

**What's For English**  
**Extend Your Listening**  
**Gerald Wright**

**A Short History of Coffee**

Guiding Questions

- Is Coffee a plant or a tree?
- Did coffee originate in Africa or South America?
- What conditions are needed to grow the best coffee?
  
- What is older: tea drinking or coffee drinking?
- Where did coffee drinking begin - in the Arab world or in Europe?
- Why was coffee popular in the Arab world?
- What did Europeans drink all day long before they discovered coffee?
- Where did the Europeans eventually grow coffee?
  
- Is there a connection between coffee and "The Age of Enlightenment?"
- Why is the coffeehouse the "18th century internet?"

You all know that coffee comes from coffee beans. Coffee beans come from the coffee plant. But the coffee plant actually looks more like a tree. Coffee plants originally grew wild in northeastern Africa, where Somalia and Ethiopia are today. Today coffee is grown in many countries. You can find coffee in Latin America - in Columbia and Brazil. You can find coffee in Southeast Asia, in Indonesia and Vietnam and Thailand in Southeast Asia. It's grown in many African countries, such as Kenya and Tanzania. The best quality coffee grows in the tropical regions. But the coffee plant seems to do best when it is grown high in the mountains. In the mountains in tropical regions is the best. Coffee does not do well in the northern hemisphere - in North America or Europe.

A legend is often told about the discovery of coffee. It is said that a goatherd in Ethiopia noticed how active his goats became after eating the fruit of a coffee plant. But legends may or may not be true. To me it is interesting that coffee drinking is not as ancient a practice as tea drinking was. Tea drinking must go back 2000 years or more. It seems that preparing coffee into a hot drink started in Yemen around 1,000 AD. But it only became widespread in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (the fourteen hundreds). This is only about 150 – 200 years before coffee came to Europe.

Coffee drinking spread quickly throughout the Arab world. It was not alcoholic, but it was a social drink that people enjoyed in coffeehouses where they could also talk, gossip and share news. Sometimes coffee was used in religious ceremonies. But sometimes coffee was also considered dangerous. Some leaders felt that people spent too much time in coffee houses, neglecting their work and possibly engaging in dangerous politics. When coffee did reach Europe in the early sixteen hundreds (17<sup>th</sup> century) it also spread quickly as an alternative to alcohol. Apparently before coffee came to Europe, Europeans spent their entire days mildly drunk. This is because water

back then was not safe to drink. Since beer is made from boiled water, it could be drunk safely. As a result men, women and children started drinking beer from the early morning. As soon as coffee arrived in Europe, people noticed how clearly they could think and how much more work they were able to get done.

When coffee became popular in Europe, the Europeans wanted to learn how to cultivate coffee. They realized that the Arabs had a monopoly on the sale and trade of coffee. And the Arabs treated the beans so that they would not grow if planted. But the Europeans soon did learn the secret to growing coffee. And they realized that coffee could be grown in their colonies overseas. So the Dutch planted coffee in Indonesia, and the French planted coffee in their colonies in the West Indies.

Europe made huge gains in science, technology, economics and philosophy in the period from 1650 to 1800. This period is known as the Age of Enlightenment, the time when rational and scientific thinking began to dominate in the universities and among the educated people. Could there be a connection between coffee drinking and the rise of democracy and the American Revolution? It is not a coincidence if you consider that the coffee house was the place where people gathered to read newspapers and pamphlets and discuss topics related to politics, science, and art. I've heard one person say that the coffeehouse was like the internet today. It was the way that information spread in society. Speaking about art, before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the novel was not yet a common form of fiction writing. But the first real English novels were written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and look at how long they are! They must have been written by coffee drinkers!