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A disputed pewter tankard

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ON 19th March, 1955, a London daily newspaper published a report that Captain Owen Cunningham, proprietor of a Mayfair oyster bar, claimed to be the maker of a pewter tankard which was displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum as an authentic late-seventeenth-century example. According to Captain Cunningham's statement, he was apprenticed as a youth to a firm which made reproductions of antique pewter, and he made it in 1929 when he was seventeen years old.

The tankard, which Captain Cunningham claimed to have made, is a typical late-seventeenth-century piece, the drum engraved with a portrait bust of William III, holding a sceptre and surmounted by a crown. The cartouche containing the portrait is flanked on one side by a lion and a rose, on the other side by a unicorn and a thistle. The lid is engraved with a conventional flower, bears two sets of owner's (?) marks, the initials IB and GB, both crowned, the date 1698 and simulated hall-marks. Inside the base is the maker's touch, the initials TC with the date 1697 within a lozenge, Cotterell No. 5531 a (Nos. 4 & 5).

This particular tankard had been acquired by the Museum during the Second World War as part of the bequest of the well-known pewter collector, Mr. Alfred Yeates, F.S.A., and had been

exhibited in the Museum galleries since 1945. The Yeates Collection had included a number of spurious pieces, and the pieces chosen for exhibition from it had been selected with particular care. As an additional check they were submitted to prominent authorities on pewter before being placed on display. It seemed, therefore, unlikely that a piece made at the age of seventeen by a beginner in the reproduction business should have been accepted by all concerned as being authentic. Further investigation showed that the tankard in question had been illustrated by the late Alfred Yeates in the second of two articles on his pewter collection which he had published in the August issue of the periodical *Old Furniture* in the year 1927. If the tankard was already in the Yeates Collection before August 1927, it could hardly have been made later than 1926; so that if Captain Cunningham's claim to have been its maker was true, then he made it at the age, not of seventeen, but of fourteen!

In appearance and in surface quality the tankard differed considerably from the spurious pieces from the Yeates Collection. The wear seemed quite convincing, and, in particular, there were numerous deposits of hard oxidized scale on the handle and in the areas where the ends of the handle joined the body. Further-



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These three plates show magnifications of corroded areas: 1. The disputed tankard; 2, a tankard of unquestioned authenticity; 3, a fake patination produced over a long period of exposure is hard and blackish in colour.

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Two views of a tankard dated 1698, from the Yeates Collection now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, claimed by Captain Owen Cunningham as his own work.



more, inspection under a strong magnifying-glass showed that deposits were formed over the engraved decoration, from which it follows that the latter must be contemporary with the tankard and could not be a later addition.

In view of the apparent authenticity of the piece, it was submitted to the Government Chemist for laboratory tests. For purposes of comparison, two other tankards were also submitted; a fake tankard and a third tankard, the authenticity of which had never been questioned, and which corresponded in type, decoration and period to the tankard (Nos. 4 and 5). The following report was received from the Government Chemist on the test:

'We have examined the three tankards submitted with the object of revealing any differences among them which might be of use in establishing the genuineness or otherwise of the challenged vessel.

1. Spectrographic examination of metal scraped from each vessel shows the following elements to be present: antimony, bismuth, tin, copper, iron, lead, silver, magnesium and molybdenum. No significant difference in composition was disclosed.

2. X-ray diffraction patterns of both metal and corrosion products from each vessel were recorded. Whilst we have not been able definitely to identify all the components, these patterns show that the crystalline form of the corrosion product from the disputed tankard closely resembles that from the genuine vessel and differs from that on the known fake.

Thus, all three patterns show the presence of stannic oxide (SnO_2), but both genuine and disputed vessels show additional diffraction lines, possibly due to stannous oxide, which do not

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appear in the pattern of the faked tankard, and this pattern bears some lines of copper-tin alloy not present in the other two.

'In addition, such corrosion as exists on the faked tankard is powdery and adheres lightly to the metal, whereas the black product on the other vessels is harder and more firmly attached. Photographs of the corroded areas ($\times 15$) which demonstrate differences in physical appearance are enclosed and may be of help in coming to a decision (Nos. 1, 2 & 3).

'The metal patterns also differ in that the fake has lines due to lead and/or antimony not found in the other two, which show tin only.

'In our opinion these facts establish similarities between the genuine and the disputed tankards which support the view that it is authentic. No evidence to the contrary has been obtained.'

In his Press statement, Captain Cunningham described the process of patinating the pieces which he made as follows: 'I would give coatings of nitric and sulphuric acid and a wash with olive-oil.' It is interesting to note that this treatment produces a dry powdery corrosion, different from the hard scaly oxide present on the Victoria and Albert Museum tankard, as also on those pieces which have acquired a patinated surface gradually in the course of centuries of exposure to the atmosphere.

In view of the circumstances described above, there seems to be no doubt that Captain Cunningham was mistaken in his claim to have made the tankard in question. It is, on the other hand, quite possible that amongst the pewter from the Yeates Bequest withdrawn from the galleries as fake there may be pieces in whose production Captain Cunningham had some part.