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# What's wine got to do with it?

Chapter 3 showed how quickly some of the memoirists were able to claim a sense of belonging in France through spatial practices. The examples were given of Bryce Corbett, Christopher Lawrence, Mary Moody and Janelle McCulloch, for whom belonging was said to be the clear result of frequenting a local bar or bars. This is of course not only a spatial practice, but a combination of regular presence and alcohol consumption.

Alcohol is often imagined to facilitate fluency in a foreign language, and in fact there is evidence that a modest quantity can indeed improve pronunciation in some cases (Renner et al. 2017; Guiora et al. 1972). Among the authors, Bryce Corbett alludes to this, writing that 'Dinner Party French did not require a massive vocabulary. It was a proficiency with the language that was directly proportional to the amount of wine you had imbibed' (2007, 226). In a radio interview, he describes looking longingly at unopened bottles of red, imagining that fluency is to be found at the bottom of them (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2008). For others, it is the symbolic value of drinking wine, rather than the alcohol content, that is expected to deliver fluency. Nielsen is disappointed when, along with other stereotypically French practices, it fails to accelerate her language learning: 'I've watched the French news. I've listened to French songs. I've eaten too much Brie, doused myself in French perfume, downed too many Beaujolais, and still I struggle' (2007, 8). In other memoirs, the symbolic power of French wine is such that it can substitute entirely for language proficiency and other cultural identifiers: Ambrose—granted,

ironically—notes that ‘Julie had left me with strict instructions that in order to be Real French Women, it was essential that we drink champagne’ (2005, 151). Ambrose seeks to soak up Frenchness as she drinks.

As these examples suggest, alcohol consumption features prominently in the Australian memoirs of life in France. This is perhaps unsurprising given the stereotypes of the two cultures. What is nonetheless revealing is the extent to which the authors are able or willing to attend to cultural differences in drinking habits, and the role drinking plays in their own cultural identification. This chapter attends to patterns among the ways the Australian authors represent drinking as a cultural practice in their memoirs of life in France.

## Expat drinking

For a number of the authors, overindulgence in wine is considered emblematic of life in France. Wine is seen as delightfully abundant, which constitutes a welcome invitation to constant consumption. This is particularly the case among those authors who mingle mostly with other expatriates, who happily down bottles in what they believe to be French fashion, and catalogue the extent of their drinking with pride.

Ann Rickard recounts a two-week ‘romp’ in a small village in the south of France for a dozen middle-aged ‘boozed-up Australians’ (2008, 156), who are ‘constantly hazy from too much excess the night before’ (52). A few days into the stay, Rickard’s husband

had already made half-a-dozen trips to the local wine cave to keep up with demand. [...] The wines are so drinkable and inexpensive, it seems mandatory to drink as much as you want. We had allowed for five litres a day. We were drinking at least treble that. (67–68)

And that figure doesn’t include what they drink when they go out. At a local restaurant, the proprietor ‘came out and asked what sort of wine they wanted. “Any sort,” they replied’ (122–23). Although aware that her group sets themselves apart from the locals through their raucousness, Rickard seems oblivious to local norms of wine consumption. This representation

of drinking is of course entirely in keeping with the idea of a 'romp'; it's a source of humour and is presumably calculated to invite identification among her largely Australian readership.<sup>1</sup>

Barbara Biggs similarly enjoys partying till dawn with other expats in the Lazy Pigs Millionaires Club, where unbridled drinking figures conspicuously (2005, 113, 141, 192, 224, 233, 255, 274). Although she notices in passing that the French drink less (112), she concludes that 'Paris is such a social whirl you could wake up one morning and find yourself an alcoholic without even trying' (242).

## Awareness of cultural differences

At the other extreme, we find authors who show acute awareness not only of cultural patterns but of subcultural subtleties in drinking cultures. Cashman explains that through interviewing the residents of the village where she lives, she:

came to appreciate the protocol of the aperitif, which I had experienced often enough, but never really thought about: it comes at the conclusion of, and not during, the serious business. And after a serious discussion it is practically *de rigueur*. (2008, 287)

Similarly contemplating the aperitif, Downes identifies French class distinctions in the consumption of champagne: 'We drink a bottle of champagne, an habitual aperitif in French middle-class families, even if there is nothing special to celebrate' (2006, 105).

Between these poles of oblivion and sensitivity, several authors identify differences between national drinking cultures. Bagwell sums up:

it seemed to me that the French simply understood the meaning of moderation. [...] most people would drink their wine slowly with their meal, savouring its flavour and aroma with small sips. (2006, 111–12)

They also abhorred what they saw as the Brits' famed lack of self-control when it came to drinking. (132)

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<sup>1</sup> Australian pride in excessive drinking is well-documented. See for example Huntsdale (2014) and Reid et al. (2013).

The contrast between French and Anglo-Australian drinking habits is noted by several authors. After two years in France, Henrietta Taylor has sufficiently distanced herself from her upbringing to mock Australian drinking norms in the person of her friend Ray, for whom one of the ‘Top Ten French Faults’ is that ‘Quality, age and provenance were considered the most important factors in red wine, as opposed to quantity, a prized Australian attribute’ (2008, 105). Taylor is not the only author to identify quantity versus quality of wine as a critical cultural difference. Indeed in John Baxter’s case, it provides a tipping point in his cultural identity. In his series of memoirs covering more than two decades in France, Baxter makes few and cautious claims to belonging in France. Only once is there a moment of qualified identification as French, and it coincides with a refusal of Australian norms of behaviour. On being given poor quality wine to taste at a Bordeaux vineyard, he writes:

I found the toilet and spat into the sink. Generations of my Australian drinking forebears groaned in their graves at the waste, but I felt no guilt. However marginal my status, I was a Frenchman now. (2008, 148)

Valuing quality over quantity is sufficient to identify him as more French than Australian.

Katrina Lawrence similarly identifies acquiring this scale of values as a milestone on the path to Frenchness. Recalling a visit to Paris while in her twenties, she recounts the aftermath of a relationship breakup:

If I were French, my well-honed sense of rationality—and commitment to quality over quantity—would have ensured that I stopped at three drinks, probably two. But I had far to go on my wishful journey to turn French by osmosis. Any Frenchness I had picked up certainly didn’t yet extend into the realm of drinking habits. So I uncorked a bottle of *rouge*, and methodically made my way through it [...]. (2017, 146)

Drinking to excess underscores the fact that she is still far from French. The ramifications of drinking habits for identity also become apparent to Sarah Turnbull, for whom quantity versus quality of wine is one of the most salient differences between Australian and French socialising:

The scene is remarkable for the startling absence of alcohol: the wine dried up after dinner. I’m used to it flowing in reckless, bottomless quantities. It’s not a lack of generosity on the part

of our hosts—the Burgundies served with dinner were very fine expensive *crus*. Maybe this is something I'll have to get used to in France: smaller, measured quantities of wine. (2002, 50)

She returns to this difference on multiple occasions (62, 73, 77, 247), discovering that Australian habits of drinking not only set her apart in France (197) but impinge on her identity, in particular her identity as a woman. In France, drinking 'more than the usual half-filled flute of champagne that French women indulge in at dinner parties' (176) marks her out as not only foreign, but also, curiously, feminist, in that it constitutes a rejection of the norms for feminine behaviour.

This, then, is a cultural difference with consequences, with drinking one of the aspects of behaviour that is most closely bound to Australianness for a number of the authors, and often quite resistant to change. Particularly interesting are the cases where contrasts in drinking cultures are described, but apparently not heeded. In several memoirs, Australian authors juxtapose descriptions of their own approach to alcohol with images of restraint among the French without considering the possibility of adapting to local customs.

Janelle McCulloch considers it necessary to learn to drink alcohol in large quantities to fit in in France, a tenacious belief blithely shared by various Australian memoir writers. She writes that 'Parisians love to drink. A lot' (2008, 85), the ambiguity of the expression suggesting that appreciation of alcohol and drinking to excess are indissociable and that both are Parisian traits. She comments that 'There is much to drink in Paris, and it can be daunting finding your way around the glasses, dinner tables and bars if you don't know your Krug from your kir' (85). Learning these distinctions doesn't put a brake on her appetite for quantity, and in her chapter on Parisian bars she takes Ernest Hemingway—the ultimate expat in Paris—as her model for consumption (69–89). Although she characterises herself as 'sadly, not a big drinker' (73), she embarks on 'an evening of alcohol-soaked hedonism' (81) with another expat journalist. This turns into one of several occasions where she consoles herself by getting 'very, very drunk' (45). And yet we find traces of irony: she describes herself sculling spirits, while across the table her friend Simone, presented as someone fully integrated into Parisian life, merely takes a second sip from her glass of champagne (100). The contrast is obvious but McCulloch pretends not to notice and continues her copious drinking, paradoxically underlining her Australianness in an activity she describes as quintessentially Parisian.

Bryce Corbett too proudly chronicles his alcohol consumption. His arrival at work with a hangover attracts the comment 'Been out Corbetting again, have we?' (2007, 53). As he observes:

The fact that my surname had become a verb to describe drunken behaviour of a most unbecoming sort should probably have given me cause for concern. But I was too busy dealing with a perma-hangover and marvelling that instead of discouraging my behaviour, my immediate superiors seemed to find it amusing—refreshing even. (53)

As with Rickard and McCulloch, the general effect is one of humour at the author's own expense. Meanwhile, he notices the restraint of the French where drinking is concerned—'French social etiquette stipulates that under no circumstances should you ever pour yourself a drink' (40)—and struggles to find French drinking partners, exclaiming with relief when he finally finds some at an underground gathering (48). Corbett ends up forming close bonds with a group of expat drinking partners of the same age, the 'Paris posse' (45), with whom he finds a 'heightened state of mateship' (160) compared to what he had experienced in Australia. Here we start to see Corbett developing ambivalence with regard to Australian expressions of masculinity. He proceeds to mock Australian men in general for their attachment to beer, remarking on the woeful efforts at seduction by a visiting rugby team (279) given that 'In Australia, the closest a male comes to flirting is asking a woman to pass him his schooner of beer' (234). He thus distances himself to some extent from these versions of Australian male drinking culture, but without embracing in any way the moderation that he has observed—as generally characteristic of the French.

Like Corbett, Mary Moody casually observes cultural differences in drinking habits without allowing them to impinge on her own behaviour. Arriving in France, she socialises with other expatriates, which 'requires a tremendous amount of stamina because it involves quaffing copious quantities of wine and beer' (2001, 78). She gradually notices that French people eat less than she does (178), and even notices that the expats who are more integrated into the local community drink less (2001, 147–48), but her effort to follow suit and adapt her drinking (178) is short-lived. This pattern continues in the sequels to her story, where we read that her drinking, unremarkable in Australia, is heavier than that of the roadworkers at the next table in the local restaurant (2005a, 4, 74), where she and her companions can be found 'quaffing the red wine like it's going out of style' (2003, 234). Indeed it resembles the drinking of the 'craggy-faced locals'

she sees when she wanders down to the bar at midday 'for a pre-lunch drink or two' (2003, 81). The barman clearly sees her daily consumption as unusual and teases her (82). When she returns to France after an absence '[t]he local barflies smile in recognition and kiss me on both cheeks, after first removing stubby cigarettes that seem permanently stuck in the corners of their mouths' (2005b, 103). She sees this as acceptance into the local culture, but passes over the fact that it is a rather particular local subculture. Once again, the transfer of Australian drinking habits into France lends them a new signification: while Turnbull's drinking marked her out as foreign and feminist, and Corbett's was characteristic of underground rather than mainstream parties, Moody's situates her among the local barflies, rather than her usual social group. Although she notices the differences in the quantities drunk by tourists and locals, she is loath to adapt her drinking, which positions her among the 'foreign holidaymakers' (2005b, 173) and local soaks.

## What's wine got to do with it?

Apparently banal, awareness of the differences in drinking habits functions as a shortcut measure of intercultural awareness in the memoirs. It appears possible to spend weeks and even longer in France in an alcohol-soaked haze, imagining this as very French, rather than an exaggeration of home-grown patterns of behaviour. Moody, Corbett and McCulloch all write of adapting to life in France, and of becoming part of the local culture. They adapt their eating habits, their dress, their interactional style and their outlook on life, but they do not go so far as to adapt their drinking habits, which appear to be so firmly anchored in their behaviour and identity as to be a fixture. In her fourth volume of memoirs, Moody attributes her drinking to a media subculture. She notes that excessive drinking is an occupational hazard for journalists (2009, 115)—a view seconded by Tony Davis (2007, 55, 189)—and recognises her own tendencies in this regard (2009, 124–25), but 'simply can't imagine sitting at a table in France, eating fabulous food and sipping a glass of sparkling mineral water' (2009, 128). Although a large proportion of the authors have worked as journalists, the memoirs when grouped together suggest that alcohol-related behaviour goes beyond this group and is deeply rooted in Australian culture, to the point where it is a cultural identifier—a proxy for Australianness—providing one of the most salient and most stubborn points of difference between French and Australian cultures.

In the acculturation of these writers to French norms, some changes in lifestyle and behaviour prove more resistant than others. In general, the authors show great enthusiasm for learning all aspects of food culture in France, comment on the smaller portions and the need to learn not to overeat, and muse on the thinness of French women, so it is curious that the same attention and desire to emulate does not always extend to drinking in France. Australian drinking habits are often the last area of behaviour that the authors are willing or able to relinquish, re-evaluate or adapt. What's wine got to do with it? In the memoirs, it functions as a paradoxical signifier of cultural belonging: on the one hand it is proclaimed as a symbol of French culture; on the other hand, the more it is consumed at one sitting, the less Frenchness it confers on the drinker, allowing the authors to reassert their Australianness through swigging champagne.

Corbett and Turnbull in particular associate drinking behaviour with gender roles in Australia and France. From the outset, this book has highlighted issues of gender and identity, paying particular attention to the cultural identifications of the women among the authors. It is time to compare these patterns to patterns specific to the men's memoirs, before exploring the ways in which gender—more particularly gender relations—develops into a theme in some of the memoirs of the corpus. Let us then bring the focus squarely on an underlying question of this book and ask 'What's gender got to do with it?'

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