

## INTRODUCTION

### *A Soldiers' Tea Party in Surrey*

On a cold Friday evening at the end of November in 1941, an unknown photographer captured a quiet moment when a group of Indian soldiers came to Woking, Surrey, to rest, pray, and drink tea. These men and the residents of this unassuming town in southern England had been fighting Nazi Germany and its allies for just over two years. Germany had reduced whole neighborhoods of London to rubble, had conquered much of the European Continent, had invaded the Soviet Union, and Japan was about to attack Pearl Harbor. Although things looked very bleak at this point in the war, Great Britain was not alone in its struggles. In 1941 it was not an island nation but a multinational empire able to marshal and supply a huge military machine. Men and women from the Indian Subcontinent, from Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and so many other regions in the empire were fighting this war. American money, munitions, and supplies had also already been deployed against the Axis powers. Millions of people and a great deal of tea sustained the nation at war in 1941. Like so many other nation-states, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union included, twentieth-century Great Britain was a global creation. Its history cannot be separated from the multiple worlds with which it interacted, whether in periods of war or times of peace. By tracing the rise and fall of tea's empire that stretched from western Canada to eastern India, *A Thirst for Empire* reveals the belief systems, identities, profits, politics, and diverse practices that have knit together and torn asunder the modern "global" world.<sup>1</sup>

If we take time to look closely at the photograph of the soldiers' tea party on the front of this book we can discern a multilayered, racially and socially diverse community that is all too often conveniently forgotten in contemporary politics and public debate. Although the picture looks as though it could be anywhere in the Muslim world, this tea party took place in front of the Shah Jahan mosque in Woking, a modest-sized English town roughly thirty miles southwest of London. The Indo-Saracenic style building that opened in 1889 is the oldest purpose-built mosque in Great Britain and indeed in all of northern Europe.<sup>2</sup> Though quite small, the mosque rapidly became an important place of worship and social center. Its history reminds us that migration and cultural exchange were as common in the 1880s as in our own day. W. L. Chambers, a British architect, designed the building. The Nizam of the princely state of Hyderabad provided funds for the land. Her Highness, the Begum Shah Jahan ruler of Bhopal and a

## 2 Introduction

number of Muslim donors financed the building. Dr. Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, a brilliant linguist born in a Jewish family in Budapest in 1840, inspired and oversaw the project. A naturalized British citizen who worked for the colonial state, Leitner was proficient in nearly fifty languages, served as an interpreter during the Crimean war, studied in Turkey, received a doctorate from Freiburg University in Germany, and at the age of twenty-three became Professor in Arabic and Muslim Law at King's College, London. He then moved to British India to take up the position as principal of the new Government College in Lahore in 1864 and contributed to several literary and educational projects in India and Britain before building the mosque. Without romanticizing this world that was also rife with racial, religious, and social tensions as well as intellectual debate, we need to acknowledge this history.

One way to begin is to take a second look at the photograph of the soldiers' tea party. While the mosque is a tangible reminder of Britain's global past, so too were the YMCA volunteers who drove their mobile canteen to Surrey, the soldiers they served, and the unseen businesses, planters, politicians, and workers who manufactured tea *and* the markets for this imperial product. This book is their story. The tea these soldiers were drinking was grown primarily in India and Ceylon but also in British colonial Africa. Tea planters and their publicists first encouraged the YMCA and other similar agencies to manufacture, stock, and drive hundreds of tea cars to serve those in need. Why did so many work so hard to serve tea to Indian soldiers in wartime Surrey? The simple answer, and one that so many Britons would easily reach, was that tea was energizing, soothing, and boosted morale. "Tea is supposed to be the favourite drink of the privileged sex," recalled Admiral Lord Mountevans, Regional Commissioner for Civil Defence in London during the war, but then he mused: "believe me, men became tea-drinkers in all our services, especially Civil Defence. It gave us courage and that matey feeling which gets the best effort out of us to help our fellow humans."<sup>3</sup> The notion that good tea would comfort the weary and support the weak seems so natural to those of us who drink caffeinated beverages that it is almost impossible to consider a time when anyone would suggest otherwise. Yet such reminiscences, the photograph on the front of the book, and the soldiers' tea party in Surrey were instances of commercial propaganda that the colonial tea industry disseminated virtually everywhere the Allies were training, fighting, or working for the war effort.

A nurse who had treated the wounded after Rommel had "punched" the Eighth Army "hard on the nose" and taken Tobruk in Libya in 1942 recalled how though the men could barely talk, the first thing they asked for was a cup of tea.<sup>4</sup> An Egyptian State Broadcasting Studio radio program that featured the military hospital recognized that the ubiquitous presence of tea in public

life was in fact commercial propaganda, but this did not make the tea any less appreciated. Speaking about the care of the soldiers, the announcer remarked: "Many of the men are of course suffering from loss of blood and shock," but they no doubt would recover because "the Army Medical Authorities have found that hot sweet Tea has, in such cases, very great value as a stimulant and restorer." The speaker went on to reflect, "This seems like a battlefield adaptation of the advertising slogan 'Tea Revives You.' But it must, I was told be *hot* and it *must* be *sweet*."<sup>5</sup> The observation that the Army Medical Authorities were sounding a great deal like an advertising slogan was apropos. The slogan "Tea Revives You" had entered the popular lexicon because British and Dutch tea planters had advertised tea in this way in key markets around the world for decades. And it did not abate in wartime. To give just a few examples, during the war tea's public relations machine screened films on tea and "National Defence" and lectured on the "proper" way to brew up a good pot of tea at the Port Said Rotary Club, Cairo's Police Schools, and countless other venues. It slapped posters on hoardings that declared: "There is Health in Good Tea."<sup>6</sup> An industry leader explained in March 1942 that although the Japanese occupation of the Netherlands East Indies had cut off supplies from Java and Sumatra, Tea was fighting back. He was not referring to the tortuous experience of tea garden laborers from Assam who had been conscripted to build roads to defend India and, it was hoped, recapture Burma from the Japanese.<sup>7</sup> He was rather describing the huge public relations effort that planters had mounted to raise awareness of "the magnificent part that Tea is playing in the War Effort all over the world."<sup>8</sup> *A Thirst for Empire* traces the origins, significance, and foreseen and unexpected consequences of, as well as opposition to, this effort to create a world market for the British Empire's tea.

We must begin this history long before the twentieth century, for the ideas behind such propaganda were nearly as old as tea itself. Although the plant's origins are still somewhat unclear, archaeologists have recently discovered 2,100-year-old tea in western China, proving that tea was ingested in some fashion before any textual or previous archaeological evidence of its existence.<sup>9</sup> Scholars will no doubt delve into how the tea buried in an emperor's tomb was used, but we know that the Chinese understood that tea had restorative properties centuries before the German scientist Friedlieb Runge discovered caffeine in 1819.<sup>10</sup> Virtually all cultures that enjoyed an infusion of the plant that Western science has named *Camellia sinensis* recognized that it fought off sleep, and many believed it could cure headaches, constipation, and other more serious disorders.<sup>11</sup> Such benefits and the caffeine that creates a mild biological and psychological compulsion have preserved tea's hold on its users, but there are many other ways to consume this substance and people often live quite happily without caffeine. Addiction has

#### 4 *Introduction*

played an important part of the history of drugs, drink, food, and capitalism, but it cannot explain individual or social differences, diverse modes of preparation, changing preferences, or brand loyalty.<sup>12</sup> Economics plays a role to be sure, but all things being equal, consumers still make countless culturally, socially, and politically informed choices when they purchase, prepare, ingest, and think about foods and drinks, even those that are addictive in nature. Chemistry, biology, and economics simply do not determine the social and commercial worlds that have inserted tea and similar commodities into the daily life of millions of individuals and the political economies of so many nations.

While there were always those who disliked its taste or who called tea a poison, a waste of money, and a dangerous foreign import, virtually every culture that has been in contact with tea has described it as an agent of civilization and a temperate pleasure. Such ideas first appeared in China more than a thousand years ago, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European scholars, merchants, and missionaries translated and reframed Chinese ideas about tea (and similar commodities) and made them a core part of European culture.<sup>13</sup> Incorporating a strand of early modern social thought that proposed that consumption and foreign commerce were positive forces that produced civility and social harmony, tea's advocates contended that it balanced the economy and produced a healthy and temperate self-controlled consumer.<sup>14</sup> This notion that tea was a civilizing force was critical to its success and its failures. We often think of temperance as a reaction against mass marketers' push to urge us to buy more, overeat, and shop till we drop. This, however, is a very contemporary understanding of the relationship between restraint and consumption.<sup>15</sup> Temperance did not reject the material world. It developed a morality of consumption that demonized certain commodities and consumer behaviors while promoting others. Thus, as we will see here, the nineteenth-century transnational temperance movement transformed the food and drink industry, contributed to the making of the modern diet, and legitimized consumerism as a positive social force.<sup>16</sup>

Even in the midcentury United States, during a time when consumers were beginning to prefer coffee, an American merchant professed:

No other production of the soil has, in equal degree, stimulated the intercourse of the most distant portions of the globe; nor has any other beverage, with equally alloyed benefit, so commended itself to the palates of the people of the more civilized nations, or become so much a source of comfort, and a means of temperance, healthfulness, and cheerfulness; whilst it may be doubted if any other is equally restorative and stimulative of the intellectual faculties of man.<sup>17</sup>

This merchant's description of tea applied a core idea of nineteenth-century liberalism, the faith that commerce was a civilizing agent, to a single commodity. Such ideas were not the exclusive property of the West, however. For example, in 1906 the Japanese-born curator of Oriental Art at the Boston Museum, Okakura Kakuzo, published *The Book of Tea*, a small but widely read English-language history, which celebrated what the author called "the Cup of humanity." "The Philosophy of Tea," Kakuzo believed, was not mere aestheticism, but it

expresses conjointly with ethics and religion our whole point of view about man and nature. It is hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; it is economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than the complex and costly; it is moral geometry, inasmuch as it defines our sense of proportion to the universe. It represents the true spirit of Eastern democracy by making all its votaries aristocrats in taste.<sup>18</sup>

The cosmopolitan Kakuzo traveled widely but settled in the United States and joined the wealthy and artistic circle surrounding Mrs. Isabella Stewart Gardner. It was at her home at Fenway Court that Kakuzo first publicly read his history of tea and encouraged the consumption of Japanese culture in wealthy America. In myriad histories such as Kakuzo's tea serves as a diplomat bridging the gap between East and West, rich and poor.

At almost the same time that Okakura Kakuzo was writing his history, Indian tea planters proposed that the true tea of democracy, health, and civilization was not from Japan or China but from the British Empire. For example, in October 1914 one of several publicists dedicated to promoting Indian tea, A. E. Duchesne, published "Tea and Temperance" in *The Quiver*. It is fitting that Duchesne should publish in this non-sectarian evangelical journal started by John Cassell, a temperance reformer and tea and coffee merchant who created a major publishing house.<sup>19</sup> These social worlds ensured that tea would be identified with Britishness and Britain's civilizing mission. This piece repeated the adage that "the temperance reformer's most valuable ally" had sobered up the British nation. Tea, Duchesne wrote, had eliminated the "drunken nurses and bibulous coachman" of Dickensian times, had eradicated the need for every businessman to "clinch his bargain over a glass," and expelled the belief that "drunkenness was the test and evidence of British manliness."<sup>20</sup> The hot beverage had in a positive way feminized twentieth-century Britain by evoking "delightful associations of home . . . the innocence of childhood, the sacredness of the mother, the love of the wife, the fascination of the daintily feminine." Free of "vulgarity," "rowdiness," and "obscenity," this simple good was "a factor in civilization." Tea drinking was moreover a democratic habit enjoyed equally by the "fashionable dame," "the

## 6 Introduction

businessman,” “the clerk and the typist,” the “factory hand, the toiling sempstress and washerwoman, the navy, and the soldier.”<sup>21</sup> This celebration of domesticated Britishness especially took hold after the devastation of the war years, but tea’s advocates had been selling elements of this story since the seventeenth century.

In 1914, however, tea was much more than a national symbol. It was a protagonist in a tale about commerce and Christianity, democracy, civility, and empire. On the surface, Duchesne’s and Okakura Kakuzo’s texts seem very similar, but while Kakuzo saw tea as an example of Eastern civilization, Duchesne contended that “the energy and business capacity of our British planters in India,” not Chinese farmers, had transformed the “luxury of the rich” into the “everyday drink of the poor.”<sup>22</sup> Duchesne thus argued that British imperialism enabled mass consumption and spread civilization. In truth, Chinese farmers and an international merchant community had cultivated the Chinese tea that Victorians so appreciated, and it was not until very late in the nineteenth century that most Britons drank or even knew about their empire’s tea. In Duchesne’s interpretation, tea justified imperialism. Critics of empire have made the same point and noted how instead of being a diplomat easing relationships between peoples and nations, tea was a thief or pirate, appropriating Eastern treasures for the benefit of the West.

The humanist and imperial interpretations of tea’s historical role differ in their attitudes to the impact of global economic and cultural exchange, but they similarly employ tea as a device to relate a story about human nature and global relationships. The humanist has tended to rely on a comparative model in which many diverse people participate as consumers in a shared pleasure. This approach typically has emphasized consumer rituals and experiences rather than labor and unequal profits. Those who created our global economy and wrote its history, for example, often celebrated consumerism as a universal human trait, yet used commodities to enforce inequalities and difference. By contrast, what we could call the imperialist model has tended to highlight those inequalities and the environmental and human costs of plantation-based colonial economies. Though academic histories have fallen more often into this category, both models have been around a long time and have been used to illuminate global connections and comparisons and reveal the intersecting histories of culture, economics, and politics. I also employ tea as a device to write the history of globalization but do so without assuming that this process is inevitable or natural or that it has produced greater equality or homogeneity.

By lifting the lid on a pot of tea and really looking at its contents, studying where it was grown and *who* bought, sold, and consumed this commodity, we can explain why British women and Indian soldiers drank tea together in wartime Woking. We can also see how the British Empire exerted power over land, labor,

tastes, and the daily habits of millions of people living in so many parts of the globe. Using both a wide angle and a focused lens, this book demonstrates how advertising, retailing, and other forms of distribution created and were shaped by the history of the British Empire and the integration of the world economy since the seventeenth century. This commodity-centered approach to world history highlights the fantasies, desires, and fears that motivated buyers' and sellers' attitudes and behaviors. While I have revisited many themes that will be familiar to scholars of empire and commodities, those in the tea business, and aficionados, I have built this history of tea from the ground up.<sup>23</sup> I have explored a wide variety of corporate, colonial, advertising, associational, and personal archives in several countries to uncover the experiences and attitudes of the people who labored to make, sell, brew, and drink tea. Tea's massive archive illustrates that there was nothing straightforward about its history, and at no point since the seventeenth century has this history been untouched by the history of capitalism.<sup>24</sup>

Many of the firms or brand names that we still associate with tea, such as Lipton's, Brooke Bond, Twinings, and Tetley, and many we are less familiar with today, such as the Assam Company, Billy Brand Tea, or Horniman's, play a pivotal role in this history. Rather than assuming the corporation is the driving force behind globalization, however, I argue that early modern trading monopolies, particularly the British East India Company, the merchant firms of the nineteenth century, and multinationals of the twentieth have overlapping histories, and all of these types of corporations participated in and benefited from belonging to a web of interconnected transnational and local relationships.<sup>25</sup> All these businesses were part of political, religious, familial, and industry-based communities that moved within but also well beyond the official boundaries of the British Empire.<sup>26</sup>

This history starts in the seventeenth century, at the beginning of a long-term shift from a Chinese to European and then a British-dominated global trade. Chinese and other Asian and Near Eastern people had manufactured, traded, and consumed tea long before Europeans encountered the beverage. Early modern Europeans played a relatively minor part in the trade compared to that of other tropical commodities such as sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cocoa. Nevertheless, in the seventeenth century, the Dutch, French, and Portuguese acquired a taste for the rare luxury and introduced the British to the drink. Over time a small but influential group of aristocratic and cosmopolitan Britons began to view and promote tea as a panacea capable of curing most mental, physical, and social disorders. The British East India Company entered the trade and its efforts, and those of smugglers, private merchants, shopkeepers, medical experts, and temperance enthusiasts, enabled tea to become a regular feature of social life

and diets of people in England, Scotland, and Wales, parts of Ireland, North America, and other areas of the British Empire and British World in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Tea was very useful to state revenue and the creation of a sober society, but in an era of mercantilism, the mass consumption of foreign things bred dependency and weakness, or so theorists believed. As is well known, the British began to exchange Indian-grown opium for Chinese tea as a way to stop the drain of silver from the nation's coffers. The Chinese addiction to opium and British addiction to tea became so intertwined that in both places myths developed about the similarities between the two substances. This anxious relationship shaped the history of retailing, advertising, consumption, and colonial conquest in India and the nature of tea production throughout the nineteenth century. The opium trade was one solution to trade imbalances and fears of dependency. Another was the search for alternative sources of supply. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the British contemplated growing their own tea within the boundaries of the Raj. In the 1820s, during a war with Burma, and with the help of local elites seeking a new source of money and power, a British soldier of fortune found tea growing wild in Assam, just outside the borders of the empire. Growing "British" tea thus began with the violent appropriation of land and labor and a good deal of subterfuge in Assam and China. However, the new generation of planters who launched the tea industry in Assam encountered enormous resistance and made many errors. It was not until the late 1870s that the industry was on a sure footing, but markets were not forthcoming. People simply preferred Chinese tea. Indian teas did not find a significant market in Great Britain until the 1880s, nearly fifty years after the first plantations had been laid out. Promoters of these new teas secured those markets by stoking anti-Chinese sentiment and claiming that Indian tea was modern, healthy, pure, patriotic, and, most important, "British," thereby transforming a foreign thing into a familiar object. Pure food activists, retailers, and Indian tea growers asserted that Chinese teas were adulterated with dangerous chemicals and bore the residue of sweaty and dirty Chinese laborers. Such stories and the blending of India's leaf with that of China accommodated palates to the new British teas. By the 1890s, Britons, the Irish, and Australians were primarily drinking the empire's produce. Yet British markets never seemed capacious enough, and planters felt compelled to conquer vast new colonial and foreign markets. They formed powerful and long-lasting trade associations that lobbied governments and raised taxes that paid for massive, and often repetitive, global advertising campaigns. Planters, their allies, and associations thus cultivated many of the technologies and ideologies we associate with the history of modern consumer society.

We need to pay special attention to the role of the planter in global history. If we follow planters as they moved through time and across space we will see how they shaped the political and cultural economies surrounding tea. By cultural economy, I mean the attitudes, sets of behaviors, and rituals around the growing, trading, and consuming of tea. Planters included the owners and managers of large-scale agricultural operations known as estates, gardens, or plantations, but the “Planter Raj” also included the investors and members of agency houses and cognate industries who may or may not have lived in India, Ceylon, British East Africa, and Dutch-controlled Java and Sumatra but who identified with this business. There were never very many European planters living in the empire. In the 1850s and 1860s, planters were a tiny fraction of the ten thousand non-official Europeans—merchants, traders, and missionaries—in British India.<sup>27</sup> The vast majority came from Scotland, but the early planting industry was more multifarious than has been supposed and there were many mixed-race individuals and families who financed and grew tea. Some indigenous planters owned tea plantations, but white Europeans and major corporations controlled the industry.<sup>28</sup> Wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters also helped erect the colonial hierarchies that sustained the planter class. Women invested in the growing and trading industries, spread knowledge about and sold the commodity, but with a few notable exceptions they typically did not manage plantation agriculture.<sup>29</sup>

The Planter Raj invented many of the advertising and marketing techniques that similar industries still use today. Decades before Coca-Cola refreshed the world or McDonald's served fast food to millions, tea growers combined propaganda, politics, and ideas derived from preexisting consumer and commercial cultures to create tea drinkers in places as diverse as Glasgow, Cincinnati, and Calcutta. Although they met with a great deal of resistance, planters were nevertheless able to alter retail and consumer practices, design new drinking habits, and transform bodily experiences. Business and family connections, politics, and religion, as well as gender, class, and racial ideologies, helped cement far-flung commercial and consuming communities, as did fiscal, land, and other state policies. Planters relied on the many new technologies that inspired globalization in the nineteenth century, including the railway, clipper and steamship, telegraph, chain provision shop, cooperative society, tea shop, newspaper, magazine, and exhibition.<sup>30</sup> They also readily used radio, cinema, popular music, market research, public relations, and television in the twentieth century. Additionally, trade associations and journals were critical to their social power and global reach and provided the skeleton upon which planters created a new kind of global political economy and consumer culture. The Indian Tea Association (ITA), for example, founded in the late nineteenth century, is one of several key protagonists in the second half

of this book. This body and similar institutions in Africa, Ceylon, and elsewhere sustained the class, gender, and racial hierarchies of colonial rule and yet also produced mass markets for tea in Europe, North America, Africa, and South Asia.

To put it simply, planters did not stay on the plantation. Starting as early as the 1850s and 1860s, planters traveled around and beyond the British imperial world, seeking diverse pathways to the consumer. They forced collaborations and engaged in numerous small and large conflicts within and beyond political empires. When they moved to London, Glasgow, Dublin, Chicago, or Cape Town they did not leave behind their colonial mentality or connections. In fact, they often conceived of creating markets as akin to colonial conquest. They explored unknown lands, gained local knowledge, and acquired territory and subjects for their commercial empire. Frequently, planters imported the rhetoric and methods of colonial conquest into the spheres of market research and advertising, and they influenced the politics of consumption and production everywhere they traveled and resided. However, the British never completely controlled the flow of ideas, capital, and commodities. Men and women from India, Ceylon, the Netherlands, Africa, the Middle East, and the United States also stimulated a thirst for the empire's tea. Ultimately, the creation of mass markets was a varied and contentious political, economic, and cultural process that required a great deal of money, labor, power, and persistence. The history of this evergreen with lovely white blossoms demonstrates the fluctuating global dimensions of empires and the racial and ideological underpinnings of transnational business and advertising; it garners for us an intimate social and cultural history of global capitalism.

It is often supposed that tea's commodity chain, especially in the past, was divided into separate gender, racial, and class spheres.<sup>31</sup> Since at least the nineteenth century, it is most common to find portrayals of white male planters, non-white female tea pickers, and middle-class or poor white female consumers. The Victorians thought in these terms and though they knew that men drank tea they often assumed that tea was a particularly feminine drink consumed most often in the private sphere, at home or in dainty tea shops. For example, in 1874, a well-regarded food scientist, Dr. Edward Smith, quipped: "If to be an Englishman is to eat beef, to be an Englishwoman is to drink tea."<sup>32</sup> Tea allowed women to in effect become British, though what that meant varied over time and in different locations. In *A Thirst for Empire* I ask, how did such ideas emerge and impact consumer cultures, business practices, and political debate? I argue that tea's purported femininity and its association with Britishness was not so much a reflection of the sociology of markets but a result of deeply embedded and long-lasting ideologies that at times benefitted sales but also became an obstacle to profits. As we will see, the industry spent a good

deal of time debating how and whether to brand tea as feminine, masculine, national, or imperial. Such considerations provide a window into when and how global business constituted the gender of consumers and producers, but as we will see the feminine and domestic image of this commodity allowed some women to declare themselves as business experts and own and manage tea shops, groceries, and specialty shops and some gained real prosperity and political clout selling imperial commodities. Of course, their activities helped solidify tea's femininity and undercut efforts to capture the male market. Gender and race also informed producers' identities and actions. Planters, retailers, and advertisers, for example, forged masculine trade-based identities that helped them gain power and make profits.

The general outline of tea's history is quite well known in part because growers, manufacturers, and retailers wrote accounts of the commodity's past to shape markets, and they continue to do so today.<sup>33</sup> We have countless general histories that tend to rely on published sources and rarely delve into the rich archival record that tea has left behind.<sup>34</sup> We can learn a great deal from some of these works and at times I have found it necessary to rely upon them, but I have also studied the origins and uses of this well-worn history. Indeed, the fact that the industry has been so involved in writing its own history is one of the most fascinating and telling aspects of this commodity's culture. The Indian and Ceylon tea industries wrote versions of tea's past to distinguish their product from Chinese and Dutch supplies, to discredit alternatives such as coffee and soda, and to maintain power even during the upheavals of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century. While it has been hard to look underneath the official story, I have been able to build upon the work of a number of historians who have diligently and creatively charted the diffusion of caffeinated beverages in Europe and colonial North America.<sup>35</sup> Sidney Mintz's seminal work on sugar, Jan de Vries's more recent examination of what he called Europe's "industrious revolution," and the work of numerous other scholars have demonstrated how tea became a highly profitable commodity in early modern global trade. Tea became a much-appreciated aspect of an "Enlightened" consumer revolution, contributing to the growth of slavery in the Caribbean and the making of an industrial working class in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Great Britain.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, for all this attention, European and American tea markets were much smaller than those in Asia at the time.<sup>37</sup> Using region rather than nation as a category for comparison, scholars have demonstrated that parts of China, Japan, India, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas had much larger and more developed market economies and tea cultures than Europe prior to the nineteenth century and that the expansion of European-dominated capitalism did not always destroy local meanings or these economies.<sup>38</sup> Much of this work

in some way or other has contributed to the larger question of the so-called rise of the West. Instead of contributing directly to this debate, I take a step back and ask why, despite the diverse nature of the people, capital, and technologies that have shaped the global economy, it has been so easy to frame modern history as the rise of the West. *A Thirst for Empire* questions such grand narratives by paying as much attention to the local and personal as the global. Consideration of the intimate and regional especially clarifies the power dynamics that have produced the broad patterns, gaps, edges, and borders that have made the contemporary world.

In the nineteenth century, tea's history does indeed look quite a bit like an epic battle between the British and Chinese empires. In one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of this commodity, British soldiers, scientists, and colonial officials engaged in outright violence, bribery, drug dealing, and stealing, and they imprisoned, executed, and expropriated the property of their South Asian allies and employees.<sup>39</sup> Slavery was abolished in the empire at virtually the same time that tea plantations were laid out, and over the course of the nineteenth century European beet sugar replaced slave-produced Caribbean sugar, but forced labor remained an important ingredient in the Victorian cup of tea.<sup>40</sup> Tea cultivation in British India and other colonies thus exemplifies what historian Sven Beckert has called "war capitalism." In his study *Empire of Cotton*, Beckert argued that in the nineteenth century capitalism relied on state power and violence to expropriate immense tracts of land, enslave whole populations, and reorganize "economic space" on a global scale.<sup>41</sup> This seemingly "relentless revolution," as Joyce Appleby has described the historical development of capitalism, repeated itself in many different regions around the globe, but as she also proposed there was nothing "inexorable, inevitable, or destined" about this history. Capitalism was a historical creation shaped by coercion, culture, and contingency.<sup>42</sup> It was also an "irresistible empire" that fashioned new wants, new identities, new ideologies, and new things. Victoria de Grazia has used this phrase to describe the American market empire that reached its greatest power in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> As we will see in this book, war capitalism and an irresistible empire often went hand in hand, and indeed U.S. business and markets played an important if subordinate role in building the British empire of tea throughout its long history.

One of my central aims in this book is to demonstrate the precise connections between the formation of markets in Great Britain, its colonies, and its trading partners.<sup>44</sup> While I could have traced the planters from Ceylon who forged markets in Russia, in France, or within their own colony, I have particularly written about the process of market formation within what the late Victorians called the British World, especially focusing on the British Isles, India, Ceylon,

South Africa, and the United States, and with some comparisons to Australia and Canada. At various moments all of these places were important markets, despite the fact that so many people could not afford to or did not want to drink tea. Comparing how similar institutions developed in each of these places offers a unique prism through which we can examine the global production, rejection, and perpetual reinvention of an imperial commodity. It also reinforces our growing sense of South Asia's role in influencing the Indian Ocean arena and connecting that region of the world with Europe and the Americas.<sup>45</sup>

Researching and writing the history of commodities is not in fact a new phenomenon, but our increasingly connected world and the global economic crisis of the early twenty-first century has led to a flurry of studies on the global circulation and meaning of things. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai inspired much of this work when he urged scholars to write the global biographies of objects and commodities, to "follow the things themselves," and detect how "meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories."<sup>46</sup> Appadurai defined the commodity very broadly as "*any thing intended for exchange.*"<sup>47</sup> The "commodity turn" in the historical profession has usefully questioned the centrality of the nation in historical writing, the modernity of globalization, and the European nature of modernity.<sup>48</sup> It has expanded our understanding of the motives for empire building and the nature and consequences of the colonial encounter. It has helped us see imperialism as something that happens in the metropole and in the colonies, and to regard colonialism as a form of exchange between the colonized and colonizer.<sup>49</sup> Following particular commodities also reveals how transnational encounters, exchanges, and agencies worked within but also outside of formal imperial borders. Instead of regarding commodities then as quantifiable evidence of the value of colonies, we can examine things as carriers of meaning, sites of contestation, and lenses through which we can see the making and unmaking of imperial, subimperial, and transimperial relationships.

In contemporary social science and the multidisciplinary field of food studies, scholars and activists have frequently employed the heuristic device of the commodity chain to demonstrate the institutions that bring a commodity from factory to market or farm to table. This method can clarify what is hidden by packaging and supermarket culture and thereby reveal the labor and/or hidden additives that produce our daily bread. Historians have used this model as well to research how things become commodities, where conflicts arise along the supply chain, and how different labor and retail systems have come into being.<sup>50</sup> These studies have brought a historical perspective to contemporary issues, including the environmental, labor, and health consequences of the global food system, and emphasize how workers, distributors, and consumers make history.<sup>51</sup>

A commodity-centered history of capitalism is not perfect, even if it is popular. The model makes it difficult to chart change over time or capture what I see as the messy, unpredictable, and highly volatile nature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalism. It also typically positions the consumer as passively responding to the work of others. Another problem is that it has tended to produce artificial categories that did not actually exist in reality. Even relatively simple commodities such as tea are not stable entities, and like the nation-state their borders have to be shored up over and over again. Moreover, manufacturers often produce and sell many types of items together; shops are situated within complex retail systems, and consumers also buy many things at once.

Capitalism, nevertheless, creates categories and knowledge systems that make commodities and industries appear singular and unique even when they are not, a problem I am especially concerned with in this book. Advertising, one such knowledge system, is central to the process of making products appear special; this capacity goes a long way to explain why advertising has become such a phenomenally successful global business, even when it is hard to prove the effectiveness of a particular advertisement or campaign.<sup>52</sup> Like advertising, packaging and branding also both produce and suppress knowledge about the production of goods, and all of these processes can shift markets, alter commodity chains, and inspire consumer-based politics. As many food activists today will readily note, advertising is just as likely to quash knowledge as to inform consumers about the nature of goods. Just to give one example, currently Kenya is one of the top two exporters of tea in the world and there are significant producing areas in Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa.<sup>53</sup> Because of the nature of advertising, branding, and packaging, however, most consumers are unaware that African leaf is in their “English” breakfast tea. Of course, not all commodities rely heavily on consumer advertising, but if we consider the broader history of trade advertising then we will see more fully how distribution and publicity in their broadest sense need to move from the periphery to the center of commodity studies and world history.

Tea’s history is in fact inseparable from that of advertising, and this has a great deal to do with the nature of the plant. While tea can grow in many climates, it thrives in tropical and subtropical areas with warm temperatures, high humidity, and a great deal of water, sunlight, and well-drained and nitrogen-rich soil. Once mature, the freshly picked leaves must be processed quickly to prevent spoilage and thus whether produced on large-scale plantations or small farms processing typically happens near growing areas. Tea can be made into bricks, pounded into powder, and dried and fermented in various ways to become green, black, oolong, and other varieties. However, ideally all leaf teas should be transported from the field to the cup relatively rapidly or they will lose freshness, flavor, and

value. Tea cannot languish in warehouses; it must be purchased quickly. Thus while this simple commodity has been enjoyed as a luxury item, in the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth century it has most often been blended, branded, and retailed as a very inexpensive mass consumer good. It can be served hot and iced, with added flavorings and spices, prepared in urns, samovars, and pots, sold in tea bags and even freeze dried, but unlike corn, soy, sugar, oils, cotton, or even diamonds, it has no appreciable industrial uses. Wherever it is grown and manufactured, tea is basically a beverage. These facts are very significant to tea's commercial history.

Manufacturers have of necessity primarily dealt with surpluses through the production of more consumers rather than the creation of new uses for tea. Very early on producers became aware of the need to find, create, and maintain domestic, colonial, and overseas markets. They became early adopters of advertising and market research, and experimented with many different forms of publicity and distribution. We know a fair amount about how the big companies introduced brand advertising, but we know very little about the kind of cooperative, generic, or group publicity that planters' organizations paid for and conducted to create new tastes in the first place. One of the leading transatlantic practitioners of generic campaigns, Sir Charles Higham, explained in 1925 that direct brand advertising was a "reaping process," with immediate results, but "group publicity is more a process of fertilization—the courageous effort of farmers who intend to do everything possible to endure a good harvest later on."<sup>54</sup> Higham insisted that generic product advertising produced new desires, educated public tastes, and created the demand that retailers would later satisfy. At the time he was developing his theory of collective advertising, Higham was hired by the Indian Tea Association to teach Americans to drink the British Empire's tea. India's planters were not as patient as Higham hoped and they fired him after they could not detect rapid results. Nevertheless, this sort of advertising fashioned many of the cultural and institutional frameworks that enabled the British Empire to determine the flow of ideas, goods, and knowledge, commonly labeled as globalization.

There are many definitions for this broad and yet vague concept, but rather than apply a contemporary definition, I trace what the global meant to consumers, business people, politicians, and others in diverse locations in the past. I thus tease out different "global" imaginations and consider where and how people gained, used, and lost global knowledge. African historian Frederick Cooper proposed that historians must disentangle the differences between "long-distance" and "global," to recognize the limits to a global framework, and avoid characterizing globalization as a unitary or inevitable process.<sup>55</sup> I have followed his suggestions by focusing on the commercial and consumer cultures of a single commodity

as it moved and failed to move from one site to another. In addition to using both a comparative and connective approach to world history, I emphasize continuities and discontinuities between early modern and modern empires and today's global world.

The notion of thirst has been helpful here. I have employed "thirst" in two ways in this book. It is a metaphor for desire that is inherent in imperialism and mass marketing, two forces in world history that share an unquenchable desire for people and resources. It is also a sensual experience. While we can never obtain a pure view of how an individual experienced his or her cravings and satisfactions, we do know that thirst has a history.<sup>56</sup> We can trace the forces that produce thirst and its satisfaction and examine why people acquire and lose tastes for food and drinks, and how this might be different from how people sell and use clothing, toiletries, furniture, entertainment, and so on. For example, food and drink habits tend to change slowly and are highly influenced by habit, tradition, and environment. Religious and scientific cultures often determine what is eaten, how it is prepared, and the spatial and temporal histories of consumption. In general, drink cultures are deeply connected to the formation of social groups and identities. As one scholar has explained, they "give rise to a whole set of graded consumption patterns" and uses that are "based on the perceived oppositions such as between wine and beer, tea and coffee . . . inebriant versus stimulant, cold versus hot, silver versus ceramic."<sup>57</sup> Drink cultures therefore have often become associated with multiple and overlapping identities. They can bolster regional or national cultures and class, gender, and racial identities at the same time.<sup>58</sup>

While the empire of tea I describe was largely the work of Scottish and English planters and colonial officials, generally speaking these men and their families used the term "British" to describe their identities, their home, and the products they produced. The term was not inert; it took on different meanings within diverse contexts. At times, for example, "British" had a racial connotation and was often a stand-in for a cluster of attributes associated with "whiteness," but this was not always the case.<sup>59</sup> It was also a common term used to brand the new teas from the colonies. At the same time, I have avoided when possible the term "Indian" or "Sinhalese" to define people that did not define themselves in this way. Yet, as we will see, it became common to describe teas and industries as having "national" characteristics long before these nations actually existed. This demonstrates how economic theories, methods, and rhetoric, particularly that of political economy, helped produce ideas of nation often well before places such as India or Ceylon/Sri Lanka became political realities.<sup>60</sup> To explore this process it is critical to pay attention to and unpack the language and actions of historical subjects, considering why they employed particular words and phrases, why they traveled where they did, and how they interacted and understood diverse people.

In one of his well-known lectures on globalization, the cultural theorist Stuart Hall thought about how commodities, slavery, empires, and immigration were interconnected forces that shaped his identity and that of modern Britain:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself. Because they don't grow it in Lancashire, you know. Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolism of English identity—I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea?

Where does it come from? Ceylon—Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history.<sup>61</sup>

As a Jamaican who moved to Britain in the 1950s, Hall perceived how a variety of British identities and colonial relationships became personified in a cup of tea and in the rituals and histories surrounding its production and consumption. Hall asked how “foreign” yet everyday objects revealed the “outside history” that is English history. He asked, how does the history of a commodity illuminate the intimate and social experience of imperialism? I have placed this question at the center of this book but extended it to consider how tea exposes as well the outside that produces African, South and East Asian, and American history.<sup>62</sup>

This book is a study of a global commodity that foregrounds intimate yet public settings, individuals, institutions, and recurrent practices. It investigates key episodes that illuminate the underlying ideologies and cultural norms and political and economic thinking that shaped the behaviors of a transnational business. I especially zero in on times of collaboration and conflict between disparate groups for a number of reasons. First, these are moments when the unspoken becomes uttered, when implicit ideas about people, bodies, places, and economy become explicit. Second, a close-range analysis highlights how the actions and concerns of men and women who lived far from one another collectively produced global capitalism. Third, my method acknowledges the centrality of gender, race, and class in the construction of global capital flows and ideologies, or what I have labeled as cultural economies. Moving between micro- and macrolevels of analysis allows us to see the way in which these markers of difference manufactured the culture of global business.

This study is organized chronologically and thematically in three parts. Each chapter delineates broad developments in production, distribution, marketing, and consumption before turning to analyses of important episodes, such as the conquest of Assam, the history of temperance tea parties, and the racial underpinnings of food science and packaging. The first part of the book, “Anxious Relations,” traces how Chinese tea was absorbed into British imperial culture and its economy between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. This was not a straightforward process, and it was always shaped by fears of foreign things entering the British nation and bodies. This part demonstrates how trade and colonialism, importing, retailing, and exporting defined and redefined nations and citizens. The second part, “Imperial Tastes,” continues these themes but focuses on how the producers of the new imperial teas from India and Ceylon overcame a great deal of resistance to find and maintain markets in Britain and in colonial and foreign settings between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. This part traces the emergence of a dedicated group of tea publicists and shows how they used politics and propaganda to make imperial tastes and markets. Rather than a political entity colored pink on a map, the empire they created was a material and cultural space defined by countless acts of production and consumption. The third part of the book, “Aftertastes,” examines the impact of decolonization on this imperial industry and tea’s consumer culture. As nations struggled to determine the place of tea, advertising, and foreign capital and corporations in their new polities, they redefined tea not as an imperial commodity but as a global industry critical to national development. At the same time, young consumers in many locations also began to eschew this imperial brew as they became addicted to new American and European tastes and consumer cultures. Young consumers traded one form of empire for another when they abandoned tea in favor of coffee and Coke. I end this book in the 1970s, when both India and Sri Lanka made concerted efforts to kick out foreign businesses, but even then they could not cast off the many inequalities and problems of the colonial era. As we will see, it is striking the degree to which today’s food conglomerates originated in Victorian and even Georgian companies, but the intensive growth and globalization of the food and drink industry in the last quarter of the twentieth century is another story.

*A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* thus charts the history of several interconnected transnational communities that were united by a powerful belief that tea was not just a plant or a beverage but a civilizing force that healed bodies, nations, and world problems. With a missionizing zeal, these communities argued that by spreading the habit of drinking tea they were ending social conflict, elevating the intellect, fueling the tired body, and calming strained and overexcited nerves. The Chinese and Japanese, Russians and Central Asians

have viewed tea in this way for centuries, but as it became an article of global trade, tea's civilizing properties became one of most long-lived and dominant advertising appeals in history. There were many who disagreed with such ideas, but nevertheless they helped build, maintain, and eventually destroy a vast empire defined by numerous exchanges and long-distance relationships. This empire inevitably encountered resistance from rival empires, from small and large-scale insurgencies, from consumers, workers, and other producers. Like all empires, it exerted power. The empire of tea has shaped the modern environment, food and agricultural systems, diet and leisure habits, nations, and other polities.