

Hideous Absinthe: a History of the Devil in a Bottle

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For aficionados of strong drink and a good story, there are quite a few books published on the subject of absinthe, and most of them have been published in the last ten years.⁽¹⁾ Perhaps it is a function of millennialism that interest has been stimulated in a drink formulated over two hundred years ago and demonised as the ruin of modern French civilisation. In the most recent of publications on absinthe, Jad Adams's *Hideous Absinthe: a History of the Devil in a Bottle*, we confront the drink in all its guises – as anti-malarial agent for French soldiers in early nineteenth-century France, as a gin-equivalent for the poor, as symbol of ascendancy for the middle class, as muse for the bohemian and decadent, and as the scourge of the temperance movements in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Much has been attributed to the wormwood drink – madness, genius, social disorder, infertility, epilepsy – but, as Adams argues, the potent image of absinthe has been articulated for different purposes since its recipe was handed over to Mr. Henri-Louis Pernod for distilling in 1797:

Absinthe, as developed in Switzerland and mass produced in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was the right product at the right time. It had sufficient alcohol to be the major alcoholic drink at a time when social dislocation and a vine blight led to an increase in alcohol consumption. Its physical properties of changing colour with water and attractive aroma made it adaptable for use by those with refined tastes when they were in the ascendant. It had sufficient psychoactive properties for it to be a favoured drink of the creative when social change, available money and national movement made for the development of centres of artistic excellence. Its unique properties were vastly exaggerated by both its supporters and its

detractors to suit their own requirements (p. 248).

Hideous Absinthe is an entertaining cultural history of the drink and its contexts and it proceeds chronologically, beginning with the popular take-up in France in the nineteenth century by the poor, the bourgeois and the artistic elite and closing with its appropriation by the aspirant jet set in the twentieth century. Identified early on as a portal to the unconscious, artists and writers of a bohemian ilk were eager to try its intoxicating and hallucinogenic properties. Oscar Wilde, never much of an *absintheur*, described the effects of absinthe as occurring in three stages, the first stage an ordinary alcoholic effect, the second engendering ‘monstrous and cruel things’, and the third stage engendering ‘wonderful and curious things’ (p. 64). Adams describes the physical and psychological effects of absinthe well, and he demonstrates how it came to be emblematic of a decadent modernity in a number of paintings by Degas, Manet and Picasso.

The vertebrae of the book are a series of potted biographies of well known *absintheurs*, including Verlaine, Rimbaud, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch, Strindberg, Toulouse-Lautrec, Ernest Dowson and, to a lesser extent, Oscar Wilde. In the introduction, Adams sets the scene, and, in an overstatement typical of the book, claims that ‘[b]y the 1880s, Paris had become an absinthe-fuelled bonanza of disparate literary groups, performances and small magazines, including the *Décadent*, a literary magazine that owed its philosophy to Verlaine, and set the tone for much of the bohemian life that followed’ (p. 7). The image of Paris overflowing with absinthe and creativity is impressionistic rather than accurate, and is typical of the approach of the whole book. In fact, Paris was not an absinthe-fuelled bonanza (Adams concedes this repeatedly), and the *Décadent*, which Adams describes later as published between 1888 and 1890 (see p. 82), was a largely uninfluential flop, publication beginning in 1886 and ceasing in 1888. More importantly, it is assumed that decadence and symbolism defined the *fin de siècle*, but, on the contrary, they were elusive phenomena even at the time, and were at times difficult to separate from other movements such as realism and aestheticism. One thing is certain: decadence was not a movement confined to the 1880s and 1890s, but a literary tradition extending back to the 1830s.

Adams begins by describing the vermicidal and anti-malarial origins of absinthe, which was used in the North African campaigns of the 1830s and 1840s by the French soldiers to assuage fever and to protect the skin against insect bites. Absinthe was also used by the soldiers to make their drinking water palatable and on their return home, they ‘took this acquired taste for bitter-flavoured alcohol back to the cafés of France, calling for “une verte”, in reference to the drink’s green colour before water is added’ (p. 20). This green colour, which gave rise to the drink’s nicknames of ‘the parrot’ (to have a glass was colloquially referred to as ‘étouffer un perroquet’, to strangle a parrot) and ‘the green fairy’ (‘la fée verte’), was produced by the chlorophyll in the leaves of the plants which made up the ingredients. The cloudy effect was created by ‘louching’, that is, mixing absinthe with water and sugar dissolved slowly through an absinthe spoon suspended like a silver bridge over the glass. Among the principal ingredients were wormwood, distilled wine alcohol (ethyl alcohol), plants of the *Artemisia* species, anise, fennel, lemon balm and hyssop. A strong distillation of the aperitif contained up to 80 per cent pure alcohol, three times as much as ordinary brandy, and its consumption in large measure could induce fitting and delirium.

It is interesting to note that when the company Green Bohemia promoted imported absinthe to Britain for the millennium celebrations in 1999 they restricted consumption of the drink to only two timid shots per customer. It was a clever marketing ploy, but was a far cry from the binge drinking of absinthe in the nineteenth century. Somewhere between ten and twenty absinthes per day seems to have been the average intake of an *absintheur*, but this varied according to what else was drunk alongside the aperitif. In many of the problem cases cited by Adams, an enormous quantity of much else was usually imbibed. The case of Jean Lanfray, a Swiss farmer, who hanged himself in prison in 1905, is one in point. Lanfray was convicted of slaughtering his wife and children after a drinking binge, which over the course of one day, according to Adams, consisted in two and a half litres of table wine, two and a half litres of *piquette* (homemade red wine), several brandies, cordials and one or two absinthes. Lanfray’s ‘absinthe defence’ was that being in an absinthe delirium he was not responsible. The judge sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Hideous Absinthe offers glimpses into the way in which absinthe became by turns a drink of the poor and then an aperitif of the rich and finally a super-indulgence of the decadents, who used it to liberate their minds and bodies for the purposes of poetry and art. Much of the anecdotal information about artists and writers provided by Adams is well known, but his brief biographical sketches are as witty and succinct as bar tales. Chapter 3, 'Absinthe for the people', documents the connections between absinthe drinking by the poor and debates about degeneration. Against the background of life in the Third Republic, where 'the incompetence of the army and the French leadership which had led the nation into conflict ... were forgotten in the lachrymose stupor' (p. 52), Adam discusses Degas's famous painting, *L'Absinthe* (1874), which depicts two people in a café, a man and a woman, sitting glumly before a glass of absinthe, and links it to the realists' portrayal of grim, ugly modern life. Chapters 4 and 5 proceed along the same lines, treating the incendiary and literally filthy relationship between Verlaine and Rimbaud (and Verlaine's long-suffering wife, Mathilde), the work of Van Gogh and Gauguin and their famous meeting in 1888, and the jealousy between Munch and Strindberg. Absinthe played a part, Adams argues, in these artists' descent into creative rage and fury, but the evidence presented is partial and, at most, suggestive. To what extent, we are led to wonder rhetorically, was their mad, bad and dangerous behaviour inspired by *that particular drink*? Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe are mentioned *en passant*, but it is clear from the accounts that they found their pleasures in other vices. Adams himself frequently reminds the reader that absinthe is possibly only a contributory factor, and we are made aware, on occasions, of the speculative basis behind many of the biographical vignettes:

Van Gogh, Munch and Strindberg were all manically devoted to their art, all heavy drinkers, and all suffered periods of mental illness, but absinthe was not a prime mover in any particular case. Strindberg drank what was available and attached no particular importance to absinthe ... The case for absinthe's involvement in the artistic process dwindles away to a mass of qualifications. It was a colourful contribution to a scene which would have existed and progressed along the same lines with or without the green fairy (pp. 121, 122).

The book is at its best when recycling detailed and founded accounts of absinthe drinking drawn from other books on the subject or from magazine and newspaper articles (see the case of Lanfray cited above). The account of the anti-absinthe campaigns in the early years of the twentieth century, for example, is the fascinating subject of Chapter 10, 'Twilight of the *fée verte*', and is an ironic lens on French politics and culture. The fear that drinking absinthe would supplant wine consumption was one pedalled by the temperance movement in France, but Adams reports that 'absinthe never made up more than 3 per cent of the alcohol drunk in France, to wine's 72 per cent' (p. 197). Still, the anti-*absintheurs* were fierce in their condemnation of the drink, and it was banned eventually in 1915. The larger debate was, of course, not about alcoholism but about national security, and it appears that absinthe played a walk-on part. It was part of a wider, international intolerance of intoxicating liquor at a time in history when nationhood (and manhood) was important and the eugenics brigade was in full voice. The American perspective in 1915 is revealing:

An American cartoon of 1915 showed the anti-saloon campaigner Carrie Nation in the guise of Mars, having destroyed a house labelled 'French Absinthe' and another called 'Russian Vodka', now bearing down on 'Ye Olde English Inn'. Italy had banned absinthe in 1913; alcoholism was such a serious cause of deficiencies in war production that the British in 1915 introduced licensing laws in an attempt to curtail drinking among armaments workers; Russia banned wines and spirits in 1914. The difference, as always in this tale, was that in France it was widely believed that banning one drink would solve the problem. At the same time legislation against absinthe was being enacted, the French high command was sending 1000-litre barrels of wine to the front to sustain troop morale (p. 214).

In spite of the factual errors and over-generalisations, *Hideous Absinthe* is an enjoyable read. It is not an academic book, or a well-edited one; it is what might be termed a 'cultural history lite'. Nevertheless it brings the context of an iconic drink to life, and is written in a slick, bold style which is easy to follow. For the subject matter, this is not inappropriate, perhaps. The highs and lows of absinthe's popularity are probably the most interesting outcome of the book, reminding us of the power of advertising and marketing to affect – and manufacture – our attitudes to products we neither like nor desire. Nowhere in the book is absinthe described as a great, thirst-quenching drink (unlike the Chablis and soda favoured by Dowson), and it is testimony to its potent image as a mysterious and dangerous seducer that it became the drink of nineteenth-century bohemians and twentieth-century hedonists.

Notes

1. Aleister Crowley, *Absinthe: The Green Goddess* (Edmonds, WA, 1994); Doris Lanier, *Absinthe: The Cocaine of the Nineteenth Century* (Jefferson, N.C., 1994); Barnaby Conrad, *Absinthe: History in a Bottle* (San Francisco, 1997); Marie-Claude Delahaye and Benoît Noël, *L'Absinthe, muse des peintres* (Paris, 1999); Marie-Claude Delahaye, *L'Absinthe, muse des poètes* (Auvers-sur-Oise, 2000); Phil Baker, *The Dedalus Book of Absinthe* (2001); Barbara Hodgson, *In the Arms of Morpheus: The Tragic History of Laudanum, Morphine and Patent Medicines* (Vancouver, 2001); Marie-Claude Delahaye, *L'Absinthe, son histoire* (Auvers-sur-Oise, 2001); Bettina Wittels and Robert Hermes, eds., *Absinthe: Sip of Seduction: A Contemporary Guide* (Anacortes, WA, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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