

Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste

Ryan Vlaar

Department of Biology
Lake Forest College
Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

In the centuries immediately preceding the modern era—where daily use of a plethora of worldwide products is a given—global commerce was a new system privy to the pangs of western persuasions. Indeed, the products seen on grocery store shelves today are the consequence of many transformative years in the history of enterprise itself. In his book, *Fruits of Empire*, James Walvin seeks to delineate the histories of now commonplace edibles and their indelible influence in shaping aspects of daily life in seventeenth, and eighteenth, and the nineteenth century Britain. Through emphasis on a number of the most dominant plant products of this time period, Walvin gives the reader a glimpse into the rise of tropical plants to prominence, from field to tabletop. Though the book is in this sense effective, it does not, however, give the reader any more than a story which folds in upon itself, time and again. This strategy is effective in outlining crucial motifs seen throughout this time period, but leaves the reader with a disjointed view of an otherwise cohesive history.

Throughout the book Walvin seeks to compartmentalize each of the focus plants into its own sub story, including and in order: tea, coffee, tobacco, chocolate, potatoes, and sugar. By doing so, he separates and traces the histories and influences of each individual plant as it made its way from the overseas plantations to the markets, and ultimately the mouths, of the British people. This, however, makes the book extremely repetitive. Not only does every chapter follow a similar timeline starting sometime around 1660 and ending in 1800, but also within many chapters Walvin circumnavigates the histories of a subject plant repeatedly, each time to draw a new point. The lack of a linear timeline is confusing to the reader and unnecessarily so. Better organization would contribute greatly to the flow of the otherwise interesting facts presented throughout the book.

This is not to say, however, that Walvin does not sometimes attempt to interpose the historical timelines of multiple plants. In fact, many chapters do mention, here or there, the significance of one plant's simultaneous existence with another in British culture. Take, for example, the coincidence of tea and coffee. Walvin states in both the tea and coffee chapters that tea was an import that stayed, more often than not, within the borders of the British mainland. Coffee, on the other hand, was more commonly re-exported elsewhere in Europe. Though interesting, this fact warrants analysis. Walvin does not lend an explanation as to why more coffee was re-exported to Europe beyond simple taste; the British preferred the taste of tea. Further analysis of the social structures built around these drinks would create a more comprehensive analysis of the British tea preference.

Furthermore, by structuring his writing with an emphasis on each plant individually, Walvin subtracts from the looking glass of British taste that is the crux of the book. Though he often returns to each plant's implications within British society, he must diverge to the plant's foreign origin and context in order to tell its story in full. The nature of this story telling means that the process of growing, harvesting, and shipping the products to England upstages the perspective of British society, however relevant it may be.

Lastly, Walvin's structure is ineffective because it seeks to separate the inherently inseparable, and this is the primary reason for repetition in the book. Tea and coffee were both

common beverages in this time, as was chocolate, and all three required sugar in order to be palatable. It makes little sense, then, that Walvin starts the book with the histories of tea and coffee, then moves to tobacco, before returning once again to chocolate—another beverage—only to go back to potatoes and then on to sugar, which was used most frequently in conjunction with the beverages mentioned earlier. If it is any indication, the disjointedness of the sentence above mirrors the disjointedness of the organization of the book. There are certain ways in which Walvin could have effectively conducted his analysis that would better pertain to the title and the message of *Fruits of Empire*, while still including the necessary amount of raw history.

Despite the dearth of organization stated above, Walvin proposes a number of patterns observed in Britain during exotic produces' rise to prominence that make the book a relevant historical perspective. His analysis, though shallow at times, emphasizes the most apparent impetuses behind the botanical successes that are focuses in the book, and blatantly so. Of these influences, the social implications of their first introduction in the higher classes was rather important, followed by their significance as foreign products, and lastly, their ability to produce with them a distinctive culture of consumption. Each serves to highlight the process each product underwent to become a staple of British culture, and used in stead of the individual plant chapters would have more effectively analyzed the adoption of the products into daily life as seen through the British perspective.

To expand upon the former of the reasons stated above, the percolation of exotic goods from the aristocracy to the peasantry was most important in establishing the foothold of exotic goods in British culture. Indeed, every chapter from tea to tobacco commented on the importance of each product as first a way of flaunting wealth and decadence before actually using the product practically in everyday life. Sugar in the early days of the seventeenth century, for example, was used to create grand sculptures that only the supremely wealthy could afford. Similarly, tea took much the same course. Consumed first by members of the Royal family, it became prominent among the well-to-do's who created an entire culture around its consumption. As more and more people saw its popularity among the fashionable upper classes, the higher the demand for the rarity, and the more tea that was sought after and supplied by the East India Company. This pattern can be extracted, without exception, from Walvin's account of each of the products histories. Even the potato, which was a lowly food only suitable only for the Irish was grown as a status symbol in gardens before it was used extensively to cure the hunger pandemic that struck in the late 1790s. This motif clearly represents a strong pattern across the histories of all the plants presented in the book. Used as a unifying chapter it would more clearly and precisely illustrate the importance of the upper class than the way in which Walvin repeated this observation in his own analysis.

Though the fashion of these plant products was vital to the demand, Walvin proposes that it was the illegal trade of these goods caused by exorbitantly high tariffs that guaranteed the infusion of these products into British culture. Again, this would serve as a more unifying chapter and build off of the ideas presented above. Additionally, evidence in support of Walvin's idea that illegal trade was crucial in creating access for the poor is found in almost every chapter. On such things as tea and tobacco, tariffs were often over one hundred percent of what the original cost of production and transport was. Because of this, tea that could be smuggled in free of tariffs was far cheaper than the tea brought in by the East India

Company, and offered a lucrative way for many to make a quick fortune. It also meant much cheaper prices for the lower classes; hence its rapid spread from a drink of the wealthy to a drink enjoyed by all, regardless of class.

Walvin's emphasis on the exotic nature of each of the products would have also served as an effective means of analyzing their influence within British society. Each of these products was an export from an area of the globe both foreign and exotic—whether that meant China or Jamaica. This can be seen perhaps most clearly in the reactions of the health professionals and the social commentators of the time, who had very polarized views of each of the products. Generally speaking, the proponents of the new age of plant products endorsed each plant as having medicinal qualities. Tea was advertised as being a general decongestant and an even better defense against sickness, coffee was a stimulant and a potential aphrodisiac, chocolate was nutritious and fattening, tobacco was thought to relieve asthma, and sugar was used simply as a common medicine.

Yet another potential section could outline the attitudes against the new products. Walvin proposes the idea that those against the new imports were in strong support of the well-defined social hierarchy that was disrupted. To many critics, access to products of a foreign nature should have been restricted to the wealthy upper classes. Furthermore, critics also commented on the degradation of a respectable culture that came in the wake of the influx of new products. Tobacco, though used nearly ubiquitously throughout this period saw what was perhaps the largest backlash, but the other products saw similar reactions and all were relevant in shaping the social and economic climate of the era.

Ultimately, Walvin's *Fruits of Empire* would have most effectively ended with a commentary of how each of the products created a new type of subculture within Britain. Tea created a strong drinking culture that took Britain by storm—from the tea parties of upper class women to working class laborer's afternoon breaks. The introduction of coffee and coffee houses opened up an area where men could convene outside of alehouses and served as hubs of upward mobility and general camaraderie. Tobacco served as the social drug of man and women alike, and transformed the habits of an entire country. Each product augmented the others in creating what would ultimately come to be the culture of Britain today.

Though lacking in general organization, James Walvin created a book that ultimately addressed the forces at work behind what was and is still one of the world's greatest superpowers. With the help of human intervention, tea, coffee, tobacco, chocolate, potatoes, and sugar have all proven to be master artisans in the co-shaping of empires. Their story from the field to the table is testament to the relevance of how man's interaction with nature moulds the spheres in which he lives, from economics to domestic life and everything in between. By examining the patterns that emerge from those interactions, James Walvin brings to light the most important aspect not only of how the British changed the world they found outside of their borders, but how the world changed the British—and along with them the world they once controlled.

Note: Eukaryon is published by students at Lake Forest College, who are solely responsible for its content. The views expressed in Eukaryon do not necessarily reflect those of the College. Articles published within Eukaryon should not be cited in bibliographies. Material contained herein should be treated as personal communication and should be cited as such only with the consent of the author.