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of
WORLD
in
6 GLASSES



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Author of *The Victorian Internet* and *The Turk*

TEA and the
**BRITISH
EMPIRE**



Empires of Tea

Better to be deprived of food for three days than of tea for one.

—*Chinese proverb*

Thank God for tea! What would the world do without tea? How did it exist?

—*Sydney Smith, British writer (1771-1845)*

The Drink That Conquered the World

WITH FAR-FLUNG TERRITORIES stretched around the world, the British Empire was famously described in 1773 by Sir George Macartney, an imperial administrator, as "this vast empire on which the sun never sets." At its height, it encompassed a fifth of the world's surface and a quarter of its population. Despite the loss of its North American colonies following American independence, Britain expanded its sphere of influence dramatically from the mid-eighteenth century, establishing control of India and Canada, setting up new colonies in Australia and New Zealand, and displacing the Dutch to dominate European sea trade with the East. Intertwined with Britain's emergence as the first global superpower was its pioneering adoption of a new system of manufacturing. Workers were brought together in large factories where tireless labor-saving machines driven by steam engines amplified human skill and effort—a cluster of innovations collectively known today as the Industrial Revolution.

Linking these imperial and industrial expansions was a new drink—new to Europeans, at least—that became associated with the English and remains so to this day. Tea provided the basis for the widening of European trade with the East. Profits from its trade helped to fund the advance into India of the British East India Company, the commercial organization that became Britain's de facto colonial government in the East. Having started as a luxury drink, tea trickled down to become the beverage of the working man, the fuel for the workers who operated the new machine-powered factories. If the sun never set on the British

Empire, it was perpetually teatime, somewhere at least.

With its associated drinking rituals of genteel afternoon tea and the worker's tea break, tea perfectly matched Britain's self-image as a civilizing, industrious power. How odd, then, that this quintessentially English drink initially had to be imported at great cost and effort from China, that vast and mysterious dominion on the other side of the world, and that the cultivation and processing of tea were utter mysteries to its European drinkers. As far as they were concerned, the chests of tea leaves simply materialized on the dock in Canton; tea might as well have come from Mars. Even so, tea somehow became a central part of British culture. The drink that already lubricated China's immense empire could then conquer vast new territories: Having won over the British, tea spread throughout the world and became the most widely consumed beverage on Earth after water. The story of tea is the story of imperialism, industrialization, and world domination, one cup at a time.

The Rise of Tea Culture

According to Chinese tradition, the first cup of tea was brewed by the emperor Shen Nung, whose reign is traditionally dated to 2737-2697 BCE. He was the second of China's legendary emperors and was credited with the inventions of agriculture and the plow, along with the discovery of medicinal herbs. (Similarly, his predecessor, the first emperor, is said to have discovered fire, cooking, and music.) Legend has it that Shen Nung was boiling some water to drink, using some branches from a wild tea bush to fuel his fire, when a gust of wind carried some of the plant's leaves into his pot. He found the resulting infusion a delicate and refreshing drink. He later wrote a medical treatise, the *Pen ts'ao*, on the medicinal uses of various herbs, in which he supposedly noted that an infusion of tea leaves "quenches the thirst, lessens the desire for sleep, and gladdens and cheers the heart." Yet tea is not, in fact, such an ancient Chinese beverage; the story of Shen Nung is a far later invention. The earliest edition of the *Pen ts'ao*, dated to the Neo-Han dynasty (25-221 CE), makes no mention of tea. The reference to tea was added in the seventh century.

Tea is an infusion of the dried leaves, buds, and flowers of an evergreen bush, *Camellia sinensis*, which seems to have evolved in the jungles of the eastern Himalayas on what is now the India China border. In prehistoric times, people noticed the invigorating effect of chewing its leaves, and the healing effect of

rubbing them on wounds, practices that survived for thousands of years. Tea was also consumed in a medicinal gruel in southwest China, the chopped leaves being mixed with shallot, ginger, and other ingredients; tribal peoples in what is now northern Thailand steamed or boiled the leaves and formed them into balls, then ate them with salt, oil, garlic, fat, and dried fish. So tea was a medicine and a foodstuff before it was a drink.

Exactly how and when it spread into China is unclear, but it seems to have been helped along by Buddhist monks, adherents of the religion founded in India in the sixth century BCE by Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. Both Buddhist and Taoist monks found that drinking tea was an invaluable aid to meditation, since it enhanced concentration and banished fatigue—qualities that are now known to be due to the presence of caffeine. Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism who lived in the sixth century BCE, believed that tea was an essential ingredient in the elixir of life.

The earliest unambiguous Chinese reference to tea is from the first century BCE, some twenty-six centuries after Shen Nung's supposed discovery. Having started out as an obscure medicinal and religious beverage, tea first seems to have become a domestic drink in China around this time; a contemporary book, *Working Rules of Servants*, describes the proper ways to buy and serve it. Tea had become so popular by the fourth century CE that it became necessary to begin the deliberate cultivation of tea, rather than simply harvesting the leaves from wild bushes. Tea spread throughout China and became the national beverage during the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), a period that is regarded as a golden age in Chinese history.

During this time, China was the largest, wealthiest, and most populous empire in the world. Its overall population tripled between 630 and 755 to exceed fifty million, and its capital, Changan (modern Xi'an), was the greatest metropolis on Earth, home to around two million people. The city was a cultural magnet at a time when China was particularly open to outside influences. Trade thrived along the trade routes of the Silk Road and by sea with India, Japan, and Korea. Clothing, hairstyles, and the sport of polo were imported from Turkey and Persia, new foodstuffs from India, and musical instruments and dances from central Asia, along with wine in goatskin bags. China exported silk, tea, paper, and ceramics in return. Amid this diverse, dynamic, and cosmopolitan atmosphere, Chinese sculpture, painting, and poetry flourished.

The prosperity of the period and the surge in population were helped along by

the widespread adoption of the custom of drinking tea. Its powerful antiseptic properties meant it was safer to drink than previous beverages such as rice or millet beer, even if the water was not properly boiled during preparation. Modern research has found that the phenolics (tannic acid) in tea can kill the bacteria that cause cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. Tea could be prepared quickly and easily from dried leaves and did not spoil like beer. It was, in effect, an efficient and convenient water-purification technology that dramatically reduced the prevalence of waterborne diseases, reducing infant mortality and increasing longevity.

Tea also had a more visible economic impact. As the size and value of the Chinese trade in tea grew during the seventh century, the tea merchants of Fujian, who were required to handle large sums of money, pioneered the use of a new invention: paper money. Tea itself, in the form of bricks, also came into use as a currency. It was ideally suited to the purpose, providing a light and compact store of value that could also be consumed if necessary. Paper money had the drawback that its value diminished the farther it was taken from the imperial center, whereas tea actually increased in value in remote areas. Brick tea remained in use as a currency in some parts of central Asia into modern times.

Tea's popularity during the Tang dynasty was reflected by the imposition of the first tax on tea in 780, and by the success of a book published the same year: *The Classic of Tea*, written by Lu Yu, a celebrated Taoist poet. Written at the behest of the merchants who sold tea, it describes the cultivation, preparation, and serving of tea in great detail. Lu Yu wrote many more books about tea, no aspect of which escaped his gaze. He described the merits of the various kinds of leaves, the best sort of water to use in its preparation (ideally, from slow-flowing mountain streams; well water only if no other is available), and even enumerated the stages in the process of boiling water: "When the water is boiling, it must look like fishes' eyes and give off but the hint of a sound. When at the edges it clatters like a bubbling spring and looks like pearls innumerable strung together, it has reached the second stage. When it leaps like breakers majestic and resounds like a swelling wave, it is at its peak. Any more and the water will be boiled out and should not be used." Lu Yu's palate was so sensitive that he was said to be able to identify the source of water from its taste alone, and even to determine the part of the river from which it had been drawn. More than anyone else, Lu Yu transformed tea from a mere thirst-quenching drink to a

symbol of culture and sophistication. Tea tasting and appreciation, particularly the ability to recognize different types, became highly regarded. Making tea became an honor reserved for the head of the household; an inability to make tea well, in an elegant manner, was considered a disgrace. Drinking parties and banquets centered on tea became popular at the court, where the emperor drank special teas made with water transported from particular springs. This led to the tradition of presenting special "tribute teas" to the emperor every year.



Tea production in China. Processing leaves into tea was a complicated process, all of which was done by hand.

Tea's popularity continued in the prosperous Sung dynasty (960-1279), but it fell from official favor as China came under the rule of the Mongols during the thirteenth century. The Mongols were originally a nomadic, pastoral people who tended herds of horses, camels, and sheep on the open steppes. Under Genghis Khan and his sons, they established the largest connected land empire in history, encompassing much of the Eurasian landmass, from Hungary in the west to Korea in the east, and as far south as Vietnam. Fittingly for a nation of skilled horsemen, the traditional Mongol drink was koumiss, made by churning and then fermenting mare's milk in a leather bag, to transform the lactose sugars in the milk into alcohol. This explains why the Venetian traveler Marco Polo, who spent many years at the Chinese court during this period, made no mention of tea other than to note the tradition of the tea tribute to the emperor (though he did remark that koumiss was "like white wine and very good to drink"). China's new rulers showed no interest in the local drink and maintained their own cultural traditions.

Kublai Khan, ruler of the eastern portion of the Mongol Empire, had grass from the steppes grown in the courtyards of his Chinese palace and drank koumiss specially prepared from the milk of white mares.

To emphasize the extent and diversity of the Mongol Empire, Kublai's brother Mangu Khan installed a silver drinking fountain at the Mongol capital of Karakorum. Its four spouts dispensed rice beer from China, grape wine from Persia, mead from northern Eurasia, and koumiss from Mongolia. Tea was nowhere to be seen. But the sprawling empire symbolized by this fountain proved unsustainable and collapsed during the fourteenth century. A renewed enthusiasm for drinking tea was then one way in which Chinese culture reasserted itself following the expulsion of the Mongols and the establishment of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The preparation and consumption of tea began to become increasingly elaborate; the meticulous attention to detail advocated by Lu Yu was revived and extended. Harking back to its religious roots, tea came to be seen as a form of spiritual as well as bodily refreshment.

The idea of the tea ceremony was, however, taken to its greatest heights in Japan. Tea had been drunk in Japan as early as the sixth century, but in 1191 the latest Chinese knowledge about the growing, picking, preparation, and drinking of tea was brought into the country by a Buddhist monk named Eisai, who wrote a book extolling tea's health benefits. When Japan's military ruler, or shogun, Minamoto Sanetomo, fell ill, Eisai cured him with the help of some homegrown tea. The shogun became a strong advocate of the new drink, and its popularity spread from his court to the country as a whole. By the fourteenth century, tea had become widespread at every level in Japanese society. The climate was well suited for the cultivation of tea; even the smallest households could maintain a couple of bushes, picking a leaf or two when needed.

The full Japanese tea ceremony is an immensely intricate, almost mystical ritual that can take more than an hour. Merely to describe the steps of grinding the tea, boiling the water, mixing and stirring the tea is to overlook the significance of the particular form of the utensils, and the order and the nature of their use. The water must be transferred from a specific kind of jar to the kettle using a delicate bamboo dipper; a special spoon is used to measure out the tea; there must be a special stirrer, a square silk'cloth to wipe the jar and spoon, a rest for the kettle lid, and so on. All of these items are to be brought in by the host in the correct sequence and placed on the correct mats. Ideally, the host is even to gather the firewood himself, and the whole ceremony should take place in a teahouse

situated in an appropriately laid-out garden.

In the words of Japan's greatest tea-master, Rikyu, who lived in the seventeenth century, "If the tea and eating utensils are of bad taste, and if the natural layout and planning of the trees and rocks in the tea-garden are unpleasing, then it is as well to go straight back home." Although incredibly formal, some of Rikyu's rules, such as the decree that the conversation was not to turn to worldly matters, are not so different from the unwritten rules that govern a ceremonious European dinner party. The Japanese tea ceremony was the very pinnacle of tea culture, the result of taking a drink from southern Asia, imbuing it with a diverse range of cultural and religious influences, and filtering it through hundreds of years of accumulated customs and rituals.

Tea Reaches Europe

In the early sixteenth century, when the first Europeans reached China by sea, the Chinese justifiably regarded their country as the greatest on Earth. It was the world's largest and most populous nation, with a civilization far older and more enduring than any in Europe. The Celestial Empire, as it was known, was assumed by its inhabitants to be located at the center of the universe. Nobody could compete with its cultural and intellectual achievements; outsiders were dismissed as barbarians or "foreign devils" who might understandably wish to imitate China but whose corrupting influence was best kept at arm's length. Nor was any European technology of the time unknown to the Chinese, who were ahead of Europe in almost every field; the magnetic compass, gunpowder, and printed books on board European ships were all Chinese innovations. The Portuguese explorers who had sailed from their trading post at Malacca on the Malay Peninsula in search of the legendary riches of the East were met with condescension. China was self-sufficient and lacked nothing.

The Portuguese agreed to pay tribute to the emperor in return for the right to trade, and they maintained sporadic commercial contact with China for several years. European manufactured goods were of no interest to the Chinese, though they were happy to sell silk and porcelain in return for gold and silver. Eventually, in 1557, the Chinese authorities allowed the Portuguese to establish a trading post on the tiny peninsula of Macao in the Canton estuary, through which all goods were to be shipped. This allowed the Chinese to levy duties and minimized contact with the foreigners; other Europeans were excluded from

direct Chinese trade altogether. When the Dutch arrived in the East Indies toward the end of the sixteenth century, they had to buy Chinese goods through intermediaries in other countries in the region.

Tea is first mentioned in European reports from the region in the 1550s. But shipping it to Europe did not occur to the earliest traders. Small quantities may have been brought to Lisbon privately by Portuguese sailors, but it was not until 1610 that a Dutch ship brought the first small commercial consignment of tea to Europe, where it was regarded as a novelty. From the Netherlands, tea reached France in the 1630s and England in the 1650s. This first tea was green tea, the kind that had always been consumed by the Chinese. Black tea, which is made by allowing the newly picked green leaves to oxidize by leaving them overnight, only appeared during the Ming dynasty; its origins are a mystery. It came to be regarded by the Chinese as suitable only for consumption by foreigners and eventually dominated exports to Europe. Clueless as they were to the origins of tea, Europeans wrongly assumed green and black tea were two entirely different botanical species.

Although it was available in Europe a few years earlier than coffee, tea had far less impact during the seventeenth century, largely because it was so much more expensive. It began as a luxury and medicinal drink in the Netherlands, where arguments raged over its health benefits from the 1630s. An early opponent of tea (and of coffee and chocolate, the other two newfangled hot drinks) was Simon Pauli, a German doctor and physician to the king of Denmark. He published a tract in 1635 in which he conceded that tea had some medical benefits, but that they were far outweighed by its drawbacks. Transporting the tea from China, he claimed, made it poisonous, so that "it hastens the death of those that drink it, especially if they have passed the age of forty years." Pauli boasted that he had used "the utmost of my Endeavours to destroy the raging epidemical Madness of importing Tea into Europe from China."

Taking the opposite view was Nikolas Dirx, a Dutch doctor who championed tea and regarded it as a panacea. "Nothing is comparable to this plant," he declared in 1641. "Those that use it are for that reason, alone, exempt from all maladies and reach an extreme old age." An even more enthusiastic advocate of tea was another Dutch doctor, Cornelius Bontekoe, who wrote a book recommending the consumption of several cups of tea each day. "We recommend tea to the entire nation, and to all peoples!" he declared. "We urge every man, every woman, to drink it every day; if possible, every hour; beginning

with ten cups a day and subsequently increasing the dosage—as much as the stomach can take." People who were ill, he suggested, should consume as many as fifty cups a day; he proposed two hundred as an upper limit. Bontekoe was honored by the Dutch East India Company for his help in boosting tea sales; indeed, the company may have put him up to writing his book in the first place. It is notable that he disapproved of the practice of adding sugar to tea, which had by this time started to become popular. (Some medical authorities of the time regarded sugar as harmful.)

Another European addition to tea was milk. As early as 1660 an English advertisement for tea declared that among its many supposed medical benefits, "it (being prepared and drank with Milk and Water) strengtheneth the inward parts, and prevents consumption, and powerfully assuageth the pains of the Bowels or griping of the Guts or Looseness." In France, where tea enjoyed a brief spell of popularity among the aristocracy between 1650 and 1700, people also began to drink tea with milk, both for the flavor and to reduce its temperature. Cooling tea using milk protected both the drinker and the fine porcelain cup in which the tea was served. But tea was soon eclipsed in France by coffee and chocolate. Ultimately it was Britain, rather than France or the Netherlands, that emerged as the most tea-loving European nation, with momentous historical consequences.

Britain's Peculiar Enthusiasm for Tea

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that almost nobody in Britain drank tea at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and nearly everybody did by the end of it. Official imports grew from around six tons in 1699 to eleven thousand tons a century later, and the price of a pound of tea at the end of the century was one-twentieth of the price at the beginning. Furthermore, those figures do not include smuggled tea, which probably doubled the volume of imports for much of the century until the duty levied on tea was sharply reduced in 1784. Another confounding factor was the widespread practice of adulteration, the stretching of tea by mixing it with ash and willow leaves, sawdust, flowers, and more dubious substances—even sheep's dung, according to one account—often colored and disguised using chemical dyes. Tea was adulterated in one way or another at almost every stage along the chain from leaf to cup, so that the amount consumed was far greater than the amount imported. Black tea began to become

more popular, partly because it was more durable than green tea on long voyages, but also as a side effect of this adulteration. Many of the chemicals used to make fake green tea were poisonous, whereas black tea was safer, even when adulterated. As black tea started to displace the smoother, less bitter green tea, the addition of sugar and milk helped to make it more palatable.

Whatever the true extent of smuggling and adulteration, it is clear that by the end of the eighteenth century there was easily enough tea coming into Britain for everyone in the country to drink one or two cups a day, no matter what their station in life. As early as 1757 one observer noted that "there is a certain lane near Richmond, where beggars are often seen, in the summer season, drinking their tea. You may see labourers who are mending the roads drinking their tea; it is even drank in cinder-carts; and what is not less absurd, sold out in cups to haymakers." What explains the speed and enthusiasm with which the British took to tea? The answer consists of several interlocking parts.

Tea got its start when it became fashionable at the English court following the marriage in 1662 of Charles II to Catherine of Braganza, daughter of King John IV of Portugal. Her enormous dowry included the Portuguese trading posts of Tangier and Bombay, the right to trade with Portuguese possessions overseas, a fortune in gold, and a chest of tea. Catherine was a devoted tea drinker and brought the custom with her. Sipping tea in small cups—"not bigger than thimbles," according to one contemporary account—caught on almost immediately among the aristocracy. The year after Catherine's marriage to the king, the poet Edmund Waller wrote her a birthday poem, "On Tea," in which he highlighted her two gifts to the nation: tea and easier access to the East Indies.



Catherine of Braganza, the wife of Charles II, introduced tea to the English court.

*The best of Queens, and best of herbs, we owe
To that bold nation, which the way did show
To the fair region where the sun doth rise,
Whose rich productions we so justly prize.
The Muse's friend, tea does our fancy aid,
Repress those vapors which the head invade,
And keep the palace of the soul serene,
Fit on her birthday to salute the Queen.*

After the initial impetus provided by the tea-drinking queen, the second factor

in the rise of tea was the role of the British East India Company, which had been granted a monopoly on imports to England from the East Indies. Though it initially lacked direct access to China, the company's records show that it began to bring in small quantities of "good thea" from the Netherlands during the 1660s as gifts for the king, to ensure that he would "not find himself totally neglected by the Company." This and other gifts won Charles's favor, and he gradually granted sweeping powers to the company, including the rights to acquire territory, issue currency, maintain an army, form alliances, declare war and make peace, and dispense justice. Over the course of the next century, what had started out as a simple trading company ended up as the manifestation of British power in the East, wielding more power than any other commercial organization in history. As the Scottish economist and writer William Playfair observed in 1799, "From a limited body of merchants, the India Company have become the Arbiters of the East." This was due in large part to the way the company fostered, expanded, and profited from the trade in tea.

Tea was served at meetings of the company's directors in London from the mid-1660s, and it was imported on a private basis by the captains and other officers of the company's ships, who were granted an allowance of space on each ship for "private trade." Tea was an ideal commodity for such purposes, given its scarcity and high value; the profit on a ton of tea could be worth several years' wages, and an allowance of ten tons was not unusual for a ship's captain. The private trade in tea probably helped to stimulate early demand, but it was banned in 1686 for fear it would undermine the company's small but growing official trade.

The company's first tea imports from the East Indies (from Bantam, in what is now Indonesia) arrived in 1669, and tea slowly became more widely available. It was initially a minor commodity as the company concentrated first on importing pepper, and then cheap textiles, from Asia. But opposition from Britain's domestic textile producers encouraged the company to place more emphasis on tea; there was no problem with offending domestic producers, since there were none. Tea's retail cost varied dramatically due to the sporadic nature of the supply, but the price per pound of the most expensive teas, which started at around six to ten pounds in 1660, had fallen to around four pounds by 1700. The price per pound of lesser teas was one pound. But a poor family at the time might have had an annual income of twenty pounds, so tea was still far too expensive to become universal. It remained a luxury item until the end of the

seventeenth century, overshadowed by coffee, which cost much less; a cup of tea cost about five times as much as a cup of coffee.

Only when the company established trading posts in China in the early eighteenth century, and began direct imports of tea, did volumes increase and prices fall, making tea available to a far wider public. By 1718 tea was displacing silk as the mainstay of imports from China; by 1721 imports had reached five thousand tons a year. In 1744 one writer observed that "opening a Trade with the East-Indies . . . brought the Price of Tea . . . so low that the meanest labouring Man could compass the Purchase of it." At its height, tea represented more than 60 percent of the company's total trade, and the duty on tea accounted for around 10 percent of British government revenue. As a result, control of the tea trade granted the company an enormous degree of political influence and enabled it to have laws passed in its favor. Imports of tea from other European countries were banned; the duty on tea was reduced to increase sales and expand the market; adulteration of tea was punishable by huge fines. Smuggling and adulteration remained rife, but that just showed how much pent-up demand there was for tea. Finally, all that stood between Britain and total dominance of the East Indies trade were the Dutch. A series of wars ended in 1784 with a Dutch defeat, and the rival Dutch East India Company was dissolved in 1795, granting its British counterpart almost total control of the global tea trade.

Catherine of Braganza made it fashionable, and the East India Company made it available; but tea also became sociable, with the invention of new ways to consume it, both in private and in public. In 1717 Thomas Twining, the proprietor of a London coffeehouse, opened a shop next door specifically to sell tea, and to women in particular. Women were unable to buy tea over the counter in coffeehouses, which were men-only establishments. Nor did they wish to send their servants out to buy expensive tea with other household items, since that would mean entrusting them with large sums of money. (Tea's expense was reflected in the use of tea caddies—special boxes with lockable lids in which tea was stored, and to which only the lady of the house had access.) At Twining's shop, however, women could buy this fashionable new drink by the cup for immediate consumption, and as dried leaves for preparation at home. "Great ladies flocked to Twining's house in Devereaux Court in order to sip the enlivening beverage in small cups for which they paid their shillings," noted a contemporary observer. They could also have special blends of tea made up for

them by Twining to match their tastes.

Knowledge of tea and its ceremonial consumption in genteel surroundings at home became a means of demonstrating one's sophistication. Elaborate tea parties emerged as the British equivalent of the Chinese and Japanese tea ceremonies; tea was served in porcelain cups, imported in vast quantities as ballast in the same ships that brought the tea from China. Authors offered advice on how to prepare tea, the order in which guests of different rank should be served, what food to serve, and how guests ought to express thanks to the host. Tea was not just a drink; it eventually became an entirely new afternoon meal.



An English tea party around 1750. The ceremonial consumption of tea in genteel surroundings became an emblem of sophistication.

Another innovation in the serving of tea was the emergence of the tea gardens of London. The first to open, in 1732, was Vauxhall Gardens, a park with lit walkways, bandstands, performers of all kinds, and stalls selling food and drink, primarily bread and butter to be washed down with tea. Other tea gardens soon followed. Their appeal was that they provided an elegant, respectable public venue, and a good place to meet members of the opposite sex. Young men at one tea garden, the White Conduit House, would "accidentally" tread on the trains of young women's gowns and offer a dish of tea in recompense; at another tea garden, the Parthenon, women would make the first move, asking their chosen young man to treat them to a dish of tea, according to a contemporary account in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Tea gardens were particularly popular with women, who had always been excluded from coffeehouses, which were in decline by this time. The more respectable coffeehouses had begun to transform themselves into private gentleman's clubs and commercial institutions; that left only the less respectable ones, which relied on sales of alcohol and were increasingly difficult to distinguish from taverns. As the writer Daniel Defoe remarked, such establishments "are but ale houses, only they think that the name coffee-house gives a better air."

For the poor, tea gradually became an affordable luxury and then a necessity; tricks such as stretching a small quantity of tea with the addition of more water, or reusing tea leaves, finally brought the drink within everyone's reach, in some form at least. Special tea allowances were added to household servants' wages from the mid-eighteenth century; an Italian visitor to England in 1755 remarked that "even the common maid servants must have their tea twice a day." Despite having come from the other side of the world, tea eventually became cheaper than any drink except water. "We are so situated in our commercial and financial system, that tea brought from the eastern extremity of the world, and sugar brought from the West Indies . . . compose a drink cheaper than beer," noted one early nineteenth-century Scottish observer. And when consumed along with cold food, tea provided the illusion of a hot meal. Some people decried the adoption of tea by the poor and argued that rather than aping the habits of the rich, they should spend their money on more nutritious food instead. One lawmaker even suggested that tea should be made illegal for anyone with an

annual income less than fifty pounds. But the truth, as one eighteenth-century writer pointed out, was that "were they now to be deprived of this, they would immediately be reduced to bread and water. Tea-drinking is not the cause, but the consequences of the distresses of the poor." The drink of queens had also become the drink of last resort.

From the top of British society to the bottom, everyone was drinking tea. Fashion, commerce, and social changes all played their part in the embrace of tea by the English, a phenomenon that was noted by foreigners even before the end of the eighteenth century. In 1784 a French visitor remarked that "throughout the whole of England the drinking of tea is general. . . . The humblest peasant has his tea twice a day just like the rich man; the total consumption is immense." A Swedish visitor noted that "next to water, tea is the Englishman's proper element. All classes consume it, and if one is out on the London streets early in the morning, one may see in many places small tables set up under the open sky, round which coal-carters and workmen empty their cups of delicious beverage." Tea had reached around the world from the world's oldest empire and planted itself at the heart of the newest. As they drank their cups of tea at home, the British were reminded of the extent and might of their empire overseas. The rise of tea was entangled with the growth of Britain as a world power and set the stage for further expansion of its commercial and imperial might.

Tea Power

The progress of this famous plant has been something very like the progress of truth; suspected at first, though very palatable to those who had the courage to taste it; resisted as it encroached; abused as its popularity spread; and establishing its triumph at last, in cheering the whole land from the palace to the cottage, only by slow and resistless efforts of time and its own virtues.

—*Isaac Disraeli, English critic and historian (1766-1848)*

Tea and Industry

IN 1771 RICHARD ARKWRIGHT, a British inventor, began the construction of a large building at Cromford in Derbyshire. Arkwright, the youngest of thirteen children, had first displayed his entrepreneurial talent when he began collecting human hair, dyeing it using his own secret formula, and then fashioning it into wigs. The success of this business provided him with the means to embark on a more ambitious venture, and in 1767 he began developing a "spinning frame." This was a machine for spinning thread in preparation for weaving; but unlike the spinning jenny, a hand-operated device that required a skilled operator, the spinning frame was to be a powered machine that anyone could operate. With the help of a clockmaker, John Kay, from whom he gleaned details of an earlier design, Arkwright built a working prototype and established his first spinning mill, powered by horses, in 1768. This mill so impressed two wealthy businessmen that they gave Arkwright the funds to build a far larger one on a river at Cromford, where the spinning frames would be powered by a waterwheel. Here, at the first modern factory, Arkwright pioneered a new approach to manufacturing. Its success made him a pivotal figure in the revolution that turned Britain into the world's first industrialized nation.

The Industrial Revolution, which started with textile manufacturing and then spread into other fields, depended on both technological and organizational innovations. The starting point was the replacement of skilled human laborers by tireless, accurate machines. These machines required new sources of power, such as water and steam. And that, in turn, made it advantageous to put lots of machines in a large factory around a source of power such as a waterwheel or steam engine. Craftsmen who could perform a range of tasks then gave way to laborers who specialized in a single stage of a manufacturing process. Having machines and workers together under one roof meant that the whole process could be closely supervised, and the use of shifts ensured maximum utilization of the expensive machinery. Arkwright built cottages for his employees next to his mill, so that they arrived at work on time. All of this had an astonishing effect on productivity. Each laborer in Arkwright's mill could do the work of fifty hand spinners, and as other aspects of textile production were automated, including scribbling, carding, and ultimately weaving, production soared. So cheap and abundant were British-made textiles by the end of the eighteenth century that Britain began to export textiles to India, devastating that country's traditional weaving trade in the process.

Just as deskbound clerks, businessmen, and intellectuals had taken to coffee in the seventeenth century, the workers in the new factories of the eighteenth century embraced tea. It was the beverage best suited to these new working arrangements and helped industrialization along in a number of ways. Mill owners began to offer their employees free "tea breaks" as a perk. Unlike beer, the drink traditionally given to agricultural workers, tea did not gently dull the mind but sharpened it, thanks to the presence of caffeine. Tea kept workers alert on long and tedious shifts and improved their concentration when operating fast-moving machines. A hand weaver or spinner could take rests when needed; a worker in a factory could not. Factory workers had to function like parts in a well-oiled machine, and tea was the lubricant that kept the factories running smoothly.

The natural antibacterial properties of tea were also an advantage, since they reduced the prevalence of waterborne disease, even when the water used to make tea had not been properly boiled. The number of cases of dysentery in Britain went into decline starting in the 1730s, and in 1796 one observer noted that dysentery and other waterborne diseases "have so decreased, that their very name is almost unknown in London." By the early nineteenth century doctors and statisticians agreed that the most likely cause of the improvement in the nation's

health was the popularity of tea. This allowed the workforce to be more densely packed in their living quarters around factories in the industrial cities of the British Midlands without risk of disease. Infants benefited too, since the antibacterial phenolics in tea pass easily into the breast milk of nursing mothers. This lowered infant mortality and provided a large labor pool just as the Industrial Revolution took hold.

The popularity of tea also stimulated commerce by boosting the demand for crockery and bringing into being a flourishing new industry. Ownership of a fine "tea service" was of great social importance, for rich and poor alike. In 1828 one observer noted that "the operative weavers on machine yarns" lived in "dwellings and small gardens clean and neat, all the family well clad, the men with each a watch in his pocket, and the women dressed to their own fancy . . . every house well furnished with a clock in elegant mahogany or fancy case, handsome tea services in Staffordshire ware, with silver or plated sugar-tongs and spoons." The most famous of the Staffordshire potters was Josiah Wedgwood, whose company produced tea services so efficiently that it could compete with Chinese porcelain, imports of which declined and eventually stopped in 1791.

Wedgwood was a pioneer of mass production and an early adopter of steam engines to grind materials and drive stamping machinery. No longer did individual craftsmen in his factories make each item from beginning to end; instead, they specialized in one aspect of production and became particularly skilled at it. Items moved in a continuous flow from one worker to the next. This division of labor enabled Wedgwood to use the most talented designers for his tea services, without requiring them to be potters too. Wedgwood also pioneered the use of celebrity endorsements to promote his products: When Queen Charlotte, the wife of George III, ordered "a complete sett of tea things," he secured her permission to sell similar items to the public under the name "Queen's ware." He took out newspaper advertisements and staged special invitation-only exhibitions of his tea services, such as the one he produced for Empress Catherine II of Russia. At the same time, the marketing of tea was also becoming more sophisticated; the names of Richard Twining (son of Thomas) and other tea merchants became well known. Twining put up a specially designed sign over the door of his shop in 1787 and labeled his tea with the same design, which is now thought to be the oldest commercial logo in continuous use in the world. The marketing of tea and tea paraphernalia laid the first foundations of consumerism.

Other Western nations took up to a century to catch up with Britain's

industrialization. There are many reasons why Britain was well placed to be the cradle of industry: its scientific tradition, the Protestant work ethic, an unusually high degree of religious tolerance, ample supplies of coal, efficient transportation networks of roads and canals, and the fruits of empire, which provided the funds to bankroll British entrepreneurs. But the uniquely British love of tea also played its part, keeping disease at bay in the new industrial cities and fending off hunger during long shifts. Tea was the drink that fueled the workers in the first factories, places where both men and machines were, in their own ways, steam powered.

Policy from the Teapot

The political power of the British East India Company, the organization that supplied Britain's tea, was vast. At its height the company generated more revenue than the British government and ruled over far more people, while the duty on the tea it imported accounted for as much as 10 percent of government revenue. All this gave the company both direct and indirect influence over the policies of the most powerful nation on Earth. The company had many friends in high places, and many of its officials simply bought their way into Parliament. Supporters of the East India Company also cooperated on occasion with politicians with interests in the West Indies; the demand for West Indian sugar was driven by the consumption of tea. All this ensured that in many cases company policy became government policy.

The best-known example involves the role of tea policy in the establishment of American independence. In the early 1770s the smuggling of tea into Britain and its American colonies was at its peak. In Britain smuggled tea appealed because it was cheaper than legal tea, since smugglers did not pay customs duties. In America the colonists had taken to smuggling tea from the Netherlands to avoid paying the duty imposed on tea imports by the government in London, since they were opposed to paying any such taxes in principle. (The tea duty was the last remaining of the various commodity taxes imposed by London with the aim of raising money to pay off the debt arising from the successful prosecution of the French and Indian War.) Rampant smuggling reduced the sales of legal tea, and the company found itself with huge stockpiles: Nearly ten thousand tons of tea were sitting in its London warehouses. And since the company had to pay import duty on this tea whether it sold it or not, it owed the government over one million pounds. The company's solution, as usual, was to get the government to

intervene in its favor.

The result was the Tea Act of 1773. Its terms, dictated by the company, included a government loan of 1.4 million pounds to enable it to pay off its debts, and the right to ship tea directly from China to America. This meant the company would not have to pay the British import duty, just the much lower American duty of three pence per pound. Furthermore, the duty would be paid by the company's agents in America, who would be granted exclusive rights to sell the tea, thereby giving the company a monopoly. As well as establishing the government's right to tax the colonists, the lower rate of duty would undercut the price of smuggled tea and undermine the smugglers. But the colonists would be grateful, company officials argued, since the overall effect would be to reduce the price of tea.

This was a huge miscalculation. The American colonists, particularly those in New England, depended for their prosperity on being able to carry out unfettered trade without interference from London, whether buying molasses from the French West Indies with which to make rum, or dealing in smuggled tea from the Netherlands. They boycotted British goods and refused to pay tax to the government in London as a matter of principle. They also resented the way the government was handing the East India Company a monopoly on the retailing of tea. What would be next? "The East India Company, if once they get Footing in this (once) happy Country, will leave no Stone unturned to become your Masters," declared a broadside published in Philadelphia in December 1773. "They have a designing, depraved and despotic Ministry to assist and support them. They themselves are well versed in Tyranny, Plunder, Oppression and Bloodshed. . . . Thus they have enriched themselves, thus they are become the most powerful Trading company in the Universe." Many British merchants felt the same way; once again the government was allowing the company to dictate policy for its own benefit.



The Boston Tea Party of 1773, in which protesters emptied, three shiploads of tea into Boston Harbor.

When the act came into force and the company's ships arrived in America with their cargoes of tea, the colonists prevented them from unloading. And on December 16, 1773, a group of protesters dressed up as Mohawk Indians—many of them merchants involved in the tea-smuggling trade who feared for their livelihoods—boarded three company ships in Boston Harbor. Over the course of three hours they tipped all 342 chests of tea on board into the water. Other similar "tea parties" followed in other ports. The British government responded in March 1774 by declaring the port of Boston closed until the East India Company had been compensated for its losses. This was the first of the so-

called Coercive Acts—a series of laws passed in 1774 in which the British attempted to assert their authority over the colonies but instead succeeded only in enraging the colonists further and ultimately prompted the outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775. It is tempting to wonder whether a government less influenced by the interests of the company might have simply shrugged off the tea parties or come to some compromise with the colonists. (On the American side, Benjamin Franklin, for example, advocated paying compensation for the tea destroyed.) But instead the dispute over tea proved a decisive step toward Britain's loss of its American colonies.

Opium and Tea

The East India Company's fortunes revived in 1784, when the duty on tea imports to Britain was slashed, which lowered the price of legal tea, doubling the company's sales and wiping out smuggling. But the company's power was gradually curtailed amid growing concern over its enormous influence and the corrupt and self-enriching behavior of its officials. It was placed under the supervision of a board of control, answerable to Parliament. And in 1813, as enthusiasm for Adam Smith's advocacy of free trade gained ground, the company's monopoly on Asian trade was removed, except for China. The company concentrated less on trade and more on the administration of its vast territories in India; after 1800 the bulk of its revenue came from the collection of Indian land taxes. In 1834 the company's monopoly on trade with China was removed too.

But even as its political influence diminished and rival traders were allowed in the market, the company still exerted a vital grasp on the tea trade through its involvement in the trading of opium. This powerful narcotic, made from the juice extracted from unripe poppy seeds, had been in use as a medicine since ancient times. But it is highly addictive, and opium addiction had become enough of a problem in China that the authorities outlawed the use of the drug in 1729. An illicit opium trade continued even so, and in the early nineteenth century the company, with the collusion of the British government, organized and massively expanded it. An enormous semiofficial drug-smuggling operation was established in order to improve Britain's unfavorable balance of payments with China—the direct result of the British love of tea.

The problem, from the British point of view, was that the Chinese were not

interested in trading tea in return for European goods. One notable exception, during the eighteenth century, had been clocks and clockwork toys, or automata, the production of which was one of the rare areas where European technological expertise visibly outstripped that of the Chinese. In fact, European technology was pulling ahead of the Chinese in many areas by this time, as China's desire to isolate itself from outside influences inspired a general distrust of change and innovation. But the appeal of automata soon wore off, and the problem remained: The company had to pay for its tea in hard cash, in the form of silver. Not only was it difficult to get hold of the vast quantities of silver required—the equivalent of about a billion dollars' worth a year, in today's money—but to make matters worse, the company found that the price of silver was rising more quickly than the price of tea, which ate into its profits.

Hence the appeal of opium. Like silver, it was regarded as a valuable commodity, at least by those Chinese merchants who were prepared to deal in it. The cultivation and preparation of opium in India was, conveniently, a monopoly controlled by the company, which had been quietly allowing small quantities of opium to be sold to smugglers or corrupt Chinese merchants since the 1770s. So the company set about increasing the production of opium in order to use it in place of silver to buy tea. It would then, in effect, be able to grow as much currency as it needed.

Of course, it would never do to be seen to be directly trading an illegal drug in return for tea, so the company devised an elaborate scheme to keep the opium trade at arm's length. The opium was produced in Bengal and sold at an annual auction in Calcutta, after which the company professed ignorance as to its subsequent destination. The opium was bought by Indian-based "country firms," which were independent trading organizations that had been granted permission by the company to trade with China. These firms, in turn, shipped the opium to the Canton estuary, where it was traded for silver and unloaded at the island of Lintin. From here, the opium was transferred into oared galleys by Chinese merchants and smuggled ashore. The country firms could then claim that they were not doing anything illegal, since they were not actually shipping the opium into China; and the company could deny that it was in any way involved in the trade. Indeed, company ships were strictly forbidden to carry opium

The Chinese customs officials were well aware of what was going on, but they were involved in the scheme too, having been bribed by the Chinese opium merchants, as W. C. Hunter, an American merchant, explained in a

contemporary account: "So perfect a system of bribery existed (with which foreigners had nothing whatever to do) that the business was carried on with ease and regularity. Temporary obstructions occurred, as for instance on the arrival of newly installed magistrates. Then the question of fees arose. . . . In good time, however, it would be arranged satisfactorily, the brokers re-appeared with beaming faces, and peace and immunity reigned in the land." Occasionally, local officials would issue threatening edicts demanding that foreign vessels loitering at Lintin should either come into port on the mainland or sail away; and both sides would sometimes go through the motions of a chase, with Chinese customs vessels chasing foreign ships, at least until they were over the horizon. The officials could then issue a report claiming to have driven off a foreign smuggler.

This villainous scheme was, from the point of view of the company and its friends in government, extremely effective: Exports of opium to China increased 250-fold to reach 1,500 tons a year in 1830. Its sale produced enough silver to pay for Britain's tea; more than enough, indeed, since the value of China's opium imports exceeded those of its tea exports from 1828. The silver traveled by a circuitous route: The country firms sent it back to India, where the company purchased it using bankers' drafts drawn on London. Since the company was also the government of India, these drafts were as good as cash. The silver was then shipped to London and passed to company agents, who took it all the way back to Canton to buy tea. Although China illegally produced as much opium, at the time, as was imported, that is no justification for state-sanctioned drug running on a massive scale, which created thousands of addicts and blighted countless lives merely to maintain Britain's supply of tea.

The Chinese government's best efforts to stop the trade with new laws had little effect, since the Canton bureaucracy had been utterly corrupted. Eventually, in December 1838, the emperor sent Commissioner Lin Tze-su to Canton to put an end to the opium trade once and for all. The atmosphere was already highly charged when Lin arrived: Ever since the end of the company's monopoly in 1834, local officials had been bickering with the British government's representative about trade rules. Lin immediately ordered the Chinese merchants and their British associates to destroy their stocks of opium. They ignored him, since they had been given such orders before and had ignored them with impunity. So Lin's men set fire to the stocks of opium, burning an entire year's supply. When the smugglers treated this as a temporary setback and resumed

their business as usual, Lin arrested them, British and Chinese alike. Then, after two British sailors murdered a Chinese man in a brawl and the British authorities refused to hand them over, Lin expelled the British from Canton.

This caused outrage in London, where representatives of the company and other British merchants had been putting pressure on the British government to force China to open itself up to wider trade, rather than forcing everything to pass through Canton. The volatile situation in Canton had to be addressed, the merchants argued, in the interests of free trade in general, and to protect the tea trade (and its associated opium trade) in particular. The government did not want to endorse the opium trade openly but instead took the position that China's internal ban on opium did not give Chinese officials the right to seize and destroy goods (that is, opium) belonging to British merchants. On the pretext of defending the right to free trade, war was declared.

The Opium War of 1839-42 was short and one-sided, due to the superiority of European weapons, which came as a complete surprise to the Chinese. In the first skirmish alone, in July 1839, two British warships defeated twenty-nine Chinese ships. On land, the Chinese and their medieval weapons were no match for British troops armed with state-of-the-art muskets. By the middle of 1842 British troops had seized Hong Kong, taken control of the key river deltas, and occupied Shanghai and several other cities. The Chinese were forced to sign a peace treaty that granted Hong Kong to the British, opened five ports for the free trade of all goods, and required the payment of reparations to the British in silver, including compensation for the opium that had been destroyed by Commissioner Lin.

All of this was a victory for the British merchants and utterly humiliating for China. The myth of Chinese invincibility and superiority had been laid bare. The authority of the ruling Manchu dynasty was already being eroded by its inability to quell repeated religious rebellions; now it had been defeated by a small, distant island and forced to open its ports to barbarian merchants and missionaries. This set the pattern for the rest of the nineteenth century, as further wars were waged by Western powers, ostensibly to compel China to open up to foreign trade. In each case Chinese defeat entailed additional concessions to the commercial aims of foreign powers. The trade in opium, which still dominated imports, was legalized; Britain took control of the Chinese customs service; imported textiles and other industrial goods undermined Chinese craftsmen. China became an arena in which Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the United

States, and Japan played out their imperialist rivalries, carving up the country and competing for political dominance. Meanwhile, Chinese ill-feeling toward foreigners grew, and rampant corruption, a withering economy, and soaring opium consumption caused a once-mighty civilization to crumble. The independence of America and the ruin of China; such was the legacy of tea's influence on British imperial policy and, through it, on the course of world history.

From Canton to Assam

Even before the outbreak of the Opium War, concern had been growing in Britain about its dangerous reliance on China for the supply of tea. Many years earlier, in 1788, the East India Company had asked Sir Joseph Banks, the leading botanist of his day, for advice on what crops might be profitably grown in the mountainous region of Bengal. Though tea was at the top of his list, the company ignored this advice. In 1822 the Royal Society of Arts offered a prize of fifty guineas "to whoever could grow and prepare the greatest quantity of China tea in the British West Indies, Cape of Good Hope, New South Wales or the East Indies." But the prize was never awarded. The East India Company was reluctant to investigate other sources of supply, since it did not wish to undermine the value of its trade monopoly with China.

The company characteristically changed its mind in 1834, when its monopoly with China came to an end. Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, who as the head of the company was also governor general of India, enthusiastically embraced the idea of growing tea after a subordinate suggested in a report that "some better guarantee should be provided for the supply of tea than that already furnished by the toleration of the Chinese Government." Bentinck established a committee to investigate the possibility. A delegation set out to solicit advice from the Dutch, who had been trying to cultivate tea in Java since 1728, and to visit China, in the hope of procuring seeds and skilled workers. Meanwhile, the search began for the most suitable part of India in which to grow tea.

Proponents of the idea argued that cultivating tea in India, if it could be done, would benefit both British and Indians alike. British consumers would be assured of a more reliable supply. And since the new Indian tea industry would need a lot of manpower, it would provide plenty of jobs for Indian workers, a great many of whom had lost their livelihoods when the company's imports of cheap cloth

from British factories wiped out India's traditional weaving industry. Furthermore, as well as producing tea, the people of India might be encouraged to consume it, which would create an enormous new market. The Indian farmer, suggested one tea advocate, "would then have a healthy beverage to drink, besides a commodity that would be of great value in the market."

Tea cultivation also promised to be hugely profitable. The traditional Chinese manner of producing tea was anything but industrial and had remained unchanged for hundreds of years. Small producers in the countryside sold their tea to local middlemen. The tea then traveled to the coast, carried by boat along rivers where possible, and by human porters over mountain passes where necessary. Finally, the tea was purchased by merchants who blended it, packed it, and sold it to European traders at Canton. All the middlemen along the route took their cut; together with the cost of transport, tolls, and taxes, that brought the price paid for each pound of tea to nearly twice the original producer's selling price. An enterprise that produced its own tea in India, however, could pocket the difference. Furthermore, applying the new industrial methods, running plantations as though they were "tea factories," and automating as much of the processing as possible could be expected to boost productivity, and hence profits, still further. With the cultivation of tea in India, imperialism and industrialism were to go hand in hand.

The enormous irony of the situation was that there were already tea bushes in India, right under the noses of Bentinck's committee members. In the 1820s Nathaniel Wallich, a government botanist in Calcutta, had been sent a sample of a tealike plant that had been found growing in Assam. He identified it as an unremarkable species of camellia but did not realize that it was in fact from a tea plant. After being appointed to Bentinck's committee in 1834, Wallich sent out a questionnaire to establish which parts of India had the appropriate climate for growing tea. The reply from Assam came in the form of further samples of the cuttings, seeds, and finished product of the tea plant. This time even Wallich was convinced, and the committee gleefully reported to Bentinck "that the Tea Shrub is, beyond all doubt, indigenous in Upper Assam. . . . We have no hesitation in declaring this discovery . . . to be by far the most important and valuable that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of the empire."



A tea plantation in India in 1880. By this time, tea could be produced more cheaply in India than in China.

An expedition confirmed that tea was indeed growing in Assam, an obscure border region the company had conveniently invaded a few years earlier to provide a buffer against Burmese incursions into India. At the time, the company had decided to install a puppet king in the poorer region of upper Assam, while it concentrated on collecting taxes—on land, crops, and anything else it could think of—in lower Assam. Inevitably, the king did not remain on his throne for long once tea had been found growing within his territory. But turning Assam's wild tea plants into a thriving tea industry proved rather more difficult than expected. The officials and scientists in charge of establishing production bickered over the best way to proceed: Did tea grow best on the plains or the hills, in the hot or the cold? None of them really knew what they were talking about. Plants and seeds were brought in from China, but even the best efforts of a couple of Chinese tea workers, who accompanied the plants, could not induce them to flourish in India.

The problem was finally solved by Charles Bruce, an adventurer and explorer familiar with the people, language, and customs of Assam. By combining the knowledge of the local people with the expertise of some Chinese tea workers, he gradually worked out how to bring the wild tea trees into cultivation, where best to grow them, how to transplant trees from the jungle into ordered tea

gardens, and how to wither, roll, and dry the leaves. In 1838 the first small shipment of Assam tea arrived in London, where tea merchants declared themselves very impressed by its quality. Now that the feasibility of producing tea in India had been established, the East India Company resolved to let others do the hard work. It decided to allow entrepreneurs in to establish tea plantations; the company would make money by renting out the land and taxing the resulting tea.

A group of London merchants duly established a new company, the Assam Company, to exploit this opportunity. Deploring the "humiliating circumstances" in which the British were forced to trade with Chinese merchants—this was just as the Opium War was about to break out—they jumped at the chance to establish a new source of production in India, since tea was "a great source of profit and an object of great national importance." A report drawn up by Bruce speculated, "When we have a sufficient number of manufacturers . . . as they have in China, then we may hope to compare with that nation in cheapness of produce; nay we might, and ought, to undersell them." The main problem, Bruce noted, would be finding enough laborers to work in the tea plantations. He blamed widespread opium addiction for the unwillingness of the local people to do such work, but confidently predicted that unemployed workers from neighboring Bengal would pour into Assam once they heard that jobs were available.

The Assam Company had no trouble raising funds; its share offering was hugely oversubscribed, with many would-be investors turned away. In 1840 it took control of most of the East India Company's experimental tea gardens. But the new venture was disastrously mismanaged. It hired all the Chinese workers it could find, falsely assuming that their nationality alone qualified them to grow tea. Company officials, meanwhile, spent the firm's money with wild abandon. The little tea that resulted was of low quality, and the Assam Company's shares lost 99.5 percent of their value. Only in 1847 did the tide start to turn after Bruce, by then the director of the company's operations, was fired. By 1851 the company had started to become profitable, and that year its teas were displayed to great acclaim at the Great Exhibition in London, a showcase for the might and riches of the British Empire. This proved, in the most public way possible, that one did not have to be Chinese in order to make tea.

A tea boom ensued as dozens of new tea companies were set up in India, though many of them failed as clueless speculators bankrolled new ventures

without discrimination. Eventually, in the late 1860s, the industry recovered from this tea mania, and production really took off when industrial methods and machinery were applied. The tea plants were arranged in regimented lines; the workers were housed in rows of huts and required to work, eat, and sleep according to a rigid timetable. Picking the tea could not (and still cannot) be automated, but starting in the 1870s its processing could be. A succession of increasingly elaborate machines automated the rolling, drying, sorting, and packing of tea. Industrialization reduced costs dramatically: In 1872 the production cost of a pound of tea was roughly the same in India and China. By 1913 the cost of production in India had fallen by three-quarters. Meanwhile, railways and steamships reduced the cost of transporting the tea to Britain. The Chinese export producers were doomed.

In the space of a few years China had been dethroned as Britain's main supplier of tea. The figures tell the story: Britain imported thirty-one thousand tons of tea from China in 1859, but by 1899 the total had fallen to seven thousand tons, while imports from India had risen to nearly one hundred thousand tons. The rise of India's tea industry had a devastating impact on China's tea farmers and further contributed to the instability of the country, which descended into a chaotic period of rebellions, revolutions, and wars during the first half of the twentieth century. The East India Company did not survive to witness the success of its plan to wean Britain off Chinese tea, however. The Indian Mutiny, a widespread uprising against company rule that was triggered by the revolt of the Bengal army in 1857, prompted the British government to take direct control of India, and the company was abolished in 1858.

India remains the world's leading producer of tea today, and the leading consumer in volume terms, consuming 23 percent of world production, followed by China (16 percent) and Britain (6 percent). In the global ranking of tea consumption per capita, Britain's imperial influence is still clearly visible in the consumption patterns of its former colonies. Britain, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand are four of the top twelve tea-consuming countries, and the only Western nations in the top twelve: apart from Japan, the rest are Middle Eastern nations, where tea, like coffee, has benefited from the prohibition of alcoholic drinks. The United States, France, and Germany are much farther down the list, each consuming around a tenth of the amount of tea per head that is drunk in Britain or Ireland, and favoring coffee instead.

America's enthusiasm for coffee over tea is often mistakenly attributed to the

Tea Act and the symbolic rejection of tea at the Boston Tea Party. But while British tea was shunned during the Revolutionary War, the American colonists' enthusiasm for the drink was undimmed, prompting them to go to great trouble to find local alternatives. Some brewed "Liberty Tea" from four-leaved loosestrife; others drank "Balm Tea," made from ribwort, currant leaves, and sage. Putting up with such tea, despite its unpleasant taste, was a way for American drinkers to display their patriotism. A small quantity of real tea was also covertly traded, often labeled as tobacco. But as soon as the war ended, the supply of legal tea began to flow again. Ten years after the Boston Tea Party, tea was still far more popular than coffee, which only became the more popular drink in the mid-nineteenth century. Coffee's popularity grew after the duty on imports was abolished in 1832, making it more affordable. The duty was briefly reintroduced during the Civil War but was abolished again in 1872. "America now admits coffee free of duty, and the increase in consumption has been enormous," noted the *Illustrated London News* that year. Meanwhile, tea's popularity declined as patterns of immigration shifted and the proportion of immigrants coming from tea-drinking Britain diminished.

The story of tea reflects the reach and power, both innovative and destructive, of the British Empire. Tea was the preferred beverage of a nation that was, for a century or so, an unrestrained global superpower. British administrators drank tea wherever they went, as did British soldiers on the battlefields of Europe and the Crimea, and British workers in the factories of the Midlands. Britain has remained a nation of tea drinkers ever since. And around the world, the historical impact of its empire and the drink that fueled it can still be seen today.