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PROLOGUE

TEA: LEAF OF AWARENESS

On a cold, clear night in December, 1773, a band of freedom-loving Bostonians, barely disguised as Native Americans, made their way to the town's harbor, where the *Dartmouth*, *Eleanor*, and *Beaver* lay moored at the wharf laden with tea. Having boarded the ships, these sons of liberty then broke open the chests stored in the holds and shoveled the tea into the sea. Soon, the harbor was awash with 90,000 lb of fragrant leaves. "This is the most magnificent Movement of all... This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid, and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences and so lasting, that I cannot but consider it as an Epocha in History," wrote the Boston merchant John Adams, who was destined to become the second president of the new republic.

The tea that filled Boston Harbor on that historic night had been picked at dawn in the hinterlands of the Fujian province of China, withered, tossed, oxidized, fired, rolled, packed in wooden chests lined with lead, carried by coolies shod in grass-sandals, tasted and haggled over by plump merchants, journeyed four months in the damp storage of an East Indiaman round the Cape of Good Hope to London, broken, warehoused, and then reloaded by stevedores for the final, fateful voyage across the Atlantic. From its humble origins in the Himalayan foothills of Southeast Asia, the salubrious tea plant has been traded by humans to every nook and cranny of the globe, and adopted by every people under the sun. Long before igniting the American War of Independence, it abetted the poets of China in their greatest achievements. It has burrowed itself to the core of the Japanese soul, solaced many a weary Tibetan yak herder, fueled the midnight cogitations of Britain's great inventors, and offered untold

numbers of Russian peasants a path to sobriety. Through the centuries, it has provided a safe, stimulating beverage that played a crucial role in reducing human epidemics and making habitation in crowded, bustling cities possible. In the modern world, it marks the day's rhythm for hundreds of millions of people, from the Koryaks of the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia to the Samburu pastoralists of northern Kenya.

It is precisely the epic nature of tea's odyssey that has always made its history so difficult to write. With its botanical, medical, religious, cultural, economic, anthropological, social, and political dimensions, with its roots in antiquity and utter unconcern for distances and linguistic divides, the task of gathering its many strands into a single story for the general reader has always proved daunting for authors, whether from the West or the East. Yet in the storerooms of the world's libraries, and in the archives of the Internet, lie reams of books and journals that contain the meticulous, passionate labors of poets, historians, scientists, and humanists, each shedding light on a particular aspect of tea history. In *The True History of Tea*, we have endeavored to consult these documents and original sources (in a number of occidental and oriental languages), to distinguish fact from popular lore, to clear up many misunderstandings regarding this beloved beverage, and to distil our research into a tale that can be enjoyed by anybody with an interest in tea and its remarkable place in the history of humankind.

The first chapter surveys an array of the plants apart from tea that humans have experimented with in search of a morning perk, relief from hunger and fatigue, religious experience, and artistic inspiration. In Chapter 2, we introduce the tea plant, tracing its botanical origin to Southeast Asia, its first use as a masticatory and preserved vegetable among the Austroasiatic people who inhabit that region, and how knowledge of the tea plant's properties spread north to the Ba people in the Sichuan Basin of China. Chapter 3 follows the diffusion of tea eastward along the Yangtze river, its adoption by Buddhists, Taoists, and herbal doctors, and its first recorded use as an alternative to alcohol and agent of temperance. In northern China, however, tea was initially rejected by the nomadic Tabgatch rulers, who considered their own fermented horse milk a vastly preferable beverage.

By the middle of the Tang dynasty (Chapter 4), tea had been firmly established as China's favorite beverage, as evinced by the magnificent tea vessels unearthed at the Famen Temple, the first imposition of an imperial tax on tea, and the publication of Lu Yu's *Classic of Tea*. During the subsequent Song dynasty (Chapter 5), the center of China's tea production shifted south to the coastal province of Fujian, and together with firewood, cooking oil, rice, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar, tea became one of the "seven daily necessities." A draconian state monopoly on the tea trade was imposed, and as the Tibetans, Mongols, Uyghurs, and other neighboring peoples fell under the spell of tea, the exchange of tea for horses of war (Chapter 6) evolved as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy.

From China, tea was dispersed around the world along three main paths: firstly, eastward to Japan; secondly, westward by land, initially to Tibet, Mongolia, Central Asia and Iran, and later to Russia and its Slavic neighbors; and thirdly, by the British (and other European nations) around the world by sea: to Western Europe, North and South America, Indonesia, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Australia, New Zealand, the Fiji Islands, Morocco, and East Africa. With the arrival of tea in Japan (Chapter 7), the seeds were sown for a unique tea culture that has come to embody all the idiosyncrasies of that island nation. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the philosophy and esthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony were brought to their apotheosis through the genius of Sen Rikyū (Chapter 8), who in his "one-page testament" boiled ostensibly the most elaborate, circumscribed ceremony invented by humans down to the following pithy statement: "It is simply to drink tea, knowing that if you just heat the water, your thirst is certain to be quenched. Nothing else is involved."

In the Ming dynasty (Chapter 9), loose-leaf green tea became the most common kind in China. Gradually, the art of abetting and controlling the tea leaves' natural oxidation (fermentation) was acquired, which gave rise to the semi-oxidized Oolong and fully oxidized black teas. Today, the world of tea can largely be divided into the green tea cultures of China, Japan, and Morocco, the black tea cultures of Britain, its former colonies, Russia, the Middle East, and East Africa, the Oolong tea culture of Taiwan,

and the brick tea cultures of Tibet, Mongolia, and Central Asia. Among the Tibetans, with their heavy diet of yak meat and barley, brick tea was prized for its digestive properties, and consumed with butter and salt in copious amounts (Chapter 10). In the 16th century, the “Yellow Hats” emerged as the most powerful Buddhist group in Tibet, and when the Mongols converted to Tibetan Buddhism for the second time toward the end of that century, they also adopted the Tibetan custom of boiling their tea long and well to extract every drop of its flavor and strength, mixing it with horse milk instead of yak butter. At about this time, the Russian people in the city-state of Moscow were emerging from their chrysalis and expanding eastward rapidly (Chapter 11). This inevitably brought them into contact with the Chinese empire, and after a few initial skirmishes, the two countries settled down to a relatively peaceful and prosperous trading relationship. Caravans of camels and ox-carts laden with tea traversed the Gobi Desert to the Mongol border south of Lake Baikal, where the market town of Kyakhta, founded in 1727, grew into one of the wealthiest cities in the Russian empire.

Along the ancient Silk Road that skirted the fringes of the vast Taklamakan desert and continued over the Pamir mountains into the fertile Ferghana valley, tea gradually supplanted silk as the staple commodity, and from the bazaars of Samarqand and Bukhara, the new beverage spread to Persia and Afghanistan (Chapter 12). Islam forbade the drinking of wine and debated the appropriateness of coffee, so that with the advent of affordable Indian tea in the 19th century, the Middle East was gradually transformed into a solid bastion of tea-drinkers. Throughout the first half of the second millennium, horse-borne Mongol and Turkic people continued to press west, and with the rise of the Ottoman Turks in Anatolia, the caravan routes that had conveyed the spices of India to Europe fell into hostile hands. This was the catalyst for the great European age of exploration, as Christopher Columbus sailed west and Vasco da Gama east, both in search of a sea route to India free from troublesome middlemen (Chapter 13). When Portuguese, Dutch, and English ships began appearing in the waters of China and Japan, tea was one of the exotic commodities

they returned home with in their holds. In Europe, doctors debated the blessings and vices of the new herb, and after a first flirtation with coffee, England threw itself headlong into a love affair with tea that transformed it into the greatest tea-drinking nation on the planet. During the 18th and 19th centuries, tea consumption in Britain expanded with such speed that national economists began to worry about the amount of silver being spent to procure the leaf (Chapter 14). The famous Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus made an attempt to cultivate the tea plant, but was thwarted by the harsh Nordic winter. As Britain turned to opium from India as a replacement for silver to pay for its tea, tensions with China escalated, and in 1840, the first cannon balls of the Opium Wars were fired.

Contrary to popular perception, it was not the villainous role of tea in America's road to independence that turned the young republic into a nation of coffee-drinkers, and tea remained a popular beverage in America throughout the 19th century (Chapter 15). But in those days, Americans preferred green tea, which they iced in their newly invented refrigerators and served as tea punches flavored with fruit juices and spiked with spirits. It was around this time that the British initiated tea cultivation on an industrial scale in the Indian province of Assam, which was followed by Ceylon; by the end of the 19th century, India had overtaken China as the world's major tea exporter (Chapter 16). The final episode of Britain's tea trade with China was written by the tea clippers, the most beautiful sailing ships ever to grace the seven seas (Chapter 17). Loading the new season's tea in May off Fuzhou's Pagoda Anchorage, the tea clippers, gleaming with polished brass and teakwood, raced each other every year round the Cape of Good Hope, until the Suez Canal, opened in 1869, cut the passage to London short by thousands of miles and ushered in the age of the steamship.

In Chapter 18, tea in our time presents a picture as varied and intriguing as a Picasso painting. In Australia, the "billy" can is swung three times around the head to settle the tea leaves before the cups are filled. In Japan, the preparation of a bowl of tea is governed by some 1,000 variations of *temae* – the rules of body movement in the Japanese tea ceremony. During World War II, tea played a crucial role in Britain's monumental struggle to

defeat the Third Reich. Mao washed his teeth with green tea, and today, the favorite drink among Beijing yuppies is a cocktail of green tea and Chivas Regal. In America, spiced chai is vying with coffee for the new generation of trendy cosmopolitans. The Tuaregs of sub-Saharan Africa, for their part, pour their strong green tea from a height to produce an enticing foam. Such are the hundred diversions of tea in the modern world.

To pay tribute to Lu Yu, the founding father of tsiology (the art and science of tea), we have included a full translation of his autobiography (Appendix A). In the year 1900, Wang Yuanlu, the self-appointed caretaker of the Dunhuang Buddhist caves near the western end of the Great Wall, uncovered a hidden cache of manuscripts dating back a millennium and more. These included the oldest known printed book, a woodblock edition of the *Diamond Sutra* now in the British Library, as well as the delectable *A Debate Between Tea and Beer* (Appendix B). And as a final treat to the language buffs, we here present the most incisive, authoritative, and entertaining treatise (Appendix C) on the genealogy of words for tea ever published.

Tea represents a true triumph of the meek. No other beverage has given rise to such an eclectic wealth of pots, cups, and other paraphernalia. No other drink has been elaborated in such an exuberant variety of rituals, each serving as a mirror of the culture from which it has sprung. The cultivation of tea provides a lucrative commodity for the big multinationals, and a livelihood for millions of farmers and estate workers in East Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, China, Iran, Turkey, Georgia, and many other countries. Whether your next cup of tea is made from a sachet of PG Tips, Dongding Oolong, gunpowder, *biluochun*, Earl Grey, or Japanese Gyokuro, it all comes from leaves of the same unassuming bush. So, between sips, take some time to contemplate the hue of your infusion, the road those leaves have traveled both in time and space, their rich history, the confidences they have elicited, the cultural transformations they have caused, and the peace they have brokered, and reflect for a moment on the fact that millions of your fellow human beings around the planet, whether in an office, a tea house, or a desert, are also taking a break from their daily chores to enjoy a moment of the lucid repose that only tea can conjure forth.