

The Long Tobacco Road: A History of Smoking from Ritual to Cigarette

Humans first came into contact with tobacco plants about 18,000 years ago when migrant Asiatic people first crossed the Bering Strait and spread across the continents known today as the Americas, where tobacco is native. The 18,000-year-old evolution of humans' relationship with tobacco has seen wide dissemination both of the plant's cultivation and of the practice of smoking, a kind of physiological stimulation long sought-after, but only relatively recently reviled—and only very recently understood at a chemical level.

In fact, aside from its social aspect, tobacco has been celebrated for its medicinal and ritualistic characteristics throughout most of its history. Even to the present day, smoking—particularly that of the ubiquitous cigarette—remains pervasive in many cultures, “so commonplace as to appear a natural act” instead of, say, a bad habit (Gately 2001). But landmark scientific research begun in the 1940s detected a possible correlation between the rise in cigarette smoking and the rise in cases of lung cancer. Their conclusions would have a profound impact on the culture and politics of tobacco manufacture and advertising—and while some of the smoking public has heeded their warnings, others have been more reluctant. Lung cancer may be a troubling reality, but what of that “perfect type of perfect pleasure,” as Oscar Wilde put it? (Parker-Pope 2001).

Pre-Columbian Tobacco

There are 64 species of the genus *Nicotiana* but only two, *rustica* and *tabacum*, are used by the modern tobacco industry. The widespread cultivation of these species began as far back as 5000 B.C., and their genetic origin is the Andes Mountains near Peru or Ecuador. Over the course of the next several millennia, tobacco worked its way across the Western Hemisphere, having “reached every corner of the American continent, including offshore islands such as Cuba” by the time of the arrival of Christopher Columbus (Gately 2001).

Tobacco was likely first either chewed (what Iain Gately calls the “eat it and then find out approach”) dried, toasted, or powered for inhalation through the nose in the process called snuffing. But tobacco seems to have also been used in several practical utilitarian applications, whether juice applied to the skin to kill lice, the smoke used as an insecticide in harvests, or medicinally, as a mild analgesic or antiseptic. Among many native groups, tobacco also had mythical and ritualistic uses (and is still used in spiritual and ceremonial applications by indigenous people to the present day). As a rite-of-passage present to young men, as a maidens on wedding nights, and as a central crop in cultivation, tobacco was associated with initiation, fertility, and cleansing. Smoke from tobacco was used by shaman in healing and was also blown over warriors before battle and women before sex.

In all its forms, tobacco was integral in the spiritual training and journeys of shamans. Above all else, however, indigenous people learned to smoke tobacco. Whether in pipes or as predecessors to modern cigars or cigarettes, tobacco was used simply as a daily narcotic by both men and women (Gately 2001).

New World, Meet the Old World...and Its Dried Leaves

As with early encounters with the peculiar almond-shaped cocoa beans, European explorers were initially confused by the gift of dried tobacco leaves and so discarded them. But when Columbus sailed from San Salvador to Cuba, his second stop in the New World, two of his crew are said to have more closely observed the indigenous smoking custom, even to go so far as to try it...“thus becoming the first Europeans to smoke tobacco” (Gately 2001).

Saint Bartolomé’s 1514 transcription and third-person modification of the Columbus log (the only extant version) included an ecclesiastical sense of wonder at the New World custom, but went on to suggest that the smoke “dulls their flesh and as it were intoxicates and so they say that they do not feel weariness.” No mention was made of the aroma or taste of the product, but it is said that those first two members of the crew became habitual smokers during their time in the Caribbean (ibid).

It did not take long for tobacco to be condemned once smoking met Christianity. Hispaniola’s military governor wrote of the indigenous peoples’ evil customs with emphasis on “one that is especially harmful: the ingestion of a certain kind of smoke they call tobacco, in order to produce a state of stupor.” Alas, having described the pipe and process of smoking, he concludes that the practice results in a slumber of inebriation, so the harmful affect appears to be spiritual, as the productive soul is deadened by the product’s intoxicating quality.

Indeed, European Christians soon observed tobacco in native ritual that looked absolutely satanic, “an active tool of the Antichrist,” as well as in individual instances by shamans who seemed to use it as a medium for communication with the devil himself (Gately 2001). Even Motecuhzoma’s seemingly innocuous after-dinner tobacco use failed to impress the likes of Hernán Cortés, though the lavish arrangements of the Emperor’s lone dining experience, a decadent feast that included endless vessels of his favorite frothy chocolate beverage, has been well documented.

As the New World peoples fell to conquest, technology, and disease, tobacco soon began to entertain a mixed reception as the custom gradually caught on. Early European practitioners took such a devotion to smoking that observers couldn’t help but notice its power, or what is now referred to as its addictive properties. Columbus is quoted having said, “it was not within their power to refrain” from smoking, having become accustomed to it (Parker-Pope 2001).

Aside from the Spaniards, other European explorers were coming into contact with native people and their practices throughout the Americas, particular on the North American eastern seaboard, and not all of them were as quick to condemn tobacco. Indeed, with a little positive marketing from influential people, tobacco would easily be separated from its negative New World associations and become a major player in the rising global empires of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Global Spread of Tobacco

Tobacco got a boost in Europe for its reputed medicinal properties, as touted by Jean

Nicot, the French ambassador to Portugal from whom the genus *Nicotiana* takes its name. Nicot had heard stories of tobacco's curative power and sent seeds to Catherine de' Medici. Though most known as an appetite suppressant, physicians went so far as to prescribe smoking to prevent the plague. Meanwhile, a pamphlet entitled *Joyful News of our Newe Founde Worlde* sung the praises of tobacco while being "careful to refute...the charge that tobacco was the Devil's herb." The Spanish doctor Nicolas Monardes enthusiastic publication "provoked a wave of interest in tobacco across Europe...[as the] pamphlet was translated into Latin, English, French, and Italian (Gately 2001).

Smoking for pleasure, however, received its greatest endorsement from Sir Walter Raleigh, who was "a favorite of the queen of England...[and] something of a trendsetter in the fashion-conscious circles of Elizabethan London" (Parker-Pope 2001). The popularity of tobacco in England prompted the English colonial tobacco industry, which was boosted by John Rolfe's move in Jamestown to acquire the finer *Nicotiana tobaccum* (to replace the more bitter *rustica*), allowing the first shipment of tobacco to England by 1613.

The English developed a preference for the pipe, based on their interactions with North American Indians, while the Spanish preferred the cigar, a closer relative to the smoking encountered on their exploration in the New World. Snuff was popular in the French court (though the Spanish clergy also admired the discreetness of snuff) and it soon spread into the country as tobacco prices came down—again, also thanks to big tobacco ventures in the New World.

For England, in particular, having a colony meant an independent tobacco supply. Like England's tea enterprises in China and India, having an independent tobacco supply in America was an undeniably strong argument for a country with a habit. Americans themselves developed a strong preference for chewing tobacco—a habit disdained by Continental visitors, but one that remained popular into the nineteenth century.

Around the world, sailors and global trade disseminated tobacco and smoking habits. Cultivation by colonists became widespread not only in America, but across the African continent as well. "The weed had been integrated within diverse cultures, and diagnosed as beneficial by the medical systems of Europe, of China, and of India," but it was the Japanese, having "received tobacco courtesy of a shipwreck in 1542," who took most zealously to it, adopting a matter-of-fact approach free from ritual or reason. A doctor from Nagasaki wrote, "of late a new thing has come into fashion called 'tobacco', it consists of large leaves which are cut up and of which one drinks the smoke" (Gately). Tobacco was instantly popular—though, as elsewhere, first in the higher strata of Japanese society, where it was favored by Samurai knights who created "ornate silver tobacco pipes" and formed smoking clubs in which to gather and share in the pleasure of tobacco (ibid).

The Rise (and Fall?) of the Cigarette

Early in the nineteenth century, while much of Europe was under Napoleonic influence, the French army occupying Spain came into contact with popular Spanish tobacco products. Many Spaniards retained the custom passed to their ancestors from the Aztecs and smoked their tobacco neatly rolled in a bit of

maize husk, which was exchanged for paper in the cities. This small, versatile method of smoking was called the *papelote*, or more commonly *cigarito*, the Spanish diminutive of cigar.

Fighting among European nations domestically and abroad (with the onset of the American revolution and other colonial troubles) altered trade relations and shifted the power of nations. In the process, the Spanish tobacco manufacturing industry continued to thrive, this time producing products to meet the demand for their rolled tobacco products. Most popular were those smaller, much less expensive versions of cigars, famously hand-rolled by nimble-fingered single women who worked for lower wages and, in the stifling heat of the Seville summer, “were reduced...to working in their underwear.” The image captured the imagination of the French, where *cigaritos* were next to catch on, becoming *cigarette* in French, now “the most commonly used French word on the planet” (Gately 2001).

As tobacco helped to build America, two key innovations in nineteenth-century cigarette production combined with modern advertising to cause a great upsurge in American smoking and, subsequently, in other countries following America’s example. The first is an accidental discovery in 1839 by a slave “assigned to tend the fire overnight in a tobacco curing barn” but who fell asleep and let the wood burn low. Awakened in a panic, he is said to have thrown charcoal on the embers to revive the fire, effectively replacing wood smoke with heat, turning the leaves “bright yellow instead of brown.” It turns out, heat cured tobacco was much milder and more flavorful, bringing the perfect end to the labor intensive crop (Parker-Pope 2001).

The second innovation was when Virginian James Bonsack patented a machine to manufacture cigarettes and Bull Durham offshoot Duke of Durham Cigarettes took a gamble on the machine as tobacco’s future. When the machine began producing 200 cigarettes a minute, and as many in a day as forty human employees rolling by hand, the future of the cigarette was, indeed, solidified (Gately 2001). Heat-toasted, machine-rolled tobacco combined with decades of experiment with blending and additives into the modern global industry, with all its pleasure, politics, and pitfalls.

It could have been the death knell for smoking. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* published Morton Levin’s landmark 1950 study that showed a statistical correlation between incidents of lung cancer and heavy smokers. The *British Medical Journal* followed suit, and the two journals became the first of many studies to be released over the following decades demonstrating statistical reason for concern. Negative health effects have long been suspected to be related to some part of the process of smoking, but the deep inhalation of smoke by cigarette smokers proved to be especially harmful, and such studies became the catalyst for countless additional examinations into the ancient pleasure of tobacco.

Media and Identity in Tobacco Politics

The storied history of tobacco advertising is based solely on the premise of creating a demand where there isn’t one. Tobacco, long to catch hold in the early interaction between Europe and the New World, is an acquired taste, particularly

with respect to the smoke—and nicotine, while addictive, is not naturally craved. The earliest cigarette advertising, for example, was based upon “tobacconists...touting the virtues of their own blends,” using newspaper advertisements, trading cards, and easily recognizable trademark logos, like Bull Durham’s bull logo plastered onto billboards and supported by celebrity endorsements as renown as Alfred Lord Tennyson.

But it was “the focused advertising and fierce competition among manufactures” begun by the producer R.J. Reynolds Co. in 1913 “that revolutionized cigarette advertising” (Parker-Pope 2001). Teaser ads generated interest by foreshadowing the arrival of a great thing: “The Camels are Coming!” and “Camels! Tomorrow there will be more CAMELS in this town than in all Asia and Africa combined” (ibid). The Camel campaign was so successful it became the standard for advertising through the middle of the twentieth century, even inducing ever-increasing numbers of women to smoke through targeted campaigns including the Lucky Strike Girls and endorsements from the likes of actress Jean Harlow.

Cigarette manufacturers even deftly maneuvered the rising health concerns of the 1950s through advertising, beginning with filtered cigarettes said to reduce tar levels and continuing through the sixties and their pursuit to produce a safer cigarette (though many were abandoned in the 1980s after many technological and chemical hurdles, as well as increased scrutiny from government and industry watchdogs) (ibid).

The future of the cigarette industry depends upon luring what they call “pre-smokers” often through psychological appeal related to image. Whether manufacturers combine advertising and gimmicks to steal customers, use additives to make products more addictive, or push sales in developing countries where health concerns related to smoking are not as vigorously promoted, the industry continues to thrive.

All of these approaches to ensuring the future of the industry have come under attack, particularly with the documented rise of teenage smokers in countries outside of the United States and Europe, where there is less oversight and fewer laws restricting sale and advertisements to what would be considered “minors” in America. The strategic marketing of many of the industry’s strongest global firms explicitly states the recognition that “replacement smokers” are to be found exclusively in younger adults (Rabinoff 2006).

Political and legal battles waged against big tobacco in the United States have left an intriguing field of uncertainty. It is clear that the battles have forced “the industry’s misdeeds out into the open” and the industry has openly collaborated with “anti-tobacco forces” monetarily to fund health programs and youth anti-smoking campaigns, despite controversy regarding their efficacy. Meanwhile, “the tobacco roads leads to the emerging economies,” throughout the world, dampening anti-tobacco fervor in the United States, where heavy government regulation and taxes can only do so much (Parker-Pope 2001). Indeed, aside from protecting nonsmokers from the detrimental health effects of second-hand smoke, it is difficult to say exactly what government regulation is intended to do.

For Iain Gately and the 1.2 billion other smokers throughout the world (one-third of

which are in China), “tobacco is not just a killer, but a pleasure, a comforter and a friend” (2001). Whether or not it has any of the potential positive medicinal properties of recent studies, it is, nevertheless, an integral part of so many lives, for whom the warnings can only work to protect them against themselves, so long as they are interested.

References

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