



A Brief History of Tea

Roy Moxham

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From the plantation to the breakfast table—the stimulating history of the world's obsession with tea from its first discovery in China to the present day. Moxham first became fascinated by the history of tea when he applied for a job to manage a plantation in Nyasaland, Africa. His book is a historical journey which includes all levels of society from the royal family to plantation slaves, revolution, and the afternoon ritual. The story he uncovered reveals a fascinating, and occasionally brutal, insight into the history of the British Empire.

A Brief History of Tea Details

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Desmond says

This book basically skips over China. While I understand that the author's expertise is mainly about India and Britain, the level of detail given suggests that he was perfectly capable of doing the extra research.

The title should really be "A Brief History of British Tea" or "A Brief History of Tea and Colonialism."

Andrew Little says

I liked it for the most part. It started and ended pretty well, but at times it got bogged down in the middle with talking way too much about the mistreatment of workers on tea plantations. I understand the importance of discussing the mistreatment of workers and I know it is an important topic, but too much of the book was devoted to it and really slowed it down. I think the ending was closer to being what I thought the book would be about.

Alison C says

I do not drink tea; I don't like the taste of it and never have. Nevertheless, I found A Brief History of Tea: The Extraordinary Story of the World's Favourite Drink, by Roy Moxham, to be a vastly entertaining and informative book. In it, Moxham traces the origins of tea from ancient China through to modern India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and various nations of Africa. Moxham himself ran a tea plantation in the early 1960s, in what was then called Nyasaland and is now known as Malawi, and he begins and ends his book with some personal reminiscences of that period of his life. The story is, of course, full of imperialism, appalling working and living conditions, near-slavery and revolutions; there is also perhaps more than I, a non-believer, needed to know about the production of different types of tea and how advances in agricultural technology helped to increase yield exponentially. On the other hand, I now know why my mother prefers Typhoo Tea over all others - she is an Englishwoman and lived much of her early life around Birmingham, the home of that British company. Good to know!

Franz says

A very interesting book. It doesn't talk (much) about the different kinds of teas but focuses on the history of tea instead which was what I wanted to learn about. Recommended.

Rucha Patkar says

This book is a must read for tea lovers! Moxham's writing is simple and interesting. He doesn't throw jargon at the readers. His book flows seamlessly and he weaves facts beautifully in his story telling. I would highly

recommend this book!

Leslie says

Although this is a work of popular, not academic, history, some indication somewhere of sources would occasionally be useful. Moxham traces the history of tea production and consumption, mostly in Britain and the Empire (he mostly ignores the history of tea-drinking in Asia except where it affects the European trade in tea), linking it to the histories of colonialism, empire, and slavery; like most such stories (coffee, chocolate, oil--all equally unedifying), it's marked by a great deal of violence, exploitation, greed, and ruthlessness, with the occasional bit of adventure and daring. Moxham's tone is pretty light, though, considering, and he leavens the history with accounts of his own experiences as a young tea planter in Africa in the early 1960s, just as the old systems were coming to an end. The organisation of the book is a bit messy, and the illustrations, though interesting, were badly reproduced. Overall, a readable overview for the curious tea-drinker who wants to know just a little bit more about where those tea leaves in the pot came from.

Dave Courtney says

A must read for anyone interested in the history of tea. The caption on the back suggests the story as a "dark history". The ensuing pages could very well lead you to rethink any sentimental appreciations of this popular drink (as we know it today).

One of the more fascinating elements of this brief history, which comes from author Roy Moxham's own journey in to Africa to participate in a plantation as a worker, is the sheer number of familiar crossroads with the formation of empires and institutions, modern trends and conveniences that we likely never give a second thought. For example, I had no idea that the competition for tea had direct implications on the invention and rise of the modern day supermarket, nor that the (American) invention of the tea bag had a large role in changing the nature of tea and tea consumption over night (essentially moving it from an organic experience based on whole leaves and fresh product to a mass marketed production focused on quantity rather than quality... although interest in quality would eventually resurface).

I found it equally interesting to read about the shift in categorization from medicine to beverage. Perhaps more illuminating though is to read about the murky trade relationship between the British (and colonization) and the East. It makes me consider the British relationship with tea (which is nearly synonymous), which absorbed and conquered this new drink with an initial caution and skepticism that is nearly comical to modern ears if it wasn't so muddled by a very unfortunate piece of our global history. The consumption of tea (and in particular black tea) in England is an oddity in that they do not grow it (it is nearly all traded/imported), they do not hold a related history in terms of any such close proximity to a native origin, and in many ways (and shapes and forms) it circumvented their own historical preference for alcohol. Indeed, some of the writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shows just how comic this transition in custom really was. Some of the back and forth sentiments regarding its benefits and dangers, the popular mythology and stigma surrounding the appropriateness as a male drink (it started for the British as a drink associated with the coffeehouses which were populated mainly by men looking for an alcoholic drink, coffee, and then eventually a cup of tea) is as perplexing to the modern ear as it is somewhat familiar at the same time. It is curious to think that even today we find sentiments regarding tea as a "girls" drink, and we

even find differences (sometimes in polarizing ways) regarding the drink as a beverage (in the mass market) or medicine (often targeted in smaller health food stores). Heck, even after all this time we still have debates surrounding the health benefits of different kinds of tea versus questions regarding the dangers of caffeinated content. Some things never truly change.

The consumption of tea for the British also, as mentioned above, comes with a tough history regarding the exploitation of workers, land, peoples and markets. The opium trade and the manipulation of lands (which would include Ceylon, which would eventually become Sri Lanka) for personal benefit often exploited workers for the benefit of exportation and monopolization, and in the case of the opium trade wreaked havoc and brought permanent damage to a whole nation. This remains as a stark reminder of our own consumption habits, which for so many products and produce/food/drink remains incredibly far removed from the trade and processes that allow us access to that which is not native to our own area. Tea is hardly alone in telling this story. However, it remains a big part of this story.

Along with the history of development and process comes an inside look at the tea itself. It explains the differences between types of teas (which regarding the well known Black and Green teas comes down to the amount of time the leaf is given to ferment and the amount of heat/burning the leaf is submitted to). It sheds light on the history of tea (in its traditional Eastern context) in terms of use as medicine, tea in herbal context, and the predominance of Black and Green leaves according to area (There were certain stigmas in certain areas regarding the forms of teas and their benefits or social acceptance, and it curious to note that it is the British involvement that made the consumption of Black Tea so popularized. In our modern day it is likewise the emergence of China that has been giving Green Tea its time in the spotlight).

It is a decent compliment to speak of a book as enlightening, which this history certainly was. There is a portion that is given to some of the pioneers in tea consumption and marketing, and one such name that comes up is Lipton. Lipton remains today as a fitting symbol of the ebb and flow of how the world of marketing and consumption works in a increasing global trade. It is a company that succumbed on a localized level to its own insistence (and stubbornness) to remain self owned, self reliant and privatized, and yet it is a brand in which assimilation in to larger corporations retained the foresight of branding the name around the globe with major success. As the book notes, Lipton remains one of the most recognizable brands of tea everywhere today except in its place of origins. Of course the brand has simply been retained as an example of professional and successful marketing, the result of using a name that conjures thoughts of a small, quaint tea shop to move the product of huge factories en masse.

As a last note, the book is also enlightening regarding the modern attention given to some of the historical errors regarding manipulation and exploitation of workers. It addresses the idea of fair trade as being well intentioned, but in the bigger picture not necessarily resulting in successful solutions. We tend to categorize some of our big mistakes on a historical level in certain black and white terms (that label big business as the enemy and small private owners as the ones who need protection). There is truth to some of this, but the bigger truth is that there is a much bigger picture that isn't always so neatly categorized in to our popular mantras of social consciousness. There is an interconnectedness to global trade that requires attention to a fine balance, let alone particular issues that require the unique attention of each smaller community. The answer is almost never singular in terms of a global affect or concern. And in some cases it is incredibly difficult to even discuss what the right answer must be regarding equal treatment and benefit of worker/owner/business/government/corporation relationship. As the book suggests, the main problem (in the case of tea) is overproduction. This is the result of global competition in which inevitably most people (on a global level) will tend to pay the least amount of money for a product that is in high demand, and where governments/corporations/private businesses will tend towards deals, systems/regulations, and financial decisions that allow the best opportunity for growth and profit. This is how any business big or small tends to

work. To infuse a sense of conscious in to the process can be difficult, especially when the largest portion of tea is exported out of the fields in which it is first harvested and in to the hands of consumers whose only connection is the picture that the larger corporation puts on the box. And yet the workers that harvest this tea that gets sucked in to the walls of the factory production have come to depend on these exports for their livelihood.

In a sense, even if we cannot find a completely satisfactory answer, I think the book sheds light on the truth that we can give some appropriate attention to the mistakes of history by always ensuring that the conversation trends towards the following concerns:

1. Provide more education regarding the who, the where and the how of tea production. Studies show that the more a consumer comes face to face (even with a picture) of the workers that harvest, the greater social awareness becomes. The upside of fair trade is that it does, at the very least, give us a face and a place to put with our product, even if the actual difference fair trade can make on fair wages remains quite minimal in the bigger picture.
 2. Become educated on local regulations that directly affect global trade, and explore and research exactly how this impacts the process for foreign workers (and their products that we consume) from start to finish. Studies show that we only tend to respond with the information that lands with us and that, at the very least "feels" important. This starts with knowing, and even if most of the information feels irrelevant or allusive, hopefully one or two things end up sticking that help us recognize how a choice or action we make in a moment can trickle all the way to a life across the ocean.
 3. Discover and support more local product/produce/drink (which means spending more money), while also not being fearful of global trade. Investing in tea that comes from halfway across the world is a positive thing, but in the end it will benefit those workers (and our economy and carbon footprint) by reducing our dependence, consumption and exploitation (I know, it's a terrible word to hear for a consumer) of foreign products. By tempering our consumption we put more control in to both the consumer and private producer/owner/worker, as we control the human tendency for large corporations to over produce for a global audience that desires to over consume.
 4. Travel and visit and talk to personally some of the areas of the world that provide some of these products that we enjoy.
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Jonathan says

I find the history of commodities to be endlessly fascinating, and I heartily enjoyed this concise and readable account of tea.

Grant Arundell says

I've ruined way too many conversations with anecdotes from this book.

Kathleen says

I love tea. Black tea, the English way. So I thought this would be a fun book with teas, recipes, chat etc. No! It tells the dark and historic story of the impact of tea on countries, their wars and independence, the treatment of workers, as well as enough of the personal history of the author to show his expertise and awareness of

history and plantations.

And then I discovered that the author was in my year at school- Prince Henry's Grammar School in Evesham, which is not a name I often see in print.

Altogether a worthwhile find though not at all what I expected.

Claire says

I gotta say, this book destroyed any romantic ideas I had about tea. I'll never be able to watch a British period drama where the characters are drinking tea without thinking of the hundreds of thousands of Indian workers who died on British tea plantations. ~Yay British Empire~

In general this book is very dry and factual, which is why it took me a long time to finish. The part I found most interesting was the description of the author's time working as a manager of a tea plantation in the former Nyasaland (Malawi). I was disappointed when the book ended because I wanted to know what happened next!

Kylie McGenniskin says

Not just a History of Tea, but a history of things that were directly and indirectly effected by tea growing and trade worldwide, including; smuggling, opium, mistreatment of anyone the Europeans could, war, the movement of silver, operation of plantations in different parts of the world, politics, major tea companies, The East India Company. A very good starting point with plenty of references to dive into afterwards. Relatively easy to read. Recommend pairing with a nice cup of your favourite hot beverage.

Janet Deaver-pack says

I was surprised by the depth of history revealed in this book. The author named it correctly. For those who enjoy a good cup of Oriental or Indian tea, this is an excellent choice. I was also surprised regarding the close ties of the opium and tea trades in the 1800s. Mr. Moxham also goes into detail about tea picking, as well as how various teas (such as fermented and semi-fermented, smoked, and green) are produced.

Francis says

A rather interesting book that I took my time reading.

This was the book I took for flights so slowly chapter by chapter it got done.

The content is informative and the writing easy. The last chapter was a nice touch to give you an idea of a tea planters life from the authors point of view.

Give the book a go.

Mariano Abilleira says

Very "fact heavy" for a casual read, although quite enlightening on the bloody background of a seemingly innocuous beverage. It really changes your perspective on some modern day luxury commodities like cacao, coffee... all come with an appalling human cost.
