



The Spice Route: A History

John Keay

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The Spice Route is one of history's greatest anomalies: shrouded in mystery, it existed long before anyone knew of its extent or configuration. Spices came from lands unseen, possibly uninhabitable, and almost by definition unattainable; that was what made them so desirable. Yet more livelihoods depended on this pungent traffic, more nations participated in it, more wars were fought for it, and more discoveries resulted from it than from any other global exchange. Epic in scope, marvelously detailed, laced with drama, *The Spice Route* spans three millennia and circles the world to chronicle the history of the spice trade. With the aid of ancient geographies, travelers' accounts, mariners' handbooks, and ships' logs, John Keay tells of ancient Egyptians who pioneered maritime trade to fetch the incense of Arabia, Graeco-Roman navigators who found their way to India for pepper and ginger, Columbus who sailed west for spices, de Gama, who sailed east for them, and Magellan, who sailed across the Pacific on the exact same quest. A veritable spice race evolved as the west vied for control of the spice-producing islands, stripping them of their innocence and the spice trade of its mystique. This enthralling saga, progressing from the voyages of the ancients to the blue-water trade that came to prevail by the seventeenth century, transports us from the dawn of history to the ends of the earth.

The Spice Route: A History Details

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Author : John Keay

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From Reader Review The Spice Route: A History for online ebook

Bernardo Moura says

"A Rota das Especiarias" pormenoriza a história das especiarias desde a sua origem, apoiada em fontes diversas e resultando num trabalho extraordinário. É de lamentar que do cruzamento da botânica e da geografia não nasça uma narrativa minimamente palatável, não sendo apresentado um único mapa nem uma ilustração das espécies exóticas.

Ned says

I have a Folio Society edition of this: you can find it at www.foliosociety.com. Keay's descriptions of power shifts in the middle ages and renaissance periods is thrilling when looked at through his lens.

Matthew Gibb says

I found this a fast and interesting read. I have been to Brazil and knew that Portuguese was spread throughout the world, but I had no idea it was first done through the spice trade. I would often refer to my big wall map while reading this book and could see that this was something that knitted the world, once separated by vast oceans back together via adding big flavor to food with small, piquant spices from the far east. Countries like Angola, Mozambique, and even Timor Leste all speak Portuguese to this day. They ruthlessly plundered places like Kerala, Sri Lanka, Melaka, and Macao in their greedy pursuit of valuable, mystical spices. The Muslims were once the middle men for these things between the Europeans and the Asians via the Silk route, but were cut out of the business by their Catholic oppressors. The Portuguese, Dutch and later the English. A great story that made me want for more information.

Colin Williams says

Keay's dense prose is something to write home about, and always rewarding. Bet you don't know where nutmeg comes from.

Brett Miller says

An accessible and engrossing story of our obsession with spices and the lengths, both in miles and through power, that we have gone to acquire them. A narrative that introduces (and re-introduces, due to many myths) a number of historical figures from Pliny the Elder to Ibn Battuta to Columbus. Keay frames thousands of years of world history around the addictive flavors of spices such as pepper, nutmeg and cinnamon.

Ricki says

Fascinating from a historical and geographical point. The earliest routes and the interactions between the countries along the route (routes really because there were many) were a revelation to me and made me want to travel to some of the distant destinations. Maybe one day....

It's a book I am keeping and there are few of those.

ickman says

Sort of quick start to finish book for readers who are already into history. Nevertheless, a special thanks to the author who came upon this intriguing topic and produced it as one big journey on the earth, especially during the mediaevals. The bandas are a revelation and one can't even imagine how people would have travelled the rough oceans thousand years back to this small place.

One cannot stop marvelling the author's narration which sometimes make you think you are in a ship loaded with spices on a rainy Indian Ocean:)

Katherine says

This is a very good history of the spice trade despite the fact that the narrative is a bit confused and the prose can be purple and convoluted and he's obviously biased towards and against certain historical players causing him to gloss over the actions of some and hyper focus on those of others and the fact that there are one or two factual errors. But other than that this book was pretty okay. Took me forever to read though. A little disappointed because he starts off saying too many authors focus exclusively on the European narrative of this subject and not enough on the Asian story and he would do differently and then he basically does the same thing as everyone else. Or maybe I just imagined he said that; I started this book an ice age ago so it's a little hard to remember. Still, if you're interested in the subject I suggest giving this a read. It's very thorough.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

If you've ever wondered about what exactly constitutes a spice, where most spices came from and why they were so valuable, then this book will give you a great overview. Did you know, for example, that mace and nutmeg come from the same plant? Or that salt (which is a mineral) is alone in adding intrinsic preservative value to food?

I found this book provided a perfect blend of the exotic, the heroic and the mundane. The story of the journeys which resulted in the discovery of spices, the desire for the rare and the risks associated with transportation make for fascinating reading. Long before a formal stock market existed, futures were made and lost in this precious trade. The spice trade is a fascinating juxtaposition of an historical process spanning three millennia, a geographic progression that encircles the world and a trade in commodities that have little intrinsic value.

So, if you have ever wondered about the stories behind those small packets or glass bottles containing those

mysteriously named ingredients that so many of us use in our cooking, you may like to read this book.

Stephen says

Spock was right. Having a thing is often not as pleasant as wanting a thing. It is not logical, but it is often true. Such was the case with the spice trade, which so tantalized the west that it spurred on a new epoch in human history and fell victim to its own success. For centuries, spices tantalized civilizations across the Old World, uniting them in pursuit. Romans wrote with alarm about the mound of gold and silver being lost to the east in the pursuit of clouds of incense and strange-tasting food. For the west, mystery was a key component in their appeal; they always arrived via streams of middle-men, and no one seemed to know they were ultimately sourced. (Their guesses based on hearsay could run wild, like Herodotus' Histories.) Although none of the pined-for substances mace, cinnamon, etc) had preservative powers, they did add subtle and exotic tastes to food that made them attractive even to China, closer to the source. Keay fellow galley, cogs, and carracks across the seas and through time, beginning with the Roman Empire and moving through medieval conflicts between Christian and Muslim traders before ultimately arriving in the globalized world that the spice trade helped create.

The spice trade's history is worth considering because of its legacy; its traffic was more than mere goods and services. They were utter obsessions to both the European and Arab worlds, and the drive to find them -- to control them, even -- spurred on the Age of Discovery and the beginning of a global economy. Because of the antagonism between the Christo-Islamic political spheres Europeans embarked on great adventures to find quicker and better sea routes to the 'spice islands'; they engaged in brutal wars, both against one another and whatever poor souls lay in their way. (Hungry, desperate men with guns don't make for ideal guests, let alone neighbors.) Eventually Europe would win control of spice route trade points from the Arab world, and conquer the spice sources directly. The competition was such -- first between Spain and Portugal, and then even more furiously between English and Dutch trading companies -- that the spice trade fell victim of its own success. So many ships were traveling from Europe to the indies -- around Africa, around the Americas, through the Red Sea and Persian Gulf -- that markets were glutted. A warehouse in England might have a half-decade worth of surplus peppercorn, and this in the age of Sail! The wooden road that now linked Europe, Asian, and American shores brought much more with than spices: it brought competition. Spices now had to contend with regular supplies of coffee, chocolate, chili peppers, tea, sugar -- an entire banquet of new and exotic tastes. The mysterious allure of spices had been lost in discovery, and now they were an old pleasure fading against new possibilities, both in Europe and in Asia. Just as the spice trade united the classical world, Islam, China, and renaissance Europe through the ages, its pursuit led to an Earth increasingly united in trade. The age of Discovery came not from scientific or religious idealism, but sheer appetite.

Keay uses his prior research into China and India here to good effect, drawing on Roman, Arabic, and Asian primary sources to delve into the Mediterranean powers' search for those goods from afar. Although this is a text heavy with details, they don't weight down the narrative too much. The only real limitation of the book is the complete lack of maps, which is problematic considering how large a role geography plays here. I largely read this to introduce myself to Keay's writings, and will definitely try more of his histories.

Related:

A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World, David Bernstein
<http://thisweekatthelibrary.blogspot....>

1493, Charles Mann
<http://thisweekatthelibrary.blogspot....>

Simon Wood says

SPICE TRADING AND RAIDING

John Keay has written a brilliant, amusing and readable account of the spice trade from pre-history to the 1800's.

Keay as always is irrerevent, his gentle and humourous mocking of the more fantastic elements of the accounts of for example Pliny, Herodotus, Marco Polo,etc are enlightening and amusing, always a pleasant combination. He charts the vagaries of the Spice Route, the changes to it over the centuries and the reasons for those changes succinctly and with plenty of clarity.

He is particularly effective in portraying the European incursion into the Indian Ocean and points further east from the late 15th Century and doesnt shirk from describing the more brutal and frankly monstrous aspects of this. Raiding rather than trading would be the more appropriate term for say the Portugese visits to the west coast of India, or the Dutch in Sumatra and the Spice Islands proper.

There are also some beautiful colour plates of people and places related to the Spice Route and a number of maps from different periods in which the development of geographical knowledge is given eloquent expression.

Thoroughly reccomended. As is John Keays "The Honourable Company: History of the English East India Company" which covers in particular the British involvement in Asia up to 1857.

Mindy McAdams says

An excellent history of the lands that produced much of the wealth of Europe from the Age of Exploration up to the Industrial Age -- but it begins long, long before that, with the Arab, Indian and Chinese traders whose ships first plied this route. Economics and conquest make this a deeply interesting story.

Kamal says

Amazing!

Sajith Kumar says

Spices were always an alluring object for Europeans of every hue. They wanted to add punch to their meals by liberally sprinkling those exotica, used them as medicine and aphrodisiacs and also for worship of gods by smoking them as incense. Human history was shaped in no mean measure by the ups and downs in the

quest for spices and to locate them in their native environment in the remotest islands of Indonesia. John Keay tells the long tale of the pursuit of spices spanning across three millennia which moulded the world as it is today. The author is an English journalist and author specializing in popular histories of India and the Far East, often with particular focus on their colonization and exploration by Europeans. One of his earlier works, 'The Great Arc – The Dramatic Tale of How India was Mapped and Everest was Named' was reviewed earlier my blog. This book may also be read as a sequel to the book Spice – the History of a Temptation by Jack Turner, which was also reviewed earlier in my blog. While Turner specializes on the spices as such, Keay is more concerned with the history surrounding their discovery and worldwide diffusion.

Even before written history came into vogue, spices arrived at the tables of the Egyptians and Greeks. They came in a series of hauls across the land and the sea. Nutmeg, mace and cloves grew only in the Moluccas island chain of Indonesia, but they trotted half of the globe before ending up in Europe. Several kingdoms presided over the spice routes. The decline in fortune of a dynasty affected the trade and conversely, hiccups in trade told heavily on the fortunes of ruling houses as well. The age old route for the spices from the remote Indonesian islands was to transport it first through sea on to Malacca. The produce changed ships at this hub. It then sailed on the Bay of Bengal to reach Coromandel ports in India. An overland stretch now lay ahead. Ports on the Malabar Coast then took on the task of loading the transit spices on to Arabian vessels anchored in those ports. To the cargo is added pepper, which was a homegrown variety. Cinnamon from Sri Lanka was also sometimes added to the list. This fleet landed either at Aden on the Red Sea or in Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. The former was then carried along the Red Sea, then by land through the Nile, reaching Alexandria. The latter moved overland through much of Syria and Turkey, ending up in Constantinople. European merchants then completed the last leg. A change in this ancient shipping practice was effected with Vasco da Gama's finding a new lane around the Cape of Good Hope. Spices could then be loaded into the same ship that carried it all the way to its European markets. The book describes these routes in some detail and includes a good narrative on the journey (periplus) of the Erythrean Sea that first identified the monsoon winds which could be used as a trade wind from Arabia that help ships to sail right across the Arabian Sea to reach Malabar ports.

We also read about an abortive naval conquest on more peaceful lines in the Indian Ocean by Chinese sailors. Admiral Cheng-ho made several voyages in the region and established contacts at Malaya, Malabar and the African coast. He came as the representative of the Celestial Empire and is thought to have created a maritime trading empire that encompassed the whole of South Asia. This was in the 14th-15th centuries. Had it flourished with a little more resolve from the Chinese side, the Portuguese would have nothing but their effort to show off for their perilous travel across half the planet. But surprisingly, after a few trips, the Chinese quit the game and left the field ripe and vacant for the Europeans to start a new leaf of conquest and colonization in world history.

The age of exploration began in the Iberian Peninsula in late-15th century. Even before Columbus and Vasco da Gama, Portuguese sailors had thoroughly explored Africa's west coast and rounded the Cape of Good Hope. Their avarice was exceeded only by their unscrupulousness, since all they could find exportable from Africa were slaves! Another dark chapter in the world's social history thus began. Columbus sought to reach the spice islands of Moluccas through a western route. This was rational, as nobody had any idea that a very large continent interposed between Europe and Asia on the western hemisphere. Besides, the distances were derived from Ptolemy's works that understated global dimensions. Columbus believed, or rather made himself believe that he had landed somewhere in Asia which is near to the source of spices. He collected a few samples in America that differed vastly with the much popular Asian ones. Quite unexpectedly, the Chilli captured the taste buds of Europe and Asia. Its cultivation soared so fast and wide that who would now believe that Indian curry was devoid of chilli till just four and half centuries ago?

The Portuguese could not hold on to the empire established through da Gama and Albuquerque's travels. They came in search of 'Christians and Spices', but soon fell foul of the local kings and Muslim traders. Wanton acts of inhuman cruelty and zealotry earned them the antagonism of the natives. As long as their arms were powerful on the battlefield, their suzerainty withstood. The world was divided neatly into two by the pope, each of which is to be conquered by Portugal and Spain. As long as Catholicism held sway in other parts of Europe, this arrangement held good. But when the church split in two, with Protestants parting way under Martin Luther and Calvin, Pope's bulls became questionable. England and Netherlands, the new protestant nations actively entered the fray and toppled Portuguese governors in the Spice Islands.

The book also tells the story of how spices lost their mystique and sheen. A part of the reason was the large volume of the commodity transported to Europe in Dutch and English vessels. Pepper soon fell to the dubious position as ballast for ships returning to Europe. But a dramatic twist in public conception occurred after the introduction of new stimulants like tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco. The British spread tea cultivation beyond the confines of China. Likewise, the Spanish introduced coffee to the New World, where it spread quickly. Sugar also found a congenial home in the Caribbean islands. Added to ideal climate for growth to sugarcane was the sweetener of slave labour to toil in the fields. The culinary habits of the world underwent a sea change in the 18th century in response to the new entrants. Spices quietly took a back seat amid all this revolutionary change.

The text is presented in impeccably fine language. In fact, it is a little too refined as to risk losing the attention of more casual readers. Very few people can reach the end of the tome without referring the dictionary a few times to clarify a point. The author is concentrated solely on the spice routes and the navigators who plied them, rather than looking into the uses for which spices were put to. Keay assumes a decidedly Asian point of view in describing the history which feels like sticking to the politically correct attitude. No doubt the conquistadores were barbarous, but Keay portrays them always at a disadvantage in view of the morally depraved act of conquering other peoples. The book includes some photographic plates that lack any focus or consistency. It is more like being included to satisfy the requirement of it in a book of this sort, rather than as a result of the recognition of its real need. A very fine index elevates the book to one helpful for further reference.

The book is highly recommended.

Atul Sabnis says

If you like *big themes* in history, this is a book you should pick up. I've read a couple of books by John Keay in the past, and he does good justice to *history-telling*. Needless to say, this is the history about the spice trade. The focus is on sea-trade rather than the *silk route* which was the overland trade route. And just like the silk route was not exclusively about silk, the spice route is not exclusively about spice.

In *The Spice Route*, John Keay has spent considerable time on the origins; he brings in ample humour, intrigue and often changes the texture from a lofty to a specific event. The prose is dense but rarely unclear. The granularity of the matter can be jarring at times and makes you keep Wikipedia and Google Maps open in two tabs. The trivia, especially of the origin of words, people, and material, is interesting.

I was personally hoping for some more detail about the place of the Indian subcontinent in the history of the spice trade. While the geography often gets mentioned, I would have liked to see more specific historical

references. The details are biased to Europe and South-east Asia.

By virtue of the trade and the diffusion of material around the world for a long time, and in complex ways, Keay explores the impact of this trade on society and the lives of people. The novelty, rarity of a spice, which inherently is of little worth, has within it, the capacity to affect the economy of different regions in almost opposing ways, is an interesting reflection of trade in contemporary times. At the end of the book, the sense of pride — this belongs to us — comes under scrutiny. What's *ours* came to us many years ago from a foreign land; what's *theirs* really moved from here to them ages ago.

After three or four chapters, the number of characters that enter the stage are too many. The places are plentiful and it can become a challenge to keep track. I found myself flipping back and forth a number of times.

To stay through the end of the book, you would need a good amount of interest in the subject. And while it's filed under history, it's really about economics, culinary interest, diffusion, and immense movement of ideas, people, and material for thousands of years.
