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BURGUNDY SCHOOL OF WINE & SPIRITS BUSINESS

The Economy of Wine in Age of Mistrust: The Butler and the Cellar in Victorian England

Graham Harding

Abstract

Though the butler and the cellar are familiar tropes in Victorian novels and short stories, they have been little studied by either social or wine historians. After William Gladstone reduced duties on light wine in 1860, consumption boomed among the British middle and upper classes. French commentators, however, warned of the lack of suitable domestic cellarage and expert cellarmen as a key impediment to market growth in Britain.

In the absence of a professional cellarman, the butler in well-to-do households had a central role in stocking and managing the cellar as well as his duties at table. Guides to cellar management proliferated with advice on storage, bottling and recuperating faulty wines. But butlers also partook in a 'system of plunder' from the cellars and the paper explores the incidence and consequences of this system of perquisites, commonplace infraction and outright criminality.

Key words: butler, cellar, wine, class, servant

INTRODUCTION

In 1860, when Gladstone lowered duties on wine, the French were initially surprised at just how little response there was from the British middle classes. They expected – according to the French trade journal, the *Moniteur Vinicole* – that their first shipments to England would be received with 'enchantment'. Was it poor quality of product or the difficulty of changing British habits, or, was it the simple lack of cellars in British houses. Without cellars, they reasoned, there would nowhere to store casks of wine, nowhere to bottle wine and no means of keeping the wine in good condition (*Moniteur Vinicole,* 16 September 1860, p. 75).

The *Moniteur* was over-pessimistic about sales. In the following fifteen years sales of French wine more or less trebled. But they were right about cellars and the broader issue of cellar management. The nineteenth-century cellar was a locus of unremitting effort, considerable concern, frequent distrust and constant criminality.

This paper focuses primarily on the domestic economy of wine in the British market and, in particular, the role of the butler who was responsible for the contents of the cellar as well as the management of social events in the household. The position of the butler, as defined by *Queen, the Ladies Newspaper* in 1887, was that of a senior 'confidential servant', second only to the steward if the household was grand enough for such a role (*Queen,* 22 October 1887, 526). But the theoretical status of 'confidential servant' did not always entail mutual trust between servant and employer. In a rather bitter article written for by a working butler a British magazine in 1892, the author, John Robinson, accepted that the typical male servant was lazy, ill-educated and frequently drunk. Little was demanded of him, little trust was reposed in him and the result was that 'he argues that he is not trusted, therefore there can be no breach of confidence in taking all he can get'.

1. THE LITERATURE OF THE CELLAR AND SERVANTS

The management of the cellar was arduous and time-consuming and demanded considerable knowledge on the part of the butler and the literature of the day on cellar management and butler's duties reflected this. Between 1830 and 1900 a series of books and manuals attempted to provide servants with guidance on wines and their treatment in sickness and in health – mostly sickness if these texts are taken to heart. The *Servant's Guide* (1831) had 20 pages on types of wine and their treatment; the *Practical Man, the Butler, the Wine-dealer and the Private brewer* (1851) had nearly fifty pages on cellars and wines (Anonymous 1831; A Practical Man 1851). As late as 1899, H.L. Feuerheerd's *Gentleman's Cellar and Butler's Guide* had 25 pages covering preparing, preserving, bottling and corking wines, showing that despite the growth in sales of wine in bottle after 1860, the role of the butler and cellarman was still important (Feuerheerd 1899).

Modern secondary literature on the subject is very limited. Most of the works on Victorian domestic service focus more on female than male servants (Todd 2009; Delap et al. 2009; Dussart 2005). Whilst the contemporary biographies edited by John Burnett are enlightening on the lives of both male and female servants, there is little on the cellar duties of the male servants (Burnett 1994). None of the work on wine in nineteenth-century Britain and little on prior periods deals extensively with what I term the 'domestic economy' of wine apart from Frances Dolan's valuable work on women and wine in the early modern period (Dolan 2018).

2. THE CELLAR IN THE BRITISH HOUSE

Although Feuerheerd's work suggests there was still a role for cellars around the turn of the century, these were decreasingly important to domestic life. Flats were displacing houses in central London and, as the wine trade journal, *Ridley's*, put it in 1899, the only space there for wine was the 'homely cupboard' (*Ridley's Wine and Spirit Trade Circular,* no. 623, 12 September 1899, p. 621). However, larger houses in suburban London and regional towns were provided with cellars and the demands of wine storage were an important factor for architects and builders. Robert Kerr's *English Gentleman's House* devoted several pages to the construction and fitting of the wine cellar with specifications on size, placement (towards the centre of house to get 'a moderate and equable temperature' and of easy access from the butler's pantry) and security (Kerr 1871, 243-4). The need for 'proof-locks' and the frequent cases involving purloined keys used to facilitate unauthorised access suggests not simply the Victorian fetish for domestic security but also the store of value represented by cellared wine. The 10' x 7' cellar recommended by Kerr for middle-class London homes could probably hold several thousand bottles (Kerr 1871, 395). That stock – at an average price of 20s per dozen – might have been worth upwards of £250; many times the yearly wage of even a well-remunerated butler who might make £70-100 per annum (Horne 1924, 272). The 12s a week paid to a young cellarman would buy only a dozen bottles of the cheapest claret in the 1860s (*Morning Advertiser,* 19 December 1854, p. 8). Wine was worth stealing and worth protecting.

That stock could come to the cellar direct from the grower, from the London Docks whose vaults acted as a form of wholesale warehouse or from a UK-based wine merchant. Grower-direct supply was rare, particularly post 1860 when prices fell, but in the late 1850s, the London Wine Company put out extensive advertisements to promote the fact that they were 'despatching a gentleman, of very great experience, to the Vineyards of Champagne, Burgundy and the Bordeaux districts, for the purpose of selecting pure wines at moderate prices'. There was a minimum order of a dozen cases at 'guaranteed' savings of 'at least 12s to 15s per dozen on the prices usually charged by retail merchants' (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 5 September 1857, p. 1). If the purchaser wanted a larger volume then they could get an 'order' to sample wine at the London Docks or go to London merchants such as Heneky and Abbott who advertised port in wooden casks of up to a hundred gallons or so with a supplementary bottling service by an 'experienced cellarman' for 3s 6d a gallon, bottles and corks included (*Portsmouth Times,* 21 December 1861, p. 1).

3. BUTLER AND CELLARMAN

In most houses the butler was the cellarman. *Queen* in its 1887 article focused on this element of the butler's role. Before addressing the butler's responsibilities at table and in managing other servants the newspaper set out the nature and extent of the cellar role:

> The real duties of the butler are of course, primarily connected with the cellars, the nature and quality of wines and spirits, and the management of the same. He should be fully competent, if called upon to do so, to advise his employer as to the price, quality, quantity and nature of any wine which it is advisable to lay in stock, and should understand the best modes of fining, bottling, corking, and sealing wines, before they go into the bins. (*Queen,* 27 October 1887, p. 526).

The subsequent comment that 'no matter how good it is to start with, or how excellently arranged the cellars may be, it will infallibly deteriorate instead of improving by keeping if it is not properly cared for' sums up the scale of the task.

In the 19th century, wine was inherently fragile. The French wine cellar master of the powerful retailer and caterers Spiers and Pond, L. P. Mouraille summed up the situation in his textbook on the *Practical guide for the treatment and management of wines in English cellars,* 'Wines are liable to contract a multitude of diseases from the day they leave the vat until the time of maturity*'* (Mouraille 1889, 79). To list these 'diseases' here would be superfluous; the issue was that many butlers simply did not have the skills to deal with them. In Cyrus Redding's harsh 1830 judgement: 'this menial [the butler] is often a footman, elevated to the position he holds from some idle predilection. Nine times out of ten, he knows no more than such a wine is placed in such a bin'. Redding continued with what was to become a common trope in the second half of the century: 'He is frequently better versed in the art of accepting a ten or twenty pound note from the merchant who supplies his master's cellar' (Redding 1839, 8-9).

4. THE 'SYSTEM OF PLUNDER'

Newspapers and journals suggested there was a 'widespread system of plunder' aimed at the wealthy. The 1823 *Footman's Directory* written under the name of Onesimus (the wicked servant whose story is told in St Paul's gospel), reckoned that 'many servants being dishonest themselves, will, when they first go to a place, endeavour to get all the old tradespeople changed, that they may be enabled to carry on with their theft and wickedness without being discovered' (Onesimus 1998, 189). In the estimate of the *London Review* in 1864 (who detailed the 'system')

at least 75 per cent of tradesmen were involved in giving kickbacks to senior servants. In the trial of the Duke of Cavendish's butler in 1854, the sums dishonestly received by the butler from his chosen wine merchant allegedly totalled nearly £700 on a wine bill of £1500 a year ran into hundreds of pounds (*London Review,* 13 February 1864, 163-4). Even if the butler were honest there many other 'perquisites' in the 19th century wine economy – ranging from those accepted as licit to the outright criminal.

The sometimes fraught encounters between master and man were the subject of repeated cartoons in the British humorous magazine, *Punch.* Between 1850 and 1914 at least 18 cartoons show butlers and masters at odds over wine. Such infractions could be serious. In a 1911 cartoon, the master has returned home unexpectedly to find the butler 'entertaining guests'. An empty bottle of champagne is on the mantelpiece and the guests are enjoying the household's port and cigars (*Punch,* 8 November 1911, p. 343). In many cases, the consequence (or cause) is a drunken butler; perhaps he has simply been at the champagne (*Punch,* 13 January 1872, p. 21) or 'putting away the port' (*Punch,* 10 May 1899, p. 222). In another case, he has obeyed the instruction to taste the wines before serving all too literally (*Punch,* 18 March 1903, p. 189). Or, annoying, but barely criminal he has simply 'reserved the best' for the servants' hall (*Punch,* 21 July 1860, p. 21).

It was generally accepted that the remains of unfinished bottles could and should go the servants for their own supper. Not for nothing was the butler in Robert Surtees' novel *Ask Mamma* known named as 'Mr Bottleends' (Surtees and Leech 1858, ch LVI). It was generally accepted that butlers sold on both corks and empty bottles. Standard corks fetched 1d each (*Shields Daily Gazette,* 5 May 1880, p. 2); champagne corks – particularly those of prestigious brands – fetched more as they were 'wanted for the purpose of giving British gooseberry or American petroleum the character of genuine champagne. What better guarantee can the epicure desire than the brand of Giesler or Irroy upon the cork ostentatiously drawn in his presence? Its sight is enough to disarm suspicion' (*Newcastle Courant,* 30 April 1880, p. 6). The price for corks branded with the names of the most famous brands – such as Pommery – could reach 30s a dozen (*Dundee Evening Telegraph,* 1 July 1882, p. 11). Empty bottles were also seen as fair game: "I always consider and shall always consider, empty bottles as my perquisite, and I sells them as such" was the comment of one butler (*The Times,* 17 December 1852, p. 7). However, bottles were less valuable than corks because they were unbranded and their second-hand value diminished after 1850. By the end of the century the going rate was only 6d per dozen. (*Cheltenham Mercury,* 7 May 1880, p. 2). Such perks were accepted; in other cases it was

suggested that a ‘gentleman’ ‘unable to pay his butler his arrears of wages, [might] connive at him pillaging the wine cellar’ (*The Times*, 16 September 1869, p. 7). However, outright theft there certainly was – with scores of cases in the newspapers between 1850 and 1900.

There were many opportunities for ‘peculations’ (as the *London Review* called them). The journal pointed to the abstraction of bottles from the cellar for personal use and the consequences of this practice. Citing the evidence of both Dr Druitt (the medical officer for the London district of Mayfair) and the ‘statistics of the Westminster hospitals’, they claimed that ‘almost to a man, their constitutions are rotten and worthless from the constant habit of tippling’. Eric Horne’s late nineteenth-century autobiography recounts the butler’s ‘delight in besting a mistrustful Bos’ (sic). Even if the butler did not have the keys to unlock the cellar it was no trouble for him to fetch the required bottle(s) – plus another secreted in his coat pocket for his own use (Horne 1924, 7). In general, however, the butler was trusted to hold the cellar keys (and the keys to the safe for household silver plate). With the keys and manipulation of the cellar book much could be dishonestly achieved. The impression given by books and newspapers was that the servant class were partial to the contents of the cellar. Horne claimed the first question when servants met was “Going to have a tonic?” (Horne 1924, 95). Some butlers were willing to provide wine for servants and their ‘followers’; others simply mislaid the keys or failed to lock the cellar door.

It was not only the butler who enjoyed – or purloined – wine. In 1876, a cook treated her male ‘follower’ to champagne having taken the key from her master’s bedroom. It ‘fizzed up like lemonade’, she reported, and ‘tasted something like the same’ (*Dundee Courier*, 18 May 1876, p. 4). In a rather more serious case, the cellar door was chiselled open and some £40 of wine was stolen after a dinner hosted by a ‘servant girl’ for her friends with magnums of champagne (*Hull Packet,* 4 July 1874, p. 3). Though it is hard to be certain about how common such thefts were, they made for newsworthy cases and would have fostered the Victorian climate of suspicion over the conduct of servants – and the Victorian mania for locks and domestic security (see Smith 2012, 264). However, as the Victorian safe-maker, George Chubb noted in his book *Protection from fire and thieves,* gentlemen must be careful have trustworthy servants or all other precautions are unavailing’ (Chubb 1875, 16).

Here was the problem for the Victorian householder. Servants – at a certain level of income – were essential to the management of the household. Even before legal restrictions on servants moving between households were eased in the 1870s, there were thousands of agencies that facilitated moves (Todd 2009, 196). As household wealth increased in the second half of the

century, the newly prosperous middle class sought domestic support. Much of this support was female; women outnumbered men in indoor service by between 20:1 and 30:1 by the end of the century (Dussart 2005, 41-2). Indoor male servants were hard to find and employers – despite reservations about conduct – seem to have been willing to accept the (relatively) minor peculations depicted in the *Punch* cartoons.

CONCLUSION

In the Victorian age, wine was so fragile that it required the attention of servants and other service providers to prepare and bottle, to store and maintain in acceptable condition and then to serve at table. Shop-bought bottled wine only finally replaced home-bottling in the twentieth century. Particularly in bottled form, wine represented an easily portable store of significant value that could easily be re-sold. It was also subject to fraud. Only after 1900, did complaints of fraudulent champagne bearing counterfeit labels and recycled corks fade away. Until that time branded champagne corks held a significant value to those such as butlers and club waiters who could easily collect and re-sell them. Increasingly waiters were forced to account for corks; butlers rarely faced such constraints.

Modern technology has removed the need for services that the nineteenth-century butler performed. The dramatic post-World War One decline in servant numbers has impelled the vast majority of consumers to rely on their own judgements. But intermediaries – be they sommeliers, retail counter staff, wine journalists – still play a major role in the choice and purchase of wines. In our present analysis of the wine business we would do well to consider the continuing role of these intimate intermediaries as well as that of the restaurants they serve, the shops for whom they work or the media outlets they supply.

Perhaps of more significance in the longer term was the impact on the development of wine branding. Although the British wine trade resisted the switch in emphasis to producer-branded wine, consumers' unwillingness to fully trust intermediaries such as merchants (and butlers) meant that bottled products whose quality was guaranteed by producer branding of corks and, to a lesser extent, labels became more and more important. One might argue that brands disintermediated butlers.

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