

COMMON COMMODITIES  
AND INDUSTRIES

TEA

*A. Ibbetson*

PITMAN'S COMMON COMMODITIES  
AND INDUSTRIES

TEA

FROM GROWER TO CONSUMER

BY

A. IBBETSON

LONDON

SIR ISAAC PITMAN & SONS, LTD., 1 AMEN CORNER, E.C.  
BATH, MELBOURNE AND NEW YORK

# CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	DESCRIPTION OF TEA PLANT . . . . .	1
II.	LARGE CONSUMERS . . . . .	7
	DISPARAGEMENT OF CHINA TEA REFUTED	12
	THE TANNIN DIFFICULTY . . . . .	12
	WHEN MILK CAN BE DISPENSED WITH .	14
III.	CHEMICAL ANALYSIS . . . . .	17
IV.	VARIOUS METHODS OF CULTIVATION AND	
	MANUFACTURE . . . . .	22
	CHINESE METHODS . . . . .	22
	TEA IN JAPAN . . . . .	30
	TEA IN CEYLON . . . . .	34
V.	TEA IN INDIA AND OTHER COUNTRIES .	40
	TEA IN NATAL . . . . .	46
	TEA IN THE CAUCASUS . . . . .	47
	OTHER TEA-GROWING COUNTRIES .	48
VI.	MODERN METHODS OF CULTIVATION AND	
	MANUFACTURE . . . . .	51
	BRICK TEA . . . . .	56
	OTHER " TEAS " . . . . .	58

CHAP.	PAGE
VII. TAXATION OF TEA . . . . .	63
VIII. PUBLIC SALES, SAMPLING AND BUYING. . . . .	66
IX. DISCRIMINATING TASTING . . . . .	78
X. BLENDING, PACKING AND STORING . . . . .	95
XI. HOW TO CREATE INTEREST IN FINER TEA . . . . .	103
XII. FINE TEA SOLD AT MINCING LANE . . . . .	112
INDEX . . . . .	116

# TEA

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## CHAPTER I

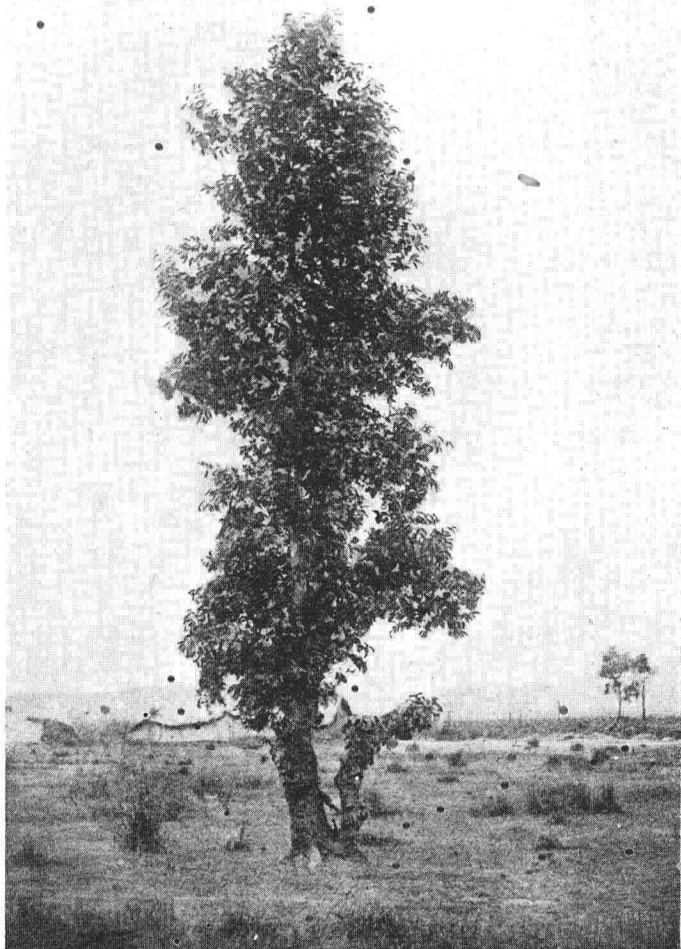
### DESCRIPTION OF THE TEA PLANT

TEA, as everyone knows, is prepared from the young leaves of the tea plant, *Camellia Thea* (*Thea sinensis*), a shrub belonging to the natural order Theaceae, and extensively cultivated in China, India, and Ceylon, and, to a less extent, in certain other countries. Under the name of *Thea sinensis*, the Swedish botanist, Linnæus, originally described tea as a single species, but later it became known that two distinct plants were cultivated in China, which he named *T. viridis* and *T. Bohea*. These two species were long thought to be the origin of green and black teas respectively. No strictly wild plants have been found in China, but an indigenous tea-tree, *Thea assamica* (or, as it is now called, *Camellia Thea*) occurs in Assam, and is generally regarded by botanists as the parent species of all cultivated forms.

The tea plant is a bushy shrub which, when left to its natural habit of growth and not subjected to the vigorous prunings necessary for its successful cultivation, attains the height of a small tree. The leaves vary considerably in size and shape, according to the variety, but are leathery, alternate, and generally elliptical or lanceolate, with a toothed margin. Oil glands occur in the substance of the leaf and contain an essential oil to which the flavour of tea is largely due. The under surface of

the young leaves is thickly covered with fine hairs which entirely disappear with advancing age. The beautiful white or rose-coloured, slightly fragrant, flowers occur either singly or in clusters in the axils of the leaves; they are succeeded by more or less globular fruits consisting of capsules composed of three compartments, usually with only one seed in each compartment.

The question as to the original home of the tea plant is by no means settled, the point at issue being whether, after all, the true home of the plant is in the country naturally associated with it, viz., China, or in the neighbouring Indian province of Assam. The evidence in support of the latter contention is largely based upon the fact that the tea plant attains extraordinary luxuriance in Assam, greater, it is said, than that attained in any part of the Celestial Kingdom, and, arguing that in its natural home a plant reaches its greatest development, supporters of this view maintain that it is in Assam and not in China that we are to look for the home of tea. It by no means follows, however, that the reasoning of this argument is sound, for it has been repeatedly noticed that plants introduced into new countries where conditions seemed favourable for their growth have flourished so well that their luxuriance rivalled that of the plants growing in the land admitted to be their home. Support for the opposite view is sought in a Japanese legend which ascribes to China the honour of being the home of the tea plant; but, unfortunately, there is evidence for supposing that the Chinese never heard of this legend except from foreign sources, although the events related occurred in their own country. There are, however, certain references to the plant in the writings of a Celestial author who lived about 2,700 B.C., and a Chinese commentator of this ancient author, writing in the fourth century B.C.,



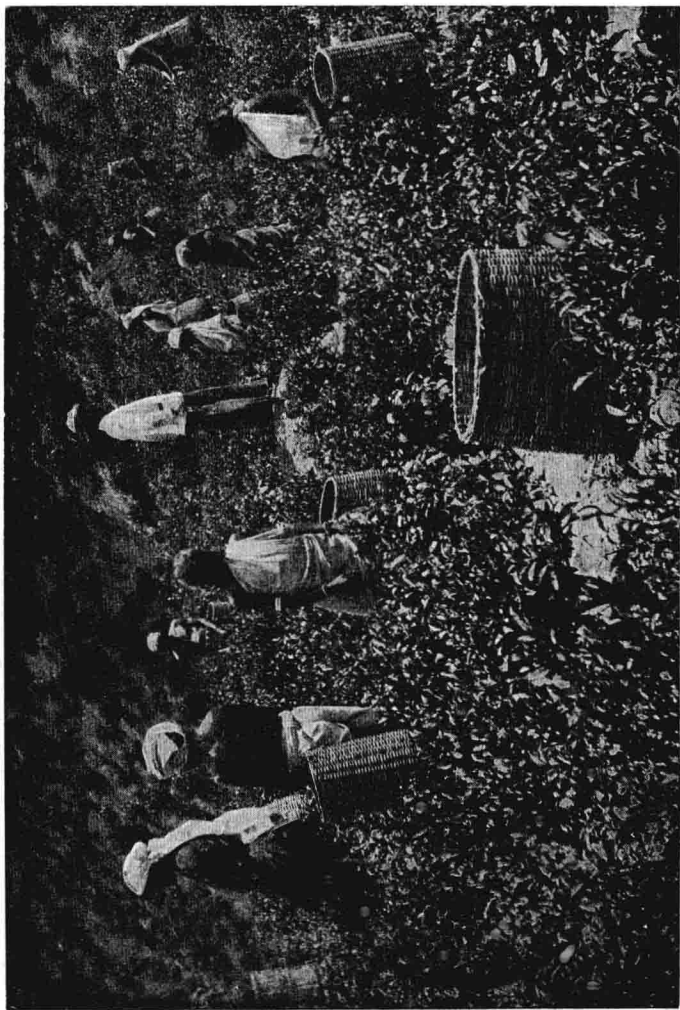
A WILD TEA TREE

calls attention to the mention of the plant, and adds that a beverage could be obtained from the leaves by adding hot water. It appears that the plant was used entirely as a medicine until 550 A.D., when it became a popular beverage.

De Candolle, however, in summing up the evidence on both sides, attaches considerable weight to the fact that apparently wild specimens of tea have been found by travellers in Upper Assam and in the province of Cochar, and adds that "the tea plant must be wild in the mountainous region which separates the plains of India from those of China"; he, however, regards the evidence as tending to prove that the *use* of the leaves was introduced into India from the latter country.

Much more certain information naturally exists as to the date of the introduction of the product into Europe. There is a story which states that a package of a commodity hitherto unknown was received by an old couple in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and that, instead of infusing the leaves and using the extract, they threw away the coloured liquid and ate the leaves after spreading them upon bread. Whatever may be said as to the probability of this story, it is definitely known that tea was introduced into Europe from China late in the sixteenth century, and that in 1657 a regular tea-house was opened in Exchange Alley, London. From this date tea began to be a regular beverage in England. It is mentioned by Pepys in his Diary; under the date 28th September, 1660, we read: "I did send for a cup of tea (a China drink), of which I had never drunk before," and, "Home, and there find my wife making of tea, a drink which Mr. Pelling the Pothicary tells her is good for her cold and defluxions." It was at about the time of its earliest introduction into England that tea first became known in Russia





A KANGANI SUPERINTENDING PLUCKING

an embassy to the Court of Pekin bringing back some green tea to the ancient capital, Moscow. In 1664 the famous English East India Company made a present of two pounds of tea to the queen of Charles II, Catherine of Braganza, and the product was still regarded as a rare delicacy. Fourteen years later the Company imported from China nearly 5,000 lbs. and towards the end of the century tea had ceased to be a rarity.

## CHAPTER II

### LARGE CONSUMERS

WHEN we turn our attention to the countries and peoples who are large consumers, we find that heading the list as the greatest tea importers of the world are the people of the United Kingdom. During the last few years the annual import of tea from all sources into this country has averaged no less than 357,741,000 lbs., costing us £13,311,000 ! We are followed by Russia, which annually receives about 130,000,000 lbs., the United States with 94,813,000 lbs., followed by Holland, Australia, Canada, Germany and New Zealand with much smaller amounts.

To us, as English people, a most important question in connection with the world's tea industry is, to what extent is the British-grown article displacing from the world's market the product of our only serious rival, China ? Let us consider the state of affairs in some of the chief consuming countries. In the United States and Canada the taste for British-grown teas appears to have taken a firm hold. The quantity sent direct from Calcutta and Colombo to Canada in 1913 was nearly 60,000,000 lbs. Further, black teas from China have practically disappeared from the Canadian market, and in all probability the green teas from Japan, which at present are very popular in America, will follow them in a few years ; for since Ceylon green tea was introduced in 1899, the imports from Japan have decreased considerably.

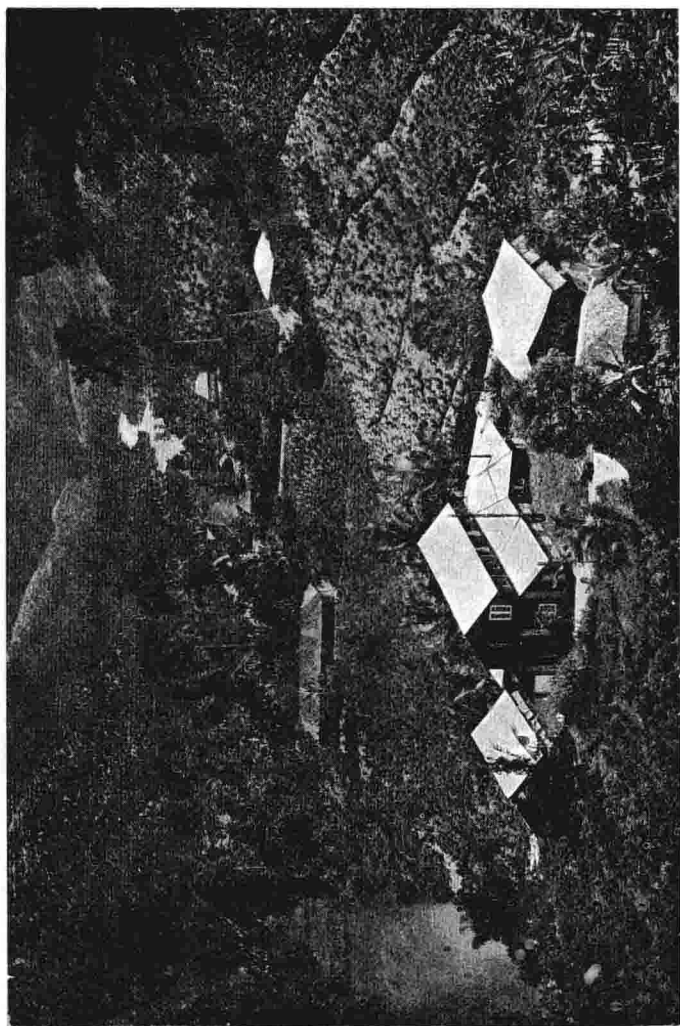
□ The United States takes a fair quantity of Indian

tea, and the increase in popularity of the beverage among our cousins gives hope to the Eastern planters of the creation of a new market of the greatest value. Australia, like the rest of the world, is changing her taste in tea. Formerly, her supplies were largely obtained from China, but the imports from that country are steadily diminishing. Although considerable quantities of tea are now taken from Java, the real fight for the Australian market lies between Ceylon and India. At the present time the advantage lies with Ceylon, whose exports during 1913 to the Southern Empire were approximately 25,000,000 lbs.

Great efforts, attended with considerable success, are being made to develop the Asiatic trade in British-grown tea, and Persia is now a large consumer of the Indian product. The preparation of brick tea for Tibet is also receiving much attention at the hands of Indian planters, who have voluntarily submitted to a self-imposed tax to be devoted to pushing their production among the Tibetans.

Austria, Belgium, Sweden, Holland, Turkey, France, and Russia are all advancing in their tea imports. Much of the tea taken by Holland naturally comes from their colony of Java, but the increase in the Russian import nearly all comes from British sources, to the loss of the Chinese merchant.

Although one of the most striking facts in connection with the tea export trade is the practical loss to China of some of the most important of the world's markets, it must not be supposed that the tea industry in China is ruined. As a matter of fact the area under cultivation has not diminished to any appreciable extent during the past forty years; for the Chinese grower has a vast local market, and immense quantities of inferior tea are converted into the "brick tea" for Tibet and Russia.



A CEYLON TEA GARDEN

Moreover, at the present time, there are unmistakable signs that the Chinese intend to make a bold bid for the recovery of some of the ground they have lost ; for the more enlightened among them have realised that the trade was lost owing to inferior, and to the Western mind sometimes repulsive, methods of manufacture, and also to the fact that, generally speaking, hand labour must at last give way before machinery. That the Chinese are serious in their desire to regain their trade is evidenced by the fact that in 1905 the Viceroy of Nanking appointed a Chinese Tea Commission, headed by an Englishman, Mr. Lyall, to enquire into the methods and conditions of tea cultivation and manufacture in India and Ceylon. As a whole the Chinese soil is said to be less productive with regard to tea than that of our Eastern Empire, and the climate of the tea districts is colder and less forcing ; further, the yield per acre cannot compare with that obtained by the European planters. Nevertheless, the ruling classes in China have become alarmed at the great falling off in revenue due to the diminution of the export trade, for there are heavy Chinese transit and export duties on the product, and it is their intention to see what improved methods of cultivation and manufacture can do to restore this trade. Whether the Chinese peasant can be induced to depart from the methods and customs which have been handed down to him for countless generations is a matter open to question, but the attempt on the part of the authorities is significant, and the situation may be very accurately summed up in the words of an editorial of a Ceylon planting paper : “ . . . The way in which it (*i.e.*, the Chinese trade) has steadily gone back during the last fifty years is not at all conclusive proof that there can be no important recovery under changed conditions and methods. In other words,

the swing of the pendulum may be witnessed in this department of agriculture and commerce as well as in any other, seeing that the (Chinese) tea gardens have suffered no radical injury."

At the present time there is a slightly increasing demand for China tea, and although the consumption in the United Kingdom is small compared with other growths, yet there are signs that these delicate China kinds will again come into favour, especially amongst people of refined taste. The following abstract from *The Lancet* of August 1st, 1908, may be taken as the last word on rival teas, although how far the consumer will be persuaded is another matter. Anyone who has never drunk really fine pure China tea has missed a great deal.

"A controversy which has long been settled in the minds of scientific men has been revived by trade partisans. The persons, on the one hand, whose business it is to sell China tea affirm that Indian tea was long ago tabooed by medical men because, unless it is prepared for use under very careful directions, it contains an excessive amount of astringent substances, known to chemists under the generic name of tannin. On the other hand, the parties interested in the sale of Indian and Ceylon teas declare that China tea is objectionable because the leaf is prepared under unwholesome conditions, that it sustains in fact contamination owing to its manipulation by hand, whereas Indian and Ceylon teas are immaculate in this respect, because nothing is concerned in their manufacture and production for the market but machinery. To this view many tea connoisseurs reply that the æsthetic qualities of the tea leaf are injured considerably by the mechanical means adopted."

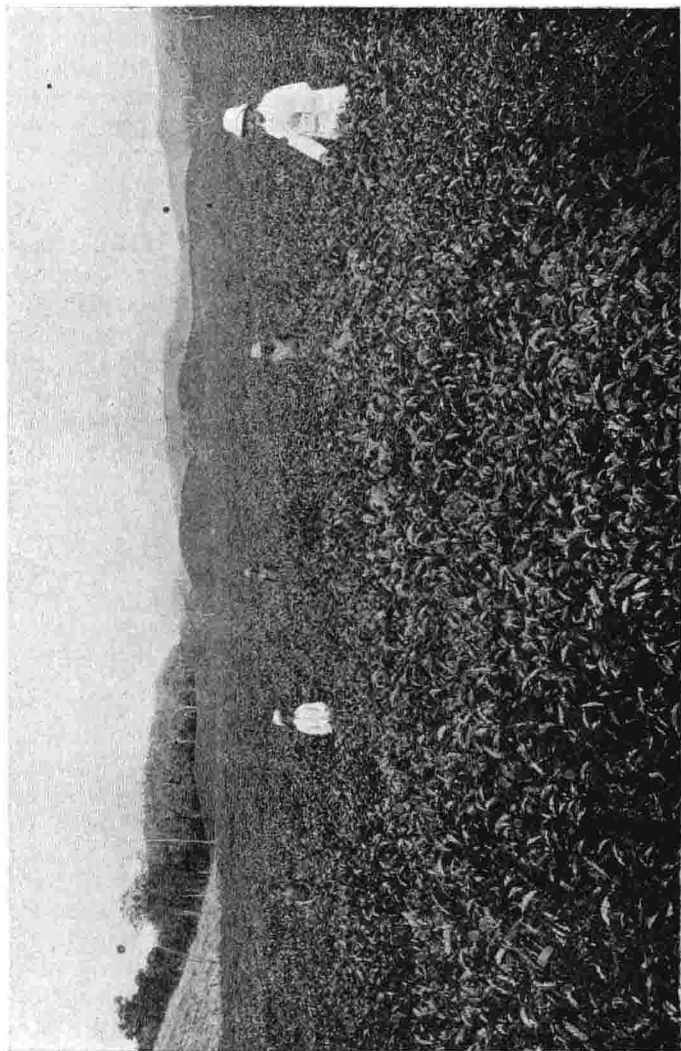
## DISPARAGEMENT OF CHINA TEA REFUTED

“The disparaging statements in regard to China tea, which are based on the fact that it is prepared by hand, may, we think, be disregarded, for it is hardly conceivable that any serious contamination can arise, and if it did any disease organisms that survived the process would be destroyed in the tea-pot. It is well known that, apart from boiling, an infusion of tea is antagonistic to the life and development of micro-organisms, and this appears to be specially the case in regard to the typhoid organism. The objection to the manipulation of tea by hand instead of by machinery has about the same logic on its side as has the objection to the grape being trodden under foot before the wine is produced. No one gives much thought to this fact when drinking a favourite claret. The fact is that the tendency of a fermentative process is to exclude adventitious impurities, and fermentation is essential to the production of both tea and wine. The argument in favour of China tea on the ground that in general it is far less astringent than is Indian tea rests on a scientific basis, and there we are content to leave the controversy.”

## THE TANNIN DIFFICULTY

“It is idle and impossible for the advocates of Indian tea to deny that their favourite commodity contains and yields when infused a much larger amount of tannin than for the most part do China teas. The latter, in fact, are altogether more delicate in character and certainly more suited to the requirements of persons with delicate digestive apparatus. If a dyspeptic is permitted to drink tea at all, that tea should be China tea, because, as a rule, it is much





*By kind permission of Mr. Fritz Kapp*

TEA GARDEN (SOUTH SYLHET)