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Owen White, *The Blood of the Colony: Wine and the Rise and Fall of French Algeria*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press. 2021. 336 pp. Maps, table, illustrations, notes, and index. \$41.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0674248441.

Review by Rod Phillips, Carleton University.

For many years until the 1960s, Algerian wine suffered from a bad press. “Algerian wine” was shorthand for cheap wine of poor quality—“plonk.” Implicitly or explicitly, it was compared unfavorably to “French wine,” which was always assumed to be far better. We might say that Algerian wine never had a chance, because until the end of the 1900s, wine from France was widely thought to be the best in the world, the benchmark that other wine-producing countries aspired to emulate.

That world of wine is long gone, and Algerian wine has gone, too. At the time of its independence in 1962, Algeria was the fourth-largest wine-producing region in the world, after Italy, metropolitan France, and Spain. For decades, from the late 1800s, the great bulk of Algeria’s wine was shipped to metropolitan France but, with independence, that market rapidly disappeared. Despite attempts to find new outlets (such as the Soviet Union), Algeria’s wine production went into a steep decline. In recent years, Algeria’s annual wine output is a tiny percentage of what it produced in its heyday.

In a sense, wine production in Algeria returned to its roots, because viticulture was a marginal agricultural activity when it was introduced by French settlers in the 1830s. But it soon got a massive boost when phylloxera—a small aphid native to North America that kills grapevines not resistant to it, as most native American vines are—was transported to Europe on vine cuttings. Starting in the 1860s, vineyards in the south of France—and before long, vineyards elsewhere in France and in other parts of Europe—began to die. By the 1880s France, which had a staggeringly high per capita rate of wine consumption, was suffering from a shortage of wine.

Until a resolution of the phylloxera crisis was found, France made up its wine deficit with imports from Spain and elsewhere. But planting vines in Algeria, which had excellent growing conditions and was effectively part of France from 1848, was a much more attractive option. The fury of planting that ensued imposed on Algeria’s largely Muslim indigenous population a robust sector of economic activity that was antithetical, if not offensive, to their culture. This was ignored as the wine industry, owned and operated by what Owen White calls Euro-Algerians, flourished and expanded.

This was well and good as far as *vignerons* in metropolitan France were concerned—until their vines were replanted on phylloxera-resistant American rootstock and their wine production rebounded. Then there were sporadic calls, especially when wine gluts appeared in the early 1930s, for quotas to be placed on shipments of Algerian wine. But what did the Algerian wine industry in was the long period of wars (World War II and the Algerian war of independence) and instability that began in 1940 and culminated in Algerian independence in 1962. Soon after, Algeria lost the market that was its *raison d'être*, and Algeria's massive wine industry went into rapid decline.

Owen White tells the story of the rise and fall of Algerian wine in this meticulously researched and compelling book. He adds complexity to the basic rise-and-fall story, adds hitherto unknown information, and demolishes some widely held beliefs. *The Blood of the Colony* is the fruit of years of painstaking work in French and Algerian archives and the press, and White has supplemented the written and printed sources with interviews. The result is a densely textured but deftly written and eminently readable book that is not only invaluable to historians of wine, but also of great interest to historians of Algeria and France and of colonialism more generally.

Among its achievements, *The Blood of the Colony* puts Algerian wine in its proper perspective. It was not just plonk that was dumped on the metropolitan French market—although some of the Algerian wine undoubtedly was, and it added to the mediocre wine that many metropolitan producers themselves inflicted on their fellow citizens. More to the point, Algerian wine was a vital part of France's wine supply for the best part of a century, from the 1880s to the 1960s. Some Algerian wine was sold and consumed as Algerian wine, much of it imported through the port of Rouen for the Paris market. A quarter of Algeria's wine production was requisitioned, along with wine from Languedoc, Bordeaux, Burgundy, and other regions, to supply French troops with their treasured *pinard* during World War I.

But most became an essential blending component for wines produced in other French regions. It turned up—not always acknowledged—in some Bordeaux wines and it was a real asset in Languedoc, where at that time most wine was made from the high-yielding Aramon grape variety. That wine was pale in color, weak in flavor, and low in alcohol, and blending with the more robust Algerian wines, often made from Carignan, made for a much more palatable and commercially successful product.

As White demonstrates, the wider French dimension is inseparable from the history of Algerian wine. It came into being because of French need, and it effectively disappeared when access to the French market disappeared. In between, there was a long period when the wine producers of metropolitan France, especially in the big wine-producing *départements* in the south, wavered between seeing Algerian wine as a complement and as competition to their own. It was as though they thought they could turn the Algerian wine taps off and on as their own situation required. The ambivalence with which the wine producers of metropolitan France regarded Algerian wine reflected the ambivalent status of Algeria vis-à-vis France. Algeria was a French colony, but it also included three *départements* that were integral territory of France, as White acknowledges (p. 79). These *départements* included important areas of wine production and this meant that wine apparently “exported” from them to markets in metropolitan France was not “exported” at all—at least not in the same sense that Spain exported wine to France. Rather, the shipping of wine from Algeria to Rouen and Sète was an example of domestic trade, essentially no different from shipping wine from Bordeaux or Burgundy to the Paris market.

But Algeria didn't look like Bordeaux and Burgundy. Nor did it look like Corsica, a minor wine-producing region that lay outside metropolitan France. Instead, Algeria looked for all the world like a colony: it had a ruling class of Euro-Algerians and an indigenous, non-Christian underclass--and it was in Africa. Whether Algerian wine was exported to metropolitan France or traded within France might seem to be a minor point, but it has tripped up some scholars, and one study of Algerian wine refers to Algeria as the world's largest wine exporter on the basis of its shipments to metropolitan France.[1] White clarifies the complexity of the relationship, noting that some politicians referred to Algeria as an integral part of a France "one and indivisible," while *vignerons* in metropolitan France sometimes referred to Algeria as if it were a foreign country (p. 126).

Although the subtitle of this book refers to "wine and the rise and fall of French Algeria," it is more narrowly focused on the rise and fall of Algeria's wine industry. At several points, White quotes Euro-Algerians to the effect that Algeria was effectively a wine colony, analogous to a sugar or coffee colony. But it would be wrong to take such views--usually expressed by people who had an interest in the wine industry--too literally, and White might have contextualized the role of wine in the fate of French Algeria more fully.

To be sure, wine was a critical part of the Algerian economy, but Algeria was also an important source of cereals and other agricultural produce, as well as of iron ore. And we cannot overlook the importance of Algeria in strategic and political terms. Its wine industry was important in defining Algeria's place within France, but it was not the only thing that made Algeria valuable as a colonial territory.

A broader economic and political contextualization of wine might have softened the impression that wine and Algeria's political fortunes were inextricably linked. Algeria's wine industry did collapse following independence, but it was not a critical force in Algeria's geo-political history. At the point when Algeria and France parted ways, the Algerian wine industry was still pumping out massive volumes of wine for blending with the metropolitan French product. There might also have been more on the indigenous population, although it is possible that White provided us with all he was able to get from the archives. In the early decades of the Algerian wine industry, up to the 1890s, the labor force was largely drawn from Spain and elsewhere, including Morocco, rather than from local populations. Jail inmates were sometimes used, but White notes that they were given a wine ration and so were probably not Muslims, and prisoners of war were drafted for vineyard work during World War I. So a range of workers was hired or forced to toil in Algeria's vineyards and wineries, but we learn very little about the indigenous workers and local reactions to wineries until after World War II and the beginning of the war for independence.

After independence, Algeria's wineries were nationalized, and it is interesting that the new government--especially of a majority Muslim country--did not close the wine industry down entirely. Instead, it negotiated progressively declining quotas for the French market and looked for new markets to take the excess production. Granted that wine was a big earner for Algeria, one might have thought that, like governments of other newly independent states, they might associate wine (and alcohol generally) with colonial domination. India, for example, included prohibition in its constitution, even though it is policy in only a few Indian states.

Finally, the book would have benefited from more maps and tables or diagrams. There is one map of France showing the four main wine-producing *départements* of the Midi and one map of Algeria. But the Algerian *départements* and the wine-producing areas are not shown, and neither are most of the places referred to in the text.

As for the statistical apparatus, there is one table that shows changes in the area under vines in the four French and three Algerian *départements* between 1928 and 1932. Yet, although the longer-term changes in Algeria's vineyard area and wine production are dramatic and lie at the heart of this book, they are not illustrated by graphs or tables. The information is in the text at various places, but the rise and the fall of Algerian wine is the central issue, and seeing it demonstrated graphically would have been helpful.

Overall, though, this is a very significant work on a subject that Owen White convincingly shows is an important one. There is perhaps no other region where wine was so central to politics and the economy. Nor is there a similar case of wine production rising to such heights so rapidly and then declining so definitively. White deserves our thanks for documenting and explaining this phenomenon in his fine book.

NOTE

[1] Giulia Meloni and Johan Swinnen, "The Rise and Fall of the World's Largest Wine Exporter--And Its Institutional Legacy," *Journal of Wine Economics* 9 (2014): 3-33.

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