



#### Trouble brewing

This illustration shows "Boston boys throwing tea into the harbour" on 16 December 1773. The protestors revelled in the opportunity to make a bold statement that would be felt across the world

# A Global Tea Party

Far from being a parochial dispute between squabbling cousins, the Boston Tea Party was an incident with global origins. And, as **Benjamin Carp** reveals, it has since inspired acts of non-violent civil disobedience in nations as diverse as Lebanon and China

**A**BOUT A HUNDRED MEN boarded three ships in Boston harbour on the evening of 16 December 1773. No one knows for sure who they were, or exactly how many of them were there. They had wrapped blankets around their shoulders, and they had slathered paint and soot on their faces. A newspaper report called them "resolute men (dressed like Mohawks or Indians)". In two or three hours, they hoisted 340 chests above decks, chopped them open with hatchets, and emptied their contents over the rails. Since the tide was out, you could see huge clumps of the stuff piling up alongside the ships.

This was in fact 46 tonnes of tea worth more than £9,659. At the time, a tonne of tea cost about the same as a two-storey house. The event became a pivotal moment in American history, leading to the overthrow of the British imperial government, an eight-year civil war, and American independence.

Yet the history of the Boston Tea Party belongs not just to the United States of America, but to the world. The Tea Party originated with a Chinese commodity, a British financial crisis, imperialism in India, and American consumption habits. It

## It was said that tea promoted vanity and pride and led women to gather and gossip

resounded in a world of Afro-Caribbean slavery, Native American disguises, and widespread tyranny and oppression. And for over 200 years since, the Boston Tea Party has inspired political movements of all stripes, well beyond America's shores.

To understand why tea had become so controversial in Boston, we would have to look at the history of how this plant had come to be embraced by Britons all over the world. *Camellia sinensis* grew among the foothills of the high mountains that separated China from the Indian subcontinent. For over a thousand years, it was the Chinese who had popularised and marketed the drink. Chinese merchants traded tea to Japanese ships, Mongol horsemen, and Persian caravans. Few Europeans had tasted tea before 1680. Yet by the 18th century, trading firms like the English East India Company were regularly negotiating with Cantonese hong (merchants) and hoppo (port supervisors) to bring tea back to the west. As the tea trade grew, the price dropped.

The bitter taste of tea might have been unpalatable to Europeans, had it not been for the trade in another commodity – sugar. The 17th century had seen the cultivation of sugarcane in the West Indies yield an enormously profitable crop. To raise cane and process sugar, West Indian planters relied on the labour of African slaves. Britons did not organise an objection to slavery, sugar and tea until the end of the 18th century. In the meantime, tea and sugar went hand in hand.

Tea made its way to American ports like Boston, Massachusetts, and even into the outermost reaches of the American frontier. Some of it was legally bought, and the rest was smuggled to avoid British duties. It soon became the drink of respectable households all over the British empire, although it





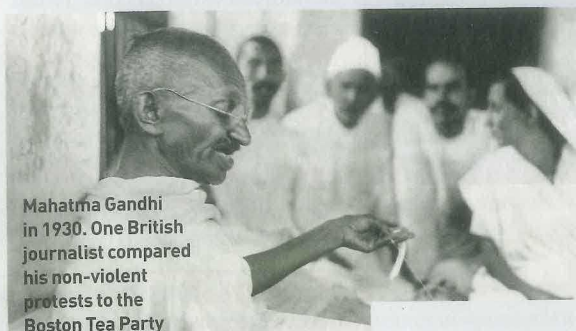


# THE GLOBAL LEGACY OF THE TEA PARTY

More than two centuries after it took place, campaigners around the world are still inspired by the Boston Tea Party as a model of peaceful protest

## TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT ▷

During the 19th century, Americans periodically drew upon the Boston Tea Party as a precedent for democratic protests: labour unions, the Mashpee tribe of Native Americans, women's suffragists, and both foes and defenders of the anti-slavery movement. As a lawyer in 1854, the future president Abraham Lincoln defended nine women who had destroyed an Illinois saloon in the name of the temperance movement. He argued that the Boston Tea Party was a worthy model for their actions.



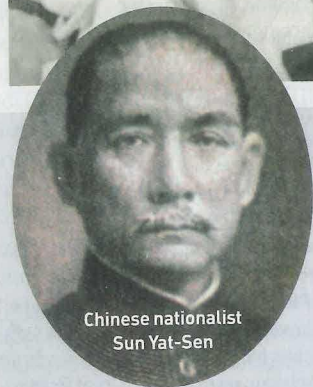
Mahatma Gandhi in 1930. One British journalist compared his non-violent protests to the Boston Tea Party



American suffragettes picket a building bearing the name of the National Woman's Party, c1900

## ▷ MAHATMA GANDHI

After the British government in South Africa mandated that resident Indians had to be registered and fingerprinted under the Asiatic Registration Act of 1907, Mahatma Gandhi adopted the practice of *satyagraha*, or non-violent protest. He led the Indian community in the burning of registration cards at mass meetings in August 1908. Gandhi later wrote that a British newspaper correspondent had compared the protest to the Boston Tea Party.



Chinese nationalist  
Sun Yat-Sen

△ REPUBLIC OF  
CHINA (TAIWAN)

In late 1923, during the struggle for power in China between the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) and the Communist Party of China, Sun Yat-Sen, head of the Kuomintang, threatened to seize customs revenues from Guangzhou. The United States and other western nations sent warships to intervene. On 19 December (three days after the 150th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party), Sun wrote: "We must stop that money from going to Peking to buy arms to kill us, just as your forefathers stopped taxation going to the English coffers by throwing English tea into Boston Harbor."



**Martin Luther King greets  
protestors at a prayer  
pilgrimage, c1957**

## △ AFRICAN-AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS

In his 1963 ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail,’ the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr called for a “nonviolent direct action program” in Birmingham, Alabama. Discussing his historical inspiration, he wrote: “In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.” Three years later, Robert F Williams would recall the Tea Party to rally more violent action on behalf of African-American civil rights: “Burn, baby, burn.”

US TAX  
PROTESTORS ▽

Today the Boston Tea Party is proving a rallying point for conservative Americans. American tax protesters have often invoked the Tea Party as their inspiration since the 1970s. The libertarian presidential candidate Ron Paul held a campaign fundraiser on 16 December 2007. In February 2009, a business news broadcaster called for a "tea party" to protest against the US government's plan to help refinance home mortgages. With the help of national organisations and media attention, the movement stitched together local groups of protestors. The tea parties have been calling for less federal regulation and lower taxes.



A Tea Party rally, Tennessee, 2009

CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY



**A potted history** This cartoon from March 1783 shows America, seated on the left, and Britannia watching a glass lantern presentation on the American revolution. Father Time, leaning against a globe, provides the commentary. The exploding teapot in the centre of the presentation represents the Boston Tea Party

were “determined not to be enslaved, by any power on earth,” and promised “an unwelcome visit” to anyone who should land tea on American shores. The tea destroyers of Boston selected a costume that situated them on the other side of the Atlantic ocean from the king and parliament. They were beginning to think of themselves as Americans rather than British subjects, as free men throwing off the shackles of empire.

Although most of the tea destroyers were born in Massachusetts, some had more far-flung origins. James Swan, an

**They were beginning to think of themselves as Americans rather than British subjects**

anti-slavery pamphleteer, was born in Fifeshire, Scotland. Nicholas Campbell hailed from the island of Malta. John Peters had come to America from Lisbon. Although there were wealthy merchants and professionals among the destroyers, the bulk of them were craftsmen who worked with their hands, which enabled them to haul the chests of tea to the decks in a short time. Mostly young men between the ages of 18 and 29, they were thrilled to make a bold statement to the world.

And the world responded. Prints of the Boston Tea Party appeared in France and Germany. In Edinburgh, the

philosopher Adam Smith shook his head disapprovingly at the “strange absurdity” of the East India Company’s sovereignty in India. He stitched his ideas together into a foundational theory of free market capitalism in 1776. A Persian historian in Calcutta would write in the 1780s that the British-American conflict “arose from this event: the king of the English maintained these five or six years past, a contest with the people of America (a word that signifies a new world), on account of the [East India] Company’s concerns.” Many years later, activists from China to South Africa to Lebanon would explain their actions by comparing them to the Tea Party. As a symbol of anti-colonial nationalism, non-violent civil disobedience, or costumed political spectacle, the Tea Party was irresistible.

In 1773, the diplomat Sir George Macartney waxed poetic about Great Britain, “this vast empire, on which the sun never sets, and whose bounds nature has not yet ascertained.” Bostonians tested those bounds later that year. The Boston Tea Party is often spun as the opening act in the origin story of the United States. Yet it is better understood as a bright conflagration on the horizon of a big world – a fire that still burns brightly. **1**

**Benjamin L. Carp** is associate professor of history, Tufts University, Massachusetts. His book *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (Yale University Press) is just out.

## JOURNEYS

## Books

► **Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America**  
by Benjamin L. Carp (Yale, 2010)

► **The Corporation that Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational**  
by Nick Robins (*Pluto, 2006*)

► **The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution**  
by Alfred F Young (*Beacon, 1999*)