



Welcome to our March meeting, Historians!

Our next meeting is Tuesday, March 5 at 6:30 to discuss *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History* by Sarah Rose published in 2009. This is the story of Scottish botanist Robert Fortune who became a kind of industrial spy, or perhaps capitalist pirate, in an attempt to steal seeds from China to replant in India to grow tea for England. As Rose points out, this was a time when two world empires—China and England—fought over two flowers—the poppy and the camellia. In many ways, the story of Robert Fortune and the East India Company is a modern tale of industrial espionage and globalization. In other ways, it is a swashbuckling adventure.

Sarah Rose gives context to Robert Fortune's adventure by first giving the historical and economic background to the Chinese tea trade. We learn about the disastrous British deficit in the balance of payments between Great Britain and China due to the huge consumption of tea in Britain. The British attempted to restore balance by selling opium to China which in turn led to the Opium War. By 1848, the British are desperate. Robert Fortune had already spent several years in China studying plants, so the East India Company turned to him with a plan to steal tea seeds and the necessary expertise in growing tea and bring both to British territories in India and Ceylon. As Rose tells us, "this job required a plant hunter, a gardener, a thief, and a spy." Fortune fit the bill.

Much of *For All the Tea in China* is told through Fortune's own letters and journals. He tells of his harrowing journey deep into the interior of China disguised as a Chinese Mandarin. Should he have been discovered, he would have been executed. And he had to avoid robbers and warlords as well as his own untrustworthy servants. Were there spies spying on the spy?

The fact that we associate tea drinking with the British tells us that Fortune succeeded. And he did, beyond the wildest dreams of the men in the East India Company. Fortune also discovered many interesting facts about tea. For example, black tea and green tea both came from the same plants. So how did they get the green tea? The Chinese added several poisonous plant extracts to make the tea a more vibrant green because that is what the barbarians liked which raised the price. Once this became known, the British demonstrated a strong preference for black tea, a preference which continues even today. These are some of the fascinating tea facts that you will learn in the book.

As you read, note the modern aspects of the global battle for dominance in the tea trade. What about the other industries that are affected as part of this trade? Pay attention to the roles of sugar and porcelain in the imbalance of trade concerns. What about the world of the Chinese that Fortune discovered? The interior of China was virtually unknown to the western world. What surprised him? What surprises you? Does Rose overstate the importance of tea in world trade and the status of two empires? Or is she right to say that the competition that developed was actually good for both empires as the number of tea drinkers dramatically increased? Are there any parallels that we can draw to today's trade wars?

There are lots of fascinating aspects to the story of tea as Sarah Rose tells it in *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History*. Bring your favorite facts and any tea stories that you may have to our next meeting on Tuesday, March 5 at 6:30.

See you there!

Donna McBride

