

How the Brits became a nation of tea drinkers

Published 30 November 2020, with Erika Rappaport.

In October, I spoke to Stuart McCook about the global history of coffee rust disease, which in the 1860s destroyed coffee production in Ceylon. There's a widespread belief that it was the switch from coffee to tea in Ceylon, which was then a British Colony, that turned the Brits into a nation of tea drinkers. Stuart pointed out that it couldn't be true.

There was then a brief flurry of interest on Twitter, as I tried to discover the truth of the matter, and almost everyone who responded said, you've got to talk to Erika Rappaport. So I did, and asked her: What did turn the Brits into a nation of tea drinkers?

Erika Rappaport: It's interesting because some people will say, of course, well, Britain's Empire, Britain owned the territory in India where tea was grown on a commercial scale, but the fact is Britons were already tea drinkers before that time. It's because they were tea drinkers that they acquired the land for Empire. It wasn't just the fact that they owned these territories and wanted to make the Empire pay. Britons were drinking Chinese tea for the entire 19th century until the 1890s. There's a shift from Chinese to Indian tea and then to tea from Ceylon.

Of course, imperial relationships helped, but it wasn't the only thing because Britons were drinking really equal amounts of tea and coffee throughout the 18th century. Well, there was a bit more coffee in the beginning of the 18th century, and then tea and coffee were still both very popular in the early 19th century. By the mid 19th century, you start to see tea really take off and coffee stabilize.

There's a number of theories about it. The other theory, that a major scholar of sugar believes, is that of course, the tea had sugar in it and it became very addictive. The combination of the sugar and the tea and the caffeine in tea helped industrial Britons work long hours in the factories. There is something to that, but you could put sugar in coffee, too, so it doesn't really explain that.

Jeremy: One of the peculiarities I think of tea drinking in England is if you look at mid-18th century furniture, you've got these strange locked tea caddies and tea is a real luxury. It's really for upper-class, rich people. Is that to do with the fashion for China? And is it conspicuous consumption as well?

Erika Rappaport: I think so. It definitely is and you're right, tea was very expensive and it was a luxury item. It was just the upper class. It's definitely not a national drink. It wasn't even, I'll say, middle-class families or something like that. It doesn't really become a mass commodity until the ... It's a big debate, but about I would say, the 1830s. Actually, it's the Temperance Movement that picks it up and it really gets associated with a moral product, I guess if you will. A Christian product

The Temperance Movement, there were radical socialist Temperance advocates, but most of them were evangelical Christians. It really gets associated as a very spiritual, sobering, that idea of the cup that cheers but not inebriates. Again, coffee can do that, too, but it was upheld by the Temperance Movement had business interests with China, so they particularly promoted tea.

Jeremy: From the mid 18th century to the late 19th century, almost all the tea was coming from China anyway.

Erika Rappaport: Yes. Again, there were early plantations that the British tried to do by taking Chinese people, laborers, but they were not tea makers, and trying to establish a tea industry in Assam in the northeast of India. They didn't have a lot of success for a number of reasons. One, it's hard to make good tea. They could grow plants, but to actually turn it into a nice drink ...

The first people who tasted the drink basically said, "This tastes like weeds." It wasn't particularly successful until around ... it starts to get blended in tea packets really, in any significant amount in about the 1860s. This starts to be the beginning of tea packets that are packaging tea from the 1860s to 1880s. Then you start to see a push for pure Indian tea.

Jeremy: If people didn't like the taste of Indian tea, how were they persuaded to prefer Indian tea?

Erika Rappaport: It's interesting because it does taste very different or different than most Chinese tea, if we're talking about

black tea. Chinese green tea was popular in Britain until about the same period, but because it was heavily adulterated, it ended up being legislated against essentially. Black tea still tastes very different, the Chinese and the Indian. The Indian tea was really distasteful to most of the experts, but it had one virtue which is it's a lot stronger, so poor people could use less tea. It became much more affordable, not in the shop necessarily, like per ounce, but to make a cup of tea or a pot of tea; or you could reuse it.

The first real large consumption of black tea is often in the poorest districts in the United Kingdom, in the industrial districts. Actually, Northern Ireland was one area where they drank a lot of black tea, Scotland as well, some of the poorer areas. Black tea had that advantage. For various reasons too, Chinese tea's quality was going down in that period. Probably the people who had a good palate could start to notice that the Chinese wasn't as good as it had been in the early 19th century.

Then also, I argue there's a massive amount of advertising. The really interesting thing about tea is that it was one of the first products that was advertised on a large scale with a large advertising budget, that is Indian teas. There was a lot of efforts to teach consumers that they should buy tea from their Empire. You start to see this imperialism, patriotism in the late 19th century advertising.

The planters were like, "How will they know that they're drinking their own product from their own Empire if we don't put it right on the package or advertise that?" It starts to be an effort to put those images of India and Indian-like names and pictures of the Taj Mahal and things like that, to try to identify the tea, that it comes from the Empire rather than China.

Jeremy: One of the things that struck me reading your book is that — how can I put this? — it's kind of racist about Chinese tea.

Erika Rappaport: Yes. It is very racist. They'll talk about first of all letting consumers know where the tea comes from, but then starting to identify a lot of negative images that are quite racist with Chinese tea. The main thing that they did was say the Chinese tea is made by hand, not in modern factories as the British do. Tea has to be rolled and dried and the machinery for making that was developed actually, primarily in Scotland, but then exported to India. It was used

in India, but the ads would say, look, we have modern clean tea that's supervised by white people, the white managers.

That tea from China is touched by dirty Chinese people who literally, they'll say, they sweat in your tea. That they're touching it by their hands, or rolling it by hand, stomping it, you can roll tea with your feet, too. They say that you actually might be drinking remnants of a Chinese person's foot, and try to develop a lot of disgust. One tea importer did say, "Oh, I once found that fingernail in the tea," and dirt and adulterants, et cetera. They'd often say that the Chinese producers were fraudulent, tricksters, the kinds of racist images that were very prominent in the late 19th century towards the Chinese.

Jeremy: There was adulteration. They had good cause to worry about adulterated tea, no?

Erika Rappaport: Yes. When I first started the research, I thought, oh, this is just a trumped-up story to get people to buy Indian tea, that the adulteration is being blown out of proportion. The more I researched it, I realized that tea was so heavily adulterated and most foods were in the mid 19th century too. Especially green tea, they had chemicals that would be added to make it look, what I imagined was like a neon green color, not a subtle green in your cup, but from the descriptions, it sounded like super green.

Also other adulterants, like if it was black tea, they put lead in it to make it look darker and make a dark brew, but obviously not healthy. Really unhealthy things. Britain was one of the first countries to pass food adulteration, pure food, Acts that became very common, of course, in other countries later.

Jeremy: Right, and I guess it's also on the other side, it's also not entirely true that Indian tea was untouched by human hand.

Erika Rappaport: Yes, exactly. There weren't that many machines actually used in the Indian and Ceylon tea gardens. They had some, and a few and they came in later. I have pictures where they rolled it and dried the tea with these machines, but then they would dump it on the floor in a warehouse in India, and then Indians were shoveling it into boxes and crates, et cetera. It not only was touched by human hands but was dirty, and clearly.

Jeremy: The whole timescale thing is so interesting because way before the 1860s, by 1839, you quote people saying that tea was once a luxury “but is now a necessary of life”. Astonishingly, in 1836, the tax on tea paid for more than the whole cost of the Royal Navy. It was big business.

Erika Rappaport: Yes, exactly. It's really astonishing how ... Most British historians associate that period, the 1830s, as that intense transition to industrial economy, a lot of incredible poverty, strikes ... but the working class, what little money they had, most of them were drinking tea. Not to the extent that they would be later, but everybody, they felt it was a necessity in the sense of maybe drinking a couple of cups of tea a day, not the 10 cups a day that they would in the 1930s. So the price kept going down and consumption kept going up, but certainly, most areas of Britain were drinking tea by the late 1830s, and the taxes really did pay for the British government essentially to run. It was primarily to pay for the Navy, and that paid for the Empire, so they were very entwined.

Jeremy: You mentioned the whole thing about sugar and tea. They're both products of Empire. Was the fashion for sweet tea, and for sweet things, and cakes with high tea. Was that a deliberate effort to shore up Empire businesses?

Erika Rappaport: I thought it was going to be, that's exactly what I thought I was going to find, but more sugar was produced in the slave colonies in the Caribbean, and sugar was the most important imperial commodity in the 18th century. When slavery was abolished in the late 1830s, sugar colonies were going through a lot of changes, not as profitable. It may have been ... I didn't see efforts of the sugar industry to deliberately produce cookbooks and push sugar as a moral good, but the same communities, the abolitionist communities or anti-slavery, actually were the ones pushing sugar and tea. It's interesting, they may have thought, "Oh, we're going to do this now to help the post-slavery, sugar producers."

I didn't really see evidence of that. What I did see was that sugar was considered by the evangelicals, again, as a moral good, something that would offset alcohol, that you shouldn't drink alcohol, and then they started to include beer in that. The total Temperance Movement took off in the 1830s and 1840s. They didn't just say don't do anything that's fun; they gave people an alternative. They said, "The alternative is this lovely tea with sugar". And then all the sweet things

that you associate with it, as you say, like an afternoon tea or tea party: cakes, breads, fruit at that time, which some of it was fairly rare. But no, the idea was that here's your alternative pleasure.

Jeremy: You do paint a remarkably graphic picture of some of these temperance tea parties with 2,000 people sitting down to tea and cakes.

Erika Rappaport: Yes, it's incredible. There's all these myths associated with tea, and one is that the afternoon tea party was an upper-class invention in the 1860s. But I found that temperance tea parties were serving tea in the afternoon with the foods and things that we associate with afternoon tea, to working-class communities, and particularly, in the north of England and industrial areas of Scotland, and Ireland in as early as the late 1820s.

What was remarkable to me — I don't know if you've ever tried to serve a number of people tea — it's really hard to brew tea for a few people, let alone hundreds. I got really fascinated with actually the literal nature of what did these tea parties consist of, and the dozens of volunteers brewing tea, baking cakes, setting the table. They had amazing, nice cotton tablecloths and greenery like garlands and ... incredible.

I believe they were trying to show people, this is a little glimpse of the life in heaven, the sweetness of the afterlife, if you live a moral life, and you're not a sinner. I think a lot of people came because they were really fun, and they were hungry, and they had lots and lots of tables that were piled with food, so why not go? Forget that message.

Jeremy: Maybe the message got through to some of them, but the message thing's interesting because you mentioned the abolitionists, and presumably the Temperance Movement, too. Were they aware of conditions on the plantations in Assam? If you painted delightful pictures of temperance tea parties, you paint a pretty horrific picture of-

Erika Rappaport: Difficult picture.

Jeremy: – of what's going on in –

Erika Rappaport: Yes. No, the Temperance Movement was interesting, because abolitionists did encourage people to boycott slave-produced sugar, so they were aware, they were thinking about

the conditions of labor as part of their ... Essentially, I can say, it's almost like abolitionist advertising and their propaganda, to get people to oppose slavery. That boycott movement was one of their strategies, but they never did that for tea. I think it's because very few ...

Primarily again, in the 19th century, the tea was from China and it wasn't slave produced, so it's interesting. Tea is one of the few agricultural commodities of the period that wasn't literally slave produced, but it was produced in India by indentured labor that had just as bad conditions. The health conditions of working on tea plantations was very bad. Many workers died. They were treated with horrible punishments, it's very similar to Atlantic world slavery. But that didn't really take off. They weren't aware of it until the late 19th century.

It was remarkable. I still never saw anybody saying, "Hey, we should boycott tea because of these conditions, or use our influence to try to improve labor conditions". I think people were so addicted, that they chose to overlook that and focus on them, a nice, sweet tea shop worker or something, what they saw in Britain. It was almost like blind to thinking about the labor conditions.

Jeremy: I think you talk about some of these exhibitions in the late 19th century when India and Ceylon, either in cooperation or in competition, participated in these huge trade exhibitions, and they painted a very rosy picture of what was going on on their plantations. You can't blame them.

Erika Rappaport: Yes, it's really remarkable. From the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851, there was these just whole, maybe for the next ... till the 1930s, these very popular international exhibitions, as well as many smaller exhibitions, that different industries would go to. At the Great Exhibition in 1851, you didn't sell your goods, but later, when they became as trade fairs, where you would make deals with grocers and exporters and importers would get together and then consumers would come and learn about new products and sample products. They're very important for the business community, in general, the exhibitions were. But they were also quite popular, and exhibitions to show the image in tea gardens were beautiful. Illustrations of the tea gardens, but no people, not the difficult labor.

What I always think is funny is they always show the image of a beautiful female tea picker look like ... it's like looking as though she's sitting in the Himalaya enjoying picking in some beautiful sari. That image, which we still sometimes see in tea packages. But they never show anyone weeding, for example, or the hard stuff — and picking is not easy, either — but that they did at that point. Advertising tried to show people the commodity chain. It was quite common to say, "Look, we control the commodity chain from the garden to the cup, but the garden was beautiful, like a garden in Britain, and tea gardens don't have any labor. Yes, no one's sweating to produce your tea."

Jeremy: There are white folks in charge, making sure everything's okay.

Erika Rappaport: Yes, yes, exactly.

Jeremy: You've got a reproduction of a wonderful infographic, I would call it, one of the first infographics I've ever seen, of how Indian tea overtook Chinese tea around this period.

Erika Rappaport: Yes, that is wonderful. They saw it through a visual, a large, growing image of an Indian man, as opposed to a shrinking tiny little Chinese figure. It was really clever. That was produced by the Indian Tea Association, which is one of, I guess, the protagonists in the book. That's a group of planters from India who formed an association in the, well, it started 1879, but 1880s. They did basically two things. They begin a business trade association. They're very involved in India, regulating labor and actually being a lobbyist in many ways, creating racial hierarchies in India. But in Britain and around the world, they became in charge of global advertising.

I argue that although we don't think of tea it, is the first kind of modern global commodity. You might think of like when you think of globalization, you think of Coca-Cola, or McDonald's or something like that. But these tea planters, the Indian Tea Association, were very adept advertisers in that they used those exhibitions but also traveled. I was just astonished how much they traveled around the world in the 1880s and 1890s, to open markets. Some of the same guys and I feel, Uh, it wasn't easy to travel. How did they do that?

That illustration came from one of their pamphlets. It also shows they had top illustrators and graphic designers of all sorts.

Jeremy: Absolutely. They're promoting tea generically. Essentially the fight for whose tea you're going to buy doesn't come until quite a lot later.

Erika Rappaport: Yes, it's interesting because initially tea is sold in grocers and other shops in bulk. It's only once you get packaging that you really start to get that kind of advertising and branding that we associate tea with: where, what kind of tea, where is it coming from. And that really takes off when Indian and Ceylon planters are trying to promote the Empire teas.

Jeremy: If the Brits are a nation of tea drinkers, and the Americans are definitely a nation of coffee drinkers, but it all started for the USA with the Boston Tea Party. And it was tax again.

Erika Rappaport: Yes. Taxes do matter. [laughs]

Jeremy: Taxes do matter. Were the early colonialists, were they willing to give up drinking tea, or did they just not want to pay the tax on it?

Erika Rappaport: Yes. Initially, the reason the Boston Tea Party was a protest against the tax that would have bolstered the East India Company, and back then the East India Company is having all sorts of financial crises. That's where the tax on tea was intended to shore up colonial finances. It was not the consumers who rejected the tax, but it was the American tea importers who didn't like the controls that Britain was reasserting over the tea trade.

They were all smugglers basically and they had become founding fathers in the United States. We call them also free traders. In Britain, people went around ... The East India Company had total control of the tea trade, so anybody who tried to go around them and import directly from China or in other ways were illegal, but you would call them free traders in economic theory. But they were smugglers at the time, legally.

It was the American tea interests which — it was very profitable — who also were particularly opposed to it. Then, of course, it's a complicated politics but it seems that there's new books on the tea in the United States, which have been really helpful that came out, some

even just after my book. One argued that these importers did stop people from drinking tea, and they did start to drink not only coffee but what we would call herbal teas, local plants. They tried a lot of different things and felt quite patriotic.

Right after the revolution was over and American independence was declared, those importers went right back and started their own importing with the China trade. It peaks off around mid-century, the mid, late 19th century and people start drinking more coffee than tea. There's always still a significant tea market in the US, that's interesting because it's so big, people are drinking that much tea, but they're drinking some and so it still ends up being a larger market.

Jeremy: You don't know how to make tea over there. That's the major problem, but let's leave – [chuckles]

Erika Rappaport: It's true. No, it is true. [laughs]

Jeremy: Let's leave that aside. I could talk about this forever, but there are a couple more things I wanted to talk about. One is this notion of tea being extremely gendered. This was said in the 18th century, it was a woman's drink, it was keeping women out of the coffee houses which were far too rowdy. As late as the 1930s in America, you've got someone saying tea is a woman's drink, “unfit for and unworthy of a man unless he is a sissy”.

Erika Rappaport: Yes, and I think they meant it. Tea is very gendered. In Britain, there's no statistics that show that women drink more tea than men, especially in the 1930s, which is people drinking just enormous amounts of tea. It might be gendered in the imagery occasionally, they'd fill the tea party with women, but it's not gendered as an actual commodity consumption.

In the United States, not only is tea considered very feminine, it's also associated with upper-class, New England anglophiles in American culture. Something it's okay for your granny, it always seems old fashioned. So it's that and a sissy's drink and they use that word. And I found whatever ... Also, there was a word for homosexual at this time, was a mollycoddle. And I saw references to that like really like real men ... There's that famous funny quote, "Real men don't eat quiche," I guess that was from the '80s ... This is like, real men don't drink tea in the US. The coffee itself they'd say it's stronger, and tea

is effeminate and weak, and all these kinds of different genderings of the tea.

Jeremy: It's so funny because in England, of course, in Britain, there's this notion of brickie's tea, bricklayer's tea, which is immensely strong and immensely sweet, and only real men who are working hard drink that stuff.

Erika Rappaport: That idea really ends up being the coffee in the United States. I think that tea did get associated with Britain and Britain, there's still a lot of distaste for memories of being a colony in the 19th century, and so there's a sense of ... There were some problems. British Anglo American relations weren't particularly good in the late 19th century. It was like the British ... people love the British ... snobs. Not that kind of frontier man. I think that that prejudice gave rise to a lot of funny advertising trying to appeal to men, like using lumberjacks and football players, and showing them drinking tea. And it never worked.

Transcripts are possible thanks to the generosity of Eat This Podcast supporters. If you find the transcript useful, please [consider joining them](#).