

# THE WINE PRESS

SOME VINTAGE SPECIMENS AND NEWER BREEDS OF AUSTRALIAN WINE-  
WRITING ARE SAMPLED HERE BY HISTORIAN DAVID DUNSTAN

THESE days we are familiar with pundits in the press and other media who specialise in gardening, sports, cookery, crafts and hobbies, real estate, rock music, fashion and finance. And a wine column is now *de rigueur* in most Australian newspapers and magazines for general circulation. But writing about wine has a long history in this country—longer, perhaps, than is the case with most of those other subjects.

European settlers from early on recognised Australia's range of Mediterranean climates and our potential to become, as one scribe put it in a title of 1886, *John Bull's Vineyard*. A literature of wine was created in the nineteenth century with primers and memoirs, advertising puffery and journalism—practitioners of the fourth estate have always found the path to the winery door easier to locate than most. Makers and critics communicated and quarrelled in trade journals. Local and international exhibitions made news for the industry with various awards, as they do today. Foreign visitors were drawn to Australian wine as a curiosity and source of hospitality. Swiss, French, German, Hungarian and Italian immigrants who engaged in the industry sent reports back to Europe. There were some vivid descriptions of the wines of the period, including this one of a St Hubert's

'Syra de l'Hermitage', a shiraz from the Yarra Valley, shown at the Paris Exhibition of 1878:

This wine had an open letter of recommendation in its bouquet, which would not have done discredit to a Chateau Margaux. In colour it was pure ruby, the exact hue of the blood of a freshly killed pigeon, and its taste completed its trinity of perfection. Resembling a Burgundy in fullness, it had none of the sub- and after-taste one finds in low-priced French wines.

Much early Australian writing about wine was a record of experimentation and a promise of a glorious future. Table wine in particular was highly commended for its supposed potential to turn the population away from more injurious alcoholic beverages, such as poorly made beers and spirits. Joseph Bleasdale, Doctor of Divinity and Catholic polymath, was among several commentators on the subject who believed growing and drinking wine to be 'the one efficient cure for spirit drinking and drunkenness'.

The wine industry grew rapidly in the nineteenth century but by the early decades of the twentieth century financial misadventure, vine diseases and natural hazards, combined with a general economic downturn and prohibitionist sentiment, saw it almost obliterated in Victoria, and severely curtailed elsewhere. Australians did not become a nation of table-wine drinkers, as early seers had hoped. In the first half of the twentieth century they exhibited a preference for fortified wines, beers and spirits. Although the industry limped along on exports, particularly to the United Kingdom, by the 1960s this overseas market was almost dead and Australia had become a byword for everything execrable in wine.

Wine survived in parts of South Australia and in pockets elsewhere, such as the Hunter Valley in New South Wales. The local scene started to expand again with new waves of migration from Europe after 1945 and an increasingly consumer-oriented society from the 1950s. Wine-drinking has now become a pervasive part of the national culture, to the extent that Australia's per capita wine consumption, at around 20 litres per annum, is higher than that of any other English-speaking country. A range of factors is responsible but wine chatter in published form has played a part.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, after years of war and depression, rural Australia was inviting territory for feature writers, such as the Melbourne-based journalist John Hetherington, and their audiences. These writers published occasional articles

about wine-growing localities such as the Barossa Valley, which were also being touted as tourist destinations. The human figures in these landscapes—the gnarled individuals at the cellar door who worked with dignity and often in conditions of hardship and isolation—provided attractive subjects for anyone who could hold a pen or push the keys of a typewriter. The poet Judith Wright, in her evocative book *The Generations of Men* (1959), traced the history of her wine-producing forebears, the Wyndham family of Dalwood in the Hunter Valley. Fellow poet John Thompson, drawing on oral history, included a moving and sensitive portrait of the legendary Hunter winemaker Maurice O'Shea in his *On Lips of Living Men* (1962). Colin Thiele's novel *Labourers in the Vineyard* (1970) centred on the Barossa Valley and its wine-making inhabitants of German descent.

The wine industry was still marginal to Australia's economy in the Menzies era but it possessed a growing mystique. Small producers had a vested interest in feeding this mystique, especially when it resulted in cellar-door sales. In those far-off days industry captains would meet over long lunches to fix prices and agree to deny vital supplies to rebel retailers. (This was long before Bob Hawke and the ACTU's retail-price-maintenance-busting crusade of 1974, let alone Professor Fels and the ACCC.) Selling direct was one way for wineries to reap a return that otherwise would go to a wholesaler or retailer—a situation that remains much the same today. Being 'in the know' was a distinct help in finding sources of good, cheap and rare wines. Small but closely knit circles of connoisseurs banded together to talk among themselves, make contacts and learn more in an environment where in the fifties and sixties prohibitionist influences still restricted the sale and distribution of wine.

An Australian branch of the Wine and Food Society had been founded in 1936. Some of those involved, such as the Sydney restaurateur J.K. 'Johnnie' Walker, had direct connections with the industry, but many others were city professionals: doctors, teachers, academics, lawyers and other individuals of means. The Wine and Food Society published its occasional lectures and later helped support a magazine, the *Epicurean*.

The Wine Society, founded in 1946 by the surgeon Gilbert Phillips, was another direct-buying, member-run organisation. Many wine merchants also purchased direct. They had their 'buyers' own brands' and wine clubs, such as Dan Murphy's Vintage Club based in Melbourne. No suburb or country town was without its Beefsteak and Burgundy club. Newsletters and writers proliferated and a growing audience for information about wine crept up almost overnight.



WALTER  
JAMES  
(c. 1981)

Melbourne was the largest market for quality wine—supplied mainly by South Australia—and the *Melbourne Age* was among the first of the metropolitan dailies to run a weekly wine column. Its first columnist was Walter James, who died in 1991, aged 86. He started writing the column in 1952—to be succeeded by Dan Murphy a few years later.

James's father, Sir Walter James KC, had risen from comparatively humble origins to become a leading Perth lawyer, a Federationist, premier of Western Australia and, in his later years, chancellor of the University of Western Australia. Young Walter, as he recounts in his early autobiographical work *Barrel and Book* (1949), was a 'well off' but rather lost and not too healthy youth who allowed himself 'to be sent, for lack of better, into a newspaper office where Familiarity gave birth in due season'. Travelling to London as a young man in the 1930s, he immersed himself in the theatre and orchestras of the capital and discovered Chateau Margaux at 7/6d a bottle and 'superb vintage ports'. In 1931, during the middle of a world depression, he enjoyed six weeks in Italy with 'everything laid on'.

Offered only a mundane form of service—as a censor—in Australia's time of peril in the Pacific War, James later found a sinecure with 'the wireless service'

that would have led to a career with the ABC. But he abandoned this, taking to the hills some ninety kilometres north of Perth, where he set up as a vigneron. He did not make much money from this (what winemaker of the period did?) but he claims not to have lost any either. A steady demand for the sweet fortified wine known as muscat kept him going, while Italian migrants purchased his prized table wine. His winemaking idyll came to an abrupt end in 1948 when he was burnt out by a bushfire. James then moved to Melbourne—but again, outside the city, on top of Oliver's Hill, overlooking Port Phillip Bay, near Frankston (a property that he later sold to television personality Graham Kennedy). Here he led a relaxed and literary life, writing and reading and travelling up to Melbourne for lunch at 'old Poppa' Triaca's Latin Restaurant where a good meal could be had with the bohemian crowd for 3/6d, plus a bottle of wine costing two shillings, and where the talk was free.

*Barrel and Book* was the first of five slender volumes that reveal his consciously crafted and literary style at its best. The others are *Nuts on Wine* (1950 and revised 1952), *The Gadding Vine* (1955), *Antipasto* (1957) and *Ants in the Honey* (1972). James claimed to have been drawn to a mannered, epigrammatic style by the English theatre critic James Agate, although he insisted that he never tried consciously to copy anyone. He was naturally withdrawn, leisured and literary—he confessed he read upwards of eight hours a day, mainly English literature of the eighteenth century and earlier. His wine-writing reveals a sensibility, and perhaps a talent, comparable to Martin Boyd's.

In 1952, the year he started writing for the *Age*, he published his famous primer, *Wine in Australia*. Until that time there had been no popular reference book dealing with Australian wines. 'Beerolatry', as James called it, still ruled the land. Yet, reflecting (and perhaps influencing) the subsequent divergence from this trend, James's primer was to remain in print for more than thirty years. Even the main wine firms of the 1950s, Penfolds and Seppelt, had tended to treat James and his efforts with 'indifference', as he recalled when speaking to me in 1981:

They were very snooty. They didn't realise that there was a wine literature in Europe and that there was bound to be one here. Then when the book came out they found themselves cut down to size. Seppelt and Penfolds were not producing good wine in those days.

IN 1959 the London publisher Phoenix House brought out James's *A Word Book of Wine*. Although cast in the same format as *Wine in Australia*, with entries

arranged under alphabetical headings, this book was aimed at an international market. It drew on additional travels in Europe and reflected James's command of the wine scene overall. Melbourne artist Harold Freedman's illustrations were of that most traditional of Victorian wineries, Chateau Tahbilk, but English readers would never have guessed it.

James gave the impression in some of his writings of being hardly interested in wine at all, more in anecdotes or manners; yet there is also a practical and educational strand in his work. He was probably the first author to make any sort of living from writing about wine in Australia and he demonstrated that the personal element could be part of the subject. He did not at first spawn any imitators.

In 1960, W.S. ('Sam') Benwell's delightful *Journey to Wine in Victoria* heralded the emergence of wine tourism and at the same time constituted a lament for the industry as it had existed in country Victoria. Benwell was a medico in general practice and a regular of Jimmy Watson's wine bar in Lygon Street, Carlton. The amateur historian Enid Heddle published her *Story of a Vineyard: Chateau Tahbilk* with Hawthorn Press in the same year, again with illustrations by Harold Freedman. Useful in many respects, her work reflected an existing tradition of vanity publishing, of which *The House of Seppelt* (1951), *The Hardy Tradition* (1953) and *The Stonyfell Vineyards* (1958) and even my own *Morris of Rutherglen* (1989) are examples. Such books chart the reigns of successive patriarchs in mainly family-based concerns that are now virtually extinct owing to corporate takeovers and the like.

Although they are fearsome gluttons for publicity, the new commercial wineries have done little to encourage scholarly or analytical scrutiny of their efforts. (There have been exceptions, Penfolds, even though submerged in a larger commercial entity, Southcorp, did pay homage to its great winemaker, and father of Grange Hermitage, with a commissioned and capably researched biography, *Max Schubert, Winemaker*, by the Sydney-based wine journalist Huon Hooke.)

Perhaps the first attempt at a comprehensive study of the industry was *The Wine Industry of Australia* (1949), written by the Australian Wine Board's representative in London, H.E. Laffer. James Halliday's *History of the Australian Wine Industry 1949–1994* (1994) brings this story closer to the present in chronicle format. John Beeston's *Concise History of Australian Wine* (1994 and 2001) is so far the only one-volume general history, though various amateur or professional historians and economic analysts have produced regionally based histories of the wine business.

Wine-writing that sells to a wide popular market began in earnest in the 1960s, in parallel with the boom in the industry. In 1964 the multi-talented Sydney surgeon, winemaker and writer Max Lake published a slender homage to the wines of his chosen district, *Hunter Wine*, and in the same year André Simon, the grand old man of the International Wine and Food Society and indefatigable author of wine books, toured the Australian vineyards. He gave his blessing to a re-emergent industry with *The Wines, Vineyards and Vignerons of Australia*, published in 1966.

That year was an outstanding one for Australian red wines and for Australian wine books as well. Among the most notable of these books was Lake's *Classic Wines of Australia*. With its confident assertions about the quality and regional integrity of Australian wine styles, it announced that an articulate and self-confident connoisseur market in Australian wine had arrived. Another book of that year was Dan Murphy's *Australian Wine Guide*, which was published by Sun Books in a highly respectable print run of 10,000 copies. Len Evans' *Cellarmaster Says*, which drew on his columns for the *Bulletin*, ran to 10,000 hardback copies in two print runs and a follow-up *Cellarmaster's Guide* appeared in a print run of 7500 in 1968.

In 1967 Jacaranda Press brought out Max Lake's slender study of winemaking doctors, *Vine and Scalpel*, in a limited edition of 500 copies on handmade paper—a surprisingly uncommercial response to his popular success of the year before. The same publisher adopted a more conventional book-trade format for Lake's *Hunter Winemakers: Their Canvas and Art* (1970).

As individual styles of quality wine began to be better defined and appreciated, shortages occurred, particularly of reds, and their prices went up. Many old-timers took the opportunity to sell out. Big companies were moving in and taking over. The picturesque and intimate character of the industry started to disappear as concrete and glass, rubber, chemical and even soap companies bought up several of the wineries, mainly because their senior executives had been bitten by the bug. Max Lake would half-jokingly regret having written *Classic Wines of Australia*. Soon after it was published he found he could no longer buy the elite wines he had written about so eloquently, they were in such demand. In the last half of the 1960s red wine sales increased 150 per cent. With new plantings and 'improved' techniques of production, red wine quality deteriorated markedly in the 1970s. No matter, the public shifted its interest to white wines, and another boom was on.

Dan Murphy's *Australian Wine Guide* was reprinted twice in 1968 (20,000 copies in all) and in 1970 was republished in a new edition as *Australian Wine*:

*The Complete Guide*. It sold 50,000 copies in twelve months. His publisher Brian Stonier, himself later a vigneron, urged him to update and republish but, with his own wine business taking off, he never had the time. But he continued his wine column for the *Age* until 1979. Another of his publications, *Dan Murphy's Classification of Australian Wines*, brought out by Sun Books in 1974, sought to apply the French ranking mentality to the now highly fluid Australian scene. An ambitious print run of 5000 hardback and 50,000 paperback copies produced sales of only 25,000, with Dan giving the rest away to his customers. A *Guide to Wine Tasting* (1977) had a print run of 10,000 but sold only 2500. In all, Murphy estimated that he made about \$20,000 out of wine books in twenty years—not a great amount. Clearly, there were ancillary benefits to his business as a wine merchant, with the books keeping his name before the public as an expert and arbiter of taste. 'I would have loved to have done it just for the fun of it,' he recalled, 'but you've got to run a business.' He did—virtually right up until his death in his eighties.

In 1973 Paul Hamlyn published, under Len Evans' name, *The Australian Complete Book of Wine*. This included sections dealing with the history of wine in this country, the vineyards and vignerons, grape varieties, wine styles, serving and storage, soils and climate and winemaking. It was a blockbuster—in a large A4 format hardback, with plenty of colour illustrations and in excess of 500 pages. It went through four editions and six printings (two each in 1973 and 1976) and sold more than 170,000 copies. The final edition, published in 1984, was of an even more lavish version of nearly 800 pages. Welsh-born but long settled in Australia, Evans was well placed to coordinate such a work. He was the industry's brilliant and ebullient public face, a prominent bon vivant who had worked his way up from the position of liquor manager at the Sydney Chevron Hotel to running the industry's first public relations effort, the Australian Wine Bureau in the 1960s. He moved on in the 1970s to become a wine show judge, winery and vineyard entrepreneur, restaurateur and back-page columnist for the *Australian*.

By this time wine-writing had changed, moving away from the literary and the whimsical and the broadly educative towards an emphasis on hard information and interpretation involving an encyclopedic knowledge of geographic regions and their style. There was an attempt to recapture the spirit of Walter James's early work in Anders Ousback's compilation *The Australian Wine Browser* (1979) but wine-writing was fast becoming a serious business dominated by serious professionals. With the rapid growth of new wine-growing regions and wineries, keeping track of the changes was proving increasingly difficult for the



expert, and almost impossible for the average consumer. No place for dilettantes any more. Two national wine magazines came into being: the now defunct Sydney-based *Wine and Spirit Buying Guide* and the Adelaide-based *Winestate*. But every trend produces a counter-thrust and the 1980s also saw the emergence of a new larrikin style of writing expressed in the 'noble rot' columns of the former industry rep, Mark Shield, in the Melbourne Age and later the irreverent columns of Philip White in Adelaide.

Even in the GST age, wine-book publishing remains a lucrative business, though writers wanting to keep their books in print have to rewrite them virtually every year, updating them like stock market reports, which some of them resemble. Successful books tend to fall into two categories. First, there are the larger-format publications, with good design, art paper and colour plates: visually striking books suited to the Christmas market. Reflecting the 1990s boom in Australian wine exports, several of these works have been written by non-Australians, such as the American world guru of wine, Robert Parker, and illustrious UK-based writers Oz Clarke, Michael Joseph and Jancis Robinson, who make regular visits here. The second category of wine book is the guide that offers citations and recommendations in a quick and easy format. Examples include the *Penguin Guide to Australian Wine* and Robin Bradley's *Australian and New Zealand Wine Vintages*. Given the nature of such books, they have to be updated every year. Bradley's pocket-format book started as a self-publishing venture titled *What is that Wine Worth?* and is now in its sixteenth edition and has sold an astonishing 600,000 copies. No self-respecting wine auctioneer dare set a reserve price without consulting it.

Australia's most esteemed and prolific wine-writer today is probably James Halliday. An energetic and capable corporate lawyer turned vigneron, Halliday writes virtually full-time now on the subject of wine. A contributor to *Epicurean* as far back as the 1970s, he published his first book in 1979—on the Hunter Valley. He signed up with Angus & Robertson in 1984, and remained an author with HarperCollins following the takeover. His best-selling *Wine Atlas of Australia and New Zealand* was last released in a print run of 30,000 copies, complete with CD-ROM. Typical print runs of his smaller books have extended to at least 15,000 copies.

Halliday's recommendations, along with those of other major wine-writers, especially in the metropolitan dailies, are capable of moving whole pallets of wine off warehouse floors with astonishing speed. Halliday's writings can also be found in the web-based newsletter and wine club *Winepros*. Halliday believes that the

level of reader interest in wine has increased significantly in recent years, though in a letter he wrote to me in 1998 he conceded that 'cookbooks, flesh, the occasional autobiography and Stephen King still reign supreme'.

As wine-writers proliferate, they cultivate a variety of audiences and personas. More often than not the wine-writer today is a person of measured habits, a taker of AFDs (alcohol-free days) and possessed of a solid work ethic. Anything else can be a health hazard. Some old types do remain, such as the elder statesman of the industry with a string of indulgent consultancies, or the syndicated wine-writer in local newspapers whose short articles bear a great similarity to industry press releases. One journalist at a recent meeting of the Melbourne Wine Press Club expressed a concern that some wine scribes were little more than hired hands for the industry. Jeni Port, a long-time writer for the *Melbourne Age*, made the point that, ideally, wine-writers should not be 'of the industry' at all. Port herself and Huon Hooke of the *Sydney Morning Herald* are writers who maintain an independent stance, but bias or partisanship can emanate from so many quarters, especially in an industry so regionally based, complex and competitive, that it is difficult to see how any sage or critic could be truly independent.

More recently we have seen a new breed of trained expert, whose knowledge is the product of hothouse training in wine appreciation by one of the new wine courses being offered at Australia's tertiary institutions. Then there's the Master of Wine (MW), whose acronym is gained at examination only after years of study and an examination involving rigorous tasting of the wines of the world. Once only a UK phenomenon, MWs are now active in Australia. Such experts can spot sulphide faults in viognier at fifty paces. Tasting, tasting and more tasting seems to be the inevitable benchmark activity of wine scribes now, regardless of their literary calibre or aspirations. There have been television and radio efforts in wine punditry but these offerings may never supplant the printed word completely. And so, out they come each year: the books, the newsletters, the pocket guides, the annual rankings presented in no-nonsense, easy-to-assess formats, the glossy new atlases, the websites. Where will it end? Perhaps the healthiest offering can be found at <http://www.spittoon.com.au>—spittoon 'because sometimes it's hard to swallow'. The website is presided over by an elder statesman of the wine industry, one Oberon Kant, OAM, BSE, who bears just a faint resemblance to Len Evans.