its brewing licence, however, and in 1965 this led to talks with the Milwaukee brewery Schlitz, which was contemplating opening a brewery to serve the European market.<sup>45</sup> The Letts offered to sell the Americans their brewing licence, but nothing came of the discussions. Mineral water manufacturing was discontinued at the Mill Park brewery in 1977, but the firm continued as a drinks distributor.

Bill Lett died in October 2010, aged 84, his hair and beard by now white. Earlier that year he had appeared in an advertisement on American television for George Killian's Irish Red, happy to ignore the unhistorical claims made about the beer's origins and his family brewery's history. Bill Lett's legacy lives on, even if the story he helped begin, as widely told today, bears little resemblance to the facts. Today G.H.

Lett & Co is run by Bill's son, Douglas, and grandson, Killian Lett (full name George Killian Lett), and one of the beers it distributes is O'Hara's Irish Red Ale, a 4.3% ABV ruby-coloured beer described by its maker, the Carlow Brewing Company of Bagenalstown, County Carlow, 20 miles from Enniscorthy, as a 'traditional ale'. It's an 'Irish tradition' that began only in 1974 in Lille, France (although today George Killian's Bière Rousse is, apparently, brewed in Heineken's breweries in Marseilles and the Strasbourg suburb of Schiltigheim) and came 'home' via a brewery marketing department in Golden, Colorado.

## References

1. [bit.ly/pelforthname](http://bit.ly/pelforthname)
2. *Irish Independent*, Dublin, Ireland. Wednesday 15 June 1983, p.16.
3. See, e.g., Jackson, M. (1977) *The World Guide to Beer*, London: Quarto/Mitchell Beazley, p.177; Rhodes, C.P. (ed.) (1995) *Encyclopedia of Beer*. New York: Henry Holt & Co, p.269.
4. *Irish Independent*, op. cit.
5. *Irish Farmers' Journal*, Dublin Ireland. Saturday 17 May 1980, p.75.
6. *ibid.*
7. *Irish Independent*, op. cit.
8. Baum, D. (2000) *Citizen Coors: An American Dynasty*. New York: William Morrow & Co, pp.233-4.
9. Hankin, L. (1988) 'Analysis of Beer', The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 865, October, New Haven, Connecticut, p.6.
10. *Evening Echo*, Cork, Ireland. Friday 13 November 1981, p.2.
11. Cottone, V. (1986) *Good Beer Guide: Breweries and Pubs of the Pacific Northwest*. Seattle: Homestead, p.47.
12. *The Denver Post*, Denver, Colorado. 28 February 1992, p.24.
13. *The Buffalo News*, Buffalo, New York. 11 October 1992.
14. Jackson, M. (ed.) (1998) *Beer*. London: Dorling Kindersley, p.157.
15. Kallen, S.A. (1995) *Beer Here! A Traveler's Guide to American Brewpubs and Microbreweries*. New York: Citadel, p.134.
16. Willenbecher, J.F. (1995) *Brewing by the Numbers: The First Book of Homebrewing*. Athens, Alabama: CEI, p.37.
17. Burgess, R.F. (1993) *Silver Bullets: A Soldier's Story of How Coors Bombed in the Beer Wars*. New York: St. Martins, p.144.
18. *The Gazette*, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. 8 February 2010.
19. *The Denver Post*. 18 March 1995, p.C1.
20. *The Examiner*, Cork, Ireland. Thursday 8 February 1996, p.20.
21. Jackson, M. (1991) *Michael Jackson's Pocket Beer Book* (3rd edition). London: Mitchell Beazley, p.107.
22. Rhodes, C.P. (ed.) (1995) op. cit., pp.269-270.
23. Jackson, M. (ed.) (1998) op. cit., pp.156-7.
24. Roel Mulder, personal communication.
25. Pasquinnelli, M. (2009) 'Irish Red Ale: The Other Beer from the Emerald Isle', *Zymurgy*. Boulder, Colorado, March/April, p.41.
26. Anonymous (c.1880) 'Instructions for Brewing Irish Porter & Stout', Guinness archives, St James's Gate, Dublin, Ireland, GDB/BR01/0856, pp.7-8.
27. *Zymurgy* (2005) January/February, p.13.
28. *Munster Express*, Waterford, Ireland. Friday 3 December 1982, p.19.
29. *The New Ross Standard*, New Ross, Wexford, Ireland. Friday 5 June 1936, p.9.
30. *Wexford Independent*, Wexford, Ireland. Wednesday 11 December 1833, p.3.
31. George Henry Bassett, *Wexford County Guide and Directory*, Dublin, Ireland, 1885, p.297.
32. *The Enniscorthy News and County of Wexford Advertiser*, Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Ireland. Saturday 11 July 1863, p.1.
33. *ibid.*, Saturday 17 October 1863, p.1.
34. *ibid.*, Saturday 16 January 1864, p.1.
35. *The New Ross Standard*. Friday 28 January 1938, p.2.
36. George Griffiths, *Chronicles of the County Wexford*, Enniscorthy, Wexford, Ireland, 1890, p.456.
37. *The New Ross Standard*. Saturday 13 July 1872, p.1.
38. Bassett, op. cit.
39. *Wexford People*, Wexford, Ireland. Wednesday 2 May 1883, p.1.
40. *Enniscorthy Guardian*, County Wexford, Ireland. Saturday 12 December 1903, p.3.
41. *The New Ross Standard*, op. cit.
42. *ibid.*, Friday 11 April 1930, p.12.
43. *Munster Express*, op. cit.
44. *ibid.*
45. *The New Ross Standard*. Saturday 1 May 1965, p.5.