



## Desert Island Drams

Ronnie Cox - Davys Wine Bar

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**evangelist**, *n.* Add: [3.] **d.** *transf.* A zealous advocate of a cause or promulgator of a doctrine.

Characters, larger than life figures, who once met are etched on ones consciousness. Characters of whom even a mention, will raise a wry smile, a far away look, and memories of evenings when the second bottle was, on reflection a big mistake.

So enter, two pewter tankards of foaming ale in hand; Mr Ronnie Cox. One time conquistador for DCL (Diageo); latterly, the global ambassador for Glenrothes. Dressed soberly, by his standards (Our editor recall Ronnie in pink coloured cords during a Speyside Whisky Festival, a bottle green sweater with a hole and a shirt with a worn collar), weaving his way through a busy lunch time throng. Eyes fixed, concentrating on that empty table, and the very full tankards.

**FE** Ronnie you've spent a large part of your working life, travelling, preaching the gospel of whisky. Is it something you were born to?

**RC** I suppose I was. Looking in the family records it seems that my Great great great grandparents owned and ran Cardhu, or Cardow, as it was then known, and we found a copy of the lease dated 1811. This is a little concerning, as that makes them outlaws!! Indeed they were fined twice in 1823 the sums of £200 and £300. I imagine that they paid in kind!

**FE** So was whisky very much part of your life growing up?

**RC** No far from it. My Father didn't really approve, so the first I tried whisky that I recall was on a holiday on Uist. We became very friendly with a chap called Charlie Maclean, who for the price of 2 bottles of whisky would take us out in his boat. Having

demolished a bottle and rather the worse for wear, he took us into a hotel. Come closing time we had to carry Charlie home. Charlie banged on the door, and his wife appeared. Charlie pushed his wife aside, "The boys need some whisky"  
"Ronnie, why don't you go into the cellar to find a bottle of whisky."  
I found some boxes, in which there were some bottles; it was something called 'Royal Household'  
"That'll do fine" said Charlie. It turned out that Charlie had rescued 25 cases of the stuff from the wreck of the SS Politician.

**FE** How did this translate into a career?

**RC** Instead of university, Father told me to go away for 3 years, and find out about the world. I thought that I needed to learn another language; something to do with marketing; and ideally involved with wine.

Germany was streets ahead at the time, so it was a very easy decision to make. I had been given an introduction to Otto Henkell. Within weeks I had been given a flat, a car, and been taken under his wing. I spent a very happy year, surrounded by the palatial splendour that is Henkell Trocken, learning German and learning about the wine business. Whilst I was there I met the David Blair of DCL. He said, "What are you doing here?"

"Well I don't really know, but I'd really like to go to Spain"

This led to me driving, to Jerez, armed with little more than a letter to Gonzalez Byass. The next day I started work for Gonzalez Byass, conducting tours of the bodegas, whilst at the same time speaking and learning Spanish. After 9 months, I was then taken on as a sales rep., running around Spain.

**FE** That must have been wonderful!

**RC** I should say so. By now I was of course working for DCL, and on a trip to London, was treated to, lunch by David Blair. Having discussed important things like golf handicaps, I was despatched for three months cleaning out stills in various distilleries, then I was put on an aeroplane, to visit twelve countries in ten weeks. I had had a fantastic time travelling around Asia as far as Papua New Guinea. I got back, to the most amazing job. Everything I could have wished for, and whisky really became my life. Concentrating on Europe and the Far East, I discovered there was a real niche for Black & White in South America. Carving out a market for Black & White in Venezuela, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Colombia, was without doubt the most fun I have ever had. The most frightening too. I was held up at gun point twice!

**FE** So, you had a couple of decades enjoying yourself in South America, with DCL. What brought about the move to Berrys?

**RC** As the group got larger, it seemed that the whisky itself was not as important as the image. In all the changes that were happening, I found that I had 3 bosses, and life was no longer such fun. So I started to look around. I found that Berry Bros. & Rudd needed someone to look after Cutty Sark in Latin America. It was a wonderful match for me, and enabled me to go back to what I knew best. The difficulty lay in the fact that the markets were used to heavier, and darker coloured whiskies. One of the great merits of Cutty Sark is that it is much lighter in colour and character. So for me it was very much an

educational process.

**FE** Do you see yourself, as a teacher?

**RC** Recently someone described me as an evangelist, which thought was a lovely expression. It has a feeling of someone who is friendly, loves to teach, and communicate passionately.

**FE** Today you're best known as being the global ambassador, Glenrothes. The distillery is hardly new, it opened in 1879. So how did the new brand come about?

**RC** It was very much the brainchild of the then deputy chairman of Berrys, Christopher Berry Green. He met John Goodwin the then Chairman of Highland Distillers (The Edrington Group) they had come to the conclusion that the future was very bright for single malt whiskies. Because of the links to Cutty Sark, which has Glenrothes at its heart; Glenrothes was the obvious choice. Claire Berry Green, Christopher Berry Green's daughter came up with the idea of the bottle shape, and the vintage concept. As wine merchants the vintage idea was a natural one. It's a wonderful way to offer various expressions of whisky in much the same way as whisky varied a hundred years ago. Today however, this variation between vintages is the real strength of Glenrothes. The one exception is Select Reserve; which breaks with both Vintage and age statement, relying solely on quality to represent the Glenrothes style and character.

**FE** What does the future hold?

**RC** Innovation. We are going to do have to be different, and seen to be different. Select Reserve is a good example. The other thing that has to be addressed is whisky's image. Still far too stuffy and male. We really do have to work together as to overcome this stereotype.

**FE** and for you?

**RC** Well I'm getting on a bit. I have little ambition beyond what I'm doing now. Showing people just how wonderful malt whisky is and can be.

**FE** What about life away from whisky?

**RC** I do enjoy a little golf fishing and shooting, with no professed skill. The only other thing I have time left for is of course my family. My wife – who I proposed to, whilst crashing a toboggan in St. Moritz - and my eight year old son.

**FE** What advice would you give someone joining the industry today?

**RC** Enjoy it!

**FE** Ronnie, thank you for agreeing to be our castaway, and for sharing, and continuing to share your passion for whisky

**RC** My pleasure.

. **1. Henkell Trocken**

. Just thinking about it brings back such fantastic memories of my time in Germany.

. **2. Palo Cortado de Jerez 1/50, Vides Emilio Lustau**

. Everything a sherry should be. Quite, quite delicious, and of course it take me right back to Spain.

. **3. 1976 Nackenheimer Rothenberg Riesling Beerenauslese, Gunderloch**

. The perfect expression of Riesling, from a great producer and a great year.

. **4. Rhum Clemant - Martinique**

. Our Caribbean agent, Marcel Clemant, once poured me some rum from his family's distillery in Martinique. It completely changed my perception of rum.

. **5. Royal Household**

. The first dram. Happy memories of a carefree youth.

. **6. Jon, Mark & Robbo's The Smokey Peaty One**

. For sheer elevation and interest and gutsiness this, comes out tops. I'm not a fan of smokey whiskies, for this however I can make an exception.

. **7. Cutty Sark**

. It was this that really made me realise just how important the influence of malt whisky on a blend is. Truly, refreshing and invigorating.

. **8. The Glenrothes 1972**

. Without doubt my favourite whisky of all time has to be The Glenrothes 1972, the latest bottling. Truly outstanding in everyway. It has a complexity, texture and balance that really is unsurpassed.

. **Seven bottles are swept away in a storm, and you can only save one. Which will it be?**

. It has to be The Glenrothes.

. **One book**

. A good big, quite funny, book on Scottish History.

. **One luxury**

. A glass. A very good, well made, slightly bigger than strictly necessary, thistle shaped glass.