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Merritt, Jane T. *The Trouble with Tea: The Politics of Consumption in the Eighteenth-Century Global Economy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. 212 Pp.

Examining the global influence of tea on the creation of the United States, Jane T. Merritt demystifies the role the drink played in the American Revolution by exploring how and why American demand for it arose between 1700 and independence. Merritt argues that this demand did not occur naturally. It took several decades for the East India Company and British merchants to convince consumers in the British North American colonies that tea was worth the expense. By the end of this short book, Merritt shows how tea became a fiercely contested issue in the political economy of the 1770s, ultimately resulting in the political and economic independence of the United States.

While the title promises a study of global consumption, the book predominantly focuses on how tea became a major commodity in British America and a point of contention at the center of the American Revolution. After the first chapter, there is little about this book that can be considered global, which is somewhat disappointing. Also, this book does not offer any new data on the importation and consumption of tea in the American colonies. These are not so much criticisms as cautions for those seeking new sources and data. That said, the book contains a wealth of qualitative evidence to document the importance of tea to colonial America.

Merritt begins her book by summarizing the East India Company's efforts to dominate the tea market by buying up as much as tea as possible, leaving little for European competitors. In the process, the company expended a massive amount of capital in its effort to monopolize Western tea markets. Unfortunately, the EIC's imports outpaced demand in England; by the 1720s and 1730s, entire warehouses were full of tea. Thus,

Merritt explains, the EIC looked to the Britain's North American colonies to help alleviate this problem. However, the solution was not a simple matter of shipping the tea to America. First, merchants had to create consumer demand for the new, East Asian good. Naturally, the first consumers tended to be wealthier and could afford the accompaniments (e.g. pots, spoons, cups) to consume the dried leaf. As demand gradually increased, however, some religious leaders and social elites warned colonists against the supposed evils of luxurious consumption of tea; they resorted to narratives of overstimulated women gossiping and neglecting household responsibilities to unsettle their audiences. Yet, Merritt deftly shows, rather than an evil that colonists shunned, tea became a common item on their tables.

Merritt makes her most insightful contribution in delineating the ways in which colonists politicized both the importation and consumption of tea amidst the rising tensions between them and the British Empire. Because the EIC faced substantial financial shortfalls as a result of fighting the French in India during the Seven Years' War, the company, along with the British government, looked to recoup these by enforcing new duties on tea and creating a monopoly for the EIC in the British colonies. Colonists, long accustomed to importing tea from other sources with little interference, viewed these new taxes and limitations on consumer choice an unabashed violation of their rights as English citizens. Colonial merchants and consumers of tea adopted nonimportation as a means of punishing British merchants and the EIC, which they hoped would force a change in policy. Compelling colonial merchants to abide by nonimportation was not easy, and tea did not necessarily disappear from American tables, as many turned to smuggling non-EIC tea into the colonies. Still, as the crisis with Britain escalated, the American colonists were inflicting severe losses on the British and EIC merchants, who were increasingly unable sell the massive quantities of tea stockpiled in England to pay longstanding debts.

Nevertheless, Merritt continues, even the growing Revolutionary fervor was unable to quench American thirst for tea. In fact, by 1776 most bans on the importation of tea were lifted in response to consumer riots against merchants and warehouses that hoarded tea for exorbitant prices. The ongoing demand for tea encouraged a surprisingly robust desire

amongst political leaders and entrepreneurs to develop a direct trade with Asia, both to capitalize on consumer demand and to increase the commercial power of the fledgling United States. In the wake of the Revolution, Americans immediately invested in ships and expeditions to China to trade in tea. The drink would continue to play a political role, as the new trade was a key issue in the debate that engulfed the young nation about the nature and form of its fledgling government. Merritt concludes her account by explaining the demise of the American tea trade with Asia due to a lack of available capital.

Throughout the book, Merritt offers some fascinating insights into the importation, distribution, and consumption of tea. Perhaps most intriguing is the essential role women played in the growth of demand for tea. Women were key decision makers for home goods, and tea was an important part of daily lives. In addition, women often managed the retail shops that sold tea; for example, in 18th century Philadelphia, as many as half of the shops in the city were overseen by women. Merritt also highlights the irony between the pre-Revolutionary colonial rhetoric of no taxation without representation and free trade, and the subsequent American willingness to tax imports, including tea, once the war had ended. Once one looks beyond the misleading title, this book offers a fresh perspective on how tea, consumer politics, and the American Revolution are inherently inseparable.

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