

## “DEEPLY INDEBTED TO THE TEA-PLANT”: REPRESENTATIONS OF ENGLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY IN VICTORIAN HISTORIES OF TEA

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Amongst the endless variety of the vegetable productions which the bounteous hand of Nature has given to [man’s] use is that simple shrub, whose leaf supplies an agreeable beverage for his daily nourishment or for his solace; but little does he estimate its real importance: he scarcely knows how materially it influences his moral, his physical, and his social condition: – individually and nationally we are deeply indebted to the tea-plant.

—G. G. Sigmond, *Tea: Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral* (1839)

THESE WORDS WERE PENNED by a professor of the Royal Medico-Botanical Society in the late 1830s to commemorate the “recent discovery in British India of the Tea Plant” (vii). Yet although written near the beginning of the Victorian era, their sentiment – that tea was both an element of national self-definition and a stimulator of the individual prosperity and wellbeing on which that polity was based – nonetheless epitomizes the broader sweep of the nineteenth century’s engagement with that article of consumption. How tea came to occupy this role, and why, is the subject of this essay, which focuses on the book-length tea history – a slightly peculiar genre that blurs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, advertisement and travelogue, personal account and scientific treatise. These histories appeared throughout the nineteenth century and often were explicitly funded by various segments of the tea industry (thus resembling the nineteenth-century equivalent of an infomercial). Because of their direct relationship to commercial and trading concerns, their role in recording and shaping the taste for the beverage, and their dissemination across a fairly broad public, tea histories offer an important, intertextual index of the Victorians’ relationship to the beverage, as well as the way in which the relationship between home and Empire was constituted and changed over the course of the century.<sup>1</sup>

As is well known, the eighteenth century witnessed the domestication of tea in Britain. Tea was transformed from an exotic luxury consumed primarily by men in public coffeehouses to a necessity of everyday life enjoyed by both men and women in the private, domestic space of the home. In the nineteenth century, tea became an icon of English domesticity and was associated with privacy, intimacy, and the nuclear family. In turn, as domesticity itself rose in prominence and importance in Victorian discourse, the domestic drink of tea soon gained the title of the “national beverage.”<sup>2</sup> According to nineteenth-century

tea histories and advertisements, tea helped to define English identity, character, and class values. Tea united the English people, temporarily erasing the boundaries between groups to unify the nation into a coherent whole. As a beverage and as a commodity, tea histories proclaim, tea simultaneously strengthened individual constitutions and the larger body politic of the nation itself.<sup>3</sup>

Configuring tea as a domestic, English commodity, however, raised fears about basing ideals of domesticity and national identity on a foreign product from China – a country that, despite British attempts to penetrate it, had remained frustratingly unknown. As Linda Colley has argued, “we usually decide who we are by reference to who and what we are not.” (“Britishness” 311). Simultaneously perceiving China as the “other” and using Asian tea to foster a sense of English national identity threatened to collapse the distinctions upon which that national identity was formulated.

At the same time, the search for more secure sources of the national beverage – in terms of pricing, availability, purity, etc. – led to a shift in the boundary between commodity and consumer. The desire for a safe, British-controlled source of a commodity that had become necessary to daily life helped to spur the expansion of the Empire, which came to include territories able to produce and manufacture tea, and involved expanding the definition of national identity to encompass an imperial one. British explorers, botanists, and industrialists united in their attempts to establish successful tea gardens in India and Ceylon, and over the course of the century, imports of tea from British-governed plantations gradually increased. They finally exceeded imports of Chinese tea in the late 1880s. Marketing also contributed to this shift. As Erika Rappaport has argued, consumers initially considered black Indian and Ceylon teas to be inferior to Chinese ones, but promoters and advertisers stimulated a taste for them by emphasizing the adulteration of Chinese teas against the purity of teas grown under the British flag.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the unique position of tea as both a luxury and a necessity contributed to its role in building the British Empire – both ideologically and financially. Historically, at least until the eighteenth century, British writers and politicians viewed luxuries as detrimental to the success of empires; they described foreign imports as enervating, depleting an empire’s reproductive resources.<sup>5</sup> Spending money and time consuming luxuries constituted a self-indulgent squandering of men and capital. But tea’s ability to exist simultaneously in the opposing realms of luxury and necessity, foreign and domestic, enabled it to animate Britain as an imperial nation, just as it invigorated the bodies of Victoria’s subjects.

*The Body and the Nation: Creating Englishness by Drinking Tea*

TEA HISTORIES EXPLICITLY ATTRIBUTE both individual and national wellbeing to tea-drinking, connecting the physical body of individual English men and women with the collective body politic. As Sigmond notes, tea is agreeable, pleasant, and comforting; it both nourishes the body and provides solace for the soul. He emphasizes that the comforting pleasure of a hot cup of tea enables Englishmen and women to temporarily merge their individual and national identities.<sup>6</sup>

The daily consumption of tea reinforced its importance in reaffirming questions of self and society, but it also allowed tea to become part of the background of daily life. Sigmond suggests that consumers take tea for granted, and therefore the tea-drinker does not even realize how much physical and cultural nourishment he draws from it, how much he depends

upon it to provide a foundation for his actions.<sup>7</sup> Thus one of Sigmond’s goals in this text is to bring tea into the foreground, to focus his reader’s attention upon its central importance to English life. He claims that tea influences all parts of an Englishman’s existence: moral, physical, and social; individual and national. The Englishman, he avers, is “deeply indebted to the tea-plant.” Whereas wheat, barley, potatoes, and wine may offer more “immediate sustenance,” Sigmond credits tea with the ability to “call into action the energies of nations” and to “give rise to the exertion of so much intellectual power” (1–2).

Sigmond also suggests that tea inculcates quintessentially English values of moderation and temperance:

... no beverage that has ever yet been introduced sits so agreeably on the stomach, so refreshes the system, soothes nervous irritation after fatigue, or forms a more grateful repast. It contributes to the sobriety of a nation; it imparts all the charms to society which spring from the enjoyment of conversation, without that excitement which follows upon a fermented drink. (95)

The action of tea within the stomach forges a connection between the body of the individual drinker and the nation as a whole, promoting sobriety and calm interaction. The individual’s physical response to the ingestion of tea – soothing the nerves, settling the stomach, and refreshing the system – therefore involves the embodiment of idealized notions of English social practice, such as social charm, personal grace, and lively but polite discourse. In addition, Sigmond’s use of the phrase “sobriety of a nation” recalls tea’s prominent position within Temperance Reform, which itself sought to create model citizens by affecting bodily changes.<sup>8</sup>

Later in the century, Samuel Day was still promoting the ideological connection between the health of individual tea-drinkers and the state of the English nation by highlighting the importance of tea to “the English constitution” in his work *Tea: Its Mystery and History* (1878): “It is not, possibly, too great an assumption to assert that there must exist something about Tea specially suitable to the English constitution and climate” (60). Day suggests that the English character is partly a response to the English climate, and tea assists in nourishing constitutions tailored to that particular climate. The use of the word “constitution” implies the extent to which physical bodies are constructed by the commodities they consume, but it also resounds with political implications. By referring to “the English constitution” as an abstract collective, Day implies that the political make-up of the nation depends upon the shared consumption of tea. Of course, tea itself does not originate within the English environment, as Day himself was patently aware. Nevertheless, tea is naturalized as English through its status as an imperial commodity – part of a circulating network of goods, currency, and labor and a vital source of revenue for the British government.<sup>9</sup>

By merging the body of the tea-drinker with the body of the nation, Sigmond’s and Day’s histories suggest that nationhood resides within the individual subject. Rather than assuming that national identity is simply an overarching abstraction, an imagined community, these nineteenth-century tea histories argue for a more organic model of national identity. Thus tea-drinking becomes vital to the construction of a shared identity that cuts across class and gender lines, performing a similar function to that of beef eating at an earlier period. More importantly, every individual tea-drinker was a regular participant in this polity. Every day and with every cup, the nation was built and strengthened.

In the same way that Victorian tea histories align the tea-drinker with the body politic, they also conflate the domestic sphere of the home with the domestic space of England on the

global map. They see the nation as being shaped by everyday domestic interactions within the home and among family members.<sup>10</sup> Sigmond explicitly attributes the accomplishments of English men and women, including “industry,” “health,” “national riches,” and “domestic happiness,” to tea-drinking, linking these variously public and private, individual and collective, goods through the consumption of tea. He locates the heart of Englishness within individual households and metaphorically describes the nation as a collective home gathered around a single hearth: “The social tea-table is like the fireside of our country, a national delight; and [it is] the scene of domestic converse and of agreeable relaxation . . .” (3). Within individual households, the abstract concept of the domestic sphere coalesces around the tea-table, invoking essentially English precepts of a moral family life.

By focusing upon family members drinking tea within their homes, tea histories participate in the wider Victorian tendency to publicly examine the details of private life and to draw conclusions about the English national community from the patterns of the typical domestic household. Representations of Victorian tea-drinking therefore offer specific cultural examples of what Karen Chase and Michael Levenson have termed “the spectacle of intimacy”: the increasing visibility of the domestic family (12). Tea histories, advertisements, and novels of the period show the importance of tea-drinking to intimate family gatherings inside the domestic sphere, and they project this vision of intimacy and domesticity outward to form an imagined bond linking all English tea-drinkers.

#### *Anxieties of Adulteration and Identity*

WHILE VICTORIAN TEA HISTORIES exhibit confidence in the ability of tea to unify and fortify the British people, they remain anxious about the foreign source of tea. Dependence on a “national beverage” produced outside the bounds of empire raised anxieties about ingestion and fears of permeable cultural, political, and physical boundaries. According to Day, whose text advertises Horniman’s Pure Tea, the English were at risk from unscrupulous Chinese tea manufacturers, who used false colorants to produce the brilliantly green tea consumed at the time. The anonymous author of the 1868 article “Leaves From the Mahogany Tree: A Cup of Tea” in *All the Year Round* similarly claims, “Tea in its finest state never reaches, never can reach, England” (156).

Tea certainly was not the only product to elicit concerns of pollution and adulteration in the nineteenth century. However, within the larger context of the period’s discourse on adulteration, the debate over safe, “pure” sources of tea emphasizes “the ways in which botany, chemistry and retailing defined goods, consumers, and healthy forms of production, distribution, and consumption” (Rappaport, “Packaging Tea” 140). Rappaport notes that tea in particular highlights the intersection of domestic and international issues (140). While tea adulteration within Britain was considered a common practice in the eighteenth century, nineteenth-century writers emphasized that English adulteration was a thing of the past, while Chinese adulteration remained a clear and present danger.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the fact that the cultivation and processing of tea were carried on within a country that allowed the British no access to its interior, where the tea gardens were located, further elevated fears about adulteration.<sup>12</sup> Despite the increasing concessions ceded after the Opium Wars, the Chinese maintained control over the manufacture of their tea.<sup>13</sup>

Just as the benefits of drinking tea register on both individual and political levels, so too do anxieties about its foreign sourcing.<sup>14</sup> Sigmond explains, “The necessity of avoiding an

entire dependence upon China for tea, has long struck some of our most intelligent statesmen” (63). As an alternative to dependence on Chinese tea merchants for supplies of the national beverage, he suggests the possibility of consuming tea cultivated and produced within British-controlled regions of India and thus symbolically within the conceptual boundaries of Great Britain itself. With its date of 1839, *Tea: Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral* was published at a pivotal point in the global tea trade; Sigmond’s treatise marks the start of the transition of tea from a commodity imported to Britain from a foreign nation to a colonial resource cultivated and consumed within its own territories. Sigmond’s emphasis on the revelation that tea grew indigenously in the Indian subcontinent simultaneously justifies imperial expansion and reaffirms the place of tea in English everyday life.

*The Discovery of Tea in India*

BRITISH EXPLORERS FIRST REPORTED the existence of wild tracts of tea plants in Assam, in northeastern India, in 1823, but cultivation and production of tea in India did not begin until the late 1830s. According to Denys Forrest, author of *Tea for the British*, the East India Company’s government-sanctioned monopoly on all tea imported to Britain from China discouraged the development of tea cultivation. Rather than encouraging internal competition, the Company temporarily ignored the potential for Indian-grown sources of tea, relying instead upon its network of trade relations with Chinese tea merchants (Forrest 107). Parliament dissolved the East India Company’s China monopoly in 1833, opening up the China tea trade to independent British interests.<sup>15</sup> A decade after the discovery of tea in Assam, the East India Company finally turned its attention to the possibility of producing Indian tea.<sup>16</sup> The first shipment of Indian-grown tea was auctioned on the London tea market in January, 1839 (Walvin 147) – the same year that Sigmond’s *Tea* was published in London.

In his treatise, Sigmond celebrates the recent discovery of the tea plant growing wild in the jungles of Assam as follows:

At the present moment every circumstance which relates to the tea-plant carries with it a deeper interest. A discovery has been made of no less importance than that the hand of Nature has planted the shrub within the bounds of the wide dominion of Great Britain: a discovery which must materially influence the destinies of nations; it must change the employment of a vast number of individuals; it must divert the tide of commerce, and awaken to agricultural industry the dormant energies of a mighty country, whose wellbeing must be the great aim of a paternal government. (3)

The simple tea shrub, Sigmond declares, has the power to affect the destinies of individuals, societies, and nations, shaking economic and political systems across the globe. Sigmond carefully delineates the “bounds of the wide dominion of Great Britain” in this passage, asserting firmly that the divine providence of “Nature” has placed the tea plant under British dominion. By placing the “wellbeing” of the dormant but mighty resources of India within the hands of “a paternal government,” Sigmond articulates the connection between the budding Indian tea industry and British imperial goals. Cultivating tea in India contributes to a new agricultural industry for British colonial planters and simultaneously participates in the enlargement of imperial territory and power. The investment of British industry and energy into the “dormant,” slumbering resources of its colony will, according to Sigmond, fulfill the agricultural potential of the wild jungles of Assam.

Sigmond emphasizes that the tea found growing in Assam is not only biologically identical to the tea cultivated in China, but also indigenous to it, rather than having been introduced from across the border in Yunnan. He quotes the Agricultural Society of Calcutta, which declared that a discovery had taken place, which

we do not hesitate to pronounce as one of a most interesting and important nature, as connected with the commercial and agricultural interests of this empire. We allude to the existence of the real and genuine tea-plant of China, indigenous within the Honourable Company's dominions in Upper Assam. This shrub is no longer to be looked upon as a plant of doubtful introduction. It exists, already planted by the hand of Nature, through a vast extent of territory in Upper Assam. (68–69)

The Society and Sigmond see the discovery of the “real and genuine tea-plant of China” growing natively in Indian soil as having the potential to revolutionize the embryonic tea industry of British India. Sigmond asserts: “There cannot be the slightest doubt of its being the genuine produce of the real tea-plant” (78).<sup>17</sup> Rather than attempting to work with seedlings taken from China, British tea planters could cultivate the native resources of India to produce an authentically imperial form of the national beverage.

In celebrating the potential for British-controlled, Indian-grown, genuine tea, Sigmond employs a rhetoric of “discovery.” He focuses most upon the fact that the tea found in India was planted “by the hand of Nature,” rather than by the hands of British growers. According to this rhetoric, the tea plant grew wild in the jungles of Assam before the arrival of British colonists, awaiting the moment when East India Company explorers heralded it as an imperial source for tea. Discovering tea, the English national beverage, growing natively upon Indian soil suggests that Nature has authorized British expansion into that region, affirming the natural right and responsibility of a “paternal government,” as Sigmond puts it, to rule Indian territories and to reap the benefits of Indian resources. The tea industry had already proved profitable to the British government through the monopoly of the East India Company; finding tea growing wild in the Honourable Company's territories in India just when its China monopoly was dissolved appears to be divine intervention, providing both the Company and the nation with a new source of the “tea of commerce,” as Sigmond calls it (22).

Even more fundamentally, the discovery of a source for the beverage that had become part of the fabric of daily life in England proved that India was indeed destined to become a great asset to the British Empire and that India had, in some sense, always been British. The expansion of British rule and agriculture merely actualized the latent Britishness of India, symbolized by the authentic tea plant, planted by the hand of Nature and hidden by the dense jungle until the British were ready to nurture it into commercial profitability. The historical pre-existence of the tea-plant in India, which pre-dated British exploration and colonization, suggests a logical syllogism which helps to naturalize the process of imperial expansion and which provides explicit justification, for Sigmond, of British rule in India. It is important to note the timing of Sigmond's declaration: Upper Assam, where this tea was found and where the first plantations were to be situated, became a British protectorate in 1833 and was only annexed in 1838.

Discovering tea growing wild within the bounds of the British Empire offered a way out of the conundrum of basing national identity upon a product imported from foreign sources – essentially domesticating the potentially troubling exotic origins of the national beverage. Rappaport's work reveals that at this date, Indian tea was popular neither with



consumers, who greatly preferred the taste of Chinese tea, nor with grocers, who found it inferior to Chinese tea and feared for their customer base. In fact, extensive marketing was required on the part of producers in South Asia and wholesalers in Britain to change the public's taste in tea (“Market Empire”).<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Sigmond is making a rhetorical argument about the place of tea in domestic culture. He suggests that tea really was fundamentally English; the fact that tea had been cultivated and produced beyond national borders could only be viewed as a temporary aberration in the history of tea-drinking in England. The discovery of “real” tea growing within the Company's territory in India manifestly could correct this mistake, restoring tea, from bud to leaf to teapot, to British hands. Once plantations could be established, British supervision of all stages of the cultivation, production, and shipment of Indian-grown tea would be able to assure English consumers that the beverage filling their teacups was authentic, genuine, and pure.

Thus Sigmond asserts that the discovery of the tea plant in India accomplishes two goals. First, the new tea industry in India provides the East India Company and the British government with a profitable addition to their financial and territorial empire. Sigmond quotes from the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, which argues that “Assam may yet be found to be one of the most valuable acquisitions to the British empire” (80). Second, the revelation that the tea plant grew within India ensured that the English taste for tea one day could be satisfied from within the Empire. Sigmond proudly proclaims that the nation can now rely upon Assam tea production to replace the China tea trade: “there can be no doubt that an ample supply for European consumption can be obtained [in Upper Assam]” (81).

Sigmond's predictions proved to be correct; the discovery and cultivation of tea in British-controlled regions of India resulted in a precipitous decline of China tea imported to Great Britain. English imports of tea continued to increase throughout the nineteenth century, as they had from tea's first introduction to England in the 1650s, but over time, more and more tea came from Assam and Ceylon. By the late 1880s, English imports of Indian tea outpaced tea from China.<sup>19</sup> Far from relying upon the uncertainties of foreign merchants and the mysteries of Chinese tea manufacture, Sigmond suggests, England could now entirely take on the responsibility of supplying its own citizens with the national beverage. Rather than remaining dependent upon China, England became indebted to the tea-plant, a commodity crucial to English culture and identity, and, henceforward, to the expansion of the British Empire.

*The Necessary Luxury of Tea: Defining a Nation and an Empire*

THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE THAT tea played in the process of creating and strengthening the British Empire from the 1830s onward stems, in part, from its status as a commodity that crosses ideological boundaries. On the one hand, tea was an exotic luxury imported over vast distances from a culture very different than England's. But on the other hand, tea had become an irreplaceable necessity of English everyday life. Tea thus occupied the binary-straddling position of being physically and morally necessary as an article of daily ingestion and of retaining the characteristics of a pleasurable indulgence to be savored and enjoyed. Tea's oscillation between the ontological categories of luxury and necessity was critical to the ideological development of an imperial nation.

Historically, empires have viewed excess consumption of luxuries as threatening to their survival. For instance, Roman writers toward the end of the Roman Empire thought

that the importation of foreign luxuries drained resources – both financial and human – from the imperial homeland.<sup>20</sup> Cultures throughout the Western world have contributed to a growing literature dedicated to illustrating the pernicious nature of luxury consumption.<sup>21</sup> But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, shifts in national economies sparked a radical reassessment of the effect of luxury consumption upon the welfare of nations. The consumption of luxury goods imported from foreign locations became increasingly important to European economies, and foreign trade became associated with the wealth and prosperity of the English nation.<sup>22</sup> *Tsiology*, a tea history written in 1827, counters the claim that tea is an “enervating luxury” draining the nation of needed resources and energy by arguing that “no article of extensive commerce can possibly exist – whether a mere luxury or a positive necessary – without enriching a nation in proportion to its extent” (105). The author of *Tsiology* suggests that whatever tea’s status as a luxury or necessity, tea as a commodity has in fact enriched Great Britain. By spending money and time consuming it, English tea drinkers were ultimately participating in the continued success of the British Empire.

Many advertisements and histories of tea grapple with the shifting definitions of luxury and necessity in an attempt to adequately describe tea’s evolving place within the English household during the Victorian period. Day’s 1878 *Tea: Its Mystery and History* outlines a gradual shift in the location of tea within daily life from a luxury to a necessity – from a product that was costly and unneeded, an extra burden upon the household, and an item purely for pleasure (whether appetitive or social) to a commodity so important within the daily diet that its absence would be felt as “deprivation.” Day quotes “an eminent statesman,” who declares, “What was first regarded as a luxury, has now become, if not an absolute necessity, at least one of our accustomed daily wants, the loss of which would cause more suffering and excite more regret than would the deprivation of many things which were once counted as necessities of life” (70). In this passage, Day maintains a binary between luxury and necessity, basing these definitions upon the importance of tea to daily life. But tea has not only traversed this divide, it also has worked its way so far into the fabric of everyday life that it has replaced older, existing necessities of life such as beer or ale, reflecting a new hierarchy of quotidian priorities and a new sense of Englishness.

More often, however, nineteenth-century tea histories and advertisements differ from modern analyses of the concept of “luxury” by insisting that tea can occupy positions as a luxury and as a necessity simultaneously. Sociologist and philosopher Christopher J. Berry has suggested that goods have a transient, dynamic status upon a continuum between luxury and necessity.<sup>23</sup> Many goods have historically moved out of their luxury status into the position of a social necessity, part of everyday life for most people in a given culture. Berry argues that a luxury good can be universally desired and widely consumed, but it cannot, by definition, be a social necessity; once it has moved on the continuum toward the position of being socially required to satisfy the needs of individuals within a certain culture, it can no longer be defined as a luxury. Tea histories, however, attempt to defy this imperative by allowing tea to be both at the same time.

Robert Fortune’s *Journey to the Tea Countries of China* (1852) explains in greater detail exactly how this dual nature was conceived at mid-century. The book offers an extended first-person account of Fortune’s travels in native disguise, in order to circumvent Chinese controls and to gain access to tea plantations’ secrets as well as samples of their cultivars. It also includes a “short notice” on plantations in India. Fortune, a Scottish botanist, was hired by the East India Company to infiltrate Chinese tea plantations in order to gain knowledge



about the cultivation and manufacturing of tea and to acquire thousands of tea seedlings to transport to fledgling tea plantations in India.<sup>24</sup> At first, Fortune maintains a rhetorical divide between the concepts of “luxury” and “necessity,” and he suggests that tea has “almost” crossed the line between them: “In these days, when tea has become almost a necessary of life in England and her wide-spreading colonies, its production upon a large and cheap scale is an object of no ordinary importance” (394).

Fortune emphasizes that to be English is to drink tea, but he also reinforces the concept of England as an imperial force, since one does not have to physically live in England to participate in the quintessentially English ritual of tea-drinking. England as a nation has lost its physical borders; the concept of what it is to be English has expanded, according to Fortune, to fill “her wide-spreading colonies.” Fortune carefully delineates a two-fold rationale for how growing tea in India would benefit both England and India. Production of tea within the confines of the Empire would, of course, offer tea produced on a “large and cheap scale” from a territory much more accessible and economically beneficial for export to England. But Fortune also suggests that Indian cultivation of tea would also serve to benefit and civilize the natives of India. Fortune provides a detailed vignette of Indian peasant life and suggests precisely how the introduction of tea crops would materially enhance the culture and comfort of Indian men and women:

But to the natives of India themselves the production of [tea] would be of the greatest value. The poor *paharie*, or hill peasant, at present has scarcely the common necessities of life, and certainly none of its luxuries. The common sorts of grain which his lands produce will scarcely pay the carriage to the nearest market-town, far less yield such a profit as will enable him to purchase even a few of the necessary and simple luxuries of life. A common blanket has to serve him for his covering by day and for his bed at night, while his dwelling-house is a mere mud-hut, capable of affording but little shelter from the inclemency of the weather. If part of these lands produced tea, he would then have a healthy beverage to drink, besides a commodity which would be of great value in the market. Being of small bulk compared with its value, the expense of carriage would be trifling, and he would have the means of making himself and his family more comfortable and more happy. (394–95)

Fortune represents the natives as so poor that they are unable to sufficiently feed, clothe, or shelter themselves without British intervention. The criteria of self-sufficiency that Fortune posits, however, is capitalist – the problem is that Indian peasants cannot sell their grain for enough money to cover the cost of transporting it. Fortune assumes that marketing surplus produce for cash profit is the norm of agriculture, and he identifies the *paharies* as held back by their lack of participation in a circulation of goods. For Fortune, introducing the cultivation of tea to India offers a “boon” to Indians: a cash crop that is physically easier and therefore cheaper to transport, thus bringing their labor into the capitalist market. And by stimulating tea consumption among Indians, it also provides significant benefits to the population’s health and industry and brings them into the body politic of the Empire.<sup>25</sup>

Thus Fortune presents the Indian hill peasants’ poor living conditions as being linked to their inability to elide the distinction between necessity and luxury. Fortune initially employs this distinction to judge the Indian hill peasant’s incapacity to provide for himself and his family. The peasant before the cultivation of tea can scarcely buy necessities, and certainly no luxuries. The introduction of tea cultivation, however, will blur the boundary between these two categories by raising the peasant’s standard of living enough to enable

him “to purchase even a few of the necessary and simple luxuries of life.” In this sentence, luxuries have suddenly become necessary – there are no longer the two categories of essential and non-essential but pleasant. With the development of tea cultivation, goods previously considered non-essential will become “necessary luxuries.”

In its position on the cusp between necessity and luxury, tea epitomized Victorian notions that the middle class were members of a socioeconomic category that gave them sufficient wealth to indulge physical pleasures, plus the moral fortitude to withstand habits of excess or gluttony. According to Fortune, the ability to grow, transport, and sell tea will transform the Indian peasant into a middle-class British subject. As the British tea-drinker would gladly attest, the ability to purchase necessary luxuries like tea is crucial to the definition of that subject position. As the Indian subjects rise in financial and moral health, they too will begin purchasing the “necessary and simple luxuries of life,” bringing them fully into the circulation of goods between colony and metropole and providing a market both for Indian tea and for other British goods as well. Tea thus literally and figuratively expands the boundaries of the empire – adding territory to the British-controlled regions of India while simultaneously creating new British subjects who will conform to the characteristic requirements of the middle-class national identity.

Fortune also implies that British readers in England could physically participate in the process of building the empire by purchasing and consuming Indian-grown tea. His text offers a tangible way to experience the full cycle of colonized and colonizer, of colony and metropole. By drinking tea produced in India, the British tea-drinker simultaneously enriches his or her own body (and thus his or her small physical piece of the British Empire) and contributes to the physical, moral, and financial health of the expanding Empire in India. The British cultivation and production of tea in India enables the poor Indian peasant to become part of the capitalist system of exchange and to rise, economically, to a position of middle-class comfort. The cycle is completed by the journey of Indian-grown tea back to England, where the British tea-drinker purchases it and consumes it, thus contributing simultaneously to the expansion of the empire, the increasing wealth and comfort of the inhabitants of British India, and his or her own sense of English national identity.

By emphasizing the status of tea as a luxury *and* a daily necessity within English culture, nineteenth-century tea histories and advertisements suggest that the tea trade held a critically important position within the English national economy, just as the wise purchase of tea was central to an individual household’s domestic economy. Luxury goods played a dual role in the development of British commerce, providing both the increased consumer commodities instrumental to revising images of consumption and indulgence and simultaneously offering a rich source of revenue for the British government. Goods imported from abroad – from both British colonies and from independent powers such as China – thus stimulated both consumption and production within England and its empire, causing English philosophers and political economists to reconsider earlier criticisms of the role of luxury items in Western culture. As a necessary luxury, tea collapses the geographical distance between colony and colonizer; bringing the exotic elements of the empire within the domestic drawing room, the rituals of the tea-table essentially domesticate the Empire and transform imperialism into a daily necessity of English life.

A late Victorian advertisement for the United Kingdom Tea Company offers visual evidence of this recasting of the role of luxury (Figure 11). The ad depicts the female figure of Britannia, complete in flowing Roman robes and plumed military headdress, reclining at

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Tea  
First  
Hand

1/-  
1/3  
1/6  
1/9  
&  
2/-  
a lb.

Immense  
Saving!



Tea  
First  
Hand

7, 10, 14,  
or  
20 lb.  
Packed in  
Canisters,  
40, 65, or  
100 lb.  
in Chests,  
all  
without  
Extra  
Charge.

Immense  
Saving!

**GRASP THESE FACTS! WHY DRINK INFERIOR TEA? WHY NOT BUY YOUR TEA FIRST HAND?** If you are satisfied, however, to continue drinking indifferent and common Tea, well and good—in that case there is nothing more to be said; but if you wish to enjoy the Luxury of a really Delicious Cup of Tea, and if you study economy in Household Expenditure, you can, by writing to the **UNITED KINGDOM TEA COMPANY, Limited, 21, Mincing Lane, London,** obtain the **BEST TEA IN THE WORLD,** of simply delicious Quality, **FIRST HAND,** direct from the **MINCING LANE LONDON TEA MARKET,** at **IMPORTERS' PRICES** (and not hampered with half a dozen middlemen's profits), **1/-, 1/3, 1/6, 1/9, and 2/- a lb.,** all amazing value at the respective Quotations. There is no trouble whatever in the matter—you have merely to send your Order, and the Teas are promptly Delivered at your own Doors anywhere in the Kingdom, **CARRIAGE PAID.** Thousands of Packages sent out Daily. **UNITED KINGDOM TEA COMPANY'S TEAS** are used in the Households of **H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES** and of **H.R.H. THE DUKE OF CONNAUGHT;** in the Members' Refreshment Rooms of the **HOUSE OF COMMONS;** in all the **GORDON HOTELS;** in the Hotels and Restaurants of the **Principal RAILWAY COMPANIES;** in upwards of **1000** other **HOTELS,** etc.; in Clubs, Colleges, Hospitals, Schools, and Public Institutions too numerous to mention; by the **LEADING COUNTY FAMILIES** throughout the land; and by **HOSTS OF PRIVATE CUSTOMERS** everywhere. The Tea Trade revolutionised, and old-fashioned prices utterly exploded.

*Write for Samples, sent free, and taste and judge for yourselves.*

**UNITED KINGDOM TEA COMPANY'S TEAS ARE THE PERFECTION OF HIGH QUALITY.**

If you are not drinking them, you are depriving yourself of one of the **Greatest Luxuries of the Day.**

MAY 1895

Figure 11. "Tea First Hand," United Kingdom Tea Company. Courtesy of Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: John Johnson Collection; Tea and Coffee Box 2.

a small table and pouring herself a cup of tea. Drawing upon the glory and military strength of the Roman Empire in order to assert similar praise for Great Britain, this ad suggests that, far from enervating and destroying the imperial power of England, commercial trade in luxury goods supports and strengthens the nation. In the background, figures representing China, India, Ceylon, and Assam – the major regions of tea production – bring chests of tea to Britannia. In the foreground, she calmly focuses her gaze upon her own tiny teacup, into which she is pouring tea from a small, round teapot labeled – in case there were any doubt – “United Kingdom Tea Company’s Teas.” Thus Britain consumes and enjoys teas imported from around the world, supported by the labor and the service of numerous foreign nations and colonies, represented by various forms of cultural dress and racial appearance in the ad.

Each chest of tea within the ad, including those carried by the figures of China and India as well as the one upon which Britannia reclines, portrays the “trade mark” image of the United Kingdom Tea Company: three young women in three distinct national costumes. Although this image is indistinct and obscured by the folds of Britannia’s robes in this particular ad, the same image appears, larger and more clearly, in other ads for the United Kingdom Tea Company. The woman in the center wears the dress of early nineteenth-century England; her gown is slim and high-waisted, she carries a small purse with a long ribbon as a strap, and her hair falls in curls around her face. The woman on the left wears Scottish highlander dress, including a long plaid skirt, a tam upon her head, and a traditional sporran (a leather pouch with three tassels) by her belt. On the right, an Indian woman wears a flowing sari, ornamented along the edges and wrapped around her waist and her arms. The trademark image of the United Kingdom Tea Company visually represents the main peoples who make up the United Kingdom and its empire (minus Ireland, Wales, the West Indies, and the subjects of colonies in places such as Africa). Each of the three women hold a teacup emblazoned with the initials “UKTC,” and they stand with their arms linked together, physically united. The image of Britannia, sitting upon the crate of tea, literally rests upon a foundation of foreign trade and domestic female tea consumption shared by all the races and cultures of the Empire. Far from posing a threat to the stability of the country and the colonies, the trade in tea, “One of the Greatest Luxuries of the Day,” as the ad proclaims, here appears to serve, support, and strengthen both the Company and the United Kingdom itself.<sup>26</sup>

*Corning Community College*

## NOTES

1. By exploring the implications of tea-drinking upon English national identity, my work is aligned with Hall and Rose’s *At Home with the Empire*. Hall and Rose argue that Britons’ “everyday lives were infused with an imperial presence” (2), and they investigate the repercussions of Britain’s imperial project on British identity “at home.”
2. Several nineteenth-century treatises claim that tea is the national beverage. For example, see Sigmond 2–3; Baildon 229; and Reade 15.
3. Explanations of culture necessitate an exploration of the significance of naming the culture, the nation, and the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The slippage between “English” and “British” highlights the tension between the simultaneous inclusive/exclusive function of

- tea-drinking in nineteenth-century literature. Nineteenth-century tea histories tend to use the term “Great Britain” when specifically referring to the relationship between their own country and its Empire; this term signals the political, economic, and imperial presence of the nation within a global context. When discussing tea-drinking within their own culture, however, nineteenth-century tea historians almost invariably define their national identity as “English.” The ideal domestic setting evoked by many depictions of the tea table reflects a particularly insular, enclosed, “English” sense of boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, private and public, middle-class and other, less culturally and economically privileged classes. My usage follows the tendencies of the tea histories. When I use the term “English,” I have chosen this more limited, exclusionary term to indicate the cultural work performed by the rituals and representations of tea-drinking in nineteenth-century texts. Schmitt, in *Alien Nation*, articulates a similar distinction in naming the nation; he differentiates between an inclusive “British” identity of all of the peoples/genders/classes of the British Isles and a more limited, exclusive “English” nationality. Schmitt argues that the nineteenth century witnessed an increasing focus on Englishness, rather than Britishness, after Victoria’s accession to the throne in 1837, due in part to imperial expansion and to proliferating discourses of racial identity (15–16).
4. Rappaport explores this shift in British taste from Chinese to South Asian tea in detail in her article “Packaging China: Foreign Articles and Dangerous Tastes in the Mid-Victorian Tea Party.” She traces the complexities of the tea industry and its advertising campaigns more fully in her forthcoming work on the globalization of Indian tea, especially the chapter “The Market Empire in the Age of Victoria: Selling South Asian Teas in India and North America.”
  5. Berry, and Berg and Eger trace the gradual resuscitation of the concept of luxury during the eighteenth century, due in large part to the increasing financial importance of luxury goods to naval and commercial European powers.
  6. Rappaport’s work suggests that this process also worked on a broader imperial scale, uniting Britons and subjects of Empire and fostering a similar sense of allegiance. Commercially, the creation of an internal imperial market for British teas became increasingly important over the course of the century.
  7. Sigmond’s postulation of tea as a hitherto unrecognized foundation of moral, physical, and social stature resonates with Bourdieu’s definition of the *habitus* – dispositions and tendencies which often reside below the level of conscious thought yet which influence an individual’s thoughts, responses, and actions. See *The Logic of Practice* (53).
  8. Sigmond, Day, and Reade all devote considerable portions of their text to tea’s role in the drying out of the nation.
  9. Mintz notes that tea “turned out . . . to be a magnificent source of government revenues through taxation” (138).
  10. My notion of domestic ideology is drawn primarily from Poovey’s *Uneven Developments*, Langland’s *Nobody’s Angels*, and Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. I align myself with these critics’ questioning of the divide between public and private, as well as with their analysis of the compelling cultural power of the doctrine of separate spheres within the Victorian period. I have also drawn from the more recent evaluations of domesticity by Cohen and Tosh. Hall and Rose also provide a useful definition of the domestic (24–27).
  11. Most sources admit further adulteration of tea once it landed on British soil. See Forrest 71 and Bramah 78–79. Both nineteenth and twentieth-century writers tend to agree, however, that English adulteration peaked in the mid-eighteenth century, when taxes on tea reached over 100%, and an estimated one-half of all tea consumed in England was smuggled into the country. Smugglers would extend their shipments of tea by adding various English plant materials. After Pitt lowered the taxes to 12.5% in 1784, English smuggling rapidly decreased (Bramah claims that it disappeared altogether). Burnett, however, argues that English adulteration of tea continued well into the nineteenth century (60–61). The author of “Leaves from the Mahogany Tree” details several Chinese tricks to extend tea by adding substitute ingredients that resemble tea leaves, but includes just one example of English adulteration: from 1828 – 40 years before the article was published.



12. See Bramah (86), Forrest (41), and Walvin (20).
13. For a concise history of the role of tea in the First Opium Wars (1839–42), see Standage's *A History of the World in Six Glasses* 206–12. See also Schmitt's chapter "Narrating National Addictions: De Quincey, Opium, and Tea" 78.
14. See *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, where Douglas explores the significance of pollution in relation to cultural taboos concerning food and eating. Douglas, an anthropologist, argues that "the processes of ingestion portray political absorption" (4).
15. Forrest notes that in 1834, five months after the dissolution of the East India Company's monopoly on trade with China, the British government established a committee to work on the possibilities of cultivating tea in India (108).
16. Rappaport analyzes the complex history of the discovery of tea and the annexation of Assam in her forthcoming work on the globalization of tea, especially Chapter 1, "A Little Opium, Sweet Words, and Cheap Guns: The Discovery of 'Indian' Tea and the Annexation of Assam."
17. Sigmond implies that the Chinese tea seedlings introduced to Indian soil did not flourish, but later sources contend that the introduction of Chinese tea plants offered significant competition to the native Indian variety. In *The Tea Industry in India* (1882), Baildon suggests that it was the cultivation of a hybrid tea plant that led to the success of the Indian tea industry: "The sturdy, sluggish nature of the Indo-Celestial species, has blended harmoniously and advantageously with the pure Indian variety; and what was absolutely necessary for the successful extension of the Indian tea industry – a plant more prolific than the China, yet less delicate than the indigenous – nature has bountifully given in the hybrid" (16). A website on plant cultures, sponsored by Kew Gardens in London, offers an informative history of tea, which corroborates Baildon's assertion that the tea currently cultivated in India is a hybrid of the imported Chinese and wild Indian varieties ([http://www.plantcultures.org/plants/tea\\_history.html](http://www.plantcultures.org/plants/tea_history.html)).
18. Many nineteenth-century sources indicate that the English tea-drinking public had to be convinced to switch to drinking Indian tea. While China exported both black and green teas to Britain, these teas tended to be mild in flavor. Indian tea plantations produced black tea almost exclusively, and Indian teas offered bolder, more assertive flavors. The debates about the relative merits of Indian and Chinese teas continued even in the late nineteenth century, when Indian imports eclipsed those of China. For instance, Green, in "A Cup of Tea," published in the journal *Good Words* in 1894, favors the "softness of flavour" found in Chinese teas and asserts that they have more "romance" than Indian teas, whose "greater pungency" is due to "the introduction of machinery in the preparation of the leaves," which results in "the loss of delicate manipulation" (751). The author of "The Revolution in Tea" (1889) disagrees, arguing that Chinese teas were treated "very carelessly and roughly," as opposed to the technologically superior methods of processing tea in India (503). Green teas also tended to be adulterated more often, Day states. Echoing these concerns, Baildon argues that Indian tea is "superior" to Chinese tea in both "purity" and "strength" (32). Once Britain began importing predominantly Indian tea, the nation's beverage was brewed with black tea.
19. According to Walvin, Indian and Ceylon tea accounted for only 3% of British consumption of tea in 1865, yet by 1887, one-half of British-consumed tea was produced in South Asia. In 1880, 114 million pounds of tea were imported from China, while 44 million came from India. By 1900, 138 million pounds of tea were imported from India, 92 million pounds were imported from Ceylon, and only thirteen million pounds of tea came from China (Walvin 147). Dutta pinpoints the years between 1885 and 1888 as the crucial years of transition in the predominant source for British tea (79), while Forrest cites the changeover year as slightly earlier – 1879 (162). See also Green (75), "The Revolution in Tea" (501), and Money's *The Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea* (177). Ramamurthy offers a fascinating analysis of how the tea advertisements of this period reflected the shift in British tea imports from Chinese to Indian sources (93–130).
20. Berry offers a comprehensive survey of Greek, Roman, and early Christian attitudes toward luxury, revealing similar diatribes against the capacity of imported luxury goods to enervate, corrupt, emasculate, and eventually destroy civilizations through gluttony and selfishness.



21. Cf. Berry, and Sekora.
22. See Berry 146–53. According to Berg and Eger, during the eighteenth century in Europe, “Luxury gradually lost its former associations with corruption and vice, and came to include production, trade and the civilizing impact of superfluous commodities” (7). Berg and Eger trace the debates concerning the role of luxuries in eighteenth-century trade; see especially their article, “The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates” 7–27.
23. See Berry 18, where he outlines this concept of a continuum between luxury and social necessity.
24. While the success of tea plantations in India has historically been attributed to the discovery and cultivation of native Indian tea trees growing in Assam, Fortune’s endeavors, according to Thurin, proved that tea could be successfully planted and harvested in British-controlled regions of India (35).
25. Fortune’s mid-century fantasy of agrarian peasants working contentedly on local tea gardens did not exactly come to fruition. Rappaport describes the fraught, violent history of the annexation of Assam and the decades-long struggle of British authorities and planters to find laborers for the new, increasingly industrialized tea plantations. But, as Rappaport points out, other British writers shared Fortune’s utopian vision of tea cultivation in Assam, and she details Charles Bruce’s bewildered lamentations that the local hill tribesmen simply won’t work for remuneration. See “A Little Opium, Sweet Words, and Cheap Guns.”
26. As the United Kingdom Tea Company ad suggests, the concept of luxury clearly evokes issues of class and gender, as well as national and imperial identity. I address these issues in my forthcoming work on tea-drinking in Victorian literature.

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