

**SOPHIE COE – MICHAEL COE, *THE TRUE HISTORY OF CHOCOLATE*,  
LONDON: THAMES & HUDSON LTD., 2013, ISBN 978-0-500-29068-2, 280 P.**



The publication of Sophie D. Coe and her husband Michael D. Coe focuses on the history of the chocolate not only in its solid, sweetened form, but also as a valued beverage. The work, originally written by Sophie Coe was completed by Michael Coe (American archaeologist, epigrapher and anthropologist) after Sophie Coe died in the very act of writing. Whole publication is divided into nine chapters. Michael and Sophie Coe answer in Chapter I the cocoa origin. Chapters II and III engage in the early Pre-Columbian cultivation, Chapters IV and V describe the introduction of the beverage in Europe. Authors explicate in Chapter VI the differences within the main cultivation areas. The rest of the book engages in the history of chocolate from 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Authors emphasizes, cocoa is without doubts one of the products of the New World, which conquered Europe. Although it was a favourite drink of Pre-Columbian civilizations, its expansion to wider layers occurred after the Spanish conquest. As Michael Coe and Sophie Coe point in the Chapters I, II, and III, cocoa had the aura of the sacred drink (its name *Theobroma Cacao* means “food of Gods”) and the Europeans had surprisingly respectful approach towards it. At the beginning of the conquest of America cocoa was cultivated in a large area from the coast of central Mexico to Costa Rica. Pre-Columbian civilizations as the Olmecs, Aztecs, Mayas etc. used cocoa not only as a drink but also as a currency and its popularity among higher strata was high.

Moreover, the authors point out in Chapter III, Spaniards and Creoles changed the original Indian recipe for preparation of chocolate. The first change was that the conquerors did not drink chocolate cold as the Indians but hot or at a room temperature. Secondly, they sweetened chocolate with sugar cane. Thirdly they replaced local spices such as chilli by Old World spices. The most popular were cinnamon or anise.

As soon as its consumption spread throughout Spanish America and Europe, it became an actual the issue of the trade. The New Spain, especially the areas of Sonusco and Tabasco, became the important centres of cocoa cultivation during the 16th century. As authors mention in the Chapter IV, the other centres were the Caracas coast in Venezuela and Guayaquil in Ecuador. M. Coe and S. Coe believe, the New Spain remained an important area for its business in colonial period. Its role was not only as a producer and consumer, but also as a place of transshipment of goods destined for the European market. Especially, the port Veracruz had a favourable strategic position for the trade between viceroyalties of the New Spain and Peru and in transatlantic trade.

Cocoa trade was also influenced by other factors. M. Coe and S. Coe emphasize, piracy, smuggling, price instability of cocoa monopoly and speculation caused that every major producer of cocoa, whether it was the area of southern Mexico, Caracas or Guayaquil, went through periods of economic boom and crisis. Also internal factors as poor harvests or political instability influenced the cocoa trade considerably.

During the time, chocolate became very popular in Europe. Authors find out in Chapter VI, the first consumers in the Old World were the Spaniards. The uniqueness of this beverage was so high that even the Spaniards kept the recipe for the prepara-

tion of chocolate in secret. From the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century chocolate began to expand in Europe. Portugal, Italy, France, and England — all these countries had first-hand experience of chocolate boom. The chocolate beverage was consumed particularly by elites, it was drunk by kings, aristocracy and rich people. Even the first minister of the King Luis XIV, Cardinal Richelieu, drank it with pleasure.

As M. Coe and S. Coe mention in Chapter VII, the popularity of chocolate was made not only by its taste but also by its supposed medical effects. By the time the beverage had become so popular in France that the French started with cocoa planting in Martinique (Caribbean colony) and in the second half of 17<sup>th</sup> century were able to supply the French market by cocoa beans. In Britain, cocoa had to contend with a relatively significant competition of other hot non-alcoholic drinks — tea and coffee. All had a similar stimulation, all were from overseas colonies (coffee comes from Africa, tea from Asia and cocoa from America) and they all came to England around the middle of 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although cocoa was a subject of high customs duties, his popularity grew steadily. As early as in 1657 the first advertisement for sale of chocolate appeared in the English newspapers:

*“Chocolate, an excellent West India drink, sold in Queen’s — Head — alley, in Bishops-gate — street by Frenchman, who did formally sell it in Gracechurch — street and in Clement’s — churchyard; being the first man who did sell it in England. There you may have it ready to drink, and also unmade at easier rates, and taught the use thereof, it being for its excellent qualities so much esteemed in all places. It cures and preserves the body of many diseases, as is to be seen by the book, who hath it there to be sold also.”<sup>1</sup>*

Regarding the other continents, chocolate never obtained a significant position in the Far East, India, or Southeast Asia. Authors claims in Chapter VIII, the exceptions were until 1898 the Spanish Philippines where cocoa was cultivated. Disinterest of Asia in cocoa was probably caused by cultural conservatism. In Switzerland, the current chocolate empire chocolate was extended in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Currently, M. Coe and S. Coe see the other significant problem in the question of quality. As they point in the last chapter, chocolate manufacturers of the European continent, especially in France and Belgium, pays more attention to the taste quality than their colleagues in United States or Great Britain. The other important thing is the issue of the Third World producers and fair trade. Invaluable is especially that the authors described for the first time a unified and detailed history of chocolate in a single volume. Moreover, publication contains a number of carefully researched biography and sources, including the codex of Mayans, Aztecs and 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish manuscripts. The text is suitably supplemented by interesting illustrations and it strictly adheres to the time line of the text.

**Václav Švepeš**

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1 S. COE — M. COE, *The True History of Chocolate*, London 2013, p. 165.