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The early history of the tea industry in



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*The* **EARLY HISTORY**  
*of the* **TEA INDUSTRY**  
*in* **NORTH-EAST INDIA**

By **HAROLD H. MANN, D.Sc.**

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# THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE TEA INDUSTRY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA.

## I.

BY HAROLD H. MANN, D.Sc.

DURING the period of my engagement as Scientific Officer to the Indian Tea Association (1900-07) I had unrivalled opportunities to collect materials concerning the establishment of the tea industry in north-east India, both by having access to old reports which were placed in my hands, more particularly by the courtesy of the Superintendent of the Assam Company, by conversation with people now no longer with us who remembered the early days of the industry, and by examining the files of daily newspapers and weekly and monthly periodicals which exist in Calcutta. This being the case, I collected together a large number of copies of some documents, and notes from others bearing on the subject, for I felt that as the tea industry is practically the only successful Indian industry in the establishment of which Government took any large part, a study of it would probably be very useful in these days when so much is being stated about industrial development. For ten years these materials and notes have remained with me unused. Their interest has, however, by no means diminished in the interval,—and I trust that the record of the pioneer labours, often against the strongest opposition and most disheartening circumstances, will be of some advantage and encouragement to other pioneers in connection with the agricultural and industrial development of India.

From its original introduction into use in Europe the supply of tea had been a Chinese monopoly, and the trade in it to England had been a monopoly of the East India Company. In the early part of the nineteenth century, on the renewal of its charter, the

East India Company lost its trading monopoly, and as the trade in tea was one of the most valuable parts of its activities, it became anxious to obtain a rival source of supply entirely under its own control. Moreover, especially in the thirties of the last century, Japan broke off all trading connection with the West, and suspicions were rife<sup>1</sup> that China would do likewise, and so at once cut off the source of supply of tea from England.

As a result of these political changes and suspicions, great anxiety arose for the production of tea in India, if such production were by any means possible. It was already known that the tea plant would thrive under very widely varying conditions. It had been naturalised in Brazil, where it had grown magnificently, in St. Helena, in Java, in Prince of Wales' Island,—but the tea made in these places was very unsatisfactory. Of that made in Prince of Wales' Island (Penang) it was stated that it had “acquired the appalling property of a nauseating and slightly emetic drug.” It was, furthermore, very much doubted whether tea grown in India would not be useless in the same way. “Everywhere,” said a Calcutta writer in 1834,<sup>2</sup> “it thrives, as far as mere vegetation is concerned, but nowhere except in China has any successful effort yet been made to render it a profitable product of industry. We have a suspicion that this arises from causes which will be found a bar to the profitable cultivation of the plant in India. Admitting that localities for it may exist in our territories, approximating in climate to its native country, we should fear that, as the value of tea depends upon its aromatic flavour, differences of soil may produce changes as fatal as those which occur in tobacco and in the vine, and that the hyson and pekoe and twankay and souchong of India, will be very little like their high flavoured namesakes of the celestial empire.....”

In spite, however, of a somewhat general feeling at least of doubt as to the likelihood of the success of tea growing in India,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 29 (1889), p. 53, and many other references.

<sup>2</sup> *Calcutta Courier*, 7th February 1834.

there were sufficient believers in its possibility that in January, 1834, the Government of Lord W. Bentinck appointed a committee to consider the question of introducing a supply of plants from China, to decide the most suitable and likely place for growing them, and to make arrangements for bringing the seed, and making the experiment.<sup>3</sup>

In some respects this committee acted with more energy than most similar bodies. They issued a circular (March, 1834) asking all opinions which were likely to be of any value as to where tea was most likely to be successful, and they arranged at once that one of their members (Mr. G. J. Gordon)<sup>4</sup> should go to China and bring back plants and seed, and also cultivators from China who knew how the plants should be grown and how the tea should be prepared.

Both these actions of the "Tea Committee" have had results which have continued to this day. The circular was issued and Gordon went to China. The first resulted in the definite decision that the tea plant occurred in Assam: the second brought about the introduction of the first lot of China tea seed,—the curse of the India tea industry.

But the discovery of the tea plant of Assam was only a secondary result of the issue of the circular of March, 1834. Before this, replies were received from people in every corner of India who, on the strength of false analogies of climate and soil, convinced the Tea Committee that the proper places in India for tea cultivation were in order of suitability (1) "On the lower hills and valleys of the Himalaya Range." (2) "On our Eastern Frontier." (3) "On the Neelgherries and other mountains in Central and Southern India." What was meant by the Eastern Frontier I do not know. It seems doubtful whether Assam was referred to. By the Himalayas, however, Darjeeling was certainly not meant, but rather Mussoorie, Dehra Dun and the neighbourhood. The

<sup>3</sup> This Tea Committee consisted in the first instance of Mr James Pattle, Mr. G. J. Gordon and Dr. Lunqua, a Chinese doctor, who had long lived in Calcutta.

<sup>4</sup> At a salary of Rs. 1,000 per month.

committee, led largely by Dr. Wallich, the then Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, maintained the superiority of the Himalayas in this region for several years,—I think, in fact, until the committee was dissolved some years later.

But the circular had been received, among other people, by Captain Jenkins, then in charge of the Assam Valley, and a man of great enthusiasm for the development of that newly-conquered province, and one who knew its possible products better than almost anyone living. He lived at Gauhati, but he knew, as most of those who had had experience of Upper Assam knew, that tea was already existing in the country of the hill tribes ( Singphos ) at the north-east of the valley, and, not only this, but was used for making tea by the Burmese method.<sup>5</sup> This fact had been known at least since 1815. In that year it was spoken of by Colonel Latter, again in 1818 by Mr. Gardner, again in 1824 by Mr. Bruce who grew it in his garden at Sadiya a year or two later (in 1826). Time and again plants had been sent to Calcutta for identification,—by Mr. David Scott, Commissioner of Assam, by Mr. Bruce, and by others. But there seems to have been an extraordinary reluctance on the part of the botanical authorities in Calcutta to acknowledge the existence of tea in India. The matter could only be settled finally, of course, if flowers and seed were sent,—but it was always apparently the part of the botanists to doubt and deny, rather than to encourage the idea that tea was present in the country.

On the receipt of the Tea Committee's circular, however, Jenkins passed it on to a young officer who was stationed at Sadiya, named Lieutenant Charlton, who had also seen and drunk the so-called tea which was growing in the country of the Singphos and also near the Dibru river. He immediately sent to Calcutta (on 8th November, 1834) not merely the tea but also samples of the *fruit* and leaves of the so-called tea trees, and this enabled the plants to be identified with certainty as tea, identical with that of China.

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<sup>5</sup> Letpet Tea.



In informing the Government of this fact the Tea Committee waxed enthusiastic and wrote as follows:—"It is with feelings of the highest possible satisfaction that we are enabled to announce to his Lordship in Council that the tea shrub is beyond all doubt indigenous in Upper Assam, being found there through an extent of country of one month's march within the Honourable Company's territories, from Sadiya and Beesa to the Chinese frontier province of Yunnan, where the shrub is cultivated for the sake of its leaf. We have no hesitation in declaring this discovery.....to be by far the most important and valuable that has ever been made in matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of this empire. We are perfectly confident that the tea plant, which has been brought to light, will be found capable, under proper management, of being cultivated with complete success for commercial purposes, and that consequently the object of our labours may be before long fully realised."<sup>6</sup>

The effect of this announcement on the policy of the "Tea Committee" and of Government was immediate. Mr. Gordon who had been sent to China to fetch seeds and tea makers was recalled, as his mission was now considered unnecessary, and a scientific expedition was sent to Assam to bring back authentic and full information as to the extent and character of the tea there found.

In accordance with this decision Gordon returned, but not before he had obtained and sent off several lots of tea seed from China. As it has often been suggested that he was fooled by the Chinese and put off with inferior seed, it may be well to give a contemporary account, evidently inspired by Gordon<sup>7</sup> himself, of what he did and what seed he got. "The first parcel of the seed was despatched personally by Mr. Gordon, in very good condition, and having been procured from the Bohea hills, is supposed to have been collected from plants bearing only the good sorts of black tea. This seed on its arrival in Calcutta was distributed partly for

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from the Tea Committee to the Government of India, 24th December 1834.

<sup>7</sup> *Calcutta Courier*, September 14, 1835.

cultivation in Assam, partly on the Himalaya hills. The second and third batches were both despatched from Canton during Mr. Gordon's absence, and from the channels through which they were procured are supposed to have been only the seeds of inferior kinds of tea. Both these parcels were sown in the Botanic Garden here; the last of them arrived out of season and in such a state as not to vegetate, but from the second batch about a lac of plants were procured, of which about 20,000 were sent up to Assam, as many more to the garden at Mussoorie, and a couple of thousands to Madras." There was evidently more than a reasonable suspicion that part at any rate of these first importations represented not the seed of the best of the Chinese tea plants, but any rubbish which (not even being inspected by the Tea Commissioner in China) could be palmed off on the unsuspecting Indian authorities. This was not the case always with later importations, but some of the first were certainly as doubtful material as could have been obtained.

The recalling of Mr. Gordon from China was a step about the advisability of which much controversy arose later. Wallich, the Superintendent of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, whose influence was then paramount, held that if tea really occurred in Assam, then there was no need to import seed. He wrote<sup>8</sup> :—"The committee have maturely weighed the subject of the new discovery in Upper Assam in all its bearings. The genuine tea grows there, or an indigenous plant which may be cultivated to any extent. There is no ground for supposing that the various sorts of tea seeds imported from China will produce anything but the shrub in its natural state, retaining nothing of the variety whose name the seeds bear : it is therefore useless and unnecessary to import from China at a great expense and great risk what may be had, as it were on the spot, to any extent almost in a state of perfect freshness and strength for vegetating. Your continuance in China, so far as regards supplies of seed, is therefore useless and unnecessary." This policy, as we have since proved by experience, was correct :

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<sup>8</sup> To Mr. Gordon, as Secretary of the Tea Committee on 8rd February 1835.

the reason given for it was as fallacious as could be,—and was one of the points which led to bitter controversies a little later between Wallich and Griffith, his colleague on the scientific deputation to Assam.

In the meantime the local progress had been considerable. Tea plants, originally supposed to be only found growing wild in the Singpho hills, had been discovered in the Manipur hills by Major Grant, in the Tippera hills, and in a number of new localities in the Assam Valley. Further Lieutenant Charlton, who had supplied the samples which had finally determined that tea occurred in Assam, had been asked to experiment with the growth of the plant at Sadiya where he was stationed, with Mr. Bruce, who had been in Assam for a number of years on his own business and who had certainly grown the plant since 1826, as his assistant. This latter arrangement was not to continue long. In the disturbed state of the country, Charlton had to go out to subdue a rebellion, and in attacking a stockade he was wounded and had to leave the province.<sup>9</sup> Bruce took charge of the experiments, and from this time onward he becomes almost the principal figure in the local development of tea culture for a good many years.

The scientific deputation to Assam to which I have referred was appointed early in 1835 and consisted of Wallich, William Griffith,—one of the most distinguished botanists who ever worked in India,—and McClelland, a man of reputation, as a geologist. They left Calcutta on 29th August, 1835, and went straight to Sadiya, arriving in January, 1836. This deputation was not a very happy party. It found the experiments in growing tea at Sadiya in a very crude state. There *had* been tea nurseries at Sadiya but they had been trodden down by cattle, and little could be seen. The country was so disturbed that Wallich got frightened and wished to return without seeing all the country. The others explored the country fairly thoroughly, however, and the reports on what was

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<sup>9</sup> *Englishman*, 1st September 1835.

found by Griffith<sup>10</sup> and McClelland<sup>11</sup> are among the most valuable documents we have as to the condition of indigenous tea in Assam in 1836.

The questions which they set themselves to answer were—

- (1) Is tea indigenous to Assam?
- (2) Are the conditions such as to make it probable that a tea industry will succeed?
- (3) What are the conditions in Assam under which it is most likely to grow successfully.
- (4) Is there any necessity to import Chinese tea seed.

The first of these questions they left doubtful, and doubtful it has remained. They found the tea plants scattered all over the country to the south of the Brahmaputra in Upper Assam, while there were none to the north of the river. They always occurred, however, in the plains in groups, almost as if they had been planted, and only in the Singpho hills did they become apparently more a part of the ordinary vegetation of the country. These groups of tea trees in the jungle, however, were exceedingly common. The "Muttuck" country between the Dibru and Dehing rivers was full of them, and other places like Gabro Purbut at the foot of the Naga hills where tea had been found, were visited by Griffith and McClelland. But the country had been in a state of war for twenty-five years on and off and completely desolated. The people in the hill round the valley were known to know tea and to drink it. Hence it was quite possible that these were remnants of former tea gardens. In spite of this both Griffith and McClelland considered it probably indigenous.

In discussing the second point, Griffith went at great length into the similarity of Upper Assam to the tea tracts of China. He concluded finally: "(1) that there is a similarity of configuration between the valley of Assam and two of the best known tea provinces of China; (2) that there is a similarity between

<sup>10</sup> Transaction of Agri-Horticultural Society of India, Vol. V, 1837-38.

<sup>11</sup> Transaction of Agri-Horticultural Society of India, Vol. IV, 1837.

the climates of the two countries both in regard to temperature and humidity; (3) that there is a precise similarity between the stations of the tea plant in Upper Assam and its stations in those parts of the provinces of Kiangnan and Kiangsee that have been visited by Europeans; (4) that there is a similarity both in the associated and the general vegetation of both Assam and those parts of the Chinese tea provinces situated in or about the same latitude." This conclusion undoubtedly did a good deal to strengthen the confidence in the possibility of Assam as a commercial tea-growing district, though I doubt whether any of these statements are very accurate.

As regards the conditions under which tea would best grow in Assam, McClelland (*loc. cit.*) had nothing to go on except the situation of the indigenous tea which he found. Of this, he said:—"It appears that the tea plant of Assam grows spontaneously under slightly distinct circumstances as follows: (1) in the level plain; (2) on embankments or mounds lightly raised above the plain. Cuju, Noadwar, and Tingrai are examples of the first, Nigroo and Gubrupbut are examples of the second.<sup>12</sup> The first class of situations are distinguished from the general plain by a porous structure and the peculiar character of maintaining a dry surface under exposure to excessive moisture; the second by a structure less porous than the first. In both the plants are situated at the verge of inundations which prevail during the greater portion of the year on the adjoining lands. The important peculiarity of these sites is that they are less secure from inundation by their elevation than by their structure. Indeed the lower sites are scarcely raised more than a yard above the adjoining flat plains, which are exposed to inundation not merely during falls of rain, but also from the overflowings of the great rivers." It is remarkable how clearly McClelland saw the need for thoroughly efficient drainage if tea

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<sup>12</sup> The names of most of these sites will be at once recognised by those who know the Assam tea industry.

is to flourish. It would have been a good thing if everyone since then had seen it equally clearly.

As to whether it was necessary to import Chinese tea seed, there was, as we have already hinted, a violent difference of opinion between Wallich and Griffith. The former held that there was no need: the latter that Chinese seed is required. I have quoted Wallich, I will now quote Griffith. "The most thoroughly philosophical course," said Griffith, "is to cultivate *imprimis*, on the tracts alluded to, the best procurable plant taking at the same time every precaution towards reclaiming the Assam plant.....The first step must be therefore the importation of seeds with a small proportion of the best plant from China: this is still more necessary from the total annihilation of those previously imported,—and the importation must continue to be, for some years, for obvious reasons, an annual one."

Griffith's position was thoroughly logical. A wild plant is not likely to give as good produce as one which has been cultivated for many generations. But the result of its adoption has been disastrous. As a result of it Gordon was sent back to China, for many years China tea seed was brought over regularly, and every thing was done to plant it instead of the "wild" indigenous tea of Assam. Wallich was illogical, but he was right; Griffith was logical, but the result of his recommendation was disastrous. It shows how dangerous it is in such matters to reason by analogy.

The general result of the visit of the scientific deputation to Assam was to commit the Government to go ahead in a definite effort to introduce tea cultivation in Assam. Previously the work had been very half-hearted. A nursery in the compound of the bungalows of Charlton and Bruce at Sadiya or in a small plantation at Chykwa,—the cutting down of the trees in a few of the groups of tea plants in the jungle,—the importation of a few Chinese tea makers, the whole under the general supervision of Bruce,—this was all that had been done, and it had been done very badly. As regards the nursery at Chykwa, Griffith reported out

of 20,000 plants put out, in August, 1835, not more than 500 remained alive and those "in the last stage of decline. The ground was literally matted down with low tenacious weeds, and it is a fact that on our arrival at the nursery not a tea plant could be seen owing to the uniform green colour of the surface." As regards the tea colonies in the jungle, he said that Tingri, where operations were commenced, looked unhealthy in 1836. "Great parts exhibited considerable confusion: almost all the tea plants had been cut down: the underwood was cleared away, and all the forest trees either felled or in process of being so, the *débris* being burnt on the spot among the still living bases of the tea plants!"

From this time onward, however, the energy put into the matter was very largely increased. Bruce, as Superintendent of Tea Culture, put a large amount of energy into the work of clearing the tea colonies in the jungle, allowing them to grow, and making tea from them. The following note on his work published in 1839<sup>13</sup> seems to give but a fair account of all that we owe to him.

"Mr. Bruce, a gentleman who by long residence in the province had become habituated to the climate and well acquainted with the country and inhabitants, was appointed Superintendent of Tea Culture. His attention has previously been given to other pursuits, and he does not seem to have possessed any knowledge of botany or horticulture, or indeed any special qualifications for the post, but his intelligence and activity supplied every deficiency, and enabled him to render very valuable service. He discovered that the tea plant, instead of being confined to a few isolated spots, was over a great extent of country<sup>14</sup> and though his researches were at first viewed with great jealousy by the native chiefs, he not only succeeded in removing their prejudices but persuaded them to contribute their hearty assistance to his labours."

I do not pretend that Bruce ever discovered the way to grow and make tea so as to be really profitable. As we shall see, nobody

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<sup>13</sup> Asiatic Journal, Vol. 29 (1839), pp. 53-61.

<sup>14</sup> He published a map of these in 1838, which shows how widely he must have travelled in what then was almost pathless jungle.

did this really until 1852,—but he was an admirable pioneer, found out the habits of the tea plant, got over many of the initial difficulties, made drinkable tea, and to him almost alone is due the bringing of the cultivation and manufacture to such a point that a commercial company was ready to take it up.

The first tea, good enough to send down to Calcutta, made in Assam, was produced in 1836. Five boxes were made of tea prepared from leaves gathered out of season, dressed according to the process used for black tea, and with a very imperfect apparatus.<sup>15</sup> It was approved in Calcutta. The then Viceroy (Lord Auckland) drank it and pronounced it of good quality, and it was considered by those interested that the question might be regarded as settled that tea could be made in Upper Assam.<sup>16</sup> The following year still better tea was made, and was pronounced to be a mercantile commodity.<sup>17</sup> The difficulty of packing was beginning now to be felt, and remained a serious problem for several years, until tea lead was made on the spot,—a not very easy operation. In 1838 the first tea was sent to England. I will speak of its reception in London a little further on.

The position of the cultivation and manufacture at the stage we have now reached is well described in a small but very interesting pamphlet published by Bruce in 1838. This<sup>18</sup> gives such an excellent account of what tea culture and manufacture meant to Bruce in those early days that I must quote a few passages.

“The tea plants of Assam have been found to grow, and to thrive best, near small rivers and pools of water, and in those places where after heavy falls of rain, large quantities of water have accumulated, and in their struggle to get free, have cut out themselves numerous small channels. On the top of this land you must

<sup>15</sup> *Calcutta Courier*, 21st November 1836.

<sup>16</sup> *Calcutta Courier*, 21st December 1836.

<sup>17</sup> *Daily News*, Calcutta, 2nd March 1838.

<sup>18</sup> Entitled “An Account of the Manufacture of the Black Tea as now practised at Suddeya in Upper Assam, by the Chinamen sent thither for that purpose, with some observations on the culture of the plant in China, and its growth in Assam by C. A. Bruce, Superintendent of Tea Culture.”



fancy a thick wood of all sorts and sizes of trees and amongst these the tea tree, struggling for existence: the ground here and there having a natural ditch cut by the rain water, which forms so many small islands, . . . the land being never wholly inundated in the rain, though nearly so. This kind of land is called Coorkah Mutty.<sup>19</sup> I have never met with the tea plants growing in the sun, but invariably under shade, in thick woods, or what we call tree jungle and only there and in no other jungle whatever . . . . The largest tea tree I ever met with was twenty-nine cubits high,<sup>20</sup> and four spans round: very few I should say attain that size."

He goes on to say that he had failed always in planting tea when put in the sun: on the other hand, his transplants did very well in the shade. He was astonished at the hardiness of the tea plants and quotes the following experience. In one case the Assamese villagers "took the tea plant to be so much jungle, and therefore nearly cut all of it down close to the ground, and set fire to the whole, and then planted paddy or rice on the spot. The crop of paddy had just been cut and brought in when we saw the plants, the shoots were coming up from the roots and old stumps thick and numerous . . . . I afterwards converted this piece of ground into a tea garden on account of the Government, and now it is one of the finest I have." Bruce says he succeeded in getting tea plants to grow from cuttings, provided they were in the shade. If so, he must have worked very carefully for it is decidedly not easy to do so. In regard to plucking of tea leaf, Bruce does not seem to have attempted to go beyond what was at that time falsely understood to be the Chinese method,—that is to say to pluck the whole of the young shoots as soon as they had four leaves on them, do the same when a second lot of leaves grew, and take a third similar crop,—if it grew after such terrible treatment.

The method of making black tea adopted by Bruce's Chinamen is interesting to those who know the process as carried on at

<sup>19</sup> Nowadays still called *Korkani* land.

<sup>20</sup> Say 43 to 44 feet.

present. Withering of the leaf was always done by preference in the sun and the leaves were taken down and clapped between the hands several times during the process. The preparation for rolling also included a short heating in iron pans over a straw or bamboo fire. The rolling was done, of course, by hand, very much in the manner one sometimes still sees used at the very beginning of the tea season. No definite fermentation process was included and, after rolling, the tea was dried on sieves over charcoal. The drying was done in several stages, and the intermediate times during which the tea got cool gave the chance for some fermentation to go on.

Such were the conditions of production and of manufacture during the succeeding two or three years. New tea colonies were found in the jungle and were opened and extended by local Assamese labour almost entirely in the so-called Muttuck country, and tea was made, in gradually increasing quantity by or under the supervision of a number of Chinese who had been introduced for the purpose. The whole development was assisted by the fact that the British Government took over in the latter part of 1838 the direct administration of the territory of Poorunder Sing, containing the greater part of what is now the Sibsagar district of the Assam valley.

During 1837 nothing really more than samples of tea were made. In 1838, however, enough was produced for a number of boxes to be despatched to England, where their arrival was awaited with great interest. On 6th May 1838, Captain Jenkins,<sup>21</sup> the Commissioner of the Assam valley, announced their despatch. These reached England in the latter part of the year and were brought to auction on 10th January 1839. There were only eight chests and each chest was sold separately. The following contemporary account of the sale will have considerable interest.

“ The first importation of tea from the British territories in Assam, consisting of eight chests, containing about 350 lbs., was

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<sup>21</sup> Letter to Lord Bentinck from Gauhati.

put up by the East India Company to public sale in the commercial sale rooms, Mincing Lane, on the 10th January, 1839, and excited much curiosity. The lots were eight, three of Assam souchong, and five of Assam pekoe. On offering the first lot (souchong) Mr. Thompson, the sale-broker, announced that each lot would be sold, without the least reservation, to the highest bidder. The first bid was 5s. per lb., a second bid was made of 10s. per lb. After much competition it was knocked down for 21s. per lb., the purchaser being Captain Pidding. The second lot of souchong was bought for the same person for 20s. per lb. The third and last lot of souchong sold for 16s. per lb., Captain Pidding being the buyer. The first lot of Assam pekoe sold after much competition for 24s. per lb., every broker appearing to bid for it: it was bought for Captain Pidding. The second, third, and fourth lots of Assam pekoe fetched the respective prices of 25s., 27s. 6d. and 28s. 6d. per lb., and were also purchased for Captain Pidding. For the last lot (pekoe) a most exciting competition took place,—there were nearly sixty bids made for it. It was at last knocked down at the extraordinary price of 34s. per lb., Captain Pidding was also the purchaser of this lot and has therefore become the sole proprietor of the first importation of Assam tea. This gentleman, we understand, has been induced to give this enormous price for an article that may be produced at 1s. per lb., by the public-spirited motive of securing a fair trial to this valuable product of British Assam.<sup>22</sup>

As suggested in the above extract the prices given were purely for the sake of advertisement. The tea was not good but it was a curiosity, and its arrival was followed in the latter part of 1839 by another lot, this time of ninety-five packages eighty-five of which were sold on 17th March, 1840, by auction as before. A very complete account of this consignment was given by the East India Company to the Indian authorities with careful criticism by nearly all the leading London tea brokers.

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<sup>22</sup> Asiatic Journal, 1839,

The tea was evidently much better than the last, and was valued from 2s. 11d. to 3s. 3d. per lb. It still fetched, however, a fancy price nearly all going between 8s. and 11s. per lb. except what was called *toyehong*, evidently a very coarse material, which fetched between 4s. and 5s. per lb. With regard to them Messrs. Twinings and Co. of London<sup>23</sup> well summarised the general opinion by saying, "Upon the whole we think that the recent specimens are very favourable to the hope and expectation that Assam is capable of producing an article well suited to this market, and although at present the indications are chiefly in reference to teas adapted by their strong and useful flavour to general purposes, there seems no reason to doubt but that increased experience in the culture and manufacture of tea in Assam may eventually approximate a portion of its produce to the finer descriptions which China has hitherto furnished."

Thus six years after the Tea Committee was originally formed and experiments commenced, we have really for the first time a reasonable quantity of Indian tea put on the market. So far the Government had borne the whole cost of the experiment, and had every reason to congratulate itself on the progress made. It had been proved that tea existed in Assam, that it would grow, that the leaf could be manufactured and that the manufactured tea was a marketable commodity comparable with that obtained from China. It now remained to convert a Government experiment into a real commercial venture,—to take it out of the hands of the experimenters and place it in those of businessmen, who would have to make it pay. Between the present stage and that final one when money could be made from tea culture there was still a long way to go. Many disappointments had to be faced and many losses made, and the preliminary steps only were soon found to have been completed. Twelve years more, in fact, had to pass before tea culture could be considered a commercial success. The story of those twelve years will form the subject of a second article.

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<sup>23</sup> Letter dated 12th February 1840,

## II.

IN my last article I traced the history of the tea industry in north-east India to the time when tea from the plantations in Assam was really on the market. This point was reached by the end of 1838 or the beginning of 1839, though the public were hardly satisfied of the soundness of the undertaking till a year or so later. At that time it must be remembered the whole of the so-called plantations in the Assam Valley, chiefly consisting of groups of indigenous tea plants in the jungle which had been cleared of other growth and weeds and had been cut down so as to form leaf-bearing bushes, were in the hands of Government under a Superintendent of tea culture. This Superintendent, Mr. C. A. Bruce, the real founder of tea cultivation in Assam, had opened out such areas in many places. Many of his gardens were near Dibrugarh, more near the Tingri and other smaller rivers in Upper Assam, others were at the foot of the Naga hills as far to the south-east as the well-known garden of Gabro Purbut.

All that had been proved, however, by 1839 was that tea would grow, and that commercial tea could be made for which a market existed in London. But the matter was getting beyond the stage at which the Government wished to control it. Their idea was only to prove its success and then hand it over to private enterprise. Early in 1839, hence, both in Calcutta and London, a number of capitalists apparently approached Government for the transfer of the existing plantations to themselves and for the creation of a monopoly of tea cultivation in the Assam Valley in their favour.

The first move was made in Calcutta, where a company termed the Bengal Tea Association was formed in February 1839, with the approbation of the Government.<sup>1</sup> Almost immediately after another company of London merchants came forward for the same purpose. The *Times*, in April 1839, wrote as follows:—"A joint stock company is forming in city for the purpose of cultivating the newly discovered tea plant in Assam. Their intention is, in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Englishman*, June 29th, 1839.

first instance, to open a treaty with the Supreme Government in India for the purchase of the East India Company's plantations and establishments in Assam, and afterwards to carry on the cultivation of tea there, for the purpose of importing it into this country. The project has been taken up with so much avidity, principally by the mercantile houses trading with India and the leading firms in the tea trade that all the shares were appropriated in a few days and before any public notice of it had appeared. The capital to be raised is £500,000 and it is stated that a communication has already been opened with the Board of Trade and the East India Company, preparatory to a negotiation for the purchase of the Assam territory."

The two—that is to say the Calcutta and the London companies—combined their forces almost immediately. It was obvious that at the stage things had reached there was no room for two such ventures and by the middle of 1839 they had agreed to join interests. This was suggested, as was stated in a meeting of the Calcutta branch,<sup>2</sup> in order that "the junction of such interests as were now combined would induce His Honour in Council to consider that no better guarantee could be given to the Government of Bengal for the early establishment of this important trade upon a bold and energetic scale." At this meeting a resolution was passed "that the Bengal Tea Association do form a junction with the London company on condition that the local management be conducted by a committee of directors to be elected exclusively in this country." Thus was originated the peculiar constitution of the pioneer tea company—the Assam Company—in its early days whereby it had two controlling bodies—one in London and another in Calcutta,—an arrangement which seems almost to have invited disaster.

In the meantime, the formation of the Assam Company in London, though it received the approval of the heads of the East India Company, did not do so without opposition. This was apparently partly due to a fear that the Company would be given a

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<sup>2</sup> On May 30th, 1839.

monopoly, and partly to a belief that it had been engineered for reasons not given out to the world. At a meeting of the proprietors of the East India Company (June 19th, 1839) the opposition was led by Sir Charles Forbes, and he got an assurance that no exclusive privilege in Assam would be granted to the Company. This did not satisfy him, however, and he stated that "he feared, although they were told of the immense advantage which must result from this plan, although it was said that the people of this country, as well as the people of India, Mahomedans and Hindoos, would profit to an infinite extent by this scheme,—that it, notwithstanding, would all turn out to be a humbug."<sup>3</sup>

It was recognised that apart from actual technical difficulties in the cultivation and manufacture which were not, as we shall see later, sufficiently considered at the time, the chief obstacles to the success of a truly commercial enterprise were the lack of labour and capital. Captain Jenkins, the administrator of Assam, described the country as a land flowing with milk and honey, with provisions abundant and easily procured, and only lacking these two necessaries. The capital was now provided by the Assam Company, the lack of labour remained, and as we know, has remained almost till to-day one of the chief obstacles to the development of the tea industry.

It was well, however, that the difficulties in the provision of labour and in the technical management of tea gardens and the manufacture of tea were not fully realised by the promoters of the proposed company. As it was, there was much enthusiasm both in London and Calcutta, and as a result of the union of the two sets of interests, the Government agreed to hand over two-thirds of the experimental tea gardens in Assam to the new company. This being the case, a "deed of settlement" was made among the subscribers to the Company to remain in force until a charter, or an act of Parliament, was passed constituting them a company as was the usual custom in those days.

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<sup>3</sup> Asiatic Journal. Meeting held June 19th, 1839.

The organisation of the Company was peculiar. As already stated it had a double board of directors whose powers were divided as follows. The duties of the Calcutta local directors were "the local management of affairs in India in the purchasing, improving, and clearing lands in Assam and elsewhere in India and of buying, renting, or building necessary warehouses, offices, and other buildings in India and in obtaining, employing and removing officers, managers, clerks, servants, labourers and generally in superintending and conducting all the business and affairs of the Company there, and fulfilling contracts for that purpose. "Provided always," as the deed goes on to say, "that they shall in all respects conform to these presents and any rules and regulations made by a general meeting . . . . and any directions for their guidance given by the General Directory of the Company."<sup>4</sup>

The Company having been formed, two-thirds of the experimental plantations in Assam were handed over to the Company on March 1840, and Mr. Bruce joined them as Superintendent of the Northern Division with headquarters at Jaipur. The other division of the Company's plantations had its headquarters at "Nazeerah"<sup>5</sup> which has remained to this day the headquarters of the Company. A gentleman named Masters was appointed as Superintendent of this division. The arrangement with Government was that the lands were to be occupied for the first ten years rent free, and at the end of this time the assessments were not to be higher than for rice lands generally. The cultivation of the poppy for opium was entirely prohibited.

Labour difficulties began from the first day. Bruce had used local labour, aided by a few Chinese. But in the first report from Masters it was stated that there was little local labour, but that the Assamese were beginning to work, "and for the important art of tea manufacture, they seem particularly adapted, and likely to supply eventually all the labour that will be required."<sup>6</sup> This was

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<sup>4</sup> Report Assam Co., for 1840 (London), dated May 7th, 1841.

<sup>5</sup> Now generally written Nazira.

<sup>6</sup> Letter quoted in report dated May 7th, 1841 (London).



obviously, however, not enough and great efforts were made to get labourers from outside. It must never be forgotten that Assam had been almost depopulated before it came under British protection by civil war and by an invasion from Burma. Any large enterprise had therefore in a very large measure to provide its own labour.

The first attempt to fill this need was by the import of Chinese coolies. A large number of Chinese coolies were brought round from Singapore, but "they were selected without discretion. Every man with a tail was supposed to be qualified to cultivate, manipulate, and prepare tea. They were sent up without adequate control. At Pabna they quarrelled with the natives, or the natives with them : some sixty were captured by the magistrate, and consigned to jail, and the rest refused to proceed without their brethren. Their agreements were therefore cancelled and they returned to Calcutta committing depredations in their progress. On their arrival in the City of Palaces, they seemed to revenge themselves on society, for the papers were daily filled with police reports of the outrages they committed. They were at length caught and sent off to the Isle of France, the planters of which will doubtless consider that it is an ill wind, indeed, which blows no one any good." The London report of the Assam Company put it more shortly when it said that the Calcutta Board imported "several hundreds of Chinese." "These men turned out to be of a very bad character; they were turbulent, obstinate, and rapacious. Indeed they committed excesses which on occasions endangered the lives of the people among whom we had sent them, and it was found almost impossible to govern them. So injurious did they seem likely to prove that their contracts were cancelled and the whole gang with the exception of the most expert tea makers dismissed." Thus ended the first attempt to bring Chinese labour to the Indian tea plantations.

But labour had to be obtained if development was to go on, and hence a large number of "Dhangar Coles" were recruited. But misfortune dogged the footsteps of the pioneers. Cholera broke

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<sup>7</sup> *Friend of India*, September 9th. 1841,

out among six hundred and fifty-two of them who were proceeding to Assam, and the survivors disappeared in one night and no trace of them was ever found. Labourers from Chittagong were also useless. And among such coolies as were on the plantations in Assam, the mortality was very high indeed. Deaths occurred with appalling frequency also among the European and other planters. In the first year the Company lost the services of Dr. Lumqua, a Chinese doctor long established in Calcutta who had consented to assist the Company in its early stages in Assam and of four Europeans from its small staff. The Assam Company, indeed, began very early to feel the difficulties of climate and of labour supply which have been among the greatest which the industry has had to fight.

The absolutely unoccupied character of the country, at any rate in the area worked from Nazira is illustrated by two letters from Masters. In the first of these he says "I have now been in this district eighteen months, and know comparatively little about it, owing to the dense tree forest and coarse high grass jungle with which the land is all overrun, so that when travelling one can see nothing but what lies in his immediate route and I am continually finding fresh patches of ground occupied by the sites of former villages or gardens or temples or tanks of beautiful water or small patches of tea plants and immense tracts of waste land." A second letter illustrates another aspect of condition. "It was with great difficulty that I could procure elephants when I first came here: I could not purchase one at any rate. . . . A herd of elephants, however, having gone off from Jorehaut in that direction" (towards Gabro) "they were followed and thirteen of them secured."

Nevertheless in spite of the labour and health difficulties the Company had a considerable area of tea in cultivation by the end of 1840, and at the annual meeting in Calcutta (August 12th, 1841) there was stated to be 2,638 acres in actual production. The production was, however, by no means intense, for the average number of plants per acre was only 457! As has already been

indicated, most of the area consisted of groups of tea plants found in the jungle, cleared and cut down for leaf yielding. The total amount of tea made this year was 10,712lbs. The cost had, however, been enormous up to the end of 1840. £65,457 had been sent to India from London. Naturally a good deal of this had, however, been absorbed in capital expenditure. A steam boat had been built and purchased in Calcutta of which we shall hear later. A saw mill had been sent to Assam, to be set up at Jaipur, and no less than Rs. 1,23,275 is put down in the Calcutta Board's report for "Labour, lost and unproductive."

At this stage the Company was still sanguine in spite of difficulties, and they ventured to estimate production in future years, as rising to 40,000lbs. in 1841 and to 320,000lbs. in 1845!<sup>8</sup> We shall see how this estimate was falsified in every particular.

The condition of the whole enterprise at this time, the way in which the management was in the hands of their Chinese tea makers, and the unsatisfactory character of the European assistants sent to Assam are well shown in the following quotations from letters from Mr. Masters. On February 12th, 1842, he writes to the Directors:—"You will please to observe that these tea makers (Chinese) are very great gentlemen; even those who receive but Rs. 3 per month consider themselves so, and object to do anything else but make tea. When spoken to, they threaten to leave the service if they are insulted by being asked to work. Gradually this will wear away as we shall soon have them under our control, and if they continue saucy, we may take a convenient opportunity of making a strike for two or three months, and when they lose their pay, they will probably become sensible that they are dependent on the Assam Company for their livelihood." Mr Masters hardly gives one the idea of a tactful manager!

With regard to the European assistants who had been sent he wrote in another letter. "Hitherto I have been overwhelmed with

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<sup>8</sup> Calcutta Board Report, Assam Co., published in *Friend of India*, 9th September 1841. The Shareholders' meeting was held on 11th August 1841.

assistants many of whom have been unaccustomed to agricultural employment, but the greatest inconvenience attending the assistant establishment is the unhealthiness of the climate; it so often happens that after much difficulty has been experienced, and the assistant is becoming acquainted with his duty, and he and the natives are becoming a little reconciled, the assistant falls sick, and is obliged to leave his post: if another is sent, the same difficulties and inconveniences are repeated . . . . It must be evident to the Directors that a passionate European entirely ignorant of the language and entirely ignorant of every part of his duty can but be worse than useless." I can quite understand Mr. Masters' annoyance, but my sympathy goes out to the young Englishman, landed in a very unhealthy country, absolutely in the jungle, with nothing to relieve the tedium of continually driving coolies to work at a job which neither he nor they understand. When we remember that the amount allowed for an assistant's house was but Rs. 300, that there was no sanitation, and that the unacclimatised European was planted down, and got fever, most probably, before he had been there more than a few days, and was never afterwards really free from it, —we could hardly expect anything but despair, irritability, illness and often a speedy death.

In the second London report,<sup>9</sup> though things are still stated to look promising, there begins to be a doubt. Nothing more is said about the labour question and so we may consider that this is temporarily solved. The kind of gardens at this time is well illustrated by figures given both by Masters and Bruce. I quote some at any rate of the names of the gardens, as they may interest those in Assam at the present time. Gabro Purbut consists of 44 *poorahs*,<sup>10</sup> of which 10 *poorahs* were large plants, 20 *poorahs* middling plants, and 14 *poorahs* small plants and seedlings. Satseia

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<sup>9</sup> Report dated 9th May 1842.

<sup>10</sup> The figure given for the area of a *poorah* varies. It is sometimes spoken of as 3½ acres. In the present report it is given as 1·21 acres which I think is the figure which should be taken in these reports.

had 213 *poorahs*. Cherideo had 23 *poorahs*. Rokanhabbi had 350 *poorahs* nearly all just planted. Deopani had 20 *poorahs*. All these names will be recognised as being still included in the Assam Company's property. Masters states that he planted his seedlings five feet apart, and he considers that the cost of clearing and planting a *poorah* of tea will be Rs. 100, while the annual cost of upkeep would be Rs. 50 per *poorah*. Taking a *poorah* as 1.21 acres, these will be equal to Rs. 83.3 as capital cost and Rs. 41.7 as annual cost of upkeep, per acre.

In the other division, in the control of Mr. Bruce, the sites of several of the gardens will be recognised as being now in the Tingri Tea Company's estates, and also in the company's working near Jaipur. Kahung had 31 *poorahs* of tea, 11 *poorahs* newly sown. Tingri (including Ballyjan and Tipling) had 34½ *poorahs*. Hoogrijan had 31½ *poorahs*, with an area of newly planted tea. The famous tea seed garden, "Bazaloni" appears in this group in 1841. Near Jaipur we find other gardens whose names still exist. In this section we hear first of the definite planting of China seed. An interesting estimate by Mr. Bruce is that it required one man coolie on Rs. 4 per month to keep one *poorah* of tea in cultivation.

The presage of coming disaster seems to pervade the atmosphere during 1842 and 1843 both in the reports of the Assam Company and in the remarks on the subject in the Calcutta newspapers. There were evidences of mismanagement everywhere. The steamer built for the Company as their means of transit to Assam proved a failure. "The Assam Tea Company," says the *Friend of India*,<sup>11</sup> after having sent their new steamer on one trip up the Berhampooter, have, on her return, offered her for sale. The cause is not made known,—probably her inability to steam the current of the Berhampooter." The amount of tea made in 1842 was far less than might have been anticipated, and only amounted to 30,000 lbs., while the net cost of the undertaking had been £160,000. Mr. Masters

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<sup>11</sup> 19th May 1842.

from Assam, evidently feels, from his letters, that there is something unsatisfactory in the methods of tea growing and plucking adopted.

By the latter part of 1843 it was certain that something was amiss. The Calcutta directors sent a commissioner to Assam to see what was wrong.<sup>12</sup> Both Mr. Bruce and Mr. Masters were summarily dismissed, and the report presented for the year 1843 is doleful indeed. "Since we last met," says the report,<sup>13</sup> "your directors have seen much to diminish the confidence which they expressed at the last meeting in the ultimate success of the Company; that confidence was necessarily founded on statements and calculations prepared in the Province where our operations are carried on. These data have since been altered by the parties who supplied them in many material respects, and the produce of the year has fallen short of the estimate in respect to quantity by one-third; at the same time, the current expenses of the Company appeared not to be diminished." They went even further than this, and wrote:—"We have positively forbidden the local board in Calcutta to pass any more bills upon us, and have enjoined them to reduce their expenditure to the level of the means at their immediate command. We can, therefore, safely pledge ourselves that no further call shall be made upon the shareholders until your directors have shown sufficient grounds for recommending you to prosecute the enterprise in which we have embarked with renewed vigour."

The position was truly perilous for the shareholders. But, to all appearances, a change for the better occurred. The Company had so far *not* been under limited liability. But a special Act of Parliament was passed in 1845<sup>14</sup> which settled their position. It was only to last till April 30th, 1854, declared a capital of fifty lakhs of rupees in shares of five hundred rupees. The cultivation of opium, sugar and coffee was prohibited.

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<sup>12</sup> Mr. J. M. Mackie. He reached Assam in October 1843.

<sup>13</sup> Presented (London) 23rd April 1844.

<sup>14</sup> Act XIX of 1845.

In the meantime expenses at least had been reduced, and this was something. The relationship between expenses and yield was as follows :—

	<i>Yield of Tea.</i>	<i>Expenditure.</i>
1841.	10,505 lbs.	£12,984
1842.	31,398 „	£16,560
1843.	87,705 „	£13,146
1844.	120,422 „	£7,284

This so pleased the directors that they very foolishly, as is now clear, declared a dividend of 10s. per share in January 1846, though no profit whatever had been made. This was the only dividend the shareholders saw till 1852.

There seems, however, to have been a renewed burst of confidence as a result of the full incorporation of the Company, and of the reduction of expenditure. This spread to the East India Company. Their experiments now having reached what they considered to be a complete success, they now decided to withdraw entirely from their connection with the industry, and the portion of their experimental gardens which they retained were ordered to be sold. The occasion is of such general interest that we may quote their orders on the subject. “The information contained in these proceedings is very satisfactory and gratifying to us. The sales of the tea, both in Calcutta and London, judging from the statements of the cost per pound<sup>15</sup> . . . confirms the opinion . . . expressed that the article may under proper management be cultivated at a real remunerative price, and we accede to your<sup>16</sup> proposal that the Government should withdraw from any further connection with the cultivation or manufacture of tea in Assam.”

Though the Government, by these orders, indicated that they considered that the industry was established, yet I do not think

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<sup>15</sup> The cost of a crop of 96,000lbs. in 1845 is given as 14 annas per pound with all expenses including freight and insurance.

<sup>16</sup> The Government of Bengal.

that this was by any means the case. Certainly after the first extravagance and mismanagement, the prospects appeared a little more hopeful. But though a dividend had been paid, no real profits had been made. The estimates of yield had been considerably falsified, and the same or a greater area showed signs of giving less yield than in previous years. There seems to have still been hopeless mismanagement, but, even more than this, it became increasingly evident that nobody knew how to grow tea so as to maintain the yield of the bushes, let alone increase the amount of tea which could be made for them. The concern had now in fact reached the stage when the method of planting and plucking tea which had been learnt from the Chinese who had taught the pioneers, had definitely broken down, and it was evident that unless new methods could be found which would yield more tea and maintain the yield of the bushes better, the industry must close.

The London Directors were the first to see this. Concentration on a smaller area till success was obtained in this matter was their policy, and in 1846 they, hence, closed down altogether the so-called northern and eastern divisions of the company (the Tingri group and the Jaipur group of gardens). But the position was first really faced in the report for 1847, published in 1848. In this the Directors definitely confessed failure, threw the blame on the Calcutta Board, and they go so far as to confess that they are doubtful whether it is worth while to continue, as even with a policy of great economy and very great care over expenditure, it was only just possible to keep the concern from showing a loss. There seemed no confidence as to its future capacity for profit. It is curious to find this only two years after Government had, with a great flourish of trumpets, declared the industry established.

The position is well shown by the following extracts from the Report of the Assam Company for 1847. "The General Directory . . . think it proper to mention to you that they find among the proprietors, and even among their own body, a difference of opinion



prevails upon the vital question whether it is desirable or not to continue the operations of the Company. On the one hand it is contended that under the present system of management there is at all events no loss, and that the last year was the first in which the expenses in the province were kept within the estimate or nearly so, and the anticipated outturns of produce was not only realised but exceeded, while at the same time there is every reason to expect an annual increase in produce from seedlings, and the vacant spaces in our present cultivation being filled up . . . . and therefore it would be unwise to throw away all that has been spent on the enterprise at a moment when there appears so little chance of further loss and much reason to hope that some part of the money spent may be redeemed. On the other hand, it appears to be thought by many that there are too small hopes of success and too limited an amount of profit to be anticipated to render it advisable to continue our operations."

The London directors actually in the sequel asked the Calcutta Board to make them an offer for the whole company, and stated that they "would feel inclined to recommend to their shareholders the acceptance of any proposition that would give them a moderate sum per share, rather than depend on the distant prospect of a larger benefit." No offer was, however, made, and both the London and Calcutta authorities determined to risk another year (1848) of work.

We have now reached the lowest point in the fortunes of tea cultivation in Assam. The great hopes and prospects of a successful tea industry seemed to have almost disappeared. The recovery from that position was primarily due in the first instance to two men,—one in Calcutta and one in Assam,—whose confidence in the undertaking, whose business capacity, and whose integrity of character drew the Assam Company from the brink of despair and made a future tea industry in Assam immediately possible. These were Mr. Henry Burkinyoung in Calcutta and Mr. Stephen Mornay who took charge in Assam in 1847. In five years these men made a

bankrupt concern into one which it was recognised could at least pay its way. There then followed the improved technical skill and methods introduced and carried out by Mr. George Williamson on the gardens in Assam, which made it into a very profitable industry.

The state of things into which affairs had drifted in 1847 was well described in a Calcutta paper, a year or two later, when the worst was over, as follows<sup>17</sup> :—

“ The mismanagement of Joint Stock Companies in India has been so general, and its effects so disastrous to all concerned with, or interested in them, that we regret we cannot afford space at present to detail the measures by which the rapid downward progress of this Company has been so timely arrested, and its rescue from destruction on the very brink of ruin so promptly effected. We presume that all the old hands, when they perceived the inevitable fate awaiting their reckless mismanagement, with the instinct of rats, left the concern, for we find none of their names in the present board or in the management.

“ If we are rightly informed, when the present authorities of the company took charge of its affairs, they found that upwards of 21 lakhs of rupees had been expended upon buildings and cultivation, which it was found, on sending a new superintendent to Assam ought not, under judicious and careful management, to have cost one-tenth of that sum; buildings which ought not at that stage of their operations to have been erected, had been so slightly constructed that they were already tumbling down, and but little was to be found of the extensive clearing and planting which had been reported from Assam, and paid for, and even those in existence were in such a neglected state, that another rainy season would have obliterated every trace of them. The credit and resources of the company were exhausted : they were £7,000 in debt in London, Rs. 40,000 in Calcutta, while the indispensable outlay required in Assam to save the miserable wrecks there, almost drove the then

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<sup>17</sup> *Friend of India*, 9th May 1850.

local directors to despair, and the more so, because the London Board urged upon them the closing or even total abandonment of the concern. They, however, possessed discernment enough to perceive the capabilities of the enterprise under better management and with a spirit, firmness, and confidence that does them infinite credit, raised funds on their own individual credit and responsibility to make one more effort to retrieve the affairs of the company."

That this was not too dark a picture can be seen from the official documents of the company. Mr. Burkinyoung, the Chairman of the Calcutta Board of Directors, wrote in 1848: "You as well as ourselves, have of course long been aware that whilst the paid up capital of the company had been entirely sunk by the close of the year 1844 or nearly so, its expenditure had not been devoted to the true interests of the undertaking, and the extended properties which such a sum should have opened out so far from having been raised, a most limited and insufficient area of tea cultivation was in possession of the company, the chief portion of the capital having been devoted to extraneous and useless purposes, and, in effect, so far hopelessly squandered." It does seem remarkable, in fact, to find that the area really under cultivation in 1848 was only 400 to 500 *poorahs* (say 300 to 600 acres).

With business management, however, the concern showed a profit of £3,000 in 1848, and the report for that year<sup>18</sup> shows new hope, and new confidence. Out of the debt of £7,000, £2,000 were paid. And the prospects was sufficiently promising to propose a new call of £1 per share (£10,000) to extend the real cultivated area.

On the technical side the production of tea, as will be recognised by all who know tea in Assam in these later days, the authorities were still only feeling their way. The maximum yield per acre on the company in 1848 was 275lbs. of tea. The largest yield in the year was obtained in April and the season

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<sup>18</sup> Dated London, May 4th, 1849.

finished in September. The actual yield month by month was as follows :—

March	...	...	...	18,269	lbs.
April	...	...	...	41,125	„
May	...	...	...	36,391	„
June	...	...	...	37,523	„
July	...	...	...	31,920	„
August	...	...	...	26,079	„
September	...	...	...	19,345	„

To us nowadays this would appear, even with China plant, to show that the bushes were being overplucked in the early part of the season, and were never allowed to grow properly before the leaf was taken. This state of affairs continued, however, for some years longer.

Progress was very gradual. The Calcutta directors wished to go ahead: the London Board, having had their fingers burnt so many times, held them back. In 1849 the northern and eastern divisions (Tingri, Jaipur, etc.) were re-opened: on this the London Board expressed “their fear as well as displeasure.”<sup>19</sup> But the area was slowly extended, and what was more, in spite of the expenditure on this, small profits were made. The crop in 1849 was 216,000lbs. The debt was reduced in this year to £2,500, and in the next season, with a net profit of £5,025, the whole disappeared. At last the first genuine dividend out of profits was paid in 1852 (for the 1851 season).<sup>20</sup> It only amounted to 2½ percent., but it proclaimed to the world that the company, having made consistent though small profits from 1848 onward, was no longer the bankrupt concern it had been supposed to be, and had, at least, possibilities of success.

This was followed by a dividend of 3 per cent. in the following season<sup>21</sup> and then the two men who had brought the Company from

<sup>19</sup> Report dated May 3rd, 1850.

<sup>20</sup> Report dated May 7th, 1852.

Report dated May 6th, 1853.

despair to a moderate amount of success—Stephen Mornay in Assam and Henry Burkinyoung in Calcutta—retired. One cannot exaggerate the debt which the tea industry owes to them. Their successors improved their results,—but they it was who made a tea industry appear possible in north-east India.

The new manager in Assam was Mr. George Williamson, perhaps the greatest figure in the development of the Assam tea industry, and afterwards the founder of the Calcutta firm of Williamson Magor & Co.; the managing director in Calcutta was Mr. W. Roberts, afterwards well known for his connection with the Jorehaut and other very successful tea companies. Williamson's report in 1853, after taking charge, was very interesting. He had been there under Mornay and had studied tea planting as nobody had done up to that time. He found a yield over the whole of the gardens of 196lbs. of tea per acre<sup>22</sup> only. The local cost of tea was between five and six annas a pound. He recognised the evil of China plant which had been used in putting out many extensions. Speaking of one garden (Kachari Pookri) he says "it also possesses an advantage . . . in having no China plant, the inferior yielding of which in respect to quantity, is now a well established fact." He notes the great lack of labour, and the unhealthiness of the places, and speaks of serious attacks of cholera "which continued with unremitted virulence for three months."

But so far as I can judge, Williamson's success was primarily due to his recognising that if tea leaf is to be plucked, the tea bushes must first be allowed to grow. The season thus tends to become later. Little tea is obtained in March and April, and when the Directors get alarmed, he re-assures them that all is right. "Injudicious and ignorant plucking may seriously injure the plant and even cause its death by rendering it more liable to be attacked by white ants and worms." The result of his policy was a singular increase of yield per acre. Apart from bad business methods, the

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<sup>22</sup> The figures are given per *poorah*. I have converted these into yields per acre.

non-recognition of that on which Williamson now insisted was, I feel, the biggest cause of the early failures. The lack of technical skill and knowledge had made large success impossible until 1852.

But now with business management, and a man, who had studied the tea bush and its yielding, in charge, things went ahead. The area, crop profit and dividend for the years following are shown below :—

Year.	Crop	Profit	Dividend.
1852	...	.....	3 per cent.
1858	... 366,687 lbs.	£13,262	5 „
1854	... 478,258 „	£20,641	6 „
1855	... 558,628 „	£11,480	7 „
1856	... .....	.....	8 „

With 1856 we reach a point when the pioneering days were over, and at this stage we may leave our study of the early days of the tea industry. It had proved itself so profitable that other companies were being formed, that prospectors for tea were all over the province, and that a regular industry was in the full course of development. It had, however, taken twenty-two years to reach this stage from the time when Government appointed its tea committee in 1834, as I have shown, the establishment of the industry had had by no means a plain course. The Government undoubtedly gave up their experimental work too soon, before the best method of growing tea had been discovered, or any way was really known of maintaining the crop from tea bushes. The Assam Company entered the field too early, before the knowledge of the subject was far enough advanced to make success really possible. It was mismanaged no doubt. The extravagance from 1840 to 1847 was colossal, and deserved the failure it got. But the technical knowledge required for success was hardly there, and even when business methods became perfectly satisfactory there was still only very moderate success until the technical advance had been made which was required for large and continued yields of tea.

The pioneers of the tea industry are nevertheless men of whom we may well be proud. Jenkins who got the experiments established; Bruce who showed that tea making in Assam was possible; Mornay and Burkinyoung who proved that tea would at least pay; and Williamson who showed how to cultivate tea in a really profitable manner,—all these names deserve remembrance and recognition. Building on their foundations progress was rapid. The next ten years showed an almost inconceivable development, and such profits as led to speculation and almost to ruin in 1866 and the years following. That is, however, another story. The foundations of one of the greatest of Indian agricultural industries had been well laid by 1856, and tea cultivation and manufacture had been placed on the track which had led, through many vicissitudes, to the position which it holds to-day.











