

LOUIS M. CULLEN, The Brandy Trade under the *Ancien Régime*: Regional Specialisation in Charente (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xvii + 284. 5 tabs. 3 maps. 1 fig. no price given) and LOUIS M. CULLEN, The Irish Brandy Houses of Eighteenth-Century France (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2000. Pp. x + 244. 1 map. 16 ills. no price given)

The mutation of alcoholic beverage consumption was an important aspect of the rise of new patterns of consumption in eighteenth century Europe. Starting in the late seventeenth century, Western France supplied London, Paris, Ireland and northern Europe with brandy as a substitute to grain alcohols. During the eighteenth century, the region around Cognac specialized in producing that quality aged champagne brandy that is still known as cognac. Irish and English traders were some of the actors of this specialization.

In The Brandy Trade, Cullen provides a thorough description of the rise and the history of the brandy trade in the region between Bordeaux and La Rochelle from the late seventeenth century to very end of the eighteenth century. In The Irish Brandy Houses, he completes this study with a vivid record of the life and activity of the Irish traders who migrated to the region during the eighteenth century. Both books were made possible by the remarkable survival of the business records of many actors of the brandy trade.

Cullen starts The Brandy Trade by describing the emergence of the international trade in brandy spirit. Cullen contradicts Labrousse and affirms that distillation did not reflect conditions of surplus and low prices. He underlines that distillation was not linked to agricultural crisis: on the contrary, the rise of distillation was linked to the most dynamic aspects of the French economy. It was encouraged by the development of domestic markets. It provided high quality bills to the Paris foreign exchange market. Cullen then describes the distilling process and the evolution of brandy toward the product we are now used to. He presents quickly the different actors of the industry, before describing the complex evolution of different markets and different producing regions. The importance of the Paris market was the most stable feature of the trade: Parisian demand repeatedly pre-empted the supply of other markets. By contrast, trade with Ireland was very volatile. In the sixth chapter, Cullen prepares a chronological study of the

trading families in Cognac and Bordeaux that constitutes the last three chapters of The Brandy Trade.

To some extent, this last part covers the same material as The Irish Brand Houses. Yet, this second book is more thorough. After presenting the history of brandy trade, the mechanisms of brandy smuggling to Ireland, and the evolution of the trading community in the first part of the eighteenth century, Cullen gives a record of the story of the Irish families - especially Hennessy and Saule, but also Jennings, Galwey, Delamain, and others - who played a leading role in brandy trade starting in the 1760s. In the remaining five chapters, he describes the life of these traders in a chronological way. This study is all the more welcome as, if the *négociants* from the main French ports are well known, there is a lack of information on smaller-scale traders. The quality of the insight that Cullen gives on the life and activity of these smaller-scale traders is remarkable. Even if, as it is often the case, we suspect that trading difficulties take a much larger part in business correspondence than their successes, the precariousness of their situation is striking. Family issues appear deeply intermingled with business relationships. The book also explores the existing trading networks with Ireland and England and the effects of the French Revolution on trade.

Because of the nature of the evidence and the existing sources, the life and experience of the individual traders is much better documented than the actual evolution of regional trade and production. The agricultural and industrial producers are largely absent from Cullen's story. To some extent, the subtitle of his 1998 book, Regional Specialisation in the Charente, is misleading: Cullen does not study the economy of the region as a whole, nor the role that brandy played in shaping the way all inhabitants were – or were not – integrated into a larger commercial economy. That could have been an alternative objective for the last part of the book, rather than going through material that Cullen explored again in The Irish Brandy Houses.

Yet, my complaints are those of a spoiled reader. The quality of both books is high. The Brandy Trade will remain for a long time the authoritative work on early modern brandy. The

Irish Brand Houses should be useful to anyone interested in diasporas and the life of traders in the eighteenth century.

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