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Abstract

With increasing productivity and rising standards of living, a new spirit of consumerism reached Britain. After its entry into the Atlantic World economy, though Scotland never fully benefited until the 1707 Act of Union, all classes eventually gained access to a wide variety and exotic assortment of consumer products. Among them, sugar, valued for its sweetness since the Middle Ages, maintained a special position, dominating all exports from British America. Embraced by the British populace, sugar provided an impetus for colonization and required imported African labor. Sugar and a newfound consumerism at home drove the British Atlantic World.

Keywords

sugar, Britain, colonization, diet

*Sweet Tooth for Empire:
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With increasing productivity and rising standards of living, a new spirit of consumerism reached Britain. After its entry into the Atlantic World economy, though Scotland never fully benefited until the 1707 Act of Union, all classes eventually gained access to a wide variety and exotic assortment of consumer products. Among them, sugar, valued for its sweetness since the Middle Ages, maintained a special position, dominating all exports from British America. Embraced by the British populace, sugar provided an impetus for colonization and required imported African labor. Sugar and a newfound consumerism at home drove the British Atlantic World.

A fondness for sweetness transcends all cultural boundaries. Even populations lacking a previous fondness for it, offer no resistance to its inclusion in their diets after their first exposure.¹ As one seventeenth century English observer, Richard Ligon noted, “the Sugar-Cane, which though it has but one single taste, yet, that full sweetness has such a benign faculty, as to preserve all the rest from corruption.”² When sugar first became available for English upper classes in the twelfth century, they gladly accepted it.

Under this context, sugar became a symbol of prosperity and high status during the English Middle Ages. With more than enough food to satisfy basic nutritional needs, elites could instead focus on relieving their monotonous diets. Sugar, like other exotic additives,

¹ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books, 1985), 14-15.

² Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of the Barbadoes* (London: Frank Cass, 1970), 85.

enabled them to distinguish themselves from the rest of English society by creating unique sensual experiences. Sugar's status as an exclusive luxury good ensured it a prominent position in medieval banquets regardless of its suitability to a particular dish.³ In addition to taste, sugar also had a visual appeal. Highly refined sugar's whiteness appealed to their senses of purity.⁴ Large eatable centerpieces known as subtleties became the premier method for conspicuous consumption. Formed from marzipan, these took the forms of animals, buildings, or other shapes.⁵ Owing to its exclusive appeal, sugar acquired a reputation as the ultimate panacea that outlasted its status as a luxury. As late as 1788, one ad in *The Times* for "The famous purging sugars" claimed:

It purifies the blood, completely cleanses the stomach, bowels, and glands, and effectually cures rheumatism, agues, intermitting Fevers, Coughs, Colds, Asthmas, and a train of disorders too numerous to insert...[with] only the taste of fine sugar.⁶

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries though, witnessed the birth of consumerism among a broader portion of Britain. Defoe in his 1724 work *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, described Britain as "the most flourishing and opulent country in the world" based on constant improvements in farming, manufacture, and trade.⁷ Although Scotland lagged behind England and Wales, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the rise of improved agricultural techniques and subsequently, enhanced crop yields. Defoe in his descriptions of rural Britain emphasized this productivity. At Bedford, for instance, "the soil hereabouts is exceedingly rich and fertile, and particularly produces great quantities of the best

³ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 85-86.

⁴ *Ibid*, 76.

⁵ *Ibid*, 87-88.

⁶ Spring Physic. The Famous Purging Sugar, *Times* (London), July 5, 1788.

⁷ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole of Island of Great Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 3, 5.

wheat in England.”⁸ This combined with an increase in purchasing power among the laboring classes opened up much of the populace to a larger consumer market as they no longer looked towards food solely for subsistence and acquired excess money to spend.⁹

Roughly, at the same time, transatlantic commerce brought a wide assortment of new imports into Britain. Just as he had done with the rural landscape, Defoe emphasized economic productivity in the cities and took immeasurable pride in Britain’s growing commerce. London, as the capital, fittingly became a major international center of trade. In the city center, “the center of its commerce and wealth,” major state trading monopolies such as “the South Sea Company, the East India Company, the African Company, &c.” had their headquarters.¹⁰ Meanwhile, on the Thames, the docks, no “less an ornament to the city, as they are a testimony to the vast trade carried on in it,” brought in a great deal of profit and shipyards transformed “the whole river” into “one great arsenal.”¹¹

British trade, however, did not entirely center on London. Defoe praised Bristol as “the greatest, the richest, and the best port of trade in Great Britain, London only excepted,” and admired its independence in trade relative to London and ability to carry its business inland via nearby waterways.¹² Meanwhile, Liverpool carried out a similar enterprise “not rivalling Bristol..., but is in a fair way to exceed and eclipse it, by increasing every way in wealth and shipping.”¹³ Even Scotland, through its 1707 Union with England gained unprecedented access to overseas markets and likewise took part in Britain’s commercial boom. At Glasgow, “the Union open’d the door to the Scots in our American colonies...and they have the greatest

⁸ Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 227.

⁹ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 118.

¹⁰ Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 144.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 148, 151.

¹² *Ibid*, 181-182.

¹³ *Ibid*, 288.

addition to their trade by it imaginable.”¹⁴ By the end of the eighteenth century, merchandise from Atlantic trade permeated the whole of Britain. One article in *The Times* from 1790 lamented that as a consequence of a likelihood of war with France, the prices of a variety of American imports, including sugar, “a necessary of life,” rose affecting “almost every rank and description of the people.”¹⁵

Sugar dominated colonial growth in the Americas. Failing to emulate Spain’s example in forging an empire based on gold and silver, England during the seventeenth centuries instead focused on a commodity-trade with an emphasis on cash crops. On this, Richard Hakluyt in the late sixteenth century commented that in Virginia:

An overplus sufficiently to be yielded...as by way of traffique and exchange with your owne nation of England, will inrich your selves the providers...and greatly profit our owne countrey men, to supply them with most things which heretofore they have bene faine to provide.¹⁶

Given their longstanding interest in sugar, they hoped to cultivate it in America. After failures at colonizing parts of South America in the sixteenth century, in 1619 and 1622, they tried and failed to plant the crop in Virginia and Bermuda respectively.¹⁷ The Caribbean’s moist tropical climate though offered a perfect location for it. Starting on the Barbados in the 1640s, Dutch merchants from Brazil offered to assist the English in beginning their own enterprises.¹⁸ As a result, the island became what a contemporary observer, Ligon, called, “one of the richest Spots

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 331.

¹⁵ Sugar, *Times* (London), August 30, 1790.

¹⁶ Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1907), 6:167-168.

¹⁷ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 37.

¹⁸ Phillip D. Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 81-82.

of earth under the Sun.”¹⁹ Inspired by Barbados’ success, other possessions in the Caribbean followed suit and developed sugar industries of their own.

Although sugar could not be cultivated in British North America, it influenced their economies. As sugar dominated the Caribbean colonial economy, these colonies still needed basic provisions to remain productive. This in turn created a burgeoning market for North American fish, grain, and lumber. Between 1768 and 1772, 60 percent of New England fish and grain, lumber, and livestock exports from the middle colonies went to provisioning the Caribbean.²⁰ North America likewise created a market for the Caribbean colonies. As transplanted Europeans, they valued sugar as a consumer good, but in addition to this, used it to stimulate a local rum industry. Despite largely failing in their endeavors to turn it into an export (consuming 90 percent of their production), it became highly successful within the continental colonies themselves occupying a substantial portion of their economies and even became a form of currency.²¹

Sugar dominated British trade with the America. By 1770, these exports totaled 97,000 tons with 90 percent meant solely for domestic markets. Between 1768 and 1772, it alone, at 63 percent of all American exports, more than doubled North American products bound for Britain.²² Sugar’s success abroad also brought a similar growth of commerce within Britain itself. Greater volumes of overseas trade required improvements in harbor and warehousing

¹⁹ Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of the Barbadoes*, 86.

²⁰ Nuala Zahedieh, “Economy,” in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, eds. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 60.

²¹ John J. McCusker, “The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments of the Thirteen Continental Colonies, 1650-1775,” *The Journal of Economic History* 30 no. 1 (March 1970), 247.

²² Zahedieh, “Economy,” 57-58.

facilities, which meant better road, river, and canal networks to reduce costs in bringing the goods inland.²³

Colonial expansion facilitated sugar's growth as a consumer good in Britain. Paralleling the evolution of a sugar based economy in the Caribbean, sugar prices fell drastically during the seventeenth century. From 1645 to 1680, prices fell by 70 percent and as expected, a considerable increase in demand followed.²⁴ Relying on monotonous diets dominated by simple starches, they welcomed the changes inexpensive sugar provided. Simply as an additive to a basic grain based diet, it imparted previously dull foods such as oats with new meaning. Lacking sugar, "Even the fruits of this country," commented Edward Long's 1774 *History of Jamaica*, would "become unpalatable to the meanest people."²⁵ Sugar consumption, however, also had an inflexible bond with tea. While chocolate and coffee also provided hot stimulants, tea emerged as the most economical.²⁶ Taken together with sugar, it provided for a unique warm and stimulating experience open to a great mass of the British public. According to Long, "It is so generally in use, and chiefly by the assistance of tea, that even the poor wretches living in the alms-houses will not be without it."²⁷

Compared to the ease with which the British acquired it, sugar cultivation required a great deal of labor. Denuded of their native populations, Caribbean sugar plantations required imported labor. While initially relying on white indentured servants, as their supply dropped off, enslaved Africans took their place on the plantations. As the basis for the British Atlantic economy, the sugar colonies in the Caribbean attracted the bulk of the British slave trade. A

²³ *Ibid*, 56.

²⁴ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 159-160.

²⁵ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, ed. Richard C. Robey (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 1: 523.

²⁶ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 112.

²⁷ Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 1: 525.

high mortality rate and skewed sex ratio with males predominating meant that slave populations on plantations could not be self-sustaining and required more imported slaves from Africa.²⁸ In addition to this, once enslaved and brought over to the Caribbean, they provided for an easily exploitable workforce. “They,” Ligon wrote, “are held in such awe and slavery, as they are fearful to appear in any daring act; and seeing the mustering of our men, and hearing their Gun-shot...their spirits are subjugated to so low a condition , as they dare not make any bold attempt.”²⁹ Sugar and African slavery became so intertwined by the end of the eighteenth century that one Abolitionist announcement in *The Times* called it, “an Article of luxury that is polluted with the Blood of innocent Fathers, Mothers and Children.”³⁰

Consumerism at home forged the dynamics between Britain, America, and Africa. Sugar, beloved by the British public, drove economic development in British America and spurred the slave trade from Africa. Their sweet tooth forged the British Atlantic World.

²⁸ Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of the Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 90.

²⁹ Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of the Barbadoes*, 46.

³⁰ Criminality of Consuming Sugar and Rum, *Times* (London), February 16, 1792.