Brain Brew

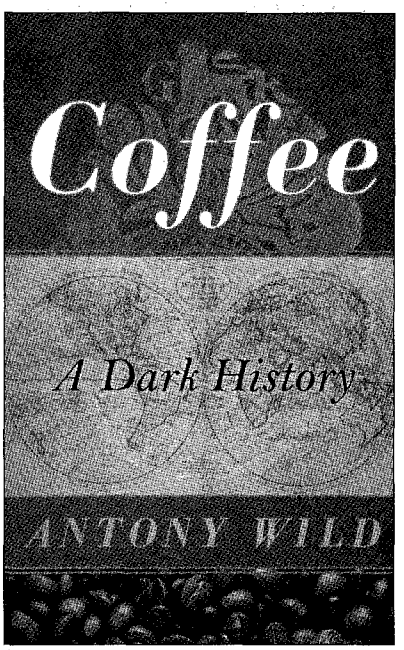
How coffee fueled Voltaire's *Candide*, Newton's theory of gravity, and Juan Valdez's modern woes.

By Brendan I. Koerner

Coffee is the drug that changed my life. Without its brain-perking effects, it's doubtful that I could have passed astronomy in college, read *The Wealth of Nations* cover to cover, or made a favorable first impression on my girlfriend's parents despite suffering from a colossal hangover. In fact, this very review would be immeasurably harder to write were it not for the steaming cup of milk-tinged joe to my laptop's left.

But I seem to have derived less benefit from my addiction than many other habitual caffeine ingesters whom Antony Wild describes in *Coffee: A Dark History*. A British coffee merchant who is credited with introducing specialty brews to his native country, as well as the author of several histories of the East India Company, Wild credits the brew, somewhat outlandishly, with having inspired some proverbial Great Men to create the modern stock exchange, the British insurance house Lloyd's, and London's first organized police force, among other legacies. Without the energizing effects of the native African bean, he argues, the world would be a far more Neanderthal place.

But Wild's chief goal with *Coffee* is laying out how the First World's modern addiction to the drink is wreaking havoc on the poor and powerless. The book's sweeping ambition, if not its politics, is similar to that of several other recent single-topic histories, from *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* to *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed the World*, which all promise to prove, in the space of a few hundred pages, that some hitherto overlooked thing in fact played a pivotal role in world history. Though his storytelling and logic could often use refinement, and despite his unfortunate tendency to meander off topic, Wild does conjure up some eye-opening trivia on the coffee manufacturing process, and there is merit to his claim that Third World farmers are facing a raw deal in part because of free trade's unintended consequences.

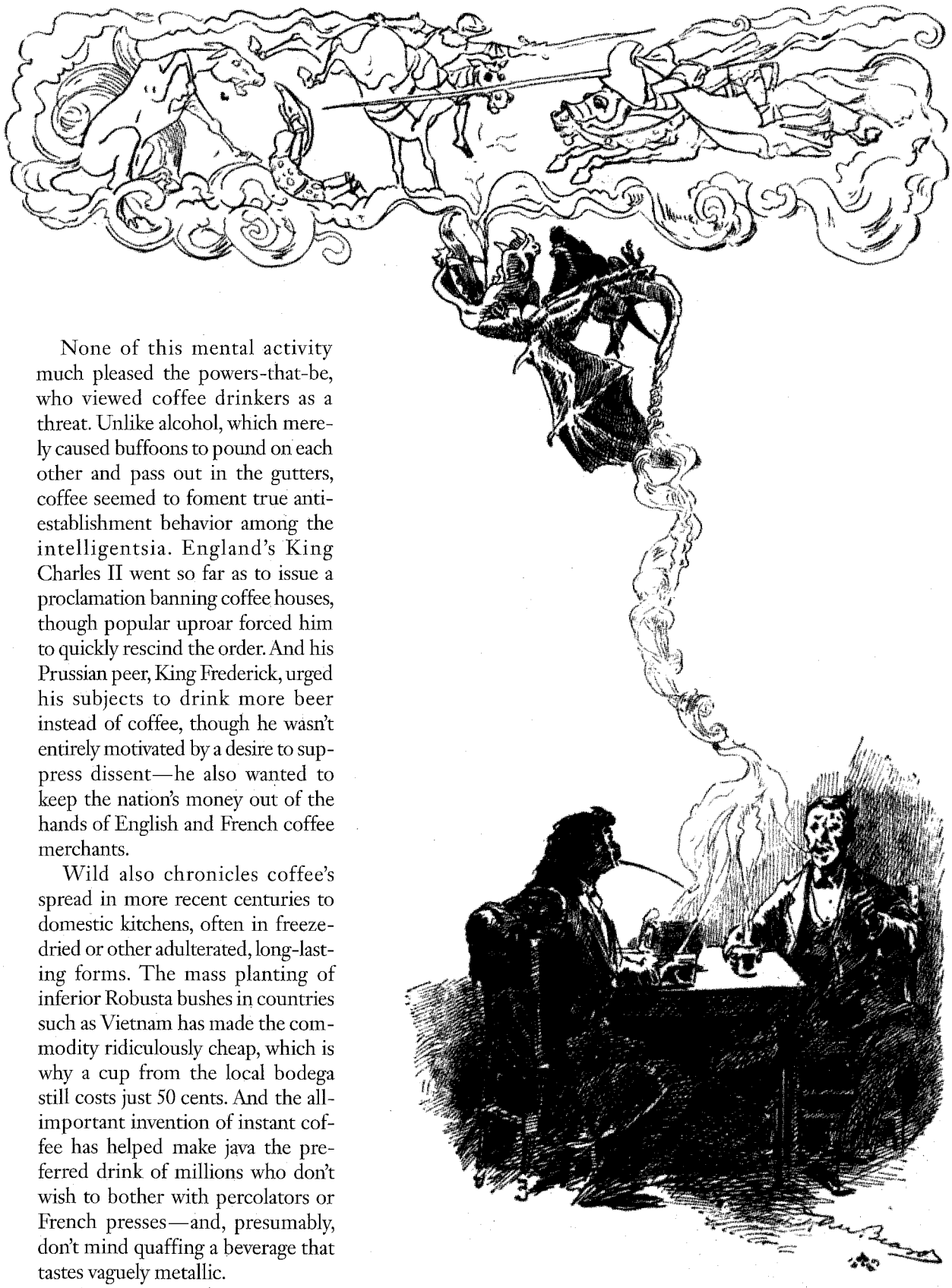


Coffee: A Dark History
By Antony Wild
W.W.Norton, $25.95

It's unknown exactly who first discovered coffee's sprightliness, but Wild surmises that it was likely a resident of Ethiopia, where the Arabica bush grows wild in the highlands—perhaps a shepherd who noticed his animals skipping about after chowing down on the plant's cherry-like beans. And, in due course, some clever person figured out that roasting the beans over a fire, then brewing them with boiling water, made the process of caffeine-ingestion much more enjoyable. Members of the Sufi sect of Islam were among the most famous adopters of this practice, and, by the 1400s, they had incorporated coffee drinking into their mystical rites. Arab traders, and perhaps a Chinese naval commander or two, soon spread the beverage throughout the Middle East.

Any Ottoman fashion was bound to hit Europe soon enough, and, by the mid-1600s, coffee houses were all the rage in Paris and London where the stimulant helped kickstart the latter-day brain explosion known as the Enlightenment. Wild argues that the creative output of the movement's greatest artists and thinkers might have been significantly less if they'd been fans of sloth-inducing ale instead of energizing coffee. The Royal Society, for example, a group of pals who gathered to slurp coffee and discuss alchemy at an Oxford café named Tillyard's, was later responsible for publishing the works of its chairman, Isaac Newton. The Coffee Club of Rota met in Westminster at the Turk's Head, where luminaries such as Andrew Marvell and Samuel Pepys discussed and promoted new political concepts, including the early adoption of the modern ballot box. In France, meanwhile, Voltaire was reputedly downing between 50 and 72 cups of coffee a day, a habit that many link to the brevity and mania of *Candide*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



None of this mental activity much pleased the powers-that-be, who viewed coffee drinkers as a threat. Unlike alcohol, which merely caused buffoons to pound on each other and pass out in the gutters, coffee seemed to foment true anti-establishment behavior among the intelligentsia. England's King Charles II went so far as to issue a proclamation banning coffee houses, though popular uproar forced him to quickly rescind the order. And his Prussian peer, King Frederick, urged his subjects to drink more beer instead of coffee, though he wasn't entirely motivated by a desire to suppress dissent—he also wanted to keep the nation's money out of the hands of English and French coffee merchants.

Wild also chronicles coffee's spread in more recent centuries to domestic kitchens, often in freeze-dried or other adulterated, long-lasting forms. The mass planting of inferior Robusta bushes in countries such as Vietnam has made the commodity ridiculously cheap, which is why a cup from the local bodega still costs just 50 cents. And the all-important invention of instant coffee has helped make java the preferred drink of millions who don't wish to bother with percolators or French presses—and, presumably, don't mind quaffing a beverage that tastes vaguely metallic.

The story of coffee's journey from African obscurity to European connoisseurship to worldwide ubiquity shouldn't be a dull one, but Wild's storytelling skills are mediocre at best. Too much of the book's first half reads like a 1950s university textbook, wall-to-wall with the names of people and places that even a memory champion would be hard-pressed to keep in order. Complicating matters is Wild's penchant for unnecessary thoroughness—he'll often put forth a theory as to a particular merchant who might have been responsible for taking Arabica beans to the West, but then he'll step back and admit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that no real evidence supports that contention.

In a chapter about Napoleon's exile in St. Helena, where coffee has always been a vital crop, Wild informs the reader that he intends to show "how the history of coffee and colonialism evolved together over the last five hundred years to forge an unholy alliance that still exists for the benefit of Western coffee consumers at the expense of the people of the Third World countries." It's an ambitious and admirable goal, but one seemingly too complicated for a writer of Wild's modest literary gifts. The extended chapter on Napoleon's time on the island seems particularly pointless, filled with the minutiae of the deposed emperor's daily routine (which reportedly included drinking two cups of coffee per day). Only the most hardcore of Napoleon aficionados will thrill to the information that their hero spent a good deal of time teaching billiards to a lively teenager named Betsy. Similarly incongruous is a chapter on the French poet Rimbaud, whose tangential connection to coffee is that he made a living dealing it for several years. Though Wild deserves some credit for digging up details on the doomed poet's merchant days in the Middle East, the Rimbaud material doesn't advance the reader's understanding of coffee's role in shaping the world economy.

That is curious, indeed, seeing that one of Wild's main aims in *Coffee* is to explain how, as he writes in the first chapter, "coffee lay at the very heart of the triumph of free-market economics in our times." The irony of that fact, he argues, is that coffee is now bastardized by the free market it made possible in the first place, and the crop's degradation is dragging down millions of Third World farmers in the process. Yet it's not until very late in the book that Wild finally starts dishing the dirt on Starbucks and Nestlé, whom he seemingly regards as only slightly less reprehensible than Idi Amin. He cycles through a laundry list of nations that are dependent on coffee exports, a situation that he largely blames on America's wicked colonialist tendencies.

Wild's big gripe is that corporate middlemen are insensitive to the economic needs of coffee farmers, paying them a pittance for their crops, then jacking up the price to ridiculous levels at the Starbucks counter. The same, of course, could be said about any number of foodstuffs—anyone interested in *Bananas: A Yellow History*?—so there's very little in Wild's ostensible exposé that will shock readers. His argument would have resonated with much more force if the book's focus on coffee were a bit more unwavering, but Wild's rhetoric too often descends into a stock harangue against corporate avarice. Though the book is titled *Coffee*, the drink vanishes for vast stretches, as Wild instead discusses everything from the School of the Americas to Agent Orange to the United States' anti-cocaine efforts—and not with particular lucidity or flair, either.

The constant digressions are a pity, as there is doubtless validity to his claims that the dire circumstances in Colombia or Nicaragua have much to do with Western bullying in the coffee trade. But Wild simply does a poor job of connecting the dots between the crop and the Third World's many woes; he hints, for example, that the Zapatista rebels in Mexico emerged in response to artificially low coffee prices in Chiapas, but he provides neither further explanation nor backstory. And though Wild teases the reader with his insinuations that overzealous Robusta planting has destroyed Vietnam's agriculture, he spends too much space on the war and how it "haunts the American psyche."

The jumble might have made more sense were Wild a reporter, but he is not. There is no evidence in *Coffee* that the author ever inter-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

viewed anyone in these coffee producing nations, let alone an actual coffee farmer. His information on various left-wing bogeymen seems culled entirely from secondhand sources, and not particularly good ones at that. At one point, when an anecdote might have really strengthened his case about the need for Fair Trade coffee, Wild instead conjures up a meandering hypothetical about the fictional Ahab Coffee House.

What's really missing from *Coffee*, perhaps, is any trace of humor, or at least a sense of fun. The single-topic genre is obviously doomed to offer less-than-comprehensive takes on history and the world, a shortcoming that *Cod* and *Mauve* and *How Soccer Explains the World* acknowledge with occasional winks at the reader. But *Coffee* is a serious book from first page to last, and you get the sense that Wild would make for a rather didactic dinner-table companion.

Worse yet, despite his background in the coffee trade, he never once seems to actually like coffee. He spends considerable space excoriating people who deign to like instant coffee, Starbucks coffee, Robusta coffee, espresso, or any number of so-called specialty blends. But he rarely, if ever, expresses an affection for any incarnation of the beverage himself. The overall effect is that Wild comes off as something of a snob, the sort who never stops sniffing at your tastes as well beneath his educated palate.

That's a shame, because *Coffee* is not a terrible book, just a jumbled and blandly written one. The dire circumstances faced by Vietnamese coffee farmers are troubling, indeed, and he sheds some much-needed light on the consequences of Starbucks' coffee-house hegemony. But given how potentially scintillating and explosive *Coffee* could have been, it's disappointing to discover that it requires several strong pots of the black stuff to get you all the way through.

Brendan I. Koerner is a contributing editor at *Wired* and a fellow at the New America Foundation.

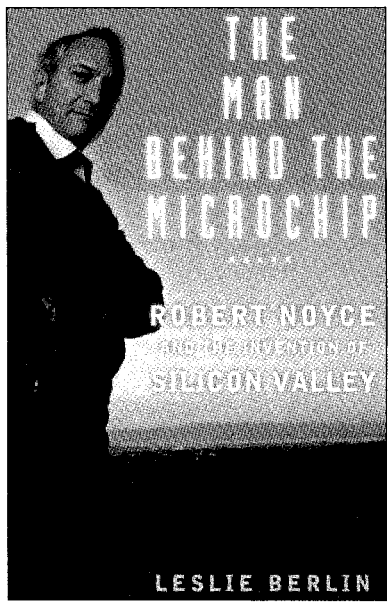
Gates, Schmates

Robert Noyce invented the integrated circuit. Then he invented the culture of Silicon Valley.

By Robert Burnett

When *Time* magazine published its list of the 100 most important people of the 20th century, it predictably inspired parlor games of second-guessing. To my engineer's mind, the "Scientists and Thinkers" category might have included the inventor of the integrated circuit, which created the largest American industry of today and paved the way to the computer revolution. Perhaps there should have been a place within the section "Builders and Titans" for the man who founded both Intel and Fairchild Semiconductor, two of the most influential businesses of the information age. And among the "Leaders and Revolutionaries," they could have included the man most responsible for the creation of Silicon Valley's world-changing community of entrepreneurs and scientists. These omissions would be debatable, rather than inexcusable, were it not for the fact that they were all the same man: Robert Noyce.

Time is not alone in its oversight. Today, Noyce is not considered in the pantheon of household-name technologists such as Gates, Moore, or Jobs. That may be due to the fact that he died in 1990, on the very



The Man Behind the Microchip: Robert Noyce and the Invention of Silicon Valley
By Leslie Berlin
Oxford University Press, $30.00

edge of the decade in which engineers became famous due to their power to make others rich. But in many ways, Noyce and his contributions to the technological, business, and cultural development of Silicon Valley did more to pave the way to this transformation than any other. Noyce, however, has finally received his due credit thanks to a comprehensive and admiring biog-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED