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# A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World

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## Book Reviews

*A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World.* By Erika Rappaport. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. xvi + 568 pp. Maps, figures, tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.50. ISBN: 978-0-691-16711-4.

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Reviewed by Jane T. Merritt

In *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World*, Erika Rappaport, specialist in British consumer culture, explores the influence of the quintessential English beverage on the rise of mass markets and British identity. Drawing from a variety of research traditions, including recent commodity studies, the author argues that tea was both a product of and a producer of empire. The commercial success of tea created powerful corporate entities with imperial ties, such as the English East India Company and Lipton's. But, it was the practice of drinking tea that defined and transformed "Britishness." Tea came to represent a civilizing force that brought together the multiethnic and multinational aspects of Great Britain, connecting the homeland to its colonial peripheries of Africa, South Asia, and North America and illuminating "the intimate and social experience of imperialism," even while maintaining inherent racial, gendered, and class hierarchies (p. 17).

Rappaport traces the origins of tea production to China and its introduction to European traders and consumers to the early eighteenth century. Yet, some of the most effective chapters detail the shift of the tea industry from China to India in the early nineteenth century as the English East India Company's power declined. After stealing Chinese plants and agricultural expertise, and destabilizing independent local rule in Assam, English and Scottish growers soon dominated tea cultivation, imposing a plantation model from the Caribbean on a reluctant labor force. Gone was the "peasant proprietor" of the Chinese tea trade; instead, recruiters contracted indentured labor that engendered abusive work conditions, high mortality rates, and rebellion. Tea planters and their trade associations also began to re-describe tea as British (and Indian) rather than Asian, labeling Chinese varieties as degenerate and adulterated to justify appropriation of tea cultivation. Still, tea merchants had to marshal the power of advertising and branding to habituate consumer tastes to Indian teas; the merchants associated them with food safety, moral purity, and wholesomeness. Peaking with Victoria's

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Diamond Jubilee in 1887, the Indian Tea Association helped to construct the commodity's reputation, which "celebrated the triumph of British industry, colonialism, and masculinity over Chinese inertia, weakness, and femininity" (p. 173).

At home, "British" tea promised to cure the ills of an industrializing nation. Sold as the moral alternative to alcohol, tea supposedly energized the working class and produced a sober citizenry. The temperance movement lapped it up and by the mid-nineteenth century had contrived the rituals of afternoon tea, which included bread, cake, and fruits that encouraged clear-headed behavior from workers, aided by the extra calories. Using images of empire (soldiers and colonized peoples) or nostalgia (middle-class comforts and elderly women), tea was redefined as a patriotic necessity and even became part of a soldier's kit and a boost to morale during the World Wars. Indeed, the cover image and opening vignette of British Indian soldiers drinking tea from a YMCA mobile canteen in front of a mosque in Woking, England, brilliantly illustrates one of the author's last major points: that commercial markets were the new colonialism. The campaign to expand the sale of British tea from South Asia to Africa, North America, and beyond created "global consumers" by the late twentieth century. Yet, younger British customers began to see tea as old-fashioned, turning instead to branded beverages like Coca-Cola, or Americanized drinks like coffee. Interestingly, those regions previously colonized by Great Britain—South Asia, Indonesia, and Africa—maintained their devotion to tea, perhaps because they took control of tea cultivation away from outsiders, promoting native ownership and management. Decolonization diminished the powers of empire, but not the allure of tea. Despite its tendency to linger on tantalizing anecdotes and occasionally meander away from the thread of its core arguments, *A Thirst for Empire* significantly adds to a growing body of scholarship on British consumer culture and the intersections between commerce and empire.

*Jane T. Merritt is professor of history at Old Dominion University. Her recent book, The Trouble with Tea: The Politics of Consumption in the Eighteenth-Century Global Economy (2017), explores early American consumer culture, British imperial policy, and the tea trade.*

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