

Book Review

- *Coca Wine. Angelo Mariani's Miraculous Elixir and the Birth of Modern Advertising*, by Aymon de Lestrangle. Park Street Press, 2018

Erythroxyton coca – known to indigenous Andeans as the “sacred leaf,” and to much of the rest of the world as the source of its infamous alkaloid, cocaine – has undergone numerous transformations: from elite Inca sumptuary good; to Spanish colonial commodity/Indian labour stimulant; to surgical anaesthetic; to active ingredient in a proliferation of European and North American tonics and patent-medicines; and, in the form of refined cocaine, to illicit recreational drug. Among the puzzles presented by this protean history is the question of how coca consumption, long shunned by Europeans and South American creoles as a “repulsive” Indian habit, crossed the western taste barrier and emerged as a global commodity. In *Coca Wine: Angelo Mariani's Miraculous Elixir and the Birth of Modern Advertising*, Aymon de Lestrangle explores the role in that process of Vin Mariani, a coca-infused Bordeaux wine created, developed, and marketed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the French-Italian pharmacist Angelo Mariani. Lestrangle's biography is the first focused monograph on Vin Mariani, a forerunner of Coca Cola that has long been a subject of interest to drug scholars. With considerable evidence, Lestrangle argues that Mariani's enterprise was of singular importance in facilitating the entrance of Andean coca into European and North American consumer culture and into the stream of global commerce. Though unabashedly iconographic, inclined toward a “great man” account of history, and lean on analysis, Lestrangle's biography of Mariani is engaging and full of original, often surprising new research that includes a rich array of visual sources.

Lestrangle begins with a brief historical discussion of coca's pre-Colombian and colonial history, which, while not new territory from a research perspective, sheds fresh light on early colonial European observations of the psychoactive properties of the coca leaf. In chapters two and three Lestrangle delves into the core of his subject, a thoroughly-researched account of the emergence, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, of coca culture in France and elsewhere in western European. Lestrangle's primary focus, of course, is on the influence of Angelo Mariani and his meteoric rise during this

period as an innovative entrepreneur of coca products. This phenomenon appeared in the context of a rising demand for “modern” patent medicines, and Lestrangle contends that it was Mariani who “made [coca’s] therapeutic properties known worldwide” (p. 29). Via colorful anecdotes and an assortment of visual sources such as promotional posters and ads for European coca products of the *belle époque*, Lestrangle documents the appearance of a proliferation of coca-based remedies – wines, elixirs, lozenges, syrups, gums, chocolates, cigarettes – for a proliferation of “modern” maladies. Lestrangle’s research thus adds texture to our understanding of the material cultural processes through which coca was embraced by European high society and, subsequently, absorbed into popular material culture.

Chapter 4 concerns the role of Vin Mariani in the rise of coca culture in the United States. Lestrangle places much weight on an episode in which Vin Mariani reportedly extended the life of United States President Ulysses Grant, when the latter was dying of throat cancer. Lestrangle takes that account largely at face value, and avers that “it was the tragic story of President Grant that made Mariani’s wine famous in the United States,” and that this made Mariani into “a kind of national hero” (p. 54). This, Lestrangle contends, cemented Vin Mariani’s medical reputation in the United States and led to a raft of endorsements of the product from United States physicians. In Chapter 5 Lestrangle labels Mariani “the father of modern advertising,” and focuses on Mariani’s innovative marketing techniques. These include the entrepreneur’s book-length “albums” of hundreds of celebrity and medical endorsements of his coca products. Lestrangle then provides a rich exposition of various themes appearing in Mariani’s promotional materials for his coca products, including the virtues of the leaf as an aphrodisiac, enhancer of athletic and military performance, extender of life, treatment for alcohol and opium addiction, and salve for the ailing larynx. This research further drives home the point that the emergence of western coca culture was as much a matter of perception and style as of its physical effects as a remedy or stimulant. Chapter 6 is a celebratory account of Mariani’s life as a charismatic figure of French elite society. It is followed by a survey of Vin Mariani “imitators” who sprang up in France, elsewhere in Europe, and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lestrangle’s book concludes with an account of the rise of cocaine addiction and anti-cocaism, leading to the eventual demise, by the mid-twentieth century, of Mariani’s once illustrious enterprise.

In his treatment of Angelo Mariani’s piece of coca’s global history the author omits to recognize the appropriative aspects of the coca entrepreneurialism of Mariani and his “imitators.” While Lestrangle notes Mariani’s use of romanticized neo-Inca imagery and themes in his marketing, nowhere does the author consider the implications of Mariani’s incorporation of an Andean cultivar into an heroic “French” national product. To be sure, Lestrangle’s documentation of what might be referred to as “French coca nationalism” in turn of the century France is intriguing. He cites the nineteenth

century journalist Emile Gautier's assessment of Vin Mariani: "Nothing is more French, more marked with the character of the terroir and the race, than this Gallic liqueur whose flow of gold and purple, retains, mixed with the warm aroma of tropical vegetation, I know not what perfume of elegance, nobility, chivalry, and sweetness," (pp. 40-41) and French General Weygand: "No more neurotics, no more layabouts! But vigorous and ardent Frenchmen at their jobs thanks to Vin Mariani" (p. 92). Characteristically, though, Lestrangle does not comment upon the expropriative aspect of this French commodity nationalism, nor does he provide analysis of the cultural phenomenon of Frenchmen claiming a coca-based product as the ultimate in "Frenchness." Nor, in his concluding discussion of attempts to industrialize coca products in contemporary Bolivia does Lestrangle seem to consider the irony of implying that contemporary Bolivian products – such as coca wine – may be imitative of Vin Mariani. These issues notwithstanding, specialists will find much of interest in Lestrangle's research into a critical conjuncture in the evolution of global coca cultures. Non-specialists will enjoy the author's absorbing and colorful exposition of a fascinating subject.

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