

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Neil McKendrick: *The Bordeaux Club*

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The Bordeaux Club is an interesting book that had its genesis in the remarkable collection of documents gathered by the Club's longest-serving member, Neil McKendrick. The book itself is a distilled version of the archive, providing abundant details about the personalities who graced the Club meetings at one time or another, including the great wines and fine dining that were shared over the years. The book is lavish in its presentation and is divided into four sections devoted to the history of the Club, its most memorable wines, its members, and the minutes of the Club's meetings.

The author's passion for the Club comes across clearly as he offers glimpses into a world in which the love of wine is entwined with appreciation of fine dining, good conversation, and elegant locales. There are countless such clubs around the world, so one must wonder what makes this one special enough to deserve a book dedicated to its activities. In this reader's opinion, it all comes down to the personalities of its members, their impact within and outside the wine world, and ultimately, their excellent taste.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Club membership was small, never counting more than six members at any time (six being the number of glasses one could pour from a bottle of claret) and only a total of 19 over its 70 years of existence. But what the Club lacked in numbers, it more than made up for in the importance of its individual members. In the words of McKendrick, the Bordeaux Club stood out because of "the diverse nature of its membership. In terms of education, social origins, politics, religion, and wealth [...], it would be difficult to find more yawning contrasts among such a small group of men" (p. 21). It included men (but no women?) of different religions, political beliefs, and wealth. Regardless, when reading about the fantastic vintages sampled at meetings, the fine dining that accompanied them, and their locations, one is left without any doubt that most of the Bordeaux Club's members had access to great resources. From its inception in 1949 by founding members, Jack Plumb and Harry Waugh, there was "insistence on not dropping standards and always comparing the best with the best."

The whole book, like the history of the Club, is imbued with the sparkle and energy that accompanies the drinking of great wines. We learn about historical Bordeaux chateaux and vintages, guided by some extraordinarily discerning palates. One is compelled to agree with the opinion that “nowhere in the world were six men enjoying the same level of excellence in the wine we were drinking and nowhere in the world has that wine been subject to the same level of expert scrutiny” (p. 143).

Each of the 13 short biographies of the Club’s members outlines the lives of exceptional individuals. We find Oxbridge dons (McKendrick), celebrated authors (Jack Plumb), bankers (Michael Behrens), professional wine men (Michael Broadbent, Hugh Johnson, and Harry Waugh), and celebrity politicians (Lord Walston), among others. McKendrick walks a fine line, trying to spice up the biographies with anecdotes while staying away from tawdriness.

As interesting as those lives are, the true heroes of the book are the great Bordeaux wines themselves, especially those produced by First and Second Growth wineries, but also many others. Great attention is paid to the wines of Sauternes and Barsac, various Champagnes, and Port. The book closes with an index that contains most of the Bordeaux chateaux, certainly all the important ones. The Club members’ experience, discerning taste, and access to all the important vintage years yield a wealth of information that can be accessed in every section of the book.

The exclusivity of the Bordeaux Club led to singular experiences, which make the book unique. For instance, being able to compare several great vintages in one sitting is out of reach for most of us, but each Bordeaux Club meeting had at least six bottles opened, most from great vintages and vineyards. McKendrick goes into great details and takes great pains to put into words the small differences between great wines, even using parallels with Hollywood actors known for their physical beauty (Redford or Newman?) and classical music (Beethoven or Brahms?).

The minutes offer another detailed view of the Club’s activities, sprinkled with assessments of various vintages. The consumer with a more modest purse may find it useful to learn that “the Louis Jadot ’98 was clearly better than the Louis Latour ’95” (p. 313), while others might take heart in knowing that “the Chateau Latour ’59 proved to be the triumph of the night among the clarets.” And how many dinners have *you* attended where “a Mouton and a Lafite are the disappointments of the evening?”

The only minor quibble I have with the book is that occasionally, the writing resembles more of a *compte-rendu* than a passionate retelling of history, especially one as tasty as the Bordeaux Club’s. Given the high profile of the Club members, the reader might expect to read more about the experience of sharing a good bottle of wine with a group of very interesting people. However, many will agree that such an experience is difficult to put into words or even remember once the great wines start flowing. The author admits in several places that notes were not taken due to intensive enjoyment. Undoubtedly, it is hard to bring back to life events that took place more than half a century ago!

In closing, I found the *Bordeaux Club* to be an enjoyable read, a great source of information on rare vintages, and a pleasant window into a world that is, alas, harder and harder to find.