



## Coffee: A Dark History

By Antony Wild

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**Coffee: A Dark History** By Antony Wild

**“Masterful and exhaustive . . . eye-opening lessons in economics, ethics, culture and science, resulting in a comprehensive overview of a commodity that is second only to oil in its importance to world trade.”** —*Worcester Evening News*

Coffee trader and historian Antony Wild delivers a rollicking history of the most valuable legally traded commodity in the world after oil—an industry that employs 100 million people throughout the world. From obscure beginnings in east Africa in the fifteenth century as a stimulant in religious devotion, coffee became an imperial commodity, produced by poor tropical countries and consumed by rich temperate ones. Through the centuries, the influence of coffee on the rise of capitalism and its institutions has been enormous. Revolutions were once hatched in coffeehouses, commercial alliances were forged, secret societies were formed, and politics and art were endlessly debated. Today, while coffee chains spread like wildfire, coffee-producing countries are in crisis: with prices at a historic low, they are plagued by unprecedented unemployment, abandoned farms, enforced migration, and massive social disruption. Bridging the gap between coffee’s dismal colonial past and its perilous corporate present, *Coffee* reveals the shocking exploitation that has always lurked at the heart of the industry.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

While coffee historian Wild brings enthusiasm to this tome on the 500-year history of the caffeinated bean, it doesn't match the simple passion with which coffee lovers enjoy their morning java. (In fairness to the author, how could it?) Wild (*The East India Company*) traces the bean as it makes its way from Africa to the Middle East (it was once known as the "wine of Araby") to the West, and the rise in cafe culture across Europe and eventually the New World, where, thanks to the Boston Tea Party, coffee surpassed tea as the patriotic drink of choice for a fledging nation. But Wild repeatedly reminds readers that for all the pleasure a cup of coffee brings to its drinker, the history of this beguiling brew is indeed dark. As long as there has been coffee, Wild asserts, there have been colonial powers—and now corporations—to exploit the workers that grow it. While this is a fascinating story that combines history with anthropology, too often the writing is buried under the heartless statistics of economic formulations. However, the work does provide caffeine junkies with intriguing reading material next time they find themselves waiting in line to order their grande vanilla latte. Illus. (*June*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Wild reveals that in the U.S. alone, some 1.5 million people are involved in the coffee industry either directly through coffee processing, sales, and distribution or indirectly through manufacture of paper cups and the like. Although coffee consumption is rising, the amount of money paid to coffee producers continues to fall, reducing many to poverty and destroying already fragile economies. Ironically, some of the trouble in coffee markets may be attributed to U.S. efforts to revive Vietnam's economy through the planting of lesser-quality coffee bushes. Wild further links coffee to ill health and to colonialism, and he holds in particular contempt the development of instant coffee. Tracing coffee's history and spread from sixteenth-century East Africa and Arabia, Wild perceptively connects it with Napoleon's career and with the poet Rimbaud. Wild depicts a particularly unflattering picture of competing efforts to endorse or to condemn caffeine's invigorating effect. His radical take on the rise of Starbucks makes McDonald's growth look innocuous. Wild may represent an extreme stance, but his effort raises many troubling questions. *Mark Knoblauch*  
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About the Author

**Antony Wild** is the author of *The East India Company* and *Remains of the Raj* and is widely credited with having introduced specialty coffees into the UK. He lives in Verrieres, France.

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**Michael Hamlin:**

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