

JOHN WESLEY TAKES TEA

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Here Thou, Great *Anna!* whom three Realms obey,
Dost sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes *Tea*.

(*Rape of the Lock*, 3:7-8)

Although obvious chronological, philosophical, and aesthetic grounds separate the satirical magnifications of Alexander Pope's political and social satire from the pronouncements and values of John Wesley's evangelical revival, both figures appreciated the degree to which tea had begun to establish itself as a dietary and commercial staple among almost all levels of English society. To the East India Company goes the laurel for injecting, as early as 1657-1658, tea into the British diet; by the third year of Anne's reign it had joined with coffee to rival beer and strong spirits. By the end of the eighteenth century, the East India Company alone managed the exports of 100,500 pounds of tea to England, while William Pitt the younger, in 1784, computed that Britons annually consumed at least 13,000,000 pounds of the stuff. In Scotland, tea entered the upper class diet at the end of the seventeenth century, also; by the 1740's in the Lowlands, thanks to the efforts of a growing smuggling industry, tea competed successfully with spirits for the imbibing pleasures of the lower classes.¹

While there exists no hard evidence of John Wesley's addiction to tea, one can, with confidence, label him a steady and regular consumer—with but the exception of a relatively brief twelve-year period during his long life. By his own admission, he entered Oxford (June, 1720), at age seventeen, a confirmed tea drinker; his diaries underscore the degrees to which tea contributed significantly to the social and dietary aspects of his daily activities. Thus, in the interest of brevity and representativeness, consider diary entries from but three distinct years in Wesley's life that help to identify and support the Methodist patriarch's ultimate position on tea-drinking: (1) from October 17, 1735 to October 16, 1736—comprising the

¹Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 162; M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the XVIIIth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 14, 55, 139; W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, 3rd ed., rev. (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1883-1890), 2:71, 5:29; G. M. Trevelyan, *Illustrated English Social History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 3:20, 168-169).

departure from England to Georgia, the voyage to Georgia, and the initial months in that colony (Wesley then between the ages of 32 and 33); (2) from August 9, 1740 to August 8, 1741—focusing upon the formative years of Methodism in London and surrounding areas (Wesley between the ages of 37 and 38); (3) December 3, 1782 to December 2, 1783—depicting an elderly but still very active Wesley (between ages 79 and 80) traveling about the island-kingdom on behalf of his evangelical mission.

Throughout those cryptic diary notations, Wesley never differentiated between whether he actually drank tea upon a specific occasion, or if he merely partook of the social event known as “tea” and limited his participation to conversation—as in this second London Diary entry:

SATURDAY [AUGUST] 16. 5 Prayed; 1 John 4; religious talk to some; visited. 8 At Sister Jackson's, tea, religious talk. 9.45 At home; journal. 10.30 write to Miss Jason, etc. 11.45 Religious talk to many. 2 At Mr. Crouch's, religious talk, dinner. 3.30 At Mr. Bird's, necessary talk (religious). 4 At Sister Persal's, tea, religious talk. 5.15 At Sister Martin's, religious talk. 6 At Mr. Chamberlain's, tea, religious talk. 6.30 Long Lane, Acts 4. 8.30 At home; tea; women, prayed! 10 Supper. 10.45.²

Thus, he noted four opportunities (8:00 a.m., 4:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m., and 8:30 p.m.) for tea within a waking day of almost eighteen hours. How much of the brew he actually consumed or the precise moment in which he drank are not always exactly indicated in the diaries; so, references to quantity need to be viewed and recorded as *occasions* for drinking tea, rather than in terms of actual cups, pints or quarts.

Therefore, focusing on the week of August 16–22, 1740, one would discover eighteen (18) separate occasions upon which John Wesley took tea; the diary for the entire month of August, 1741 reveals that Wesley took tea on no less than seventy-three occasions.³ Expanding the chronology even further, examination of the diaries provides clear data for the three sample years: during October 17, 1735 through October 16, 1736, Wesley took tea on 483 occasions; from August 9, 1740 through August 8, 1741, the figure rose to 722 diary references to tea; from December 3, 1782 through December 2, 1783, it declined slightly to 703 occasions.⁴

The very same diary entries also help to determine the time patterns for Wesley's tea drinking. In other words, *when* did the Methodist leader usually pause from the activities of a strenuous schedule to partake of tea and its accompanying social exercise—polite but meaningful conversation?

Further and closer examination of the same three sets of diary entries (October 17, 1735–October 16, 1736, ages 32–33; August 9, 1740–August

²R. P. Heitzenrater and Frank Baker (eds.), *The Works of John Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975–), 19:430.

³*Works* 19:428–432.

⁴*Works* 18:312, 432; 19:429–470; Nehemiah Curnock (ed.), *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1909–1916), 6:380–463.

8, 1741, ages 37-38; December 3, 1782-December 2, 1783, ages 79-80) depict Wesley as a most *methodical* tea-drinker. Of the 1908 separate occasions, 1003 (53%) took place between 1:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.; 905 (47%) occurred between noon and 9:30 p.m. From another view, those 1908 "teas" may be distributed into the three sample stages of Wesley's life as follows: 483 (25%) during ages 32-33, 722 (38%) during ages 37-38, and 703 (37%) during ages 79-80. Finally, consider two distinct time periods: Between 7:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m., Wesley had tea on 502 occasions; 171 during ages 32-33, 138 during ages 37-38, and 193 during ages 79-80. Between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., he partook on 623 occasions; 128 during ages 32-33, 206 during ages 37-38, and 289 during ages 79-80.

Wesley's usual day extended from 4:00 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., a point necessary to understanding his daily business and social itineraries. Also, one must realize that as Anglican priest and Methodist patriarch, he spent little time by himself and at his various residences. He moved about the city and the country—visiting, visiting, and visiting! Thus, he, himself, created the majority of the 1908 occasions noted and coded in the various diaries. Without spending too much time analyzing those figures, one can easily conclude that most of his tea drinking occurred between 4:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., and between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. Further, one notices a number of similarities and consistencies between the years 1740-1741 and 1782-1783, particularly in the total number of occasions upon which Wesley partook of the brew. The irregularities of schedule and general life style caused by a long sea voyage and a not always tranquil residence in a rather primitive colony undoubtedly contributed to the reduction in tea-taking during 1735-1736.

The eighty-four days in which Wesley went without tea (65 in 1735-1736, 5 in 1740-1741, 11 in 1782-1783) do not merit excessive attention. In 1735-1736, for instance, almost half of those tea-less days occurred aboard the *Simmonds*, bound for Georgia, where, obviously, the passengers had to conserve supplies and endure periods of physical discomfort. Thus, Wesley's diary for Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, December 14, 15, 16, 1735, contains no references to tea; for the next three days (December 17-19), he drank coffee; on the 20th and 21st he drank tea, partook of nothing for the next five days, returned to tea on December 27-28, coffee on the 29th and 30th, then nothing on the 31st. He drank tea during the first five days of January 1736, but went without it during the next four days (*Works* 18: 331-338). Throughout the three periods isolated for this discussion, Wesley noted (in diary or journal) only once the reason why he did not take tea: "THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5 [1736]. . . 8[:00 a.m.] Account; breakfast, could not get tea."⁵

Related to the tea-less occasions are instances when Wesley drank something other than tea. Coffee had come to England as early as 1637

⁵ *Works* 18:349.

and, although less expensive than tea (3s.6d. a pound in 1689, 4s. per pound in 1690, and 6s. by 1692) it never really reached the popularity of the latter.⁶ Wesley appeared to have partaken of it only sparingly during each of the three periods analyzed for this discussion: 21 occasions from October 17, 1735 to October 16, 1736; 14 during August 9, 1740 to August 8, 1741; 9 from December 3, 1782 to December 2, 1783.

Wesley also mentions that he drank chocolate—always in the morning (no earlier than 4:00 and not later than 9:00): on seven occasions in 1735–1736, nine in 1740–1741, but never during 1782–1783. Finally, on Thursday, March 18, 1736, in Savannah, he noted that at “breakfast (began sassafras)”⁷ but that item never became a frequent contributor to Wesley’s diet. Two questions arise, both prompted by Wesley’s consumption of coffee and chocolate: (1) Did he engage in conscious but sporadic attempts to break the tea habit? Or, (2) were those simply the beverages preferred by those who hosted him, leaving him with little choice but to practice common courtesy, accept what they offered, and await another opportunity for tea?

The piles of statistics from the diaries evidencing the extent of Wesley’s tea-drinking also support his arguments in opposition to the brew. In 1748, the Methodist leader sought both to defend his own two-year abstinence from tea and to inform his followers of its harm—both to their bodies and to their purses. In July or August, 1746, he abandoned tea-drinking, partially for his own benefit and as an example to others; he did not resume the habit until twelve years later, when Dr. John Fothergill (1712–1780)—the noted (and extremely wealthy) London Quaker physician, writer, and biblical translator—prescribed tea as a preventative against further attacks of consumption. Thus, from Newington on December 10, 1748, Wesley issued an epistolary essay “To a Friend” (published that same year as *A Letter to a Friend Concerning Tea* (London: W. Strahan), in which he considered “What an advantage it would be to these poor enfeebled people, if they would leave off what so manifestly impairs their health, and thereby hurts their business also!”⁸

Wesley began his argument in the narrative mode by recalling symptoms of his own that, while at Oxford (c.1720), he attributed to tea-drinking—specifically, “paralytic disorder” and “the shaking of my hand.”⁹ Then, in July 1746, he began to observe the same symptoms in a number of Londoners who drank nothing stronger than tea. Weighing the cost, both physical and financial, of excessive tea-drinking, the Methodist leader,

⁶Christopher Hibbert, *The English. A Social History, 1066–1945* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1987), 291.

⁷Works 18:369.

⁸John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.* (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 2:159–160.

⁹Letters 2:160.

as was his custom, achieved a solution by raising a question to which he provided an immediate and simple answer:

Is there nothing equally cheap which they could use? Yes, surely; and cheaper too. If they used English herbs in its stead (which would cost either nothing, or what is next to nothing), with the same bread, butter, and milk, they would save just the price of the tea. And hereby they might not only lessen their pain, but in some degree their poverty too; for they would be able to work (as well as to save) considerably more than they can do now. And by this means, if they are in debt, they might be more just, paying away what they either earned or saved. If they are not in debt, they might be more merciful, giving it away to them that want.¹⁰

One need not dwell too long upon the argument before following the route of Wesley's thinking. If he could, among Methodists, redirect the flow of coins from tea to the societies' coffers, then both organizational and charitable responsibilities could be more readily met.

However, that principal question and answer carry Wesley but one-third of the way through his essay. He devoted the major portion of it to formulating hypothetical objections to his scheme and countering those with his own rebuttals—most of which he extracted from medical writings of the day. The supposed objectors generally deny the unwholesomeness of tea, refute its harm to the body, declare that substitute foods and beverages will not agree with them, argue that abstinence will result in little or no financial savings, and uphold the occasions for tea-drinking as examples of common social courtesy and Christian behavior.

Wesley's principal source—in fact the only one he cited by name in the "Letter"—appears to have been *A Dissertation upon Tea* (London, 1730; another edition in 1750), by Thomas Short, M.D. (1690?–1772), a Scots physician who practiced at Sheffield before retiring to Rotherham in 1762. The Methodist leader introduced that tract to support his opinion of tea as a poison; that "while the Chinese dry the leaves and turn it with their hands upon the tin plates, the moisture of them is so extremely corrosive, that it eats into the flesh, if not wiped off immediately." It is not probable, then, that what remains in the leaves is quite friendly to the human body.¹¹ To rid themselves of the "poison" and break from the habit, Wesley asked his readers to undergo a trial period of a week or ten days and sample from a list of antidotes that he offered to them:

- (1) Take half a pint of milk every morning, with a little bread, not boiled, but warmed only; a man in tolerable health might double the quantity.
- (2) If this is too heavy, add as much water, and boil it together, with a spoonful of oatmeal.
- (3) If this agrees not, try half a pint, or a little more, of water-gruel, neither thick nor thin; not sweetened, for that may be apt to make him sick, but with a very little butter, salt, and bread.
- (4) If this disagrees, try sage, green balm, mint, or pennyroyal tea, infusing only so much of the herb as just to change the color of the water.
- (5) Try two or three of these mixed in varying proportions.
- (6) Try ten or twelve other English herbs.
- (7) Try

¹⁰Letters 2:160.

¹¹Letters 2:162.

foltron, a mixture of herbs to be had at many grocers', far healthier as well as cheaper than tea. (8) Try cocoa.¹²

Specific substitutes aside, Wesley's ultimate concern focused not upon the diets of his followers, but upon the conditions of their minds and hearts. He urged them first to "follow reason, wheresoever it stands. . . . Examine your heart, and beware inclination does not put on the shape of reason."¹³ Second, and most important to the overall scheme of Methodism, "pray earnestly to God for clear light; for a full, piercing, and steady conviction that this [abstinence] is the more excellent way. Pray for a spirit of universal self-denial, of cheerful temperance, of wise frugality; for bowels of mercies; for a kind compassionate spirit, tenderly sensible of the various wants of your brethren. . . . Then you will once more, with all readiness of heart, make this little (or great) sacrifice to God. . . ."¹⁴

Certainly, in 1748, Wesley could list abstinence from strong tea as among *his* personal sacrifices on behalf of the evangelical revival. However, once Dr. Fothergill suggested resumption of the beverage as a *benefit* to Wesley's health, all of the arguments and suggestions set forth in the "Letter to a Friend" retreated to the darkness of history. From 1758 until the final days of his long life, the Methodist patriarch held fast to his tea cup. Indeed, each of the final ten diary entries—Monday, February 14, 1791, through Wednesday, February 23, 1791—contains at least one reference to Wesley having taken tea. From Thursday, February 17, 1791 through Wednesday, March 2, 1791 (the day of Wesley's death), Elizabeth Ritchie, who nursed him during his final days, maintained a narrative of events; on Sunday morning, February 26—but four days before he died—"with a little of Mr. [Joseph] Bradford's help, Mr. Wesley got up, took a cup of tea, and seemed much better. Many of [our] friends [seemed] all hopes. . . ."¹⁵ Surely, the wildest of all imaginations could not draw a connection between the death of the eighty-seven year-old Wesley and his life of tea drinking.

Nonetheless, Wesley's own habits as a tea drinker, combined with his single attack upon the beverage, must be considered within the overall context of eighteenth-century eating and drinking habits. The advantage of holding Wesley before the world as a *model* for a study of those habits is, simply, that his activities can be documented with greater detail than the general comments of his contemporaries. Regarding tea, we have been told, for instance, through Boswell's recollections, "that no person ever enjoyed with more relish the infusion of that fragrant leaf than Johnson.

¹²*Letters* 2:163–164.

¹³*Letters* 2:165–166.

¹⁴*Letters* 2:170.

¹⁵*Journal*, ed. Curnock, 8:136.

The quantities which he drank of it at all hours were so great, that his nerves must have been uncommonly strong, not to have been extremely relaxed by such intemperate use of it. He assured me, that he never felt the least inconvenience from it. . . ."¹⁶ In contrast, Wesley's diaries and journals allow one to venture beyond historical generalizations to a focus upon the minute but necessary specifics of life. We know, if not how much tea the Methodist leader drank, at least *when* he drank it. Therefore, in the end, Wesley emerges as major figure of the period whose daily habits need to be observed, discussed, and analyzed for those students of the eighteenth century striving to construct a meaningful and accurate picture of life in one of humankind's most significant moments.

¹⁶Boswell, James, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman; new ed., J. D. Fleeman (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 222.