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## An English Visitor Checks Out Trappist Beer – In 1893.

May 10, 2016 by Gary



E. (Edward) Harrison Barker was an English professional travel writer. His active period was the last 25 years of the 1800s and into the Edwardian period. It appears he was the son of [Thomas Jones Barker](#) of Bath, a well-known artist who specialized in equestrian and military subjects. One of the Charge of the Light Brigade paintings is his.

[E. Harrison Barker](#) specialized in France. He lived there for at least ten years before authoring (amongst many other books) *France Of The French*, which was well-reviewed for its perspicacity and, as one reviewer put it, the author's independence of mind. In particular Barker had an interest in southwest France and liked to seek out areas which were still backward (as things were viewed then) in the Belle Epoque.

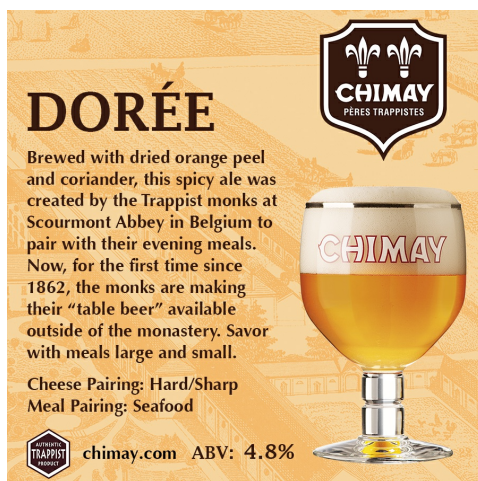
Poverty could be extreme in the areas Barker favoured and in one of his books, he describes an area where bread and little else sustained the people, who slept on hard wooden benches. In one perceptive and sensitive piece, he describes a French clergyman (not monastic) who lived for his library of learned books. He subsisted on bread and oranges but glowed with delight when describing his collection to Barker which included Milton and Shakespeare.

There are other illuminating moments like this, and wry ones. In one, a sharp peasant-woman says to him, I paraphrase, "Why do you tramp hundreds of miles into desolate areas like this only to visit upon poverty and

imbeciles?”. She says, “If I was you, I would go to Paris and London and be enlightened by the best minds”. The book review in which I read this thought her overly practical and modern; I think it missed the point, which is not to take away from the value of Barker’s work.

In 1893, Barker, in his typical wide-screen style, described a visit to a Trappist monastery, the Abbaye de Notre-Dame de Bonne-Espérance in the town of Echourgnac. The piece is called *A Night With The Trappists*. Echourgnac is in a remote *pays* west of Limoges in Aquitaine’s northern Dordogne. It was often marshy, fever-ridden, impoverished. Older people often still did not know French, versus that is the patois they grew up with.

Barker specialized in introducing such areas to a British public long familiar with France as a destination for gentlemen to finish their education, or for holidays. Even then, people wanted the exotic, and he gave it to them.



The fathers had come to the marshlands in 1868 from the famed Port-du-Salut abbey in Mayenne, to help bring agriculture to the area, drain the swamps, make cheese (in the Port Salut way, naturally), and help the people. The particular area they went to is and was called, the Double. Sorry, it’s true.

They built a brickworks first, to fashion and cure the bricks from which the abbey was built. Barker’s description of his stay is rather absorbing, not least because of his repeated references to the abbey’s beer. He speaks often of the food, too, which was fairly rude: bread and cheese, which he enjoyed, thin soup, and “black macaroni”. No meat was eaten, in the Trappist way, and fish is not mentioned. Still, the monks seemed to thrive on it – and the beer.

Indeed Barker noted, “There is no escaping malt liquor here”.

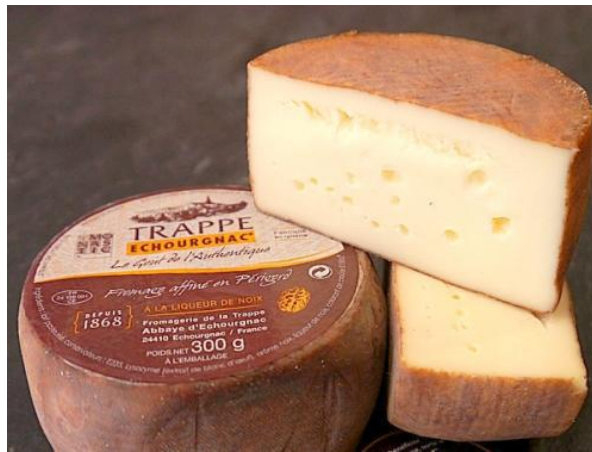
He was greeted with a glass of it by the porter on arrival – this was from a stone jug – and it was served to him in bottles numerous times during his stay, including with each meal. While Barker seems to have liked beer in general, one senses that he was a little taken aback to be given beer so often, “monastic barley-brew”, he called it. At one point he intimates that some of his interlocutors had an ulterior motive – their own refreshment, no doubt. Barker didn’t like the brew initially, describing it as “yellow” and in another passage, looking like pea soup. He also called it “thick and slab”, a term in Shakespeare. (“Make the gruel thick and slab”, from *Macbeth*). Slab meant gluey.

However, he also says he became accustomed to drinking it. I’d like to think it tasted like Chimay Gold.

No doubt it wasn’t fermented that highly, which makes sense for a drink that was a daily standby for the fathers: it would be fairly low in alcohol, that is. One of his hosts told him the beer was “new”. It was probably yeasty and turbid, like some beers which are toast of the town today. *Plus ça change*. The brewing activity shows, too, that it was not only monasteries in northern France, Belgium and other northern climes who brewed: brewing took place, in line with old monastic practice, all over Europe where monks did their work, even in some southern parts. It’s a reminder too that most grain-growing areas have had a beer of some kind at one time or another.

Why would a yellow beer strike Barker as unusual? This is hard to say. He was probably used to pale ale, mild ale, porter, which ranged from orangey-amber to black. But who knows. Barker noted that the abbey made both wine and beer. He pined for the wine, a white, but it was only served in winter: he was there at the wrong time, the bane

of any traveller.



When he left, the monk seeing him off offered him a last glass of monastic barley brew – which he refused. Not so sporting I think. He comes off as an odd combination of prig and practiced traveller, almost stereotypically English in this sense, by which I mean, the image the English had in foreign parts then. (Do they still? I don't know, my sense is things have changed). But the account is withal very interesting and a sure guide no doubt to the time.

What happened to the Trappist *projet* at Notre-Dame de Bonne-Espérance? By 1910, the profound anti-clerical legislation of 1903-1905 did it in. The monks left, *inventaire* was taken of the goods, and they were sold off. But the story ends well from a Trappist standpoint. In 1923, a community of sisters established a permanent presence, also of the reformed Cistercian (Trappist) order. They had come from another part of the southwest, had spent a spell in Spain under exile, but finally were given refuge in Echourgnac in the relative detente of State and clergy following the convulsions of WW I.

The nuns are [there today](#) and still make the Port Salut-type cheese which Barker ate. Indeed in 1999 they added a second cheese which is matured in walnut liqueur fetched not too far away, and it became a hit. No beer or wine is made as far as I know.

Michael Jackson, the great beer writer who introduced Trappist beer to the world, once described a night he spent at a brewing monastery. He wasn't the first to do so who took note of the beer.

*Note re images: the first image is of the subject abbey in Echourgnac, France and was taken from [the website](#) of Service des Moniales, a site devoted to the sisters of all orders who inhabit convents and serve their communities. The second image is from the website of a marketing agency for Chimay beer, [here](#). The third image is from the French tourism site, France-Voyage, [here](#). All are believed available for educational and historical purposes. All feedback welcomed.*

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