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## “Honest Claret”: The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland’s Favourite Wine

Brian Murphy  
*Technological University Dublin*, [brian.a.murphy@tudublin.ie](mailto:brian.a.murphy@tudublin.ie)

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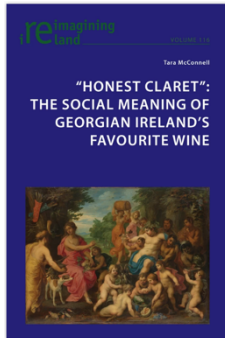
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## BOOK REVIEW

**“Honest Claret”:** The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland’s Favourite Wine, by Tara McConnell, Oxford and New York: Peter Lang Reimagining Ireland, 2022, 336pp., ISBN 978-1-8007-9790-1.



Tara McConnell has penned an excellent and engaging book, *Honest Claret*, which skilfully guides readers through the enchanting world of wine in eighteenth-century Ireland, focusing on the beloved Bordeaux red wine known as claret. Unveiling Ireland's distinct wine preferences during the Georgian era, the book delves into the captivating historical social context that contributed to claret's enduring popularity.

The enduring popularity of Claret in Ireland, in stark contrast to changing tastes in England, was intricately linked to political and economic factors. While British drinkers shifted allegiance from claret to port throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the divergence can be traced back to sheer economic considerations. The Methuen Treaty, a pivotal military and commercial agreement between England and Portugal, signed in 1703, during the War of the Spanish Succession, played a decisive role in shaping wine preferences in Britain. This treaty imposed unfavourable taxes on French wines and, conversely, granted advantageous terms to Portuguese wines, effectively promoting port wine as a more affordable and patriotic choice championed by the Francophobe Whig Government.

In contrast, Ireland unfolded a distinct narrative. A considerable number of Irish parliamentarians, fervent enthusiasts of claret, consistently championed for low tariffs on French wine throughout the majority of the 18th century. In the kingdom of Ireland, the act of indulging in claret did not carry the stigma of being unpatriotic; instead, it became a symbol of refined taste and cultural appreciation, sustaining its popularity among the privileged classes.

While Guinness stout, Irish whiskey, and *poitín* may dominate the narrative of Irish beverages today, it's noteworthy that wine, despite being an imported libation, currently holds the position of the second most popular alcoholic

drink in the country. This contemporary trend traces its roots back to the Georgian era when claret, the distinguished red wine of Bordeaux, reigned as the acknowledged “genteel tippie” among those who could afford it and those who could only aspire to do so.

The book adeptly intertwines historical narratives, medical practices, and societal perspectives to deliver a comprehensive and captivating narrative. McConnell’s dedicated research draws upon a diverse range of period sources, offering a vivid reconstruction of the social life of claret in Georgian Ireland. During this era, there existed a prevailing consensus among both medical professionals and the general population regarding the therapeutic virtues of wine. From physicians prescribing claret as a remedy for various ailments to individual patients and caregivers administering it medicinally, McConnell's work illuminates the widespread confidence in wine's healing properties, a belief that has perhaps not quite endured into modern times!

Among those who subscribed to the relieving effects of wine was the renowned author and satirist, Jonathan Swift. Plagued by a range of unpleasant physical symptoms, now attributed to Meniere's disease, Swift light-heartedly dubbed his favourite Bordeaux red wine as “Irish wine.” This became his remedy of choice to keep his ailments at bay.

The book examines the medical practices of physicians during the Georgian era, offering a glimpse into the recommendations of figures like Dr. William Buchan, a prominent doctor of the time. He often prescribed copious amounts of claret, occasionally blended with various substances to enhance its supposed curative effects, as the ideal wine for treating specific maladies. This pervasive belief in wine's medicinal properties is further emphasised by the period's wine merchants, who actively promoted 'wine for invalids' in their advertisements.

The inclusion of fresh anecdotes about notable figures like Buchan, Swift, John Boyle (the Earl of Orrery and a close writer companion of Swift, Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson), and even the Liberator himself, Daniel O’Connell, a giant of nineteenth century politics, provides an intriguing and engaging quality to the historical narrative.

Dr Tara McConnell, the author of *Honest Claret*, is a food historian with a particular interest in drinking studies and material culture in eighteenth-century Ireland. As a long-time Francophile and wine-lover, her curiosity led her to explore the role of claret in the lives of the Georgian elite. In recent years, food history has gained strong recognition within Irish studies as it offers a unique lens to explore cultural identity, societal changes, and economic shifts. In examining the evolution of our food (and drinking) practices, McConnell has provided valuable insights into Ireland's history, reflecting the

interconnectedness of culinary and imbibing traditions with broader social and political developments.

*Honest Claret* meticulously unravels the intricate tapestry of Georgian Ireland's social customs, vividly portraying attitudes toward wine. Tara McConnell's research, infused with humour and insight, immerses readers in the festive essence of eighteenth-century Ireland, particularly its enduring love affair with claret. A must-read for those in and beyond the food and wine industry, this accessible and enjoyable book stands as a valuable resource, offering profound insights into Ireland's cultural heritage. In unravelling the rich tapestry of Georgian Ireland's wine culture, *Honest Claret* not only enlightens readers about historical practices but also sparks a renewed appreciation for the enduring significance of claret in Ireland's fascinating food history, making it a delightful and informative journey for enthusiasts of both history and wine.

**Brian A. Murphy**

*Technological University Dublin*