

# 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

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 hongs (merchants) and hoppos (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

also pained critics who worried about its corrupting effects. They lamented that tea led to vanity and pride, it encouraged women to gather and gossip, and it threatened to undermine the nation. Nevertheless, the British government, reliant on the revenues from global trade, did nothing to stand in the way of tea drinkers. Indeed, in 1767, parliament passed a Revenue Act that collected a duty on all tea shipped to the American colonies.

These were years when Great Britain, still groaning under the debts incurred during the Seven Years' War (1756-63), began tightening the reins on its imperial possessions all over the globe. In America, this meant restrictions on westward expansion, stronger enforcement of customs regulations, and new taxes. In India, this meant increased control over the East India Company.

The employees of the East India Company were not just traders in tea and textiles. Since the reign of Elizabeth I, the company had also been fortifying, making allies, and fighting rivals in the lands east of the Cape of Good Hope. It had a monopoly on the eastern trade, and its role took an imperial turn in the 1750s. Eight years after Robert Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal at the battle of Plassey in 1757, he arranged to have the company assume the civil administration (and tax collection) in Bengal.

#### **General clamour**

Many Britons had high hopes for this new source of revenue but then, in the autumn of 1769, Indian affairs took a horrific turn. A famine struck Bengal, killing at least 1.2 million people – this was equivalent to half the population of the 13 American colonies at the time. A horrified British public blamed the East India Company for the disaster. "The oppressions of India," wrote Horace Walpole, "under the rapine and cruelties of the servants of the company, had now reached England, and created

The East India Company's troubles multiplied. In 1772, manipulations of its stock were blamed for a series of bank failures that sent a shockwave of bankruptcies across the globe. The company was losing money on its military ventures in India. The Bank of England refused to keep lending it money, and it owed hundreds of thousands of pounds in back taxes. What's more, competition from smugglers and excessive imports led the company to amass 17.5 million pounds of tea in its warehouses – more than the English nation drank in a year.

To rescue the company (and gain greater control over it), parliament passed a series of laws in 1773, including the Tea Act. This law levied no new taxes on Americans, but it allowed the



The tea plant, 'Camellia Thea', as portrayed in

Joseph Roques's

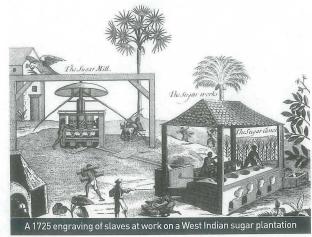
published in 1821

Medicale, which was

Phytographie



This 18th-century watercolour shows workers crushing tea in wooden crates in China, where the drink was first marketed and popularised



company to ship its tea directly to America for the first time. The legislation, Americans feared, would have three effects. First, it granted a monopoly company special privileges in America, cutting out American merchants (except a few hand-picked consignees). Second, it encouraged further payment of a tax that the Americans had been decrying for six years. Third, the revenue from the tax was used to pay the salaries of certain civil officials (including the Massachusetts governor), leaving them unaccountable to the people.

Americans were vitriolic in their response, and their pamphlets resounded in global language. "Hampden", a New

York writer, warned that the East India Company was "lost to all the Feelings of Humanity" as they "monopolised the absolute Necessaries of Life in India, at a Time of apprehended Scarcity". The new tea trade, he warned, would "support the Tyranny of the [Company] in the East, enslave the West, and prepare us fit Victims for the Exercise of that horrid Inhumanity they have... practised, in the Face of the Sun, on the helpless Asiaticks". John Dickinson, a Pennsylvania lawyer who gained

**BBC History Magazine** 

Tea for two A fashionable gentleman takes morning tea with a

lady in her boudoir, while a

idservant looks on, in an 18th-century engraving

May 1774

Parliament passes two more laws for restoring order in Massachusetts. These laws limit town meetings, put the provincial council under royal appointments, and allow British civil officers accused of capital crimes to move their trials to other jurisdictions

**Timeline** From Tea Party

Protesters dump 340 crates of the East

India Company's tea into Boston harbour

London learns of the destruction of the

so-called Coerciver Acts, the Boston Port

Act, which closes the port of Boston until

the town makes restitution for the tea

tea, and of other American protests

Parliament passes the first of the

to independence

16 December 1773

January 1774

March 1774

1 June 1774

The Boston Port Act takes effect, and Governor Thomas Hutchinson departs for England, never to return. His replacement is General Thomas Gage, a military commander

Summer 1774

Massachusetts protesters resist the Coercive Acts by disrupting local courts and forcing councillors to resign their seats

September to October 1774

The First Continental Congress meets. declares opposition to the Coercive Acts, and calls for boycotts of British goods and an embargo on exports to Great Britain

February 1775

Parliament declares Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion. Governor Gage will later receive orders to enforce the Coercive Acts and suppress the uprising

19 April 1775

British regular troops and Massachusetts militiamen exchange fire at Lexington and Concord. In response, armed New Englanders surround the British fortifications at Boston

March 1776

American forces take Dorchester Heights and the British evacuate Boston

The Continental Congress adopts the Declaration of Independence of the United States

BOSTON, December 1, 1773.

At a Meeting of the PEOPLE of Bogon, and the neighbouring Towns, at Fancuil-Hall, in faid Bofton, on Monday the 29th of November 1773, Nine of Clock, A. M. and continued by Adjournment 40 the next Day; for the Purpofe of conflicting adving and determining upon the molt proper and effectual Method to prevent the unloading, receiving or vending the derains, but to

JONATHAN WILLIAMS, Efq:

A newspaper from

1 December 1773

tensions between

American colonists

over the arrival of

tea ships in Boston

Britain and the

reports on the growing

Adjourn'd to Two o'Clock, P. M.

he wrote, they now "cast their Eyes on "But thank GOD, we are not Sea America, as a new Theatre, wheron to exercise their Talents of Rapine, Poys, or Marattas, but British Oppression and Cruelty. The Monopoly of Tea, is, I dare say, but a Subjects... born to liberty" small Part of the Plan they have formed to strip us of our Property. But thank

Having drained Bengal of its wealth,

past, has given ample Proof, how little

Lives of Men."

GOD, we are not Sea Poys, or Marattas, but British Subjects, who are born to Liberty, who know its Worth, and who prize it high."

fame as a protestor against British taxes, similarly attacked the

East India Company. "Their Conduct in Asia, for some Years

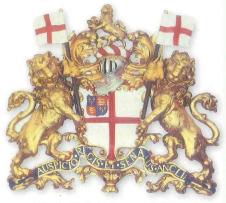
they regard the Laws of Nations, the Rights, Liberties, or

Bostonians responded to these warnings. Under pressure from the Sons of Liberty (a group of American patriots) in New York and Philadelphia, they threatened Boston's consignees until they fled the town. When the first of the tea ships arrived on 28 November 1773, the Bostonians demanded that the cargo be returned to London without unloading. The owner, a Quaker merchant named Francis Rotch, protested that he couldn't do this, by law, and so a stalemate of almost three weeks ensued. Upon the stroke of midnight on 17 December, the British customs service would have the power to step in, seize the tea, and sell it at auction.

**Derided as savages** 

Therefore, the evening before, on 16 December, the Bostonians got their Indian disguises ready. These were crude costumes, not meant to conceal so much as warn the community not to reveal the perpetrators' identities. Yet the choice of a Native American disguise was still significant. Americans were often portrayed as American Indians in British cartoons, and the colonists were often lumped in with the indigenous population and derided as savages. What better way to blunt the sting of this epithet than to assume an Indian disguise?

The Bostonians may have been inspired by a New York City newspaper piece in which "The MOHAWKS" wrote that they



The East India Company coat of arms. This emblem was made in c1730 and originally hung above the chairman's seat at East India House in the City of London

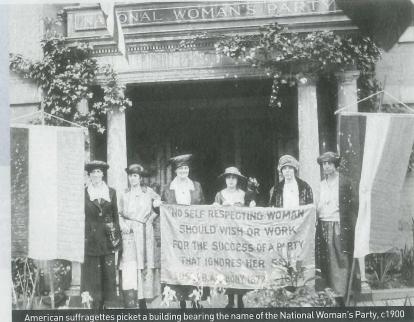
**BBC History Magazine** 

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.





### 

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.



### △ 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 Partyl, 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."

### △ 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 partiers have been calling for less ederal regulation and lower taxes.



**BBC History Magazine** 

CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRAI



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.

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)