

A UNIVERSAL COMFORT

Tea in the Sydney penal settlement

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Abstract

John E. Crowley opens his paper 'The Sensibility of Comfort' with an observation of the English from Spaniard, Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella. Writing in 1808, Espriella notes:

There are two words in their language on which these people pride themselves, and which they say cannot be translated. Home is the one, by which an Englishman means his house... The other word is comfort; it means all the enjoyments and privileges of home; they have enjoyments which we never dream of (1999: 1).

As far removed from 'home' as an English person could ever imagine, one form of 'comfort' for the first settlers of New South Wales could be found in something as simple as a cup of tea. The First Fleet arrived from England in 1788 with a two years' supply of salt provisions but tea and sugar were not included in the government rations. Among the native vegetation around Port Jackson (now Sydney) that was deemed edible by the European settlers, one species in particular stood out from the others, according to extant records from the time: *smilax glyciophylla*, a native sarsparilla, which the colonists named 'sweet tea'. By 1788 tea was entrenched in British culture and rather than being the luxury item it had previously been, was regarded by many as a necessity. More importantly, for the early colonists, in an unknown place in uncertain times, sweet tea provided a necessary 'comfort' and was regarded as a health-giving restorative. According to First Fleeter, Captain Watkin Tench, this indigenous tea alternative "was drank universally" (1793/1998: 18).¹

Locale: The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies

Number 1, 2011

This article began as a gastronomic investigation into ‘sweet tea’ from the colonists’ perspective. That is, with an interest in why we eat what we eat, or in this case, drink. It documents the Europeans’ attitudes towards this native resource as a tea. By examining contemporary letters, diaries and journals that refer to sweet tea, several key points in the broader gastronomic context emerge. First, the investigation provides fresh insight into the colonists’ engagement with their new environment, exposing differences across the social tiers. Second, the importance of tea as a cultural entity is evident, as a marker of civility among the higher social orders and a necessary comfort in the lower social stratum. In this context tea is indicative of the extent that colonists, including convicts, maintained a right to ‘comfort’, despite Port Jackson being a penal settlement, in providing themselves with at least one enjoyment and privilege from home: drinking tea.

Keywords

Convicts, First Fleet, comfort, native food, tea

Introduction

For the Europeans that arrived in New South Wales on the First Fleet in 1788 to establish a British penal settlement, one of the first challenges was to investigate the usefulness of indigenous plants for their medicinal or nutritive value, or their potential for toolmaking or to use as building materials. The fleet carried food staples and medical supplies founded on naval victualling standards for the times. Dominated by salted meat, flour, rice and dried peas, the food supplies were dispensed in predetermined amounts to all personnel: convicts, officers, marines and civil servants. In addition, marines and civil servants received a quota of rum, a privilege denied to the convicts. These supplies were to be supplemented with fresh produce that the colony would grow in public and individuals’ gardens, but until introduced crops were established, native fruit and vegetables were sought. Native plant types familiar to European species were welcomed into the diet; Surgeon John White recorded that “wild celery, spinach, and parsley, fortunately grew in abundance about the settlement” (White, 1790/2001: 166). These resources provided much needed freshness and nutrients after the long sea voyage on salt rations, especially important to combat scurvy, which afflicted many First Fleeters in the early months of settlement in Sydney.

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Journals of the day provide mixed responses to the wild specimens. One female convict wrote, “there is a kind of chickweed that is so much in taste like our Spinach that no difference can be discerned”, referring most probably to *Tetragonia tetragonoides* (sometimes called ‘Botany Bay’ greens, or today, *Warragul* greens). Her letter informs us that “Something like ground Ivy is used for tea” (Heney, 1985: 1). Captain Watkin Tench, who proved himself adventurous in sampling all manner of native fauna, was somewhat disparaging about the local plant foods: “The list of esculent vegetables, and wild fruits, is too contemptible to deserve notice, if the sweet tea and the common orchis root be excepted” (1793/1998: 164). The ‘sweet tea’ or aptly described ‘ground ivy’ was a native sarsparilla, *Smilax glyciophylla* (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 – *Smilax glyciophylla* (source: Jacqueline Newling, 2011).

Imported Tastes: invisible luggage

Many diarists made mention of the *smilax glyciophylla*, including First Lieutenant Bradley who described its qualities as such:

We also found a plant which grew about the rocks & amongst the underwood entwined, the leaves, of which boiled made a pleasant drink & was used as Tea by our Ships Company: It has much the taste of Liquorish & serves both for Tea & Sugar & is recommended as a very wholesome drink and a good thing to take to sea. (1788/2005: 136)

Some of the more privileged individuals brought their own personal ‘luxuries’ and ‘necessaries’ including tea, but neither tea nor sugar was part of the corporate provisions. Tea, imported from China, had by 1788 become an established British staple. Over the 18th century, even lower orders of society had developed a taste for the exotic stimulant, albeit not the finest grades. Duncan Forbes noted as early as 1744 that “Trade with East-Indies... brought the Price of Tea... so low, that the *meanest* labouring Man could compass the Purchase of it” (Mintz, 1986: 114). Tea sales through the British East India Company had grown from 200,000 pounds in 1720 to three million pounds in 1760; by 1790, nine million pounds had been traded (Khamis, 2006: 61). Servants in tea-drinking households were given tea as part of their domestic entitlement or, according to Hilary Young in *Tea, East and West* (2003), employers who would not oblige would expect to have it stolen from them. A series of poor grain harvests in the 1780s drove the prices of lower and middling classes’ beverage staples (beer, ale and malt liquor) so high that the British government acknowledged tea as a ‘necessity’ rather than a luxury commodity, and reduced taxes and duties on tea from 119% to 12%. Thus by the 1780s, tea consumption was firmly embedded in British culture across all classes. A French visitor to England observed in 1784, “even the humblest peasant will take his tea twice a day” (Young, 2003: 105).

The majority of convicts and soldiers on the First Fleet were from England’s poorer classes, and many would have developed a taste for tea, a taste that arrived in Port

Jackson with the colonists' 'invisible luggage'. Strong black teas from China, taken with milk and sugar, were the preferred style in Britain, although more delicate green teas still had a place in the market. Sometimes the two styles were blended according to taste, or to offset the cost of the more expensive varieties. Tea caddies often had two or more compartments to house various tea leaves. Unless from a rural district, poorer classes in Britain's urban centres may not have enjoyed the luxury of milk in their tea. The dairy cattle brought with the fleet absconded soon after landing, so early colonists had no access to dairy produce; what little milk that could be obtained was from a modest number of goats, primarily owned by a select few officers, so tea would commonly have been taken without milk. The quality of tea that poorer classes were accustomed to would not necessarily be regarded a luxury product, with cheaper black bohea or green hyson style teas being popular styles in Britain (Khamis, 2006: 61). The settlers' thirst for tea, albeit poor quality black or green, continued well into the 19th century, when a colonial merchant noted in 1831: "It is drunk by all Classes of people—convicts and all, who cannot do without large quantities of it" (Diamond, 2003: 50). According to *The Tea Purchaser's Guide* published in 1785, green hyson tea was one of the strongest bodied, which would "bear four or five waters, and does not require so much tea to the same quantity of water" and would have been quite economical (Anon, 1785: 43).

Surprisingly few *Smilax glycyphylla* leaves are required to deliver a flavourful beverage, when boiled in water for several minutes and then given time to infuse. As many convicts shared huts with several others and cooking vessels were scarce, this form of preparation would have suited the communal nature of food preparation and consumption. This is possibly where the boiling of tea leaves 'billy style' became iconically Australian; rather than boiling water separately and pouring it over tea leaves in another vessel and allowing them to steep, teapot style, the 'billy' method was less ceremonial but more efficacious, and could be made on a crude camp fire. More water could be added and a second brew created. The native 'sweet tea' was thus a welcome substitute for Chinese teas of the day, and became a 'universal' comfort, enjoyed by convicts and others in the colony. Grace Karskens' view is that for early colonists, "*Smilax glycyphylla* must have been delicious; a pick-me-up, an anti-scorbutic, a great comfort, perhaps addictive" (2009: 366).

A ‘pick-me-up, an anti-scorbutic’: perceived health benefits of sweet tea

It is unknown whether the local Cadigal people used *warraburra*, the Eora name for the *smilax glyciophylla* plant, as a ‘tea’ type infusion to drink (ibid: 365). However, Aborigines from the Jervis Bay area of New South Wales are believed to have sucked on *smilax* leaves, either for pleasure or medicinal purposes (Robinson, 1998). It is likely that the local Aborigines of the Cadigal and neighbouring clans of the coastal Eora people assisted the Europeans in identifying plants of value, though Tim Low attests that the vegetation selected by the settlers for consumption were not traditional Aboriginal foodstuffs. European cooking techniques such as boiling and pickling were required to make many of the coastal plants edible (Low, 1988: 293, 296). Boiling was not a cooking method employed by Aborigines in the Sydney region, as Tench observed that although they boiled water in oyster shells and the like, the local Aborigines had no suitable vessels which could withstand fire, and in which to boil a larger quantity of water (1998: 204). Unless very young and fresh, usually in spring and early summer, *smilax* leaves do not immediately exude their characteristic flavour and colour; as a tea, they need to be boiled and then be given time to steep. *Smilax glyciophylla* was therefore likely to have been a medicinal plant for coastal Aboriginal people, and appropriated by Europeans in a familiar and known application – as an herbal infusion.

Indeed, *smilax glyciophylla* was lauded by colonists for its health-giving benefits, notably as a treatment for scurvy. White described the plant and its vine-creeping characteristics, comparing its stalk and leaves with bay and other English plants, and stated: “In using it for medical purposes, I have found it to be a good pectoral, and... not at all unpleasant” (1790/2001: 195,196). Later in his journal, in a section titled ‘Natural History’ which featured colour plates (probably not authored chronologically), he stated:

The leaves have the taste of liquorice root accompanied with bitter. They are said to make a kind of tea, not unpleasant to the taste, and good for the scuroy. The

plant promises much in the last respect, from its bitter as a tonic, as well as the quantity of saccharine matter it contains. (ibid: 230)

Low surmises that it was the bitter characteristic of sweet tea leaves that was reminiscent of other herbal extracts used as medicines at the time such as Willow and Cinchona barks (aspirin and quinine respectively), that made the colonial surgeons place “so much faith in an unknown and probably useless vine” (1988: 294–295). Low attests that native sarsparilla leaves do not contain enough vitamin C to be attributed with curing the colonists’ or voyagers’ scurvy: “thousands of leaves would be needed daily to allay just one person’s scurvy”, and the leaves would not be found in such quantity (ibid). An ethno-pharmacological report released in 2005 determined that further studies of *Smilax glycyphylla* are merited, as preliminary tests indicate that *smilax* taken as a tea contains antioxidants that are beneficial in the gastrointestinal tract, and may have anti-cancer properties (Cox et al., 2005). This may account for its treatment for dysentery, but the report did not refer to its vitamin C content, which would have been necessary for treating scurvy. It is important to note, and will be discussed in more detail shortly, that White’s claim that the tea was “said to [be] good for the scurvy” was based on hearsay, rather than from his own experience.

Dysentery and “that dreadful sea distemper” scurvy remained the colony’s greatest medical challenges (Collins, 1798/2003: 393). High dosages of citrus fruits at both Rio de Janeiro and the Cape of Good Hope meant that few fell victim to scurvy on the voyage from Britain, however scurvy dogged the population from the time of landing: “the scurvy began to rage with a virulence... esculent vegetables [were rarely] obtained in sufficient plenty to produce any material alleviation of the complaint” (Phillip, 1788/2004: 59). Although citrus had been identified as a scurvy cure, it was believed that other acid or sour items such as vinegar or sauerkraut, and exotics such as turtle meat, were remedies. In May 1788, a quest to Lord Howe Island seeking turtle meat returned fruitless and in August White recorded “That disorder still prevails with great violence, nor can we at present find any remedy against it” (1790/2001: 196).

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Although records show that many varieties of ‘tolerable’ native vegetation had been identified and were in common use, the supply was not adequate to cure the disease. A consequent discovery of a berry “of a most excellent acid, equal to lemon juice... [which, with] the great attention of the Surgeons [many are] recovering very fast” (Waterhouse, 1788/2005: np). White lamented in August 1788: “This [berry] has proved a good antiscorbutic; but I am sorry to add that the quantity to be met with is far from sufficient to remove the scurvy” (1790/2001: 196). White’s journal gives no further references to scurvy until the arrival of the Second Fleet, indicating that springtime brought relief with seasonal fruits and the colony’s gardens finally becoming productive.

While sweet tea was not the scurvy cure it was credited for, its reputation remained strong, despite the disease’s virulence. Mariner John Nichol, who passed through Sydney on the *Lady Juliana* in 1790, was so enamoured by sweet tea and its properties that he took a quantity with him on his return to England.

They have an herb in the colony they call sweet tea. It is infused and drank like the China tea. I liked it much. It requires no sugar and is both a bitter and a sweet. There was an old female convict, her hair quite grey with age, her face shriveled, who was suckling a child she had borne in the colony. Everyone went to see her, and I among the rest. It was a strange sight. Her hair was quite white. Her fecundity was ascribed to the sweet tea. I brought away with me two bags of it as presents to my friends, but two of our men became ill of the scurvy and I allowed them the use of it, which soon cured them but reduced my store. (in Flannery, 2000: 130-131)

Nichol was so impressed by sweet tea and its attributes that he traded much of his remaining stock in China, en route to England: “[the Chinese] bought it with avidity and importuned me for it and a quantity of the seed I had likely preserved” (ibid).

Lieutenant Bradley nominated *smilax glycyphylla* as being “a good thing to take to sea” implying that it may have had health benefits (1788/2005: 136). Similarly, William and Mary Bryant, who escaped the colony with their children and several other convicts in the Governor’s cutter in March 1791, included sweet tea leaves in

their escape provisions. It is likely that they regarded the leaves as a remedy for scurvy, which they would have anticipated as a significant risk to their survival on their journey to Timor, and beyond. The State Library of New South Wales holds two 'Botany Bay tea leaves' which are said to have been part of a store taken by Mary Bryant for the journey, which she consequently gave to prominent lawyer James Boswell once safely back in England (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 – 'Botany Bay tea leaves' (source: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW: R 087, 100 Collection, 2010).

Going Native: an intimate or abstract engagement?

Tench ascribed sweet tea's popularity to its taste and health giving properties, in a footnote to his journal:

On infusion in hot water, [it yields] a sweet astringent taste, whence it derives its name: to its virtues the healthy state of the soldiery and convicts must be greatly attributed. It was drank universally. (1793/1998: 18)

But how universally was sweet tea consumed? It is likely that Tench added this note when he was preparing his account for publication, once he had returned to England. It is unclear from his writing as to whether his description is from first-hand experience; nominating the "soldiery and convicts" as its beneficiaries suggests that as a captain-lieutenant of the marine detachment, senior officer and friend of the Governor's, Tench did not regard himself in the category of the 'soldiery'.

White similarly noted “the convicts and soldiers make an infusion which is tolerably pleasant, and serves as no bad succedaneum for tea” (1790/2001: 195–196). He made two references to the plant itself in this part of his journal, of August 1788; one saying “That which we call the sweet tea ”; and the other, “A convict who had been out gathering what they called sweet tea”. Use of *they* suggests that sweet tea was part of the convicts’ realm, removed from his. Yet he described the *smilax glyciphylla* plant with some authority:

That which we call the sweet tea is a creeping kind of vine, running to a great extent along the ground; the stalk is not so thick as the smallest honey-suckle; nor is the leaf so large as the common bay leaf, though something similar to it; and the taste is sweet, exactly like the liquorice root of the shops. (ibid)

Smilax glyciphylla leaves do grow to be as large as bay laurel leaves if left on the vine; the sample brought to White perhaps had only new growth, or had been plucked of its fully-grown specimens. Young, moist leaves produce a strong liquorice taste, which diminishes as the leaf ages, requiring the boiling and steeping process to develop it again as a tisane. White continued, “Indeed, were it to be met with in greater abundance it would be found very beneficial to those poor creatures whose constant diet is salt provisions” (ibid). White’s statement demonstrates the significant divide between the tiers of social organisation; unlike the lower orders, his diet was not limited to salt provisions.

Despite his report on its characteristics, it is clear that White had not seen *smilax* growing in the wild. Later in his journal, in a chapter titled ‘Natural History’ (the chapters were not necessarily written chronologically), White admitted to his ignorance of the plant in its entirety: “This is a tree or shrub whose leaves only we have seen, but from them we judge it to belong to the genus *Smilax*. For want of the stem we cannot settle its specific character” (1790/2001: 230). He had tasted the bitterness in the liquorice-like leaves, and used them medicinally as a pectoral, but White did not indicate that he had tried the herb as a tea, or used such an infusion as a treatment for scurvy.

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As with much of his account, Judge-advocate David Collins' entry on sweet tea indicates a moral and cultural aloofness from the majority of the population.

Sweet tea; an herb so called by the convicts, and which was in great estimation among them. The leaves of it being boiled, they obtained a beverage not unlike liquorice in taste, and which was recommended by some of the medical gentlemen here, as a powerful tonic. (1798/2003: 56)

Collins provided this description to explain sweet tea foraging as the cause of a convict's death in the bush. From its resonantly impersonal nature it can be concluded that Collins did not consume this tea, nor felt compelled to try it, even with an academic interest, with the possibility that his information was gleaned from others rather than being from personal exposure.

The 'medical gentlemen' may have included First Lieutenant Bradley's ship's surgeon. Bradley intimated more familiarity about *smilax glycyphylla* in its natural state than his peers. As quoted earlier, he said: "We also found a plant which grew about the rocks & amongst the underwood entwined". *We* may refer to colonists in general. The perception that "It has much the taste of Liquorish & serves both for Tea & Sugar" may have been second-hand, but Bradley also comments on the change in taste that the beverage took when blended with leaves from another native species – the now more commonly known and recognised native 'Tea Tree'. His *Account of the different kinds of Timber & the use it is fit for in Port Jackson* states: "The Tea Tree, so called because a little of the leaves being put into the Native Tea gives it a pleasant spicy taste" (ibid: 232-233). This suggests he may have experimented with sweet tea himself, yet he distanced himself from taking it as a personal practice in noting "it was used as Tea by our Ships Company". Bradley, like Tench, appears to separate himself from those in subordinate ranks in its consumption as tea.

Bradley's entry on the New South Wales tea tree indicates that different concoctions were being trialed, as was the trend in Britain, where different types of teas could be blended to suit individuals' tastes. How many varieties of wild leaves were brewed as experimental tea substitutes? Or were such discoveries the result of a

serendipitous mistake, as indeed legend tells us was the origin of tea in China many thousands of years ago? Clearly the colonists sought to identify qualities in native species either for health-giving attributes or simply to enjoy the pleasures of taste.

Tea as a cultural entity; a marker of civility and gentility

It is commonly recognised that nutritional value is not the only factor that constitutes something edible as 'food'. Barbara Santich states that "food can never be simply sustenance for the physical body; it also represents the myths and mores, the priorities and practices of a society" (1996: 43). Largely due to the British East India Company's hegemony in global tea trade, tea represented a cultural civility and identity, enmeshed in 'being British'. In the colonial age, social practices such as taking tea illustrated the superiority of 'civilised' colonisers over less civilised, or in the perceptions of some, barbaric, colonised 'natives'.

Early settlers actively maintained familiar cultural protocols, as a foil against, or perhaps regardless of, the remoteness and foreignness of their new environs. For the more privileged colonists, formal meals and the taking of tea in a ceremonial fashion were social conventions that reinforced the importance of maintaining 'civilised' English cultural traditions. At the Governor's residence, according to Judge-advocate Collins' biographer John Currey, "the officers gathered to dine... in a brief re-enactment of the life they had left behind" (2000: 85). While not necessarily in a position to dine in such esteemed company, lesser officers such as second lieutenant Ralph Clark made dozens of references in his journals to having tea with his peers and commanding officers in his journals, on the voyage and on shore: "Mr. Consident came on board after dinner to drinke tea with use" (1787/2003: 56).

Tea parties also featured in recreational activities for the few ladies in the leisure class. Captain Porter's wife and Elizabeth Macarthur, for example, a few years on, enjoyed little boating parties on the harbour, "taking refreshments with us and dining out". They would explore the creeks and coves or chose "some pleasant point of land" such as Garden Island, where "we sent for our tea equipage and drank Tea on the turf" (King, 1980: 28, 34).

The taking of tea in a ceremonial and social sense was a marker of one's gentility. According to Crowley, in the 18th century "gentility was something to be learned and expressed, not just afforded... Tea with guests became a feasible domestic leisure activity" (1999: 3). This display of gentility was evident in Captain John Hunter's account of one particular tea party hosted at Governor Phillip's house in May 1789. Having just returned from a seven month journey to the Cape of Good Hope, Hunter reported to the Governor's house on the foreshores of Sydney Cove:

I went on shore to wait on the Governor, whom I found in good health; he was sitting by the fire, drinking tea with a few friends; among whom I observed a native man of this country, who was decently cloathed, and seemed to be as much at his ease at the tea-table as any person there; he managed his cup and saucer as well as though he had been long accustomed to such entertainment.
(1793/2003: 140)

The "man of this country" was Arabanoo, who had been captured and taken by force, under Phillip's instructions, on 31 December 1788. Arabanoo at first resisted the foreigners' foods as Tench described: "He dined at a side-table at the governor's; and ate heartily of fish and ducks, which he first cooled. Bread and salt meat he smelled at, but would not taste: all our liquors he treated in the same manner, and could drink nothing but water" (1793/1998: 11).

Arabanoo had been captured so that the colonists might gain information about the indigenous peoples and their ways. With some irony though, it is apparent that Arabanoo was quick to learn many of the newcomers' civil European practices. His willingness to adopt European etiquette, especially at the table, demonstrated that he had the ability to 'learn' civility, and adopt the Englishmen's etiquette, yet maintaining his own sensibilities. He was willing to accept advice and adopt some new 'civilised' practices. For instance, "On being shewn that he was not to wipe his hands on the chair which he sat upon, he used a towel which was gave to him, with great cleanliness and decency" (ibid). Tench in particular admired many of Arabanoo's social qualities. He commented on Arabanoo's frequently displayed gentleness and humanity, steadiness of character, gentle and placable temper, his joy

at being around children, and the courteousness he demonstrated when amongst the officers' ladies: "His countenance was thoughtful, but not animated: his fidelity and gratitude, particularly to his friend the Governor, were constant and undeviating" (ibid).

By the end of his first month at the Governor's residence, Arabanoo's tastes in foreign food items had changed enough that, "Bread he began to relish; and tea he drank with avidity", however he retained his disgust for strong liquors (ibid: 14). Arabanoo's acceptance of the foreigners' food acted as a marker for his acquiescence towards his captors, or resignation to his fate perhaps, trusting that although they kept him under guard, his captors were not wanting to harm him. The officers' association with Arabanoo was short lived, when a few days after Hunter's return to the settlement, Arabanoo fell victim to the smallpox epidemic which killed so many Aborigines in the district: "Every person in the settlement was much concerned for the loss of this man" (ibid: 22). Arabanoo's place in Hunter's descriptive tea party scenario is in stark contrast to many other depictions by early diarists of 'barbaric natives'. Hunter's account of Arabanoo's accomplished ease in this setting was a demonstration of respect towards him; Arabanoo's ability in handling delicate chinaware at tea signified grace and dignity, and was an obvious measure of cultural civility.

Tea as a cultural entity: luxury, necessity or necessary comfort?

Arabanoo was probably enjoying real China tea with avidity at the Governor's residence. Many of the senior officers had brought enough of their own personal supplies of imported tea, alleviating the necessity to imbibe the local brew. Hunter may also have procured fresh stock on the officers' behalf on his expedition to Batavia for provisions in 1789, while lower ranking officers may not have had the same privilege. Almost a year later, in 1790, provisions were so severely short that, even at the Governor's table, guests were required to bring their own bread. However it is evident that there was still a quantity of tea in the colony, brought with the officers' personal supplies. On his departure from Sydney to Norfolk Island in March 1790, Ralph Clark requested if his superior officer, Captain Campbell, would

“purchas me Some Tea and Sugar and Some Soap from the first Ships that may Arrive” (1794/2003: 116). Having resigned himself to the native sweet tea while on assignment at the secondary settlement, Clark was honoured with a parting gift of tea from Campbell: “Captain Campble has been very kind... he Said I no that You have not much Tea I have put up a caddy for you with Majr. Ross’s” (ibid). The transfer to Norfolk Island at this time was an exodus from Port Jackson as a means of relieving the desperately depleted provisions stores. Even a modest supply of ‘real’ tea would have been not simply a personal comfort but a privileged luxury in that desperate period.

Clark, a second lieutenant, was very passionate about his tea, preferring it with milk and sugar. He recorded in his journal his hopes of having his own personal tea caddy crafted by Will Haynes, a convict cabinet-maker aboard the *Friendship*, on the voyage to New South Wales. This was not to eventuate, as Haynes was transferred to another ship “for which I am very Sorry for as I am afraid that I shall not be able to get my Tea Caddy done which I intended to have made” (ibid: 72). Milk would have been a rare luxury on the voyage to New South Wales, and Clark had to ration his use of sugar: “to day for the first time in my life drank my tea without Sugar which I intend to doe all the Voyage as my Sugar begins to grou Short therfor will only drink tea and Sugar now and after we get on Shore on certaind days” (ibid).

Clark evidently developed a taste for the native alternative during his new life on shore in New South Wales. In preparation for his transfer to Norfolk Island in February 1790, Clark determined to take a supply of sweet tea, his own stock of imported tea probably spent. He recorded: “the day turning out very fine I went father up the Cove and collected Sweet Tea to carry with me to Norfolk”. Days later, fearing his cache might not be sufficient, he wrote “Sent Ellis [a marine] and my two convict Servents out in the Boat to get Sweet Tea for to carry with me to Norfolk” (ibid: 112, 114).

Clark’s voyage ended in disaster with the *Sirius* wrecked just off the shore of Norfolk Island. Deeming himself a “child of Bad luck”, Clark’s personal affects were lost,

most probably including Captain Campbell's precious gift, and his cache of sweet tea; his distress on Norfolk Island would only deepen (ibid: 123). After several months on Norfolk Island with no outside contact, and anticipating a ship from Sydney, Clark outlined their wretched plight as the marines officers attempted to salvage a remote vestige of civilised English dietary habits:

from her [the Supply] we will be able to get Some Tea and Sugar if we dont get any thing else for I have not nor has Majr. Ross drunk a dish of tea or drunk a Glass of wine these Six months... our Breakfast is dry bread and Coffy made from burnt wheat and we are glad even to be able to get that – God help use I hope we will Soon See better days Soon for the[y] cannot well be Worse. (ibid: 179)

Clark's distress at his circumstances is evident. His discomfort was extreme, in being reduced to forsaking what were, in his mind, necessities (such as soap, tea and sugar) that set civilised people (like himself) apart from brutes.

In his paper 'The Sensibility of Comfort' Crowley maps the change in meaning of the term comfort over the 18th century, from being a support in a moral, emotional and spiritual context to one of material and physical well-being associated with one's environment. Comfort was now associated with clean, warm, well ventilated accommodation, decent food and clothing, sociable leisure activities, and was pursued in an attempt to improve moral and physical health (1999: 2, 7). So, "Comfort, like gentility, was... learned and expressed; luxury's antonym, necessity, became associated with poverty and death" (ibid: 16). Following the antonym line, Crowley describes comfort as forming a middle ground between luxury and necessity, civilization and barbarism, which, I argue, can be extended to morality and depravity, good-health and mortality.

As a mode of behaviour, gentility was a quality expected in the higher orders, and from those who aspired to be accepted into the higher levels of society. Comfort, as Crowley describes, pertained more closely to material culture, and could be expressed more readily as standards of living in the West improved and the

middling and lower classes emulated their social superiors (ibid: 7). While luxuries remained unattainable to many, items such as tea, as discussed earlier, had transgressed to being an accessible commodity, albeit not taken with the aplomb and ceremony displayed in higher society. Captain Clark maintained the need to separate himself from convicts and lower order marines; his journal expresses his horror and disgust at the immoral behaviour and wretchedness of the transported convicts. His desire for a tea caddy indicates his wont for a material manifestation of his gentility. For Clark and his cohort, wine, coffee, and tea with milk and sugar were established comforts and symbols of rank and social standing. Being without even a tea substitute, and reduced to such poorly replicated coffee, left them feeling miserable and deprived. Omissions of these cultural staples from their daily diet, regarded by them as necessities, acted to reinforce their poverty and despair and feelings of banishment from civilisation, a world away from home.

For the English in the early 19th century, and as observed by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella (quoted in the Abstract), home and comfort were intimately connected, and the basis of particular enjoyments (Crowley, 1999: 1). One of these enjoyments was the act of taking tea. No longer the luxury it had once been, tea was one of life's 'necessaries', and could be categorised by most Englishmen, as one of the 'comforts' of home. 'Necessaries and comforts' were commonly used terms, often paired together just as we might now refer to 'wants and needs'. They defined primary and secondary elements for survival—with shelter, food and clothing obvious necessities, and tobacco, alcohol, tea and sugar as secondary. In response to a cut in the spirits ration during the stores shortage in 1790, for example, Collins lamented: "Thus was the gradual decrease in our stores followed by a diminution of our daily comforts and necessities" (2003: 98). Tea was not regarded enough of a 'necessary' to be included in the government-issued rations for the First Fleet expedition to New South Wales. Even if not officially a 'necessary', though, tea would, for many, be regarded so. In 1776 Adam Smith, championing improved living standards for Britain's labouring poor, defined 'necessaries' as "not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without" (Crowley 1999: 15).

Crowley attests, “At the end of the eighteenth century, physical comfort could be asserted as a right of the unprivileged and a humanitarian responsibility of the propertied”(ibid: 2). A sensibility had emerged, where people of “social and economic privilege... empathise[d] with the physical and psychological distress of others less fortunate than themselves”(ibid: 2). While ‘real’ China tea may have been a luxury, tea drinking was a transferable comfort for many of the convicts, civil servants or marines, and its culture was embedded in their psyche. White’s observation that the native tea was beneficial to “those poor creatures” (the convicts) may not solely have been due to its perceived health benefits, but a recognition for their right to some physical comfort in their living standards, despite being, or perhaps *because*, they were prisoners. Albeit a native substitute, sweet tea provided a familiar comfort, reminiscent of the domestic culture from home, even more revered in the remote, foreign, and to some, hostile, environment of New South Wales.

Conclusion: a diminishing resource

Lamentations for the limited availability of many of the native plant foods are a consistent theme throughout the extant records. White expressed regret that the sweet tea vine and other useful plant products were not found in greater abundance. Collins noted the exhaustive harvesting that occurred close to the settlement and its scarcity after barely a year: “[Sweet tea] was discovered soon after our arrival, and was then found close to the settlement; but the great consumption had now rendered it scarce” (1798/2003: 56). This is consistent with the Europeans’ homogeneous approach to native resources which, according to Richard Wilk, was typical of European ‘extractive’ workers in other colonial settlements attached to such industries as mining, plantations and whaling: the notion of preserving natural resources was not abided (2004: 298–299). Other resources around Sydney such as mud oysters and the cabbage tree palm, and Mount Pitt Birds (*Pterodroma solandri*) on Norfolk Island, suffered similar demises. As the victualing system provided only certain core food items, it was necessary for early settlers, including convicts, to supplement their diet by foraging in the bush and foreshores for fresh food. *Smilax glycyphylla* is a relatively slow growing plant and difficult to cultivate from seeds (Karskens, 2009: 366). As Clark’s expeditions seeking sweet tea demonstrated,

excursions to forage for the straggling forest vine extended to the far reaches of the settlement area.

Harvesting in the native bush was a dangerous undertaking, with many reports of violent and sometimes lethal attacks on foragers from Aborigines. It is unclear as to whether these attacks were in response to trespassing on Aboriginal territory, retaliation for other misdemeanours incurred by the new settlers, or because the Aborigines were protecting a supply of plants they also used.² Collins' dismay at the risks convicts and soldiers incurred to satisfy their avid thirst for sweet tea is evident when he reported in May 1789 that two soldiers had been missing from Rose Hill for nine days: "They had gone in search of the sweet tea plant... the extreme danger attendant on a man's going beyond the bounds of his own knowledge in the forests of an unsettled country could no where be more demonstrable than in this" (1798/2003: 69).

The convicts' and soldiers' thirst for the beverage and their belief in its health giving properties resulted in exhaustive harvesting, rendering it scarce within months of settlement. Convicts are recorded foraging for sweet tea near Parramatta in 1791, after which there is little mention of it in extant journals. The flow of trading ships to the colony steadily increased, with a marked change from 1792 when NSW Corps officers established regular trade runs to China and India, importing all manner of consumables, including tea. On Collins' departure from the colony in 1798, he was able to reflect with some flourish:

In the houses of individuals were to be found most of the comforts, and not a few of the luxuries of life. For these the island was indebted to the communications it had had with India, and other parts of the world; and the former years of famine, toil, and difficulty, were now exchanged for years of plenty, ease, and pleasure.
(ibid: 496)

By the mid 1790s, imports from across the globe were readily available and reliance on native produce was eclipsed. By the 1820s tea and sugar were part of the standard government-issued convicts' rations. In 1825, an outcry ensued in the *Sydney Gazette*

at the idea that ‘third class’ (the most depraved) prisoners in the Parramatta Female Factory would be deprived of tea and sugar as a form of extra punishment:

We must entirely dissent from the propriety of withholding tea and sugar those least but most essential comforts. Women are still women, and however destitute of moral principle they may be, yet their vileness of conduct might be punished some other way, equally effective with that of giving them mere bread and water! This is a system parallel with corporal punishment, and the sooner abandoned the better. Keep them to hard labour – use them every way rigidly, but give the unfortunate women their tea and sugar. (8 December, 1825: np)

The link between luxury and necessity, associated as much with morality as physical well-being, had strengthened since the turn of the 19th century (Crowley, 1999: 9). First Fleet females had valued tea as a necessary comfort. One convict woman wrote after almost a year in the colony, “As for the distresses of the women, they are past description as they are deprived of tea and other things they were indulged in [during] the voyage by the seamen” (Heney, 1985: 1). While recognising tea as an indulgence, the distress of being denied it, for women at least, added to the discomfort incurred in the early settlement. This letter made no reference to the indigenous alternative, or perhaps its author found the sweet tea an unsatisfactory substitute, stating: “we are comforted with hopes of a supply of tea from China” (ibid). The tea drinking culture undeniably arrived in Sydney with the First Fleet, and although tea was not included in official rations, was maintained across all classes. Despite gaining a reputation as a hostile environment, convicts and marines in New South Wales found a necessary comfort from the native bushland in the form of sweet tea. Whether taken for its perceived health benefits, enjoyment of its saccharin-like taste, or ‘pick-me-up’ qualities of a warm flavoursome beverage, sweet tea offered some relief, however slight, from the ‘distresses’ of transportation and the harshness of life in early settlement. Furthermore, it preserved the culturally familiar practice that is said to have ‘civilised’ Britain: taking tea.

Endnotes

¹ Where specified, contemporaneous journals, diaries and accounts have been referenced using the SETIS online transcript service, through the State Library NSW and the University of Sydney. These were accessed between February 2007 and December 2010. Spelling has not been corrected in direct 18th century quotes from these sources.

² For detailed accounts of such events see Karskens (2009): 365–369.

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