

The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse. *By Bryan Cowan.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xii + 364 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$40.00. ISBN: 0-300-10666-1.

Reviewed by Michelle Craig McDonald

Commodities have received significant scholarly and popular attention recently. But unlike commodity studies of the past, which focused on production or distribution, recent commodity studies are hybrids of history, economics, social geography, material culture, and cultural studies that ask where goods traveled, how they moved, in what quantities, who wanted them and, the most elusive factor of all, why were they desirable? Relieved of their roles as mere economic cargoes or anthropological artifacts, commodities—and their circulation and consumption—have gained a new lease on life, forming an area of study in which, as cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller has noted in his recent book *Material Culture: Why Some Things Matter* (1998), the “social is as much constituted by materiality as the other way around.”

We are, in other words, what we eat, what we drink, and what we use. Brian Cowan’s *The Social Life of Coffee* falls squarely within the scope of this scholarly direction. For too long, he argues, supply has been the principal tool historians have used to understand changes in demand. Though his subtitle—“the rise of British coffeehouses”—implies that his book will focus on places of consumption more than on the beverage directly, Cowan instead weaves the two together to explore “the subjective motivations for consumption expressed by the consumers themselves” (p. 10). To understand how coffeehouses became popular in early modern London, in other words, we need to know why Londoners decided to drink coffee.

Arranged in a loose chronology, the book uses three themes—curiosity, commerce, and civil society—to track Britain’s coffee habits from discovery abroad to widespread absorption into domestic diet. Chapters one to three outline what Cowan believes to be familiar territory, the supply side of the commodity’s history. But his fresh insights combine traditional sources, such as trade statistics, with medical, commercial, and intellectual travel narratives to explore not only how much coffee westerners drank

but also what the act of drinking meant. The result is a tale equally satisfying to economic and cultural historians, related as often through coffee merchants' and British East India factors' correspondence as through customs-papers data.

Chapters four and five focus on the coffeehouse as a social and cultural institution. Merchants and adventurers brought coffee to Britain, but it was "a genteel virtuoso," Cowan argues, whose "culture of curiosity" centered in London, that proved to be the pivotal link between coffee and coffeehouses' popularity (pp. 2–3). Coffeehouses opened in Oxford before London and faced an uneasy and occasionally antagonistic relationship to the city's colleges. Early establishments functioned more like private clubs than public houses, hosting chemistry experiments, lending libraries, and public lectures with "an air of exclusivity and aloofness that remained at odds with their supposed openness" (p. 91). Coffee caught on slower in London, and through the 1660s coffeehouses were the objects of public and poetic attacks that alternately characterized its patrons as either cosmopolitan scholars outside of academia or dilettantes engaged in "superficial, merely fashionable, social display," but it was ultimately in this capital city that coffee-drinking stereotypes of "virtuosi" and "wits" were best realized (p. 101). Cowan goes beyond cataloguing coffeehouse activities to explore why virtuosi preferred these institutions to taverns or inns. The number of coffeehouses in London made them accessible, but it was their exclusive nature, he proposes, that created a controlled environment for those engaged in imagined social leveling, something that was impossible where "drunkards, prostitutes, common tradesmen, and plebeians" actually congregated (pp. 104–5). Occasionally lost in this part of the discussion, however, is coffee itself. Cowan cites Samuel Pepys, Robert Hooke, and John Evelyn as examples of virtuoso habitués, who frequented coffeehouses to attend scientific debates and book auctions, engage in just plain gossip, or even, as Evelyn did in 1684, view the first rhinoceros to visit seventeenth-century London (p. 113). But though Cowan's careful reading of their letters and diaries chronicles the various social and cultural functions coffeehouses assumed, we do not know whether Pepys, Hooke, or Evelyn ever actually drank coffee. The social life of coffeehouses might be, but is not necessarily, synonymous with coffee-drinking and could at times benefit from stronger delineation.

The final three chapters focus on coffeehouses' physical and political attributes—where they were located, who owned and frequented them, and who tried to control them—and provide some of the book's most innovative analysis. Coffeehouses' role in trade and news mongering is well known, but Cowan's strategy of connecting periodical subscription rates and coffeehouse tokens—illegally produced currency used to augment specie and tie consumers to particular neighborhood establishments—elegantly blends printed and material sources (pp. 175–80). Similarly, coffeehouse licensing has been discussed by other authors but not with the overtones of political favoritism and punishment that Cowan carefully traces through quarterly session reports (pp. 184–88). The range of evidence Cowan marshals in these chapters is one of the study's real strengths. And, at a time when academic presses are reducing the number of pages of illustrations they publish, Yale deserves special mention for allowing Cowan to include the many prints and object images that augment his written narrative so richly.

But, as all engaging books do, *The Social Life of Coffee* left me wanting more. Cowan argues that coffee is an ideal lens through which to view not only the development of the eighteenth-century consumer revolution, but also the public sphere as a separate place for political debate and critique beyond regulation of the state. His focus, however, is the “long seventeenth century”—1600 to 1720—the period before either of these phenomena really got underway. Consequently, it would have helped had he spelled out more explicitly how the early buying behavior, which he argues was “less revolutionary . . . than evolutionary,” and coffeehouse politics, which thrived only when it “would not upset the status quo,” set the stage for eighteenth-century changes (p. 3).

Admittedly, these chronological categories, as their amorphous names imply, are moving targets, but that brings me to my second suggestion. Cowan acknowledges that he concentrates on England rather than Britain, and then largely on London. His reason for doing so is well articulated: London's sprawling urban influence—“a city whose cultural dominance loomed large of the British Isles”—was the center of coffeehouse culture and serves as a microcosm for understanding the institution's development elsewhere. But time, space, and evolution, that historical triumvirate best articulated by Ira Berlin in the *American Historical Review* (1980), produce distinctive ends in different times and places. Cowan's study introduces a social phenomenon that—like the drink

itself—was adopted and adapted throughout the British and Atlantic world. Coffeehouses may not ultimately have been revolutionary spaces for political change in Cowan’s “long seventeenth-century” London, but they certainly played key roles in British–North American debates about commerce, culture, and civic fealty a century later. Cowan’s decision to focus on depth rather than breadth allows him to plumb the minds of his consumers with fascinating results, as well as prompting another set of questions about whether those conclusions would have been the same in Ireland, Scotland, or the British colonies in the Americas—places whose inhabitants considered themselves equally as British as the residents of Westminster or Piccadilly Circus.

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