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Nina S. Studer, *The Hour of Absinthe: A Cultural History of France's Most Notorious Drink*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024. 264 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. $29.95 U.S. (pb). IBSN 9-78-0228022206.

Review by Adam Zientek, University of California Davis.

The history of drugs and alcohol is on the rise. Once a small niche in social history, it has become an important field in its own right. This is long overdue. After all, drugs and alcohol have been part of civilization from its beginning and nearly every society has had its psychotropic of choice. This not only implies the existence of various systems of production, distribution, rituals of consumption, and attempts to regulate that consumption and direct its effects, each of which has its own history. It also means that the ways that people in the past thought about and consumed psychotropics can tell us much about the way they thought about their societies and social problems, about their bodies, minds, and spirits, and, indeed, about what it meant (and means) to be human.

Nowhere is the history of alcohol more important than in Modern France. This is because between the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and the Second World War, the French produced and consumed more alcohol per capita than any other people in history. This consumption reached its height in the early Third Republic (1871-1914), a time when France was, according to historian Michael Marrus's famous formulation, amid a "great collective binge."[1] It is thus fitting that alcohol history is most developed in the French context. There are excellent general and specialized histories of wine, [2] a plethora of works that examine the concept and treatment of alcoholism, [3] and, most recently, several studies about alcohol consumption in the army during the First World War.[4] But something has been missing: a serious history of absinthe.

Absinthe--the "green fairy," "green sorceress," "green peril," and the "opium of the west"--was and still is the most mysterious and mythical of drinks, one that reportedly produced intense, unique physical and mental sensations that could lead to heights of ecstasy or vales of tears. With its extremely high alcohol content, absinthe was a powerful drug and symbol, a master of disguise whose cultural and social meanings changed throughout its history. In the nineteenth century, it was sequentially a colonial medicine, the drink of choice of bourgeois and scruffy bohemians, and a perfidious poison that threatened to wipe the French race from the earth by corrupting the bodies and minds of women and workers. For some, absinthe was the essence of French genius distilled green; for others, it was a noxious foreign substance that viciously

conquered both Hexagon and empire. The drink thus embodied both the joys and anxieties of the *belle époque*.

In *The Hour of Absinthe: A History of France's Most Notorious Drink*, historian Nina S. Studer seeks to penetrate through absinthe's historical *louche* and demystify the drink. Studer begins with the its hazy origins in mid eighteenth-century Switzerland, where the drink was consumed for medicinal purposes. Absinthe was then brought to France in the 1790s, but it is not clear by whom, perhaps by a certain Doctor Ordinaire or maybe by a member of his household, Madame Henriod. It is clear, however, that absinthe was first produced in quantity by Henri-Louis Pernod, who established a distillery in the Swiss town of Doubs in 1797-98 and then another right across the French border in the Pontarlier in 1805. The latter, named "Pernod Fils," became, over the course of the nineteenth century, France's largest and most famous absinthe producer.

Absinthe's popularity was neither immediate nor metropolitan. Studer shows that the drink's initial rise took place in France's army in Algeria, particularly towards the end of the conquest in 1844-7. But again, absinthe's early history is obscured by myth. Rumors held that the army supplied an absinthe ration to soldiers because of the drink's supposed medicinal properties and ability to make water potable. Studer disputes this, finding no evidence of official rations. That is not to say that soldiers did not supply themselves generously with the drink as a form of "self-medication" (p. 51). Indeed, the strongest evidence of the African army's love of absinthe came in the form of the army's own attempts to regulate or even ban its consumption among soldiers in the late 1840s and early 1850s. These were the very first French temperance measures. French settlers then took up the practice of drinking absinthe for much the same reason as soldiers: for its supposed medicinal properties and the sociability it produced. It was these settlers who first committed themselves to the "blessed hour of absinthe" (p. 58), a time in the afternoon when the drink was typically consumed publicly and ritualistically in *cafés*. This argument about the colonial origins of absinthe is Studer's most significant contribution to the historiography. She provides yet another example that the histories of metropole and colonies are intimately connected and that we cannot understand one without the other.

Studer then shows how absinthe migrated to France in the 1850s when victorious soldiers returned to the metropole and civilians took to the drink as a way of glorifying (and vicariously experiencing) the conquest of Algeria. And so launched absinthe's campaign to colonize the Hexagon. It first took off with fashionable members of the bourgeoisie, who enthusiastically committed themselves to the hour of absinthe. So long as the right people consumed it in the right place, at the right time, and in the right way--"only during the hour of absinthe, before meals, [...] limited to one glass, and [not taken] neat" (p. 75)--absinthe was a source of joy, inspiration, and relaxation. Any ill effects of the drink were supposedly avoided by moderation and constraint in its consumption. This, Studer notes, tracks well with bourgeois constructions of masculinity circulating in the nineteenth century, which held moderation and self-discipline to be the highest of virtues (pp. 75-76).

Enter *phylloxera*, an aphid that, after travelling to France from the United States during a mid-century viticultural exchange, infected and more than decimated French vines. By the 1870s, about a third of all vines under cultivation had been destroyed. The supply of wine plummeted, pushing prices up. Some French drinkers, with wine now prohibitively expensive, turned to what

the French called "industrial alcohol"--distilled alcohol mass produced from beets, potatoes, and grain--as a substitute for wine. The price of distilled alcohol plummeted as its production and consumption skyrocketed. Nowhere was this more apparent than with absinthe, which became affordable enough that people other than bourgeois men (e.g., bohemian artists and *declassés*, women, workers, and colonials) began to consume the drink in quantity. Studer shows how members of these groups were believed to lack the restraint and discipline of "M. Bourgeois." Their consumption of absinthe became, as the century ended, a pressing social problem precisely because the wrong people began consuming it in the wrong places at the wrong times and in the wrong ways.

In the late nineteenth century, the French made a clear distinction between beer, cider, and wine, which were classified as *boissons hygièniques* [hygienic drinks] and industrially distilled alcohols, which were classified as *boissons alcoolisées* [alcoholic drinks]. On the one hand, *boissons hygièniques* were healthy and their moderate consumption desirable. On the other hand, *boissons alcoolisées* were unhealthy and any amount of their consumption dangerous. Indeed, French doctors and temperance reformers believed idiosyncratically that *boissons hygièniques* were so healthy that their consumption could *cure* alcoholism. The solution to the problems of depopulation and degeneration was thus to assure that every alcoholic in France had enough wine to drink himself sober. These reformers considered absinthe the *boisson alcoolisée* par excellence, a uniquely dangerous form of drink that led workers--who barbarically took down more than one neat glass in a single sitting--to violence and the destruction of all that is good, pure, and beautiful. Indeed, as Studer demonstrates, by the end of the century, absinthe's reputation had changed. It was no longer only or even primarily considered a source of joy and sociability. It was a mortal threat to French power and prosperity.

Women's absinthe consumption was particularly problematic in the early Third Republic, when French politicians and social reformers became obsessed with the twin threats of depopulation and degeneration. Depopulation (i.e., falling birthrates that promised fewer workers and conscripts) and degeneration (i.e., the idea that the conditions of modernity driving evolution in reverse and producing physical weakness, criminality, and disease, particularly among the working classes) threatened to destroy the quantity and quality of French bodies. Women, as the bearers and early teachers of French citizens, had a special duty to remain healthy, vigorous, and abstinent. Absinthe consumption and abuse among women thus portended the decline and destruction of the French nation and race.

But nowhere was politicians' and reformers' anxiety about distilled alcohol consumption more acute than when contemplating workers, who could as of the 1880s, afford absinthe for the first time. As Studer argues, absinthe and addiction to it (known awkwardly as "absinthism") became problems precisely when the working class began to drink it. The drink, reformers believed, was a kind of super-drug, one whose negative effects were profound, especially when drunk by people who lacked the will and self-control of bourgeois gentlemen. Reformers believed that this "opium of the west" could even, Studer contends, turn French citizens into a degraded and weak "oriental other" (p. 172). "The conviction that absinthe caused violent reactions in people led some to view all absinthe drinkers--even occasional ones--as potentially dangerous" (p. 148), she argues. When absinthe was banned one year into the First World War, reformers, politicians, and all concerned with the health of the French race celebrated.

In Studer's view, the hour of absinthe was not just a ritualized practice that involved taking a cool refreshing glass at a café with friends in the afternoon. Rather, it is a metaphor for the early history of the Third Republic and all its hopes, fears, and contradictions--the hour of absinthe encompassed the entire duration and spirit of the *belle epoque* in France. To make her case, Studer relies on a commendably wide variety of sources in French and English. Writings of social and medico-psychiatric reformers, newspaper articles, accounts of travelers, absinthe advertisements, and legal cases involving supposedly absinthe-driven violence: these make up the bulk of her generous citations. The narrative she provides is clear and convincing; the book is logically structured and generally flows well; and Studer throughout shows a keen sense of ironic humor that makes for a good read.

Of course, *The Hour of Absinthe* has some shortcomings. While the research Studer has done into the medico-psychiatric literature on absinthe consumption is fulsome, there is a puzzling lack of consideration of the rich literary sources that describe the experience of drinking it. Studer's prose can occasionally be wordy or redundant. Moreover, Studer's intersectional approach, that views absinthe's history through the lenses of race, gender, and class, is largely standard in French history. Therefore *The Hour of Absinthe* sits squarely in the interpretive mainstream, taking few methodological or interpretive risks.

Finally, Studer leaves arguably the most interesting questions about absinthe largely unanswered. If it was nothing other than ordinary albeit overproof alcohol, how and why did it produce such distinct and powerful experiences? Why did drinkers report vivid hallucinations when the drink had no hallucinogenic properties? Why did they themselves think absinthe's intoxication *felt different* than that of regular alcohol, even though that is just what it was? And how did this different feeling lead to different behaviors and interpretations thereof? The answer surely has to do with the effects of what Norman E. Zinberg called the "set" (i.e., drug-takers' expectations about what the drug's effects will be) and the "setting" (i.e., the physical and social environment in which a drug is consumed), which are every bit as important as the pharmacological properties of a given drug in shaping the experience of intoxication.[5] *The Hour of Absinthe* would have benefitted greatly from a more thorough investigation of the sets and settings in which absinthe was drunk and how culture interacted with pharmacology.

Nevertheless, *The Hour of Absinthe* is necessary reading for those interested in the history of alcohol and that of the early Third Republic. Well-researched and refreshingly free of jargon, it will undoubtedly be the canonical work on the history of absinthe for years to come.

NOTES

[1] Michael Marrus, "Social Drinking in the '*Belle Epoque*'," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1974).

[2] See, among many others, Leo A. Loubère, *The Red and the White: A History of Wine in France and Italy in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978) and *The Wine Revolution in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Marcel Lachiver, *Vins, vignes, et vignerons: histoire du vignoble français* (Paris: Fayard, 1988); Didier

Nourrisson, *Une histoire du vin* (Paris: Perrin, 2017); W. Scott Haine, *The World of the Paris Café: Sociability Among the French Working Class, 1789-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Kolleen Guy, *When Champagne Became French: Wine and the Making of a National Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Noelle Plack: *Common Land, Wine and the French Revolution: Rural Society and Economy in Southern France, c. 1789-1820* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009); Rod Phillips, *French Wine: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

[3] See, for instance, Thierry Fillaut, *L'alcoolisme dans l'ouest de la France pendant la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Documentation française, 1983); Jean-Charles Sournia, *Histoire de l'alcoolisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986); Didier Nourrisson, *Alcoolisme et antialcoolisme en France sous la Troisième République* (Paris: Documentation française, 1988); Patricia Prestwich, *Drink and the Politics of Social Reform: Antialcoholism in France Since* 1870 (Palo Alto; Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1988); Betrand Dargelos, *La lutte antialcooliqaue en France depuis le XIX siècle* (Paris: Dalloz, 2008); Joseph Bohling, *The Sober Revolution: Appellation Wine and the Transformation of France* (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 2018).

[4] See Thierry Fillaut, *Le pinard des poilus* (Paris: Éditions la Manuscrit, 2014); Stéphane le Bras, "Vin, littérature de guerre et construction identitaire. Le cas des soldats languedociens pendant le Grand Guerre," *Siècles* 39-40 (2014); Christophe Lucand, *Le pinard des poilus: une histoire du vin en France Durant la Grande Guerre* (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2015); Charles Ridel, *L'ivresse du soldat: l'alcool dans les tranchées, 1914-1918* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2016); Adam D. Zientek, *A Thirst for Wine and War: The Intoxication of French Soldiers on the Western Front* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 2024).

[5] Norman E. Zinburg, *Drug, Set, and Setting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

Adam Zientek
University of California Davis
azientek@ucdavis.edu

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