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Nicolas Marty, *Perrier, c'est nous! Histoire de la source Perrier et de son personnel*. Paris: Editions de l'Atelier/ Editions Ouvrières, 2005. 254 pp. Map, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 24 € (pb). ISBN 2-7082-3816-7.

Review by Stephen L. Harp, University of Akron.

A shortened version of a doctoral thesis defended at the Université de Perpignan, Nicolas Marty's book surveys the history of Perrier and its workers from 1903 to 1990. After a short introduction, Marty organizes the work chronologically, with each section reading first as traditional business history, tracing management and marketing changes, company finances, competitors, and the growth of the business. Turning to labor history, each section then addresses the recruitment and origins of workers, working conditions, wage rates, benefits, and labor activism.

Since at least the fifteenth century, the pond of Bouillens, situated in the present-day commune of Vergèze and fed by a natural spring, was open to anyone. Local inhabitants bathed in the waters reputed to treat dermatitis and rheumatism. By the middle of the nineteenth century, its owner, Alphonse Granier, managed to get legal sanction for his closure of the site, then opening up a bathing establishment. The business failed, and in the late 1890s, Dr. Louis Eugène Perrier, a specialist of mineral water treatments, took control. In dire need of financing in order to develop the site, by 1903 Perrier managed to catch the interest of St. John Harmsworth, a wealthy Briton. Born into the family that owned *The Evening News* and *The Daily Mail*, Harmsworth had access to capital and, as important, an alternative vision of the use of the gaseous waters from the Bouillens spring.

Harmsworth quickly took control of Perrier's business and transformed the spring from a site where people took the waters to one that bottled the water. Perrier remained as a technical consultant, studying the properties of the waters and lending his reputation to the claim that drinking the water had health benefits. And Harmsworth retained Perrier's name for the company. Clearly recognizable as French, as a name Perrier appealed in wealthy British circles conditioned to appreciate French food and drink. At the same time, the name Perrier offered reassurance within France that this was a French product, even though Britons actually maintained controlling interest in the company until after World War II. In addition, Harmsworth and his British managers adopted the oblong green bottle; though more expensive to produce (about 65 per cent of the cost of production in the early years, not including transport [p. 29]), the bottle distinguished Perrier from competing mineral waters. From the beginning, marketing was a fundamental part of the business plan. Using the family newspapers, Harmsworth saturated the British market with ads for Perrier. Harmsworth was well-acquainted with British soda water, usually used to dilute whiskey, and Perrier offered a "natural" and "French" alternative, a "champagne of waters" to repeat the company's slogan. In the early twentieth century, Perrier focused on British and North American markets and only incidentally on the French one. In 1907, 93 per cent of sales were outside France.

The years before the First World War brought reorganizations of the Bouillens site and the necessity of recruiting more workers. Given the firm's relative isolation between Nîmes and Montpellier, Perrier competed not with other factories but with Languedocien vintners. In the late nineteenth century, Languedoc had become the site for vast, over-planted (and mediocre) vineyards, making vintners important local employers even though they paid poorly. From the beginning, Perrier pulled its workers from the local vineyards. In the early years, many workers combined work *chez* Perrier with

less remunerative agricultural work. In the first half of the twentieth century, most Perrier sales were during the summer months, and production was concentrated in that season. In the vineyards, it was the spring pruning and the fall harvests that required the most labor. As late as the 1940s, Perrier actually halted production during the fall harvest, allowing its locally recruited workers to combine their factory and agricultural work. While Marty provides more detail than interpretation of worker recruitment or worker politics during the early years of the firm, he successfully shows the importance of seeing Perrier labor policies in the Languedocien context, implicitly arguing that historians of labor should not lose sight of cross-sector labor patterns within regional contexts.

After the travails of attempting to sell a non-essential product for export during the First World War, Perrier thrived in the 1920s. The company simultaneously rationalized production while building a much larger international and French market for the water. Above all, Perrier returned to a discourse of health. Buyers could avoid presumably less hygienic municipal water supplies. In addition, temperance advocates' condemnation of alcohol created a backdrop for Perrier to claim its water's healthfulness. Perrier, trumpeting its "eau des sportifs," became a major sponsor of the Tour de France in 1923 and co-sponsored the French Open in 1927. It even supplied Wagons-Lits, probably at a loss, in order to build market share among well-heeled travelers. In 1926, Perrier spent 700,000 francs on advertising, while Badoit, its slightly less gaseous counterpart, spent only 200,000. Marty estimates the Perrier spent 9 per cent of its total sales on advertising (p. 68). Throughout the 1920s, Perrier grew quickly, maintaining pace with the growth of the sector more generally. The 1930s initially proved quite challenging, when exports to Britain and the United States dried up (exports fell from 4.6 million bottles in 1933 to 1.5 million in 1935), but sales increased in the hexagon and in the empire (p. 100). By the late 1930s, while not eclipsing Vichy, Perrier was the dominant producer of fizzy water, selling about twice as many bottles per year as Badoit.

Marty portrays a relatively quiescent workforce in the interwar years. Two factors seemed to have been essential. First, pay increases chez Perrier continued to outpace those of the other employers in the region, a fact that led to constant tension between the firm and local employers. Second, though the politics of workers were undoubtedly leftist and the Confédération Générale du Travail was the dominant union, the workers themselves continued to act in many respects as a disunited agricultural workforce. Workers still walked or rode bikes to the plant from local villages, as Perrier remained a relatively small firm (between 200 and 300 employees in the early 1930s), a fact that never necessitated the workers' housing (*cités ouvrières*) that many larger French employers built in the interwar years. Workers remained embedded in village contexts, according to Marty, reducing their willingness to undertake collective action against an employer that paid notably better than others. Even during the Popular Front, through what Marty portrays as adept management, Perrier managed to avoid strikes by quickly agreeing to a collective contract that recognized the local CGT.

As for much of French industry, the Second World War initially presented a challenge to Perrier's fortunes, eliminating the company's foreign and imperial markets. Ultimately, the PDG, Alexandre Joël, agreed to supply German troops (who drank 67 per cent of Perrier's production by 1944 [p. 113]), a move that actually generated a profit during several years during the war. From the company's point of view, Vichy labor policies provided the real obstacle. Despite repeated requests from the company, Vichy rejected bids to increase wages. Perrier, in an effort to maintain its work force, undertook company welfare schemes (*oeuvres sociales*) far more elaborate than any established in the inter-war years. Perrier offered stipends (*allocations*) to employees who had ended up prisoners of war as well as to their families. Vegetables, grown on Perrier grounds, were distributed gratis to workers' families. Perrier established an elaborate pension plan for retirees, camps (*colonies de vacances*) for the children of workers, and an array of physical education measures designed to improve the health of workers (and, ultimately, for the sake of the "national recovery" [*redressement national*]).

After World War II, French investors bought out British interests in the company. By 1952, Gustave Leven managed to gain controlling interest. Serving as PDG until 1990, Leven oversaw the remarkable postwar expansion of Perrier. On the one hand, mineral water, both gaseous and still, became a mass product in the postwar years, and Perrier remained a dominant producer, coupling ever larger advertising budgets and ever higher production. On the other, Perrier took control of a host of other companies, mostly in the sectors of drinks (most notably former competitor Contrexeville, a still water) and candy. In the early 1950s, British and American markets were largely abandoned as the company focused on the rapidly expanding French market and on the diversification of product lines.

Despite considerable gains in productivity, Perrier needed ever more workers, employing more than 3,500 permanent employees (as well as fluctuating numbers of seasonal workers) in the Vergèze plant by the 1980s, making Perrier the largest private employer in Languedoc. Wage rates remained higher than regional norms, helping Perrier to secure a stable work force. However, the cozy relationship between management and workers deteriorated as the firm expanded. Leven ended many of Joël's *oeuvres sociales*. Workers abandoned accompanying agricultural labor. And the CGT became much more militant, particularly in the wake of 1968. Marty ends the narrative in 1990, when Nestlé purchased Perrier. After that point, workers at Vergèze fought tooth-and-nail to preserve the benefits they had acquired, even appealing to national authorities to keep Nestlé from eliminating local jobs and potentially producing "Perrier" elsewhere.

As the above summary should make clear, this book has many strengths. Marty provides abundant detail about the evolution of a company that in many ways came to symbolize France itself. Given that many company records have not survived, Marty deserves praise for an elaborate effort of reconstruction from limited company records, union records, interviews, bank records (of the Société Générale and the Crédit Lyonnais), chamber of commerce deliberations, and the local press. In addition, he manages to combine a history of business with that of labor, allowing readers to see the importance of understanding a major national business within the regional context. And there is an array of fascinating details. For example, from an environmental perspective it is depressing to learn that Leven abandoned the deposit system (*consigne*) for Perrier bottles in order to keep pace with Badoit and still water competitors that switched to plastic in the early 1970s, even though the deposit system actually cost less. Although Marty doesn't say so exactly, it seems that Leven realized that consumers would be less willing to buy a Perrier with the knowledge that they could or should return the bottle whereas a nonreturnable glass bottle, like a plastic bottle, could be easily pitched even if it actually cost slightly more. Leven, as a result, focused on the use of recycled glass, and his strategy appears to have been successful. Thus French consumers could easily dispose of Perrier bottles, even though they remained glass (a necessity given the pressure of bubbling Perrier water). And, even more significant according to Marty, the reliance on recycled glass and nonreturnable bottles allowed for a new incursion into foreign markets, in the 1970s and 1980s.

In several respects, this is a traditional business and labor history, little influenced by the emergence of cultural history. Several works in business and cultural history might have deepened Marty's analysis. For example, in his discussion of Perrier's interest in the soft drink market in France, Marty might have used Richard Kuisel's work on Coca-Cola as background for a discussion of how Perrier distinguished its water, through advertising, from American soft drinks (even while producing soft drinks for the French market itself and serving as French distributor of Pepsi).^[1] I would imagine that Perrier stepped up its health claims just after World War II at the very moment that French vintners claimed that Coke was a health hazard. Moreover, it would be interesting to compare how Perrier deployed notions of French national identity within France with those purveyed in foreign markets.

Similarly, it might have been useful to explore how the "natural" qualities of Perrier were peddled to French and foreigners alike. Marty mentions that, at the Perrier spring, the carbonic gas is captured

separately from the water and then reintroduced back into the water, in an exact and thus not “natural” way, during the bottling process. Yet Perrier appears to have been consistently billed as a “natural” fizzy water, distinct from the “artificial” soda waters or soda pop. In short, while Marty mentions marketing as a business strategy, some historians will want to know more about the texts of Perrier ads and the interplay with the production process. Here it might have been useful if Marty had seen Kolleen Guy’s work on the champagne industry.[2]

Of course, these are very minor criticisms of a fascinating and quite readable book. Readers will learn much about Perrier and a great deal about the interaction of French business and labor in twentieth-century Languedoc.

NOTES

[1] Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), chapter 3.

[2] Kolleen M. Guy, *When Champagne Became French: Wine and the Making of a National Identity* (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

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