

LANDSCAPES OF BACCHUS: THE VINE IN PORTUGAL

DAN STANISLAWSKI's new book about Portugal *The Landscapes of Bacchus* (1) is written in the same spirit as his two former books, *The Individuality of Portugal* and *Portugal's Other Kingdom: The Algarve*. It is an extremely thorough study of the vine in Portugal, primarily concerned with the various forms and secondarily the areas delineated and their history.

The choice of subject the author justifies, on page 4, by saying that, in a country of disparate parts and of a long, unbroken historical experience, one may find a dominant clue to the character of its regions. In Portugal, the vine serves as this clue.

Although, in the introduction, he also mentions its social and economic importance, it is only superficially treated in the text and briefly in the conclusion. The process of wine making, its marketing, consumption and export are not treated at all. However, the title of the book does not suggest any such study.

The geographical method employed is purely classical, the author's tools having been books, maps and, most important of all, his eyes. By pure observation, he arrives at many subjective, though balanced judgements. Moreover, the book is entirely descriptive.

The first chapter is dedicated to the early history of the vine. The Greeks appear to have been the first to bring the cultivated vine to Portugal, but only during the Roman occupation did the various forms which exist nowadays appear. During the Moslem era, such cultivation continued, despite the injunction of the Koran against alcoholic beverages. The author explains this by saying that it was one thing to forbid it in Arabia, but another thing to make the rule effective in Portugal. It could also, I imagine, be that they merely continued cultivation for commercial reasons.

(1) DAN STANISLAWSKI, *Landscapes of Bacchus The Vine in Portugal*. 2110 pp., University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1970.

A separate chapter is set aside for the anomaly of the vineless area of South Portugal. The distribution of vine in Portugal really seems quite unique, at first sight. According to the author, the explanation of such a situation may be understood from an appreciation of the medieval history of the country. There is historical evidence that the vine was grown both in the Algarve and the Alentejo, a phenomenon which, he says, may be proved by the fact that, in recent years, the clay dolia of the Romans were still in use in the Alentejo. If this is true, it would indicate that the vine was grown there until recently, thus contrary to his theory.

As far as his reference to the Moslem is concerned, the author contradicts himself by first saying that the Moslem cultivated vineyards more widely in the Alentejo and Algarve (page 14), and afterwards adding that it was, without doubt, achieved in certain areas, which may have included the south of Portugal. What is of greater importance, however as regards this anomaly he considers to be the damage done to agriculture during centuries of warfare, particularly to the Algarve and Alentejo, which remained for the longest period of all in a transitional stage. When these two last provinces were conquered, the country's wealth was exhausted and therefore grain was in far greater demand than wine. This is given as the reason for the existing agricultural pattern.

Well, although a very sophisticated way of thinking, it is not quite correct. The reason why there have always been less vineyards in the South is related to population distribution in Portugal, and the reason why there is even less, nowadays, is because of the effects of phylloxera. After this plague had ruined all the vineyards at the end of last century, there were simply not enough people in the South to undertake the replanting. If one travels through the Alentejo, one notices that only around the large centres of population are vineyards of considerable size to be found.

The Green Wine area is described under the title, «Granite Made Green», and, judging from the space the author dedicates to it, must be the area which interests him most. The heritage of the Minho culture is widely discussed and he completely agrees with ORLANDO RIBEIRO in calling it a «granite culture».

A very complete picture is given of how a terrace is constructed even the price of construction per square yard is calculated. Terraces in the Minho are not only used for vines, but for all irrigated crops. Their origin goes back to the Roman era and since then, they have been built as a consequence of hunger on the land and unofficial unemployment. It is, however, tending to become rarer as migration to France has disposed of surplus population.

The fortunate combination of the high growing vine and maize came into existence as a result of two historic events: first, the introduction of maize from the New World, in the sixteenth century, and secondly, legislation of the eighteen-fifties which, in order to protect Porto Wine, prejudiced the low vine of the Minho.

The various vine forms are described in great detail and accompanied by drawings and photos. The high tree-vine, the festoon, the arjoado, the arbor, the high bardo, the low bardo, the cruzeta are all very well studied with their relative advantages and disadvantages.

A short description is given of the Green Wine, mainly to eliminate erroneous views held, due to the bad handling of the wine. To the Portuguese reader, I particularly draw his attention to the alcoholic contents of the Green Wine; he usually considers it to be very alcoholic, when, in reality, it only contains 8 to 11.5 per cent by bulk.

The various sub-regions of the area treated separately. This chapter is by far the best in the book. However it would be useful to know how the map on page 48, showing the localities of the vine formed, has been constructed and who constructed it.

After giving a short introduction to the geology and climate of the Douro, the author makes a very astute observation, namely, that it is difficult to understand how people ever came to consider this area suitable for cultivation. In the physical conditions of the Douro Valley, few plants can survive, and, often, with an incline of sixty degrees, it would be impossible to cultivate the wine without the use of terraces. These giant steps were only possible to construct as a result of a large supply of lowly paid labour. Such labour is no longer available, subsequently many old narrow terraces have had to be abandoned.

However, to say that the vine growers are desperately trying to meet the problem of labour shortage is perhaps an exaggeration. My own experience is that they are extremely conservative and afraid of any initial costs. Contrary to what is said, the machine used to till the Douro slopes does exist, but only a few vineyard cultivators have taken the trouble to replant in such a way that the machine may be used.

Although the Port Wine, as we know it, is a relatively recent product (less than two centuries old) wine from this region has been exported since the early fourteenth century. The development of the Port Wine trade with England was partly an outcome of politics and war. After the «Methuen Treaty» in 1703, Portuguese wines received special tariff preference. British prosperity created a rise in prices, and with the rising demand, new land was used for production. Moreover, adulteration reached scandalous proportions. Oversupplying became a major problem, and prices fell to one-tenth their initial figure.

So began the history of the Port Wine and thus it continued, ever fluctuating between success and disaster. In an otherwise complete account of these historic events, I wonder why Baron Forrester has been omitted—he is even said to have been the one person who wielded greatest influence in the Douro Valley.

The present controls of the Casa do Douro is recounted in a very clear and comprehensive way such as I have not seen before.

The Dão Region is the third major defined area. Its story only commenced at the beginning of this century, when a Portuguese

agronomist, Cincinnato da Costa, recognized the region as producing a wine of unique character. But the history of the area, in itself, may be traced as far back as the Celts at least. As far as the region is concerned, we are told that it has rather high population density, and, in order to support it, vineyards must bear a disproportionate load of the burden. They only occupy 4 per cent of the total territory, but employ 20 to 30 per cent of the labour.

About 98 per cent of the wines from this region are red. This does not mean that white grapes are not grown. In fact, one-quarter of the grapes are white and are mixed with the red in winemaking to obtain a lighter coloured wine.

The Dão area has also its own organisation to protect quality and name. One of its laws mentioned is that of a minimum ageing of 18 months. However, the author does not omit to say that, in general, all the best companies age their wines five years.

The demarcated zone is furthermore divided into three zones of quality. One of the subdivisions encircles the two others, in this way acting as a buffer area around the central zone of higher quality.

Four minor areas have been of sufficient importance to be officially delineated: Moscatel of Setúbal; Colares; Carcavelos and Bucelas. DAN STANISLAWSKI observes that all four came into importance as a result of their proximity to the capital, and all of them have, for one reason or another, lost their significance.

The Setúbal area is treated first, with its physical nature, the history of the Moscatel and the present state of production. The author assumes that the reason for decline of this wine is that it cannot seriously compete with other fortified wines. But why can it not compete? If I were to answer my own question I would say — as time changes, so does taste, and, nowadays, sweet wines enjoy a rather small market and Moscatel is the sweetest of the fortified wines of Portugal.

As regards the Colares region, the author says, «Perhaps the best wine of Portugal, Colares, is the victim of improved transportation and the extension of Lisbon to the Atlantic slopes». The week end or country cottage is replacing the vineyards that have been planted and cared for with herculean labour. He adds, very correctly, that, even if this was not the case, the rising wages in the area would perhaps have the same effect, as these vineyards demand more total effort in planting and maintenance than any others in Portugal.

The vine has been grown here since early times and, apparently, both on dune sands and non-sandy soils. It therefore seems false logic to say, as is the case on page 173, that the dune sands came into use because of their resistance to the root louse. This was the case in Setúbal, as he mentions himself, where formerly, the vines were only grown on the limestone slopes, while, at present, they grow as much in the Pliocene sands.

The planting process of the Colares vine is quite unique in view of the dune sands and is therefore described in considerable detail.

Only the vine grown in sandy soils and, according to the process referred to, can be sold under the label of the outlined district.

In recounting the history of the Carcavelos Wine, the author tells us how the Marquês de Pombal arranged for this wine from Oeiras to be sent up to the Douro and mixed with the Port Wine, as he wanted it to sell at a better price. I wonder if this really true — anyway it seems contradictory to the fact that the Carcavelos Wine was one of the star items in Cristie's first wine auction in London, in 1769.

In order to demonstrate the decline of the wine, he compares the yearly production at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which ran as high as 300,000 gallons, with that of 1964, which fell as low as 1,300 gallons. The reason for this, was, of course, the process of urbanization.

The last of the four small demarcated regions is that of Bucelas. The plants for this white wine are grown in the alluvium of the valley bottom, something which, as the author says, is certainly an unusual situation for a high quality wine. He explains this on the grounds of the special contents of this alluvium.

The present owner of virtually all the land in that area is a principal merchant of various other types of wine which apparently have a greater market. This should thus explain the low production of Bucelas Wine.

Among the bulk-producing wine zones of the Torres region, the Ribatejo and the Bairrada enjoy special attention. Besides these, he also briefly mentions small areas in the Alentejo, Algarve, Pinhel and Chaves-Valpaços. In this context, why are Lafões, Agueda and the Upper Douro left out as they are, today, of greater importance and produce better wine?

In conclusion, DAN STANISLAWSKI takes the opportunity to underline all the fine aspects of wine both as a social and a health factor, and proves why it should be a part of our diet. He also expresses his resentment for the self-righteous opposition to wines, often met in his country.

He closes by briefly considering the economic importance of wine for Portugal.

His style of writing makes the reading of the book both easy and pleasant. What may surprise non-Portuguese readers are the frequent historical digressions, but, in Portugal, history is very much alive and represents a part of their culture and everyday life, to a degree that I have not met in any other country.

With the appearance of this new book, DAN STANISLAWSKI has done no more than reinforce his rights to be truly called an expert on Portugal.