Excerpt from

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF COFFEE AND CAFES

by Bob Biderman

Hardback ISBN: 9781900355773
Softback ISBN: 9781900355780

Published by Black Apollo Press

www.blackapollopress.com/peopleshistory.html

❖1❖

Delving into Origins

IT WAS PARIS in the summer of 1714 – a breezy Sunday afternoon. Jean de la Roque hurried down Quai St. Bernard bound for the Jardin des Plants. He'd been invited by Monsieur de Jussien, the head gardener, to witness something that few Europeans had ever seen. Something, indeed, so special that his hands trembled with anticipation and his heart pounded as he strode quickly along the quay.

What could it be that induced such a powerful response in an 18th century Parisian gentleman? The answer might seem a bit prosaic to us looking back more than a quarter of a millennium on. In our mind's eye we see a Paris quite different than the one we know – a Paris with a leg still in the medieval world. Rather than the grand, symmetrical boulevards, this was a city with narrow winding streets and rickety, ancient houses yet to be demolished by great urban planners set loose by future Napoleons. Yet this was a city seething with anticipation. For if one foot was in the old world, the other was firmly planted in the new.

Such a distance tends to blur one's vision, especially when gazing back from an age like ours. Having seen everything there is to see and eaten everything there is eat, our senses have been

shattered to a point that there are few surprises left – or so we are led to think.

But back then, two and a half centuries ago, what Jean de la Roque was going to witness was as fantastic to him as the marvels and horrors of bio-technology are to us. Only in one other place, at the famed Hortus Medicus in Amsterdam, had anyone accomplished such a feat – coaxing a coffee tree to bear fruit in European soil.

For Jean de la Roque, seeing this horticultural slight-of-hand was a culmination of an obsession which had plagued him since childhood. He had long been fascinated by the stories of his father who had travelled to Constantinople in 1644 and then to the Levant, bringing back to his home in Marseille not only some of the first coffee ever seen there, but also the enticingly exotic service used in Turkey when entertaining guests – the tiny Fujian cups of ancient China, the little silk napkins embroidered in gold, the delicate silver spoons and the lacquered serving tray.

Coffee was little more than a curiosity when la Roque's father had returned to France, brewed sparingly in drawing rooms of the wealthy or those who had, through travel or trade, contracted the habits of the Levant. But in 1669 something happened which made this substance very much in vogue and launched the epoch of coffee that so fascinated la Roque.

It was in July of that year when the emissaries of Sultan Mohammed IV came to Paris bringing with them sacks upon sacks of a curious bean.

Paris, at the time, was already in the throws of Turkomania as the Empire of the Ottomans pressed ever onward into Europe, till it was knocking at the gates of Vienna itself. Stories of eunuchs dressed in robes of silver and mauve, overseeing their master's erotic needs and courtiers with organs of hearing and speech removed so as to assure their trustworthiness, vied with tales of the Janissaries, the Sultan's elite infantry corps, made up of children torn from their mother's breast as a periodic levy on Christian youth. But it was Constantinople, the ancient seat of Byzantium, which fired the Gallic imagination with shimmering images of silks and spices and all the exotic loot of an empire which stretched from Yemen to Persia to Hungary.

When the Sultan's Ambassador left in May the following year, the coffee habit he introduced into Parisian society had already become the newest fad. People of means were beginning to bring it in from Marseille, or making private arrangements with ship's captains who sailed to the Levant. Yet it wasn't until 1672 that an enterprising Armenian, known simply as 'Pascal', took to selling it publicly, first at the grand fair of Saint Germain and then in a little shop located at the Quai de l'Evole where he sold coffee for two sols, six derniers (or about 2 English pennies) a dish.

La Roque was later to write about a little lame man who, in those years, went through the streets of Paris touting this strange new drink. 'He had a napkin tied about him very neat carrying in one hand a chafing dish made for the purpose, upon which he would set his coffee-pot. In the other hand he carried a kind of fountain full of water, and before him a tin-basket, where he kept all his utensils.'

He was known as 'Candiot'. It seems he just appeared on the scene one day with his companion, a young man named Joseph, who came from the Levant to seek his fortune in Paris.

But that was a generation before. By the time la Roque hurried down the boulevard that summer day in 1714 toward the Jardin des Plants, there was scarcely a town of any size that hadn't one or more coffeehouses. Within a brief period they had sprung up almost magically from one end of the kingdom to another. Coffee had gone from an exotic luxury to a necessary commodity with shiploads of raw beans in rough, muslin sacks coming into harbour almost every day.

Coffee had come of age. What had been small–scale bartering forty years before, had emerged into full-fledged commerce. And the Ottomans, who till now controlled the trade through their Red Sea ports, were quick to realise a good thing when they saw one – as they had been searching for an alternative to the spice monopoly the swaggering Dutch had lifted from them.

‘The potentates of Egypt,’ la Roque complained, ‘have become more difficult in letting that commodity be transported, which has caused a scarcity and raised the price to six and seven haucks per pound.’ The hauck was equivalent to about three English pence, and though that seems incredibly small in our inflated age, back then it was certainly enough to make the new entrepreneurs think seriously about alternative sources of supply.

The problem was, however, that alternatives didn’t exist to the Red Sea ports – except for one. Which is why the fruiting of that plant la Roque had rushed to witness was so vitally important.

‘We went there to see it and observed it a good while with pleasure; it was set in its case and placed in the glass-machine, with the Taper of Peru beside it,’ he wrote. ‘The Hollander who had that tree under his care came from Marly to the Royal Garden. He told us that there was a great tree of this species in the Hortus Botanicus of Amsterdam whose height was equal to the second story of a house and proportionally as large. That great tree came originally from Arabia, brought from there very young and transported to Java. After some stay, it came at last to Holland where it grew to perfection. The fruit of this same tree, planted in he Garden of Amsterdam, have produced diverse young plants, some of which have born fruit from the age of three years. The shrub sent to our King was of that number, according to the Dutchman.’

It was the scourge of the Ottomans – the Dutch – who first got that bean to grow outside its homeland. Now it had been handed over to the French. What la Roque had witnessed at the Jardin des Plants on that very special Sunday was the Mama tree. It was her progeny that travelled the perilous seas to Dominica. And from there, her grandchildren moved on, jumping from the Caribbean to French Guyana and becoming the founding nurseries of the great coffee empires of South and Central America.

Perhaps this marvel of growing coffee in a European garden can hardly be appreciated now, in our age when human life is nurtured in laboratory test tubes. But it takes more than a green thumb to force a coffee tree to bear fruit outside its native habitat, especially without the technical understanding of soil and nutriments based on sophisticated chemical analysis that we have at our disposal. The critical factors these incredible Dutch gardeners had to contend with in perfecting their Super-tree were, quite simply, astronomical.

To understand what was behind these astounding achievements, however, we need to consider the relationship of humans and plants in the 17th and 18th centuries – a relationship much different than the one we have with vegetables today.

Before the industrial revolution and the dubious marvels of chemistry, plants were the main basis of drugs and tonics which doctors and herbalists prescribed for their patients' health and well-being.

European theologies of the day still accepted the notion that all plants originated in the Garden of Eden and were placed there by God specifically to serve (or tempt) the human race. This belief formed the basis of the ancient theory of 'signatures' which said that each plant gave forth a sign, both in colour and shape, as to its effect. Many herbalists believed that plants could be 'read', and, if interpreted correctly, could be used to cure any known disease.

It was a widely held belief during the Middle Ages that the Garden of Eden had somehow survived the flood, and during the 15th and 16th centuries, the great journeys of exploration kept this item on their agenda along with the search for the Holy Grail and the Fountain of Youth. But by the 17th century, opinion had shifted as the world became more and more charted and pragmatic philosophies of mercantilism became the force to be reckoned with rather than the vague mythologies of the Church which could produce fascinating dreams but very little hard, convertible cash.

The idea of the Garden of Eden, however, persisted even though its current existence was doubted. And, in line with the magnificent arrogance of the time, men began thinking of starting it anew by bringing together all the bits and pieces of creation into one place.

This resurrection of Paradise became a virtual obsession among the new breed of merchant adventurers, perhaps as a rationale for their pillage

and looting of the world or, more probably, because they understood that in the new economies being forged, knowledge was power and commodities, wealth.

Most merchant ships, therefore, carried with them a trained botanist whose business it was to discover new vegetation, describe and codify and, hopefully, bring back living specimens for the proliferating botanical gardens which had sprung up in nearly every university town in Britain, Italy and France – though the best gardens, the most brilliant displays of flowering diversity, were owned by the Dutch.

In Leyden, for example, practically every plant known to European naturalists was on display. The garden there was like a botanical encyclopaedia containing examples from the far reaches of the world. Academics, herbalists and medical practitioners awaited each discovery with the anticipation of a physicist learning about another building block of matter. And each new plant would be nurseried and brought to the marvellous Hortus Medicus in Amsterdam, where it would be duly noted in their vast and ever-expanding pharmacopoeia.

The skill of the chief gardeners, like Dutchman Hendrick Gerritsz and Cornelis Vos, in keeping such a monumental collection in bloom, was quite extraordinary. The difficulty, for example, in growing coffee from seed exemplifies the prodigious amount of information necessary in keeping one, let alone

thousands of exotic plants, through succeeding generations.

Viability of coffee seeds is comparatively short and germination is a chancy operation at best. Soil warmth is a critical factor, with the optimum temperature hovering at 27.7 degrees Celsius. Propagating the plant through cuttings is equally difficult and requires the maximum of light plus a humidity reading of close to 90%. Rooting can easily take three or four months.

Keeping these things in mind, it's not difficult to understand why the fruition of a coffee tree in a Paris garden might have been such a great event. What is less clear is why it was so important to people who were not in the business of rushing out every time an exotic flower bloomed.

The fascination that Sunday, was, of course, coffee itself – at least for la Roque. His obsession was so great that he ended up writing a book on the subject; the most definitive one to that date.

What interested la Roque was its origins, most likely because of his childhood memories and his father's ritualised use of the ornate paraphernalia he had brought back from Turkey. He had witness coffee emerge from a surreptitious drink, known only to those familiar with the ways of the Levant, to something which burst onto the urban scene, abruptly transforming the course of social life.

Yet the coming of this drink, which Montague said quickened the mind and let the spirit fly, coincided

with a period of intense turmoil and change. The noted French historian, Roland Mousnier, even went so far as to call it the 'century of crisis which affected all mankind causing new uncertainties in thought and faith.'

One contemporary observer wrote 'the whole world is shaking'. And, certainly, few people who were around at the time would have denied it. France witnessed well over 1000 revolts during the course of the 17th century and historians have discovered a similar pattern of popular unrest almost anywhere else they cared to look.

Numerous theories have been expounded as to why this century was so extraordinary. Puritans saw the turbulence as a sign from God, warning humankind to mind their wicked ways. Others suggested that malign forces were being influenced by the stars. Modern astronomers now think they might have been right.

Between 1645 and 1715, the skies, according to the records of the time, had a curious absence of sun-spots. And observers from Scandinavia to Scotland noticed another mysterious disappearance – that of the Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis.

Both these phenomena are indicators of solar energy. The Northern Lights are cause by particles from the sun entering the earth's atmosphere, and sun-spots, themselves, are an indicator of changes in the sun's magnetic fields.

Considering that a decrease of one percent in the total solar radiation can cause a fall of one degree centigrade in mean summer temperature, which in turn restricts the growing season by three to four weeks as well as the maximum altitude at which vegetation will ripen, it's not surprising that a world in which 90% of the total population was dependent on agriculture for food and employment would be thrown seriously out of whack. As a consequence, the population of Europe, between the years 1625 and 1650, fell by twenty percent.

Curiously, this is the very time that coffee first entered Europe. Could it be that la Roque's fascination had something to do with this coincidence? Or perhaps he thought it wasn't a coincidence at all.

In 1714, la Roque stood on a pinnacle. Behind him was a world laid waste by famine, plague and insurrection. Before him was the grand new age of Europe illustrated by the growth of commodity markets and the stock exchange, the empires built on plantation-based trade, and the flowering of the continental cafés.

For the great emerging powers – Holland, England and France – true wealth now came in the form of plants: sugar cane, cotton and tobacco. And, added to the list now was coffee, the new drink that oiled the economic machine and kept it going – the drink that so fascinated the likes of la Roque and seemed to epitomise this new age.

No wonder la Roque tried so hard to delve into its origins, as if its story could shed some light on those extraordinary times. But the history of coffee lay in a past so murky and vague that la Roque, like most of his contemporaries had to resort to third-hand tales in order to trace its way. What he found out was how amazingly little was known – at least in the West. And what was known in the East was shrouded in mystery.