



The Empire of Tea

Alan Macfarlane , Iris MacFarlane

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From the fourth century B.C. in China, where tea was used as an aid in Buddhist meditation, to the Boston Tea Party in 1773, when its destruction became a rousing symbol of the American Revolution, to its present-day role as the single most consumed beverage on the planet, "The Empire of Tea" explores the effects of the humble Camelia plant?both tragic and liberating?in the history of civilization. Alan MacFarlane explains, among other things, how tea became the world's most prevalent addiction, its use as an instrument of imperial control, and how the cultivation of tea led to the invention of machines and technology during the industrial revolution. "The Empire of Tea" also incorporates personal stories of the people whose lives have been affected by their contact with the global obsession with tea, including the elegantly detailed account of Iris MacFarlane about her life on a tea estate in the Indian province of Assam, the world's center of tea cultivation. A fascinatingly tour of the world's great tea cultures?Japan, China, India, France, the United Kingdom, and others?"The Empire of Tea" brings into sharp focus one of the forces that have shaped history.

The Empire of Tea Details

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Seligne says

Anecdotal, not a serious history

Ray Campbell says

I've read "A History of the World In 6 Glasses", "Salt" and other sketches through the experience of a seemingly trite item. This book is in that category, was not as generalized. The book begins with the story of Iris MacFarlane who lived on a tea plantation and worked at mid-twentieth century to improve education for Tea workers in Siam. The book is then taken by Iris' son Alan who writes a solid, straight forward history of the British tea industry from the 17th century to present.

The British Crown chartered the East India Company opened trade with China in the first years of the 18th century. The discovery of tea and subsequent import from China had a huge impact. The author explains that since it sterilized water, provided calories and a boost in attention among workers, tea fueled the British industrial revolution! The story goes on to show how tea was the reason for the conquest of China, the Opium wars and the shaping of the far East by the British in the 18th and 19th century. Since it was this period and the actions taken on behalf of tea that shaped western interaction with Asia, could it be tea that caused the issues that has the US at war in Afghanistan? The author does not suggest this, but he does show the fact that would support this.

I enjoyed this, but it didn't warrant 4 or 5 stars because I think I was familiar with much of this history. Never the less, well written and enjoyable. If the US "runs on Dunkin'", Britain and the Empire not only runs on tea, it exists to no small extent, because of tea! Check it out.

Madeleine says

This is a good overview of the global history of tea, though each part of the story could easily be turned into a book of its own. Macfarlane's theory that the antibacterial properties of tea itself (not just that fact that the water used to make it must be boiled) allowed urban agglomeration and technological development is interesting and not something I've seen mentioned anywhere else. He devotes the most attention to the horrifying system of British-run tea plantations in Assam - that's not surprising, since he was born there in the forties. His mother Iris's opening chapter, Memoirs of a Memsahib, describes twenty years of isolation, insulation and boredom. She didn't really start to look around her until her children were off at boarding school, and the next ten years were spent on ineffectual attempts at minor reforms until she finally lost her mind and had to be carried out on a stretcher. Toward the end, Alan includes responses he got during interviews with modern Indian tea managers - the people who inherited the system when the British left. Quoting them at length allows the reader to read between the lines when they declare that the British were mostly tough but fair, and that the plantation workers were and continue to be better off than their fellow Assamese.

Sally says

This is more than a history of the cultivation of tea. The author also theorizes that tea has had a major role in the prevention of disease, especially those associated with contaminated water. He has a convincing argument. Unfortunately, the history of tea also includes the destruction of forests and exploitation of people in tea growing regions of the world.

Andrea says

This is an interesting and readable introduction, but nothing more. Iris, the co-author's, memoirs of growing up in an Indian tea "garden" are more interesting than the rest of the book. I think of books like this as "history lite," interesting anecdotes, major figures, not much analysis of how it fits into larger historical context.

Mohamed Islam says

Did not mention about the important episode of how Chinese Tea was brought to India after the Opium War of 1840s when British Empire was afraid of losing supply from China. Did not mention the route of Navigation to Assam from Calcutta. Also did not mention much about the original geographical locations of the Tea Qualis. Still did a good job in describing the condition of Tea Slaves of Assam. Worth reading but not too many will find it engrossing.

William Shep says

Unlike a cup of tea, this book does not satisfy. Rather than being a history of tea it is a means for the authors to assuage their guilt as being members of a family that benefited by their former involvement in the tea growing industry and consequent exploitation of tea workers. One must look elsewhere for a detailed history on the origins of tea, with commentary on the various blends and regional tastes.

Paula says

An interesting survey of tea and the tea business from the perspective of the wife and son of an Assam tea plantation manager.

Jen says

I'm not sure this book deserves a second star, but I'm in a generous mood today, so let's run with it.

Let's start with the good things. The introductory chapter where Iris Macfarlane discusses living on an

Assam tea plantation with her husband is simply fascinating--even if she paints herself with a rather saintly brush.

The rest of the book has interesting parts, but is so disorganized that to find them you have to dig. The author goes off on tangents and, I suspect due to the disorganization, is highly repetitive. I also question some of the assertions such as the one repeated ad nauseum that tea is "strength-giving." I don't think I got through a chapter without seeing this driven into my skull. I agree completely that tea brought health, and I'm sure the caffeine did wonders, but "strength-giving?" Were the drinkers healthier? Well, yes, and this can probably be attributed to drinking water that had been boiled first. The author gives no evidence for "strength-giving" or any reason for it to be so, just it was and really it was and did you know it was.

The author also relies heavily on long quotations and excerpts from other sources. The sections are so long and without analysis, I wonder if he was trying to reach a page quota. Although primary sources are interesting, paragraph after paragraph of a British colonial-era apologist borders on the absurd.

I walked away knowing only a little more about tea and I turned the last page with a sense of relief. Rather than this, read *A History of the World in Six Glasses*; it's a better book with more information and more analysis. Plus you get five more beverages--A BARGAIN!!!

Jo says

This book needed a really good edit. It is often repetitious and sometimes factually incorrect. Definitely suffers from not having a scientific editor - for example breast fed babies do well against enteric pathogens due to reduced exposure to contaminated water and antibodies not tannins from tea in breast milk or if they do then reference it - because it is an unusual theory. Don't quote reporters who report scientific papers - read the papers. Surely there were detrimental effects of tea - like tooth decay due to all the sugar - never mentioned whereas the breast fed theory is . Needed a really good academic scientific editor to tighten it up . However despite these gripes it isn't a bad read.

Necayl Norris says

Didn't quite "finish". Got the info I wanted from it.

Andrew says

A confused book with a confused narrative. The division of labor is between a mother and her daughter. The authors both say that they wanted to write this book for different reasons. Although they each present their own introduction chapter, the purpose of the book remains unclear. They both want to reflect on the crop that made their earlier life experiences on Assamese plantations possible: tea. While the authors say they want to get closer to the lives of the Assamese tea pickers and plantation workers, the book is preoccupied with several other stories: the geopolitics of Assam, tea's health benefits, the cultural history of tea around the world, and the functioning and life of British colonialists in India. Chapters jump around all of these themes and rarely in any logical order. The final two chapters read like rehashes or left-overs of earlier chapters.

The authors refuse to get as close to the Assamese as they claim they want to. In one chapter they cite an anthropologist that spent time with the pickers, but then express that that book is too harsh. They then interview retired Indian plantation owners, clearly in another class from the workers, who reiterate the fairness of the prior colonial and post-colonial British planters.

Ultimately, I enjoyed the book only when it was specific about Assam and using colonial records and primary accounts. The writings on China and Japan were halfhearted and out of place, and the descriptions of the health benefits of tea were not always in proper context: that is, older accounts can be used to illuminate the prevailing ideas about tea's benefits in a certain period, but should not be used as scientific claims about the quality of tea.

Like many books in the "micro history" genre the authors overstate the role of tea in history. It did not cause the industrial revolution or even boost it as much as they claim. As Sidney Mintz has shown in a much better book, the sweetened tea the British drank did bring cheap calories, but this was of course from the sugar not the tea. Also hot boiled water without an added infusion is not "unpleasant" as the authors claim, this is clearly a cultural prejudice of the authors. I recommend reading smaller and more limited, but better focused accounts of the history of tea, such as Sarah Rose's "For All of the Tea in China." The history of tea is simply too vast and complex in all of its cultural, social, economic, and political aspects to be told in one book: it is better illustrated in compelling vignettes.

Michael Ostendorp says

Too much post-colonial guilt and vague pseudo-science, not enough history. Despite a fascinating introductory chapter by the author's mother, and interesting arguments about tea's benefits throughout, this book was more about how the British Empire took over Assam than how tea "took over the world" (as the subhead of this book suggested it was about). Its focus would have greatly benefitted from a few more rounds of editing, condensing and rewrites.

Nicole says

1.5 stars for the book (repetitive, baseless assertions, more repetition).

5 stars for the 25 page foreword "Memoirs of a Memsahib", which is completely unconnected to the rest of the Book. The author's mom describes her time in Assam from the 30ies to the 60ies in such a condensed, lively, dark-humored, British way that, apart from making that part of society at that time and place come to life before your eyes, it just cracks you up.

I'd buy the book for those 25 pages alone.

Ruby says

The best part of this book was the format. I love unusually sized books. It's adorable and had good pictures. Leaving in my bookbox.
