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## Consuming Knowledge:

### Produce from the Empire in *The Penny Magazine*

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#### Abstract

There is debate among historians as to whether the British public was uninterested or unaware of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. This article considers the extent to which the Empire and the colonies in fact infiltrated everyday life through trade and produce, specifically in the form of tea, a product that even Britain's poorest considered a necessity. To do this, this paper draws upon *The Penny Magazine* of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) which ran from 1832-1845. Selling an unprecedented 200,000 copies weekly at its peak, what did the public learn about the Empire through articles on its produce in *The Penny Magazine*? This paper demonstrates that the SDUK promoted Britain as an industrious, imperial land with a strong work ethic- an example to its colonial peoples, and a nation its people should be proud of.

#### Keywords:

Knowledge- Empire- Penny Magazine- Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge- Tea

In 1984 Oxford historian Frederick Madden wrote that the British Empire had 'no everyday relevance, it was a ... peripheral fact, which rarely surfaced' (Fieldhouse and Madden 1991, xix). Similarly Professor Bernard Porter asks whether the Empire was in fact not as important as it seemed as 'that would certainly explain its lack of impact at home. Alternatively, the evidence of the impact may be there, but have been missed' (Porter 2004, 3). Conversely Ruth Watts in her article "Education, Empire and Social Change in Nineteenth Century England" (2009) suggests that the Empire can in fact be seen in 'various ventures', including London Zoo, Kew Gardens, museum guidebooks and travellers' tales. Simply, she states: 'Knowledge was drawn from the empire, but lessons learned were not necessarily imperialistic' (777). Similarly C. A. Bayly (1996) argues that the 'expansion of knowledge, is not so much a by-product of empire, but a condition of it' (56). This is one topic this paper will attempt to assess: did knowledge of the empire infiltrate the everyday lives of British men and women, or was it really a peripheral fact, uninteresting to the population?

During the nineteenth century, Britain was 'the world's richest single consumer market for food... and former luxuries such as tea and sugar became common items of diet' (Tomlinson 1999, 62). Furthermore, tea drinking in this time period was considered patriotic as it supported British trade and empire, unlike wine and coffee, the beverages of imperial rivals (British Museum). The British Museum has even included an early Victorian Wedgewood tea set in its innovative exhibition and publication "A History of the World in 100 Objects". Therefore I propose that, contrary to the ideas of Madden and Porter, the Empire was important to the people of Britain, and was present even in the everyday lives of Britain's poorest in the guise of produce, particularly tea. In this paper I wish to explore how produce was used to express the idea of empire to Britain's masses in *The Penny Magazine* of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.<sup>1</sup> How, by using items known to even the poorest reader, did the SDUK portray the idea and meaning of empire to the everyday Briton?

*The Penny Magazine* sold 200,000 copies weekly at its peak, and 40,000 at its decline (nonetheless a huge readership for its time). *The Penny Magazine* was sold nationally and permeated every social class, and therefore would have been able to disseminate information concerning the Empire across Britain. Furthermore it has been argued that the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was one of the first middle or upper class groups to interest the working classes in empire, suggesting to them 'that national identity involved possessing an empire' (Barrow 2004, 678).

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<sup>1</sup> The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was active from 1826-1846; *The Penny Magazine* ran from 1832-1845.

Despite including a vast number of articles on the Empire, *The Penny Magazine* does not provide a history of the acquisition of the territories. Knowledge of the extent of the Empire is therefore assumed to be present. This draws on a key issue outlined by Bernard Porter in his work *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*: how, without formal schooling, did the working classes acquire knowledge of the Empire, when even in the available schools ‘it was simply not taught there’ and neither was a ‘regard for the empire’ (Porter 2004, 116).

I believe this was at least partially done through the omnipresence of East India Company in Britain. In 1813 for example, Thomas William Plummer, a London merchant, wrote that ‘scarcely any part of the British community is distinct from some personal or collateral interest in the welfare of the East India Company’ (Appendix 14, xxxi).

The Company, formed in the late sixteenth century, and given a royal charter in 1600, intended to bring spices and textiles to European markets. Strengthened by Charles II in the seventeenth century, the East India Company was able to acquire territories and administer presidencies, as well as muster and train its own troops, and it seems that the Company heavily promoted recruitment opportunities. For example, a correspondent in the *Caledonian Mercury* (1842) reported that ‘the greatest activity has prevailed in raising recruits for the East India Company. The walls of the metropolis are placarded in all directions, offering an increased bounty to recruits...’. Recruitment drives also extended to the provinces through newspaper advertisements.<sup>2</sup> Newspapers in fact reported on all aspects relating to the Company, from their success in overseas trade, to the movements and crew of ships, and most importantly for this purpose of this paper, newspapers advertised commodities brought to Britain by the East India Company. These advertisements also took the form of window bills, and trade cards, of which Troy Bickham (2008) writes, ‘[In the eighteenth century] British colonies and imperial trade were abounded in British advertisements for empire-related foods, regularly reminding consumers that tobacco was a product of North American colonialism and slavery, coffee came from trade with the Middle East and British plantations, and that tea was a product of the East India Company’s activities in Asia’ (81). This trend, of emphasising the exotic origin of a product as a method of promotion, continued into the nineteenth century but can be seen to have expanded into further media such as informative articles in periodicals such as *The Penny Magazine*.

Therefore, given the long history of the East India Company, its overarching reach into society, and the wealth of commodities it brought to Britain, it would no doubt be a suitable subject to be explored by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, who strove to

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<sup>2</sup> See H. V. Bowen ‘The East India Company and Military Recruitment in Britain, 1763–71’ *Historical Research*, 59:139, 1986, 78-90 which outlines recruitment methods.

provide the Britain with safe and informative reading. *The Penny Magazine* offered a vast number of articles discussing the origins and use of colonial produce, but perhaps can be seen to shy away from the more militaristic actions of the East India Company; it does not however completely ignore it, writing:

But although, towards the conclusion of the seventeenth century, the Company felt and avowed that territorial acquisitions were necessary for the security of its commerce, its political power in India can only be considered to have commenced subsequently to the renewal of its charter in 1744. Until that period the military organization of the Company had been merely defensive, but it soon began to occupy such a situation as made it, to the native powers an important ally, and no contemptible opponent. We cannot here even touch on the onward march of a power which now rules over a population of 85,000,000 natives of India, besides 51,000,000 who are directly or indirectly under its control. (1840, 96)

This paragraph not only emphasises the military actions of taking and occupying new territories for British commercial gain, but also stresses the power of Britain's forces abroad through the sheer number of people under the control of the long established East India Company. It does not however discuss the details of how this territory was acquired, or the consequences of battle. Also describing the acquisition of new land as an 'onward march' would indicate to the reader the necessary expansion of British imperial and military power across the globe, promoting patriotism and a sense of national identity across the working class audience.

*The Penny Magazine* discusses the most familiar imperial commodity, tea, as early as issue five. Articles on produce further stress the links between empire, commerce, and their role in the lives of Britain's people, prompting a sense of pride in the reader in being a part of a nation providing for its people:

The East India Company are obliged by their charter to have always a supply [of tea] sufficient for one year's consumption in their London warehouses; and this regulation which enhances the price for the consumer, is said to have been made by way of guarding in some measure against the inconveniences that would attend any interruption to a trade entirely dependent upon the caprice of an arbitrary government. (1832, 34)

Similarly, the reader is reminded of the quality of tea provided to them, compared to the inferior leaves given to those in the Occident:

The people of China... are obliged to content themselves with a very weak infusion. Mr Anderson in his Narrative of Lord Macartney's Embassy, relates that the natives in

attendance never failed to beg the tea-leaves remaining after the Europeans had breakfasted, and with these, after submitting them again to boiling water, they made a beverage, which they acknowledge was better than any they could ordinarily obtain. (1832, 34)

Even when troubles in trade did arise, Britain's population would not be without its necessities, as they can rely on the 'welfare and happiness of that mighty empire placed under our dominion in India' to replace the produce previously provided by China who are 'uncourteous' to the English and other 'foreign "barbarians"'. Instead tea production was to be taken over by the 'quiet and sedentary habits' of 'our fellow-subjects in India' (1840, 59).

It was suggested that drinking tea deriving from India would promote moral habits, having a restorative karmic affect, putting the fate of India's people and landscape in the hands of the British at home:

They have been deprived of their occupations... and their skill and industry have been superseded by the power-looms of Manchester and Glasgow; but if we could be supplied with tea from India instead of China, such an employment as the cultivation and making of tea would promote peaceful habits of industry among the Hindoos, would render the slopes of barren mountains fruitful, and add an additional staple for export equal in value to that of the aggregate mass of indigenous articles now shipped to England, and thus prevent the loss in exchange with the East India Company experience in remitting home their territorial revenues. (1832, 34)

The cultivation of tea in India under the auspices of the 'Tea Committee' (formed in 1834), became a tale of science, adventure, and imperialism. According to *The Penny Magazine*, wild tea-plants were growing inside the territory of the East India Company, but only a short month's march away from the Chinese province of 'You-nân' where the plant is cultivated for its leaf. Charles Alexander Bruce, the super-intendant of the tea-nurseries, was almost the only European who has explored the little known districts where the tea plants are grown, and it was he who converted an area of jungle land into one of the finest 'tea-garden[s] on account of the East India Company' (1840, 71). Even some of the native chieftains recognised Britain's power, 'acknowledging that the British government was lord paramount of the soil, and consequently was entitled to claim unoccupied lands, surrendered the tea forests unconditionally, and offered to supply labourers and a guard'. (1840, 71) India's inferiority is further stressed with a quote from Captain Jenkins of the East India Company, as he describes the population of Sudiya as '...able, strong men, but without the introduction of a more civilised race, they are not convertible to immediate use' (1840, 72).

The series of articles on the cultivation of tea in Assam ends on a patriotic note that reminds the reader of Britain's commercial and imperial power: Britain need not rely on others to provide for her people, so even if trade disputes are not resolved in China, 'we have the alternative of raising our own supply of tea from Assam' (1840, 72).

An article on the banana also promotes Britain's superior industrious society, similar to Captain Jenkins's notion of the idleness of colonial people, whose nations are complacent, failing to progress in to industry, 'proposing no higher ends in life':

The idleness of the poor Indian keeps him where he has been for ages, little elevated above the inferior animal; - the industry of the European, under his colder skies, and with a less fertile soil, has surrounded him with all the blessings of society- its comforts, its affections, its virtues, and its intellectual riches. (1832, 253)

An article on sugar presents the nation of China in an equally idle manner:

...every nation which has cultivated commercial relations has been steadily advancing... while the inhabitants of China, although possessed of the greatest advantages, arising from variety of soil and climate... have remained altogether stationary... (1832, 33)

All of these examples are used to present Britain as a utopic, patriotic nation which promotes and maintains a population with a strong work ethic compared to the idle colonial people. To be British, is to be powerful, moral and superior.

Throughout *The Penny Magazine* it can be seen that colonial produce is implicitly linked to several qualities, particularly, industriousness, which in turn has led to power, success, and the happiness of the population, both domestic and colonial. Imperialism and empire is the root of Britain's industriousness and to be part of this wider community<sup>3</sup> has led to a harmonious, utopic Britain; but it is the Empire that makes Britain great. It can be seen however that *The Penny Magazine* assumes that the reader already has a basic knowledge of Britain's imperial expansion and does not explain or elaborate on (what could be considered) prominent people, places or organisations.

This basic knowledge, without being part of formal schooling, would have come from several places, from stories in broadsides and newspapers, military recruitment drives, as well as things as simple as advertisements from the East India Company promoting produce. This produce and the wider food trade 'was essential to the success of empire and the military fiscal state that helped fuel it' (Bickham 2008, 72). The origins of this produce were emphasised in publications like *The Penny Magazine* as well as the trade cards and adverts,

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<sup>3</sup> Barrow uses this term to describe Britain, the Empire and the colonies

allowing the people of Britain not only to derive a sense of pride in the imperial power of Britain, but also allowing them to feel a connection to the wider world and distant colonial lands despite class barriers (Bickham 2008 and Barrow 2004). And in this way, the Empire was able to infiltrate the everyday lives of the British population.

In conclusion it can be seen that *The Penny Magazine* painted a utopic picture of empire, and by making consuming produce from the colonies a patriotic act, support for, and knowledge of the empire would be rife. Articles concerning the Empire were therefore not only used to disseminate information, but can also be seen to have been used as an ideological vehicle, used to shape colonial stereotypes, and encourage support for Britain's imperial politics. As Troy Bickham argues for the eighteenth century: 'products of empire were far more pervasive than any of the traditional print media- pamphlets, newspapers, travel narratives...' (Bickham 2008, 73), and this rings true, if not more so, for the nineteenth century. Simply, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, through informative articles, associated the Empire with a sense of national identity, pride and industriousness.

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