Teatimes
A World Tour
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This book is dedicated to my late mother,
Hilda Canning
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WRITING this book brought back many happy memories of teatimes. As a child growing up in Yorkshire in the 1950s and ’60s I remember coming home from school, tired and hungry, and my mother would give me tea. In those days ‘tea’ was a meal in the late afternoon at about five or six o’clock. Our midday meal was called dinner. This custom prevailed in the north of England for a long time and some people still talk about dinner at lunchtime and tea at, well, teatime. My mother would give me a savoury dish to be eaten first. My favourite was smoked haddock poached in milk with bread and butter but I also liked cheese on toast, macaroni cheese, cauliflower cheese, egg and bacon pie and much more. In summer we often had salads such as corned beef salad (always with beetroot, lettuce, sliced boiled egg, tomato and salad cream) or Spam or ham. My mother loved baking so there was always something sweet for ‘afters’. There were plenty of cakes and biscuits in her baking tins such as fairy cakes, raspberry buns, jam or lemon curd tarts and date and walnut cake. We drank tea – strong Indian black tea with milk and sugar. In winter we sometimes ate hot crumpets oozing with butter by the warm fireside. I also remember the afternoon teas on special occasions or for guests, when my mother would bring out her silver teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl, sugar tongs and best china. Tea would be served in the front room from a hostess trolley. Tea sandwiches were placed on the bottom shelf alongside scones (with jam and butter), and cakes such as butterfly cakes and perhaps slices of Madeira cake. Sometimes she baked a Victoria sponge cake filled with jam and buttercream, or a chocolate cake.

My later memories of special teatimes are from the time I lived in Afghanistan in the 1970s. Women of different nationalities who had married Afghans formed what we called the ‘foreign wives tea circle’. Every first Thursday of the month we took turns hosting a tea party. It was an opportunity to get together and chat. We
all tried to showcase our own country’s traditions and specialities. The Germans, for example, would make wonderful cakes such as Gugelhupf and torte. The Scandinavians made open sandwiches and pastries. We British would make scones served with cream and jam, chocolate cake and tea sandwiches, while the Americans served angel food cake and strawberry shortcake. We often included Afghan teatime specialities such as shami kebab (a kind of rissole made with minced meat, mashed potatoes, split peas and onions formed into a sausage shape and fried), fried savoury stuffed pastries called boulani, pakoras (sliced vegetables such as potatoes or aubergines dipped in a spicy batter and fried) and sweet, crisp gosh-e-feel (‘elephant ears’) pastries sprinkled with ground pistachios. These teas were a wonderful opportunity for cultural mixing.

Common to all these meals is tea. The story of tea began long ago in China when it is said that some wild tea leaves accidentally fell into a pot of water. This infusion was sipped by the legendary Emperor Shennong, who declared that ‘Tea gives vigour to the body, contentment to the mind and determination of purpose,’ and recommended the infusion to his subjects. The leaves were from the plant Camellia sinensis. From these beginnings, and over successive dynasties in China, different styles of tea drinking evolved. By the eighth century AD tea began to spread east to Japan where the elaborate ritual of the tea ceremony was created. Tea also began to be transported along ancient caravan routes to Tibet, Burma, Central Asia and beyond. Tea reached Europe much later, in the seventeenth century, when Portuguese and Dutch traders brought it as a luxury alongside silk and spices. From Europe tea drinking spread to America, India and other places.

This book traces the history of tea drinking and teatimes and explores why and how tea has become the world’s second most popular beverage after water. It also explores the social aspects of tea drinking and the different ways human beings across the planet drink their tea and what they eat with it.

Tea is not only drunk for enjoyment; it quenches thirst and brings feelings of well being, harmony, conviviality and hospitality. It is a versatile drink that is prepared in many different ways depending on the type of tea, the region and personal preferences. Tea has become very cosmopolitan. Nowadays people in London, Hamburg, Paris or New York can easily buy rare teas from Japan or Korea or expensive Pu-erh or first flush Darjeeling, not to mention the different styles of tea rooms or places to drink them: the kissaten of Japan; the dim sum restaurants of Hong Kong and China; the chai khana of Central Asia; the tea houses of the Far East; and the luxury hotels of North America and Europe.

Some kinds of tea, and the way they are drunk, are associated with men, others with women. For example working-class men in Britain tend to like their tea to be strong, with milk and lots of sugar and drunk from a sturdy mug, sometimes called ‘builder’s tea’, while ladies in a sewing circle in Canada might prefer a lighter tea such as Darjeeling, served from dainty porcelain cups and saucers.

The word ‘tea’ (or teatime) can also mean a time in the day when people enjoy a refreshing drink of tea. This can be mid-morning or mid-afternoon, when tea might be served with a small snack, biscuit or piece of cake. Teatime can also mean ‘afternoon tea’ at 4 or 5 p.m. when dainty sandwiches and small cakes are served with tea. It can also indicate a more substantial meal in the early evening – often called ‘high tea’
– which replaces dinner and consists of tea with hot dishes, meats, pies, cheese, large cakes and bread and butter.

Tea can also mean a social event. And, just as tea is drunk in many different ways, the rituals of teatime are also varied. Tea as a meal is usually associated with Britain, Ireland and some Commonwealth countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, which pride themselves on their ‘well filled tins’ of home-baked cakes and biscuits. The focus of this book is mainly on the history of teatimes in these countries. Teatime traditions in the Netherlands, Germany, France and Ireland are also described. In the United States tearooms boasted homely food such as chicken pot pie and iced tea is the drink of choice. In India tea played an important social role during the Raj and continues to do so today, where teatime is often a fusion of East and West, with British-type cakes served alongside spicy Indian snacks.

Teatime traditions of other parts of the world are often different from those of the West, such as the butter tea of Tibet and the lephet (pickled tea) of Burma. How tea is made and how it is served is also described; in Russia and other countries along the Silk Road, for example, water for tea is often boiled in a samovar and the tea then served in ornate tea glasses.

China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan have their own distinct teatime traditions. China, where the story of tea began, has its own unique teatime called yum cha (‘drink tea’), often taken late morning or midday, when small, delicious, bite-size snacks called dim sum are served. In Japan the meal served before the tea ceremony is called cha-kaiseki. Koreans have their own tea ceremony and enjoy a wide variety of herbal teas, while Taiwan has created a new trend of tea drinking in the form of bubble tea. The story of teatimes concludes with descriptions of other teatime traditions from around the world, including the mint teas of Morocco, the onces of Chile and the Welsh teas of Patagonia.

I hope that by reading this book you will enjoy your own memories of teatimes and take pleasure in reading about teatimes, past and present, from all over the world, in the comfort of your armchair while sipping a cup of your favourite tea.
Catherine of Braganza, wife of Charles II, giving a tea party at Somerset House. Illustration by Kitty Shannon, 1926.
Tea arrived on Britain’s shores in the 1650s, brought over by Dutch trading companies, and quickly became fashionable among the rich upper classes. However, by the 1850s, when the cost of tea had become much lower and it had become more available, tea became the preferred beverage of everyone, rich and poor. It became part of the fabric of society and shaped the British way of life, appearing in almost every sphere of life from fashion to the decorative arts. Tea has become a defining symbol of Britishness.

Thomas De Quincey, an English essayist best known for writing *Confessions of an English Opium-eater* (1821), summed up the pleasures of taking tea in Britain:

Surely everyone is aware of the divine pleasures which attend a wintry fireside: candles at four o'clock, warm hearth rugs, tea, a fair tea-maker, shutters closed, curtains flowering in ample draperies to the floor, whilst the wind and rain are raging audibly without.

The novelist A. P. Herbert wrote the following song in 1937. It became hugely popular, with music by Henry Sullivan, and sums up just how important a ‘nice cup of tea’ was for the British:

I like a nice cup of tea in the morning
For to start the day you see,
And at half past eleven
Well my idea of heaven
Is a nice cup of tea.
I like a nice cup of tea with my dinner,
And a nice cup of tea with my tea,
And when it’s time for bed
There’s a lot to be said
For a nice cup of tea.

Tea drinking also led to the very British traditions of afternoon tea and high tea. Today, going out for afternoon tea at a hotel or tea room has become an essential stop for tourists who want to experience an important part of British culture.

**Early days of tea drinking**

The first newspaper advertisement for tea in Britain appeared in 1658: ‘That excellent and by all physicians approved, China drink, called by the Chinese “Tcha” and by other nations “Tay”, alias “Tee” is sold at the Sultaness Head Cophee [coffee] house in Sweetings Rents by the Royal Exchange, London.’

Although its acceptance as a drink was slow, it was to last. Of the three new exotic drinks in seventeenth-century Europe – cocoa, tea and coffee – the British at first preferred coffee and it was at the newly established coffee houses that tea was introduced to the public. Tea soon became the national drink, replacing ale. As Agnes Repplier says in her book *To Think of Tea!*

Tea had come as a deliverer to a land that called for deliverance; a land of beef and ale, of heavy eating and abundant drunkenness; of grey skies and harsh winds; of strong nerved, stout-purposed, slow-thinking men and women. Above all, a land of sheltered homes and warm firesides – firesides that were waiting – waiting for the bubbling kettle and the fragrant breath of tea.

Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, was an early devotee of tea drinking. In 1660 he wrote that he ‘did send for a cup of tee, a China drink, of which I never had drunk before’. Seven years later on 28 June 1667 he recorded coming home to find his wife making tea, which ‘Mr Pelling the potticary [an old word for a chemist via apothecary], tells her is good for her cold and defluxions.’

In 1662 Charles II married the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza. She was also a devotee of tea drinking and her dowry included a chest of China tea. It is said that the first thing she asked for when she landed on England’s shores was a cup of tea.

Queen Catherine set the fashion for tea drinking. In 1663 the poet and politician Edmund Waller (1606–1687) celebrated her birthday with verses in praise of the Queen and ‘the best of herbs’:

Venus her Myrtle, Phoebus has his bays; Tea both excels, which she vouchsafes to praise. The best of Queens, the best of herbs, we owe To that bold nation which the way did show To the fair region where the sun doth rise, Whose rich productions we so justly prize. The Muse’s friend, tea does our fancy aid, Regress those vapours which the head invade, And keep the palace of the soul serene, Fit on her birthday to salute the Queen.

The green tea from China was expensive and so remained, in those early days, a drink for the rich. Not everyone knew what to do with this new exotic ingredient. It is said that the widow of the Duke of Monmouth (who was executed in 1685) sent a pound of tea to one of her relatives in Scotland without indicating how it was to be prepared. The cook boiled the
Tea leaves, threw away the water and served the leaves as a vegetable, like spinach.

Tea was served in small handle-less bowls from small teapots made of stoneware or porcelain. The majority were fine glazed porcelain with blue and white designs and were often referred to as chinaware, reflecting their origins. When tea was shipped from China to Europe, alongside spices and other luxury goods, this chinaware was stowed in the bilges in specially constructed boxes which formed a floor for the tea above. Wooden ships always leaked, so while the teapots and tea bowls got wet but could withstand seawater without damage, the precious tea stayed protected and dry on top.

Catherine of Braganza would have been served tea from a Chinese porcelain or stoneware teapot. Later she may have had a silver one. The earliest known silver teapot in England was made in 1670 and was presented to the Committee of the East India Company.

It wasn’t until nearly a hundred years after the introduction of tea to Europe that the secret of porcelain manufacturing was discovered, by a German firm in Meissen. The first porcelain was produced there in 1710 and soon after exported to Britain. The secret spread beyond Germany in the mid-1700s. In 1745 the Chelsea Porcelain factory became the first British firm to produce porcelain, followed by Worcester, Minton Spode and Wedgwood, all producing exquisite tea services.

Tea continued to be popular with royalty in England and in Scotland. Mary of Modena, the beautiful second wife of the future James VII (James II of England), introduced tea drinking to Scotland in 1681 and it quickly became fashionable. James II’s daughter Mary, from his first marriage to Anne Hyde, continued the custom of tea drinking in England, as did her sister Queen Anne who came to the throne in 1702. The custom of social tea drinking that developed in the

Silver teapot engraved with the words ‘This silver tea-Pott was presented to ye Comtte of ye East India Company by ye Right Honul George Berkeley . . . of that Honourable and worthy Society, 1670.’

Queen Anne period produced a need for small movable chairs and tables, as well as for china cabinets in which to house the expensive tea service. The earliest tea service dates from her reign.

Queen Anne held court across her tea table, and, in imitation, fashionable women in England sipped Chinese tea from tiny porcelain bowls and ordered the new tea tables on which to serve it. Queen Anne was such an avid tea-drinker that she exchanged her tiny
Chinese teapots for a capacious bell-shaped silver one because it held more tea.

**Tea equipage**

**IN THIS PAINTING** from around 1727 attributed to Richard Collins, the artist portrays a fashionable family sitting around a tea table not only showing off their fine clothes but their expensive tea equipage, indicating their wealth and social status. The family is drinking from small Chinese porcelain tea bowls in a delicate manner. On the tea table is a typical silver tea service of the time: a sugar dish, sugar tongs, a hot water jug, a spoon boat with teaspoons, a slop bowl, a teapot with a lamp beneath it to keep the contents hot and a tea canister.

Because tea was so expensive and precious it was kept in the boudoir or drawing room in a Chinese jar or bottle called a canister or a catty (a word meaning a Malayan weight of approximately 21 oz., or 600 g).

These jars evolved into elegant boxes or caskets made of wood, tortoiseshell, papier maché or silver, with a lock and key and often containing two or more compartments for different types of tea, and some with a compartment in the middle for sugar. They became known as tea caddies.

A tea caddy spoon was used to measure out the tea leaves kept in the tea caddy before adding them to the teapot. When tea was first imported it came in tea chests and included was a scallop shell that was used to scoop the tea leaves. This is the first known form of a tea caddy spoon. Caddy spoons soon followed, which had a comparatively large bowl spoon with a disproportionately short handle. They are found in many different materials, including bone, pearl, tortoiseshell and silver. The shape and decorative style of the bowl varies from quite plain to imaginative designs such as a leaf, shell, shovel and jockey cap.

Mote spoons, also called mote skimmers, were considered an essential part of any upscale English tea service in those early days. (Mote is an old English word for a particle of dust or foreign matter, particularly in food and drink.) Mote spoons date from as early as 1697 and were made of silver, with small holes perforating the bowl or ladle and a long thin handle with a pointed end. Early shipments of Chinese teas arrived unsorted with a mixture of large and small tea leaves which would not only float in the tea poured out but also clog the spout. Society hostesses who served tea were aware that there might be a few motes floating on the surface of the tea and the mote spoon was an elegant accessory with which to remove them or any floating tea leaves. She would use the handle or shaft with the pointed end to unclog the spout of tea leaves. Teaspoons eventually replaced mote spoons when tea strainers came into use between 1790 and 1805 and
When made, the tea would then be served from the tea table, which was first introduced in the late seventeenth century. Around 1700 over six thousand lacquered tea tables were imported to Britain. By the mid-eighteenth century London furniture makers were producing their own alternative form for the luxury market in mahogany embellished with brass inlay.

Some people had what is called a teapoy – a pedestal table with a top which lifts up revealing two lidded compartments for storing tea and two others containing cut-glass bowls for mixing the dried tea. It was a practical object but also a means for the hostess to display her modish taste in furniture as she presided over tea and gossip."

Although servants would set everything up and aid the hostess, she was in charge of brewing the tea, which would then be served to guests. Both green and black tea were popular and sometimes sugar was added (although this, like tea, was a new import and expensive). In these early days it was still unusual for milk to be added to tea. So, while the men were drinking their tea in the noisy, smoky surroundings of the coffee shop and enjoying the gossip and politics of the day, the ladies were doing much the same thing but in more refined surroundings.

Teapots had integral straining holes set inside at the base of the spout.

Until the mid-eighteenth century tea was served in small handle-less bowls and people often talked about ‘taking a dish of tea’. In about 1750 a man called Robert Adams incorporated a handle into the design of teacups. Although the cups were more costly to make than tea bowls and didn’t pack tightly together for carriage to distant markets, this innovation was welcomed by English tea drinkers who found tea bowls difficult to use, and that they often burned their fingers. Adams designed teacups that were taller than their base and came with a saucer. Some tea drinkers liked to pour their hot tea into saucers, allowing the tea to cool before sipping. This habit also became known as taking ‘a dish of tea’.

Tea kettles were used to refill the teapot while tea was being served. The lamp or burner was filled with camphorine, an odourless and inexpensive fuel that kept the water hot. For those who could afford it, a silver kettle would be preferred together with a silver teapot, milk jug and sugar bowl. The tea urn, heated by a charcoal burner, appeared in the 1760s and superseded the kettle with a spirit burner. Sheffield plate tea urns did not appear until 1785.
Not everyone liked tea. In 1748 John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, argued for complete abstinence from tea on the grounds that it gave rise to ‘numberless disorders, particularly those of a nervous kind’.

Tea was also denounced in Scotland by both medical men and the clergy. It was considered ‘a highly improper article of diet, expensive, wasteful of time and likely to render the population weakly and effeminate’. Some ministers of the Church of Scotland considered it a greater evil than whisky. A movement was even begun all over Scotland to stamp out the ‘tea menace’. However, despite all the opposition, tea drinking became firmly established, especially with women, although gentlemen on the whole still preferred their alcohol.

Back in England Jonas Hanway, in his essay of 1757, branded tea ‘as pernicious to health, obstructing industry and impoverishing the nation’. But Dr Johnson, who wrote the first *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, and who was perhaps the most celebrated of all tea drinkers, drinking, it is said, 25 cups of tea a day, came to tea’s defence, calling himself ‘A hardened and shameless tea-drinker who has for many years diluted his meals with only the infusion of this fascinating plant; whose kettle has scarcely time to cool; who with tea amuses the evening, with tea solaces the midnight – and with tea welcomes the morning.’ Dr Johnson was known to frequent London’s famed coffee houses. Gentlemen went there to discuss the politics and business of the day. They were smoky, noisy places. Women were not allowed and in any case no gentlewoman would have cared to set foot in one. Ladies took their tea at home. Some coffee houses sold tea in loose-leaf form so that it could be brewed at home. Thomas Twining, who opened Tom’s Coffee House on the Strand in 1706, was very well aware that lady customers would not venture inside a coffee house. In 1717 he renamed his establishment The Golden Lyon, a shop which specialized in selling a wide range of good quality teas and coffees.

This was London’s first tea shop and ladies could enter without any impropriety. Jane Austen obtained
her tea from Twining’s shop. She wrote to her sister Cassandra in 1814 from London: ‘I am sorry to hear that there has been a rise in tea. I do not mean to pay Twining till later in the day, when we may order a fresh supply.’ If Jane went in person to Twining’s shop in the Strand she would have walked through a door which looks very much the same today.

Tea drinking remained largely a pastime for the wealthy until 1784 because it was heavily taxed. Smuggling was rife; so was adulteration. The government came under pressure from legal tea merchants whose profits were being seriously undermined by all the smuggling so Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger drastically cut the tax on tea from 119 per cent to 12.5 per cent. Tea became affordable and the illegal smuggling trade was wiped out virtually overnight.

Tea gardens

Tea drinking now spread to the middle classes and replaced ale for breakfast and gin at other times of the day. Tea became Britain’s most popular beverage and drinking coffee at coffee houses declined. Many coffee houses changed into men’s clubs, some of which remain today in Pall Mall or the vicinity of St James’s. Men joined the ladies and their families at one of the pleasure gardens, which were frequently referred to as ‘tea gardens’. These large parks had shrubs, flowers, pools, fountains and statues. There were leafy arbours where people could sit, drink tea and eat bread and butter. As early as 1661 gardens were created at Vauxhall, on the south bank of the River Thames in London. In 1732 the gardens were developed further and they became the place to see and to be seen. The Prince Regent, later George IV, was a frequent visitor. Horace Walpole, Henry Fielding and Dr Johnson also used to visit with their literary friends. Later, other gardens were opened in London (such as Ranelagh, Marylebone, Cuper’s and less famous ones such as St Helena Gardens in Rotherhithe and the Rosemary Branch in Islington) and in other major towns throughout the country.

Tea gardens provided outdoor entertainment for every class from April to September. The attractions included music, conjurors, acrobats, fireworks, riding and bowling, as well as tea and refreshments. Marylebone attracted famous people, including the composer Handel in the late 1750s. Leopold Mozart (father of Wolfgang, the child prodigy who came to London to amaze local music lovers) recorded visiting Ranelagh: ‘On entering everyone pays 2s. 6d. For this he may have as much bread and butter as he can eat, and as much coffee and tea as he can drink.’

Sadly, the rapid growth of London and of ‘rowdism’ eventually led to the tea gardens being closed. Tea drinking became confined to the home.

Regency era

The Regency era can refer to various stretches of time. The formal Regency (1811–20) was the period when King George III was deemed unfit to rule and his son ruled as Prince Regent. On the death of George III in 1820 the Prince Regent became George IV. However, the period 1795 to 1837 is often attributed as the Regency era, a time characterized by distinctive trends in British architecture, literature, fashions and so on. The era ended when Queen Victoria succeeded William IV.

During this period tea was taken at breakfast time and at the end of the day after dinner. Evening parties known as routs were much in vogue at the time. The name rout was also given to small biscuit-like cakes
which were often served with tea. Maria Rundell’s recipe is from *A New System of Domestic Cookery* (1806):

Mix two pounds of flour, one ditto butter, one ditto sugar, one ditto currants, clean and dry; then wet into a stiff paste, with 2 eggs, a large spoonful of orange-flower water, ditto rose-water, ditto sweet wine, ditto brandy drop on a tin-plate floured: a very short time bakes them.

Jane Austen liked drinking tea with her breakfast and in the evening after the late afternoon dinner, when the men joined them for tea, cakes, conversation, cards and music. The characters in her books also drink tea. For example, in *Mansfield Park* (1814) tea cannot come too soon for Fanny Price. Longing to escape Henry Crawford who has just proposed marriage, she wants to flee to her room to escape this unwelcome approach but etiquette forbids leaving until after tea:
She could have hardly kept her seat any longer had it not been for the sound of approaching relief, the very sound she had been waiting for, and long thinking it strangely delayed. The solemn procession . . . of the tea board, urn and cake bearers made its appearance and delivered her . . . Mr Crawford was forced to move away.

**Afternoon tea**

There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

Although the tradition of afternoon tea is usually credited to Anna Maria, the seventh Duchess of Bedford, one of Queen Victoria’s ladies-in-waiting, there is evidence suggesting that there was a custom of drinking tea accompanied by bread and cakes in the afternoon from the 1750s, with advertisements in the newspapers of main cities such as Oxford and Bath. This one is from the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* (1766):

> Spring Gardens are now open for the Summer season with Breakfasting and Afternoon Tea, as usual – Hot-Rolls, and Spring-Garden Cakes every Morning, from Half after Nine ’till Half after Ten, Sundays excepted.

However, afternoon tea taken at four or five o’clock does not seem to have been a regular institution until a quarter of a century after Jane Austen’s death in 1817. Great social changes were taking place in Britain. The main meal of dinner had now shifted from the middle or late afternoon to much later in the evening, sometimes as late as eight or nine o’clock, and only a light lunch was taken at midday.

It is said the Duchess of Bedford complained of hunger or ‘a sinking feeling’ during the long gap between lunch and dinner and so she took all the necessary tea things and something to eat (probably some light cakes or bread and butter) to her private room. In a letter sent from Windsor Castle, she wrote to her brother-in-law in 1841: ‘I forgot to name my old friend Prince Esterhazy who drank tea with me the other evening at 5 o’clock, or rather was my guest amongst eight ladies at the Castle.’ The Duchess also took tea when staying at Belvoir Castle in Rutland and invited other ladies to take tea in her boudoir. The actress Fanny Kemble recollects in her autobiography, published in 1882, a visit to Belvoir Castle in March 1842:

> My first introduction to ‘afternoon tea’ took place during this visit to Belvoir. When I received on several occasions private and rather mysterious invitations to the Duchess of Bedford’s room, and found her with a ‘small and select’ circle of female guests of the castle, busily employed in brewing and drinking tea, with her grace’s own private tea kettle. I do not believe that the now universally-honoured and observed institution of ‘five o’clock tea’ dates further back in the annals of English civilization than this very private and, I think, rather shamefaced practice of it.

It seems that tea drinking in the afternoon had long held a certain mystique, as seen in an article from eighty years earlier in *The Gentlemen’s Magazine* for October 1758: ‘Afternoon tea drinking is censured in
It was not till about 1849 or 50 . . . that five o’clock tea in the drawing room was made an institution, and then only in a few fashionable houses where the dinner hour was as late as half past seven or eight o’clock. My mother was the first to introduce the custom to Scotland; and this was in consequence of Lord Alexander Russell, who was staying with us at Balmoral, telling her that his mother, the Duchess of Bedford, always had afternoon tea at Woburn [the Duchess’s own home].

Afternoon tea, an occasion for refined social contact, especially among women, became more elaborate. It was not long before all fashionable society was sipping tea with sandwiches and cakes. The portions were

the lower and middle classes as a waste of time and money, an occasion of gossiping, slander and sometime intrigue.’ Gossip, slander and sometimes intrigue were not unknown at informal tea parties known as kettle-drums in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Tea, drinking chocolate, cakes and sandwiches were served.

Scandal and gossip may have been entertaining but in the 1800s telling one’s fortune by reading tea leaves was also fun.

By the mid-1850s afternoon tea had firmly established itself in British tradition. It was not long before other social hostesses picked up on the idea of afternoon tea and it became respectable enough for it to move into the drawing room. Georgiana Sitwell wrote that

It is inscribed ‘Would you please to have another Cup of Tea.’

Thomas Rowlandson, *Ladies at Tea*, 1790–95, watercolour with pen and ink.

BRITAIN
Teatimes usually small – just enough to stave off hunger pangs until dinnertime. Not everyone was so keen. Sir Henry Thompson in *Food and Feeding* (1901): “Here may be just named an invention of comparatively recent date, afternoon tea, which, however, cannot be reckoned as a meal. In reality, a pleasant excuse to mark the hour for friendly gossip.”

‘A Kettledrum in Knightsbridge’, 1871. Ladies and gentlemen could mingle together and talk scandal at these parties.

Fortune teller reading the tea leaves, 1894.
Reading the tea leaves

Tea-leaf reading is also called tasseomancy, tasseography or teomancy. Tasseomancy comes from the Arabic word *tassa*, meaning cup, and the Greek word *mancy*, meaning divination. Like tea itself, tasseomancy originated in ancient China, but it became associated with gypsies who later started the spread of the practice throughout the world. Tea-leaf reading, or fortune-telling by tea leaves, first began to make its mark in England during the seventeenth century when tea was introduced into Europe from China. It began to grow in popularity during the 1800s as a means of telling one's future. Tea-leaf fortune-telling uses the symbols and the patterns formed by the way the tea leaves fall in a person's cup.

To read someone's tea leaves, you must first make a pot of tea, using loose leaves, and pour the tea without a strainer so that leaves pour into the cup. The inquirer is asked by the reader to sip the tea slowly and make a wish. The inquirer should drink from the cup until only a teaspoonful of tea remains. The dregs are swirled round the cup three times in an anti-clockwise direction with the left hand. The cup is turned over and placed on the saucer. The cup is then turned right side up. The handle of the cup should point to the inquirer. The reader takes the cup in both hands. The patterns of the leaves are examined and pictures and symbols formed by the leaves are looked for. This is where your imagination comes in or your intuition helps you decipher them. Leaves close to the brim relate to events soon to occur and those at the bottom of the cup to bad tidings or the distant future. Those close to the handle concern matters at home.

Remember that a symbol or pattern may have its meaning altered by others nearby, so all symbols should be read in conjunction with each other. Good luck symbols include stars, triangles, trees, flowers, crowns and circles. Bad luck symbols include snakes, owls, crosses, cats, guns and cages.

Fortune-telling by tea leaves is still popular in Ireland, Scotland, Canada and the USA, as well as other places. Whether you believe it or not, reading the leaves can be an entertaining way of sharing tea with friends. I remember my mother, on dark, cold, winter teatimes, entertaining us by telling our fortunes. She was good at it and we all had a lot of fun.

There are many symbols and their meanings. Here are my favourites, chosen to foretell the future as I write this book:

- Anchor – voyage or success
- Book – revelations
- Clouds – doubts or problems
- Cross – suffering
- Horse – ambition fulfilled
- Ladder – advancement
- Mountain – a strenuous climb ahead
- Star – good luck
- Palm tree – creativity
- Wheel – a sign of progress
- Windmill – success through hard work