

On Lettsom's literary legacy: The Natural History of the Tea-Tree

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John Coakley Lettsom

Theam omnium pulcherrimè et graphicè descripsisti.

[You have, of all others, most excellently and exactly described the Tea-tree.]

— Carl Linnaeus to John Coakley Lettsom¹

John Coakley Lettsom was Britain's first literary authority on tea: his 1772 work, *The Natural History of the Tea-Tree*², represents the earliest English language attempt at a comprehensive survey of the science and history of what would become the United Kingdom's national beverage. In [my last essay](#) we reviewed the tea literature of Europe leading up to Lettsom's time. We're therefore ready to take a closer look at what Lettsom

himself wrote, and get a better sense of Europe's ideas on tea in his time.

A little about Lettsom



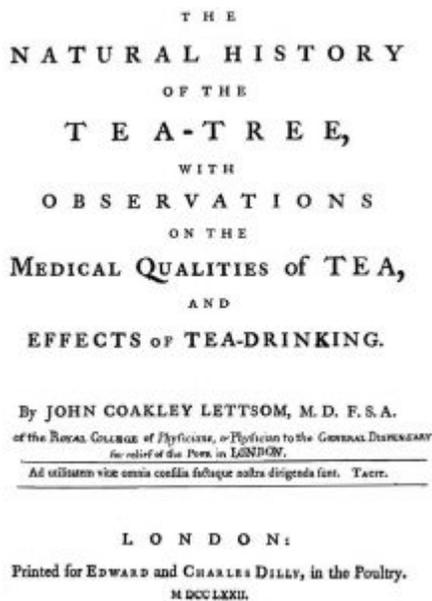
Little Jost Van Dyke (all of it).

Lettsom was born on a beautiful but otherwise useless little rock in the Caribbean called [Little Jost Van Dyke](#) (part of the British Virgin Islands). Lettsom's father had moved onto the island with the intention of starting a plantation, but life here was very difficult yet and almost none of his children survived beyond infancy. Young John Coakley was packed off into a ship at the age of 6 and sent to England for his education. He set himself to becoming a doctor and was very successful at his studies.

His apprenticeship was interrupted at the age of 23 by his father's death. Lettsom returned to the islands to claim his inheritance, whereupon he set the family's slaves free (preceding the region's abolition movement by some twenty years) and started a small medical practice. Seemingly the only qualified doctor in the area, his practice was a raging financial success, and Lettsom soon had enough money to return to Europe and complete his studies. For his thesis, submitted to the University of Leiden (Netherlands) in 1769, he chose the subject of tea; it was revised and published in 1772 as *Natural History of the Tea-Tree*.

Lettsom himself was a fascinating man, patient and dedicated to his work, generous with his money and skills. If you're interested in his story, my favorite introduction is that written for the children at [Dog Kennel Hill primary school](#). He went on to have a distinguished career as one of London's most influential and admired physicians, founder of the [Medical Society of London](#) (still in existence at Lettsom House), and a powerful Fellow of the Royal Society. As such, his book on tea was accepted as definitive by his contemporaries and cited as authoritative for another century, most particularly in England.

Definition & delineation



Title page, from Lettsom, 1772.

Lettsom begins by expressing his hope that a complete review of tea would prove useful because, while many authors had written about tea, these writings “lie so dispersed, and the accounts which have been given of the virtues and efficacy of tea, are in general so contradictory, and void of true medical observation, that it seemed no improper subject for a candid discussion.” Indeed, tea literature up to this point had been a hodgepodge of post-medieval science, religious dogma, hearsay and guesswork. While Lettsom won't entirely clear all of this up, he makes a sincere effort to understand tea by reviewing all of the literature possible and resolving as many conflicts as he could, without having

direct access to the tea plant in China.

In his preface, Lettsom tells us that within the past “three or four years” a small number of tea plants had been successfully planted in England. In particular, he tells a story of an East India Company captain who had brought over a plant even before Linnaeus received his in 1763, but the plant was jealously guarded and no cuttings were ever shared. He also writes that the first tea plant to bear flowers in Europe lives at Sion House (today, Syon House), home of the Duke of Northumberland. I have been thus far unable to find an earlier reference to this plant, and it may be that Lettsom himself is the origin of this story, which is repeated in multiple works afterwards, such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*³, and the books of William Smith in 1826⁴ and G.G. Sigmond in 1839⁵. As tea could therefore be grown in England, Lettsom observes “it seems probable this very distinguished vegetable will become a denizen of England, and such of her colonies as may be deemed most favorable to its propagation.”

He then acknowledges that, despite tea’s immense popularity across Europe, there was still little clarity or consensus in the medical community regarding its qualities and effects. Certainly, there had been just as many respected writers claiming that tea was the most dangerous poison, as there were who advocated its healthful benefits. Lettsom assures us he has reviewed the existing literature, and personally consulted with London’s medical authorities, “so as to furnish the means of a more extensive knowledge of the subject.”

Thus concludes Lettsom’s preface. The work then opens with a proper botanical definition of the tea plant, accompanied by this beautiful engraving:



“Green Tea”, by J. Miller. From Lettsom, 1772. Credit: [Welcome Collection](#).

This illustration would be reused in modified form in the third edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* where it specifically states that the drawing was taken from the tea plant at Sion House.⁶ Lettsom, however, does not mention this himself, although it is clear from his footnotes that his botanical description of the plant is largely derived from observations of that living specimen.

At this time in history, there was still intense debate whether [red](#) and green tea came from the same species of plant, or if there were two distinct species of tea. Lettsom explains that the preeminent botanist of Europe, Carl Linnaeus, had **incorrectly** listed two separate species of tea⁷, *bohea* (red) and *viridis* (green) under the influence of the highly dubious Englishman John Hill⁸. Lettsom makes it absolutely clear, however, that there is but one species, citing the opinion of John Ellis (the fellow who wrote the book on bringing seeds and plants from Asia)⁹, and the fact that Lettsom himself had “examined several hundred flowers, both from the bohea and green tea countries, and their botanical characters have always appeared uniform.” Despite this evidence and the supporting opinions of later important authors, Linnaeus’s reputation was of *such* magnitude that his inclusion of Hill’s error continued to mislead botanists for another century!

Method & monkeys

Lettsom then defers to Linnaeus and lists those sources used by that botanist in his *Species Plantarum*, before listing 51 sources of his own, published between 1588 and 1772. Throughout his dissertation, however, it is clear he most heavily leans upon the writing and authority of Engelbert Kaempfer's description of tea in Japan¹⁰ and Louis le Comte's observations on China¹¹.

On the origin of tea, Lettsom writes that it is likely indigenous to China and Japan, and supports le Comte's assertion that its early use was probably inspired by the poor, brackish quality of the local waters. On its introduction into England, he writes that tea was "brought over from Holland" by Lords Arlington & Ossory around 1666 - however, the **only** source for this assertion that I've yet found is the anti-tea lunatic, Jonas Hanway¹². Ever since Lettsom's validation, Hanway's claim has been regurgitated by nearly every author following, including William Milburn (who, to his credit, corrects the error) in 1813¹³, Robert Montgomery Martin in 1832¹⁴, and Auguste Saint-Arroman in 1852¹⁵. The acceptance of this "fact" is the more remarkable in that Lettsom *immediately* presents Thomas Short's proof that it was "indeed certain" that tea was used in England earlier¹⁶, as Parliament had enacted a duty on tea in the year 1660¹⁷.

Lettsom then makes a passing mention of the writing of Cornelis Bontekoe¹⁸, the Dutch physician who suggested that one could drink up to 200 cups of tea a day. Lettsom politely calls Bontekoe "a very zealous advocate", and suggests that Bontekoe may have been politically motivated in his writings.

At this point Lettsom now delves more fully into the subject of tea cultivation, drawing almost entirely from Kaempfer, who had provided a detailed description of tea growing in Japan. We are informed that in Japan, farmers do not dedicate gardens to the tea plant, growing it "round the borders of the fields, without any regard to the soil", but in China,

due to the considerable export trade in tea, “they plant whole fields with it”. Important to the question of growing tea elsewhere, it is pointed out that tea “endures considerable variations of heat and cold”, growing as far north as Peking (Beijing) and as far south as Canton (Guangzhou).

Kaempfer’s notes outline three main gatherings of tea leaves during the harvest season. The leaves taken at the first gathering become “*Ficki Tsjaa*, or powdered tea, because they are pulverized and sipped in hot water”, according to Kaempfer – the modern word is *hikicha* 挽き茶, which refers to tea leaves ground to fine powder, as [matcha](#) 抹茶 is today. Kaempfer mentions that this tea is reserved for the use of nobility only, and therefore is also called imperial tea, but Lettsom is quick to point out that the tea sold in Europe named “imperial” was *not* the same kind, as this highly-prized Japanese delicacy was never exported.

Lettsom then provides Kaempfer’s description of the second and third gatherings of tea, *Tootsjaa* (“Chinese tea”) and *Ban Tsjaa*. “Chinese tea” is so named because the leaves were not ground to powder, but rather dried and fired to be infused in the same way as Chinese leaves (possibly an archaic form of [tuóchá](#) 沱茶). *Ban Tsjaa*, of course, is the modern word *bancha* 番茶, Japanese “coarse” tea.

Lettsom includes Kaempfer’s description of tea-gathering in Uji, which became one of Europe’s favorite stories, relating that, when gathering tea for use by the imperial family, workers were, for weeks, not allowed to eat any “gross food” that might communicate bad flavors to the tea through the workers’ sweat or breath, and that they were required to wear thin gloves, to keep the leaves entirely unpolluted by human touch. Europeans loved this story and it was often repeated to show that tea was treated with great reverence and ceremony during its plucking.

And then... the damn monkeys. Lettsom was one of the first writers to bring this story to European attention, and it has been repeated ever since:

We have observed that the tea tree frequently grows on the steep declivities of hills and precipices, where it is commonly dangerous, sometimes impracticable to collect the leaves, which are often the finest tea. The Chinese in some places surmount this difficulty by a singular contrivance. These cliffs are inhabited by a large kind of monkey; these the tea gatherers irritate by some means; in revenge the monkeys break off the branches of the tea tree, and throw them down in resentment; the branches are gathered up, and the tea leaves picked off.

Furthermore, according to Lettsom, and corroborated by George Staunton¹⁹, paintings of Chinese tea farms depicted apparently trained monkeys carrying tea branches. Of all the useful and true things that Lettsom wrote, unfortunately, it was this little bit about tea-pickin' monkeys that attracted the most negative attention, being received with incredulity or, in some cases, outright mockery. When the French clergyman, Jean-Baptiste Grosier, tells the exact same story in his book of 1788²⁰, Staunton writes that a relieved Lettsom "wrote to the author, to thank him for having given an account which coincided so exactly with his own... and which had been treated with unmerited ridicule." This is somewhat astounding to me, since it seems pretty obvious Grosier had simply plagiarized Lettsom:

This shrub grows often on the rugged backs of steep mountains, access to which is dangerous, and sometimes impracticable. The Chinese, in order to come at the leaves, make use of a singular strategem. These steep places are generally frequented by great numbers of monkeys, which, being irritated and provoked, to revenge themselves, tear off the branches, and shower them down upon those who have insulted them. The Chinese immediately collect these branches, and strip them of their leaves.

As much as tea academics may have laughed at Lettsom, tea marketers have absolutely loved this fairy tale ever since. The monkey picking story survives to this day - you can still find teas with names like "Monkey-Picked Oolong", and "Golden Monkey", which harken back to this tale. The myth deserves its own future blog entry, but for the

moment we can rest assured that Lettsom and Grosier were *quite* mistaken: monkeys do not pick tea and, though perhaps it happened once or twice upon a time, it was never a regular practice in China, nor anywhere else.

Lettsom then goes on to provide Kaempfer's extended description of the preparation of the plucked leaves, in the Japanese method, the most detailed notes available up to his time on tea manufacture. These notes were the first clues Europe had about the mysterious process used to dry and fire tea leaves, and formed the basis of Western understanding of tea processing up to the time of Robert Fortune some sixty years later. Lettsom has little to work with regarding tea processing in China, and admits as much, but attempts to synthesize le Comte's general observations with Kaempfer's detailed notes. Lettsom once again leans on the evidence of Chinese paintings, and surmises that the best tea in China grows on steep hills and difficult cliffs.

Varieties & verdure

Lettsom now gets to one of the most interesting sections to the historian, a list of the known varieties of Chinese tea. Breaking down tea into its two general classes, he lists the following teas, providing names for each in English and Chinese:

Green tea

1. Bing, Imperial, or Bloom
2. Hy-tiann, Hi-kiong, or Hyson
3. Singlo, or Sanglo

Bohea tea

1. Soochuen, Sutchong, Saatyang, or Sy-tyann
2. Camho, or Soumlo
3. Congo, or Bong-fo
4. Pecko, Pekoe, Back-ho, or Pack-ho
5. Common Bohea, or Moji

Lettsom also mentions “a sort of tea, of a different form from any of the preceding, made up into cakes or balls of different sizes”, of which he names two types:

1. Tio té
2. Gun powder

Let’s review Lettsom’s tea types. Starting with the green teas, the first is **Bing**, **Imperial**, or **Bloom** tea, which Lettsom describes as “a large loose leaf, of a light green color, and faint delicate smell”. This is not the same tea described by Kaempfer as imperial tea (as noted above), but a variety imported by the Dutch and sold in Europe under this name.

Next up is **Hyson** tea, which of course has become today’s [Young Hyson](#). Lettsom claims the tea is named “after an East-India merchant... who first imported it into Europe” - another tea “fact” that may or may not be true. In today’s literature, you’ll see claims that Phillip (or Philip) Hyson was an East India Company director, or captain, or London tea merchant, who popularized green tea in England. Sorting this out is another future blog entry (we’re piling up a lot of those, aren’t we?), but for now we’ll note that Lettsom is one of the earliest sources for this dubious story, and sadly provides us no further details.

Singlo, the last green tea enumerated, is said to be named for the place of its cultivation

- this would be Songluoshan in Anhui, China, believed by many to be the birthplace of tea.

Now the Bohea (or [red](#)) teas: **Soochuen** or **Sutchong**, is written as Souchong today, while **Congo** is now Congou. The term **Pekoe**, of course, remains unchanged. These terms are no longer varieties of tea, but used as leaf grades. Though we usually understand bohea tea to be today's red tea, Souchong is here described as infusing to "a yellowish green color"; the Congo is described as a larger leaf and deeper-colored infusion than Bohea.

Camho, or **Soumlo**, is a little more confusing. This same tea was described by Ephraim Chambers in his *Cyclopaedia* of 1728 as a medicinal tea "reserv'd for [...] sick Folks"²¹; Sigmond repeats this in 1839, and adds that the Chinese often make this tea in the form of a pressed cake. Lettsom, however, tells us nothing about this tea, other than that it is named for the place of its origin, and is "a fragrant tea with a violet smell".

Lastly, Lettsom defines common **Bohea** as consisting "of leaves of one color". Of the "ball teas", **té** is described as "rolled up in a round shape, about the size of peas", and **Gun powder** as "the smallest kind done in this form".

In his footnotes, Lettsom names a few lesser-known types of tea, most of which were unavailable in England at this time. He includes **Hyson-utchin** and **Go-bé** as narrow-leaf varieties of green tea; **Lin-kisam**, a "rough" variety of tea blended by the Chinese with Congo to form a kind of Pekoe; **Tao-kyonn**, "the best bohea tea"; and **Honam té** or **Kuli té**, "the least agreeable". Lettsom also includes this note:

Padre sutchong has a finer taste and smell than the common sutchong. The leaves are larger and yellowish, not rolled up, but expanded, and packed up in papers of half a pound each. It is generally conveyed by caravans into Russia. Without much care it will be injured at sea. This tea is rarely to be met with in England.

I've written before about the origin of Russian Caravan tea, but it is worth noting that Lettsom here identifies it with Padre Souchong, today known as Pouchong (*Bāozhǒngchá* 包種茶).

Lettsom now segues into a discussion of the cause of the diverse variations in tea, particularly by the means of drying and firing. Unfortunately Lettsom, like many authors of his time, has no solid empirical basis for his conclusions, basing his ideas instead on analogies with European plants, more Chinese paintings, and even stories from “an intelligent friend of mine”. But in particular he does discuss the concerns in Europe regarding the source of the verdure (greenness) of dried tea leaves.

The quality of tea is often judged by the appearance of the dried leaves themselves. Tea experts look for a shapely curl, fine colors, and so on. It is a matter of opinion how important these aesthetics are, but in Lettsom's time the color of the dried leaf was *extremely* important to the Europeans, as they simply did not yet know enough to judge the unsteeped leaves otherwise. They termed this “bloom” and based much of the value of a tea on this characteristic. Scientists engaged in heated debate whether the verdure of green tea was natural, or if the Chinese cheated with artificial, possibly toxic, coloring agents.

One popular theory was that the Chinese dried tea leaves in copper pans and a chemical reaction created tea's green color, but this idea was easily refuted by Lettsom, as well as many authors afterwards. Herman Boerhaave, an anti-tea writer of the early 1700s, had contended that green tea was artificially colored by iron sulfate, but Lettsom also disproves this falsehood. Lettsom does remain convinced that *some* artifice was used to enhance tea's color, but ultimately concludes, “Is it not more probable, that some green dye, prepared from vegetable substances, is used for the coloring?”

Miscellany & medicine

Stitching pieces of information together from Kaempfer²², Osbeck²³, and du Halde²⁴, Lettsom provides a brief overview of the modes of preparation, pointing out that it is primarily the Japanese who make powdered tea, while the Chinese generally infuse the leaves in the manner familiar to Europe. He does allow that the common Japanese make tea in the same way, and repeats Kaempfer's observation that powdered tea, and the full tea ceremony, is reserved almost exclusively for the nobility.

Lettsom emphasizes that tea is the universal beverage of the immense Chinese population, illustrated by the fact that "one scarcely ever sees them represented at work of any kind, but the teapot and teacup are either bringing [*sic*] to them, or set by them on the ground". He also explains its great cultural importance:

To make tea, and to serve it in a genteel and graceful manner, is an accomplishment, in which people of both sexes in Japan are instructed by masters, in the same manner as Europeans are in dancing, and other branches of a genteel education.

Lettsom then discusses the question of substitutes for tea, pointing out that the Danish anti-tea author, Simon Paulli²⁵, "was the first who pretended to have discovered the real tea plant in Europe", assuming it was the same as the Dutch myrtle, despite being refuted by a large number of his contemporaries. He also mentions Jean-Baptiste Labat²⁶, a French clergyman and explorer of the West Indies, who had claimed to have discovered the tea plant growing in Martinique. Lettsom, being of course intimately familiar with the West Indies, recognizes Labat's description as that "a species of *Lysimachia*", a "shrub I have frequently met with". Lettsom concludes that while many authors have claimed to discover tea growing elsewhere, all were quickly disproved, and while there are many European plants that can be processed and infused in way similar to tea, "we now find, that from the palace to the cottage, every other substitute has yielded to the genuine Asiatic tea."

Lettsom concludes the first part of his thesis with a section on transporting the seeds for

further planting and experimentation, and offers some thoughts on the challenges to transplanting tea and starting new tea cultivations in Europe or North America.

The second part of Lettsom's work is subtitled "The Medical History of Tea", and is broken down into twenty sections, investigating the chemical nature of tea and its effects upon the human body. Since science has changed so much since Lettsom's time, and of course modern experiment and technology have revealed many of tea's components and effects, we won't take this section apart in great detail, but rather cover the general findings, derived largely from his own experiments:

- Chemical experiment reveals that tea possesses both antiseptic and astringent properties. Common experience shows that tea has sedative and relaxing effects, which experiment demonstrates "appear greatly to depend upon an odorous fragrant principle".
- While tea is generally appreciated by healthy persons as "a grateful refreshment, both fitting them for labor and refreshing them after it", those of tender or weaker constitutions may experience ill effects such as indigestion, anxiety, and distress.
- The negative effects of tea appear to be more pronounced in the "finer" varieties of tea, and therefore most common tea drinkers (*i.e.*, those of lower economic ranks) rarely suffer these troubles, excepting those who drink excessive quantities, or regularly drink tea at too high a temperature.

Unfortunately, at one point Lettsom starts to rely on secondhand accounts again, and while his good friends may be excellent medical authorities of some sort, the *extremely* questionable nature of their stories reflect poorly on Lettsom's scientific judgement. He opines upon tea's effect on the nervous system solely on the evidence of "a physician whose acquaintance I have long been favored with" who would suffer stomach pain and insomnia after even the tiniest amount of tea, though strangely pointing out the friend was an opium user who'd get the same effects from the drug. Think about this for a second - Lettsom based his medical opinion on a friend who claimed opium *caused him insomnia*.



Hint: opium does **not** cause insomnia.

He also recounts some pretty odd stories about people who work in the tea industry who suffer sudden nosebleeds and loss of consciousness, and the seemingly ridiculous tale of two tea inspectors who suddenly *collapsed and died* while sniffing tea, as evidence of tea's narcotic and dangerous properties.

Like the monkey stories before, this part of Lettsom's paper was widely rejected as fantasy, but we will allow him the excuse that Lettsom was apparently a very trusting man; I honestly believe Lettsom did not invent these stories himself for any sensationalist reason. It was very common practice in medical literature of this time to rely on information provided by respected colleagues and friends. Unfortunately for Lettsom, some of his friends were blithering idiots, and their accounts, as well as Lettsom's conclusions therefrom, were rejected by many writers with a fair amount of contempt.

Lettsom returns to reason, and leaves these exceptional cases aside, pointing out that multitudes of people in Europe (and certainly many more in Asia) had enjoyed tea for years without dying horribly, so there must be some incidental cause for the reports of occasional negative effects.

He spends the next many sections of his paper discussing the way in which tea is drunk and prepared by people, how its temperature may affect different constitutions, how it may interact with the European diet and work habit, and many other considerations. For the science of his time, it is a sincere attempt at thoughtful and exhaustive discussion; for

the reader of today, of course, it is very outdated medicine.

Lettsom relies on then-current medical theory and suggests that incorrect approaches to making or drinking tea may be cause for many complaints, and of course one's own constitution may lead to different consequences for different tea drinkers. He concludes mostly on a negative note, suggesting that the abuse of tea and hard liquor often go hand-in-hand (as one supports the other, from stimulation to relaxation and back), and that the expense of tea, particularly for the lower classes, is too great for it to be considered anything but a wasteful luxury, and money would be better spent on milk and bread, and other sources of greater nutrition.

One almost believes Lettsom, like Hanway and Wesley²⁷ before him, was secretly an opponent of tea himself. In the end of things, however, he settles upon the opinion that tea was a luxury best reserved for the healthiest members of the higher classes, and that it may have negative effects for all others, either due to the inferior nature of their own health and diet, or to the inferior quality of the tea they could acquire. The fact that Lettsom was part of, and wished to remain in, high society may very well have influenced this conclusion.

This thinking would become the underpinning of an eventual compromise between the majority of high society in London, who passionately embraced tea and made it an integral part of their social rituals, with those who morally opposed the "abuse" of tea and its perceived pernicious consequences.

Conclusion

While much of Lettsom's writing has since been made obsolete, overall much of Lettsom's work stands up quite well for a book written in 1772. Tea had only been present in Europe for just over 100 years, and European nations still had only the faintest misguided notions about Japanese and Chinese culture and technology. Of course,

European understanding of anatomy and medicine was also in a barely-post-medieval state.

The value of Lettsom's work is as the earliest English language attempt at a *complete understanding of tea*, making Lettsom Britain's first serious tea scholar, and his work was of great influence on all English language writers on tea following. *The Natural History of the Tea-Tree* was used as the basic definition of tea in all popular reference works for many years after, and was cited and considered by all of the important tea writers of later generations. Lettsom's facts and ideas - both correct and incorrect - have been cited, repeated, and stolen many times, and formed the foundation of Britain's scientific understanding of tea, and by extension, the tea science of the United States and India.

Notes

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17. *Short, 1730 or 1750?*
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