

UPTON TEA QUARTERLY

Vol 19 No. 4

Holliston, Massachusetts

Fall, 2010

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry Part XVII: Pioneers in the British Tea Industry



DRAWN BY T. ALLOM

LOADING TEA-JUNKS AT TSEEN-TANG

ENGRAVED BY J. TINGLE

At the conclusion of the *First Opium War* (1839 - 1842), Great Britain had secured Hong Kong as a trading center. At least in theory, they had also forged the right to open trade with China. But those who believed that the flow of China tea to Great Britain was finally secure were as delusional as those who believed the idyllic, laid-back scene above was an accurate illustration of China and her tea trade in 1845.

Please turn to page 48.

To allow our employees to enjoy a four-day workweek at the end of the summer, Upton Tea Imports will be closed on Fridays from August 6 thru September 3. Orders received after 2:00 PM on Thursdays will be shipped promptly on Monday.

Also, please note that we are now shipping from our new location in Holliston, Massachusetts. See page 3 for details.

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XVII

The first British-produced Assam tea to reach the London tea auction house was dispatched from Calcutta in May 1838. It arrived at the end of the year, to be auctioned on January 10, 1839. That the tea was of marginal quality seemed to matter less to bidders than its groundbreaking uniqueness, and everyone agreed that the quality would have to improve for it to be accepted as a substitute for China tea. That same year, Assam was “annexed” into the British Empire.

Optimism ran rampant, and almost immediately a group of enterprising capitalists in Calcutta formed the *Bengal Tea Association*, intending to monopolize tea production in Assam. But before word of this organization reached London, a joint stock company was already forming in London with the mission of “cultivating the tea plant in Assam”. By the middle of 1839, the two ventures merged, giving birth to the *Assam Company*.

Great Britain was in the midst of the First Opium War with China, and there was an urgency to Assam tea production. In 1840 a larger lot of higher quality was shipped to London. Once again, auction prices were significantly higher than the quality would merit, due entirely to the uniqueness of the tea. Twinings and Co. of London reported:

Upon the whole we think that the recent specimens are very favourable to the hope and expectation that Assam is capable of producing an article well suited to this market, and although at present the indications are chiefly in reference to teas adapted by their strong and useful flavour to general purposes, there seems no reason to doubt but that increased experience in the culture and manufacture of tea in Assam may eventually approximate a portion of its produce to the finer descriptions which China has hitherto furnished.

Optimism soon faded as the Assam Company faltered for the next few years. C. A. Bruce’s early pioneering work in Assam had earned him the key position as supervisor of

northern operations. Mr. J. Masters, who was reported to have some knowledge of agriculture and botany, was Bruce’s counterpart in the south. Bruce and Masters had both underestimated the significance of the challenges they faced, and neither had the executive experience that Calcutta operations ultimately required.

Early knowledge of tea cultivation, harvesting, and production was quite superficial, resulting in many production problems. Topping off their troubles, laborer problems plagued the Assam Company throughout its formative years.

Dr. Harold Mann gives a detailed account of these obstacles in *The Early History of the Tea Industry in North-East India*, which was a major source for this installment of our series. Local Assam laborers were scarce, largely due to the devastation of a civil war and the Burmese invasion, the combination of which nearly “depopulated” the entire region. Bruce and Masters turned to China for workers, but that soon turned disastrous. According to Dr. Mann:

The first attempt to fill [the need for laborers] was by the import of Chinese coolies. A large number of Chinese coolies were brought round from Singapore, but they were selected without discretion. Every man with a tail [i.e., queue] was supposed to be qualified to cultivate, manipulate, and prepare tea. They were sent up without adequate control. At Pabna they quarreled with the natives, or the natives with them: some sixty were captured by the magistrate, and consigned to jail, and the rest refused to proceed without their brethren. Their agreements were therefore cancelled and they returned to Calcutta committing depredations in their progress. ... Thus ended the first attempt to bring Chinese labour to the Indian tea plantations.

This was also the last attempt to recruit Chinese workers on any significant scale. It is not clear whether Bruce and Masters could have altered the outcome, but Dr. Mann has hinted that, at least for Mr. Masters, there was a question of his management style and stern treatment of workers.

Bruce and Masters started the process with little groundwork or guidance. Their mistakes were costly and deemed foolhardy, but it is unclear whether the Assam Company could have succeeded without the enthusiasm and efforts of these tea pioneers.

To many historians, including Dr. Mann, C. A. Bruce is best known as the pioneer who demonstrated that tea manufacture from indigenous Assam plants was a possibility. He also carried the torch for the Assam Company in Calcutta until more experienced managers could lead the company to success.

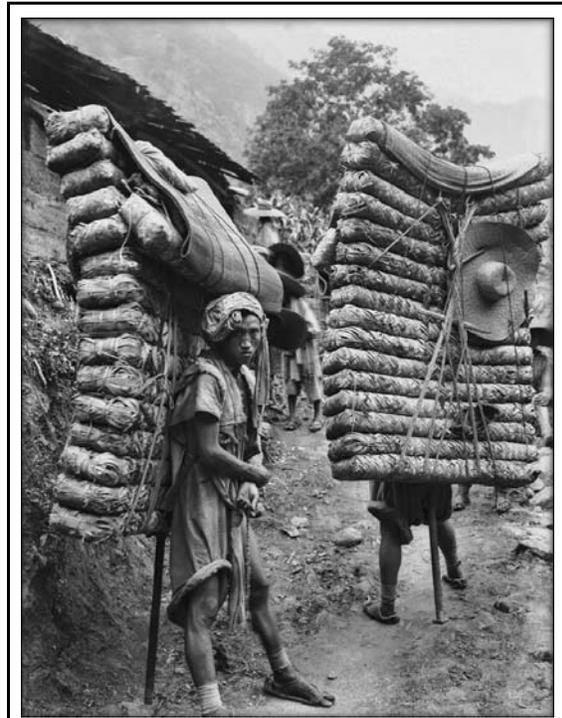
Unable to unload their stock, the directors in London made a final attempt to install experienced management in Calcutta and Assam, selecting Henry Burkingyoung and Stephen Mornay for those posts. Under their capable leadership, the Assam Company was transformed from a bankrupt money pit into a profitable concern in just a few years.

Later came George Williamson, who is credited with ending the debate over which tea plant was the right choice for Assam tea production. He was also instrumental in correcting the improper harvesting procedures that had crippled production in prior years.

Before Williamson, tea plants were nearly plucked to death. When Williamson instituted a managed plucking concept that allowed the plants to recover from each plucking, the health of the plants improved and yields suddenly increased. It was a simple change, but the results were dramatic.

The science behind the manufacture of tea would soon be completely understood by the British. Labor shortages would be partly solved by creative engineering, replacing some of the most labor-intensive procedures with "orthodox" rolling machines, and other mechanical devices. The transportation problem would be solved by another British invention, the steam locomotive.

Great Britain's tea industry would become a unique enterprise. Both China and Great Britain worked with the same plant species, but China continued to use human labor for



Men Laden with Brick Tea for Thibet

A 1908 photograph from the Royal Geographic Society.
Ernest Henry "Chinese" Wilson, photographer.

Wilson reported that one of the loads above weighed 317 pounds, and the other 298 pounds. Some have considered this an exaggeration, but it is believed that loads in excess of 200 pounds were common. A porter could average six miles per day, walking rough paths at an elevation of 5,000 feet above sea level. "The porters put opium behind their ears to numb the pain caused by the straps and weight".

everything from planting and plucking to packing and shipping, while labor shortages forced the British to industrialize their tea industry.

The above photo, taken in 1908, dramatically illustrates the lack of mechanization available within China. Space limits us from depicting the British approach, but envision a long line of rail freight cars with the name Lipton stenciled on the side and you will have the appropriate illustration.

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.