



Coffee: A Dark History

Antony Wild

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Reveals the shocking exploitation that has always lurked at the heart of the industry.

Also known as Black Gold: The Dark History of Coffee.

Coffee: A Dark History Details

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From Reader Review Coffee: A Dark History for online ebook

Nikki says

I enjoyed many parts of this book and appreciated the content. Advertised by the author as a "dark" history, it seemed lacking in cutting edge journalistic research. The early and late chapters dealing with the coffee crisis of recent decades and the globalization of consumption were more compelling than the slow slog through coffee's oceanic trade history, recounted without a great deal of narrative purpose. I would recommend a different historical overview to friends but would suggest some of this book's chapters.

Darren says

One's natural concerns are raised when the author starts the book by asking you not to question his facts and sources too much. For a history book that's a bit odd. The conclusions suffer from a lack of fact. In one occasion a point is made about dates where the author got Jim Morrison 's age at death completely wrong so I had to take this book as a work of fantasy. It also spends a lot of time discussing the history of St Helena which is what in fact I would guess the book started life as until the publishers pointed out that a book about St Helena is not going to sell as many books as a book about Coffee. A good editor could probably sort this book out.

Kris McCracken says

A popular history of coffee. It has its moments of appeal, but a little to ideologically driven for mine. To be honest, I wasn't expecting (nor in the mood) for a post-colonial, neo-Marxist tirade, particularly one that picks and chooses its areas to expose quite so randomly. The lack of a narrative thread (let alone citations or list of resources) also made it a bit of a struggle to get through. Not recommended.

Geordan Williams says

Antony Wild writes like a journalist instead of a historian. Many of his arguments are half-baked; he'll make claims with little follow up or some bare bones causation. For instance, the suggestion that certain Central American countries have less violence today because they killed fewer indigenes during the colonial period. He also makes arguments that sound like something from a college cafeteria. He'll reference different events as if you should know what they are and how exactly they support his argument without him taking you through the steps. His adoption of the island of St. Helena as a central place for his book is only loosely linked to coffee and was more of an excuse to use his old notes on the British East India Company.

All that being said, the last few chapters were very interesting. He talks about how the free market system, supported by the IMF, WTO, and World Bank have ruined coffee producing countries. The one argument I did find to be convincing was his argument that any "independent" research institutions looking into the health effects of coffee are actually funded by different transnational coffee companies. If I recommended it to someone, it would just be for a few select chapters.

Leo Africanus says

Seemingly written in a frenetic caffeine-fuelled state, the book contains far too many rambling tangents and a sprinkling of horrendous factual errors (especially when explaining Islamic terminology e.g. confusing the sunnah with the Quran).

However the first couple of chapters demand attention as they chart the Chinese inspired path of coffee under Arab and then Ottoman auspices to the gates of Vienna only for secular Turkey to dismiss its 400 year coffee drinking history in favour of tea.

Reading about the banning of coffee in Mecca in 1511 and the subsequent "redeployment" of the mufti responsible for the fatwa is worth it in itself.

Amy says

NF

308 pages

Oh coffee, how I enjoy drinking you! Very interesting to know where you come from. I learnt a lot about the cultivation of coffee and the history it installed. What an eye opening account of coffees' history. Along with the trading and economics and science and cultures that co-inside with its' history, I learned about the civilizations that were a part of it. Coffe was very important in world trade for over 500 years and still is today.

Jamie Burgess says

This one was a little slow to get through. I'm much more interested in the social history of food and the culture surrounding than the historical background or economic view, which was presented by this book. But it did give me some of the information that I wanted to know about the history of coffee.

Jeff says

This was quite a fascinating book. The author has a very quirky sense of humor and a good writing style that I enjoyed. I had to read a number of passages aloud to friends and family as I went through. The author does need to calm down a bit though, as the first few chapters feel like he has imbibed a bit too much of this beverage and he is on a caffeinated romp zipping through this subject and that subject back and forth seemingly at random, sometimes even within the same paragraph.

I definitely learned a number of things about politics and the US, Napoleon and some facts about coffee as well. A good portion of the book is a history lesson about trade and diplomacy and a few tie-ins with coffee. It also puts the USA's meddling with other nation's governments and economies in a decidedly negative

light, with the World Bank being the next target behind that. There are also very convincing arguments to be very selective about where you purchase your coffee from, and I am going to attempt to do so from now on.

This book is definitely a good read for anyone that is interested in history, fair trade, and coffee. It would be recommended to avoid if you do not want to read anything bad about the USA.

Norain says

It was not that thick but halfway through it, I had to put it aside. I would not say the narration was bad. It just had the tendency to wander off to other things, so you got not only about coffee and its rival tea but also Napoleon, Sufism, goat and apple berries, Starbucks, capitalism in America, Monsanto... And oh yes, don't forget St Helena.

But I did not abandon the book altogether, thanks to the experience of reading *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* which was not only long winded and had everything running and bumping into each other, but also very, very thick. Compared to *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* this was, well, novice.

The author's main concerns in this book (in my slightly blighted opinion) were the high dependency of caffeine in the American community, and the spread of capitalism: highly caffeinated and badly tasting Robusta coffee bean instead of high quality Arabica bean and worse than that, the coming of even more caffeinated instant coffee... And even worse than all those were the curse the coffee brought to most of the countries in South America which grew and exported its beans. Kind of like the curse oil brought to countries like Iraq, Iran and Sudan – they owned the oil but they never got rich; somebody else did.

It was ironic that the reason I read this book was because I wanted to start drinking coffee. I loved the smell of roasted coffee beans and as I loved micro-history even more, I thought I might as well find out where this delightful drink came from. Turned out its past was not in any way delightful. I am really, really glad I read and finished this book.

Petra says

A 3.5 star book. There's a lot of interesting information here about coffee and the coffee trade. The author does run off on mainly unrelated tangents occasionally and some of the history of the Coffee Traders, with all the names and dates and ship names, is quite dry and detailed but, on the whole, this is an interesting look at coffee history from ancient times to the present, including Fair Trade coffees.

Richard says

I've been thinking about reading a book about coffee when I saw *Coffee: A Dark History* at our local library, so I took a chance.

A Dark History sets out to explore the origin of the coffee plant, how and who started drinking coffee and it's spread through out the world to became one of the most important commodity. In addition, the author shows the devastating effect the coffee crop (and policies around coffee) has had on countries and people (African slave trade - North South issues) that provide our daily jolt of caffeine. Along the journey we meet historical figures such as Napoleon (yes that Napoleon...) and Poet Rimbaud.

Just a minor warning though, while it's a nice historical take on coffee, it reads like an academic research paper.

Now, onto Tea...any good recommendations for a historical book on Tea?

Mr_wormwood says

I enjoyed this, most memorable part was when the author makes a case for the coffee bean as an evolutionary catalyst, sort of how Terrence McKenna made the argument that the ancestors of Homo Erectus benefited psychologically and socially from ingesting psychedelic mushrooms, except its caffeine and not Psilocybin that initiates the great leap. It is an intriguing hypothesis backed up by the fact that fossils of some of mankind's oldest ancestors have been found in the same Ethiopian highlands where wild coffee trees first originated as well the proven heightening of the powers of cognition and expression that caffeine has on the human brain. So coffee, the drug that made us human? no wonder i barely feel human before my first cup of the day

Tyler True says

Coffee: *A Dark History* is a great feat of story-telling and of research. I will look for an opportunity to buy this book. Antony Wild thrillingly pursues the hard-to-isolate history of coffee rather than succumbing to “the number of myths that are ritually aired by the coffee trade to keep the curious at bay” (pg. 17).

Biology and chemistry, anthropology and linguistics, history and government, theology of all kinds and economics, painfully real or theoretical – these are but some of the fields traversed by the reader of what is really a non-fiction novel by the time it reaches its thesis. This is a thrilling work of philosophy by an author who writes objectively, not as a coffee expert who has read a little history or a biologist co-opting cultural data to the extent that it serves his argument, but as an informed and critical thinker tracking a profound idea that happens also to be a powerful drug and one of the world’s most important commodities. Despite the unorthodox resistance to citation and minor errors of logic and grammar, Coffee tells the history of this idea, this substance, through a series of breath-taking tales supported by the best evidence possible.

There are no controversial claims, to my way of thinking, throughout the entire work, but if there were, the omission of source citations would prove frustrating. By acknowledging this “largely stylistic” decision (pg. vii), Wild has set the tone of his “dark history,” and claimed authority over his information where, had he not acknowledged this choice, he might have weakened the foundation of the entire book instead.

Notwithstanding the authority he thus obtains, one could easily disagree with Wild’s thinking at any point because he writes not definitive proofs but passionate arguments. The most fascinating one to me is the connection of coffee to the evolution of humanity itself, viewed through the lens of their common location in

the highlands of Ethiopia, but far more substantial than that one coincidence (pgs. 17-21). Another delightful argument drives the chemical makeup of caffeine right into the worlds of philosophy and then literature in the person of Goethe, and further illuminates a parallel with research on the effects of caffeine on spiders through his imagery – the spiders are both objects of research and literary devices (pgs. 205-206, 208). There is no end to the tales of how coffee, in its deliciously pure complexity, carries an indelible record of trade, power, diplomacy, corruption, enslavement, poverty, and hope. It is a record of earth itself, the varieties of ways it is prepared encodes human history, and our love for it, tantamount to a need, reveals what is universal about our way of life in spite of – or through – the specificity of coffee varieties.

Because of his command of vast amounts of tangible and intangible information, data and arguments from many perspectives, Wild is able to make the best possible argument at every turn. When anecdote provides the best evidence, that is what he uses, referencing the \$350,000-yearly back-up exchange that allowed the New York Coffee, Sugar, & Cocoa Exchange to resume business immediately after being destroyed in the World Trade Center attacks to prove the significance of coffee as a commodity (pg. 8). He also uses the death of dismissed coffee plantation workers trying to enter the U.S. as evidence of coffee's role in the devastation that has led to this social problem (pg. 237). In both cases, these examples bear more credibility and more potency than statistics or citations of experts might. When an analysis of a nation's economy or of the practices of the World Bank or International Monetary Fund would be best, he uses those. When culture will speak for itself, he references, for example, the place in Dutch society of the novel "Max Havelaar" (pgs. 258-260). Even semantics, usually understood to mean the avoidance of a difficult question through technicalities of language, proves the clearest, most interesting way to teach the reader about the make-up and history of espresso: "a wonderful system for making good coffee, but not a good system for making wonderful coffee" (pg. 271). It is a memorable literary device, rather than some kind of trick, that expresses Wild's point both profoundly and concisely. In short, Wild always has at his disposal the optimal way to make the essential point.

Only once, in his country-specific breakdown of the Western Hemisphere, do sweeping conclusions, elsewhere based on broad and vetted analysis of practically the whole world, become detached from the solid logic of the book overall. The section on Panama makes several statements about the U.S. treatment of that country which are probably true but not credible based only on what is written there. In addition and in stark contrast to the rest of the book, it says nothing about coffee except that coffee is grown there (pg. 245). Analysis of "the doleful consequences of U.S. hegemony" is complemented by location-specific names and information in the following pages, but no brilliant argument like what can be seen elsewhere (pg. 234). There are many interesting insights into the fallacies of U.S. and Western policy regarding Central and South America, particularly the abuse of the Colombian environment, as revealed not by campaigners but through the coffee trade itself, but they should be fully expounded or not discussed at all rather than lightly mentioned. This seems to be a case of over-polishing because the writing here has sacrificed key substance in the interest of flow. That is, the substance seems to have been revised away.

A few nearly negligible problems do exist in the writing. One is the curious description of "land lying vacant" when "lying fallow" was clearly intended (pg. 248), and another is the illogical "ex-alumni" (pg. 238). "Status quo ante existing before the date of the reforms" is a bizarre error of editing (pg. 238); so is the duplication of "only" (pg. 173) and the missing preposition on pg. 152. A misplaced modifier on pg. 159 would cause confusion as to whether "the Exile" referred to a person or an event had it been placed in less clearly established context, but there is no reason not to employ proper grammar, even if the meaning might be apparent, anyway. Likewise, a missing comma also disrupts the flow: "The coffee houses of England could make no such claim to be the first secular public meeting places for taverns had been around for hundreds of years" (pg. 86).

"Coffee: A Dark History" provides a provocative yet satisfying account of coffee as almost everyone enjoys

it: a drink we enjoy, something we all have in common, a many-faceted problem. Because the unassailable array of data, historical research, first-hand experiences, and cultural references in combination with expertise on the coffee plant and its products is not presented as a work of persuasion, it does not require the reader's agreement in order to be appreciated as a work of literature. It is precisely this quality that makes the book so brilliantly persuasive.

Just A. Bean says

It's certainly informative! On any number of topics, one of which was coffee, but many of which felt as though they were whatever pet subject that caught the author's attention that chapter, most of which were at least tangentially related to coffee, sure, and about several of which I was left wondering.

Peculiar sidetracks about the Freemasons aside, this was one of the better written (the author has some wonderfully funny turns of phrase) and better researched coffee books I've read. It might be more affecting to someone who has spent more time steeped (brewed?) in coffee culture, as Wild has yet to meet an icon he hasn't wanted to clast, and I was unattached to most of the mythology in the first place. Good to know, in any case, and an entertaining read.

Kara says

For me, the best part was the beginning when Wild suggested that when the Bible talks about Adam and Eve eating something that made them more aware, able to open their eyes, making them think better and faster – it was referring to the coffee bean. I like this theory!

Then onwards to the history/science that concludes with the fact that coffee's true beginnings are very, very murky with nothing concrete until the Sufi's writings of the middle ages document them drinking this odd drink that meanttheycouldprayallnightandpraysomemoreinthemorningandthatmeansitmustbeholy!

Of course, once coffee becomes an established Thing, it sadly becomes entangled with the slave trade.

There is a LOT about Napoleon's involvement with the coffee trade as well as his possible dealings with THE coffee during his Elba exile, so, um, yay if you like reading about Napoleon.

And, of course, the last section covers how currently coffee is wreaking political, social-economic, environmental havoc on our global market.
