

On botany and budgets: a tale of two Roberts

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Well, we've covered [Captain Pidding](#), and I'm still working my way through the 1800s literature, so let's make our next subject the two Roberts: **Robert M. Fortune** and **Robert Montgomery Martin**.

The two men are fairly opposite personalities. Fortune can be generally characterized as a robust, fearlessly determined adventurer, while Martin was a matter-of-fact analyst, and meticulously detailed researcher. But both are responsible for great contributions to the spread of tea to the western world, in their vastly different ways.

Robert M. Fortune

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Fortune was a botanist, and the botanists of the 1800s, in many cases, bore more resemblance to a daring adventurer than a quiet professor. Fortune himself may have been the epitome of the "Indiana Jones" style of botany of his time in history.

In the 1800s, the Linnaean system of classification had botanists racing to all parts of the globe, each hoping to be the first to discover and catalog new plants to be added to the

ever-growing lists of known flora. Fortune started off his career at the botanical gardens of his native Scotland, rapidly moving up and going to London to work with the Royal Horticultural Society.

For the British government of this time, tea was an exceptionally important and controversial subject: its trade was an insanely powerful branch of the empire's commerce, created out of nothing, seemingly overnight. At the same time, budgetary concerns and occasional crises attendant upon war had caused a back-and-forth over the duties on tea that had raged in Parliament over several generations of legislators. This part of Britain's history is of course dominated by the East India Company, the colonies of India and Africa, and the increasingly determined efforts by the British to break China's control of the production of the world's tea.

Fortune seems to have very much been the right man at the right time, recognized early by his superiors at the Society for his determination and ability. As such, he becomes the Society's "007" in the far east, sent abroad and tasked with learning as much as possible about China's botanical secrets... particularly those of the mysterious and valuable tea plant.

Fortune's successes in his adventures caused him to become, in my opinion, Europe's first true scientific authority on the tea plant. His published memoirs - especially the oft-cited *Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China*^{2,3} - provide valuable **firsthand** knowledge about the culture, commerce, and geography of the Chinese through the eyes of a European explorer.

It must be remembered that, at this time, free travel in China was utterly forbidden to foreigners, so Fortune frequently traveled in disguise (head shaved to the local styles, clothed in robes, and even using make-up for daytime encounters), and by the use of bribery and negotiation made his way through the inner regions of China, acquiring information and, more importantly, seeds and young plants to be returned to the eager hands of his superiors. All this, mind you, without *any* education in the Chinese language,

knowledge of the maps, laws, or customs of the area, or any real protection from the dangers of travel in China of the times. Brashly and boldly, he simply learns as he goes.

Fortune provides detailed accounts from witnessing the cultivation, processing, packaging and preparation of tea in China; he spent time equally corroborating the writers of previous generations and correcting the misapprehensions of contemporary authors. It had been originally believed by European botanists that [red tea](#) and green tea came from different species of plant, called *bohea* and *viridis* respectively. Fortune settles the debate once and for all, positively declaring that the two plants were from the same plant, solving one of Europe's great mysteries regarding tea (though several authors, including Ball¹, continued to doubt Fortune's claims on the matter).

Beyond the knowledge of tea that he brought back with his writing, Fortune was also one of Britain's most energetic "collectors", surreptitiously acquiring tens of thousands of plants from China and smuggling them out to the British plantations in Southeast Asia and India. While the vast majority of his plants perished in the attempts, the occasional successes were important contributions to the founding of the tea industries of the British colonies.

Fortune himself (or Sing Wah, as he was called in China) was a curious man, and very likely a pretty fun dude to hang out with. His memoirs are casually and smoothly told, and present rich and engaging pictures of China being discovered through European eyes. The sheer lunacy of some his adventures - fighting off pirates, slipping around in Chinese costume to avoid arrest, and so on - make the stories more than historically interesting, but genuinely entertaining at times. The man himself comes off as bull-headedly determined and seemingly indomitable, fighting off illnesses and threats as simply part of the task at hand. Fortune seemed to be a fairly pragmatic and down-to-earth individual, and his treatment of the Chinese is neither dismissively racist nor naively awed. These are all welcome developments in English literature of this time, I assure you.

While the scientific value of his writings have certainly changed as we gather new information (and evolve the descriptive language), the historical importance of Fortune's writings is indisputable, as they continue to be cited and discussed 150 years after their publishing. Further, his direct and practical effect on the tea trade, helping usher in the competitive production of tea in India and Sri Lanka, broadens his legacy.

Robert Montgomery Martin

Martin, while equally if not more important than Fortune in tea's history, is not nearly of the same swashbuckling nature. Martin was an economist and accountant who worked his way up through civil service to become a highly-respected Treasurer for the crown, managing colonial wealth and writing detailed, influential reports for Parliamentary committees shaping national policy.

Martin's works are exhaustive in their detail, providing invaluable tables of information painting overall pictures of the complicated economy of the empire. In particular, he produced two important government reports, *The Past and Present State of the Tea Trade of England*⁶, and *China; Political, Commercial, and Social*⁸. The first more primarily focuses on tea, obviously, while the second is a larger-scale work regarding all the commercial activities involving the Chinese empire.

Martin's works are characterized by a confidence rooted in a man entirely comfortable with the facts (as he sees them) of the matter at hand. His research is *painfully* well-documented, with pages upon pages of economic returns and statements backing up his assertions regarding the development and management of the tea trade. At the same time, he shows the occasional fiery side, particularly when addressing (and savaging) those writers he feels have deliberately or wantonly misled their readers by the presentation of falsified or biased information.

The Past and Present State of the Tea Trade of England is essentially a response to

published pieces in the *Edinburgh Review*, testimony presented to Parliamentary committees, and several authors, most notably McCulloch, in his *Commercial Dictionary*⁹, all of whom aggressively denounce the East India Company's monopoly and management of the tea trade. In defending the Company, Martin provides an exhaustively detailed history of the commercial development of the tea trade, and strongly argues against the *Review* on the nature of the Company's presence and conduct in Asia. The report is characterized by Martin's peculiar juxtaposition of the calm minutiae of an accountant at his task, and the passionate patriotism of one "would not barter my integrity for a momentary honor, would not offer deception as the price of ephemeral devotion".

Regardless of the political context (and proclaimed unbiased nature) of the work, Martin's survey provides a valuable portrait of the early development of the East India Company, the tea trade in China, and the political import of the tea duties in Britain and the Parliamentary debates upon the matter. His reports were influential evidence for consideration by Parliament's special committees tasked with debating and proposing adjustments to the duties on tea, and as representative of the "official" British knowledge on the subject of tea, his writings have been relied upon as fact by generations of tea scholars since.

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