Cultivating Civilization: The Age of the English Coffee House

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The English coffee house flourished from 1652 to 1838 as a social and economic institution that provided everything from newspapers and a new beverage to a vital center of commerce. The coffee house was as novel and social in England as music television was novel and asocial in America in the 1980s.

The Origin of the Coffee House

The impetus for coffee houses, the coffee itself (in reference to the coffee tree or the berries it yields), originated somewhere in what we now consider the Middle East. While uncertainty abounds, coffee could have been discovered through a miracle by a religious sheik in Mocha (in Yemen) as early as 1258. In a more ordinary manner, it could have been discovered by a shepherd in the region of Ayaman (now part of both Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni Republic) after he tasted the strange berries that caused his camels and goats to remain awake all night while they frisked and danced their time away (Robinson [1893] 1972, 2-7). The word "coffee" is derived from the Arabic word *qahwa,* which became *kahveh* in Turkish, and entered European languages when coffee reached Europe from the Ottoman Empire. Regardless of its initial discovery, coffee probably first started brewing in England arow-d 1648, the year in which the English Civil War ended. According to one version, a Greek undergrad uate student at Balliol College, Oxford, brought it from his homeland (then part of the Ottoman Empire) and introduced it into his morning regimen (Robinson [1893] 1972, 71; Morton 1951, 133). Most people in England thought coffee to be a hot. black, soot-like powdered drink, taken as warm as possible, which originated in Turkey (Timbs [1872] 1899, 269). Coffee's filtration into England from Greece, Turkey, and the East ensued in earnest after the end of the Civil War, a time of bustling commercial activity, adventurers, and return of many exiles. With Oliver Cromwell's victory in the War, "Coffee and Commonwealth came in together for a Reformation to make's [sic] a free and sober nation" (Robinson [1893] 1972, 95). One of those repatriated was a man named Jacob, who returned from Turkey with {offee. In 1650, he opened Angel's Coffeehouse in the parish of St. Peter, which is thought to be England's, as well as the Christian world's, first coffee house (Robinson [l 8931 l 972, 72; Timbs [1872] 1899, 269) . However, coffee houses only flourished when they were introduced in the City of l.ondon. A considerable amount of mystery and intrigue, as well as hundreds of years of scholarly uncertainty, surround London's first coffee house. Ironically, it is the decidedly "un-English" Pasqua Rosee around whom much controversy revolves. Morton (1951, 133) thought that this central figure was a man named "Rosa Pasquee," although "Rosa" could be indicative of a woman. Among early coffee house scholars, Houghten, writing in 1698, thought the figure was named "Pasqua," but Aubrey, writing in 1681, did not mention him in his coffee house commentary (I illywllite 1963). However, Lillywhite (1963), Robinson ([1893] 1972)? and Timbs ([1855] 1885, [1872] l 899) call this figure "Pasqua Rosee," a male youth from Ragusa (now Dubrovnik, Hercegovina), which was part of the Ottoman

Empire. They disagree, however, an his date of arrival in England (either IG52 or 16S7). Apparently, around 1652, an English merchant, Daniel Edwards, brought Pasqua (as he was probably known) from Smyrna (now Izmir) in Turkey to London as a servant to prepare the coffee to which Edwards had become accustomed on his trav els abroad. Edwards himself is noted in *The Little London Directory of* 1677, a compilation of well-known merchants and bankers of the time. The I)irectory lists a "Dan. Edwards [of] Walbrook" as one of the "most eminent merchants of the period" (Merchants and Bankers of London 1863, E). Every day in Edwards' home Pasqua expertly prepared coffee for Edwards and his business associates, who ritually, and perhaps habitually, appeared early every morning. Edwards thought that sharing his coffee would foster goodwill **and more business. Instead, with** the daily intrusions, Edwards discovered that he could not escape his home early enough to conduct his business. Thus, Edwards set up Pasqua in a shed in a churchyard in St. Michael's Alley, Cornhill, where **Pasqua could sell coffee.** However, fearing competition, the nearby ale-sellers petitioned the mayor to remove Pasqua, who was not a freeman, from his shed. Pasqua's business was saved by the intervention of Christofer Bowman, the free coachman of Daniel Edwards' father-in-law, a Walbrook alderman named Hodge. Pasqua and Bowman became partners, but because of some unknown misde meanor, Pasqua was forced to flee England at an unknown time, almost certainly before 1662. Parish records of 1662-1663 list a Christofer Bowman but no Pasqua Rosee (Lillywhite 1963,438). Bowman moved the business from the shed, possibly to a tent, and ultimately to a building, which Bowman called "Pasqua Rosee's Coffee House." The fate of Pasqua is unknown, although Robinson ([1893] 1972, 84-87) posits that he may have ?ed to Holland. However, his fortunes may have been profitable, at least if one can specu late on tWO 400 year old advertisements. The British Museum in London holds the "earliest known advertisement for making and selling coffee" (Lillywhite 1963, 437). The advertisement origi nated between 1652 and 1666 and has been attributed to Pasqua. It reads in **part: "The Vertue of the COFFEE Drink.?First** publiquely made and sold in England by Pasqua Rosee ... Made and Sold in St. Michael's Alley in Cornhill, by Pasqua Rosee at the Signe of his own **Head." Unfortunately, the buildings in St.** Michael's Alley, including the coffee house, perished in the Great Fire of London in l 666.

Pasqua Rosee's Coffee House was followed, also in i 652, by the Grecian Coffee House, which remained open until 1843, when the age of the coffee house largely expired. With coffee being advertised as curing "dropsy, gout, and scurvy" (Timbs [1872] 1899, 271), coffee houses exploded in the 1700s, at one point numbering 3000 in London alone (Besant 1903, 310). They continued to prosper through 1809-1810, when a growing alcohol sobriety and a reduction of coffee taxes made coffee rather than old porter (Morton 1951, 134) or purl and gin the breakfast beverage choice (George 1925, 306). Business was so good that each coffee house even issued its own token, which could be used as currency at the issuing coffee house (Beaufoy 1855). Coffee houses opened at 5 or 6 A.M. and closed at 10 PM. (George 1925, 306) or later. Customers might be charged a penny for admission and twopence for coffee or tea (Besant 1903). The coffee house consisted of a large room that contained several tables for reading and writing. The room was similar in appearance to beer drinking rooms at some college student unions, or to "oak" or "cedar" rooms in bars that long for a wood motif. A customer might be charged half a crown (thirty pence) extra for the use of pen, ink, and paper for the season ("A Journey from London to Scarborough 1734," 73). Boys would rush about serving favorite dishes and chocolate, coffee, and tea, all of which were warmed on a large fire. The long bar near the fire held the pots that contained whatever bubbling brew had just been heated to a boil. History

saw its first "barmaids" when cof fee house owners hired the most attractive females available to take the particular brew from the bar to customers who were sit ting throughout the coffee house (Morton 1951, 133).

Coffee House, Commerce, and Letters

The coffee houses were unique in England during their time because they were open to men (but not to women) of all classes of life. In London, the city was divided into areas for workmen, buyers, aristocrats, Westminster, and coffee houses (Besant 1903, 77). Some coffee houses or taverns catered to actors, doctors lawyers, thieves, and prostitutes. In medical emergencies, a patient would seek an apothecary to go to a coffee house to summon an appropriate physician (Lewis 1941, 64-65) . At the coffee houses, customers could receive their mail and any other correspondence. Indeed, coffee houses were the forerunners of local post offices and newspaper box numbers. When coffee houses originated, the houses and apartment buildings in London had no street numbers. As a result, a man would have his mail delivered to his coffee house, which the Post Office could find more easily than it could find an unnumbered residence. Similarly, his newspaper advertisements would direct inquiries to the same coffee house (Lillywhite 1963, 22). Even the *Tatler* and *Spectator* were crammed with descriptions of particular coffee houses (Robinson [1893] 1972, 201). However, coffee houses became best known as repositories of reading material, business transactions, and men of letters. The coffee house was a place to discuss politics, read the ten London newspapers of the day, and make one's appointments (Lewis 1941, 32-33), although each customer might be charged sixpence per month for the privilege of reading magazines and reviews (George 1925, 306). Coffee houses were particularly appealing because each of them subscribed to at least three or four newspapers, which were not always affordable for many people (Besant 1903, 318). A favorite coffee house for booksellers was The Chapter of Paternoster Row. Coffee houses even served as meet ing places for the Society of Friends (Quakers) and Free Masons. Many coffee houses grew around the Royal Exchange, the cen ter of finance, stock transactions, insurance, commodities, and property deals (Lillywhite 1963, 22-23). The coffee house was the center of the business world, the place where "everything that has an existance in Nature, is bought, sold, and transferred from one to another" (Gonzales [1745] 1886, 42). Accordingly, by 1663, all coffee houses had to be licensed (Timbs [1855] 1885, 261) and coffee was taxed at the rate of fourpence per gallon (Robinson [1893] 1972, 140). With a robust business and scarcity of small change, most early coffee houses issued individual trade tokens for exchange (Beaufoy 1855; Robinson [1893] 1972 145-46), despite Oliver Cromwell's desire for a uniform currency. At coffee houses, auctions were held, copyrights were bought and sold, and bankrupts met creditors (Besant 1903,98). Edward Lloyd's coffee house provided space for customers interested in shipping and foreign trade (Lewis 1941, 33; Morton 1951, 133 34) and exists today in slightly larger fashion as Lloyd's of London, the famous insurance concern. In 1691, brokers went specifically to Lloyd's Coffee House to find men who would underwrite their ships (Marshall 1968, 69-70). In the most regrettable part of the history of coffee house "commerce," slaves were occasionally sold at coffee houses. The practice was stopped by Lord Chief Justice Mansfield in] 772 when he declared that any slave who set foot in England was free (Lillywhite 19G3, 24). Perhaps London coffee houses are best remembered for the men of letters who inhabited them. Indeed, in *The CoJ?ee House Politician,* Henry Fielding (1730) wrote about the coffee houses and their men. Dryden was deemed the oracle of the coffee house circuit. He, Addison and Steele, and Johnson favored Will's, Button's, and the Turk's Head, respectively. The best coffee house company, thought Defoe, could be

found at Will's and Tom's (Besant 1903, 309), where many people would go after a play (Malcolm 1808).

Coffee House Criticism

For all the favor bestowed upon the coffee house, it was not immune to criticism. At one point, with the 1675 Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffeehouses, Charles II attempted to close all coffee houses because they were "nurseries of sedition and rebellion." They spread "divers false, malitious and scandalous reports ... [about] his majestie's Government" (Robinson [1893] 1972, 166). Charles did succeed in closing coffee houses for eleven days, but because of a popular outcry he was forced to reopen them.

Probably the most severe criticism of coffee houses was administered by women, and especially the wives of frequent coffee house customers. By custom, though not by rule, women were excluded from the houses. With the arrival of the coffee house, their men became balls who bounced all day between the coffee house and the tavern. The wives complained that coffee houses caused every ill from evil smells to wives' sexual deprivation. Women claimed that the coffee bcrry itself, and the coffee house, rendered their men unfit to engage in the proper performance of their husbandly duties. To women, coffee was a vile, detestable, intoxicating liquor. "Soote colored and dryed in a furnace" (Robinson [1893] 1972, 92), coffee was bitter, stinking, nauseous puddle water that caused women to fall ill. Named "Ninnybroth and Turkey-gruel," coffee made men as unfruitful as the deserts from which the berry was thought to have been brought (Lillywhite 1963, 17). This coffee, this "syrup of soot, or essence of old shoes" (Besant 1903, 310) even spurred the Women's Petition against Coffee of 1674, which ultimately failed to suppress coffee houses.   In some respects, the women made valid points. In unfriendly coffee houses, such as Little-man's, an unsuspecting visitor could be met with sharp faces and devouring eyes (Malcolm 1808, 154). Other coffee houses were plain inhospitable. At the Tilt-yard and Young Man's Coffee Houses, the patrons discussed honor and satisfaction, which frequently led to duels and rencounters (sudden, hostile arguments). Surgeons and solicitors, who were themselves often customers of the coffee houses, mend ed the wounded or issued verdicts against survivors (Besant, 1903, 311).   The Bedford Coffee House was infamous. It was known as thc place where l.ord Malton's son shot himself to death in l 776, and where, in 1779, the Revc? d Mr. Hackman, in a jealous rage, shot and killed Miss Day, the mistress of Lord Sandwich. I he Reverend Mr. Hackman shot but failed to kill himself and was hanged the next week (Marshall 1968, 208).   Seeking redemption, then as llOW, men were not without an answer to the criticism of the women. The men claimed that for all their lives they had been subjected to merely being providers for their wives. They maintained that the coffee house and its popular beverage served as a relaxing time and healing liquor. Men believed that women should, instead, focus on the decorum of the coffee houses, all of which maintained a similar code of conduct. For example, while in 1710 a foreigner thought London to be uncivil and its inhabitants to be slovenly (von Uffenbach [1753] 1934), the coffee house was presumed by Englishmen to be a model of virtue. In addition, the houses did not distinguish one social class from another. The following is a copy of the Rules and Orders of a typical coffee house.

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Preeminence of place none here should mind, But take the next fit seat that he can find: (Timbs [1872] 1899, 272-73).

The coffee house was a place where one could find a good acquaintance and shake hands until one's shoulder was almost dislocated (Lewis 1941, 33).

Enter, sirs, freely, but first if you please, Peruse our civil orders, which **are these. First, gentry, tradesmen, all are welcome** hither, And may without affront sit down together:

The Decline of the Coffee House

Despite its popularity and social utility, the F.nglish coffee house probably declined because of the same factors that cause societal decay today. Manners diminish, city clerks crowd out private patrons, literary leaders go elsewhere, and people become more political than social (Besant 1903, 319). As society progressed, the need for coffee houses diminished. On a basic level, coffee houses declined because of a lack of technology and burgeoning urbanization. Great fires that spread rapidly through attached wooden buildings destroyed large parts of London and the coffee houses in it. In 1666, the Great Fire of London destroyed much of the city and many coffee houses, including Pasqua Rosee's. Ironically, the insurance industry, which originated and operated in coffee houses, boomed soon thereafter. Insurance companies charged greater fees to insure wooden, as opposed to brick, buildings, which caused some cof fee houses serious problems because they were built of wood, a cheaper but more flammable material. Other devastating fires in 1748 and 1759 destroyed many more coffee houses in Sweeting's Alley and Freeman's Court, Cornhill. The coup de grace was the fire of 1838, which destroyed L.loydls Coffee House and the second Royal Exchange (the center of business around which many coffee houses first began, which, itself, had been destroyed first by a previous fire). To advance its underwriting business, Lloyd's eventually rebuilt and was housed in a grand structure that contained "magnificent apartments" and a giant underwriting room (Thornbury 1873-78, 509). The area around the Royal Exchange was cleared for new construction, and many coffee houses were simply condemned. The loss of the Royal i exchange in 1838 resulted in a recognition of the "need for business premises and [stock and corn] exchanges suitable to the needs and activities of the trade concerned" (Lill?white 1963,2G). Also, while societal inefficiency led to the growth of coffee houses, the efficiency that coffee houses fostered led to their demise. In 1767, London finally numbered its houses and eventually introduced street letter boxes. As a result, the mail could be delivered with greater dispatch, eliminating the need for coffee houses as central repositories. By 1820, the Post Office had compiled a list of 20,000 merchants and their numbered street addresses along with postage rates (His Majesty's Postmaster General 1820). By the 1830s, railways displaced country wag ons, couriers, and mail coaches of earlier days, thus increasing further the efficiency of the Postal Service. In addition, publish ers improved their distribution systems and thus newspapers could be obtained at many places other than coffee houses.

The nature of society itself also changed. In 1734, the Bank of England relocated from Grocer's Hall to Threadneedle Street. By 1772, to meet its expanding needs, the Bank acquired

many near by properties, including coffee houses. 1 he Bank was centralizing and growing within the city. The increasing population of the city, utilizing better travel and communication facilities, was moving outward in search of better living conditions. By the 1830s the expansion led to what we might today consider suburbs. In the end, what remained of coffee houses evolved into other social gathering places that are more familiar today. With increased travel, hotels occupied the places of coffee houses. Eating houses or restaurants were in greater demand. For example, the Jamaica Coffee House became the Jamaica Wine House, sitting in St. Michael's Alley, near where Pasqua Rosee sold coffee from a shed. The community gathering place evolved from "inn to tavern, tavern and cofFee-house, thence to coffee-house, to coffee-house tavern and hotel, and lastly to hotel" (Lillywhite] 963, 2G). By the mid-1800s, coffee houses had almost disappeared, except for those that provided a working man with dinner, a slice of bacon, and a cup of coffee (Besant 1909, 31) . Coffee houses either merged into or were edged out by taverns and clubs that were by nature private and exclusionary (Nevill 1911, 2). Perhaps women finally prevailed when tea, which they favored, rather than coffee, ultimately became the hot beverage of choice in England (Morton 1951, 134). **The English coffee house enjoyed success for only about one** hundred and seventy five years, but these were important years in which England went through a transition from a dispersed. disorganized medieval existence to an age of industry, rationality, and improved government. The coffee house was part of the changing social scene. By providing a forum for engaging in business, politics and pleasure, it deserves recognition as a vital, far-reaching institution.

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