# A ROUGH GUIDE TO SNUFF

*An old print showing female snuff-takers.*



highlife highland na gàidhealtachd

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**Snuff Mulls and Snuff Boxes**

The beauty of snuff, however, lies in the containers that hold this smokeless tobacco. Snuff boxes are prized possessions that are much sought-after for their beauty, elegance and history.

*Snuff Mulls*

Highlanders accompanying the court of James VI of Scotland to London in 1603 introduced the "sneeshin miln", now known as the snuff-mull and made from ram's horn. The horn is a symbol of abundance and plenty. The tip of the horn was heated and curled into a tight scroll to keep it from rubbing a hole in the pocket. The mulls were decorated with silver mounts depicting highlanders, thistles and inscriptions. Some snuff-mulls were decorated with semi-precious stones such as cairngorms found in the Cairngorm Mountains of the Highlands. The horn snuff mulls were typical of the Scottish highlands and were made in different sizes. There were small pocket snuff mulls as well as larger communal snuff mulls. Some were even made from an entire ram's head. Many a Scot, from about 1700, carried with the snuff-mull a tiny spoon for applying the snuff to the nose, and a hare's foot for wiping the upper lip afterwards.




*Snuff Boxes*

Snuff boxes range from simple boxes made from wood or papier mâché to elegantly decorated boxes made from gold and silver. These boxes had to be airtight as snuff is sensitive to moisture and contamination. The tricky problem of keeping an airtight snuff box was solved by James Sandy from Aberdeenshire. He invented the 'Laurencekirk' hinge This technique was copied and applied to other containers as well as snuff boxes.

Snuff-boxes appeal to people for many reasons and they have always been sought after as collector's items. Beautifully made boxes were and are desirable gift items and are symbols of wealth and grandeur.

**The Journey of Snuff**

Snuff was first used for its medicinal properties. It is believed that the first users were the Mayan people (2000BC – 900AD) in Central America. They used tobacco leaves to heal wounds and in religious rituals. In 1561 Jean Nicot de Villamain, the French Ambassador to Lisbon, Portugal, sent tobacco to Catherine de' Medici along with instructions on how to use it in the form of snuff to treat her son's persistent migraines. This miracle cure helped to popularize snuff among the elite. Nicotine, the active element of tobacco, was named after the plant *Nicotiana tabacum* which in turn was named after Jean Nicot.

In the early 17th century, Scottish snuff contained no tobacco, but was the dried and powdered leaves of the


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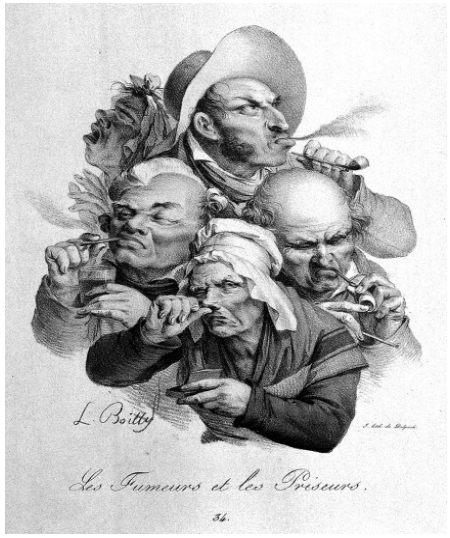
plant *Achillea ptarmica*. This powder was known as '*sneeshin',* and to take a pinch of it was sneesing. It was used to cure sinus infections, tooth-ache and bad breath.

By the 18th century, snuff, made from finely-ground tobacco, became popular. Snuff taking was considered more elegant than pipe smoking. Royalty and the aristocracy took up snuff with enthusiasm and were great patrons of the habit. The French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte took 7 pounds (3 kilograms) of snuff per month. The wife of King George III earned the name 'Snuffing Charlotte' for her over-indulgent habit of taking snuff, and her family called her 'Old Snuffy.'

Snuff culture soon spread to all sections of society. From clergymen to soldiers and peasants, people took up this 'glamorous' habit. It was particularly popular with women. In 1788, when snuff-taking was at its height, the Ladies Journal calculated that the habitual snuff-taker took a pinch every ten minutes.

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Mrs. Margaret Thomson of east London was notorious for her indulgence in snuff. When she died in 1776 she left instructions in her will that her coffin was to be filled with the best Scotch snuff, making it 'the world's largest snuff-box'. She stated that the men who were to carry her coffin should be the biggest consumers of snuff in the parish. Six maidens accompanied the coffin carrying snuffboxes and the clergyman had to go before them taking copious quantities of snuff. The procession was followed by servants, placing a liberal handful of snuff every 20 yards in the street for the crowd. As a final act two bushels of good quality snuff were distributed at Mrs. Thomson's door on the day of her funeral.

Snuff was not popular with everyone and over-indulgence brought opposition. Tsar Michael I of Russia ordered that persons caught taking snuff should be whipped for the first offence, have their nose cut off for the second and be executed for the third offence. Pope Urban VIII ordered that anyone found guilty of taking snuff in church should be excommunicated.

During the reign of Queen Victoria snuff-taking was no longer glamorous and came to be regarded with distaste. However, it continued to be used widely until the 20th century. Women, who had been important patrons of snuff, began to regard snuff-taking as demeaning - a habit fit only for the lower classes. As cigarettes became more popular, the number of people taking snuff reduced considerably and the industry suffered.

Recently there has been a revival in snuff. This new-found interest has been linked to bans on cigarette smoking in public and to anti-smoking laws, which have forced smokers to look for alternatives. Little research has been carried out on the effects of snuff but recent studies show that it contains elements that cause cancer.


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If the health risks don't worry you, it is important to note that taking snuff is a messy affair. It includes putting snuff up your nose and a lot of sneezing, not to mention carrying a snuff-stained handkerchief during the ritual of snuff taking.


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