

Tea and Tiree

by
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An Introduction

There is no separating the two. The Hebridean Island of Tiree and the story of tea are inseparable, thanks to the Great Tea Race of 1866, and the legendary sea captain from the Isle of Tiree, Captain Donald Mac Kinnon (Domhnall 'ic Neill 'ic Dhomhnaill Ruaidh), Master of the fast China Tea Clipper *TAEPING*.

However, more separately on the famous seaman from Tiree and that Great Tea Race of 1866 in which he came first after 99 days and 16,000 miles from Foo-Chow to the Port of London, this short dissertation concerns the *cause celebre* – tea.

Tea first arrived on British soil in the 17th century. In the beginning, tea was a luxury drink enjoyed by only the wealthiest, whereas by the 20th century it was one of the cheapest refreshments available. Without question, tea has grown in popularity over the last two centuries, reviving the weary and thirsty, soothing those in anxiety, and serving as the elixir of social interchange. The influence of tea on the social history of the British has been reflected on virtually every sphere of British culture and life. Indeed, as tea replaced alcohol during the 18th century, people's life expectancy rose proportionately. Later, in the 19th century, the temperance movement used tea as an alternative when encouraging people to 'take the pledge'.

There can be no doubt on the stabilising effect that tea brought the Nation, particularly at times of stress - such as wartimes – when morale needed the consequential boost that tea brought to the nation.

The Origins of Tea

No one knows for certain where it came from but, according to experts, the plant from which it is made, *Camellia Sinensis*, first appeared in the jungles of Eastern Himalaya. In the present day, the plant is cultivated in tropical or sub-tropical regions of the world including China, India, Japan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Kenya, Pakistan, Rwanda, Argentina and Australia.

Surprisingly, the United Kingdom can also claim to grow the plant, commercially, since the early part of this century. This is the Tregothnan Estate in Cornwall, which has the same soil and microclimate as Darjeeling, and whose teas are so fine that it supplies the luxury London store of Fortnum & Mason.

It is not known when or where it became known that tea could be drunk as an infusion – it is thought that originally it was chewed by early tribesmen – but during the Chinese Tang Dynasty (AD 607 - 907) tea-drinking had become more and more common throughout China and, over the years, the Chinese gradually became expert at the manufacture of 'tea bricks', densely packed blocks of compressed tea.

By the 12th century tea bricks had become so common that they were used as a form of currency in many parts of central Asia, some being scored to enable them to be broken into smaller pieces and used as 'change'.

It was only after 1391, when Emperor Hung-wu – Founder of the great and long-lived Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) - requested the tea at his Court to be in loose-leaf form, that this now common form of tea became more widespread.

Tea arrives in Europe

It was only from about 1610 that tea began to be imported into Europe. As new global trade developed with Age of Discovery maritime explorations, there was an increase in the exchange of goods such as silk, gold, silver, pepper, porcelain and tea. The Dutch and Portugese started importation of tea to Europe, but it was not until 1657 that the first teas arrived on English shores. By the 1660s, the English had themselves started importing teas through the English East India Company, on ships that took 12-16 months to reach England. The first Englishman to write about tea was the diarist Samuel Pepys who wrote trying it for the first time on 25th September 1660. At first the quantities imported were only small – 143 lbs in 1669 (65 kg), increasing to 5,000 lbs in 1678 (2,268 kg). This, then, was the beginning of Britain's long and unbroken love-affair with the culture of tea-drinking.

Tea - the great new cure-all !

Before long, taking tea was considered the remedy for ailments such as dropsy, headache, stones, scurvy, sleepiness, loss of memory, colic and was generally promoted as being of health-giving properties.

Tea Drinkers of Note

Tea drinking in the 17th century was very much a royal and aristocratic pursuit. It is considered that its popularity at the English Royal Court was the arrival, in 1662, of King Charles II's Portugese wife, Catherine of Braganza. Tea was already a popular beverage in Portugal and Catherine had herself been enjoying it since her youth. After settling in England she continued drinking tea and made it fashionable. The appearance of tea drinking in Scotland has been attributed to Catherine's sister-in-law, Mary of Modena, the wife of King James II (King James VII of Scotland), as it was she who introduced the habit, in the 1680s, at Edinburgh's Royal Palace at Holyrood. Subsequent monarchs William and Mary and Queen Anne (and later Queen Victoria) were also keen tea drinkers.

Venues

With the increase in tea-drinking popularity, dedicated tea rooms sprang up, some in the towns and cities, others in private houses and estates, and the manufacture of dedicated tea brewing and consuming porcelains and ceramics became fashionable and in great demand. In the early days of tea consumption in Britain, most of the fine porcelain came from China and later the well-known names of Wedgwood (1759), Spode (1767), Minton (1793) and Royal Doulton (1815) came on the scene.

As tea consumption increased, so did the number of places where it could be enjoyed. One of the first and most famous of these was Twining's Golden Lyon Shop on The Strand, London. This was opened in 1717 by Thomas Twining and is still there today, making it the oldest shop still trading from the same site.

Thomas Twining became famous for his tea blending skills, paving the way for such well-known blends as *Earl Grey* (created by Jacksons of Piccadilly in the 1830s and named after Charles Grey, the 2nd Earl Grey, British Prime Minister between 183—1834) and *English Breakfast*, created by Twining's in 1933.

The move away from China Tea

From the advent of tea drinking, Britain had relied upon China for its supply of tea, a fact that kept the prices paid high and made this a luxury drink afforded only by the well-off. However, during the course of the 19th century, the cost of tea became a more affordable commodity thanks to the establishment of British-run tea plantations in India.

The move towards Indian Tea

The significant event that was to highlight the fragile and morally corrupt nature of the tea trade was the Opium War of 1839-1842, whose roots go back to the 1750s when the British Parliament gave the East India Company the monopoly of opium production in India. For the next 100 years or so the British grew vast quantities of opium, mainly in Bengal, and illegally exported it to China. Whilst this undoubtedly went a long way to swell revenue for the British Government, it also resulted in the opium habit spreading through China like wildfire, with an estimated three million addicts by the 1830s. Deciding that drastic measures were called for, the Chinese Government destroyed, by fire, one year's supply of opium in June 1839. Britain declared war on China and China in turn placed an embargo on tea exports.

Although the Opium War came to an end with the defeat of the Chinese in 1842 it had now become clear that Britain needed to grow her own tea and free herself from dependence on China. A few years before the Opium War, Britain had already taken steps to grow 'British' tea – in 1834 the East India Company established its first Tea Committee whose mission was 'to create a plan for the establishment for 'the introduction of tea culture into India'. Earlier, Britain had taken over Assam in North-East India and it was there, in 1835, that tea plants were first found by Englishmen. However, it was ironic that the British, mistakenly believing that the China tea plant was superior to anything else, introduced it into Assam instead of focusing on growing Assam tea from the native Assam tea plant. Assam went on to become a huge tea producer with new tea plantations springing up at an astonishing rate as tea investors bought plots of land, cleared it, and cultivated the product. Such was the success of the Assam tea production that commercial tea estates were soon introduced in other areas such as Darjeeling (in early 1850s) and Ceylon (in the 1860s).

With the development of India tea, the demand for China tea decreased and by 1889 tea imports from India had overtaken tea imports from China – thus ending the Chinese

monopoly. Ten years later, Indian exports were fourteen times higher than Chinese exports (219,136,185 lbs compared with 15,677,835 lbs)

One of the Indian tea success stories was Sir Thomas Lipton. He bought his own tea estates, in order to cut out the middlemen, and thus be able to reduce prices and be more competitive.

In 1890, after buying four estates in Ceylon, and with his keen eye for product advertising, he adopted the slogan 'Direct from the Tea Gardens to the Tea Pot' and made sure the name Lipton always appeared prominently on packaging, tea chest, tea cases, baskets, etc.

The Role of the fast Tea Clippers of the 19th Century

In the 1840s, the appearance of the tea clipper brought a new excitement for the tea drinking public of Britain and undoubtedly led to an increase in the consumption of tea. These sleek vessels, each capable of carrying over 1,000,000 lbs of tea, were designed to replace the bulky East Indiamen. Whereas the larger bulkier vessels took about 200 days for the passage from Canton to London, the fast clippers vessels could do the same passage in about 120 days, and often even less than that.

When the clippers set sail from the East in May or June with the new season's tea, they immediately entered into a frenzied race for home as the first landings of tea would always fetch a higher price than subsequent arrivals. The race for home always caught the imagination of the British public and the newspapers of the day. In many ways it was the 'Grand National' of the day, attracting heavy betting on the 'favourite' vessel/s, and with huge crowds gathering to witness the clippers' arrival.

Such was the cachet of winning the race that some Captains barely went to their beds during the 3-4 months voyage, opting instead to catnap on deck.

Soon thousands of tea-carrying steamships plied the sea routes between Europe and the Far East and, effectively, was the end of the Great China Tea Clippers of the 19th Century.

Great Tea Names over the years

Horniman, Twining, Darjeeling, Mazawattee, Early Grey, Priory, Lipton, Fortnum & Mason, Ty-Phoo, Tetley, Lyons Tea, Ringtons, Whittard, Scottish Blend, Charbrew, Co-op Tea, Brooke Bond (now PG Tips), Bettys & Taylors.

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