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"Honest Claret": The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland's Favourite Wine

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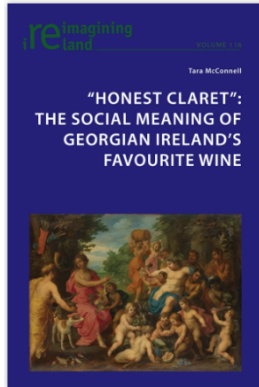
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BOOK REVIEW

"Honest Claret": The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland's Favourite Wine, by Tara McConnell, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022, 322pp., ISBN 978- 1800797901.



I am of an age to recall the days when many better English wine merchants bought their French wines in barrels and bottled them on their own premises. I witnessed the demise of this practice as a restaurateur in the 1970s. Our own merchants, Averys of Bristol (est. 1793), had been bottling *grands crus* from Burgundy and the very best of clarets (though not the *premiers crus*) for many years and we offered them proudly on our list. Not, however, for long. More opinionated and perhaps more refined clients began to protest and insist on *domaine* or *château* bottlings, even suspecting those that had been bottled in their country of origin by *négociants-éleveurs*. By contrast, in the eighteenth century and before, everyone, whether merchant or great house, or even humble bourgeois with cellar space to store it, bought their wine in the wood. Bottles were expensive and, until the 1820s, inconveniently shaped for horizontal binning – so dear were they that individuals and taverns marked them with their own seals.

Tara McConnell has written the biography, as she likes to call it, of one French wine type, claret, in the context of Ireland during the Protestant Ascendancy. Though possessing no vineyards, the Irish had long contact with wine, archaeology seeming to confirm imports from Syria and the Mediterranean some time before a sensible preference manifested itself for wines from Gaul. The essential rites of Christianity and the cultural hegemony of Rome were doubtless the spur to this diffusion, but the Irish embraced the drink as well as the symbol. McConnell's sketch of early Irish encounters with wine, and with Gascony, its usual point of embarkation, is useful in this regard. But when it comes to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries her aims are twofold: first, to demonstrate the mutual identification of claret with the (largely Protestant) élite, and second, to assert the singularity of Irish claret when compared to the thin, adulterated rubbish served up in England.

Thanks to political and fiscal manoeuvres at the end of the seventeenth century and beyond, the English largely favoured port (low tax) over claret (high tax) in the Georgian era, while the Irish remained faithful to the French wine at least until ca. 1790 when duties were finally increased to English levels. Their preference was not merely financial but owed much to the long association of Bordeaux and Ireland, geographical, economic, political and religious. After the exile of James II in France and the advent of the Irish Wild Geese in Europe, a sub-group, the “wine geese,” drifted towards Bordeaux and western parts (think Hennessy in Cognac, Barton, Johnston, Kirwan and Lynch in Bordeaux). These latter had an astonishing grip on the products of the “new clarets,” the future *premiers crus* of Lafite, Latour, Haut Brion and Margaux who produced wines of an altogether higher calibre than the *clairets* of old.

The author proves her point by a thorough trawl of memoirs, correspondence, biographies, household accounts and records, in manuscript as well as (the majority perhaps) in print. She produces an infinity of examples of claret consumption reinforcing the identity of a social group (the Ascendancy) as well as ensuring its continuance through the generosity and magnificence of the Viceroy’s entertainments at Dublin Castle. She does not shy away from the problems of overindulgence. As Lord Chesterfield (Viceroy 1745/6) remarked, if “an exact calculation [were made] of what Ireland has lost within these last fifty years in its trade, manufactures, manners, and morals, by drunkenness, the sum would frighten the most determined guzzler of either claret or whisky, into sobriety.” Some of the conventions, for instance toasts, increased the volume consumed. The foxhunter Nimrod, in a piece entitled revealingly, “Memorabilia Bacchanalia,” observed, “the excellence of their claret’ and ‘their convivial toasts’ provided Irish gentlemen with ‘the incentive to drinking’.” Like her subjects when circling an overflowing jug, McConnell is sensitive to status and gender. Those not quite part of the Ascendancy, yet aspiring to reach it, were mindful of serving good claret as a means of achieving that goal, “the usages of Dublin make it necessary to give dinners, often beyond the income of the entertainer,” was the comment of an English observer. And women too, were permitted to share in the jollities: “drink a bottle of Old claret,” the nationalist Daniel O’Connell urged his wife as she prepared to receive a visiting relative; nor were the ladies necessarily excluded from the toasting. By hints here, dropped remarks there, McConnell builds up a convincing picture of upper-class social life in Dublin through the long eighteenth century. Other centres get mentioned, as do sometimes the country palaces of the aristocracy, but the capital (thanks to the viceregal presence) has the star turn.

The biggest question posed by this book concerns the true nature of “Irish” claret. What made it so special? One might think that it was merely a superior product, bought from better merchants in Bordeaux and from better properties. But the customs records for 1740, mentioned by Professor Charles Ludington in his studies of claret in Great Britain, show that while the average price of a tun imported into London was 1500 livres and into England was 800 livres, it was only 400 livres if destined for Ireland.

This disparity continued all through the century. A run-of-the-mill tippie, you might think. Yet McConnell chronicles the peerless reputation of “Sneyd claret” (the product of the house of Sneyd, French and Barton of Dublin and Bordeaux) still celebrated late in the Victorian era by wine-lovers as far afield as Australia and Ceylon. What magic, we might ask, did Sneyd work upon his casks? Dare one mention doctoring, improving, Hermitaging, the slight addition of Alicante, or the blending of vintages or châteaux? That Tara McConnell does not descend too far into the alchemist’s laboratory is a tribute to her discretion, and we too should be gratified that she has accorded us so enlightening, enlivening and wide-ranging a portrait of a society happy in its cups.

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Author and Publisher