

Teas warranted genuine as imported



W. Grimshaw,
GROCER & TEA-DEALER,
Corner of Green Street, Bishopwearmouth.

Trade card of W. Grimshaw, grocer & tea dealer, c. 1810 (Source: British Museum, Banks 68.54)

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Running Tea: A Story of Smuggling in the eighteenth century

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“The masters (of the ships) have regular attendants on shore to receive the cargoes, who make signals in the Night to inform the Crew when the Coast is clear –The cargoes being landed, and paid for in Specie or bartered for wool (which they carry to our natural Enemies to the great Detriment of our manufactories) [sic].”

As late as 1779, fair tea traders in England, in other words those who paid taxes to the British state, asked their Parliament to take firm action against the smuggling of tea. As the quote above, from “a memorial and petition of the tea dealers of Britain to Parliament” makes clear, this was a thorny question as the smugglers were not foreigners, but Englishmen working from the inside. Historians still depict international trade in these times of mercantilism as a zero-sum game for silver between countries. However, states were apparently not the only actors in channeling global trade. In fact, one of the problems the early modern state faced was its inability to control what entered its borders. The quoted source narrates how the smugglers formed bands on horses, each carrying 100 to 200 pounds of tea each, and openly rode through towns and challenges the dragoons of the royal army, “some of whom have been so unfortunate as to lose their lives in fruitless attempts to stop their progress.”

Smugglers were not only willing to apply violence to get their way, but were often more capable in applying violence than the state itself. This source suggests that smuggling and illegal dealings were organized and substantial. This presents historians with a complex problem: a large part of it happened hidden from our sight and has left no paper trace. In contrast, the trade conducted under the aegis of the state was registered and is available for analysis by historians today. This may explain why trade in the early-modern period is still mainly

presented as a struggle between nations, where one nation prevails over another in direct competition. As the above example has already shown, there are strong reasons to doubt if this was actually true, but how can we prove that if all we have is anecdotal proof of smuggling?

This is where my comparative and quantitative research with a global perspective of long-distance trade becomes interesting. The main item of smuggling in this case was tea. At this moment in time, this commodity was only available to Europeans from China. Relatively few players (Dutch, English, French, Danish, Swedish and Ostend East India companies) imported tea for the West-European market. The largest market by far -to which all East India companies catered – was England and its thirteen colonies in the Americas. High taxation on tea in these areas led to profitable smuggling. My research has made it possible to reconstruct how much tea came to Europe by analysing the total amount of tea that was shipped to Europe based on records from East India companies. In turn, the total trade gives us a clear indication of the amount of smuggling as almost all of the tea was sold in the British Isles and its thirteen colonies in the Americas. If we follow the trail of records, it shows us that as much as 60 to 80 per cent of tea was imported into England by East India companies other than the English East India Company, until the moment when England radically lowered taxation and put a stop to smuggling in 1786. This is of course a radically different picture from the one depicted in academic literature whereby the English East India Company is portrayed as the winner in the tea trade from the moment it started buying its tea directly from China in 1715. What is more, the smugglers brought more varieties of tea to England than the English East India Company did. These varieties not only indicate the popularization of the consumption of tea by the smugglers, but also cannot disguise the fact that the continental companies had a better feeling for the market than the English East India Company.

This research radically alters our understanding of how the global and the local interacted in the early-modern period. Flows of goods from far-away places simply did not respect the sound borders of European states. By studying these global connections as products passed from Asia to Europe and beyond we can give new meaning to how we should understand globalisation in the early-modern world. And of course, it is not strange either to conduct this research at Rotterdam as this story of smuggling to England is deeply rooted in the history of this region: many of those involved in smuggling departed from Rotterdam itself or from cities close-by such as Flushing and Middelburg.

Further reading

Carp, Benjamin. "Did Dutch Smugglers Provoke the Boston Tea Party?" *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, 2 (2012): 335-359.

McCants, Anne. "Poor Consumers as Global Consumers: The diffusion of Tea and Coffee Drinking in the Eighteenth Century." *Economic History Review* 61.s1 (2008): 172-200.

Mui, Hoh-Cheung and Lorna Mui. "'Trends in Eighteenth Century Smuggling' reconsidered." *The Economic History Review*, 28, 1 (1975): 28-43.

Nierstrasz, Chris. *Rivalry for Trade in Tea and Textiles. The English and Dutch East India companies, 1700-1800*. Basingstoke, 2015.