Title
The political economy of the colonial Australian wine industry

I want to submit an abstract for:
Conference Presentation

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Keywords
Regional development
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Research Question
Consider the social and cultural context of the economic development of the Hunter Valley, Australia, wine region from 1830 - 1890.

Methods
This study uses a case study approach to qualitative historical data including business records, agricultural diaries, published works and private letters contextualized with historical statistical data.

Results
Competing political economic frameworks in colonial Australia and the broader British Empire created challenges for regional wine producers that exacerbated other limiting factors to earlier economic success.

Abstract
From the early imperial occupation of the temperate zones of the New World, British colonists sought to develop Mediterranean cash crops, especially wine grapes (Dunstan and McIntyre, 2014). Not until the occupation of eastern Australia in the late eighteenth century did British wine growers successfully seed a colonial industry. This wine growing success in Australia shifted British status in the wine world from prodigious traders and elite consumers to producers, a change brought about through transimperial exchange of plant stock, knowledge and labour that differed greatly from Britain’s assumption of control of the Dutch-administered wine industry of South Africa in the early nineteenth century.

The political economy of wine in nineteenth century Australia saw the combination of laws governing land, labour and licencing encourage new landholders to plant wine grapes instead of alternative crops, despite the absence of a domestic market for wine. In the second half of the nineteenth century small landholders became...
vignerons, drawing on vine acclimatisation, knowledge acquisition and labour accumulation that began earlier in the century with investment by larger landowners able to divert capital from other enterprises. A dynamic booster literature encouraging first the large and then smaller landholders drew on the free market theories of Adam Smith, as well as England’s long observation of French economic success with wine, and elite British enthrallment of this lucrative and romantic pursuit (McIntyre 2012). This literature also mirrored a super-boosterism for grape production in the USA from the mid-nineteenth century (Hannickel 2010) as part of the Settler Revolution of the Anglo world (Belich 2009).

The availability of a comprehensive historical data set for Australia’s wine industry provides much-needed context for the specificities of colonial Australian industry development (Anderson 2015). Using a case study of Australia’s oldest continually producing wine region, the Hunter Valley NSW, this paper locates regional production in the second half of the nineteenth century within broader economic forces and wider economic trends in the colonial Australian wine industry, and the British Empire. It identifies how Hunter Valley wine growers manufactured and sold their product during periods of low domestic and export demand, and how growers responded to the first wave of wine globalization in the late nineteenth century when unexpected supply opportunities were created for New World wine countries such as colonial Australia. These opportunities resulted from plummeting production in European wine countries due to powdery mildew and phylloxera.

In the Hunter Valley, family businesses existed within strong social networks that provided professional support (McIntyre, Mitchell, Boyle and Ryan 2013). By extending historical analysis of the Hunter wine region into the realms of the social and cultural it is possible to trace why particular families proceeded with wine growing despite periods of economic uncertainty, the external factors motivating wine growing in boom times and how particular firms demonstrated resilience during busts. Part of the success of Hunter wine in this era is told through the prizes it gained at international as well as national exhibitions of products amid celebration of the economic progress of British colonies.

Unfortunately, the nature of wine as a sensory and cultural product – and attendant questions of quality and taste – meant that historical ambitions for colonial wine to establish a place in British cellars did not meet with the great success hoped for. In economic terms, this did not not occur until the second wave of wine globalisation in the 1990s. While this may be partly attributed to the comparative shortcomings of colonial Australian wine, the political economy of empire also played its part. In the late nineteenth century Hunter wine arose from the collaboration of a tightknit community but faced wider challenges. The analysis of groups of historical actors in the Hunter region within the context of economic booms and busts allows a more nuanced understanding of the vicissitudes of an industry at the regional level where the region is depending on a complex of forces including competing market expectations and policy frameworks.

REFERENCES


