

HUGH JOHNSON: *The Story of Wine: From Noah to Now*; new edition with a Foreword by Andrew Roberts. Académie du Vin Library Ltd., Ascot, Berkshire UK, 2020, 496 pp., ISBN: 978-1-913141-06-6 (flexibound), \$45.

Rule Britannia! Britannia ruled the wine world in Europe, at least between the 18th century and well into the 20th century. This is all the more remarkable since only until recently has the United Kingdom produced anything vinous worth mentioning, and not all that much at that. Even more ironically, as an example of always hurting the one you love, a vine disease, *oidium tuckeri*, passed from England to France via Belgium in 1851 and wreaked havoc for a decade until it was found that dusting with sulfur would stop its spread. England's more enduring positive impact was as a thirsty market for French, Spanish, German, and Portuguese wines. Hence it was the most important stimulus for elevating their quality. As Hugh Johnson affirms: "Great wines are made by their markets" (p. 245).

Alongside the growing wine trade, wine writing began to flourish in Britain starting in 1775 with the publication of *Observations, Historical, Critical and Medieval, on the Wines of the Ancients and the Analogy between them and Modern Wines* by Sir Edward Barry. "Writing about wine from the consumer's point of view had in the past been almost a branch of medicine..." (p. 317) explains Johnson. "Such writing was to become the specialty of the English, for the simple reason that English wealth, at the top of the social ladder, had accumulated the most varied cellars of top-quality wines on earth" (p. 317). Building on this tradition, Johnson presents his masterful overview of the evolution of the world's most cherished beverage, not surprisingly in an unabashedly Anglocentric way.

Following the Foreword by Andrew Roberts (more on this later), Johnson's Preface addresses his wariness of the word "history" and the limited degree to which he updated the story after 30 years. On the former, he recognizes that "scholars have made [the word history] their own and will challenge any unqualified pretender" (p. 11). His reluctance to go on with the story stems from his belief that it would be "as much about money as it is about wine, or taste or pleasure" (p. 14). Moreover, he asks: "It would further our knowledge – but does it further our understanding? In any case...I have limited myself to the story of wine at the time when it took over a large part of my life, and became my enduring pleasure" (p. 15).

Gustave Flaubert declared that "Writing history is like drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful." Having eschewed the "h" word, Johnson instead, after consuming thousands of wines, including one that was 421 years old, and digesting dozens of references, penned his tale that unfolds across 43 chapters organized into five parts. The nine chapters of Part One cover the period from "Man's First Experience of Alcohol" to when "Mohammed Condemns Wine." (I'm using chapter subtitles which are more descriptive of the content than the titles.) Part Two, with ten chapters, begins with "Charlemagne and the Rebirth of Europe's Vineyards" and ends with "Great Steps in the Technology of Glassmaking." The

11 chapters of Part Three cover the period from the end of the 17th century into the 19th century. Part Four comprises ten chapters, which dwell on the turbulence caused by revolution and wars. They address their impact on the maturation of the wine industry primarily in Europe but with excursions to the New World and take us to the dawn of the 20th century. The first of three chapters of Part Five is an overview of the first half of the 20th century featuring “War, Slump, Poor Weather and Prohibition” and is followed by two containing updates since the first release of the book. Up-to-date information is also spliced into the text throughout, for example: “...the oldest pips of cultivated vines...were found in Soviet [as it was then] Georgia...” (p. 24). Mercifully, an index of 19 pages each containing three columns of smaller text is included to facilitate refreshing the reader’s memory. A bibliography lists references by chapter. Unfortunately, there are no maps or illustrations.

Freed from the strictures of historians, Johnson takes a totally relaxed and occasionally personal approach to his subject, covering many topics superficially while going down the rabbit hole on others. He infuses the text with opinions, wit, and amusing digressions but not at the expense of a serious message. This story shows how much wine permeates and influences various cultures and so must include some of their histories. Wine is overlaid on this chronicle with names and places, empires and raiders poking through the tales requiring the most curious to look elsewhere for details.

Although I am well-read on the subject of wine, I learned quite a lot. In particular, insets were especially helpful to break up the formidable blocks of text and further illuminate a topic. Some offer quirky insights. For example, one named “Tent” introduces a term no longer used for a dark red wine and “is the directly comparable with, and complementary to, ‘claret’” (p. 167). Johnson muses “It would be pleasant to see it introduced for that general class of wine such as Australian Shiraz, California Zinfandel, and indeed such dark Spanish reds as Duero (as opposed to paler Rioja)” (p. 167).

Another example of the myriad topics touched on, Johnson tells us that “Plato’s views on the minimum drinking age are remarkably severe. ‘Boys under 18 shall not taste wine at all for one should not conduct fire to fire. Wine in moderation may be tasted until one is 30...But when a man is entering his fortieth year...he may summon the other gods and particularly call upon Dionysius to join the old men’s holy rite...wine...is the cure of crabbiness of old age...’ It is a sobering thought that to Plato old age began at 40” (p. 50).

Johnson’s remembrance of the oldest wine he tasted opens Chapter 29, “Cabinet Wine.” In 1961, he sampled an 1857 Rudesheimer and an 1820 Scholl Johannisberger: “Both had completely perished...But the Steinwein of 1540 was still alive. Nothing has ever demonstrated to me...that wine is indeed a living organism...It even hinted...of its German origins” (p. 288). The exposure to air quickly

turned the ancient liquid into vinegar. “It was a moving event in any case to drink history like this,” Johnson concludes (p. 289).

Johnson is not only one of the most prolific wine writers, but he is also one of the most literary. Chapter 33, “Methode Champenoise,” begins with this description of a scene shortly after the abdication of Napoleon: “The sun rising over Champagne on the September 10th 1815 found something more stirring to illuminate than the usual placid dewy vines, their leaves yellowing and their grapes turning old for the approaching harvest...where the first light had touched the little hill..., a seemingly endless army was assembling...The light of dawn flashed on the cuirasses of hussars and glowed on the bearskins of great-coated grenadiers” (p. 332). Passages like this are not only a pleasure to read but help the reader conjure up mental images that might partially offset the lack of illustrations.

At the same time, while impressed at the sheer scope and depth of the coverage, I feel that more could have been added in the update despite Johnson’s reasoning. There are only three references to China listed in the index. The first reduces the early events in that country to a single page inset entitled “Far Cathay” (p. 28). The second is a reference to tea, not wine, and the third, to the number of bottles packed in a hamper sent to China. Surely room could have been made in Chapter 42, “New World Challenges,” for an overview of the burgeoning wine industry in one of the world’s largest wine markets.

In the Foreword, Roberts acknowledges that “No one could be better qualified to write the story of wine than Hugh Johnson whose name is synonymous with wine writing” (p. 7). True enough. “There is tremendous scholarship to be found in these pages, but the immense learning is never ponderous. It is erudite, but never pompous,” he maintains (p. 7). Also true, but it is not light reading. Readers should have at least an intermediate level of wine knowledge as well as more than a passing knowledge of the world and especially European history and geography. Without the slightest hesitation, Johnson casually references wines and wineries as well as major events throughout history, assuming that they are common knowledge. Admittedly, it is on the reader to fill in the blanks, but doing so while engaging with the dense text can be distracting and break the flow of the story.

Nevertheless, armed with a rare depth of knowledge and understanding, Johnson admirably, skillfully, and literarily undertook the formidable task of summarizing the development and expansion of viticulture and enology since biblical times. Particularly in the insets, he larded and leavened his saga with enough trivia, facts, and factoids to make the reader, depending on the guests, either a genius or a bore at the next dinner party. But despite its title, this is only one story of wine, obviously limited to the interests and perspectives of the author, as he admits, and one that is distinctly Eurocentric. Johnson’s rationale: “I was drawing a line between regions where wine had evolved through history and regions where it was an import based on what was being done elsewhere – almost all in Europe” (p. 14). While that continent is where a lot of the action has been happening, it is certainly

not the only one, especially since the original publication date. Perhaps there is a non-European counterpart to Johnson who will pick up the story someday and celebrate the contributions of those in less obvious but equally important places.

Neal D. Hulkower
 McMinnville, OR
nhulkower@yahoo.com
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SUSAN KEEVIL (ed.): *In Vino Veritas: A Collection of Fine Wine Writing Past and Present*. Académie du Vin Library Ltd., Ascot, Berkshire UK, 2019, 224 pp., ISBN: 978-1-913141-03-5 (hardcover), \$45.

OK, I'll warn you up front, I'm enamored with British wine writing. The dry wit, the masterful yet effortless use of language, and the confident command of the subject remain inspirational models for this wine writer.

In Vino Veritas assembles 36 pieces, dating from 1833 through 2019 by 34 writers, many of whom are English, including Michael Broadbent, Hugh Johnson, and Steven Spurrier. The latter two, along with Simon McMurtrie, founded the Académie du Vin Library, the publisher of this volume. A brief introduction by Hugh Johnson highlighting the origins of wine writing is followed by 10 chapters, each covering a single theme and each containing 3 to 5 stories covering 2 to 11 pages.

Charles Walter Berry's *In Search of Bordeaux* is a highlight of Chapter 1, "Good Vintage, Bad Vintage." This excerpt from *In Search of Wine, A Tour of the Vineyards of France* published in 1935 by "one of the first British wine merchants to venture abroad and taste wines on their own terroir" (p. 18) chronicles his visits to the chateaux the year before. It contains descriptions of wines, both good and not so good, and accompanying dishes. Included as an insert, Michael Broadbent's tasting notes of several of the wines supplement Berry's pithier ones. In addition, Fiona Morrison MW contributes *Le Pin: the First Day of the Harvest* written in 2019 and H. Warner Allen describes *My Best Claret* (1951).

A 1981 extract from Christie's Wine Companion by Broadbent, *My Wife and Hard Wines*, concludes the chapter. It is a charming recollection of visiting old wine cellars whose bottles ended up on the block at the famous auction house. Contrasting "map-bedecked modern American air-conditioned cellars" with "the 'feel', smell, chill and content of an old cellar," he wonders: "How can a room comfortable enough to sit in for several hours...possibly be the right temperature for storing fine vintage wines?" (p. 25)