

The Politics of Wine in Britain

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In this imaginative, ambitious and well-researched book, Charles Ludington presents a provocative thesis analyzing how changes in alcohol consumption constituted power, influence and legitimacy in politics over two centuries. Based on his dissertation at Columbia University, Ludington, Teaching Assistant Professor of History at North Carolina State University, offers in his first book a novel view of wine's role in early modern British history. Drawing on impressive, diverse sources, from diaries, newspapers, plays and speeches to novels, prints, cartoons and paintings, many of them illustrated, he combines these with copious consumption statistics (presented in graphs) to give the reader an entrée into the world of the Stuart and Hanoverian landed elite.

Central to Ludington's book is the concept of consumption which provides the framework for his interpretation. What Britain's landed elite drank, represented not just political power but legitimacy. Shifts in drinking habits of the landed elite and middling sorts were rooted, he argues, not in personal preference, cost, new products, fashion or concerns about insobriety, but in politics. Even drunkenness itself had nothing to do alcoholic addiction – a term never mentioned – or societal norms, but instead with preserving the elite's power, authority and status. 'Taste', Ludington writes, 'is a battleground for those who want to maintain or change the social order' (p. 4). For Ludington, 'the taste for wines was a blatant political statement because it structured social relationships' (p. 1). Embracing the appropriate taste enabled the landed elite to retain political legitimacy, thereby ensuring its leadership. Indeed, Ludington goes still further to make the case for the elite's uncertain, at times strongly contested, position. He elevates the middle-class to a position of political parity and cultural supremacy with the aristocracy in the 18th century. This is an astonishing perspective, sitting rather oddly with the cautious franchise extension in the 1832 Reform Bill. And Ludington's attempted revisionism can't explain why the landed elite, in one famous characterization, adroitly conceded the appearance while retaining the substance of power well into Queen Victoria's reign.

Given this outlook, culture (part of his subtitle) is ascribed a subordinate role to politics. To put the matter concisely, everything was political. Though labourers began consuming prodigious amounts of gin in the 1730s and 1740s, Ludington disregards the importance of this new drinking habit. Likewise, he ignores entirely the introduction of porter and India pale ale for the same reason: the working class had no political clout, so Ludington spends no space on examining these changes.

The Politics of Wine in Britain, therefore, adopts a quite narrow perspective, with the focus always on landowners and potential challenges from the middle classes. This is really old-fashioned political history in a new bottle. His analysis comes from the commanding heights of the landed elite, with occasional glances downwards to the middling sort but only when the latter's behaviour affected the landed classes. To subtitle *The Politics of Wine* 'a new cultural history' is dubious not just because of this narrowness, but because it covers only two centuries (1650–1860s).

During this period, the elite's consumption of wine shifted four times: claret, 'luxury claret,' port and finally sherry as well as port ([table 1](#) [2]). When integrated with politics, these categories are less straightforward. To differentiate themselves from early Hanoverian Tories, who drank French claret, and displayed their support for the Stuarts, France and French culture, Whigs championed high tariffs and embargoes on French wines, Francophobia, the Protestant succession and parliamentary supremacy. The final ingredient was for the Whigs to identify themselves first with Spanish red wines and later with port. Ludington believes that all these traits constituted English national identity.

Several considerations, however, raise serious doubts about this argument. Though Spain and Portugal were diplomatically anti-French, they were both foreign countries and Catholic. As other scholars have forcefully argued, France and Catholicism were inseparable traits constituting the 'other' throughout the 18th century. Residual hostility to Catholicism surfaced in the Gordon Riots in the 1780s. Scholars have sought to link alcoholic beverages with national identity in other periods or countries, but in such cases the beverages were indigenous, not imported.⁽¹⁾ Why then did the Whigs not publicly champion efforts of General George Oglethorpe, one of the proprietors of the new North American colony of Georgia (1732), to revive English viticulture in southern England?⁽²⁾

Another problem here was that Whigs, while extolling consumption of port as a patriotic measure, drank far more claret and 'luxury claret' than port. Ludington defends his interpretation (and his Whigs) in several ways: privately, though not publicly, they were 'indifferent to the popular politics of wine' (p. 80); they 'drew a distinction between their own personal preferences and the national interest' (p. 45); and uppermost in their minds was altering the popular preference for different wines.

Ludington offers another defence: the need to legitimize political power. Politeness, a model of moral behaviour, arrived from the continent in the late 17th century, and gave the elite a code of conduct vital for differentiating the powerful from everyone else. Politeness meant behaviour and taste in material possessions, aesthetic appreciation and their proper use – the self-defining characteristics of this group ([table 2](#) [2]). For Whigs, the concept symbolized their anti-court, anti-French, genteel and urban stances. 'Aesthetic appreciation, or taste, served as a new foundation for political power', Ludington contends (p. 83). Since 'luxury claret' arrived about the same time as politeness, Whigs seized the opportunity to drink the superior, more expensive claret rather than port. In embracing an expensive French wine affordable only by the rich, Whigs asserted their claim to political preeminence. 'Luxury claret was polite, and politeness was power' (p. 83). Put another way, taste 'quickly became a justification for political power', maintains Ludington (p. 96).

Because the Whigs trumpeted the virtues of port and blocked a commercial treaty with France in 1713, the middling sort turned to consuming the cheaper, stronger, anti-French and patriotic Portuguese wine. Ludington, however, offers no evidence that the middle classes drank port as a patriotic gesture in response to Whig leaders' advocacy. He does point to the rising consumption of port, which he suggests the middling sort drank primarily in taverns. From the gin craze of the 1730s and 1740s. Ludington infers that since

Englishmen wanted powerful alcoholic beverages, the poor drank gin, while the middling groups quaffed port. This intriguing point, however, is never explored.

British military losses in the Seven Years' War discredited claret as a patriotic beverage, together with politeness. A warrior masculinity, associated with hard drinking, drunkenness, fighting, hunting, gambling and whoring, became the new code of moral behaviour which dominated until the 1820s. Freightened by increasingly threatening criticisms from the middling sort, the landed elite concluded it could best preserve its power, status and influence by appropriating middle-class taste. Ludington characterizes this process as the 'embourgeoisment of the English elite taste' (p. 159), and it served to legitimize the landed classes' authority. Improved port quality itself facilitated this shift in beverages and attitudes. Both classes thus drank the same type of wine, but, owing to price differentials, not of the same quality. This concept of taste as a symbol of power which flowed upwards is part of Ludington's thesis, but no evidence of how the middling sort intimidated the elite is presented. Apparently, the middling sorts' proud display of masculinity expressed through prodigious drinking and drunkenness subconsciously embarrassed the elite, scorned for effeminate conduct and drinking French claret.

To assert their own masculinity, aristocrats embraced port literally on a gigantic scale. This class preservation looms large in Ludington's interpretation, but not in his analysis. It was not Methodism, state repression or other factors but the elite's conscious decision to drink port enthusiastically that pre-empted a revolution in Britain during the Napoleonic Wars. As proud port-drinking men, the elite regained masculinity and legitimacy, while silencing social critics.

To ensure continued political legitimacy, the elite became committed to drinking staggering amounts of port. Three, four, or more bottle-a-day men were notorious, including Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. When these avid drinkers began what often evolved into ten to twelve-hour drinking sessions, their avowed goal was drunkenness. Curiously, given concerns about 'binge drinking' in the last two decades in Britain, Ludington draws no parallel with modern youth, who allegedly drink with the same commitment to drunkenness or, for that matter, with groups in other countries during his period.⁽³⁾

From the 1820s, the code of respectability supplanted warrior masculinity. Synonymous with hard work, frugality, domesticity and sobriety, this model of behaviour embodied new middle-class values, and became the basis for a reformulated masculinity. Heavy drinking, its association with pugnacious masculinity and the aristocracy's embrace of port as a symbol of manliness – all these disqualified this type of wine as suitable for middle-class claims to greater political influence. But more delicate sherry drunk as a complement to port proved ideal: sherry refined port and as a duo elevated the drinker, so that when consumed separately, but over the course of a drinking session, drinkers had no fear of lapsing into the debauchery of their Georgian forbears. The fact, too, that for the first time elite women would join men in consuming sherry fostered closer identification with domesticity and respectability.

Middle-class Britons had asserted their superiority through renouncing drunkenness, debauchery and aggressive masculinity for respectability and sobriety, and so could now claim moral pre-eminence in demanding wider political influence. With sobriety regarded as the critical component of morality and ultimately of political legitimacy, aristocrats and labourers 'would have to follow suit if they wanted to maintain or gain political power' (p. 224).

Ludington concludes his survey by examining the Victorian debate on wine consumption. Though parliamentary legislation in the 1860s sought to open up the wine market and reverse two centuries of economic policy in which fortified wines were favoured over unfortified ones, the ultimate impact on drinkers was disappointing.

This provocative book has some flaws. The author states categorically that because of expense the lower classes 'drank no wine at all' (p. 8). Yet, many alehouse keepers (evolving later into publicans), who sold alcohol primarily to working- and middle-class customers, took out separate wine licences: some 11,000

were issued in 1800, with the figure doubling by 1840 and exceeding 25,000 by the early 1860s. Between one-third and two-fifths of publicans held wine licences.⁽⁴⁾ Surely, savvy alehouse keepers and publicans would not have obtained such licences unless assured of customer demand, much of which had to come from labourers and perhaps skilled artisans. In evidence presented to the Select Committee on Import Duties on Wine in 1852, a gin palace proprietor told of selling sherry and port to respectable artisans, while a wine house proprietor testified to catering to cabmen and omnibus men who drank sherry.⁽⁵⁾ To claim, therefore, that just the elite and middle classes consumed wine in taverns or inns is untrue.

Class segregation in drinking was not so neatly divided into three categories, as Ludington would have us believe. Throughout much of the 18th century, classes interacted together in taverns and alehouses. Peter Clark notes in his book, *The English Alehouse* ⁽⁶⁾, that when the demands of domesticity forced some to withdraw from public drinking, public houses began specializing in the early 1800s with separate rooms, a bar counter and beer engine. Instead of a tri-level hierarchy of Georgian inns, taverns and alehouses, now public houses gradually accommodated different classes in different rooms. One distinct step below pubs, beerhouses, created in 1830, catered primarily to the impoverished. Dram shops specializing in spirits and gin palaces also appeared in these years. Nor did everyone drink in public places. Despite these changes, Ludington writes as if his typology of drinking establishments and their clientele remained unchanged for two centuries.

Except in his discussion of sherry in the Victorian era, women are virtually ignored. Women were not so much absent as overlooked by Ludington. Women (not all of them from the lower classes) accompanied menfolk into pubs and gin shops in the early 1800s. Throughout the period wives assisted husbands in selling alcohol, and widows did run the family business with tacit magistrate approval. Did not elite women play a role as hostesses in promoting political alliances?

By far the most critical shortcoming is the lack of a conclusion, in which Ludington might have expanded on the historiography referred to in his introduction. At some point a theoretical discussion of consumption as a concept would have enabled the reader to grasp what made Ludington's book different. This oversight is compounded by Palgrave/Macmillan's house style of using endnotes without putting the relevant text pages at the top of the endnote page; reading his citations therefore becomes quite cumbersome.

Readers, too, would have been assisted considerably by the two tables in this review which I compiled myself.

Overall, this is an interesting, thought-provoking book, with a thesis that often goes beyond its quite thin evidence. Had Ludington left out the politics of his study, this would have left scope for pursuing the intriguing social and cultural dimensions of drinking. As it stands, *The Politics of Wine* overreaches in seeking to impose a political framework on social and cultural changes in drinking and new moral codes of behaviour. In the end, one is left pondering whether every change in drinking behaviour arose from politics.

Notes

1. David W. Gutzke, 'Tennent's Lager, national identity and football in Scotland, 1960s–90s', *Sport in History*, 32 (2012), 550–67; W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, NY, 1979), ch. 4.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Canon Ellacombe, 'The vineyards of Somerset and Gloucestershire', *Proceedings of the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club*, 3 (1890), 34–44; Edmund Venables, 'The Vineyards, Bath', *Notes and Queries*, 12 (1891), 10. Oglethorpe's passion for viticulture explained why Georgia settlers were initially instructed to grow grapes as one of the colony's staples.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, Peter Mancall's *Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America* (Ithaca, NY, 1995; paperback ed., 1997), pp. 75–9, 83.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. George B. Wilson, *Alcohol and the Nation* (London, 1940), table 25.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Asa Briggs, *Wine for Sale: Victoria Wine and the Liquor Trade, 1860–1984* (Chicago, IL, 1985), pp.

27, 29.[Back to \(5\)](#)

6. Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: a Social History, 1200-1830* (Harlow, 1983).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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