

How Sweet It Is: From the Mountains of Mexico to the Streets of York

By Carole Levin



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Though I am a specialist in Elizabethan England, if I were offered a one-way ticket on a time machine so that I could live back then, I am not so sure I would jump in. I would certainly miss my friends very much. And what of the job as a teacher and scholar that I love? Not only could I not teach at a university, but Oxford and Cambridge were not even open to women seeking degrees until the 20th century. But here is what was most lacking in Elizabethan England—no chocolate!

This essay discusses the history of chocolate: how it was valued by the Mayans and Aztecs, brought to Europe by the Spanish conquerors, and eventually came to England, where it was believed to have a range of medicinal purposes. We will also see the forward thinking of some chocolate manufacturers who cared not only for the product, but also for those who produced it.

Chocolate did not come into England until the mid-seventeenth century, and in the first centuries it was known in Europe it was drunk, not eaten. The Spanish were the earliest Europeans to learn about it, taught by the Mayans, who gave the world the word "cacao." Cacao had great religious

and social prestige among the Mayans; the highest elite would drink chocolate during important rituals. We know about this thanks to Diego de Landa Calderon, one of the first Franciscan monks sent to the Yucatan, who arrived around 1549 and later became bishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of the Yucatan. In that role, tragically, he destroyed much of that civilization's culture and traditions by burning manuscripts and images, and the inquisition he set up there meant terrible abuse of the indigenous people, but we can at least be grateful the bishop wrote down as much about the Mayans as he did.

Bishop Landa wrote about a Mayan ceremony that he perceived as a baptismal rite for boys and girls. Gorgeously arrayed priests were in charge of the ritual. Children gathered together inside a cord held by four elderly men representing the rain gods, each standing in one corner of the room. The noble hosting the ceremony took a bone and wet it in a vessel filled with water made of certain flowers and with cacao pounded and dissolved in it. In complete silence, the priests used the liquid to anoint the children on their foreheads and in the spaces between their fingers

and toes (Gates 40-41).

Aztecs also considered chocolate the most desirable beverage, though some saw it as exotic, luxurious, an indulgence—priests, for instance, did not drink chocolate, as they were supposed to lead lives of high austerity and penance. Aztec chocolate was not sweet, and the Aztecs drank it cool (the Mayans drank it hot) and added chilies. Drinking chocolate was confined to the Aztec elite: those of the royal house, the nobility, long-distance merchants—and warriors, the backbone of the Aztec state. Power and valor on the battlefield, demonstrated by the taking of captives for sacrifice in the capital, was rewarded with both social and economic advancement, and accordingly with access to chocolate, which warriors claimed caused them to feel blazing with spirit and courage. Chocolate was served at the end of the feast, just as port or brandy was at the close of a very formal dinner in Western society. At the emperor's banquet it was served in beautifully painted cups made of gourds.

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From the initial invasion of the Yucatan, beginning in 1517, and of Mexico, in 1519, it took the Spaniards little time to grasp and take advantage of the monetary value of cacao beans in the native economy. Hernan Cortes and his followers found out that the beans could be used to buy things, to pay the wages of their native laborers, such as the all-important porters. A 1612 English translation of Peter Martyr's *De Orbe Novo* described

cacao beans as “happie money [...] for this growth upon trees” (MacNutt 354-55). This “happie money” retained importance as small currency through the entire colonial period. Though they appreciated cacao as money, conquistadores at first were baffled and often repelled by it in the form of a drink.

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Girolamo Benzoni in his 1575 book *History of the New World* wrote that chocolate “seemed more a drink for pigs, than for humanity. I was in this country for more than a year, and never wanted to taste it” (150). Bernardino de Sahagún, a missionary priest who spent more than fifty years studying Aztec beliefs, culture, and history, cautioned that too much will “intoxicate, derange, and disturb” (Off 29). At first the Spanish were contemptuous of all native food and they imported cattle, goats, pigs, and chickens; they forced natives to plant wheat and fruit so they could have peaches and oranges. But within a few generations there was intermarriage and custom

exchange. In this context chocolate was taken into the colonial cuisine of New Spain, and eventually transplanted to Old Spain and then the rest of Europe.

Francisco Hernández de Toledo, Philip II of Spain's court physician and also a naturalist, played a role in this shift. In 1570, Hernández was ordered to embark on the first scientific mission in the Americas, a study of the region's medicinal plants and animals. He traveled for seven years collecting and classifying specimens, interviewing the indigenous people through translators, and conducting medical studies in Mexico. In his writing, Hernández gave chocolate recipes in which he asserted that chocolate was an aphrodisiac, encouraging sexual desire—a claim that was to rise again and again in Europe, and that some still believe today, perhaps one reason why chocolates are seen as such a romantic gift. One of the recipes recommends dropping a petal of the beautiful *Magnolia* flower into the chocolate (Aaron and Bearden 70).

Europeans in the Americas changed chocolate. While the Aztecs drank it cold or room temperature, the Spanish wanted it hot, possibly adopted from the usage of the Mayans, from whom they first learned of chocolate as a drink. They also began sweetening it with cane sugar, and instead of chili pepper used cinnamon and anise seed to flavor it.

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The story of chocolate's arrival in Europe reflects the complexity

of this history-changing encounter between civilizations. While the conquest of the Americas by the Spanish was for the most part brutal, some Dominicans led by Bartolomé de Las Casas began an experiment to win over the rebellious Kekchi Mayans of Guatemala by kindness and understanding rather than violence, and their efforts were largely successful.¹ In 1544, the Dominican friars took a delegation of Maya nobles to visit the seventeen-year-old Prince Philip of Spain, bringing valuable presents from their native land, including receptacles of chocolate: thus the debut of chocolate in the old world (Wilson and Hurst 45; Off 33). It was not until 1585 that the first official shipment of the cacao beans reached Seville from Veracruz. An English traveler, Ellis Veryard, declared in his 1701 account of a visit to Spain, “The Spaniards [are] the only People in Europe to have the Reputation of making Chocolate to perfection” (273).

Italy followed Spain and Portugal in adopting the chocolate drink. In the seventeenth century in Italy, perfume-laden flavors were introduced into chocolate. Jasmine chocolate was a specialty at the court of Cosimo III, Grand Duke of Tuscany. He and wife Marguerite Louise d’Orleans loved to drink flavored chocolate. Other Tuscan ingredients added included musk, ambergris, citron, and lemon peel.

Chocolate was very popular at the French court, loved by the kings and queens, especially Louis XIV. Alphonse-Louis du Plessis de Richelieu, the Cardinal’s brother, argued that chocolate was useful

to “moderate the vapours of the spleen” (Wilson and Hurst 58). He assured people that he knew it worked, as he had tried it himself. He was also convinced that if someone wanted to overcome feelings of anger and bad temper, the answer was to just drink some chocolate.

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The English were at first very contemptuous of chocolate. In 1579 English buccaneers took over a Spanish ship and burned a load of cacao beans, stating they looked like sheep droppings. In 1590 English pirates came into a port in New Spain and burned more 10,000 loads of cacao. A load was 24,000 beans, so these were fortunes in cacao going up in smoke.

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By the 1650s, though, things were changing. Coffee and tea were catching on. In 1655, Oliver Cromwell’s forces took from the Spanish the island of Jamaica, where there were already flourishing cacao plantations, and

from that time Jamaica became England’s main source for chocolate. The coffee houses that had started springing up were soon followed by chocolate houses; one of the first, Madame Sury’s, was established in Oxford about 1660.

While in some countries chocolate seemed to be the purview of the aristocracy, in England it was available for all who could pay for it—but it was expensive, more so than coffee. There were several one-page broadsides explaining the values of chocolate and where to go to drink it. One of these, *The Vertues of Chocolate East-India Drink*, explained that “by this pleasing drink health is preserved, sickness diverted.” The pamphlet also claimed chocolate could cure kidney stones and urinary problems, and promised women that drinking chocolate would make them very attractive to the opposite sex.²

Chocolate was soon very popular. Dr. Henry Stubbe prepared chocolate for Charles II. He would double the usual amount of cacao in relation to other ingredients, which included allspice, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. For a more substantial chocolate dish he suggested adding milk, eggs, and sherry. Stubbe argued, as many had earlier, that chocolate was perfect as aphrodisiac (130, 141). Given that Charles II was known as “the Merry Monarch,” and had a long string of girlfriends, this was probably a great plus for him. The book from this time period, *A Curious Treatise of the nature and quality of Chocolate*, assured that chocolate “Twill make Old women

Young and Fresh...And cause them to Long for you know what, If they but taste of Chocolate” (Colminero, n.p.).

London’s chocolate houses mostly concentrated around Covent Garden, Pall Mall and St James’s. Lorenzo Magolotti, a London resident from 1668 to 1688, stated that chocolate houses competed with coffee houses as somewhere to eat, play cards and gamble, and to talk and discuss the burning issues of the day. The discussions at chocolate houses often became politically charged. Chocolate houses were so much the center of Protestant discontent at the prospect of the accession to the throne of James, Duke of York (the Catholic younger brother of Charles II), that Charles, as much as he loved to drink chocolate himself, tried to close the chocolate houses in 1675. The attempt was unsuccessful—people needed their chocolate! The Italian Francesco Bianco, also known as Francis White, opened Mrs. White’s Chocolate House in 1693. This became *the* place to see and be seen. But Jonathan Swift preferred the other famous chocolate house, The Cocoa Tree, which opened around 1698.

* * *

In 1828 a Dutchman, Coenraad van Houten, invented a hydraulic press that pressed fat from roasted cocoa beans, got rid of the bitter taste, and made his cocoa darker, mellow, softer, and, with added sugar, sweeter. This led to mass production of cheaper chocolate in powder and then solid form.

Eventually this meant creation of what we would think of as modern chocolate bars.

Quakers were deeply involved in the manufacturing of chocolate.

The city of York became one of the centers of chocolate production in England, especially among the city’s Quakers; Quakers were deeply involved in the manufacturing of chocolate. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Quakers were not allowed at Oxford or Cambridge, could not serve in Parliament, could not go into the legal profession since they refused to take oaths, and were disqualified from military service since they were pacifists, so they often went into business. Chocolate was all the more appealing as they believed in abstinence from alcohol.

One Quaker who went into the business with even more to overcome was Mary Tuke (Strevens, chapter 2). In 1725, at the age of 30, on her own as she was unmarried, she established a grocery store in Castlegate in the center of York. The shop specialized in the sale of coffee and drinking chocolate. The York Merchant Adventurers’ Company was not pleased. In order to be in trade, Mary was required to be

a member of the Company or be granted a license by them, but she had no means to get either one. She had her store anyway, and was prosecuted for trading without a license, but she kept defying them. In 1728 they relented and allowed her trade on the payment of ten shillings a year, and with the promise to buy all her goods locally. In 1732 Mary was allowed to trade for the rest of her life after a payment of £10, which was a substantial sum of in those days. Mary’s nephew William joined her as an apprentice in 1746; he inherited the business on her death in 1752.

William’s son Henry joined his father in 1785. They then began to manufacture cocoa and chocolate themselves, and were successful enough that they could use money to help society. In 1796 William established The Retreat in York—a new and revolutionary and humane way to treat the mentally ill. Instead of chaining them up, Williams stated he wanted a place where they were cared for and treated well. He also established a girls’ school in York (Digby).

One of York’s most famous sons is Joseph Rowntree, a Quaker remembered and revered both for his outstanding work towards improving the lot of working people (including his own employees) and for his work in the famous Rowntree confectionery company of the same name.

In 1827 his father set up a grocer’s shop in York where Joseph learnt his trade. Joseph’s younger brother Henry, knowing that he

would never inherit the grocery business, went to work as an apprentice to his cousins the Tuke family, discussed earlier. In 1862, Henry Rowntree acquired the cocoa side of his cousins' business. Henry was not a brilliant businessman and was near bankruptcy when, in 1869, his elder brother Joseph was sent to assess its finances and rescue his business. Henry died in 1883 and the business passed to his brother who, in time, expanded the business to the chocolate factory on Haxby Road that is still there today. Joseph set up three influential Trusts (which was extended to four) that still bear his name today, and which continue his legacy in the fields of poverty and affordable housing, international peace, social justice and democratic reform.³

The Cadbury family in Bournville were all Quakers and chocolate manufacturers. Their priority was that their workers have as good working conditions as possible. They built model villages for their workforce, with comfortable, sanitary houses with gardens. There were recreational and sport facilities and chances for education. They offered pension schemes and medical services. Quaker beliefs led to business practices with a largely contented workforce. Cadbury was one of the first companies in the UK to introduce half day on Saturday.

How sweet it is that we can appreciate the pleasure of eating chocolate and also appreciate the history of chocolate and those impressive chocolatiers who each had not only a sweet tooth but a social conscience.

NOTES

¹The region in which the Kekchi Mayans lived became known to the Spanish as the "Alta Verapaz," or "True Peace," because of the Dominicans success in living peacefully with the Kekchi.

²Anonymous, *The Vertues of Chocolate East-India Drink* (Oxford: Henry Hall, 1660), one page. This apparently was taken out of Antonio Colmenero, *Chocolate: Or, An Indian Drink*, translated into English by James Wadsworth (London, 1652), A4.

³For more on chocolate and reform see Paul Chrystal and Joe Dickinson, *History of Chocolate in York* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2012).

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