

*H-France Review* Vol. 8 (March 2008), No. 40

Jad Adams, *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. 294 pp. \$24.95 US (pb). ISBN 0-29-200-000-0.

Marie-Claude Delahaye, *L'absinthe au féminin*. Saint-Remy de Provence: Equinoxe, 2007. 136 pp. €19 (pb). ISBN 978-2-84135559-4.

Review by Scott Haine, University of California Santa Cruz and Holy Names College.

Why have so many histories of the drink absinthe appeared in the last twenty years? Overall, more than fifteen books have appeared on the subject in French and English. We shall concern ourselves in this review with two of the most recent publications, Jad Adams's synthetic overview and Marie-Claude Delahaye's pocket-sized picture book on the connections between women and absinthe in art and, to a much lesser degree, literature. While Adams's work is an impressive summary of recent general work on the subject, he does not really bring a new perspective to the subject. Although Delahaye's most recent effort may appear to be little more than reproductions with captions, its sparse text does explore much more fully and evocatively the association with evil, especially feminine images, that surrounded this drink in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In our amorphous public sphere today even first-rate writers often lose track of the difference between popular and academic history, a tendency well illustrated in the study of absinthe. Christopher Dickey, Paris Bureau Chief for *Newsweek*, illustrates this contemporary permeability of genres in an enthusiastic piece touting absinthe in *Cigar Aficionado* in 2001.[1] Convinced that William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" represented another fruit of the poetic imagination irrigated by absinthe, Dickey feigned chagrin when he found no reference in books on absinthe (Barnaby Conrad's and one of Delahaye's). Dickey quipped "Academia has failed us again," but did not acknowledge that neither writer pursued the topic as an academic study.

Indeed, Adams is correct that Patricia Prestwich's 1979 essay entitled "Temperance in France: The Curious Case of Absinth" remains the best scholarly work on the prohibition of the drink.[2] Prestwich did not deepen or broaden her analysis of absinthe in her otherwise superb book *Drink and the Politics of Social Reform: Antialcoholism in France Since 1870*, which was clearly not her main agenda.[3] In our studies of Parisian life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which focus in varying detail on the role of drink and cafés in popular life, neither Ruth Harris nor I cover the role of absinthe with any degree of specificity or depth.[4] In terms of other possible approaches to absinthe, iconographic and medical, no scholar has published a systematic study of the medical discourse or the art inspired by the beverage although the recent Stanford PhD dissertation by Rael Anton Lewis is a superb work that deserves publication.[5] In particular, Lewis uses the theories of Walter Benjamin on the flâneur and Guy Debord on the spectacle to highlight the intimate link between absinthe and modern culture in the Paris of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This study avoids the anecdotal approaches of all the other works mentioned.

Into this vacuum has marched a wide range of writers from journalists to "Sunday historians" whose studies of absinthe are outside their regular work as academics. The quoted phrase, coined by demographer Philippe Ariès in regard to his own "weekend" research as a historian (outside his regular academic work as a demographer), can readily be applied to Delahaye who is a lecturer in cellular

biology at the University of Pierre and Marie Curie in Paris and has recently published French medical guides for pregnant women as well as continuing to publish on absinthe as well as on aperitifs, pastis and Pernod.

Although Delahaye has not transformed the study of absinthe as Ariès did in his work on family, death and private life, she has single-handedly put the study of absinthe back into the public sphere not only with general overviews of the drink's history but with a further revised and augmented history. Indeed, Delahaye opened, in 1994, a museum of absinthe in the distant Parisian suburb of Auvers-sur-Oise, the town in which Vincent Van Gogh died. This museum now houses her extensive collection of primary sources, the basis of her continued publications. These books, dealing with absinthe references in the works of painters, poets, poster artists, and newspaper and journal illustrators, are her greatest contribution to the field. Her various books provide a copious, although neither systematic nor complete, compilation of absinthe in the artistic and cultural fields. Nor do they provide much analysis or insight into the importance of absinthe in the creative process. Her work, along with that of art historian Benoît Noël, provides a brief biography of over forty painters and an index that includes the names of hundreds of painter and models.[6] Then in *L'absinthe: Muse des poètes* she profiled seventy-four poets, providing a chronology of their lives, some of their poems and illustrations of café life and absinthe drinking. Delahaye published a similar book on poster illustrators with *L'absinthe: Les affiches* in 2003. More than eighty poster makers and brief bios cover both advertisements for absinthe and the posters of the anti-absinthe campaign of the anti-alcohol organizations in *L'absinthe: Ses dessinateurs de presse*. [7] Two Hundred and sixteen illustrators, with brief biographies, are listed in the index. One might expect Delahaye to complete further volumes on novelists, short story writers and journal and newspaper articles, but instead she published two new compilations on the labels of absinthe bottles: *L'absinthe: Dictionnaire des marques*. [8]

The great strength and weakness of all these books are interconnected. All display a great passion for striking and meaningful details but none trolls systematically through specific historical sources to provide a comprehensive historical record. Striking images abound on almost every page, but the reader wishes the author would provide an interpretive grid which seldom occurs. Ironically, in restricting her most recent work to cover only depictions of women, a provocative thesis does emerge. But it is one the reader must infer from the iconography more than from any analysis. Nevertheless, a comparison with Adams's work is instructive on this key point. For here is an author well equipped to deliver a sharp analysis but one who also falls into the mania of collection and anecdote rather than systematic analysis of journals, newspapers, or police, medical, and judicial records.

Of all the English-speaking writers on absinthe, Adams comes with the best credentials. Even though he has cast his talents widely, as a television producer and a politician in his native Britain, he is also the writer of a well-reviewed biography of Ernest Dowson, one of the most notorious fin-de-siècle British absintheurs. [9] Adams has also written well received biographies of Tony Benn and the Nehru and Gandhi dynasties. He brings to the study of absinthe not only a great ear for the biographical but also a good grasp of the historiographical. In his introduction, Adams correctly notes that "The study of absinthe as a social phenomenon suffers from the repeated quotations of anecdotal or even openly fictional events as historical fact" (p. 12). The first part of his critique is especially trenchant.

In the body of the book, however, Adams does not break new ground in either his research or his analysis and thus does not rise much farther above anecdote than other recent English writers on absinthe. Indeed, he essentially follows, though often with better prose and livelier detail, most of his predecessors. The first contemporary to write a history of absinthe was San Francisco-based journalist Barnaby Conrad, who has also written on a wide variety of cultural topics from a history of the blonde to the cigar and the painter Richard Dibenkorn. His *Absinthe: History in a Bottle* initiated the reliance on the research and writings of Delahaye. [10] In 1994 Doris Lanier, an emeritus philosopher published *Absinthe: The Cocaine of the Nineteenth Century*. [11] In 2003 Phil Baker, book reviewer for a number of British papers and journals (including the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Economist*), and author of

books on Samuel Beckett and the London artist and spiritualist Austin Osman Spare, published *Book of Absinthe: A Cultural History*.<sup>[12]</sup> Finally Noel, along with two expatriate Americans (Peter Verte and Artemis) brought out an English edition of their *Absinthe: A Myth Always Green*.<sup>[13]</sup>

All of these books contain much of the same information. All cover the origins of absinthe in the wormwood plant, detail its Greek-inspired name meaning “undrinkable” and its citation in the work of the ancient botanist Pliny the Elder. We learn about its use as a medicine for a millennia and more and then its eventual distillation (first in Switzerland and then in France) through its introduction into the French army as a means of purifying water and then as a drink for bourgeoisie and bohemians on Parisian boulevards, its diffusion to wider artistic and literary circles and its descent into the working classes and its ascent as a drink for fashionable women. Inevitably the books mention Baudelaire, Manet, Degas, Van Gogh, Picasso, Rimbaud and especially Verlaine and Oscar Wilde. Each book also covers the rising temperance and anti-alcohol crusade against the drink and its eventual ban at the start of World War I. Finally each book traces the renaissance of absinthe that began in the late 1980s and has accelerated ever since. Nevertheless, absinthe today has none of the cultural resonance, influence or alcoholic potency of its forbear a century earlier.

A good example of the way these books complement but rarely surpass one another concerns the question of gender. Each author of these works in English has fine scattered bits of information on women and absinthe in the late nineteenth century. Adams rightfully notes that one of Delahaye’s best insights was the way women used absinthe as “a sign of women’s emancipation” (p. 256, footnote 25) and he briefly discusses how Manet’s paintings reflect the growing respectability of upper class women frequenting cafés and drinking absinthe on the terraces during the “green hour.” Adams, however, does not provide any historical overview on when women began to frequent cafés. This point was noted by Lanier as well as by Michael R. Marrus who argued that only in the 1880s did French drinking establishments cease to be “an almost exclusively male sanctuary” (pp. 26-27).<sup>[14]</sup> Nor does Adams cite my work showing that cafés catering to the working classes had been serving a significant number of working women as clients from at least the French Revolution. (See chapter 7 in my book.)<sup>[15]</sup> In short, Adams strives to be evocative rather than comprehensive in his use of sources, which is fine for a general audience but leaves an academic one desiring a fuller treatment.

Adams, like most of the preceding authors, is also ambivalent about the ultimate historical meaning of absinthe’s golden age of consumption and cultural influence. These authors, aside from Lanier, are skeptical that absinthe was the scourge so many contemporaries believed it to be. Although Lanier, for example, believes absinthe was deservedly banned, she does not develop her analogy of absinthe as the cocaine of the nineteenth century. The comparison serves as a metaphor in her work, noted in the introduction and conclusion, but not as an interpretive tool. The same is true for Adams in his use of the metaphor, in his subtitle, of absinthe as a “devil in a bottle.” In the introduction, he frames the evolution of absinthe as a drink with great cogency across the centuries: “Why did absinthe, venerated as a healing draught by the ancients and treated as such at the beginning of the nineteenth century, become so cursed at the end?” Yet his conclusion downplays the demonic and decadent effects of absinthe: “Treated with no more than usual caution, absinthe is not dangerous. Some people will abuse it, but this will be because of their tendency to abuse substances, not because of inherent qualities in the drink itself” (p. 249). Like the other authors, Adams does not consider absinthe as a metaphor or commodity that helped define France and other European nations at a specific point in their social, economic and political evolution and why it evoked so much hysteria at a particular historical moment.

Delahaye’s most recent book assembles cogent and striking iconographic evidence on the subject Adams correctly sees as one of her great achievements: the intimate connection between absinthe and women. As I previously noted, her book contains a paucity of text, much less commentary, but her presentation develops a powerful story of the gendering of this plant and later drink as female and its growing association with evil until its eventual ban in the opening year of World War I. In his

dissertation Lewis also provides a nuanced gender analysis, lacking only an analysis of the iconography related to the ban on absinthe. Delahaye shows that an analysis of this iconography is very important. In the introduction she elaborates on the etymology of *artemisia absinthium*, named after the Greek goddess Artemis, patron goddess of wilderness, the hunt, wild animals, fertility, childbirth and a patron deity of the amazons. On these same pages Delahaye provides a striking piece of evidence of the association of absinthe with women in the late nineteenth century, a woman's face superimposed within a glass of absinthe (pp. 8-9). Delahaye then notes that the nineteenth-century imagination added another mythic image: absinthe, like electricity, is portrayed as a female fairy.

Delahaye reveals an iconographic (and to a degree a literary) record that by 1900 associated women with absinthe from the time they were born through puberty, courtship, marriage and old age. We find illustrations of working-class girls initiated into drinking absinthe even as children, and grooms at upper middle class weddings introducing their brides to their first taste of absinthe. Delahaye then traces, again primarily through illustrations and paintings, women drinking absinthe in public, from the bohemian cafés of the Latin Quarter to the grand boulevards in the 1860s and later. Most especially, the visuals she provides reveal the difficulty the contemporary observer had in correctly distinguishing between the working woman, the prostitute and the bourgeoisie. The subtle gradations of women's behavior in cafés is something I found in the judicial sources, but I had not fully realized the degree to which the iconographic records reveal the same subtleties.

The second half of Delahaye's book reveals the fears of the largely male illustrators and painters that women were breaking out of traditional roles by working in public and asserting their right to organize politically, thus having access to the public drinking of absinthe and to smoking. Delahaye also provides extensive coverage of the way in which French poster illustrators (the prime venue for the advertising industry in Belle Epoque France) often portrayed women consumers as ethereal goddesses, full of vigor and displaying luminous white teeth, but especially as seductive temptresses (their connection with the Devil typified by red hair). Delahaye misses the point here, which I hope to develop fully in a forthcoming book on French advertisers as primary innovators in linking female sexuality and commodities in modern advertising. Delahaye concludes with the transformation of prostitution in the late nineteenth century--the decline of regulated prostitution in tolerated houses (Maisons de Tolérance) and the rise of a more casual and informal prostitution in cafés--and the ravages of alcoholism and insanity in women. One of the most striking images, "L'Absinthe," by lesser-known artist Joseph Apoux, portrays a woman coming out of a glass of absinthe with a body still intact but a head that is little more than a toothless skull--in short, a complete reversal of the women portrayed in the sensuous poster art of the period. The last images show an iconography of female demonization connected to national celebration as French President Raymond Poincaré stands triumphant over the slain green fairy, a cross through her heart, and another of a massive crowd watching in delight as a naked French green fairy is burned at the stake and looks to heaven to see her waiting sister, the Swiss green fairy, whose mountain nation had outlawed absinthe seven years earlier in 1908, await her passage to the heavens. This iconography has not yet been fully studied but certainly should be for the links between misogyny and violence during the Great War. Despite her lack of textual analysis, Delahaye provides a graphic confirmation of the way in which absinthe was gendered in nineteenth-century France, and primarily in the form of a demonization rather than emancipation. Some future scholar will surely ponder the irony of a Greek goddess associated with fertility being transformed through absinthe into a cause of national degeneration and demographic decline.

What do we learn from these studies? Absinthe the drink as product, ritual and image is a fertile topic ripe for a systematic archival and analytical work. Amazingly, each of these studies (especially the ones indulging in extensive iconography) finds images that previous studies have not uncovered. The key now is to collect all of this data into a series of academic syntheses. The question of gender is certainly a key theme to develop as is the relation between alcohol consumption and artistic creativity, a question that the study of absinthe is ideally suited to cover. Although all of the authors deal extensively with the

relation between the flowering of absinthe consumption and the rise of artistic and literary modernism between 1850 and 1914 (in short, between Baudelaire and Picasso), none convincingly makes or disproves a link between these two social phenomena. Each author also makes reference to but does not sufficiently address the question of the relationship between alcohol and drug consumption and artistic production in the early twenty first century. The issue of social class has not been tackled by any of these authors but is nevertheless a key subject ripe for future research. For example, to what degree did workers, regardless of gender, enjoy the new consumer world rather than ratifying the traditional working-class bonds when they drank absinthe rather than wine? Another key question to consider: to what degree did other French cities create their own absinthe cultures to rival that of Paris and to help transform provincials (or colonials, for that matter) into French nationals? Much can be learned from all these authors, with Adams and Delahaye as the most prominent. Hopefully scholars will explore more systematically the trails that have been blazed and will heal the rift between popular and scholarly history.

## NOTES

[1] Christopher Dickey, "Absinthe's Second Coming: The Forbidden Elixir of La Belle Epoque Returns – After a Fashion," *Cigar Aficionado* (March/April 2001): pp. 165-172.

[2] Patricia Prestwich, "Temperance in France: The Curious Case of Absinth," *Historical Reflections/Reflections historiques* 6 (Winter/Hiver 1979): pp. 301-319.

[3] Patricia Prestwich, *Drink and the Politics of Social Reform: Antialcoholism in France Since 1870* (Palo Alto: SPOSS, 1988).

[4] Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin-de-Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). W. Scott Haine, *The World of the Paris Café: Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[5] Rael Anton Lewis, "Intoxication and Representation: A Visual Culture of Absinthe, 1859-1915," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2002).

[6] Benoît Noël, *Absinthe muse des peintres* (Paris: Editions de l'Amateur, 1999).

[7] Marie-Claude Delahaye, *L'absinthe Muse des poètes* (Auvers-sur-Oise: Musee de l'absinthe, 2000); *L'absinthe, Les affiches* (Auvers-sur-Oise: Musee de l'absinthe, 2003); *L'absinthe Ses dessinateurs de presse* (Auvers-sur-Oise: Musee de l'absinthe, 2004).

[8] Marie-Claude Delahaye, *L'absinthe: dictionnaire des marques* vols. 1-2 (Auvers-sur-Oise: Musee de l'absinthe, 2003-2004).

[9] Jad Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

[10] Barnaby Conrad, *Absinthe: History in a Bottle* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997).

[11] Doris Lanier, *Absinthe: The Cocaine of the Nineteenth Century* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994).

[12] Phil Baker, *Book of Absinthe: A Cultural History* (New York: Grove Press, 2003).

[13] Benoît Noël, Peter Verte and Artemis, *Absinth: A Myth Always Green* (Paris: L'esprit Frappeur, 2003).

[14] Michael R. Marrus, "Social Drinking in the Belle Epoque," *Journal of Social History* 8 (Winter 1974): 115-41.

[15] Haine, *The World of the Paris Café*, pp. 181-83.

Scott Haine  
University of California Santa Cruz and Holy Names College  
[SHaine@aol.com](mailto:SHaine@aol.com)

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. No republication or distribution will be permitted without permission. ISSN 1553-9172