

The Archaeological History of English Teaware
Caitlin Coleman, MA, Assistant Manager for Laboratory Services
Anatolijs Venovcevs, BA Hons, Staff Archaeologist
Archaeological Services Inc., Toronto
August 27, 2013

Introduction

The following essay is compiled from several weeks of notes and research collected for a display case exhibit at the main office of Archaeological Services Inc. (ASI). Given the medium of the presentation, it was impossible to impart all of the research collected. Thus, this essay was developed as a way of sharing this information both with interested ASI staff and with other individuals who might benefit from this information. While this essay has not been peer reviewed beyond the confines of the company, all the information here is cited and can be followed back to its original source. It is hoped that this essay will encourage critical understanding and further inquiry on how teaware in particular, and material culture in general, provides important chronological markers for understanding archaeological sites and the social, cultural, and economical forces that underlie those chronological markers.

Similar to the display case that it was originally designed for, this essay will start with a brief global history of tea, followed by a discussion on three of the major accoutrements required for its consumption – teacups, saucers, and teapots. The essay will then dive briefly into how teaware as a commodity was used as a medium for social discourse and conclude with its role in the socioeconomic dialogue and how it helped shaped class and gender identity over the last 350 years.

Global Perspective on Tea

Tea and tea culture was first imported from China to Europe by the Dutch (Sabieri 2010:86) and was used as a medicinal drink, becoming very popular with the Dutch aristocracy in the early seventeenth century (Heiss and Heiss 2007:19). In 1662, Charles II of England wed Princess Braganza of Portugal who brought the fashion of tea drinking to the English upper classes. The princess enjoyed the flavour of tea and consumed it as a beverage, not simply as a medicine, and taught other members of the court how to properly brew and serve the new exotic beverage. A fad was created.

Tea became an irrevocable part of English culture, in contrast to continental Europe, where coffee, wine and chocolate remained the favourite beverages. The transition of tea from a luxury enjoyed by the aristocracy to a common beverage enjoyed by the masses was revolutionary and occurred incredibly rapidly within English society. Within a century, tea went from an exotic, expensive drink enjoyed by a select few, to a beverage that nearly everyone could afford.

By the end of the eighteenth century official import records show that over 20 million pounds of tea were brought to England every year. This translates to more than two pounds per person, or at least two cups of tea a day (Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004:70). Middle and lower class diets became centred on the new staples of bread, tea and sugar. In 1751, Charles Deering, writing about Nottinghamshire, noted that “even a Common Washerwoman thinks she has not had a proper Breakfast without Tea and hot buttered white Bread” (Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004:71).

Why was it that this beverage took hold so strongly and quickly in English culture while it failed to do so in most of the rest of Europe? There is no one answer to this question, but there were certain conditions unique to England that made tea an appealing new product. There was a general dislike of drinking plain

water in English culture at this time, likely due to contamination issues. Beer and gin were frequently consumed, but because of new malt taxes the prices for these alcoholic drinks were on the rise. The English were also accustomed to consuming hot drinks since hot ale, wine, milk, punches and toddies were already popular (Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004:72). There was also a growing and affluent middle class that was willing to take up new traditions, particularly in imitation of the aristocracy. Furthermore, the East India Company had a monopoly on English tea imports from the 1730s onwards and was involved in a marketing push to introduce tea to the masses (Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004:73). All these elements together facilitated a dramatic change in the meals, rituals, and traditions of English people, especially when one considers that tea replaced a good deal of alcohol in their diet.

Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tea culture took further root in Britain and unique tea customs were created. Fuelled by the boom of consumer culture started in the late eighteenth century, teacups were offered in many different shapes, grew in size, and handles became standard. Milk was added to tea, a custom borrowed from the Dutch, and high quantities of sugar, another valuable import, were added. This tea culture came across the Atlantic with English immigrants, and remains an intrinsic part of the archaeological record in Ontario.

A teacup found on a nineteenth-century Ontario archaeological site, perhaps a farm in Durham County or a townhouse in York, is a tangible reflection of the global trade network, ancient and modern traditions, and the cultural, economic, and political power of the British Empire.

Teacups

The teacup, along with tea, entered Europe from China with the first mass importation of Chinese porcelain in the 1680s. The classical hemispherical Chinese tea bowl shape (Plates 1 and 2), referred in the Staffordshire price listing agreements as the “Common” shape (Miller 2011), was directly borrowed from the Chinese and was seen for over a century on European porcelain tea sets. During this time, porcelain was a specialized ware that fulfilled a niche in elite houses where tea, a prohibitively expensive drink, was served in porcelain, a prohibitively expensive ceramic (Richards 1999:95). With the development of European porcelain, and later, cheap but popular earthenware imitations of porcelain, the ancient Chinese tea bowl shape was transferred into the European manufacturing world (Plate 3).



Plate 1: Porcelain tea bowl, 1620-1633 Jiangxi province, China.

Fuelling the boom of consumer culture that started in the late eighteenth century, teacup shapes started to multiply in the early 1800s. Not only was this seen in trade catalogues that presented a variety of ceramic shapes that one could order to decorate their table, but also in decorative motifs displaying a variety of painted and printed motifs. This boom was stimulated by volumes of etiquette books, newspapers, and periodicals that educated the growing middle class in how to behave in “good taste” (Richards 1999:41).

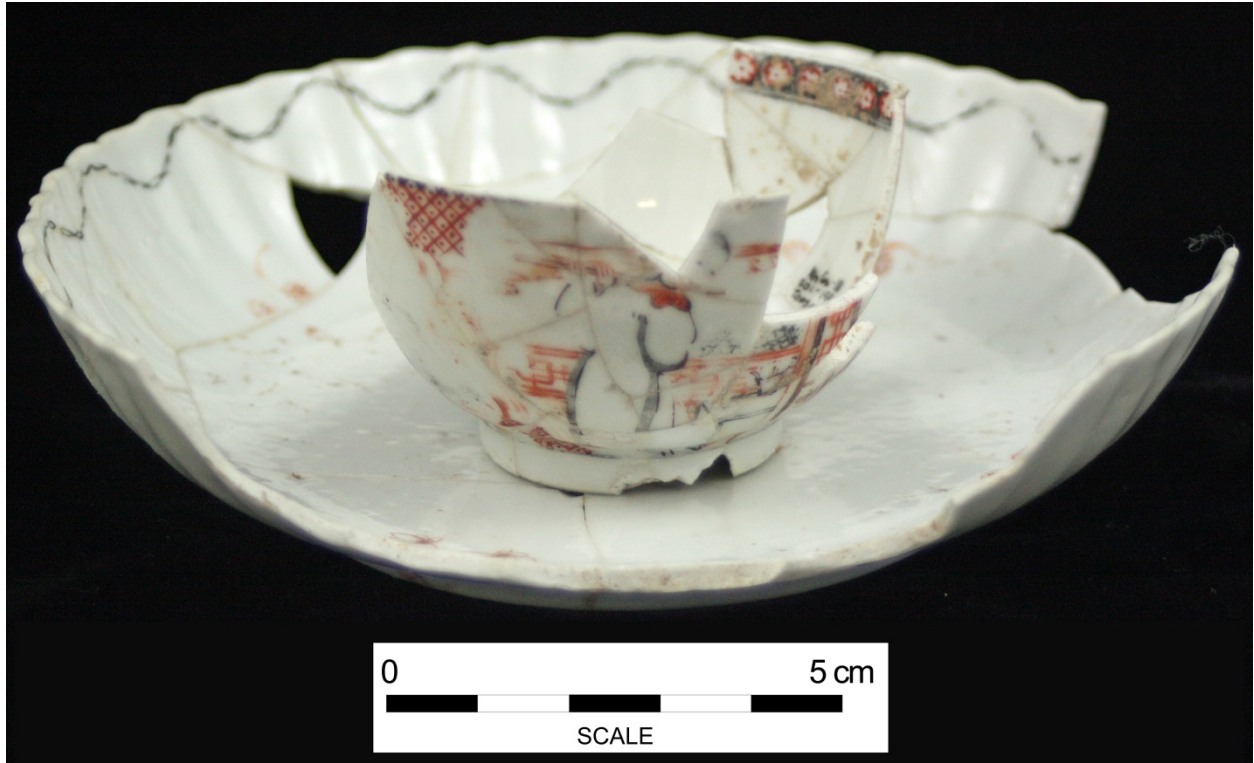


Plate 2: Chinese porcelain teacup and saucer - 1780s from the Butler site, Niagara-on-the-Lake.



Plate 3: Pearlware "Common" shape teacup, picture by the Northeast Museum Services Centre.

Starting in the 1820s, "Common" shape teacups began being replaced by "London" shape cups. The "London" shape cup first appeared in a Wedgwood shape book in 1802 and was defined by a distinct carinated shoulder (Plate 4) (Miller 2011). The "London" shape cup's popularity lasted until the 1840s when the carinated shoulder softened and the "Bell" (Kenyon 1987) or "Double Curve" teacup shapes became popular (Plate 5) (Miller 2011).



Plate 4: “London” shape cup, early nineteenth century from the John Beaton 1 site, Vaughan.



Plate 5: “Double Curve” teacup, mid-nineteenth century from the Dollery site, Toronto.

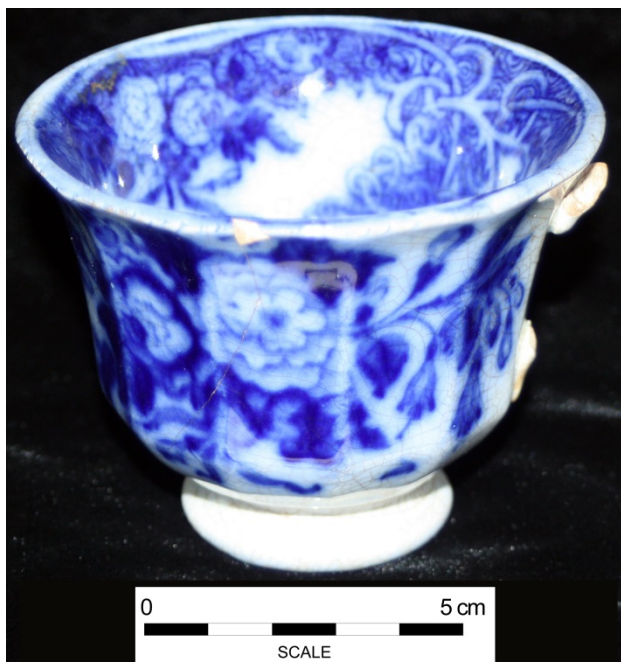


Plate 6: “French-fluted” ironstone flow blue teacup, mid-nineteenth century from downtown, Toronto.



Plate 7: Ironstone “Wheatware” teacup, 1860s from the Bishop’s Block site, Toronto.

The “Double Curve” teacup remained common until the 1850s. There was a price-fixing agreement among the Staffordshire potters from 1770 on, where the price of ceramics was fixed to stave off the drop in value that inevitably results from competition. This price-fixing did not work as can be seen in the larger discounts being offered by manufacturers for bulk buys and the gradual increase in teacup shape. From the small “Common” shape cups, the size gradually grew as manufacturers tried to offer a larger vessel for the customer’s buck. While this trend would subside in the second half of the nineteenth century, seen at its apex, the mid-nineteenth-century teacups are enormous vessels for tea. (Miller 2011).

The mid-1840s saw the introduction of a completely different form of ceramic – a thick-bodied, bone-white, vitrified earthenware called ironstone or white granite by archaeologists. For this new ceramic ware a new cup shape was introduced – a tall body with fluted or faceted sides. While this shape was not confined to ironstone, an ironstone “French fluted” teacup with the new flow blue-printed motif was a highly fashionable and expensive teacup to own in the 1850s and 60s (Plate 6) (Kenyon 1987).

Marketed to appeal to farmers in the newly-settled Canadian and American prairies, ironstone vessels with wheat-moulded motifs started to be produced in the 1860s and quickly became very popular (Plate 7). This can be seen in the teacups of the period that display wheat motifs along the rim of fluted or ribbed teacup bodies (Kenyon 1987).

The popularity of ironstone reached its peak and started to decline in the 1880s. The availability of cheap porcelain from Japan and continental Europe as well as the invention of semi-porcelain led to a larger proliferation of more elaborate shapes (Kenyon 1995:13). Ironstone, reduced to an inexpensive ceramic at the close of the nineteenth century, was produced in only a few simplified forms. Thus, the low, squat, cylindrical cup shape became popular during this period (Plate 8) (Kenyon 1987).



Plate 8: Short and squat teacup from the Yeager site, Hamilton.

It is important to remember that while certain teacup shapes ebbed and flowed in popularity, they did not disappear entirely and continued to be produced far into the twentieth century (Miller 2011). This is why historical archaeologists prefer to date ceramics by the decorative motifs they display in conjunction to their overall shape.

Saucers

While the idea of tea drinking and teacups came from China, the combination of a tea bowl and a matching saucer came from Japan as no saucer exists in Chinese culture. Although the saucer was not a traditional part of the traditional Chinese tea service, it became a vessel that was made in China for export. The relationship between British markets and Chinese manufacturers created new ceramic types that were made entirely for international consumer market. The Chinese were quick to react to what was popular in England, just as the English were quick to imitate any new products the Chinese produced.

From the introduction of saucers to Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century and until the mid-1800s, it was not unusual for the saucer to be used to consume tea (Plate



Plate 9: A Chelsea Pensioner Sipping Tea out of a Saucer by Michael William Sharp, 1777-1840, The Royal Hospital Chelsea.

9). Pouring tea into the saucer allowed it to cool more quickly. Sometimes in the saucer tea was mixed with another drink, such as whiskey, producing a hot toddy-like beverage. The intention behind this use for the saucer and the shift away from that use can be seen by the presence or absence of the “well” – a circular concavity in the centre of the saucer that allows for a teacup to sit more securely in the saucer, thus facilitating its use as a teacup-supporting vessel (Plate 10).



Plate 10: An early nineteenth-century bowl-shaped saucer (left) contrasted with a late nineteenth century ironstone saucer with a well (right).

An earlier version of this was the trembleuse, a raised section at the bottom of a saucer that allowed somebody with unsteady hands to hold the saucer without spilling (Plate 11).

The well did not become a common feature before the 1820s, when the public opinion on drinking tea from saucers began to change and steadying the cup with a saucer took precedence over using it as a vessel for beverage consumption (Kaellgren 2012).

Teapots

The teapot was first developed in China in the 1500s and the first teapots to arrive in Europe in the late seventeenth century were small vessels of either Chinese or Japanese porcelain (Plate 12) or oriental redware (Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004: 91). These small ornately-painted vessels were imitated by the porcelain factories in Continental Europe who produced equally ornate hard paste teapots and tea sets with imitated oriental designs (Plate 13) (Kaellgren 2012). In the 1720s, the grill was added to the teapots to keep the tea leaves out of one’s cup.



Plate 11: Trembleuse cup and saucer, 1762 Höchst Porcelain Factory, Germany.



Plate 12: Chinese porcelain teapot, China, Jingdezhen c.1685-1700.



Plate 13: Soft paste porcelain moulded teapot, Vienna, 1720-1723, Gardiner Museum.

Porcelain development in England was slow and the first English teapots were from silver. There was a concerted effort to develop an English porcelain industry beginning in the 1750s; the first teapots made of soft-paste porcelain were not without their drawbacks as they had the tendency to explode when boiling water was poured into them (Kaellgren 2012). It was not until the invention of English bone china in 1796 by Josiah Spode that the English create a functional and financially viable porcelain industry.

Creamware and black basalt teapots were the first widely popular English teapots. Black basalt was especially fashionable due to its Ancient Greek and Roman inspired decorative motifs that appealed during the neo-classical movement. Its dark body was also attractive to women for its ability to show off the hostess' white hands (Plate 14) (Kaellgren 2012).

Later, with the emergence of refined white earthenware, teapots were designed to match the tea sets with which they were sold (Plate 15).



Plate 14: Black basalt teapot, 1822, Shelton, UK, Victoria and Albert Museum.



Plate 15: Late 19th century teapot from the Yeager site, Hamilton.

Teaware as a Medium for Societal Discourse

Not long after the adoption of tea consumption by the European elites in the sixteenth century, teaware was produced not only as a utilitarian object but also as a powerful medium for social and political dialogue. At no time is this more apparent than in the nineteenth century, when the transfer printing method allowed for bright, crisp, durable, and detailed ceramic motifs to proliferate. For instance, teaware with anti-slavery transfer prints were used to advocate the boycott of slave-produced cane sugar in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Plates 16 and 17) (Kaellgren 2012). These ceramics, as well as pamphlet campaigns and public meetings, successfully changed public opinion and buying habits within England. Thomas Clarkson, a tireless abolitionist, estimated that 300,000 people had stopped using sugar when they learned about the horrors of slavery during the late eighteenth century (Margolin 2002).



Plate 16: Black transfer print cup and saucer with image of kneeling female slave in chains, England, ca. 1830. Sam Margolin, Private Collection.



Plate 17: Abolitionist sugar bowl, purchased in Philadelphia 1836-1861, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

The dialogue that these motifs inspired helped to usher in the abolition of slavery through all of the colonies of the British Empire by 1833 (Margolin 2002). Similarly, teaware was used as a medium to encourage temperance among another marginalized group – the Irish Catholics (Plate 18). It was thought that advocating the image of self-worth through temperance and industry would lead the Irish Catholics to be socially accepted in the Protestant-dominated societies of Britain, Canada, and the USA (Brighton 2008).



Plate 18: Temperance slop bowl, part of a tea set, Staffordshire, 1830-40. Father Mathew was an Irish priest who preached the power of temperance, industry and frugality, travelling to America in the mid-nineteenth century (Brighton 2008).

Nowhere is the discourse surrounding teaware more evident than in children’s toy tea sets. Toy tea sets are very common in invoices and were produced both in tiny sizes for dolls (Plate 19) and as smaller versions of functional cups for little girls playing tea party (Plate 20) (George Miller, personal communication, 2012).

These toys, powerful conveyors of nonverbal messages, were used to instill the ideology of the Cult of Domesticity in girls from a tender age (Plate 21) (Lima 2012:70). The tea ceremony at play subtly reinforced the cardinal virtues of “true womanhood”—piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness (Spencer-Wood 2002:157-159). However, these toys could also be used as tools for liberation. In Brazil, toy tea sets were used to introduce the Anglo-American tea ceremony to little girls. Later, as women, they used these ceremonies to move from the confines of the private areas of the house to the social sphere of the parlour (Lima 2012:75).



Plate 19: Toy tea set from the Bishops Block site, Toronto, mid-nineteenth century.



Plate 20: Child’s London-shape teacup from the Dollery site, Toronto, mid-nineteenth century.

Status, Society, and Gender

When tea was introduced in the mid-seventeenth century, it was expensive and was restricted to the upper classes. Tea was consumed privately and in small quantities as a medicinal drink. Given its expense, it was heavily taxed and, therefore, often smuggled. The prices slowly declined through the seventeenth century and by the 1690s the tea ceremony started to become ritualized – silver spoons were introduced and tea slops (bowls for putting tea leaves found floating in one’s cup) became essential elements of tea

consumption (Kaellgren 2012). Chinese traders created a demand for porcelain and tea accessories by including them with shipments of tea (Heiss and Heiss, 2007:335). Soon the act of drinking tea and the objects surrounding the activity became equally important (Plate 22).



Plate 21: Ian A. Ross and Eugenia M. Ross Having Tea, 1898, Quebec, Canada Archives.



Plate 22: A Family of Three at Tea, Richard Collins, 1727.

The introduction and proliferation of tea had a massive effect on gender dynamics in English society. Throughout the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, tea was explicitly seen as a woman's drink (Richards 1999:105). In fact, for a long time in English culture, it was considered bad luck for tea to be served by a man (Kaellgren 2012). During this time, men were seldom present at the tea table. The creation of this women-only sphere was a dramatic split from earlier, less sexually-divided practices of food and beverage consumption. Since it was seen as rude to be quiet at the tea table, the polite "tea talk" reinforced the already diverging masculine and feminine topics of conversation in the eighteenth century (Richards 1999:141-142).

Tea and teatime became a national obsession in the nineteenth century largely because of its popularity with women. Women's roles were becoming increasingly narrow as the industrial revolution created the ideal middle class woman who had a large household, many servants, and little to occupy her days. Many women found themselves in the position of enforced leisure, and tea parties were a way for them to escape the loneliness of their homes and meet up with other women in similar situations (MacFarlane and MacFarlane 2004:86).

Tea shops or pleasure gardens, where tea was also served, were some of the few public places where it was acceptable for women to travel without a male chaperone. It was considered acceptable for women to go, unaccompanied, to meet their friends at a tearoom to socialize (Sabieri 2010:106). Tea merchants emphasized that they were willing to sell to unaccompanied women in their advertisements; this was considered a marketing point as it was socially unaccepted for unescorted women to be present in other public spaces. Tea gardens were places where men, women and children could socialize as a group. These gardens had pleasant walkways, sculptures, groves of trees and an area for tea (Plate 23) (MacFarlane and MacFarlane 2004:79). In cities, pleasure gardens were one of very few public spaces where the entire family could spend time together. Tea created innovative new forms of communal space that allowed some flexibility within the strictly enforced gender divisions of Victorian society.

It took some time for tea to become popular among men. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, men largely congregated around the punch bowl, another oriental drink that commonly contained alcohol. Thus, throughout the 1700s this men-only activity became emblematic of male drunkenness and aggression. This negative stereotype contributed to the widespread adoption of tea drinking by both genders toward the end of the eighteenth century (Richards 1999:142). Tea consumption, in particular proper and genteel tea consumption, served through a matching set of tea accoutrements, started to become a tool for the middle class to associate themselves with aristocracy and distance themselves from their peers among the lower socioeconomic echelons (Richards 1999:131-132). The last step into the widespread acceptance of tea in England came in 1784 with William Pitt's *Commutation Act* that reduced the tea tax from 114 to 25 percent. At the close of the eighteenth century, tea was so affordable that most people could consume it twice a day – in the morning and evening (Kaellgren 2012).

The proliferation of tea in the nineteenth century led to showy tea sets and dessert services among the moneyed classes (Kaellgren 2012). The affluent strove to own a variety of tea services for private and social use (Kenyon 1992:11; Wall 1991:78). The private tea sets were more mundanely decorated with low to medium cost stamped, sponged, and painted motifs while those meant for social events were highly and intricately decorated with transfer-printed scenes and lustre and/or made from expensive porcelain (Plate 24) (Kenyon 1992:11; Miller 1980).

Women used the expensive tea sets to entertain their guests during afternoon tea in the parlour. Serving tea in the home gave women an opportunity to display their adherence to the prescribed characteristics of a "proper woman" through the rituals and material associated with the tea ceremony (Plate 25). More



Plate 23: Afternoon Tea, Canada Archives 1895.

ordinary tea sets were employed for familial tea consumption, which occurred beyond the judgemental eyes of society (Wall 1991:79).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the working-class person usually owned only a few sponged or undecorated teacups and saucers (Kenyon 1992). Given the plethora of different styles and motifs on ceramics and the difficulty in transporting them into a backwoods, rural region like Upper Canada, the loss of a piece usually did not result in purchase of a matching vessel. Rather, the periodic breakage of old ceramics and the purchasing of used seconds produced mismatched table and tea sets among lower income households (O'Donovan and Wurst 2001-2002:81).

Industrialization and the drive for cheaper production saw prices of ornately decorated ceramics decrease throughout the 1800s. At the turn of the twentieth-century the industrialization of the ceramic industry reached its apex. Increased mechanization and the invention of decal decorations that allowed for an accurate



Plate 24: Fluted transfer-printed teacup from downtown Toronto.

and uniform reproduction of drawings, paintings, logos in multiple bright colours allowed potteries to drastically reduce their skilled workforce. (Plate 26). This allowed for the proliferation of cheap, ornately-decorated vessels and mass produced porcelain and semi-porcelain wares with gilt trim and decal motifs which began to dominate the market (Kaellgren 2012).

Concomitant with the proliferation of cheap tea wares market, the twentieth century saw tea become the international beverage of the common person. The tea break

became the central social activity during long hours of repetitive work in factories, workshops, offices, and mines. The tea break fortified workers with caffeine and sugar and gave them the opportunity to socialize with their peers (Plate 27). Today, the consumption of tea equals all other manufactured drinks in the world – including coffee, chocolate, soft drinks, and alcohol – put together (Macfarlane and Macfarlane 2004). Be it bagged, loose-leaved, compressed, instant, or bottled, tea continues to play an important role in our lives.



Plate 25: Group of Women Having Tea, 1850-1894, Canada Archives



Plate 26: Decalcomania-decorated teacup from the Weir site, Scarborough.



Plate 27: *Bell Telephone Workers Eating Lunch, 1908, City of Toronto Archives.*

Works Cited

Brighton, Stephen A.

2008 Catholic Identities, the Catholic Temperance Movement, and Father Mathew: The Social History of a Teacup. *Northeast Historical Archaeology*, 37:21-36.

Heiss, Mary Lou, and Robert J. Heiss

2007 *The Story of Tea: A Cultural History and Drinking Guide*. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley.

Kaellgren, Peter

2012 History of English Tea Wares: Late 1600s to the Present. Public Lecture delivered at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto. June 19, 2012.

Kenyon, Ian

1987 Ceramic Cups. *KEWA (Newsletter of London Chapter, Ontario Archaeological Society)*, 87-7.

1992 Spilled Ink and Broken Cups: The Distribution and Consumption of Ceramic Tableware in Upper Canada, 1800-1840. *KEWA (Newsletter of the London Chapter, Ontario Archaeology Society)*, 92-4.

1995 A History of Ceramic Tableware in Ontario: 1780 – 1910. Paper presented at Table Talks Lecture Series, Montgomery's Inn, Toronto.

Lima, Tania Andrade

2012 The Dark Side of Toys in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Historical Archaeology* 46(3):63-78.

Macfarlane, Alan and Iris Macfarlane

2004 *The Empire of Tea*. The Overlook Press, New York.

- Margolin, Sam
2002 "And Freedom To The Slave: Antislavery Ceramics, 1787-1865." *Ceramics in America, Volume 2*, edited by R. Hunter, pp. 80-109. The Chipstone Foundation, Madison, Wisconsin.
- Martin, Laura C.
2007 *Tea: The Drink That Changed the World*. Tuttle Publishing, Tokyo.
- Miller, George
1980 Classification and Economic Scaling of 19th Century Ceramics. *Historical Archaeology* 14:1-40.
2011 Common Staffordshire Cup and Bowl Shapes. Essay written for the Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum. Accessible online at <http://www.jefpat.org/diagnostic/Post-Colonial%20Ceramics/Cup%20Shapes/Essay%20on%20Cup%20and%20Bowl%20Shapes.pdf>.
- O'Donovan, Maria, and Lou Ann Wurst
2001-2002 Living on the Edge: Consumption and Class at the Keith Site. *Northeast Historical Archaeology*, 30-31:73-84.
- Richards, Sarah
1999 *Eighteen-century ceramics: Products for a civilized society*. Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York.
- Sabieri, Helen
2010 *Tea: A Global History*. Reaktion Books, London.
- Spencer-Wood, Suzanne
2002 "Domesticity." In *Encyclopedia of Historical Archaeology*, edited by Charles E. Orser, pp. 157-159. Routledge, London.
- Wall, Diana Di Zegera
1991 Sacred Dinners and Secular Teas: Constructing Domesticity in Mid-19th-Century New York. *Historical Archaeology* 25(4):69-81.

Acknowledgements

The writers wish to thank Ms. Eva MacDonald, Senior Archaeologist and Manager of Historical Archaeology at Archaeological Services Inc., and Dr. Katie Hull, Senior Archaeologist and Assistant Manager of Historical Archaeology at Archaeological Services Inc., for their hard work in helping to edit and revise this paper.