**GAVEL GAMUT**

By Jim Redwine

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**SLÁINTE**

Not long ago Peg and I visited the Isle of Skye in Scotland. We took a bus ride to the small town of Portree and chuckled when we were let off near an intersection with a sign that said, “Caution, Elderly People Crossing”. The sign had a drawing of a bent at the waist old woman holding onto an even more acutely bent old man leaning on a cane. It looked strangely familiar.

Portree is the capital of the Isle of Skye. It has a little more than 2,000 residents, most of whom pretend to speak English, but who really communicate among themselves in Scottish Gaelic. Alcohol is available as long as you do not order “Scotch”. The Scotch drink is “whiskey”. The locals are reservedly polite but do not hide their bemusement at American tourists, especially if the tourists resemble the Elderly Crossing signs.

Just as many other societies, the Scotch have an arcane yang and yin approach to regulating the use and abuse of alcohol. At our hotel the tiny bar was intimate and comforting. Dark walls and heavy wooden furniture were accented by the lone barkeep who was obviously accustomed to explaining the local customs to hapless American tourists. He was of ruddy, bewhiskered visage and a roguishly engaging attitude. He was reminiscent of the 19th century immigrants who brought their Viking-like culture with them to America. Peg and I were his only customers that bleary afternoon after our bus trip. He put on his best Scottish brogue to disguise the true meaning of his responses to my haltingly timid order for a double shot of Bailey’s as though I were addressing Cerberus guarding the Bar. He scoffed, rolled his eyes and his tongue then condescendingly informed me it was illegal to buy a double for one person. Then, with a twinkle he said, “Now, should you wish to buy a single for your wife and a separate single for yourself, that will work”. So, even though I had already ordered a “Scotch” for myself and received a primer on it being properly called a “whiskey”, I ordered as instructed.

This experience reminded me of my days as an underage American trying to procure 3.2% beer from a drive-through beer joint. It always seemed to me that the only thing the Volstead Act accomplished was to sharpen the imaginations of thirsty Americans and, according to my family’s lore, to keep my Uncle Henry’s moonshine still in business. It looked to me like Scotland had approached alcohol prohibition and regulation in a similar fashion.

Regardless, Peg did get to drown her ennui about “Elderly People”; the two Baileys did the trick. However, we both have remained acutely aware of how our strides might appear; we strive to walk straighter and more briskly, and, of course, without a cane.

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