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With Sam Benwell and the House of Lords Journeying to Wine in Victoria

David Dunstan

Wine is a good beverage at any time. But wine is always best when it is drunk near its own soil. Wines are places. Which is why it is a good and profitable thing to set off in search of the wine belts with nose in air and palate clean instead of simply telephoning your wine merchant and placing another order.

(W S 'Sam' Benwell, *Journey to Wine in Victoria*, 1960)

In 1960 the Melbourne-based subsidiary of the British publishing house Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons published W S 'Sam' Benwell's *Journey to Wine in Victoria*. This rambling travelogue account of the wine industry in Victoria covered aspects of its history and setting in the Victorian countryside.¹ It was a well-written, neat and slender little book by a local writer, and the text was laced with good humour and affectionate portraits of places and people. It was a guide with understated literary pretensions, and it dealt, as one might expect, with the styles of wine produced by the various wineries and the burning consumer issues of the day, like whether there could be any difference between a claret and a burgundy when both wines were made from the same Shiraz variety.² *Journey to Wine in Victoria* was well reviewed, and between 1960 and 1978 it ran to three editions.³ It was a modest publishing success. It might have achieved greater sales had its scope been wider. A wider canvas might have included other well-known wine regions, such as the Southern Vales and Barossa Valley regions of South Australia or the Hunter Valley district of New South Wales. But if its scope had been wider it would not have illuminated the Victorian scene as well as it did.

Benwell's useful and engaging little book is interesting from another perspective. It is a literary record of a self-conscious 'wine pilgrim'⁴ whose documentation of his journeying influenced others. But, as reviewer Alan Bell observed, the book was somewhat out of place in Australia as its author lacked the rich subject matter he would have found in Europe. In marked contrast to 'the happy valleys of the continent, where every undulation proffers its different vinous source' the reader 'cannot forget his vital handicap — that he has been deprived of his raw material'. It was a regrettable fact that Victoria in 1960 just did not have all that many vineyards and wineries to visit. Further, the situation had got worse rather than better over the years. Bell observed that 'a pilgrimage to Victoria's vineyards last century would have enforced a book of 400 or 500 pages, not just 111 pages'.

Three malt bred generations ... have reduced Victoria's wine districts, once abloom with promise, to a few last anxiously defended 'wine stockades.'⁵

Vine plantings in Victoria had boomed in the 1860s, and again in the 1880s and 1890s. By the turn of the century it had the largest extent of land under vine of any of the Australasian colonies. But within two decades its industry had all but

collapsed, and South Australia consolidated its position as the leading wine-producing State of the Commonwealth. The vine louse Grape Phylloxera — ‘the vigneron’s Black Death’⁶ — is often blamed for wine’s demise in Victoria. This was the same blight that devastated the great vineyards of Europe in the nineteenth century. While it was undoubtedly a factor, ill-advised attempts to boost the industry and the boom-and-bust cycle of the Victorian economy were also responsible.⁷ War, economic depression and the better returns offered on labour by dairy cattle and wool in the twentieth century contributed to the demise of many vineyards. By 1960, when Sam Benwell published his necessarily slender little book, only a handful of stalwart producers remained scattered across the State.

Nevertheless, there was a Victorian wine industry about which it was possible to be a chauvinist, in the same way that like-minded Sydney-based enthusiasts celebrated the vineyards and wines of the Hunter Valley.⁸ Melbourne had its own back garden of vines, as did Sydney and Adelaide, and it was the leading Australian market for table wine. But by the middle decades of the twentieth century Victoria was supplied mainly by South Australian vineyard and winery concerns, and Victorians had little awareness of having a wine industry of their own. In 1960, the Australian wine industry was still economically marginal and restricted by trade practices, but it was possessed of a growing mystique and poised for development.⁹ Small producers had a vested interest in feeding this mystique, especially if sales resulted. Many of them were mixed farmers, too, for whom wine was not always a primary activity. In the days when large commercial companies limited supplies to retail outlets and prices were fixed by executives over long lunches, small wineries could find customers and reap a ready return by selling from the cellar door. And so, visitors were welcome. Winemakers were happy to talk about their wares and to become the travelling public’s informal educators.

Touring the wineries was a means of acquiring both the product and knowledge of it. The industry’s setting was attractive also. After years of war and depression, rural and provincial Australia was picturesque, having acquired the patina of decay. Still extant but seemingly ancient (by Anglo-Australian standards) vineyards and wineries existed in attractive regions like the Barossa Valley and North-Eastern Victoria. Defunct wineries could be visited, ruins clambered over and delights obtained while staying in local hotels.¹⁰ The magazine *Walkabout*, published by the Australian National Travel Association, touted places where vines were grown and wine was made as tourism destinations. It helped, too, if there were distinctive social customs, such as in the Barossa Valley, where settlers from Silesia in the nineteenth century had left that district its Barossa Deutsch.¹¹ No special attraction was required beyond a counter or makeshift table at the cellar door and the ready presence of family and friends to greet the visitor. Rustic individuals, many of whom had worked, often in conditions of hardship and isolation, with dignity in family-based concerns for decades, were now happy to offer up their stories and treasures to the new breed of visitors and to present to the camera.

When Melbourne medico Sam Benwell took to his typewriter, the favoured Australian drink was not wine but beer. This was in the 1950s. The infamous ‘six o’clock swill’ that accompanied the early closing of hotels was the repulsive daily

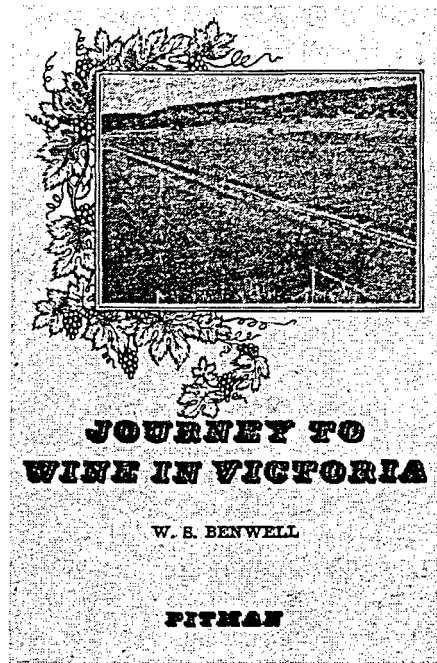


Figure 1: Journey to Wine in Victoria.

expression of the stalemate of liquor and temperance interests. Hotels, too, were mainly 'tied houses' and sold mostly those products favoured by large brewery interests, many of which were hostile to the sale and consumption of table wine. An anti-drink lobby remained politically powerful. While it never realised its goal of total prohibition of the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages, it promoted restrictive legislation. This, together with an unsympathetic beer and spirits industry, inhibited the development of the public's understanding of the marriage of wine and food, which is today so much part of the Australian leisure experience.¹² By 1960 Victorian wine was still a comparatively little-known commodity, in need of celebration and renewed custom. But maybe it was not too difficult for a perceptive observer of Australian society's growing affluence to see that wine was the coming thing. Benwell may have had other motives as well. Perhaps he considered his community to be lacking a sympathetic tourist culture of a type that could be readily found in Europe, and in need of a bit of creative relaxation. With emerging flexible leisure regimes, increased ownership of automobiles and hinterland tourist delights now more accessible, people could be encouraged to visit the vineyards.

Journey to Wine in Victoria was read by a generation of Australians who were beginning to discover the delights of affluence after years of depression, war and post-war austerity. This new affluence involved 'good living', which, as one connoisseur of the period defined it, included an appreciation of wine and food.¹³ There had been a consciousness of wine and food in elite and enthusiast circles before this point, but it now began to spread. An Australian branch of the International Wine and Food Society had been founded as early as 1936. The

society published its occasional lectures and later helped support a magazine, *Epicurean*. The Wine Society founded in 1946 by the surgeon Gilbert Phillips was a direct-buying, member-run organisation, which still survives.¹⁴ Quality wine merchants purchased direct from vineyards and had 'buyers' own brands' as well as the established wines of the big South Australian companies. Their trade increased, and the Vintage Club promoted by the merchant and author Dan Murphy was an organisation said to rival the National Trust in membership.¹⁵ An enthusiasm for wine was a badge of sophistication and a basis for conviviality. By the end of the 1960s it seemed that no Melbourne suburb or Victorian country town was without its Beefsteak and Burgundy club. An audience hungry for information crept up overnight. Wine consumption increased dramatically, resulting in shortages of wine, quality red wine in particular.¹⁶

Neither Benwell nor his *Journey* can be held solely responsible for the very great changes that occurred in the social and culinary habits of Australians at this time. But he was among the advance guard of writers and enthusiasts who promoted an emerging interest not just in wine but also in a wider context of food, drink and lifestyle. This is seen in his invitation to the reader to travel and visit the places where wine is made. He was a pioneer promoter — in the modern period, especially — of what we now call wine or culinary tourism, and which is now so extensively promoted by the wine industry and government agencies, and studied in university marketing and tourism programs.¹⁷

Visits to vineyards and wineries have long been a part of tourism, probably since ancient times, and certainly from the days of the Grand Tour in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the sons of English noblemen were sent abroad on the continent to gain both wisdom and life experiences. Journeying across Europe to those seats of classical learning and piles of antiquity that were Greece and Rome, they could not fail to encounter Mediterranean agriculture, vineyards and wine.¹⁸ As far back as the 1840s in Australia, vineyards were places to visit at vintage time for the purpose of enjoying the fresh fruit; wine festivals, which were often held at vintage time, remain a legacy of this custom and a continuing factor in wine tourism.¹⁹ Wine trails and vineyard visitations were a part of German tourism, too, as far back as the 1920s.²⁰

Wine tourism is still an emerging phenomenon both in terms of its commercial contribution and as an expression of the social pathology of tourists. These days it is cultivated by elaborate marketing and promotional strategies and catered for in the budgets of large and small wine-producing enterprises. In this context, *Journey to Wine in Victoria* is a social document. It is illustrative of the world that existed before the great Australian enthusiasm for wine 'took off' in the mid-1960s. This 'wine boom' was assisted by the promotional efforts and the publication of guides and studies by authors and experts such as Max Lake, Dan Murphy and Len Evans, whose works preceded the extensive range of publications that include the wine books, the guides and magazines of today, including some that explicitly link culinary delights and travel, such as *Gourmet Traveller*. Unlike Benwell, these scribes took a national focus, and their larger, more ambitious books, which supplanted his, were considerable publishing successes.²¹

Benwell's earlier work was notable in at least two respects. Firstly, it was the first full-length study of any type in the twentieth century (then already more than



Figure 2: W S 'Sam' Benwell. Photograph courtesy of Meg Benwell.

half concluded) to take the vineyards of Victoria as its exclusive subject.²² In its approach, too, it was an echo of an earlier, nineteenth-century lament for the industry's fortunes, Hubert de Castella's *John Bull's Vineyard* (1886). Secondly, as we have noted, it reflected the mobility and culinary tourism interests of a new generation of Australians, in particular the car-owning professional upper-middle class. Benwell's personal example of touring of vineyards in company, undertaken extensively in the 1950s and described in *Journey to Wine in Victoria*, would be followed by others. In this respect it is interesting that his book preceded both the boom of boutique vineyards and wineries and the development of government-sponsored tourism initiatives.²³ Wine tourism would, in time, become a widespread and commercially important activity that would contribute to the growth of both the wine and tourism industries as well as helping to sustain non-metropolitan Australia. In all these respects, *Journey to Wine in Victoria* is a pioneering text, and Benwell is of interest to us as both exemplar and scribe.²⁴

It is pertinent to ask — as it would be with a pioneer of any social movement — where Sam Benwell's motivation came from, or, in this case, what gave rise to his consciousness of wine and food, conviviality and the joys of travel. In his day-to-day existence Benwell was a medical practitioner and, in retrospect, representative of the better-educated and well-off professional types later identified as wine tourists.²⁵ He was a general practitioner and a member of the Clifton Hill medical group, but he had another life. He was a regular luncheon

diner at Jimmy Watson's wine bar in Carlton. He had a wife who was an artist, and they had travelled and lived in Italy together. Benwell enjoyed wine and food and company, but he had long harboured ambitions to be a writer, and he worked his subject matter for its literary potential. All of these influences came together in the creation of a minor classic of culinary tourism, the 1960 edition of *Journey to Wine in Victoria*.

In the 1950s, when *Journey to Wine in Victoria* was being conceived, knowledge and interest in wine was not a common thing. Enthusiasts were few in number. Good wine was scarce. There were good reasons for making contacts. Being 'in the know,' sharing knowledge and travelling to places where wine was made was helpful, too, not just in finding sources of good, cheap and rare vintages but also in creating convivial social situations for like-minded people to enjoy. Then, as now, travel was a basis for cementing social relationships, enjoyment and learning. As Priscilla Boniface has observed, tourism is a laboratory for everyday life and a basis for social experimentation.²⁶ It is interesting that Benwell felt constrained to point out enjoyments that could be had within a relatively short compass of a major Australian city in such a stylised and almost defensive way. It says a lot about what people expected, or did not expect, of life in general. Melbourne in the 1950s was a city dominated by kill-joy wowsers, a place where hotel bars were closed by law at six o'clock and the enjoyment of wine in restaurants was restricted.²⁷ Leading businessmen acknowledged the lack of night-life and considered it a bar to progress. Former Lord Mayor Sir Harold Luxton acknowledged the fact in 1950: 'I love Melbourne. I have lived here all my life, but it is still deadly dull.'²⁸ Dining out was regarded as Bohemian or exotic; however, by the 1960s, it was becoming more a part of normal routine.²⁹ Australians in general and Melburnians in particular were opening up to life's pleasures.

Along with other members of the medical fraternity before and since, Sam Benwell was a wine enthusiast. He was the product of a comfortable, upper-middle-class upbringing and might have been destined for comfortable suburban conformity but for a generous and bohemian streak. He was interested, too, in the world around him and beyond Australian shores. Born in Melbourne in 1916, William Samuel Benwell was educated at Scotch College and studied medicine at the University of Melbourne, graduating in 1941.³⁰ It was while he was a university student that he was introduced to wine by the remarkable William Alexander Osborne, who, in addition to being professor of physiology at the University of Melbourne, was a polymath, a raconteur, a rationalist, a literary man, and well-known as a wine enthusiast and connoisseur.³¹ According to his future wife, Meg, Sam was keen on one of the professor's daughters, and something of the paternal influence seems to have rubbed off on the young man as well. Following war service, Sam became a general practitioner in Carlton, then a depressed inner-city industrial area of Melbourne, which was being repopulated by Italian migrants. The stock-in-trade patients at his clinic were the industrial accidents that were a regular occurrence at the local manufactories, notably among the boot-workers and at the cannery nearby.

Along with many of his generation, Sam Benwell's early life was dislocated by the experience of war. He spent years as the doctor of several casualty stations in

New Guinea, and this experience shaped his views on humanity and social justice. In 1950 he married Meg, who had returned to Melbourne following the failure of her marriage to an American air force officer stationed in Australia. After the war Meg joined her first husband in Chicago, where she lived for two years. The difference between them at that time, Meg recalls, is that she had seen a little of the world, but Sam's experiences beyond Australia's shores had been confined to war service. The medical practice at Clifton Hill, of which Sam was one of five equal partners, offered an opportunity for them to travel. A scheme was conceived whereby the five doctor members agreed to provision for six incomes, giving each the opportunity of taking one year in five as a sabbatical. Sam was the first to go, and the couple elected to go to Italy. In 1952 Sam and Meg Benwell spent eight months on the island of Elba, where they rented a villa set in a vineyard overlooking the bay to Porta Ferraio and travelled about. They went as a family group, taking with them Sam's mother, Eleanor, a mothercraft nurse, Meg's daughter, Jo, from her previous marriage, and their baby son, Andrew. When they embarked on the Flotta Lauro ship the *Sydney* in Naples for the return journey, Meg was pregnant with their third child, Stephen.³²

They loved it. Italy was still poor and devastated by the war. There were very few automobiles, but Sam was able to buy one. Most of their travel was by boat, car and slow trains. But because they went *en famille*, Italians, who are so family-oriented, welcomed them — 'they took us into their hearts and their homes,' Meg recalls.

We knew how the people lived, their sentimentality, their happiness, their gorgeous food. We knew how poor they were. He could empathise with them and he adored them. They were terribly kind to us.

Meg had studied the language, not Sam, but he had a natural affinity for the land and the people, and for travelling — 'he was a charmer, he could get away with anything'.

Sam wrote and Meg sketched. Meat was expensive and scarce, so there was a lot of fishing on the beach and *al fresco* cooking. They drank the wine that their good friend, Emilio, had made. Meg recalls it was 'cloudy, crude and wonderful — like the island of Elba itself'. The summer passed 'wonderfully'. Then it got cold and the group moved south to Positano, breaking their journey on the way by staying in simple *pensiones*. They rented a modern apartment next to the famous 'Bocca Di Bacco', right on the beach, where they lived until it was time to return to Australia. And then it was over. They arrived in time for Christmas in 1952. 'When we came home we had changed. It's a wonder we had any Australian friends left because we spoke so much about Italy.' Sam and Meg looked forward to travelling to Italy again, but when Sam's turn for a sabbatical came around again he still had not paid off the overdraft from the first trip, and now they had small children to look after. But they still had the memories.

The Benwells' journeying in Italy was a part of the inspiration for *Journey to Wine in Victoria* because the travel through the Italian countryside had been such a rich and rewarding experience. The other influence was Melbourne in the 1950s, with its nine-to-five work regime, stifling wowser-dominated atmosphere, no social life after six o'clock, only football on Saturdays, and nothing at all allowed on Sundays. It was in this context that Benwell became a regular at Jimmy

Watson's wine bar, where the life and the conviviality of the day occurred around lunch. Indeed, when the practice moved from Alexandra Parade to Macarthur Place, Carlton, it was said that the reason was to be closer to Watson's. It was interesting, too, that just as the Benwells returned from Italy the impact of post-war migration from Europe, and particularly Italy and Greece, was beginning to be felt in cities like Melbourne. Nowhere was this more evident than in settings like the formerly working-class, inner-city suburb of Carlton, where Sam Benwell had his practice.³³

Although the Victorian wine industry was at low ebb around 1960, as we have noted, there was a heritage to reflect upon and a continuing legacy of production that matched emerging consumer tastes. The depression years of the 1930s had been difficult, with the South Australian companies dominating the Melbourne market and low prices obtained for table wine compared to fortified. A growing source of support for the vineyards were those migrants recently arrived from Europe who did not share the British preference for malt-derived alcoholic beverages, such as whisky and beer, or sweeter styles of fortified wine. Winemaker John C Brown of Milawa in north-eastern Victoria remembered Italian growers of hops and tobacco in the King Valley who purchased his lighter-style table red wine at the cellar door as far back as the 1930s.³⁴ Following the 1939–45 war, the collapse of the export trade to the United Kingdom in the rich style of dry red wine known as Australian Burgundy made for a modest availability of this style of wine from north-eastern Victorian vineyards.³⁵ A similarly ancient cluster of city and metropolitan merchants and outlets survived alongside the network of old vineyards and wineries.

The wine bar of J C 'Jimmy' Watson in Lygon Street, Carlton, held one of the few remaining licences that permitted the sale of Australian wine. These had been created in the 1870s specially to foster the sale and consumption of the locally grown product.³⁶ It, too, in its way was a relic of the wine boom of the nineteenth century, and in immediate post-war Melbourne it attracted a Bohemian clientele. Benwell was a regular at Watson's, as was Dudley Phillips, the publisher-manager at Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons whose offices were not far away at Bouverie Street, Carlton. *Journey to Wine in Victoria* was written following a suggestion made by Dudley Phillips during a lunch some time in 1958.³⁷ Although it is a homage to rural industry, it is interesting that *Journey to Wine in Victoria* was the product of urban professional associations, and this most urbane and informal of Australian institutions, Watson's wine bar.

By all accounts, Watson was a remarkable man. 'No franker extrovert ever poured a glass of claret', according to Sam.³⁸ He was a former dance-hall musician who, when the 'talkies' in the cinema did away with the dance bands, returned to the family business in which his Italian forebears had engaged: hospitality, restaurants and the liquor trade. In 1935 he had taken up an ailing wine saloon business in a depressed and run-down area, and he was able to build a clientele, drawing on the university nearby but also theatre people, writers and people with aesthetic interests generally. Watson was a saloon-keeper but also an agent of social change who, by sheer force of personality and example, undermined ingrained social habits and attitudes. Watson's banter, his ceaseless activity and generosity fuelled the mix; there was an influence and an

environment, which he created, that 'made it easy for people to communicate, one with the other':

he made it easy to eat there, and eat well ... he revelled in showing how most of the good things in Australia need only a fire, a few minutes — and wine. Prime beef, pork and cutlets tumbled on to his hot plate with mushrooms, pepperoni and aubergines, to be seared and splashed with claret, until the steaming aromas could be picked up on the other side of Lygon Street. Salads were tossed in seconds, and the bread and cheese from the shops nearby were the best in Melbourne. As with his wine, he made sure that all these things never cost much.³⁹

By the time he died, in 1962, Jimmy Watson was a legendary figure, and Benwell was his close personal friend, his doctor, and one of the elders of the Watson wine bar establishment.⁴⁰

The catalyst for *Journey to Wine in Victoria* was 'The House of Lords'. This was a group of men (women were admitted later) that began meeting for lunch about 1947 or '48 and who formed the company for the vineyard tours that provided so much of the raw material for the successive editions of *Journey to Wine in Victoria*. Prior to its renovation designed by the architect Robin Boyd in 1962, Watson's was simply two old Lygon Street shops joined, and the luncheon club used to meet in the kitchen of one of these. The last surviving original member is Benwell's younger colleague at the medical practice, Dr Richard 'Dick' Gutch, now retired but active as a Yarra Valley vigneron. He recalled:

we were tolerated by Jimmy, and so anarchistic we would bring our own wine and even our own food. We would go where we could cook our own food in the old kitchen. We were all going in one day and some other guy wanted to go in [to the old kitchen area] ... he could have been drunk. Anyway Jimmy stopped him and he said: 'Who do they think they are? The House of Lords or something.'⁴¹

And so the name stuck. Original members included Benwell and Gutch of the Clifton Hill Medical Group, John Adams, who was a senior pilot with Australian National Airlines, Phil Clempson, an engineer, Frank Downes, who was chairman of the appointments board at the University of Melbourne, and his assistant, Keith Gravell. Max Hargreaves, who was professor of metallurgy and chairman of the professorial board at the university, Harold Hunt, professor of classics at the university, Jack Jones, secretary of the Carpetmakers Association, Max Marginson, a biochemist at the university, Eric Merton, a senior executive at Kodak, Dudley Phillips, publisher of Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Bill Rawlinson, who was associate professor of biochemistry, and Mick Salami, a local clothing manufacturer. Notwithstanding the suggestion some derived from his name, Salami was a native-born Australian — 'the same as the sausage', he would say. A plaque on the wall at Watson's produced by Eric Merton has suitable emblems for the members' occupations.

The group did the usual things that wine enthusiasts still do. Wines were tasted masked — 'we could be pretty clever because there weren't many vineyards then', Dick Gutch recalled. The conversation, too, was generally of a high order. 'Dudley Phillips had a very good classical education. He and Harold Hunt used to despise those of us with a scientific education unless we could recite the Iliad and all the classics.' The tours started in the 1950s. Jimmy Watson did not himself go but

provided all the contacts. 'Wine pilgrims',⁴² as Benwell dubbed them, were not a commonplace thing in those days. Some winery enterprises were suspicious, wondering if Sam and his fellow Lordships were spies for the big South Australian companies.⁴³ The vineyards were a standard litany of those days: Bailey's Bundarra at Glenrowan, Brown Brothers at Milawa, All Saints and St Leonards at Wahgunyah, Morris and Chambers at Rutherglen, Bests and Seppelt's at Great Western and Chateau Tahbilk at Nagambie. 'We went by car', Dick Gutch recalls:

One car was a Citroen with front wheel drive. Sam had a Morris Major. I had an early model Falcon. If we were going to Milawa some might come by train. We all sort of drove. One person might go with somebody else.⁴⁴

At the wineries they would taste the wines directly out of cask. Vignerons such as George Smith senior at All Saints were 'so generous and enthusiastic'. John C Brown at Milawa was 'a gentleman'. He and Benwell had been schoolmates together at Scotch College in Melbourne. It was, Gutch admits, 'a middle-class thing'. They were all educated people, but inclusive. Salami, the local Carlton businessman, was savvy and earthy, and, like the others, he was 'quite a character'.⁴⁵ The maleness of it all reflected the times and their values, but didn't pass without comment, as Meg Benwell recalled: 'To belong to this mob you had to have a very understanding wife and one who was preoccupied with small children'.⁴⁶ Anne Bermingham was a female member who could match it with the blokes. She was an academic palaeontologist, ornithologist and archaeologist, and perhaps she qualified as an honorary male. When asked her occupation, her standard reply was: 'I date fossils and stuff birds'.

A typical journey would see the group meet at a predetermined spot out of town. A billy would be boiled and chop or two cooked on a barbecue by the side of the road. Gutch recalls that most often Benwell would cook, and that he always went well prepared with roasts and meat. They would find hotels that would let them cook, and at the vineyards they could always fix themselves a picnic lunch. All the time, Benwell was writing, collecting notes and making jottings. 'It was really a friendship thing', according to Gutch:

There was no sex. Drink, food and conversation were the main interests. We did buy wine but most of time it was wine we could buy at Watson's anyway.⁴⁷

The group were all home-bottlers of bulk wine, and this was freely available from Brown Brothers of Milawa, All Saints at Wahgunyah and Chateau Tahbilk at Nagambie. But one did need to master the technologies of freight, containers, bottling and storage; there was a lot of drinking and there were casualties, seen most notably in the truncated career and life of the academic Max Hargreaves, who died in 1976. These were days, also, before the association of drinking and driving was made taboo: 'How we ever got away with it without killing ourselves or someone else I do not know', Gutch recalled.⁴⁸

But there were good reasons for going. In keeping with European tradition, Benwell believed that wine of any consequence is the distinctive product of the place where it is grown and made — a view summed up by the French word *terroir* — and he admired the guarantee of product and place that is enshrined in the French authenticating legislation, the *appellation d'origine contr lee* (AOC).

Benwell's support for schemes of authentication for Australian wines is a theme of his writing.⁴⁹

Associations of place and style in wine have, of course, long existed independently of legislative or official description, and it is no accident that so much wine literature takes the form of regional studies, travel compendiums and atlases. Benwell's writing is highly evocative and descriptive of the landscape:

To [the wine follower] the North East is found in the far top-right hand corner of the State where it forms a triangle, its apex on the Warby Range near Glenrowan, the sides fanning out northwards left and right to the Murray. It has compartments: an upper comprising the vineyards close to the river based on Rutherglen and Wahgunyah, and a lower centred about Wangaratta where the vignobles of Glenrowan and Milawa are located. It is a beautiful wedge, rimmed on the east side by the Alps which send down several fine rivers through a ruddy-coloured topsoil. It is a rich and tranquil land with an air that you can feel, and a sky that must be the highest in the world.⁵⁰

These were truly convivial journeys, with much pleasure obtained talking and drinking late into the evening in country hotels, many of which (like the Vine near Wangaratta) dated from the early days and had a history quite as impressive as any of the old wineries of the district. There were some rough characters to encounter, like miners hosted at the Trawalla pub, and less-than-adequate sleeping arrangements in shearers quarters. These deficiencies could be borne if there was the opportunity to cook food and yarn and drink in front of a log fire of a Saturday evening.

It was in the landscape and visits to the wineries that one really discovered *terroir*, not in the bottle. At Bailey's Bundarra there existed a vineyard with 'personality' where high natural yields of grapes and outstandingly distinctive wines had ensured a continuous record of grape-growing since the 1870s. To describe the rich red wines of 'extravagant character' made from the Shiraz variety at Bundarra, Benwell selected phrases 'from sound performers, friends who need not be named'. They were, of course, their Lordships trying to outdo each other in eloquence and precision in describing the look, smell and taste of a unique and remarkable wine.

The first impression of a Bailey red is the gravity of the stream as it leaves the bottle and enters the glass. It runs heavily, silently. The colour is a velvet rubor which belongs to the Cinquecento and can still be seen in Murano glass. It carries a hint of violet, which disappears when the wine is held to the light. The bouquet is a veritable fume of vinosity in which can be detected the mature esters and yet also the fresh fruit of the vine. The flavour is broad, earthy and humid. There is little acidic tang but in its place a gripping sensation of mixed tannic and ferruginous qualities. It is a strong, heady, and lasting wine. There is no other wine quite like it.⁵¹

Not fifteen miles away could be found the vineyard of John C Brown at Milawa, where the altogether more elegant red wines made from the same Shiraz variety in a similar manner provided a dramatic contrast:

Incidentally, both these vigneron point to the ground when asked to 'explain' their wines. Alan Bailey speaks of the great fertility and depth of his soil layer at Bundarra. John Brown also points downwards and says 'river gravel'.⁵²

Wine led them into history in their journeys. All Saints, at Wahgunyah on the Murray near Rutherglen, was founded by the Smith family, who were Scottish joiners. George Sutherland Smith was an 'adventurer, visionary and builder' who had done well in the fluid colonial environment. He had constructed stone buildings, bridges, railways and roads in the goldrush years before acquiring a river frontage on the Murray and turning his talents and acquired wealth to the creation of a large vineyard and winery enterprise. In the district's heyday in the 1880s he built a large castellated red-brick winery over an earlier structure. This was a proper castle, reminiscent of the Castle of Mey of his homeland in Caithness, and it was intended to impress. He planted a double row of elms along a drive leading to it, something Benwell noted seventy years later as 'worth making a journey to see'.⁵³ He found the third generation in charge of the estate; in the manner of royalty, they displayed 'a genius for male heirs'. The vineyard and winery at vintage time was also something to see:

First the visitors are taken to the fermenting vats — large open concrete chambers in two rows in a dim lofty section of the winery. During vintage, the floor is a tangle of twisting hose lengths as the new wine is drawn off to wood storage. Bare waisted men shovel out the exhausted grapes into big barrows and another hose gushes into the vat with a new pressing of juicy pulp. It makes a fine subject for a drawing — something by Piranesi.⁵⁴

At Chateau Tahbilk could be found an old pastoral property transformed by the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for wine and new industries. It was to be one of the focal points for the revival of wine in Victoria, and it remains one of truly great cultural tourism destinations Victoria has to offer. Tahbilk was a great estate fallen on hard times. It had been purchased by a British Member of Parliament, Reginald Purbrick, and taken up in the Depression by his youthful Cambridge-educated son, Eric, as resident manager in 1931. As Benwell noted, with classic understatement: 'it was not a particularly good year, 1931, to assume ownership of any enterprise. Today, however, Chateau Tahbilk, Eric Purbrick, and the times would seem to a visitor, to be tolerating each other very well.'⁵⁵

It is impossible to say just how many Australians took up Benwell's invocation to journey to wine in Victoria following the publication of his book in 1960. While we can hardly ascribe the sole motivating influence to him or his book, we can say that Benwell represents a convenient beginning because, in a subtle and characteristic way, he defines the activity and its objectives. As for the legacy, we know that virtually all of the wineries he described in 1960 are still in existence in one form or another and that, in addition to being sources of quality wine, most are today highly profitable as tourism concerns as well.

The wine industry in Victoria, too, has gone ahead in leaps and bounds, with many nineteenth-century locations, such as those vineyards of the Upper Yarra Valley, revived and others, such as those of the Mornington Peninsula, begun virtually afresh.⁵⁶ Many of the things Benwell wished for have come to pass. His arguments with the Australian industry over the use of generic terms such as claret and burgundy, or the lack of attention to geographic descriptors on labels, have been resolved mainly in ways that would have pleased him. The generic terms have been phased out, and wine regions are now better described under Australian wine-labelling laws. But perhaps the most striking instance of Benwell's influence

was the interest in those places and wines described in his book that occurred in the 1960s. Nowhere was this seen more tellingly than in the case of north-east Victoria, for which, as his writing indicates so clearly, he always had a special affection. Wines that could hardly find a sale, even in bulk, at the time of publication were with a few years in short supply and with a premium attached. Undoubtedly, travel and tourism were factors in this transformation. Such was the increased appeal of the north-east to the travelling public that when the town of Rutherglen, which is widely regarded as the geographic heart of the wider regional wine industry of those parts, only a few years later decided to sponsor a wine festival, an estimated twelve thousand people packed its Main Street to witness the float procession. Only slightly less, an estimated ten thousand people, attended the 'starlight carnival' held in Barkly Park on the Saturday night.⁵⁷ In due course, the 'festival' tag was done away with and the event settled to become the more sedate Queen's Birthday 'winery walkabout' weekend. Most of those people who travelled to Rutherglen town by automobile in 1967, as in subsequent years, spent time visiting the region and following trails described by Sam Benwell and blazed by him and his fellow Lords.

Recipe: Sam's Meat Loaf

700 grams of hamburger steak mince beef
 2 rashers of bacon, diced
 2 or 3 slices of bread (crusts and all)
 2 or 3 green apples, grated
 3 or 4 onions, grated
 1 clove of garlic, grated
 Parsley, pepper and salt
 2 eggs

Put all the ingredients into a basin, mix thoroughly with the hands until the mixture is smooth, then scoop a hole in the centre, break in the eggs and fork through thoroughly to blend.

Have a floured board ready. Pat the mixture into a firm loaf and keep turning on the board until dusted with flour. Put two or three tablespoons of oil in a baking dish, place the loaf on it and smooth a little oil on top. Heat oven to 370–400° F (175–200° C) and bake for a further twenty minutes, then turn oven to low and cook for another three quarters of an hour.

Have ready a mixture of tomato sauce or paste with a little Worcester sauce and barbecue sauce. Mix thoroughly. When you take the loaf from the oven, baste well with juices from the pan. Then, while piping hot, smooth over with the savoury sauce. Let the loaf get quite cold before removing from the pan.

Thanks to Mrs Meg Benwell and Jo Taylor for this recipe of Sam's, which, I am told, is still a family favourite.