

# London Grocery Advertisement, c. 1800

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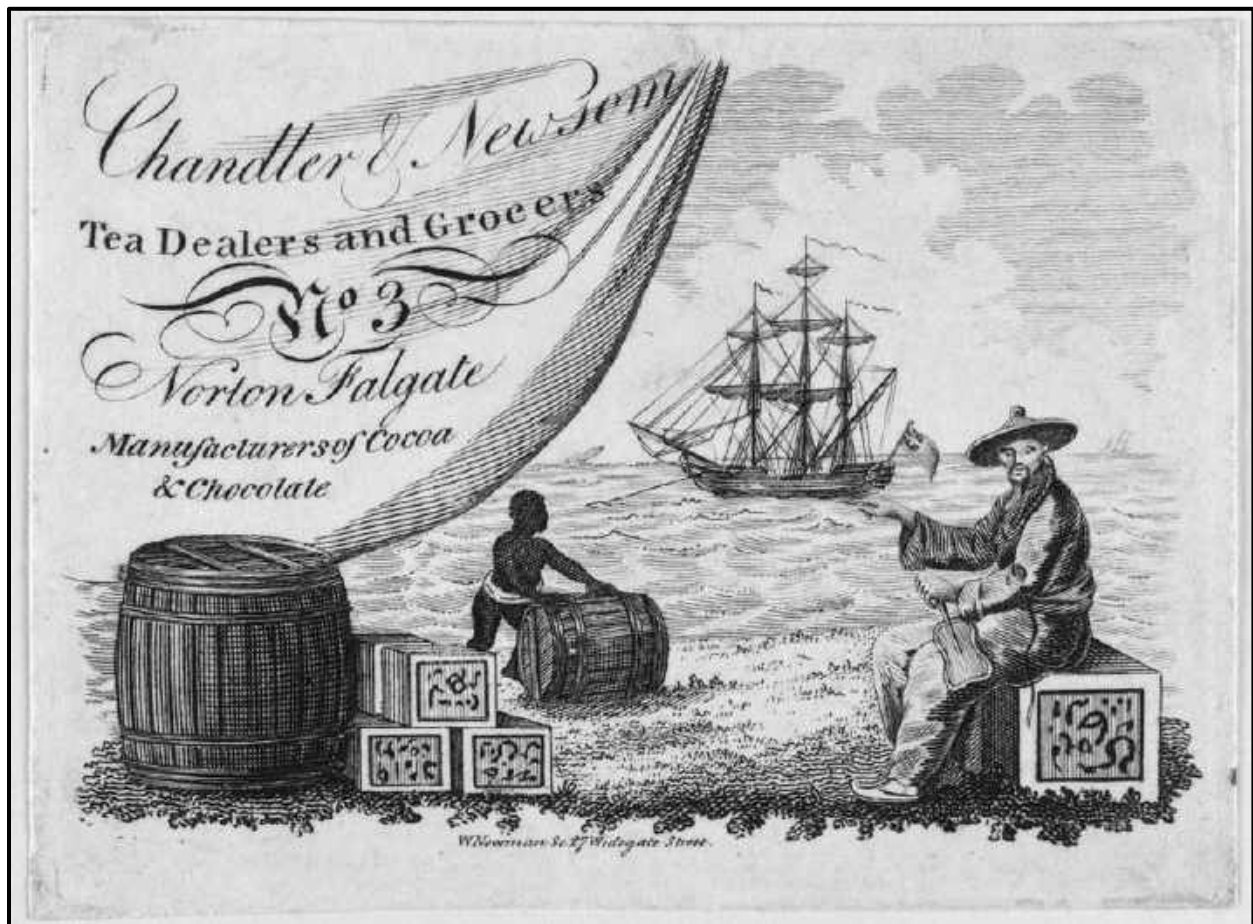


Figure 1. Trade card of Chandler and Newsom, London, n.d. By permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University. John Johnson Collection, Bill Headings, box 11 (13).

Measuring less than ten by eight centimeters, the little trade card is one of the millions of pieces of printed ephemera that circulated throughout Britain during the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—far more likely to end up as toilet paper than in an archive. The owners, Chandler & Newsom, grocers who operated out of a modest shop on Norton Falgate in London, were indistinguishable from the thousands of similar shops that peppered the growing metropolis. Thanks to cheaper and more readily available printing opportunities from the 1740s onwards, shops such as Chandler and Newsom's created trade cards as an effort to increase business. Relatively expensive at roughly five for a penny, both modest and high-end shops alike used the cards as bill headings,

receipts, advertisements, and package labeling in attempts to remind and inform existing and potential customers of the goods on offer. As visual advertising grew, printers increasingly turned to stock images and layouts. In instances of early branding, wholesalers, such as the still-operational Twinings, created cards that advertised their goods with blank spaces for local grocers to add their details. Advertising images of the ingestible commodities of the empire overwhelmingly related to their origins, playing the dual role of exoticizing the goods and assuring authenticity in a marketplace awash with counterfeits. Thus was born the stereotype of the Chinaman wearing a douli, adjacent to crates inscribed with mock-Mandarin representing tea; toiling, enslaved Africans and smoking Native Americans symbolized tobacco; and Arabs and Turks signified coffee. The waiting British ship in the background reminded consumers that these favored goods were the consequence of a flourishing maritime trade, secured by the Royal Navy.

I use this (or a similar) card when my courses engage the combined topics of consumerism and imperialism—British history and world history usually. I open with a large visual of the card, discuss its provenance, and then launch into a lecture or discussion regarding the roles of trade and consumerism in empire-building, drawing on the information described below. My primary aim is to show how ordinary individuals contributed to imperial expansion and how consumer goods became a way through which people (including women and children) connected with their wider world.

This trade card's historical significance rests in the ubiquity of both it and the goods it peddled. Commodities of imperial trade and rule boomed during the 'long' eighteenth century (1660-1837), with such ingestible goods as coffee, tea, sugar, and tobacco transforming from luxuries and curiosities to staples of the British diet. Tea-drinking, first introduced commercially to England in the 1660s, literally became a time of day within a couple of generations. Tea, whose importation was just a few hundred pounds a century earlier, was so plentiful that on a given day in 1784, London shop shelves alone carried over 146 tons of it, and by 1835 the British were consuming 40 million pounds of tea each year. Trade in tobacco, primarily grown in the Chesapeake region of British North America, was dominated by merchants in Scotland, where it accounted for nearly half of all Scottish overseas imports by the middle of the eighteenth-century. Trade in these goods mattered enormously to the economy and the nation. The annual duty on just sugar, arguably the most widely traded good in the Atlantic world at the time, in the 1760s was roughly equivalent to the cost of maintaining all the ships in the Royal Navy in peacetime.

The hero, or villain (depending on one's perspective on either the goods themselves or the imperial mechanisms that brought them to British tables), was the humble shopkeeper. In a process Adam Smith described as 'breaking and dividing' in his seminal *Wealth of Nations* (1776), these men and women took the vast quantities of teas, coffees, sugars, spices, and tobaccos that poured into Britain and repackaged them in ways that made them accessible to even the poorest and remotest of its inhabitants. By mid-century, there were 32,234 shops licensed to sell these goods—a number that doubled within forty years. Even village shopkeepers such as Ann Gomm's little grocery in the Cotswold town of Shipton-Under-Wychwood offered customers a choice of at least a half a dozen types of teas, three types of coffee, various types and qualities of tobacco products, several types of sugar, orange peel, confectionery, chocolate, and an assortment of spices that included nutmeg, Jamaica pepper, cinnamon, allspice, ground ginger, and black pepper. To aid buyers, these shops revolutionized personal credit by extending the one-time preserve of the wealthy to ordinary Britons. John McGeorge in the Scottish market town of Dumfries, for example, extended credit to a typically diverse group that included the households of a host of artisans, fellow shopkeepers, and members of the gentry along with those of an organist, fiddler, midwife, Sergeant Major, borough officer, and dancing master. Credit ledgers listing common laborers were not unusual.

Such changes in the British diet and consumerism had serious consequences. For example, the growth of sugar consumption to twenty pounds per person in Britain by 1800 ushered in the dentistry trade and the advent of fad diet books promising cures for obesity and what would later be recognized as diabetes. For the millions of enslaved Africans producing that sugar, the consequences of the British preference for sweet tea were immeasurably more severe. Ultimately, the mass consumption of these goods connected ordinary Britons to their empire via their daily rituals and practices. It also empowered them as consumers. Household cookery books discussed the economic and political consequences of switching coffee production from Arabia to Jamaica, tax-adverse American colonists famously tossed British East India Company tea into Boston's harbor, and British abolitionists launched the first nationwide boycotts of slave-produced sugar.

Almost invariably, the issue of individual responsibility becomes a focus of the class discussion. For example, to what extent were the families who ate sugar responsible for African slavery in the Caribbean? By extension, to what

degree do we, as modern consumers, have a duty to ensure our clothes, food, etc. are produced humanely and with limited environmental impact, or does that responsibility rest primarily with the producers? As with modern consumers, eighteenth-century Britons thought deeply about these questions, torn between the benefits of cheap luxuries, the tax revenues on these trades, and a sense of moral responsibility.

## **Bibliography**

*Trade card of Chandler and Newsom, London, n.d.* By permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University. John Johnson Collection, Bill Headings, box 11 (13).