Submission for DIT Dublin Gastronomy Symposium 2012

Tara Kellaghan, MSc.

Dublin Institute of Technology

Claret: the preferred libation of Georgian Ireland's élite

Irish wine

In the modern era, stout, whiskey, and *poitín* tend to be the alcoholic beverages most closely associated with Ireland in the public imagination. In the eighteenth century, however, the red wine of Bordeaux was consumed so widely and with such relish by Ireland's nobility and gentry that Dean Swift (Swift cited in Swift 1768, p.23) playfully referred to it as 'Irish wine' in a personal letter, confident that his correspondent would understand the term to denote claret.

Claret was, likewise, a preferred wine in England in this period, but due to varying political and trade issues throughout the eighteenth century, it often ceded its popularity there to that of port (Ludington 2003). In Ireland, the enthusiasm for claret strengthened apace with the century. A high tax on port in the 1780s ensured that claret's appeal did not wane (Kelly 1989, p.99). For Ireland's Georgian-era élite, the real impetus behind claret consumption can be ascribed to their susceptibility to the imperatives of native standards of hospitality and their delight in 'making the grand figure' (Barnard 2004). As Barnard explains, privileged members of Georgian Irish society shared 'a preoccupation with making the right impression ... with many contemporaries throughout Europe and America' (Barnard 2004, p.xxi). A period of relative political calm and increasing prosperity allowed those in the upper echelons of society (and some in its growing middling ranks) to steer Dublin to the position of second city in the Hanoverian empire (Barnard 2004, p.xviii). Only gentlemen (and ladies) of 'figure and fortune' were in a position to benefit from the social and material delights that a prosperous Dublin could offer─particularly in the latter half of the century. The members of this privileged social stratum comprised aristocratic estate owners; military officers; Anglican clergy; politicians; lawyers; bankers; landed gentry; gentlemen farmers and wealthy merchants. The majority of the members of these groups would have been of 'Old or New English lineage', whereas Catholics were by and large of ancient Irish lineage, i.e., Gaelic. In the context of this paper, nonetheless, the adjective 'Irish' will frequently be applied to the country's Georgian élite. Such a simplistic application is open to debate, but it should be noted that the aim of this paper is to consider the historiography of a specific gastronomic element of material culture, i.e., claret, in the context of a specific time and place; not to engage in socio-political or historical rhetoric.

Many wines were available to the eighteenth-century Irish lord or gentleman, from Canary to Rhenish (Mac Con Iomaire and Kellaghan 2011, p.3). Why then did claret achieve a position of social and gastronomic significance in Ireland that endured throughout the long Georgian era? The answer lies in the alignment of various political, social and economic factors which created the ideal conditions for claret's universal popularity amongst the ascendancy classes and a minority of middle to upper-class Roman Catholics who generally had direct trade links with Bordeaux (Clarkson 1999; Cullen 1986; Hayes 1971; Kelly 1989).

Turning misfortune into fortunes in Bordeaux

Strong Irish links with Bordeaux had been established before the eighteenth century. Hayes (1938, p.293) notes that there was an active trade with Bordeaux in the sixteenth century, and an Irish College was founded at Bordeaux in 1603. It was, nevertheless, during the eighteenth century that socio-economic links between the French port and those of southern Ireland reached a new level of importance. Clarke de Dromantin (1995, p.16) points out that the influx of *les oies sauvages* into late-seventeenth and early to mid-eighteenth century France occurred as a result of three distinct waves of emigration. The most significant of these followed the Jacobite defeats at the Battle of the Boyne (1690) and the Battle of Aughrim (1691), with two further waves following attempts at a Stuart restoration in 1715 and 1745. The approximately 50,000 Jacobite émigrés were primarily comprised of *gentilhommes* whose subsequent careers in France tended to be either military or mercantile in nature (and, in the case of a few prominent Catholic families, ecclesiastical). Numerous sources (Chaussinand-Nogaret 1975; Cullen 1981; Hayes 1971a) credit members of these 'Wild Geese' with playing a remarkable role in eighteenth-century French commerce, establishing businesses in the main ports on the Atlantic seaboard─most significantly in Nantes and Bordeaux. The latter had the distinction of sheltering an Irish colony notable for its dynamism (Clarke de Dromantin 1995; Hayes 1971b; Murphy 2005).

Dublin's expatriate communities may have been insignificant in comparison to those of Bordeaux. Notwithstanding, Cullen (1986, p.198) observes that a combination of Scottish Presbyterians working in association with Huguenot refugees was responsible for growing Georgian Dublin's wine trade with Bordeaux in the first half of the eighteenth century. The Huguenots carried their taste for French wine to other parts of Ireland. McCracken (2009, p.41) states that in Waterford the Huguenots participated in the wine trade, and Borrowes (1858, p.339) notes that Huguenot refugees from Bordeaux drank 'the prized beverage of their own native land.' He specifies that, in 1726, claret and

wine from Frontignac was supplied to a Huguenot residing in Portarlington by a fellow refugee trading as a wine merchant in Dublin.

The fact that Irish Catholic merchants were excluded from participation in the lucrative wine trade with Bordeaux for the first half of the eighteenth century cannot be surprising. The Catholic Dillon and Lynch families were two notable exceptions to this professional ostracism. The Dillons profited from family and banking ties to Ireland, and strong links to the Bourbon court. Lieutenant-Colonel the Honourable Arthur Dillon followed James II to France in 1690 (Hayes 1942, pp.485-86), where one Dillon *fils* became Archbishop of Narbonne and a grand-daughter became the Marquise de la Tour du Pin. The Lynches direct family ties to Galway helped to gain them the advantage in the wine trade with the west of Ireland (Cullen 1986, p.198). They became one of the preeminent families involved in the commercial and political life of Bordeaux for over a century, eventually rising to the ranks of the French peerage through their industry. The wine of Lynch-Bages perpetuates the family name to this day (Whelehan 1990,p.6).

The Winegeese spread their wings

Murphy (2005, p.35) coined the term 'Winegeese' to denote the Wild Geese who became involved in the wine trade in France, and for whom Bordeaux became 'home' in a spiritual and cultural sense. Irish merchant émigrés, however, were initially obliged to live and work outside of the city walls─a restriction then imposed upon all foreigners. Settling on the waterfront on the Quai des Chartrons, many of the Irish *Chartronnais* (as the foreign merchants came to be distinguished) rose to be the greatest of the city's wine brokers. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Irish Chartronnais had become the most influential expatriate community in Bordeaux (Murphy 2005, p.41). Hayes (1971a, p.29) enumerates Irish families who achieved positions of social prominence in Bordeaux (although his list is not exhaustive): Lynch, MacCarthy, Dillon, O'Byrne, Ffrench, Galway, and Kirwan. To these can be added the names of, Barton, Lawton, and Johnston; three Anglican families that numbered amongst the most successful in the wine trade. Through their relatives and business connections, they achieved levels of success that helped them wrest the custom of Ireland's most prominent families from Scottish Presbyterian wine merchants by the mid-eighteenth century (Cullen 1986, p.200).

It is important to note that Hiberno-French merchants did not depend solely on their former compatriots for business; their list of clientele included the illustrious in England (and later, America). In 1714, when James Brydges, 1st Duke of Chandos, was made Earl of Carnarvon, he marked his elevation by placing a large order of wine comprising 'six hogsheads of luxury claret, two of burgundy and two of champagne' from the Irish-born Richard Cantillon, and a further six hogsheads

of ‘the best Bordeaux’ from Bordeaux-based Irishman, Thomas Walsh (Ludington 2003, p.189). In 1785, on a visit to Bordeaux, Thomas Jefferson sought advice on stocking his Paris wine cellar from Abraham Lawton, originally from Cork. The Johnston family consolidated Bordeaux-Irish links with America’s political and social élite. A family member was despatched to North America in 1807. Courtesy of the Marquis de Lafayette, this *hibernois* was armed with a letter of introduction to George Washington’s secretary─General McHenry, another Irishman. Such prestigious connections soon facilitated acquisition of over a thousand American clients for the Johnston firm (Murphy 2005, p.39).

Hayes (1971b, p.18) states that between 1771 and 1789, Ireland *alone* imported almost double the amount of French wine that was imported into England, Scotland, and Ireland *combined* by the mid-nineteenth century.

TABLE A: Bordeaux Wine Exports, 1739-1740

Denominated style of wine	Destination of export	Wine in tuns
Grand wines*	**England**	**300**
Fine wines	**England**	**700**
Fine wines	**Scotland**	**2,500**
Fine wines	**Ireland**	**4,000**

Source: Murphy (2005, p.35)

* It is assumed that Murphy’s reference to ‘Grand wines’ implies 1st growths only.

Table A indicates that mid-eighteenth-century Ireland was Bordeaux’s most significant export customer for fine claret and that Lord Chesterfield’s concerns about the Irish gentry ruining themselves through excessive expenditure on claret were not misplaced (1745, cited in Clarkson 1999, p.84).

Table B: French Wine Imports into Ireland, 1771-1812

Year Imported into Ireland	French Wine in Tuns

1771-1780	**27,802**
1781-1790	**20,883**
1791-1800	**11,605**
1802-1811	**4,876**
1812-1821	**2,960**

(Source: French Consul in London, 1827, cited in Hayes 1971, p.18)

Table B illustrates the fact that Irish claret consumption dramatically decreased in the years approaching the Act of Union (1800) and in its immediate aftermath.

Hospitality in Georgian Ireland

The American traveller, Edward Melville, visiting Bordeaux in 1805, fairly tripped over Hibernians, noting that 'there are vast numbers of Irish in this city' (Melville 1811, p.137). Melville lived for a time in Bordeaux, from whence he travelled to Ireland, mainly staying in the cities of Cork and Dublin. Consequently, he was well placed to draw comparisons between his French and Irish hosts and acquaintances. Prior to quitting Bordeaux, he had been warned that the Irish were 'sad drunkards' (Melville 1811, p.2). Upon arrival in Cork, Melville was promptly entertained by the brother of an Irish acquaintance in Bordeaux. Brief exposure to Cork hospitality led Melville to marvel that, in Ireland, he experienced:

> ... three meals crowded into less than six hours, which would be fully sufficient for the temperate French in twenty four, and as much wine consumed as would serve the same number of Frenchmen, mixed with water, for a week.
>
> (Melville 1811, p.85).

Melville frequently expressed great fondness for the Irish, but found that their gastronomic regime rendered him 'heartily sick' (1811, p.85). He was not the first visitor to Ireland to fear that his hosts might endanger his well-being through the extravagant nature of their hospitality. The distinctive quality of Irish hospitality has long been a source of amazement to visitors (Stanihurst 1584, p.33), and is an invariable leitmotif in the writings of diarists and travellers to Ireland in the Georgian period (Delany cited in Cahill 2005; De Latocnaye1984; Hill 1836; Pückler-Muskau 2001). Booth (1995) postulates that the national tendency towards excess is linked to traditional admiration for the gargantuan feasts depicted in Irish mythology. The *Tuatha Dé Danaan* (people of the goddess Dana) 'celebrated for their incredible eating and drinking habits', feature in such tales (Booth 1995, p.19). Historically, Protestants had perceived the Irish natives' adherence to modes of hospitality that were

part of the Gaelic tradition as (yet another) negative characteristic. Paradoxically, from 1600-1800, the Anglo-Irish adopted these very modes of exaggerated hospitality (Mac Con Iomaire 2009, p.69). Mary Delany, whose wealth of letters provide so much valuable detail about upper-class life in eighteenth-century Ireland, observed of the citizenry that 'no people can be more hospitable or obliging' (Glin and Peill 2007, p.60). She voiced that opinion in 1732, the same year in which another visitor to Ireland noted that 'the Irish Gentry are an expensive people: they live in the most open hospitable manner, continually feasting with one another' (Markham 1984, p.124). De Latocnaye reported that even the wretched (usually Catholic) poor would offer a stranger their all─forcing their meagre food supplies upon one─the imperative to hospitality being so deeply ingrained in the national psyche (De Latocnaye 1984, p.68).

A substantial element of élite hospitality was vinous in nature, and, more often than not, supplied in the form of claret. This liquid was consumed on such as overwhelming scale that the Earl of Chesterfield, during his term as Lord Lieutenant in Ireland, famously despaired in 1745 that 'nine gentlemen out of ten are impoverished by the great quantity of claret ... drunk in their houses' (cited in Clarkson 1999, p.84). Maxwell (1946, p.101) emphasises that 'no one in any position in Dublin would have thought himself truly hospitable unless he provided large quantities of claret for his guests'. Such a stance is unsurprising when one considers that the individuals responsible for setting the *ton* in Irish society─the Lords Lieutenant─were punctilious in terms of providing and consuming a quantity and quality of claret that was commensurate with their social standing. As viceroy, Charles Manners, the 4th Duke of Rutland (1784-1787), despatched George Kendall, a member of his military staff, to France for the purpose of securing premium wines for Dublin Castle (Robins 2001, p.72). Bordeaux links to Ireland were instrumental in ensuring that Kendall assembled a consignment of France's finest wines for the castle's cellars. The Archbishop of Narbonne, one Arthur Richard Dillon, a scion of the aforementioned Dillon family and a noted epicure who lived a life 'more gay than episcopal' (Comtesse de Boigne, cited in Hayes 1942, p.485), assisted Kendall in fulfilling his mission.

Viceregal banquets represented the apogee of élite entertainment in Georgian Dublin, and at these, wine quite literally flowed. A font flowing with wine through the night was a particular feature of castle celebrations during Lionel Sackville, 1st Duke of Dorset's two terms of office in the 1730s and 1750s. Under the viceroyalty of Chesterfield in 1745, the banquet held to mark the king's birthday saw the Castle's supper room transformed into a Temple of Minerva with statuary dispersed throughout from which spouted a continuous flow of wine (Robins 2001, p.27).

Honest Claret

The wine almost invariably preferred by polite society in Georgian-era Ireland was claret─certainly by those who could afford it. Jonathan Swift, writing his friend Sir Charles Wogan in Spain in 1732, expressed his dismay at a recent increase of twenty percent in claret prices, due to a poor season. Swift thought he might be able to afford Spanish wine 'as like French claret' as could be obtained, 'such as our claret-drinkers here will be content with. For, when I give them pale wine ... they say it will do for one glass, and then ... call for Honest Claret'. (Interestingly, Swift adds that if Wogan thinks such wine can be obtained, he would commission 'Mr. Hall, an honest Catholic merchant here, who deals in Spanish wine' to import it for him). Despite the demands upon his purse, Swift considered wine essential to his health 'for my disorders ... make it absolutely necessary to me' (cited in Sheridan & Nichols 1813, p.185). Swift, dubious about purchasing Spanish wine as a substitute for claret, evinces an oenophile's discernment. Swift was not unique in his preoccupation with quality or in his views about the health-giving properties of claret. In correspondence Bishop Edward Synge directed to his daughter between June 21 and July 1, 1749, he fretted that no one in his household had yet troubled to send him an opinion on a recent wine purchase (cited in Legg 1996, pp.113-127). An Armagh gentleman, writing a convalescent friend in 1783, assured him that 'It is not fit for you and me at our Time of Life to drink Water etc. ... I beseech you not to drink less than a Bottle of good claret in condition after your dinner' (cited in Clarkson 1999, pp.100-101).

What was the style of this wine that so appealed to the Georgians? Prior to the Stuart Restoration, the claret exported from Bordeaux was generic in nature─light-bodied, and a very pale red or deep rosé-coloured wine. The 'creation' in 1660 of Haut-Brion, the first 'branded' wine, according to Johnson (1989, p.202), ushered in a new style of claret. Haut-Brion and other premium clarets that followed were advertised as 'new French clarets' and sold under specific estate or place names, e.g., Lafite, Margaux. Vinification methods and cellar practice must have improved concomitantly as Ludington (Ludington 2003, p.155) notes that 'new' clarets were described in a *London Gazette* advertisement of 1711 as 'deep, bright, fresh, neat'. He explains that 'deep' and 'bright' pertained to the wine's body and colour, 'fresh' to its age, and 'neat' to the fact that it was pure and unblended. The new luxury clarets were deeply coloured and, judging by the 'Ho Bryan' that Samuel Pepys tasted in 1663, they had 'a good and most particular taste' (cited in Johnson 1989, p.201).

Superior-grade claret was costlier than the ordinary version and aimed at the upper echelons of society. A Dublin newspaper advertisement of 1750 called attention to the availability of 'choice Clarets of different growths, the vintage of 1747 and 1748 ... Neat Claret of the 1st growth of Obrejone ... at 18*s*. per dozen. Neat Margoux and Medoc Claret at 16*s*. per dozen. Graves Claret at 14*s*. per dozen' (Dublin Penny Journal 1833, p.3). Wealth enabled the Georgian gentleman to buy claret, but the salient factor in determining to whom it would be served was class; even ordinary claret was

reserved for the enjoyment of the select few. In Kilkenny, in 1714, the provisioning of the celebrations of George I's accession to the throne were handled by a Captain Hedges, who ensured that 'bottles of claret and glasses to drink His Majesty's health' were set out for the local gentry, whereas beer was laid on 'for the soldiers and inferior company' (Connolly 2002, p.133). Bishop Synge advised his daughter in 1750 that it would not be fitting to offer a prospective housekeeper and steward an 'allowance of Tea or Claret' (cited in Legg 1996, p.228). If, as Harper and Le Beau suggest (2003, p.134), food and drink choices can symbolize 'the integration and similarities of peoples as well as the boundaries and differences between them' then it appears evident that, in adjudging claret unsuitable for consumption by the socially inferior, Hedges and Synge recognized it as a marker of the upper classes.

Quality wine for 'the quality' was the order of the day, but serving wine in quantity was just as important as being exacting about the calibre. Native Irish hospitality, imbibed (not just metaphorically) by the Protestant Ascendancy, demanded excess. There is evidence to suggest that manly bravado and ritual also influenced the drinking habits of the age. It should be noted that Dublin Castle was not simply the site of society roistering: the viceroy's role was political as well as social. Doubtless, certain viceroys used drinking sessions as a means of forging or consolidating social and political relationships, and, additionally, as a means of gauging the character and strength of participants and opponents in government. Heavy drinking, like combat, requires physical stamina (Ludington 2003, p.442).

Influential Irish grandees were put to the test in 1755 when the new Lord Lieutenant, the Marquis of Hartington, hosted a stupendous drinking session at the castle. The eminent Lord Kildare withstood its rigours, but wrote to his wife the following day that 'I don't think I ever drank so hard and fast in my life: everyone of the company complain today' (Fitzgerald cited in Fitzgerald 1949, p.16). It is perhaps revealing that the Earl advised the Duchess that the participants 'all stay'd to the last.' They probably dared not do less. In 1736, Lord Orrery opined:

> Drunkenness is the Touch Stone by which they try every man; and he that cannot or will not drink, has a mark set upon him. He is abus'd behind his back, he is hurt in his property, and he is persecuted as far as the power of Malice and Intemperance can go.
>
> (Orrery cited in Booth 1995, p.20)

Orrery's judgment is corroborated by the comments of the following English observer recording his perception of Irish drinking habits of the day:

> ... a middling drinker here will carry off his four bottles without being in the least apparently disordered. A man is looked upon, indeed, as nothing with his bottle here, that can't take off his gallon coolly'
>
> (Bush 1769, pp.26-27)

The terminology used by drinkers of the period emphasised the bravura nature of drinking sessions, e.g., empty bottles were referred to as 'dead men', casks were 'killed' (Ludington 2003, p.442).

Fondly recollecting 'Irish dissipation in 1778', Barrington (1826, p.45), reminisces that numerous toasts were the custom of the day as 'claret flowed'. Toasting was not necessarily an ad hoc option. At any official dinner, and especially at Castle banquets, protocol dictated that specific toasting rituals were followed. The purpose of these was to reinforce 'prevailing political and religious prejudices' through the regulation of matters ranging from determining which persons were to perform toasts, to stipulating to whom the toasts should be proposed (MacCarthy Mór 1996, p.161). In the early eighteenth century, corporation of Dublin dinners honouring newly elected Lord Mayors were presided over by the Lord Lieutenant. Custom dictated that he proposed a series of six specific toasts. These honoured members of the royal family and the decisive battle that led to the exile of James II. The Lord Mayor and other notables would have followed with further toasts─a typical feature of such events. Maxwell (1946, p.101) attributes the notoriously arduous nature of drinking sessions at Dublin castle to 'the interminable toasts that were given, in accordance with the fashion of the times'.

Bordeaux's best customer

Dickson (1987, p.110), writing about Ireland in the period between 1660 and 1800, claimed that as the Irish gentry became a distinct cultural entity within the country, they 'attempted to model themselves on their English counterparts ... usually with some Hibernian modification'. In the context of hospitality, the issue was one of adoption rather than modification. The Anglo-Irish élite embraced the Gaelic standards of exaggerated hospitality so wholeheartedly that, ironically, they attracted the very criticism from English commentators that they had once levelled at the native Irish. Bush (1769, pp.14-15) summed up the views of the more querulous genre of English visitor to Ireland when he observed that 'They pique themselves much on their hospitality in all parts of the kingdom ... I am afraid, indeed, that too much of their boasted hospitality in every province has a greater right to be denominated ostentation'. Bush took particular exception to a gentleman 'of the first rank and fortune in the kingdom' who greeted another Englishman new to Irish shores with the following exhortation to join his company: 'as you are come over quite a stranger to the country, it behoves us to make it as agreeable as we can. There is a company of us to meet at the Black Rock ... and, by Jesus, there is to be five or six dozen of claret to be emptied' (Bush 1769, p.16).

Claret lubricated the social life of those of rank and fortune to such an extent that even at the dawn of the Victorian age, its association with Ireland was still strong. Hill (1836, p.25), an English artillery officer, noted in his recollections that he had 'heard Dublin claret highly extolled in England'. In 1829, the British Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, recalled of Edward Sneyd, that his wine-house, *Sneyd, Barton and French*, 'was the first in Dublin when I was in Ireland (in the 1810s) and ... I continued to have my wine from Mr. Sneyd after I left' (History of Parliament Online 2012). In North America, the Irish Johnston family of Bordeaux was stocking the cellars of the new republic's leading citizens with their clarets which had the imprimatur of no less a personage than the Marquis de Lafayette (Murphy 2005, p.39).

In Georgian Ireland, to consume claret was a privilege enjoyed by those at the apex of the social order and to assert one's cultural identity. The élite's food and drink choices were as much 'an element in refined sociability' (Barnard 2004, p.123) as the material goods with which they surrounded themselves. The drink they chose─above all others─to indicate their taste and status was claret, and to provide claret in quantity to guests was a social imperative rooted in the traditions of the disenfranchised native population. The disenfranchisement of Irish Jacobites led to the establishment of a significant wine-trading community in Bordeaux which, in turn, resulted in felicitous connections between *hibernois* wine merchants and those in Ireland. It was by virtue of these connections that Irish wine merchants established a reputation for the excellence of their claret. The fact that they benefitted from a position of privilege and favour is unsurprising, since their suppliers in Bordeaux were frequently their own relatives, through blood or marriage. Familial ties ensured optimal quality. Thus, the well-established Irish firms enjoying these special links and specialising in premium clarets were held in such esteem that they retained important clients and attracted new ones even into the Victorian era. As George Berkeley (Berkeley, cited in Murphy 2005, p.159) mused, 'was there any kingdom in Europe so good a customer at Bordeaux as Ireland?'

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