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978-0-521-59248-2 - The Brandy Trade under the Ancien Régime: Regional Specialisation in the Charente

L.M. Cullen

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The Brandy Trade under the *Ancien Régime*

Regional Specialisation in the Charente

This study of the brandy trade and its merchants illustrates an intimate knowledge of spirits, the origins of which are relatively obscure and which were little traded internationally in 1600. Professor Cullen explores the emergence of cognac, the world's most famous spirit, as well as the evolution of its home region, the Charente. Brandy was part of the dynamic changes in alcoholic beverages in the seventeenth century, which a growing taste for spirits and novel surplus conditions in conjunction were to boost in the following century. Professor Cullen demonstrates that the brandy trade did not belong to a culture dependent on unstable agrarian surpluses and a precarious peasant viticulture, and illustrates that the French economy in the eighteenth century was more complex and dynamic than is often assumed. He shows that the brandy trade was based on a sophisticated regional economy, which, from the 1720s, was not only linked to the international market, but also supplied the imbibers of Paris with brandy and its bankers with bills drawn on foreign centres. Notwithstanding competition from cereal- and sugar-based products and from other brandy regions which emerging surplus created, regional specialisation in the Charente was an indispensable element in ensuring skill in distillation, quality of product and a stable output, and was recognised in the region's success in attracting foreign merchants who later became household names, such as Martell and Hennessy.

L. M. Cullen is Professor of Modern Irish History at Trinity College, Dublin

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To the memory of Síle Ní Chinnéide

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Preface

This book grew out of what was originally research – still ongoing intermittently after more than forty years – into the Irish merchant community in France. I assumed that a one-day visit by motor car from Bordeaux to Cognac at the beginning of October 1976 would be the prelude to a further two or three days in Cognac at a later stage. The sheer scale of the Hennessy archive changed all that and my interest gradually widened to embrace other houses and the brandy trade at large. Cognac is a remarkable drink, perhaps the most remarkable spirit of all, and it is fitting that its records in all their richness should have the same uniqueness.

More than twenty years later, and after innumerable visits to the region, with the refrain ‘Angouleme, Angouleme, deux minutes d’arret!’ at the railway junction for Cognac still ringing in my ears, weighty obligations have mounted up. Two stand out. One is to Alain Braastad, proprietor of Delamain’s, who guided me to many sources and discussed many problems; my major single debt to him is for help in sorting out the early technical development of brandy, in which a knowledge of brandy making is as essential as the documentary sources, in order to avoid slipping into error, and to both him and Marilise for hospitality and friendship. The other debt is to Maurice Richard Hennessy who, like his ancestor two centuries ago, looks after the Irish market and whose patient help and support have been forthcoming on numerous occasions. There is yet a third obligation to Jacques de Varenne whose interest and support have been unstinting and who also gave me the run of Augier’s premises at weekends; Monsieur and Madame de Varenne’s hospitality at midday on Cognac’s winter days often compensated for the rigours of the numbing cold of unheated offices.

There are also obligations to others, often for access at short notice or in busy seasons. At Hine’s they are owed to Brian Thompson, managing director in the early 1980s, and to Bernard Hine. At Hennessy’s, over the years, they are owed to Frank Rochard, to Madame Jouannet and Monsieur Pestiaux in the archives, and to the genial and legendary Louis Bertin, sommelier of the house when the archives were stored with the

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bottles (in the customary cold conditions), who knew how to restore a researcher with brandy, claret and pineau. At Martell's Madame Evelyn Chapeau Woodrow, who was responsible for the excellent arrangement of the archives, and Mademoiselle Rousseau provided willing assistance over many years. Gérard de Ramefort, managing director of Otard's, provided much help, especially in relation to his researches on the difficult and interesting background of the Otard family, and both he and Madame Ludy Chapeau helped me in several visits to the firm. Madame Adole, to whom I was introduced by Monsieur de Varenne, provided me with information about her ancestor, Samuel Turner. The fact that two Samuel Turners resided in Hamburg at the end of the 1790s was, to say the least, disconcerting, and patient enquiry by Miss Ann Neary of the National Archives, Dublin, and, through the good offices of Dr Anthony Malcomson, by Miss Linda Johnston of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, provided information on one of the two Turners which was essential to resolving this problem beyond all doubt.

Professor Paul Butel of Bordeaux very kindly gave me a copy of his transcript of the brandy exports of Bordeaux and has often helped with his advice. Other debts are to Recteur Jean-Pierre Poussou, president of the University of Paris IV (Paris-Sorbonne) and to Professor Philip Loupès of the University of Bordeaux III. My wife spent a week with me in the Hennessy archives in 1978 and Matthew Stout of the Department of Geography, Trinity College, has very kindly drawn the graph and maps. The late Dr Peter Skrabanek of the Department of Social Medicine and Professor James McCormick, both of Trinity College, gave me advice from a medical perspective on the properties of spirits and brandy. I am indebted to Dr Jean-Louis Plisson for permission to reproduce details of the 1804 sepia sketch. I am also grateful to Professor T. M. Bartlett of University College, Dublin, for some invaluable detail on the Irish distiller Hilary Andoe. Finally a warm note of appreciation is in order to Richard Fisher at CUP, the production team and the anonymous referees. The dedication is to Síle Ní Chinnéide who introduced me to historical research in 1953 and whose suggestion of French trade as a dissertation subject was in a sense responsible for everything.

Twenty years is the time span in which a well-cared-for brandy reaches perfection; my hope is that some of this quality may have rubbed off on the book and that its twenty years of maturation may be a small repayment to many, not all mentioned in this preface, whose cooperation, unstinting help and unfailing courtesy have been drawn on. This volume deals with production and trade; it is hoped that a second book will appear shortly dealing with the families engaged in the *ancien régime* brandy trade.

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Abbreviations

AAC	Augier archives, Cognac
AAE	Archives des Affaires étrangères, Ministères des Affaires étrangères, Paris
ACC	Archives of the Chambre de Commerce, La Rochelle
ADC	Archives départementales de la Charente, Angouleme
ADCM	Archives départementales de la Charente maritime, La Rochelle
ADG	Archives départementales de la Gironde, Bordeaux
AN	Archives nationales, Paris
CPA	Correspondance politique Angleterre
DAJ	Delamain archives, Jarnac
HAC	Hennessy archives, Cognac
HAI	Hine archives, Jarnac
MAC	Martel archives, Cognac
OAC	Otard archives, Cognac
PRO	Public Record Office, London

Glossary

<i>acquit</i>	Revenue entry or declaration for payment of the <i>aides</i> (see below), also described as an <i>acquit à caution</i> , which means that the merchant had signed a bond for later payment of the duties.
<i>aides</i>	Excise or sales taxes collected at local level by the fiscal authorities. As such, goods destined for local consumption, inland trade and export were all liable to the charge.
<i>Angleterre</i>	In French usage, denoted the British Isles including the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands as well as Ireland (in this sense the term is used in italics in the text).
anker	In French <i>ancre</i> , a small measure used by smugglers. It was as small as 12 gallons (HAJ, letter book 1771–5, 22 November 1773; 22 January 1774). Such ankers were illegal under revenue law in Britain or Ireland. They were also discouraged in France, and there was opposition as far back as 1729 by the officials of the <i>aides</i> to <i>ancre</i> s below 60 pintes (ACC, La Rochelle, no. 3601). As a result they were not readily available, and Irish smugglers sometimes brought ankers out with them from Ireland. An <i>ancre</i> of 64 pintes was, however, made in the Cognac region. This would amount to 16 gallons, English or Irish measure.
<i>banquier</i>	A banker. However, unlike the term ‘banker’ in English which was used sparingly, the term ‘ <i>banquier</i> ’ was used widely, and the nearest equivalent is the informal term ‘correspondent’ or ‘friend’, denoting a house which handled bill business, often as a sideline to other dealings. In essence a <i>banquier</i> or correspondent, neither of whom nec-

- essarily conducted a full range of banking functions, did – or could – create credit by allowing a provincial merchant to draw on him before he had negotiated such bills as were passed to him for disposal. No French *banquiers* issued notes payable to bearer, whereas English, Scottish and Irish bankers did (though by the end of the eighteenth century bankers existed in London, Edinburgh and Dublin who had ceased to issue notes payable to bearer). *Banquier* is an elastic term referring to function and to houses, some highly specialised, some not; ‘banker’ in English is a rigid term confined to houses issuing notes or, where notes were not issued, creating credit on a wide scale.
- barrique** In La Rochelle a measure containing 27 veltes, in Bordeaux 32 veltes.
- Borderies** A region to the north-west of the town of Cognac producing the best of the sweet wines of the region and also a brandy which was held to be almost the equal of brandy from the Champagne. See map 2.
- canton* A market. The Saturday canton in the town of Cognac was the main market for brandy. Though larger distillers sold direct to *négociants*, it remained important, especially for the smaller distillers. The name survives to this day in the Place du Canton in Cognac.
- Champagne** A region on two sides of the town of Cognac. The modern distinction between Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne was never made by eighteenth-century merchants. See map 2.
- Cinq grosses fermes** A customs union formed in 1664 embracing north-central France and reaching the sea in the Aunis (La Rochelle) and Poitou on the west coast and in Normandy and Picardy on the north coast. It had a common tariff on trade with other provinces and with foreign countries. Provinces outside the Cinq grosses fermes were termed Provinces réputées étrangères.
- couper (or coupe à la serpentine)* See also rectification. This process was used to create a better brandy. The flow of inferior brandy out of the *serpentine* (worm or cooling coil) was directed into a separate receptacle and later

returned to the still. In addition, the very first stages – the *tete* or, in English, the foreshots – of a distillation second pass contained highly volatile and unwanted elements and were directed into a separate receptacle. The final flow – the *queue* or tailings – was also diverted from the main receptacle. The object of the *coupe à la serpentine* was to eliminate a flow of brandy of intermediate quality – *seconde* – which was formerly admitted into the finished liquor.

état Summary returns of foreign trade, usually of a *généralité*. More detailed returns survive very rarely.

farmers-general *Fermiers-généraux* in French, they were the main tax-farming body, their duties *inter alia* including the collection of *aides* and *traïtes*. Their activity was determined by a series of successive contracts and they enjoyed a quasi-official status.

Fins Bois, Bons Bois Regions outside the ring of Champagne and Borderies districts. A clear distinction between Fins Bois and Bons Bois was not made in the eighteenth century although merchants made occasional reference to ‘woodlands’ and ‘best woodlands’ brandy in their letters. The reference to woods implied that they had been mixed regions of woods and varied agriculture, whereas the Champagne regions had acquired their name centuries previously as intensive cultivation had already left them comparatively denuded of woodland. The Bois Ordinaires or Bois Communs were regions beyond the Fins Bois and Bons Bois, still more mixed in activity and producing a brandy that was not highly regarded. While under modern legislation brandy from the districts defined as Bois Ordinaires, Bons Bois and Fins Bois enjoys the style of cognac brandy, the term ‘cognac’ was restricted in eighteenth-century usage to Champagne, Borderies and a region covering the Fins Bois and Bons Bois in later times. Brandy from the Champagne regions, usually designated as such, was increasingly the basis of the London trade. While some brandy from the Fins Bois and a little from the Bons Bois regions did enter into brandy bought for the London market,

- both regions and especially the Bons Bois provided a 'best cognac' which was quite distinct from and inferior to the Champagne and Borderies cognac.
- généralité* Administrative district supervised by an intendant. It usually embraced several historic provinces, and was the basic unit for the compilation of the statistics of the *balance du commerce*. As such, each *généralité* contained several 'bureaux' (in British customs' parlance 'creeks').
- muid a variable measure, used for many dry goods, but not regularly used commercially for liquids. It seems to have been used in the *balance du commerce* as a common measure to which to convert other measures of brandy or wine. It amounted to $1\frac{1}{3}$ of a la Rochelle barrique of 27 veltes or 144 *pots*. A decree of 2 July 1784 noted it as a measure of 36 veltes 'pour constater l'exportation et servir à la formation des états de la balance du commerce' (ACC, La Rochelle, no. 3666). Its use can be confirmed by detailed scrutiny of the figures in AN Paris F¹² 1666. While the *pot* was a variable measure, the revenue *pot*, like the revenue muid, seems to have been a fixed measure, used for coping with the varied local measures.
- négociant* The equivalent of merchant, and like merchant in the eighteenth-century usage of that term it denoted a position of prestige. *Négociant* derived from *négociier* (to negotiate) and indicated a trader who regularly negotiated or marketed bills, his own or those of others. It thus meant a merchant of standing and credit. As the century went by, merchants in this position ceased to describe themselves as they often had in the past as *marchand*, and used the more prestigious term.
- octrois* Municipal or town duties but with the proceeds usually going to the state.
- pièce* A large measure, the largest used in shipping brandy, generally the equivalent of 81 veltes or 3 barriques. A large *pièce* of 85 veltes was a recognised measure (AAC, letter book 1727–8, 1 November 1727). In Bordeaux the *pièce* was a measure of 50 veltes.
- pinte Four pintes were the equivalent of 1 gallon.

xvi	<i>Glossary</i>	
pipe		The term was in declining use in both English and French in the brandy trade. It seems to have been an alternative and archaic expression for the <i>pièce</i> . In 1763, there was reference to pipes of 85 veltes (MAC, letter book, 28 March 1763), and in 1768 to pipes of 180 to 190 gallons (DAJ, letter book, 13 August 1768).
<i>pot</i>		A small measure containing 4 veltes.
Provinces réputées étrangères		Provinces outside the Cinq grosses fermes. Goods paid tariffs on entry or exit from them and at identical rates, whether to or from each other, the Cinq grosses fermes or overseas. The level of duties also varied from one province to another.
puncheon		In French, tierçon. A measure amounting to two barriques, and the most common type of barrel for brandy shipments to England or Ireland (the smaller and more tightly bound barrique was favoured for longer voyages). Though in theory containing 54 veltes, its size grew (as a means of minimising charges) and after mid-century it universally contained 60 veltes, even running to 66 veltes.
rectification		Enhancing the alcoholic strength of brandy by one or more distillations beyond the two distillations which were normal to reach an acceptable strength. The term was also used to denote the strengthening of brandy in a second distillation by cutting off the flow through the worm or cooling coil before the alcoholic strength began to fall off, thus achieving a total accumulation in the receptacle at the outflow from the worm of a very high strength. This process was known as the <i>coupe à la serpentine</i> (see above). As it became widespread, the term ‘rectification’ was increasingly confined to the raising of brandy to a higher strength by a third or even further distillation. Specialist rectifiers emerged in Bordeaux and in the Languedoc who routinely raised brandies of indifferent strength to the desired strength by further distillations.
<i>régie</i>		Direct collection of taxes by state officials rather than by the tax farmers (i.e. private interest who contracted to collect taxes for an agreed sum,

	receiving a surplus as their profit or income). The collection of the <i>traites</i> by a <i>régie</i> became effective in 1783, though the <i>fermiers-généraux</i> were employed as the commissioners charged with administering the <i>régie</i> . That helped to draw on the state itself some of the hostility already directed against the farmers.
<i>soumission</i>	Declaration in order to obtain an <i>acquit</i> (see above).
<i>tierçon</i>	French for puncheon.
<i>Traite de Charente</i>	<i>Traite</i> signified the customs duties payable on entry or exit. The <i>Traite de Charente</i> was the duty payable at the ports of the provinces of Saintonge, which were principally Tonnay-Charente, Rochefort and Mortagne. In the <i>Traite de Charente</i> the customs duty levied on brandy was 11 livres compared with 3 livres levied in the Cinq grosses fermes. Other charges also accrued before the total duties, amounting to 19 livres at the beginning of the 1780s, were determined.
<i>velte</i>	Or verge. Widely used as a measure of content, the equivalent of 2 gallons. Hence it contained 8 pintes.

Terms in French are indicated in italics only when they have a special meaning, e.g. *Angleterre*. *Pièce* is written in italics, whereas *barrique*, used as a standard measure in the text is not. In general, measures are given in *ancien régime* units, rather than, as in modern French practice, converted into metric equivalents. The use of *ancien régime* measures reduces the ambiguities of processing uncertain or variable measures, and, more importantly, remains a more convenient mode of comparison for historical purposes with figures as quoted in both older and modern sources in English, where metric usage is very recent.

For the conversion of the Republican calendar into the Gregorian, M. Lyons, *France under the Directory* (Cambridge, 1995), appendix I, pp. 239–40, has been used.

In accordance with current practice, the French in this book does not include circumflexes.