

Writing Tea's Empire

A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World, E. Rappaport, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. 568 pp. £21, ISBN 978-0691167114

Tea & Empire: James Taylor in Victorian Ceylon, A. McCarthy and T. M. Devine, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. 272 pp. £25, ISBN 978-1526119056

Tea is a captivating topic for those interested in historical narratives of consumerism because it is at once both unremarkable and astonishing, a fertile ground for defamiliarizing aspects of everyday life. Tea is an established feature of cultures of consumption across the world. In Britain it is even popularly understood as a key component of national culture, with its roots in the imperial infrastructure of British India. Yet it was acknowledged as a national drink in Britain in the eighteenth century, when the plantations of empire were barely conceivable, and all tea was shipped across the world from south-eastern China by the East India Company. Today, the practices of tea's cultivation, harvesting, manufacture and wholesale are typically recognized only dimly by its consumers, with little attention paid to the complicated histories of imperialism and global trade by which these practices have been produced (histories which have in turn been to some degree produced by them). The similarities of the titles of two new studies — *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* and *Tea and Empire: James Taylor in Victorian Ceylon* — belie two quite distinct approaches to this subject. Erika Rappaport in the first of these books offers a wide-ranging history of tea as an article of world trade from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, with a particular interest in advertising and the emergence of trading organizations. Angela McCarthy and T. M. Devine, by contrast, offer in *Tea and Empire* the remarkable biography of a nineteenth-century Scottish tea planter, told through his letters and extensive archival research in Scotland and Sri Lanka.

The stories that we routinely tell each other about tea, Erika Rappaport reminds us throughout her absorbing book, are always in some manner inventions. Our understanding of tea's history as firmly grounded in the imperial plantations of nineteenth-century India and Ceylon is the legacy of the campaigns organized by powerful planter-based organizations and the state-sponsored 'Empire shopping movement'. The fond imaginings we may harbour of the excitement and drama of the tea-clipper races are a part of a set of cherished cultural imaginings in which one of London's iconic tourist sites, the Cutty Sark, participates. Even our confidence in a cup of tea as a refreshing drink, a longed-for reward at the end of a hard day, a pick-me-up, a balm for frayed nerves, is evidence of the success of generations of advertisers keen to ensure that the infusion should maintain its privileged place on the palate. Exactly how that place is to be defined, Rappaport makes clear, depends on the context. The largely domestic settings of British consumption in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries are augmented by the factory tea break of a

later period; in Australia, tea acquired an association as the refreshment of the labouring man, whereas in the mind of the American consumer it remained stubbornly connected with femininity (until, that is, the twentieth-century emergence of 'iced tea'); Indian consumers at the turn of the twentieth century were encouraged to regard tea drinking as a chance to participate in the opportunities of empire. These overlapping patterns of tea consumption are the product of a complex set of factors: political, commercial, historical and geographical. In their emergence they were inflected by global movements such as those associated with British imperialism and the growth of American commercial domination, the national activities of trade organizations and planters' associations, the local decisions made by tea wholesalers and advertising executives, and the personal preferences and desires of consumers and retailers.

A Thirst for Empire covers a period of some four centuries associated with the European encounter with tea, beginning with the evidence found in the writing of Portuguese merchants in the mid-sixteenth century, and finding an end-point in the post-war consumer society of Britain amid the artistic and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth-century contexts are nevertheless dealt with quickly in the first chapter, drawing from established scholarship concerning tea origins in China and Japan, the trade of the British East India Company and the recognition of tea's European foodways. Revising Habermas's well-known narrative of the transformation of the 'public sphere' in the eighteenth century, Rappaport argues instead for tea's role in the establishment of a 'zone of cultural debate' invoking emerging cultural practices associated with tea consumption in importing countries, the interpretation and revision of pre-existing Chinese and East Asian practices, and the recognition of the remarkable commercial and mercantile technologies involved in that enabled long-distance trade. This formulation directly informs the book's ongoing treatment of its theme in the chapters which address its core interests: the history of tea's production, marketing and consumption in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For whilst the subjects of the successive chapters range widely across continents, contexts and time periods – even in the way in which they understand tea as a commodity – they are underpinned by a persistent and compelling interest in the production and collision of these national, commercial and popular cultures. Indeed, these frequent changes in focus are central to what makes the book so engaging for its reader.

A striking example of this lithe and ludic approach (though one of many) can be identified in chapters five and six. A series of chapters from the central section of the book demonstrates this lithe approach to the subject matter, whilst also evincing the impressive and diverse range of archival resources employed. Drawing on the fascinating Horniman papers at the London Metropolitan Archive, the fourth chapter exposes contemporary anxieties concerning tea adulteration (and, by extension, how companies like Horniman sought to capitalise on these fears in order to foster brand loyalty). In material that may be

of particular interest to historians of science, Rappaport considers the rising profile of what we might now term 'food scientists' such as practised by figures such as the chemist Arthur Hill Hassall ('the Apostle of Adulteration') who claimed to use employed the chemical analysis of Chinese tea to identify artificial colourants such as 'Prussian blue'.⁷ and She argues suggests that we can see in these developments the emergence of modern frameworks for food provenance and purity. Following a chapter concerning the mid-nineteenth century anxiety about tea adulteration, the fifth chapter In the chapter which follows, focuses shifts to on the 'Jubilee of Indian Tea': 1887, the year in which the combined tea imports of India and Ceylon into Britain exceeded those of China. Through archival research using the papers of nineteenth-century retailers such as Horniman, Rappaport analyses the changing contexts of tea retail ('packet tea' rather than loose tea sold by weight) and the emergence of an advertising and promotion campaign that described the purchase of 'Empire teas' as a patriotic duty, supporting British innovation in tea cultivation and processing, whilst lessening the troubling economic dependence on China. Chapter six takes this interest beyond the context of metropolitan Britain, focusing on the close relationship between colonialism and commerce, with impressive original archival work uncovering the stories of tea's marketing and consumption in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and India.

Even in a study of this scale, there are inevitably decisions concerning coverage and treatment which result in aspects of the subject being considered with less rigour. Most significant among these, perhaps, is that the tea itself often takes something of a backstage. There seems a general assumption, for example, that the distinction between 'black' and 'green' tea in the early nineteenth century is similar to that of the modern day, even though – at least during the period of the dominance of Chinese tea – there is significant evidence that what was described as 'black' was a partially-oxidised leaf closer to what might today be termed an 'oolong'. Indeed, the 'black' teas of modern experience were largely enabled by the mechanized production processes developed in India and Ceylon. The complex nomenclature of the eighteenth-century tea trade emerged as British knowledge of the product developed; whilst these terms, and the distinctions between their botanical and commercial usage, are explained in the first chapter, there is nevertheless little acknowledgement of how these terms they were inherited and adapted as core components of the grading system used at Mincing Lane auctions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Broken Orange Pekoe, Pekoe Souchong, Tippy Golden Flowery Pekoe and so on). The emergence of key blends, most significantly the ubiquitous English Breakfast Tea, also goes unremarked. And notwithstanding the (rightful) attention given to 'packet tea', the nineteenth century innovation in tea retail, the mid-twentieth century emergence of tea bags – surely deserving of equal recognition – together with the crush-tear-curl method of tea production, receives relatively cursory treatment.

None of this, however, detracts seriously from *Thirst for Empire's* real achievements. I am unaware of another study of the practices associated with the trade in and consumption of tea in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that comes close in terms of its scale, its ambition, or its deep and careful research. More specifically, in terms of its attention to nineteenth and twentieth century advertising, its focus on practices of consumption in the colonial and postcolonial settings associated with British imperialism, and in its detailed consideration of the various state-sponsored trade organizations and planters' associations, the book convincingly establishes exciting new contexts for tea scholarship.

If Rappaport's book is rich in the breadth and diversity of its interests, McCarthy and Devine's *Empire and Tea* derives its strength from its absorbing focus on a single story: the life of a Scottish migrant credited with a significant role in a series of agricultural innovations in nineteenth-century Ceylon, most critically the introduction of tea. It is striking that although the Indian Tea Jubilee of 1887 marked the first year in which the combined imports from the empire's tea estates – critically including Ceylon – exceeded those of China, the cultivation of tea on the island was unheard of in 1851 when the *Sydney* docked in Colombo Bay with Taylor as a passenger. Ceylon's economic mainstay at this time was in the service of another component of the eighteenth-century fashion for hot drinks: coffee. Coffee cultivation had increased steadily in the 1830s and 1840s, and Taylor would witness its continued growth in much of the next two decades. Along with Brazil and Indonesia, Ceylon had become by 1860 one of the three greatest coffee producers in the world, at a scale of activity that was likened by some to a gold rush.

Despite this success, in the forty years that he lived and worked on the Loolecondera (or Lookandura) estate in the highlands to the south of the city of Kandy, Taylor was a witness and core contributor to a striking agricultural revolution. As coffee crops were increasingly blighted by a little-understood fungal leaf disease (*Hemileia vastatrix*, commonly known as 'coffee leaf rust') which gradually decreased yields and quality during the 1870s, Taylor adopted ~~an innovative approach~~ tea series of agricultural innovations directed towards maintaining the profitability of the estate. ~~These~~ is included the use of ~~manure~~ fertilizer to ameliorate the effects of the coffee leaf disease, the refinement of techniques related to the growing of cinchona (the shrub whose bark is used in the production of quinine) and – most significantly – the cultivation, harvesting and processing of tea. It was at Loolecondera in 1868 that the island's first tea plantation was ~~planted~~ established, under Taylor's direction. In the years which followed Taylor adopted an inventive approach based on his discussions with fellow planters, his observations of the techniques employed in Darjeeling during a visit in 1874, and his own practical experiments. He was credited with the development of a particularly fine method of harvesting, based on the principle of plucking two leaves and a bud from each tea plant. He was also keen to streamline aspects of the production process; and whilst the fate of a tea-rolling device that he designed in

[1872 is uncertain, Loolecondera became well-known for its use of machines in the later 1870s.](#)

The remarkable insights that the book offers into the often solitary life of a European plantation supervisor in an outpost of a vast trading empire are the result of detailed research. But at the heart of *Tea and Empire* is a remarkable and hitherto untapped archive: the almost unbroken series of letters which Taylor wrote from his bungalow at Loolecondera to friends and family in Scotland over a period of four decades. In the core chapters of the book, McCarthy and Devine use Taylor's first-hand testimony to construct an enlightening account of the development of Ceylon's plantation economy in the second half of the nineteenth century, the primary source material offering unusually direct (and occasionally disturbing) recognition of the mechanics of the colonial plantation. These include observations concerning the uncertain relationship between plantation supervisors and their (often absentee) owners; the awareness among European settlers of the racial and ethnic distinctions within the Ceylonese population; and the treatment of plantation workers. Taylor seems to have been keenly aware of the different groups with whom he engaged: the largely Buddhist Sinhalese (described in his letters, following prevailing European terminology, as 'natives') and Hindu Tamils (termed 'coolies', typically – though not exclusively – migrant labour from India). There is also ~~some~~ evidence that his approach may have been in some respects unusually enlightened: the letters reveal that he sought to learn the Sinhalese and Tamil languages, and there is ~~some~~a suggestion that his workers enjoyed favourable conditions compared with those on neighbouring estates. Nevertheless, the account of his tarring and feathering of a man identified as the ringleader of a rebellious group of Tamil workers is particularly horrifying and, whilst the authors are to be commended for acknowledging Taylor's prejudices, the prose occasionally betrays a latent suggestion that he cannot be held directly responsible for the exploitation that was structural to the plantation system of which he was a part.

There is sometimes a slight tension between the overarching biographical design of the book and the micro history which it offers of the emergence of Ceylon as a major tea exporter in the second half of the nineteenth century. Occasionally Taylor has to take something of a back seat as wider contexts, which are beyond the scope of his letter archive, are considered (this is perhaps most in evidence in the fourth chapter, which focuses on the profile of Ceylonese leaves in the world tea markets). Elsewhere, conversely, the desire to offer a full biography of Taylor means that the interest in tea cultivation recedes. A strict adherence to chronology means that readers encounter an early chapter on the subject's life in Scotland before their interest in either the character of James Taylor, or the wider story of Ceylon tea, is guaranteed; as a result, the material can appear a little directionless. And whilst the consideration of the circumstances of Taylor's death at Loolecondera in 1891 soon after his dismissal by his employer (and just six months after being awarded a fine silver tea service by London's Ceylon Association in recognition of his

achievements) is generally valuable in terms of highlighting the changing contexts of tea planting in Ceylon at the end of the century, the more lurid speculations concerning his passing seem unnecessary. Elsewhere, however, the added dimensions afforded by the biographical approach add depth and interest to the portrayal of the Victorian plantation supervisor. Readers can glimpse in the fifth and sixth chapters, for example, authentic details concerning Taylor's interaction with the natural historical, domestic and social worlds beyond the limits of the plantation. Moreover, the authors are able to use Taylor's story both as an opportunity to consider the particular role of the Scottish migrant in the narrative of empire and – more intimately – to explore the complex range of emotions evidenced in the letters concerning the migrant's relationship with 'home'.

In *A Thirst for Empire* and *Tea and Empire*, Erika Rappaport, Angela McCarthy and T. M. Devine offer their readers complementary, but also distinctive, studies of the complex, multi-layered and interconnected stories of consumerism and imperialism. Both books establish important new contexts for scholarship about the growth and development of the tea trade. Just as significantly, however, they also demonstrate how global histories of commerce, consumption and cultural exchange can be meaningfully elucidated through a focus on a specific article of trade.

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