

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 D'Israeli, *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

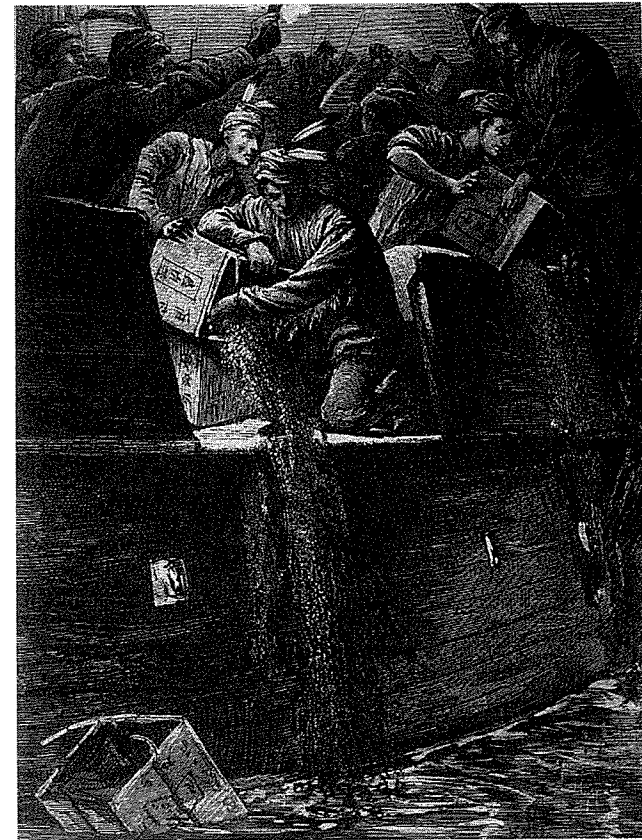
The political power of the British East India Company, the organization that supplied Britain's tea, was vast. At its height the company generated more revenue than the British government and ruled over far more people, while the duty on the tea it imported accounted for as much as 10 percent of government 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



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

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.

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 tempo-

rary 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.

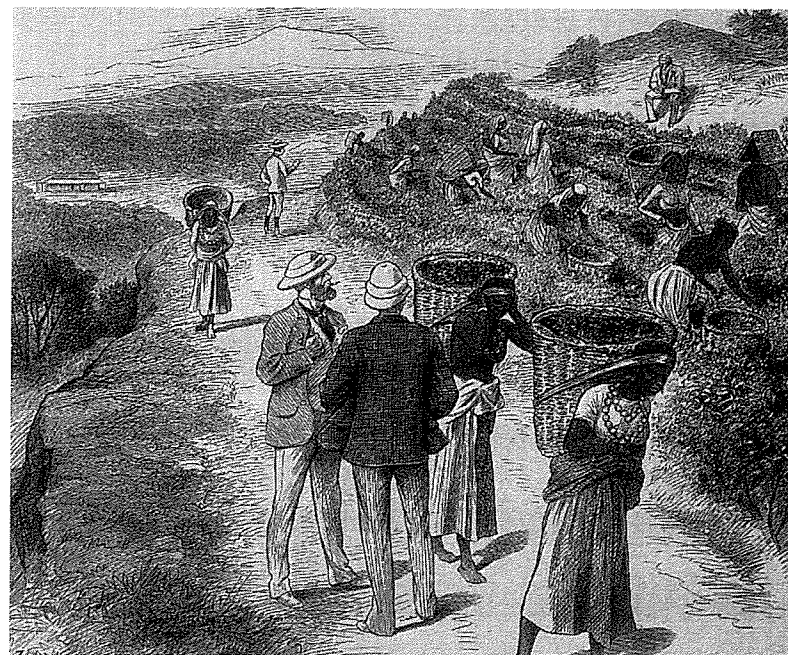
The company characteristically changed its mind in 1834, when its monopoly with China came to an end. Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, who as the head of the company was also governor general of India, enthusiastically embraced the idea of growing tea after a subordinate suggested in a report that "some 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



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

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 valu-

able that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of the empire."

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.