

***MARTIN ROSS,
E. OE. SOMERVILLE***



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COUNTRY***

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COUNTRY***

Martin Ross, E. Oe. Somerville

In the vine country

Enriched edition.

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Introduction

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In the Vine Country pivots on the magnetic pull of wine's romance against the stubborn gravity of the labor, landscape, and local lives that make that romance possible, following two keen observers as they discover how elegance coexists with the clatter of harvest, how social ritual depends on seasonal risk, and how the tidy promise of a label is born from sun, soil, and the many hands that turn vines, carry baskets, and watch the fermenting vats through long nights, across unfamiliar roads and in conversations that sharpen appetite into understanding.

Written by the Anglo-Irish collaborators Martin Ross and E. Oe. Somerville, *In the Vine Country* is a work of travel writing set in the wine districts around Bordeaux in southwestern France, observed during the bustle of the grape harvest in the late nineteenth century. First published in the 1890s, it brings the duo's practiced eye for scene, character, and incident to a landscape shaped by rows of vines, river light, and chateaux economies. The book sits at the lively intersection of reportage and sketch, grounded in place yet alert to the social and commercial networks that make a regional vintage legible to distant drinkers.

The premise is disarmingly simple: two travelers enter the vine country during vintage, move from estate to village to cellar, and record what they see and hear. Their narrative voice is companionable and sharp, a flexible first-person perspective that shifts between amused self-awareness and

meticulous description. The tone favors light irony without cruelty, and the style builds scenes from crisp sensory detail: the heft of a trug, the stain of must, a courtyard's quiet after the wagons depart. Instead of plot twists, the book offers sequences of encounters, conversations, and vistas that accumulate into a textured understanding of a working countryside.

It is travel literature that trusts observation, but it also recognizes that every vantage point is partial, so the authors fold their own expectations into the story with tact and humor. Quick character sketches enliven innkeepers, proprietors, brokers, and field hands; deft turns of comparison test English habits against French customs without pretending that either is definitive. The prose is attentive to surfaces, from labels and etiquette to architecture, while quietly measuring what those surfaces conceal, from the schedule that keeps a vat at the right temperature to the hands that sort fruit at speed. The result reads as bright, humane, and exacting.

Several themes organize the book's quiet momentum. It continually contrasts the polished culture of wine with the manual routines that sustain it, bringing labor out from behind the bottle. It explores cross-cultural meeting points, showing how language, gesture, and humor mediate encounters between hosts and visitors. It tracks money as well as taste, noticing the brokers, contracts, and calendars that shape a harvest. It also hints at the freedoms and limits of women's travel in that era, since curiosity opens doors yet propriety constrains vantage. Throughout, land,

weather, and time structure human intention more firmly than fashion or talk.

For contemporary readers, *In the Vine Country* matters because it treats wine not as a luxury isolated from life but as a nexus of work, environment, and culture. In an age attentive to provenance, sustainability, and the ethics of tourism, the book models how to look closely without presuming to possess what one observes. Its comedy still plays, but so does its insistence that taste is social knowledge shaped by class, labor, and place. Readers interested in food writing, travel narratives, or the human history inside a glass will find here a gracefully written, grounded companion.

Approached on its own terms, this is a book of roads and rows, of talk and toil, of landscapes that become legible through repeated attention. It offers the pleasures of style and scene while inviting reflection on how value is made, shared, and remembered. Because it keeps faith with detail rather than drama, it rewards slow reading and revisiting. And because it captures a specific region at a particular historical moment without nostalgia or condescension, it continues to travel well, guiding twenty-first-century readers toward a clearer, kinder, way of seeing both the romance and the real of the vine country.

Synopsis

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In the Vine Country is a travel narrative by the Anglo-Irish collaborators Martin Ross and E. Oe. Somerville, set amid the vineyards of southwestern France during the annual grape harvest. Written in a shared, observant voice, it follows their excursion into a landscape defined by wine and the labor that sustains it. The opening positions the travelers among stations, inns, and roads leading toward vine-covered districts, establishing a tone that balances curiosity with restraint. As the vintage gathers momentum, they present themselves as attentive outsiders, intent on understanding daily routines, local etiquette, and the seasonal economy without presuming specialized expertise or authority.

Early chapters convey the approach to vineyard country through changes in scenery and pace. The authors move from urban thresholds to rural lanes, registering the spread of trellised fields and the bustle that precedes picking. Their first forays introduce the practicalities of lodging, transport, and the negotiation of permission to watch work in progress. They set down initial contrasts between quiet off-season villages and the sudden concentration of workers and carts. The narrative emphasizes the allure of the harvest's rituals while keeping focus on the everyday decisions that orchestrate the season's narrow, exacting timetable.

As the harvest begins, the book turns to careful observation of the picking and the movement of grapes

from rows to press. The authors track how labor is organized, how timing and weather guide each step, and how the cadence of fieldwork meets the measured routines of the cellar. Visits to properties of differing scale reveal variations in method and means, from modest holdings to established estates. Without technical digression, they mark the essentials of cleanliness, supervision, and patience, noting how tradition and practical ingenuity coexist in shaping the year's effort into a coherent, marketable wine.

Encounters with people anchor the account. The authors watch the collaboration of pickers, carriers, cellar hands, and overseers, describing the physical demands of the work and the social codes that govern it. They convey snippets of conversation and gesture without turning individuals into caricatures, showing care for the dignity of routine tasks. Language differences create occasional misunderstandings that the narrative treats with gentle humor rather than condescension. The scene-setting highlights how local knowledge circulates—through instruction in the rows, through quiet authority in the cellar—and how shared purpose holds a temporary community together until the last basket is emptied.

Travel itself forms a subplot of misalignments and accommodations. The writers chronicle arrangements that must be revised when weather shifts, schedules slip, or roads complicate plans. These inconveniences draw attention to the material culture of the vintage: tools, carts, barrels, vats, and the spaces where grapes become wine. Descriptions of sound and smell emphasize the sensory intensity of the season, while the measured pace of

fermenting and racking offers a counterpoint to the haste of gathering fruit. The narrative keeps technical explanation to what can be seen, letting observation carry the texture of the process.

As visits accumulate, the book broadens into reflections on reputation, risk, and the annual gamble that binds growers, merchants, and consumers. The authors register how expectations beyond the region shape choices within it: the value placed on consistency, the anxiety over weather, and the premium on judgment developed over years. They are attentive to social gradations without reducing the scene to a simple hierarchy, and they consider what it means to write as women travelers in a world of entrenched practices. Their perspective remains descriptive and comparative, interested in how work, pride, and livelihood intersect under seasonal pressure.

The closing movement gathers impressions rather than conclusions. Having followed the vintage from approach to aftermath, the authors leave readers with a portrait of a working landscape caught at its most concentrated moment. Their reserve preserves the privacy of people and places while conveying the satisfaction and fatigue that end a harvest. The book's enduring resonance lies in its clear-eyed, humane attention to process and place, offering a record of rural France at a historical moment and a classic instance of collaborative travel writing that values patience, detail, and the ethics of looking closely without claiming final judgment.

Historical Context

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In the Vine Country, by the Anglo-Irish collaborators E. Oe. Somerville and Martin Ross, records a journey through southwest France during the grape harvest in the early 1890s. The authors, already known for lively travel sketches, observe the vineyards and towns of Bordeaux and the Charente at the height of the vendanges. Their narrative moves amid châteaux, cooperages, warehouses, and quays, with the port of Bordeaux and the Charente River serving as commercial arteries. Set within France's Third Republic, the book surveys local institutions—estate management, municipal authority, and the regional wine trade—through the vantage of visiting Irish gentlewomen and professional authors.

The Bordeaux wine economy they encountered rested on mid-century structures that still shaped the 1890s. The 1855 Classification, devised for the Paris Exposition, ranked Médoc and Sauternes châteaux into crus and fixed a hierarchy that guided prices and prestige. Parallel to the estates stood the négociant houses of the Place de Bordeaux, which blended, matured, and exported wines under merchant labels. Railways linked vineyards to the port, while brokers, coopers, and dockworkers enabled global distribution. British demand for "claret" remained crucial, and English was a language of commerce in certain firms, embedding Bordeaux in a long Anglo-French trading relationship.

The narrative unfolds in the aftermath of the phylloxera crisis that, from the late 1860s, devastated French vineyards by the insect's spread from the Rhône and Garonne basins to nearly all wine regions. By the 1890s, recovery depended on grafting European vines onto resistant American rootstocks, alongside chemical measures and improved vineyard hygiene. In nearby Gironde and Charente, growers also adopted the "Bordeaux mixture," a copper sulfate and lime spray publicized in 1885 by Pierre-Marie-Alexis Millardet to combat downy mildew. These technical remedies, and the debates they provoked, frame the conditions Somerville and Ross observe in fields, nurseries, and cellars.

Moving into the Charente, the authors enter cognac country, where eaux-de-vie distilled from Ugni Blanc and other permitted grapes aged in oak warehouses before blending and export. The region's great houses—among them Hennessy (founded by Irishman Richard Hennessy in 1765), Martell (1715), and Rémy Martin (1724)—had long structured production through contracts with growers and distillers. Phylloxera had struck the Charente severely, and replanting and nursery work dominated the countryside in the 1890s. River traffic on the Charente and rail links to the ports channeled casks toward overseas markets, especially Britain and North America, anchoring local livelihoods to global demand.

The rural society depicted operates through layered labor systems. Estate owners, régisseurs, and steward-vignerons coordinated permanent crews and hired seasonal pickers for the vendange. Métayage and fermage contracts coexisted,

while smallholders supplied labor or grapes to larger concerns. In the southwest, Spanish and Italian migrants often augmented local harvest work, part of wider nineteenth-century circulations of rural labor. Markets and cafés served as hiring points, and cooperative practices and village festivals punctuated the agricultural calendar. The Third Republic's civic institutions—mayors, gendarmes, secular schools—appear as everyday frameworks around which vineyard communities managed work, sociability, and disputes tied to land and weather.

The book belongs to a flourishing late-Victorian and Belle Époque travel culture enabled by railways, steamship links, and standardized hotel networks. Baedeker and Murray guides structured itineraries, while the illustrated press created a market for first-person sketches by professional writers. Somerville and Ross, independent women authors from the Anglo-Irish gentry, fit the era's expanding opportunities for female travel and reportage sometimes labeled the "New Woman." Somerville's drawings align the volume with contemporary pictorial journalism. Regular postal and telegraph services, and Thomas Cook's arrangements on main routes, made cross-Channel trips routine, allowing the pair to visit cellars, fairs, and administrative offices.

Economic policy and brand reputation shaped what Somerville and Ross encountered. The Cobden-Chevalier Treaty of 1860 had lowered Franco-British tariffs, nurturing a taste for claret that persisted despite later protectionist turns in the 1890s. Before the 1935 creation of the appellation d'origine contrôlée system, provenance rested

on château names, merchant brands, and local reputations, amid worries about adulteration and mislabeling. Louis Pasteur's mid-century studies on wine stability informed cellar practice, while brokers (courtiers) mediated sales and authenticated samples for export. Their visits to merchants and estate offices thus touch a world where law, science, and marketing worked to reassure distant consumers.

In tone and method, the book mirrors late-nineteenth-century realist reportage, balancing anecdote with close description. Through lightly satirical scenes in tasting rooms, village inns, and harvest fields, the authors register the gap between ceremonial hierarchies of class and vintage and the precarious labor sustaining them. They notice technological routines born of recent crises alongside resilient local customs and speech. Written by Irish outsiders familiar with landed management, the account views Bordeaux and the Charente with comparative tact. As such, it reflects an era rebuilding its viticulture through science and commerce and quietly critiques the social performances surrounding prestige wines.

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CHAPTER I.

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It was our first day's cub-hunting, and things had been going against us from the outset.

To begin with, we had started rather late,—it is noticeable that the minutes between five and six A.M. are fewer and closer together than they are at any other period of the day,—and, when half way to the meet we found that Betty had given way to her sporting proclivities, and had surreptitiously followed us. When it is explained that Betty is a St. Bernard puppy of cart-horse dimensions, whose expression of smiling imbecility only cloaks a will of iron, it will be understood that there was trouble before us. The trouble began at once. Directly she saw she was discovered she ran away, and the next time we saw her she was three fields ahead of us, lumbering cheerfully into covert at the heels of the hounds, pursued by several cows and the curses of the master.