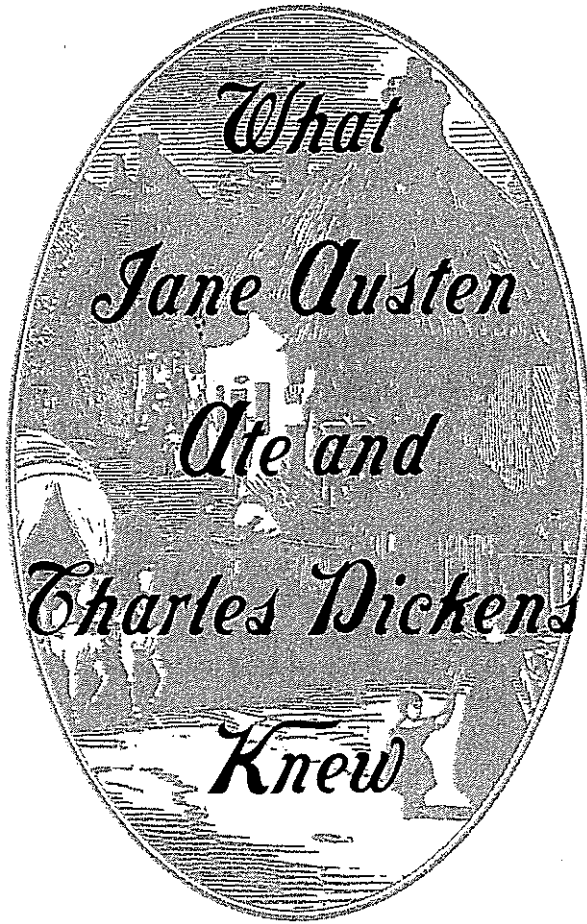


DANIEL POOL



FROM FOX HUNTING TO WHIST—
THE FACTS OF DAILY LIFE
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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T E A

*T*ea caught on long before the nineteenth century. By the 1800s, it rivaled beer in popularity even among the lower classes—it was, after all, a hot item to liven up the otherwise cold meals of the poor, and the fact that the water was boiled made it safe to drink, unlike beverages made with water right out of the ground.

Originally, tea was imported from China by the East India Company under a virtual monopoly, and for a long time it was so expensive that it was sometimes kept in locked boxes called tea caddies. The tea was not very strong, and the monopoly was broken in 1833, but until the early 1870s 85 percent of British tea came from China. Subsequently, imports of the substance began to pour in from India and Ceylon (gunpowder-green being a favorite type), but in the meantime a flourishing market in ersatz and secondhand tea had grown up, so great was the demand. Enterprising "tea" merchants busied themselves converting things like blackthorn leaves into reasonable facsimiles of tea leaves by the addition of artistic coloring here and there, a business so successful that the government estimated that for every seven pounds of authentic East India tea being sold under the monopoly, there were four phony pounds being sold to unsuspecting buyers. Even when the import monopoly ended, import duties kept the price very high. So people recycled—sometimes for profit. Indeed, by the 1840s there were eight factories in London busily recycling used tea leaves, often dyeing them and then mixing them with new tea for resale. At one point it was estimated that about 80,000 pounds of tea were gathered annually and rejuvenated in this manner.

We think of afternoon tea as being an English practice of long standing, but in fact the habit began in the 1840s. Before that, tea was frequently offered after dinner, when the ladies and gentlemen had gathered together in the drawing room. By the 1860s or so, five o'clock tea was a recognized social ritual, company sometimes being formally invited to partake, and by 1877 there was even a special costume—the tea gown—with which ladies could grace the occasion. Tea was customarily served in the drawing room, although, at a country estate, if the weather were good, it might be served outdoors on the lawn à la *Portrait of a Lady*.