Dr Sherlock Smart unravels a grape mystery

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Many of you will be familiar with the name Dr Richard Smart. I have had the pleasure of working closely with him as viticultural editor of both editions of *The Oxford Companion to Wine* and found him extremely thorough, conscientious - and stimulatingly opinionated. His main work is as one of the world's best-travelled viticultural consultants who has revolutionised grape growing thanks to his promulgation of canopy management techniques. A native Australian, he was in charge of the New Zealand national viticultural programme in the 1980s and is widely credited with ridding the country's wines of their excessive herbaceousness. Since then, he continues to travel widely, as you will read below in his account of a single, intriguing grapevine, and can be reached at vinedoctor@compuserve.com.

I have a penchant for history and heritage. One of my few regrets about the Australian wine industry is that it is not as mindful of recognizing its history and protecting its heritage as it might be. About a decade ago, the Australian wine industry failed to recognize the 200th birthday of wine being made in Australia, though gladly the NSW Historical Society celebrated the occasion. Further, Australia's most important heritage site, James Busby's convict-dug cellar 'Kirkton' at Singleton NSW is used as a domestic rubbish tip! More of Kirkton in what follows.

The following story is one of my favourite after-dinner speeches. It tells of the story of one grape vine imported into Australasia soon after grapevines were first brought here. The story spans several continents and islands, and a long period in history.

When I tell this story, I usually introduce the cast of characters. These include the following, but not necessarily in order of appearance. See if you can spot them:

- A saint
- Two popes
- A bishop
- A priest's assistant
- A runaway sailor
- A priest
- A king
- A prince
- Two nuns
- A miracle
- An airline hostess
- A prime minister
- A dog
- A government scientist
- Phylloxera
- Grapevine viruses

Introduction

During the first several years of my time as government viticulturist in New Zealand in the early 1980s, the invasion of phylloxera began in earnest in the vineyards. This was firstly around Gisborne and Hawkes Bay, and subsequently into Marlborough. This meant that there was an enormous job of replanting to be done. There was commenced an urgent research programme to identify available rootstocks and to review which might be most suitable.

Another problem immediately became apparent. This was the need for virus-free planting material. A review of virus symptoms of vines in the national collection revealed widespread occurrence of virus diseases, especially leaf roll virus. It would indeed be a tragedy if the newly planted vineyards were to become equally as virus infested. With my colleagues we immediately embarked on a programme to procure virus-free planting material.

This led to an expanded grapevine importation programme as well as testing of virus status of vines within New Zealand. Clonal selection of several varieties was also initiated. This programme was largely successful and with the cooperation of the newly formed grapevine improvement groups led to the distribution of improved planting material.

The role of heritage vines

I was aware that heritage grapevines usually had lower virus disease content than modern ones. This arises because once grapevines began to be grafted for the control of phylloxera, beginning in the 1890s, virus disease became more widespread. This fact was the basis of early clonal selection in New South Wales among the heritage vineyards of the Hunter Valley.

So as part of the programme to locate sources of virus-free planting material, I endeavoured to locate vines which had been imported to New Zealand before 1890. I was pleased to do this because of my interest in history and heritage. I put articles in national newspapers and was soon receiving responses from persons who had old grapevines often growing beside residences throughout the country. These vines were identified and if they were an interesting variety, were planted in the national collection, virus-tested and released as improved clones.

The first grapevines planted in New Zealand were at the Bay of Islands in 1817, likely by Charles Gordon, superintendent of agriculture for the missionary Samuel Marsden. Soon grapes were growing in many places in the north and Charles Darwin visiting on the Beagle noted in 1835 that grapes were growing around Keri Keri. James Busby, the so-called a father of the Australian wine industry, was also an early vigneron in this region, as diversion from his difficult position as the first British Resident in New Zealand, appointed in 1833. Interestingly, Busby played a key role in New Zealand becoming a British colony, and the Treaty of Waitangi is in his handwriting.

The French connection

Another group of our early settlers in the north is the subject of this story. In 1838 a group of French Catholic missionaries under Bishop François Pompallier arrived at Hokianga on the west coast of the north Island. Bishop Pompallier had been appointed by Pope Gregory XVI as the first Catholic Bishop of the South Pacific. His group of missionaries left the French port of Le Havre on Christmas eve 1836 and landed at Valparaiso, Chile, in late June 1837. After taking on provisions they left for Hawaii in August and arrived at the small Pacific Wallace Island on the first of November 1837. Father Pierre Chanel and Brother Nizier were left at nearby Futuna Island on 8 November 1837. Wallis and Futuna Islands are now part of French Polynesia, east of Fiji. Bishop Pompallier then went on to Sydney then to Hokianga, New Zealand, where he set up his first mission. He subsequently went to the Bay of Islands, which became the early headquarters for the Catholic mission.

Fr Pierre Chanel lived with natives on the east coast of Futuna Island at Poi for many years, and was frustrated by difficulties in converting the natives. He was assassinated by the native Musumusu on 28 April 1841. His body was discovered by Brother Nizier and their companion, a runaway English sailor. They fled to Wallis Island and then alerted Bishop Pompallier in New Zealand. No retaliation was brought to the natives who proclaimed themselves converted to Christianity. Pierre Chanel was canonized in 1956, and is the first Catholic saint of Australasia. His remains were brought together at Auckland airport from France, Australia and New Zealand, under the watchful eye of dignitaries including David Lange MP, newly elected local member for nearby Mangere. Lange was to become Prime Minister, and released the Rainbow Warrior bombing French terrorists to supposed internment on Wallis Island many years later. Pierre Chanel's remains were returned to Poi, Futuna, for final burial, and a chapel and museum were created on the site.

During my research I learned of grapevines apparently still surviving at the old Pompallier mission site at Hokianga. On visiting the site I was bitterly disappointed to hear that the vines had been destroyed by 2, 4-D spraying a few years previously. I did however learn of a vine surviving at Poi on Futuna Island. This vine was apparently planted by St Pierre Chanel. The leaves of the vines are regarded as having healing powers by the local natives. Nuns at the mission have taken cuttings from the vines which are being defoliated by the natives and have planted new ones behind the mission walls.

I visited Poi in 1983 on return to New Zealand from the USA. I was given hospitality by the local priest Father Ikatuno and drank kava with the king M Tuigafo. His son (and prince) drove me around the island. I pruned the

vines inside the mission walls for the nuns, and for the first time ever they produced fruit. Was this a miracle? Being at latitude 12 degrees S and in the topics, the vines grow as an evergreen, but with some pruning new growth produced fruit. The nuns wrote to thank me, and advised me they continued to prune and harvest fruit!

I took photos of the vine and made an ampelographic description. I was unable to import cuttings directly to New Zealand as I had no importation documentation. I was able to import them to California by courtesy of Dr Austin Goheen of University of California at Davis, who conducted their quarantine facility. I found it would cost an inordinate sum to airmail them from Fiji, but an obliging airline hostess promised to mail them for me in the USA. I subsequently imported cuttings from California to New Zealand.

Gift to the Pope

My little story of the 'saint's vine' was met with curiosity by the local wine industry. Terry Dunleavy, then CEO of the Wine Institute, was impressed with the links to NZ history, and was able to make contacts for me to present the vine to the present Pope during his first visit to New Zealand in November 1986. So it was that I presented to Pope John Paul II a potted grapevine, a living link with his predecessor Gregory XVI, the first Catholic missionaries and the first saint in the Pacific. It seemed incongruous during the television coverage of gift presentation by island communities like Tonga, Samoa, Cook Island and the local Polish communities to have someone giving the Pope a pot plant, and a vine at that! The TV commentators gagged!

Study of the origin of the vine

I had a Master's student Doris Zuur at the time studying grapevine ampelography. In a scientific attempt to sort out confusion about names of some grapevine varieties in New Zealand. I asked Doris to track down the saint's vine which I assumed to be an old French variety, telling her it would be easy as the vine has distinct deep, lyre shaped leaf lobes, red petioles and forked shoots among other features. We had excellent resources of old French vine ampelography books.

Doris amazed me by saying that she could not find this variety listed in France, but it was in the CSIRO Australian variety book by Antcliff. A vine called Moschata Paradisa found at Mudgee had the same ampelographic characters. Antcliff says 'it has not been traced to any variety grown or described overseas.' How could a vine brought to the Pacific in 1838 have turned up in Mudgee NSW?

Gil Wahlquist, then owner of Botobolar vineyard, Mudgee, provided the answer. He says Antcliff likely found the vine in Craigmoor vineyards in either 1970 or 1974. They had been used for winemaking by Jack Roth in the 1960s. These vines have now been removed, although some exist at nearby Mudgee Wines. Like most of the early vines in Mudgee, it is assumed that these vines may have come from Busby's vineyard Kirkton at Singleton, where his important vine collection, made in Europe in 1831, was planted.

But how did the 'saint's vine' become mixed up with Busby's collection? My guess is that when Bishop Pompallier visited Sydney he still had on board plants of the same vine as that dropped off at Futuna. Some were probably taken ashore, and planted among the vines of Busby's European collection at a location in the now present Sydney Botanical Gardens. And presumably from there they made their way to Kirkton, thence to Mudgee.

The Chile connection

If the 'saint's vine' did not come from France, where might it have arisen? I began to wonder about the possibility that the French missionaries may have picked up the vine in Chile, when they were re-provisioning the ship in June 1837. Obviously vines would be dormant then, and suitable for taking cuttings.

Grapevines were taken to South America in the 16th century by the Spanish *conquistadores*. However, it was seeds which were transported, and not cuttings. So when these seeds were planted in the New World, they gave rise to a whole group of 'new varieties'. (I am sure that all readers will realize that taking a seed from say a Chardonnay bunch does not produce a Chardonnay seedling, but rather a new variety reflecting the genetic characteristics of the pollen donor father as well as the Chardonnay mother). Possibly the 'saint's vine' was one of these so-called *pais* (*criolla* in Argentina) or native varieties of South America.

In 1986 I went to Chile to lecture about table grapes. I contacted my friend Dr Jorge Perez, Professor of Viticulture

at Catholic University, Santiago, and sent photographs and ampelographic descriptions. He was not able to locate the vine for me. However, I was lucky, and stumbled across it myself.

I was being driven from my motel to the University and noticed in a nearby backyard the very characteristic leaves of the vine! That evening I walked to the house and was able to confirm that this vine was indeed identical in an ampelographic sense to the 'saint's vine'! What luck! My excitement was soon diminished by the owner's dog, which was unable to understand my interest in his domain. As he attacked I was able to grab some leaves and run, gladly with a fence between us! In my motel I compared the leaves with photos from Futuna, and they were identical. Circle completed.

Conclusion

While the parentage of the 'saint's vine' is unknown, I think a fair guess can be made as to its origin. Seeds from Spain of the sixteenth century would have Spanish varieties as parents. Cuttings were likely taken on board the 'Europe' by the French missionaries in the Chilean winter of 1837, and dropped off with Father Chanel on Futuna in November of that year. Other cuttings (or maybe growing plants) were taken on to Sydney by Pompallier, then presumably mixed with Busby's collection at Sydney then 'Kirkton' and Mudgee.

Peter Clingeleffer and George Kerridge of CSIRO provided descriptions and cuttings of 'Moschata Paradisa'. I planted these in my home at Port Macquarie in NSW, alongside the 'saint's vine' which I had previously imported from New Zealand in 1990. Mature leaves lead me to believe they are the same vine, although the younger vines of Moschata Paradisa are yet to fruit.

Many people have been aware of the heritage value of these vines. I planted the vine in November 1988 at Hokianga, New Zealand, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Pompallier's arrival. It is also planted in the grounds of St Patrick's, the Auckland cathedral. I also planted it in the vineyard of the Mission vineyards in Hawkes Bay, where part of Pierre Chanel's remains were kept until their return to Poi. I also gave cuttings to Bishop Clancy of Sydney, whose father coincidentally was a friend of my parents.

Finally, what to call this vine? Because of my involvement, I would like to have the pleasure of naming it. How about a combination of the names of the saint who planted it on Futuna 166 years ago, and its Australian name. I like 'Chanel Paradisa', an appropriate name for a saint's vine. Perhaps the vine will see some commercial adoption for the manufacture of communion wine, which was, interestingly enough, the reason why the Spanish *conquistadores* took priests and vines on their voyages in the first place.