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## **Tea in a Historical and Anthropological Perspective ---An Interview with Alan Macfarlane**

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### **Abstract:**

In the interview, Professor Alan Macfarlane talks about tea and its functions from a very distinctive historical and anthropological point of view. He briefly compared the tea ceremony and etiquette of the Great Britain, China and Japan. In his opinion, tea plays a crucially important role in history. Tea improved the health and comforts of people in the 18th century. It caused the Industrial Revolution and the changes of social gender relations. It shaped empires and the relationship between them. It helped the British surviving the First World War. In *Green Gold: The Empire of Tea*, tea is personified and the empire of tea has a double meaning. It might be the British empire being very much associated with tea for various reasons. It may refer to tea as a great plant which decided to conquer the world or the British who used tea to conquer the world. Chinese tea and things with it will become more and more important in the world because of the influence of China. Tea is a substance that relaxes and makes you feel optimistic and friendly and takes the stress out of you. Although tea may not get you out of an economic recession, it may make you relaxed about it.

### **On Tea: A face-to-face Interview with Professor Alan Macfarlane**

Interviewee: Alan Macfarlane (1941-) is Emeritus Professor of Anthropological Science and a Life Fellow of King's College, Cambridge University. As an anthropologist and historian, he has worked in England, Nepal, Japan and China. He has done interdisciplinary and comparative studies covering history, anthropology, culture, literature, economics, methodology, multimedia and film. In 2003, he co-wrote with his mother Iris Macfarlane and published the book entitled *Green Gold: The Empire of Tea* which was issued in America in 2004 as *The Empire of Tea, The Remarkable History of the Plant that Took Over the World*. More information can be found on his website [www.alanmacfarlane.com](http://www.alanmacfarlane.com)

Interviewer: Xiaoli MA

MA: Good afternoon, Professor Alan Macfarlane.

AM: Good afternoon, Xiaoli.

MA: Thank you very much for your happiness of being interviewed on the topic of tea. To begin with, as an Englishman and son of a tea planter, you may drink tea. When and how do you drink tea in your daily life and what about the selections in your cupboard?

AM: I drink tea at breakfast which is Assam tea from the area where I was brought up as a boy, and it is a very strong brand tea with milk. And that is the first thing. Then at eleven o'clock, I make a pot, a teapot of green tea, and I drink at eleven o'clock, I drink it after lunch at two o'clock. So I infuse it with new hot water and then at four o'clock, my wife joins me and we sit either inside or on the steps of our tea house in our garden, I make her a green tea and a green tea for myself. We usually have two cups then, so I tend to have about six cups of tea in a day. And as for the number of selections in our cupboard, in the house we have Assam tea, we have Ceylon tea, we have some green tea, but in our tea house, I have many kinds of tea, mainly Chinese and Japanese, also sorts of different varieties, Oolong, green, powder tea, leaf tea. Because I have the good fortune I have good friends like yourself who bring me those beautiful teas from Japan and China, so I have lots of tea.

MA: Then any differences with friends, how do you entertain your friends with tea at home and what is your understanding about the connection between tea and hospitality?

AM: Well, I have really learned from China and Japan. When, either a stranger or a friend or even a family come to your house, the way to meet them to make them feel relaxed and friendly and absorbed into your house, is to immediately offer them a cup of tea. So even when my daughter or my son-in-law come from just down the road, the first thing I tend to say to them, "Would you like a cup of tea?" Likewise, when my students or friends come, for instance, someone who is working with me on computers, the moment he comes to the door, I say: "Would you like some tea?" He always looks very happy and says: "Yes, please." So you are signifying the symbolizing of friendship and absorption and it's something which in ancient

cultures as you know in Nepal where I worked, and I noticed in Japan and China, the moment you go into someone's house, they tend to offer you tea. That is what I do with my friends. If they are very special friends, then we invite them to afternoon tea. And that is in our Japanese tea house, and there depending on where they are from, we might do a small informal ceremony where we sit around the middle of the floor with the various things you have for the Japanese tea ceremony. If they are from a culture that does the tea ceremony, if they are Japanese or Chinese and they know how to do the tea ceremony, we might invite them to be the tea masters and they do the ceremony for us. As to the connection of tea and hospitality, we have expressed our emotions and our friendship through materials or objects, it might be through drink, it might be through food, it might be through tea, it might be through gifts and since the introduction of tea into England in the early 18th century on a large scale, one of the best ways of our expressing friendship and hospitality is to offer people tea.

MA: In 2003, you and your mother published the book *Green Gold: The Empire of Tea* which was a great sensation in the world and translated into at least four foreign languages. What inspired you to co-write with your mother such a book related to tea and empire?

AM: Well, I was born on a tea or near tea estate. I was actually born there because of the war. But my father was a tea planter, a manager of a tea plantation in India. So I grew up for a year or two in India at the end of the War on the tea plantation. I visited my parents a number of times later and of course I heard lots about the life there from both my sisters who have been out there, and particularly my mother who wrote me letters. So tea has been with me ever since I was a child and I've always been interested in this subject. Then I wrote various books. When I was approached by a publisher about ten years ago, who said they had read one or two of my other books and asked whether I would be interested in writing a book about tea?" This is Random House. I said I would be happy if I could do it with my mother because she always wanted to write. She collected materials on the history of tea in India, using the Assam tea company's records. So she always wanted to write a book about tea. So I thought this was a well-of collaborating with my mother on this book. [I am just going to get some tea, haha.....I will answer a little more on the question.] So that explained why I've written with my mother and why I personally might be interested in tea.

But the idea of empire of tea, I think, came from another influence which is basically from anthropology. Because towards the end of the 20th century there were numbers of studies by leading anthropologists about commodities, about, one of the most famous was one by Sidney Mintz called *Sweetness and Power* which is about sugar and the way which objects become exchanged around the world and is all part of globalization, peaces and so on. And how they are used in politics, empires, trade and so on was something I was teaching in courses of anthropology and I think there are also well-known books on other things like Cod, the Fish Cod and spices and so on. So publishers and students were all interested in the history and anthropology of commodities. I think I saw tea as an important international commodity. Finally the word so the empire of tea, normally empires are only run or held together or sort of

by human beings. And I was playing a trick because here tea was like a human being, it was making an empire. It had its own will, so to speak. It decided to conquer the world like the British Empire. So the empire of tea, but it also has a double meaning because the empire of tea might be the British empire, which was very much associated with tea for various reasons. So it could be referring to tea as a great plant which decided to conquer the world or the British who used tea to conquer the world.

MA: So you wrote that your part of the book “is an attempt ... in a personal exploration of my own past and that of my family, which has for many generations been involved both in tea and in the area around Assam.” Anything else you want to add about your family background and tea?

AM: Yes, I would like to add something. Because in the last two maybe three months I’ve learnt a lot more about it. I thought that mainly it was, although I said many generations, in fact I was thinking of other members of my family who’ve gone to India and Burma, but they went as lawyers, missionaries and different kinds of things. I knew that my great grandfather was involved with coffee and tea in Southern India.

That was 1870, but I thought my father had gone into tea because of some relationship or something, but looking at family papers as I have been doing for the last two or three months, I discovered the exact chain of things which is that my father’s uncle went out as a tea planter in about 1880 and it was he who then came back and then encouraged my father to go out and another uncle was also out there. So the generation before my father was in Assamese tea, right from the beginning the early days and then my father’s generation, so nearly as long as Assam has been a famous place for tea, there has been my family. So I am exploring bits of my family which was involved there and I also discovered several of my relatives were in China. They were in Canton and in Shanghai as consuls and ambassadors and traders and doctors. The traders might be involved in tea. So there were Indian side or possibly the Chinese side.

MA: When being interviewed by Ms Clarinda Still in 2008, you said that your mother was a philosopher, a novelist, a poet, a short-story writer, a Buddhist and vegetarian. And you also know the old Buddhist saying, “The taste of ch’an/Zen and the taste of cha’a/ tea are the same.” Could you tell me about the relationship about the talents your mother had and tea and religious philosophy?

AM: Well, in my mother’s case, I am not sure that; I mean, she drank tea obviously and she liked tea. And she was all the things I mentioned a poet, a Buddhist and all the things. But she didn’t use tea, I mean, she had a Buddha and she would meditate. I didn’t think she knew until we wrote the book how tea and Buddhism were connected, how good tea is for meditation and there was the Zen thing which you probably know, you kindly gave me some nice zen tea. There are four kinds of meditation. There is walking. There is feeding fish. There is meditation, Zen meditation and there is drinking tea. And drinking tea is worth one hour of Buddhist meditation, very powerful. So Zen grew up around tea as you know the original Zen philosophy

in Japan was very much tied up with the tea ceremony. The monks who practiced Zen used to go up into the mountain to build the little tea house and drink tea. So tea and religion as well as art, all the exotic, pottery and so on, were, it is said, were heavily influenced by tea in Japan, China and Korea. So all that long long history of philosophy, religion, tea coming together came down and I am sure some of it influenced my mother and some of it came to me.

MA: As to the functions of tea, what do you think are the most important in British society? Could you separately comment on them from both historical and anthropological culture point of view?

AM: Well tea is, a very large subject. First, I will do it historically. Historically tea came into England on a large scale in the early 18th century and I have a theory in my book that it was the absolutely crucial ingredient in improving the health of the British people in the middle of the 18th century which was the time when Britain was just about to launch into world-dominance. It was the time when the British Empire was expanding very fast. And it was the time of British Industrial Revolution and it was also the time the cities were getting very large. My theory is that although tea does not cause obviously an empire; it does not cause the Industrial Revolution; it does not cause a big city to grow. Without it, none of these things would happen. In other words, the great period of the British Empire and the great period of the British Industrial Revolution and obvious growth into an urban society were made possible by tea. Without tea it's quite possible some or all of those things might not have happened. So historically it was very very important. It also influenced enormously the relationship with China, obviously, tea and the opium business. And it also influenced the relationship with America, because Britain lost the United States because they tried to force the Americans to pay taxes on tea. They rejected that, and that is the background to the American Revolution. So historically, it shaped empires. It shaped relationship between empires and it has been enormously important.

In terms of functions in British society it had all thoughts you can separate those or you can have those medical ones which have ever been alluded to. It improves the health of and comforts people. It made people able to work in very very difficult conditions in factories, very long hours in factories, down mines with a bad diet. It had the same effects as in Japan and China. People can work in rice agriculture. Because tea improves your muscle coordination you can do things if you drank a cup of tea you can run, you can use your whole body much more efficiently. This is why all armies the British armies and American armies issued tea for their soldiers. I think in the First World War, one of the things that helped the British finally surviving the First World War was tea. And I've known the Second World War. My uncle was fighting in Burma against the Japanese. And the most important thing that was dropped down from airplanes to him was tea as he told me. So medically and in terms of physical strength tea is very very important.

But it also had many functions in changing social relations. For instance, it altered the gender relations. Before tea came along, the only drinks you could really drink with people were all

alcoholic drinks and these were all associated with men. Tea's association can be given as an afternoon entertainment by women. Children can come, so immediately it broke down some of the male and female oppositions, the adults and children oppositions. And it made much easier for women to socialize together. So that was a very important function. It changed the nature and shape of meals in England. Because before tea you had a very big breakfast, then you had a moderate lunch, then you had an early evening meal. Tea meant you could have a lighter breakfast, because tea gave some of the energy you needed in the morning. So you made the morning meal lighter. You had a medium middle meal, then you could have tea which meant you could push the evening meals such as in the middle classes back an hour or two. So it changed the shape and had huge effects on economy. Potteries, for example, Wedgwood the Potter, were based on tea services and so on. A lot of furniture, a lot of silver ware, all sorts of things. It affected sugar which was mainly imported from the Jamaica and elsewhere.

So it made use of sugar much much more important. So it shifted also the social relationships and it set relationships and finally it was serious and made it much easier to socialize with people in other places. Because you can just drop in for a nice cup of tea. So it became a symbol, also a symbol of Britishness. When the Iraq War was just about to be launched by Tony Blair, the huge demonstration that tried to stop the war had as its kind of symbol people marching with a large banner saying "Make Tea, Not War". And also the rituals and ceremonials which I didn't talk about which are anthropological.

One of the curious things about tea is where you compare with any other drinks. Why I think it is so important to human beings is that all other drinks wine and alcoholic drinks, you just put them into water. Coffee you make very quickly. Tea has to wait and you make the tea, therefore, then laid themselves slowing down the time and to ceremonial and ritualistic behaviour. You do the same way each time. So it becomes a ceremony. You don't talk about coffee ceremonies. You can have some elaboration of coffee but not much, whereas you talk about the tea ceremony it is almost like a religious ceremony. And that has an effect on humans because you would mean to like ceremonial behaviour.

MA: What do you think is typically English afternoon tea and its etiquette?

Could you tell me something about the Cambridge academics and afternoon tea?

AM: Well the etiquette of tea varies, even it is very class-conscious, very class-based societies. So tea there is usually by social class, if I am just describing tea, say, early 20th century tea in a working town in North England it might consist of a large, very large mug, for instance in the First World War, the soldiers from different social classes and the officers were served tea in different kinds of things. Soldiers had huge great tin mugs filled up with steaming tea while the officers drank tea from smaller china cups. And so you will find different etiquette and behaviours. If you went to tea in some parts of Cambridge whether they are older in habitant himself a non-university home, you will get tea served in one way. If you go to a college tea you will get another way. I think the day of elaborate tea parties in Cambridge as far as I know

is not nearly as strong as it used to be because people are busier and concern their own alternatives, playing with their computers or whatever it is. When I first came here 40 years ago I met some other fellows of the Colleges, who said, "Come to afternoon tea!", particularly older ones, and then the ceremony would be quite informal. The whole process would be, when you came into the door, the hostess would ask you how you would like your tea? Did you like it with milk before or after? Would you like sugar? Various questions would be asked, "Did you like Darjeeling tea? Did you like Assam tea? What kind of tea would you like? And she would probably prepare some foods to go with the tea which were ceremonially sandwiches with some higher quality ingredients like cucumber, fish paste or some rather special honey or something like that. There is a famous line in Rupert Brooke's poem on Grantchester. The last line is "Stands the Church clock at ten to three? And is there honey still for tea?" It also symbolizes the tearooms in Grantchester. If you go to Grantchester, you will see the tea rooms there. And that was the kind of thing you go up in a punt or you may take a picnic tea and you thought beside the river and you have tea. There was food and tea was served on special china.

Sometimes there are little tables for each person so you can put their cups and so on. The hostess would walk around with the sandwiches and you always started with savoury sandwiches first and sweets afterwards. And you would be asked "Would you like a second cup of tea? Would you like some sugar?" So it was just a way of demonstrating on the part of the hostess, she was wanting to make you feel comfortable and at home. In a proper Japanese tea ceremony you must not talk about anything aggressive, anything that divides you. You should comment on the beauty of the tea and instruments. You should make comments on the niceness of the tea. You should compliment the tea masters. You should talk about the paintings or the flowers or whatever. So they are all always neutral and pleasant things. Because the idea is you will get a pleasant state of friendship. I think that sometimes these tea parties, it was the same conventions. If there were people you didn't know very well there because there were sometimes occasions for meeting new people. Then you would talk in a neutral kind of way. You talk about the weather of course to start with and then you will talk about contemporary politics, but always try to avoid confrontation and argument. If you find a group of people who meet regularly for tea, then of course you would gossip. You would say "Have you heard of so on and so on and whose wife has run way" and so on and so on. So there were bonding sessions. So it depended on who was there.

MA: How many times have you been to China? What kind of Chinese tea do you like best?

AM: I have been to China eight times. I've been right through the northeast, mostly I was in Beijing and Shanghai and so on, up the Yangtze Gorges, Chongqing, Sichuan, down particularly the southwest. I just can't say I like one better than the other. I love all Chinese teas. There is one kind I don't like very much. I've got some in my cupboard. It's a long thin stick-like tea. It is very bitter. Chinese tend not to have Japanese powder tea which whisks up. That is a Japanese zen kind of tea. Chinese is nearly all leaf tea, but I like all of it. I haven't had any brick tea that kind of tea they exported to Mongolia and Tibet. It is very rough tea. You drink

that with a lot of milk and sugar on things like that. But all the green teas, white tea, red tea, yellow tea, I like all of them.

MA: Have you been to any tea houses?

AM: Yes, many. We've been to, for example, in Chengdu there are some nice tea houses and we've been to some beautiful tea rooms. They are not as elaborate as Japanese ones. Japanese have always taken the Chinese things like tea and taken their own stages further. It is absolutely pure and clean. The Chinese are often in a garden. Some of the nice ones we've been to are in Buddhist or other Monastery gardens. So this time, when we went to Beijing this time we went to a Buddhist Monastery on the edge of Beijing and there they have a lot of very beautiful courtyards and our host from the University treated us to tea and when he saw the bill, he was rather horrified because the cost of the tea was more than the whole meal which we had just before and. There were two or three girls doing the tea ceremony which we were watching. That probably added to the cost of the tea. It's very expensive tea. But I think that is something I like about China. A lot of them, you know, the kind of rock, famous rock gardens, you can get in Chinese cities. A lot of tea is served outside under the tree or with rocks around while the Japanese tea is nearly always inside.

MA: As an anthropologist, can you predict the development of tea culture and its social roles in the world?

AM: Well, I do not know how the sales and whatever teas, but I suspect that as it has done and it will become more and more important for various reasons. One is the influence of China, which is influencing culture tradition and everything all around the world. So that's why China becomes more important, Chinese tea will become more important and things associated with it. Second is that I've told that certain parts of the American people are finding coffee, which is an alternative too stimulating. We live in a very hyper kind of world very active and constantly being challenged and stimulated by things. Therefore, we need a substance which relaxes us and improves our concentration as tea does by a large amount and makes the small even and yet gives the same energy over a long period because coffee just gives you a short and then disappears. Alcohol gives you a short, then both disappear and make you depressed very soon. You go down and down and you get drowsy. Tea doesn't make you sleepy or it can help you sleep if you want. It just makes you feel optimistic, relaxed, friendly and takes the stress out of life. This is why tea in Britain is particularly associated with stressful situations. Whenever you know someone has an accident cry or is wounded in war or anything like that, the first thing you should do is to give them a cup of tea. A nice cup of tea will heal. In hospitals, they sell a lot of tea because they thought it to be very helpful to relax people and so on. So in all those institutions where you need to calm people down, tea is very important.

MA: Since tea plays an important part in your life, in which way is, or will be, tea concerned in the memoir that you have been writing?



AM: Well, the memoir I am writing which is many volumes about the British Empire, through one family, my family. The two great periods of my family's imperial expansion were first in Jamaica, where for a number of generations my family were involved in sugar exporting from Jamaica to England which was very very important. So the first British Empire was really North America where they first settled in New England. The second, very important is the British Empire, was in the Caribbean, Jamaica, Cuba and so on. And that lasted till the abolition of slavery. Then my family moved from there east towards India, China, and Burma. And in that period, the second half of the period from the middle of the 19th century through till the middle of 20th century and all through my childhood, the centre was tea for me. So tracing the course of tea planting and the profits from tea has shaped my family.

When I went to school, obviously I didn't know anything about tea though I knew we had tea every day. I didn't realize what good it was doing me. When I was exhausted from playing games or studying or particularly when I was older in my secondary school, I am sure tea helped me survive the very cold, wet hard environment. And then it was repeated in my life because I had wanted to become an anthropologist which I live later and then went back to Nepal. Although Nepal is on the edge of tea growing area, it is in many ways influenced by tea. Tea is the national drink in Nepal. And so people who I worked with for 20 years are anthropologists, and have been deeply influenced by drinking tea. And also Tibet in which tea is terribly important. So much of my own being and history of my family being has come out of tea.

MA: Have you already written anything about tea in your memoir?

AM: Not yet. But I think I will.

MA: Are you going to write a volume of tea or do you have any plan for it?

AM: No. It will be scattered through it. I mean when I come to deal with my great grandfather on the tea estates and coffee estates of the Nilghiri Hills. I have been writing about my father and his early life and my mother. And tea will form a theme on that, but it won't be a whole volume on it.

MA: As a filmmaker and director of many interviews and media, what are your suggestions and opinions for spreading tea culture and health via media?

AM: Well, I have interviewed a lot of people. I don't usually ask them about whether they drink tea or not but I should. And I've put on the web some of the materials I have on tea estates and talking about tea which is on my website. Perhaps more will go up. When I try directly to persuade people that tea is a wonderful medicine, is a wonderful relaxant, helps us to concentrate, everyone should drink more and more tea, sometimes they listen. And you know I get emails from people saying "I've seen you talk about the Industrial Revolution and tea and I have been drinking tea since." So a number of my personal friends have been influenced.

MA: But what about the mass media?

AM: Well, from time to time, people said we should make a programme or set up programmes or films. And there are one or two Chinese producers I have friends in the Chinese media who work for CCTV and want to make a series of films about tea for Chinese circulation. "Can he talk to you?" I said, "yes, yes." But I haven't heard more about that. So who knows.

MA: Do you have any plans to study about the comparison between Chinese and British tea culture, or writing another tea book in the future?

AM: You never know with writing. I mean I don't have any plans at all, because I have written one book. It is best not to write on or around the same topic. But books and what you get interested in are very unpredictable. You know I often sit down to write a short piece about something thinking that will be a little bit. So I might sit down to write what I did in my first school, you know, preparatory school. I thought it would be ten pages. It's now seven hundred and fifty pages. It was the same as James George Frazer who wrote *Golden Bough*. He just sat down to write a short article. Thirty years later it was twelve volumes. So you don't know. You can't rule it out. I expected that others like yourself could write such a book because I've done my bit and explained how important it is. But it requires new energy and new insights. Comparison is very important! It is much interesting to have a book which is to compare the history culture of tea in two or three places, say, India or perhaps four places India, China, Japan and Britain for instance. There is huge room and scale and that is a very important subject.

MA: How will tea production and trade influence the world economy revival and prosperity?

AM: Three places that have done really well in the last ten years economically, are the real big tea producing countries China, India and Turkey. Turkey is a tea-producing country and it's doing fantastically well. So maybe we should grow tea in England because the climate is getting so warmer here! The British, of course, think that tea grows in England. We talk about "British tea". I think quite a lot of people think somewhere maybe in Yorkshire for we have "Yorkshire Tea". It's British tea, not from Assam or other places. We grow it. We drink it, none of them foreign staff. I think quite a lot of people think that which isn't true. But maybe it should be true...

But the thing tea will do is not, maybe, to get you out of an economic recession, but may make you more relaxed about the economic recession. The economic recession is largely nonsense. People say, it is the worst recession since the War, as bad as the 1930s. They know nothing about history. There are one billion people very poor people. But, many people are immensely wealthier and more secure economically now than they were, even 20 or 30 years ago let alone the 1930s. This is an entirely different world. In terms of a hundred years of history we are enormously wealthy. You look at the roads in England filled with cars. You look at what people eat. You look at their bodies. We are very far from the hungry starved, unemployed, desperate people of the 1930s in Britain. Let alone, you know, a hundred years before. Let alone India in the 60s and 70s where they had real famines. Much the world has moved a long

way. So we get worried about trifles, small fluctuations. If you have a cup of tea, you get things into a sensible proportion. So maybe, tea would make us more relaxed about it all.

MA: Thank you very much again.

AM: It's my pleasure.