

Kind words about our Vintners' Tales DVD

4 Feb 2008 by JR

In the February issue of *Wine & Spirit*, the monthly magazine currently on sale in the UK at *W Smith* and as for which I had read desperately to write about wine back in 1975, is a very generous review of our [Jancis Robinson DVD](#) by author David Williams:

Sweet, repetitive and endash it may have been, but there's no doubt the British wine trade used to be a far more colourful place. Such, at least, is the impression you get from re-watching *Vintners' Tales*, Jancis Robinson MW's landmark series of interview portraits of notable wine trade figures, which is currently available once again via [www.jancisrobinson.com](#) in aid of *Wine Relief* (the wine fundraising arm of [Comic Relief](#)).

1

Although the oldest of the two *Clarendon*-winning series is only a decade and a half (the first series was screened in 1992, the second in 1998), almost all these 10-minute tales seem to depict a much earlier era, a time when names were double-barrelled, such as *David Rose* and the class still largely bought for consumption rather than investment. In the case of wine writer Edmund Penning-Rossell and Harveys of Bristol dining table Henry Wigham, we really are talking about another era, both having passed away in recent years after enjoying very long and distinguished careers.

The Penning-Rossell film could almost be taken as a satirical take on the old school wine geeks, with Penning-Rossell coming across as a Nottingham film type figure played by Peter Cook in full-on *St Arthur Street* Groucho mode – someone who 'talked the country like punctuated only by visits to his London club'. Penning-Rossell's eccentricities, as lovingly revealed by Robinson, included some 'iron rules' about food: 'What should be uncondemned, cheese should be hard. Nothing sweet – no scones, no home-made, no redcurrant jelly – should be allowed to disturb his beloved claret'. But he was also, as Robinson points out, one of the world's 'most cultured, best-dressed, sophisticated, a connoisseur to everything except his politics', who didn't even 'why the Tories should get all the best wine' – back to him the only eccentric on view, however.

The magnificent Mississippi-born English wine grower, Celia Curliak, of *Ulysses* (not in Suffolk, as mentioned in her beautiful country home, as she languorously strikes a chicken on her hip, John Avery in an comically disorganised whole sections of his vast country house) appears that access to a country seat was something of a pre-requisite for the wine trade in those days: one of Britain, as full one Ray of unidentified place of soil. 'I wish I could be more urgent!' he says, and reveals he once took on a French girl because, 'she had trained to be an air traffic controller in Caracas, and I thought, if she can do that, surely she can deal with me.' (She could!)

Then there is [Bill Baker](#).

Joyful bon vivant par excellence, who relates a tale of barely eating his way through a dish he was covered by a top restaurant. Though Robinson does a fine job of teasing out these eccentricities, you never get the sense she's laughing at her subjects.

The guiding emotion is affection, rather than mockery or assessment. And, like the subject I dealt with, there is a sense that this is programme-making from a bygone age – a time before the malign influence of reality TV had spread throughout the schedules, when commissioning editors were still prepared to take a punt on subjects outside the mainstream, and when programme-makers still had faith in their audience's attention span.

So, although the production values are much higher in the second series, there's no heart-cutting, no invasive music, no injection of spurious narrative and faux-drama à la *Dr O' James*. All you get is Robinson and her subject chatting amiably and maybe having a nose around a cellar, office or, of course, a beautifully appointed country home. Indeed, with the exception of the film on the vastly successful and, to the traditional wine trade, vulgar-looking *Tim Fair Vintners* (who, with their television perpetually tuned to the *Cartoon* show prices page, clearly represent the white-hot technological wine trade of the future when compared to Bill Baker and his cartoon-paper investors), the compilation has a distinctly elegant tone.

This, clearly, was a rapidly changing trade, one where, as Robinson says, the colourful characters were already getting lost in 'a recess of middle management'. In doing so, she suggests, the trade may well have become more professional, more egalitarian. But it also, undeniably, lost some of its soul.