

**Robin Butler**

*Great British Wine Accessories*

1550–1900

Published by Brown & Brown

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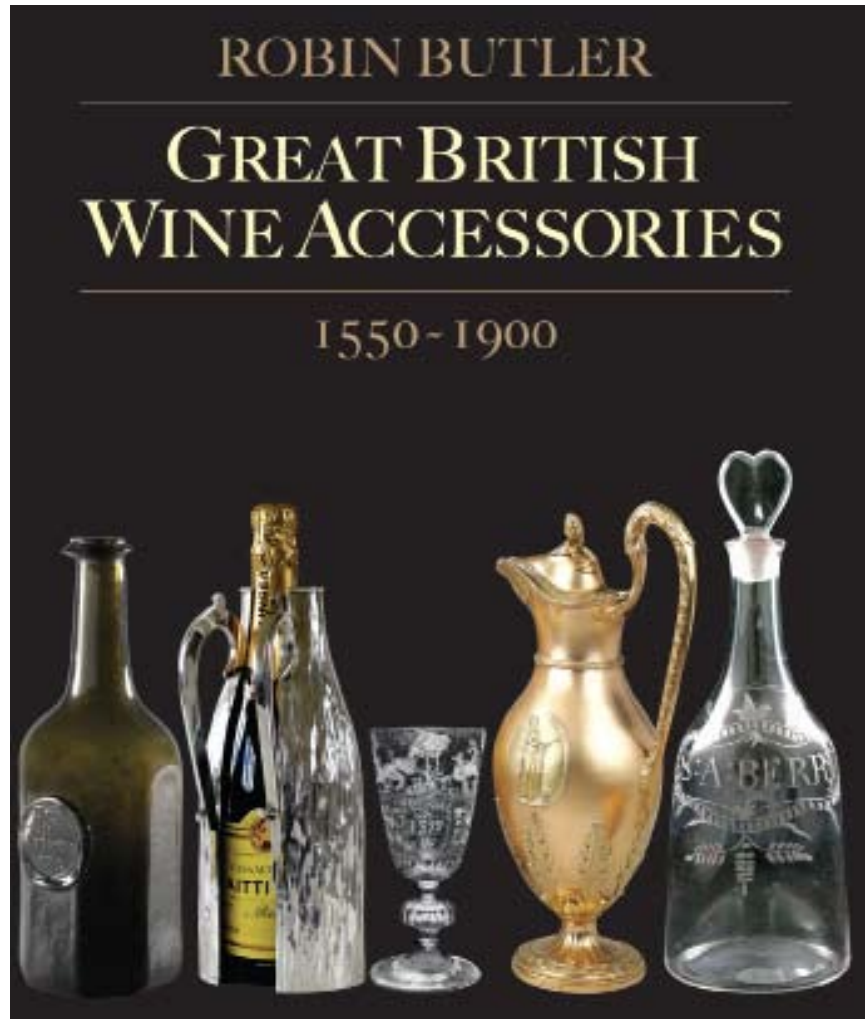
*Reviewed by David Peppercorn MW*

Book reviews come in many shapes and sizes. Sometimes they are essays on the subject of the book, more, or perhaps less, informative on the actual quality of the work in question. Others tell you, in some detail, what is actually in the book, but give little idea of the reviewer's actual opinions. Others again go to town on the minutiae that may have escaped the eagle eye of the editor or proof-reader. I would certainly not be the right person on this last aspect!

What I can report is that Robin Butler's new book displays impeccable scholarship combined with outstanding book production. Brown & Brown and their printers BPS, both in Suffolk, England deserve the highest praise. The illustrations—all compiled and researched by the author and all in color—are of the highest quality and perfectly complement the text. Yet the book remains comfortable to handle despite the heavy paper required to ensure the quality of the picture reproduction. This is achieved by using soft covers but protecting the book in a box—a very practical solution, since the book is far heavier than its 288 pages would lead you to suspect.

Apart from chapters on the obvious things—bottles, corkscrews, decanters, and glasses—there are very informative chapters on more esoteric items such as bin labels, tasters, wine coolers, wine funnels, wine labels, coasters, and decanter trolleys, as well as a salutary warning about fakes. Some of the most beautiful furniture ever designed were specialist tables at which to take wine, where decanters might circulate, sometimes on brass rails.

There is also much fascinating social history. Thus, the small glasses produced in the 17th and early 18th centuries were for drinking wine but more especially for making toasts and, as with present-day Scandinavians and their toasts in



aquavit, the glass had to be drained in one gulp. It was only after numerous such toasts and the end of the meal that serious wine drinking began, using larger glasses. (As an echo of such customs, Oxbridge High Tables still reserve their serious wines for drinking at leisure after dining in Hall). While decanters are still as useful as ever, as well as a joy to behold, modern glasses are greatly to be preferred to their 18th or 19th century predecessors which are better enjoyed with the eye. If you have ever wondered how the bladder-shaped bottles made prior to 1730 could have been binned, the answer is in sand. Only when bottles became more or less straight-sided could they be stored in the large, brick bins still to be found in the cellars of old country houses. One thing surprised me—I had never heard that the indentation under the bottom of a bottle could be called a “kick” rather than a punt; a term apparently reserved to

those in the wine trade. The silversmith's art comes into its own with wine labels used for indicating the contents of decanters as well as for coasters. Some beautiful examples are illustrated here.

But perhaps nothing else quite has the immediacy, when it comes to evoking the past, as the wine bottles embossed with a date, and with the name or initials of the happy owner for whom they were made. Few examples dated prior to 1700 survive, and the invention of the bottle mold in 1821 sounded the death knell of the hand-blown bottle, but also ushered in standard bottle sizes.

I have only scratched the surface of what is contained within the covers of this fascinating book. It is a joy to handle; it illustrates the subject with erudition and charm, and is a pleasure to thumb through. The sort of book one hopes to receive as a present for Christmas or a birthday but, in the end, a book you must have if the subject is of any interest at all!