

BOOK AND FILM REVIEW

Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre: *Imperial Wine: How the British Empire Made Wine's New World*

University of California Press, 2022, 323 pp.,
ISBN 978-0520343689, \$34.95.

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The title of this book provides a good indication of its contents, shaped by an apparent paradox that a country that produced no wine of its own played such a pivotal role in the global spread of *vitis vinifera*. Regan-Lefebvre points out that while the higher social strata in Britain had long indulged a taste for wine, there was never a shortage of the commodity—except during the peak years of phylloxera. This raises the question of why bother producing wine in the far-flung colonies when it was available just next door. Regan-Lefebvre offers three answers. First, imperial governors imagined that the colonial enterprise would literally be rendered fruitful by turning “empty” and unused land over to the vine—thereby fulfilling a British version of the civilizing mission. Second, the settlers who followed and made wine subsequently looked to the British market (as well as to other colonies), to absorb the wine that resulted. Third, there was a lingering belief in Britain that it was only fair to reward imperial loyalty by helping to level the playing field with European producers.

The first section of the book, which deals with the foundational years in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, inevitably has more of an anecdotal feel about it. But it is bound together by stories of connections between them in the shape of Cape vines that reached Australia, and of James Busby's pioneering efforts in Australia before his relocation to New Zealand. In the second section, the focus shifts to developing the market for imperial wine. The discussion of the Cape in the nineteenth century addresses a brief period of prosperity when access to the British market was facilitated by lower tariffs than on European wines. While the first blow was struck in the 1820s, like most others, the author regards the equalization of tariffs and the levying of duties according to alcoholic content after 1861 as the killer blow for Cape wines that had made some inroads into the middling sections of the market.

The emphasis in Australia was initially on increasing the local uptake of wines that were considered more conducive to healthy consumption habits and the wellbeing of

small farmers. But from the 1850s on, exports were beginning to increase there as well. Because spirit was added to Cape and Australian wines in order to enable them to survive lengthy sea journeys, these augmented alcohol levels were naturally higher than those of French wines. Regan-Lefebvre shows that while exporters defended their wines against charges of adulteration, they now struggled to remain competitive based on price and perceived quality.

After a short chapter on responses to phylloxera, the analysis turns to the ways in which the vogue for Exhibitions was exploited by those seeking to export wines. This included the efforts of Australian producers to probe the Indian market, alongside efforts to develop a local alternative. Whereas Indian wine was doomed to failure, wines from Malta and Cyprus enjoyed greater success, and some early markers were laid down in Canada.

The book comes into its own in the third section, where the author provides a compelling account of how wines from Australia and, to some extent, South Africa gradually found favor among ordinary British consumers over the course of the twentieth century. The author shows how fortified wines made significant inroads during the 1920s and during the Great Depression, in part because of the return of imperial preferences. She also shows how the interruption of supplies provided a renewed opening during WWII—a tale told, somewhat in fascinating detail, through the wine cellar books of King's College in Cambridge.

Regan-Lefebvre further demonstrates how off-licenses played an important role in increasing access to wine well before the advent of the supermarket. A short final section is actually the most compelling. The author points out that the increase in popular consumption of wine in Britain was initially to the advantage of European wines, especially after accession to the European Economic Community. She goes on to show how increased demand created the space into which Australian producers could move in the 1980s—followed in due course by the New Zealanders and South Africans, not to mention the Chileans and Argentinians. Regan-Lefebvre rightly emphasizes that while this breakthrough might have seemed to come out of the blue, it built on a much longer series of efforts to popularize wine in Britain.

The author explains that COVID-19 put an end to her efforts to carry out research in South Africa. This helps to explain the contrast between the rich discussion of particular regions and producers in Australia, whereas the South African section discussion is pitched at a higher level of generality. Even the discussion of the *Kooperatiewe Wynbouwers Vereniging (KWV)*, for which more research material would have been present in South Africa, is rather circumscribed.

There are a couple of errors, such as the equating of the workhorse “hermitage” grape with Syrah rather than with Cinsault (p. 78). But South Africa also poses a challenge for the larger interpretation. Although the author maintains that Cape wine farmers were a mixture of Afrikaners and settlers from Britain (pp. 64, 124), there were a mere handful of wine producers who could trace a meaningful link to the latter. The vast majority claimed Dutch or Huguenot heritage, and many were Afrikaner nationalists who had little time for Britain and its empire. This does not nullify the argument that Cape wine farmers looked to the British market to save them, but it does complicate the story of a British imperial transplant to Africa.

This is probably not a book that will have the greatest resonance with wine economists or academic historians of empire. But informed readers will appreciate its extensive coverage and writing style, in which lively and uncomplicated prose is enlivened with numerous wry asides. At the end of the day, it tells a compelling story of how wines from the former Empire came to win over British palates, and capture a major share of the global market. It is the first book that succeeds in explaining how this unfolded over the course of more than two centuries.