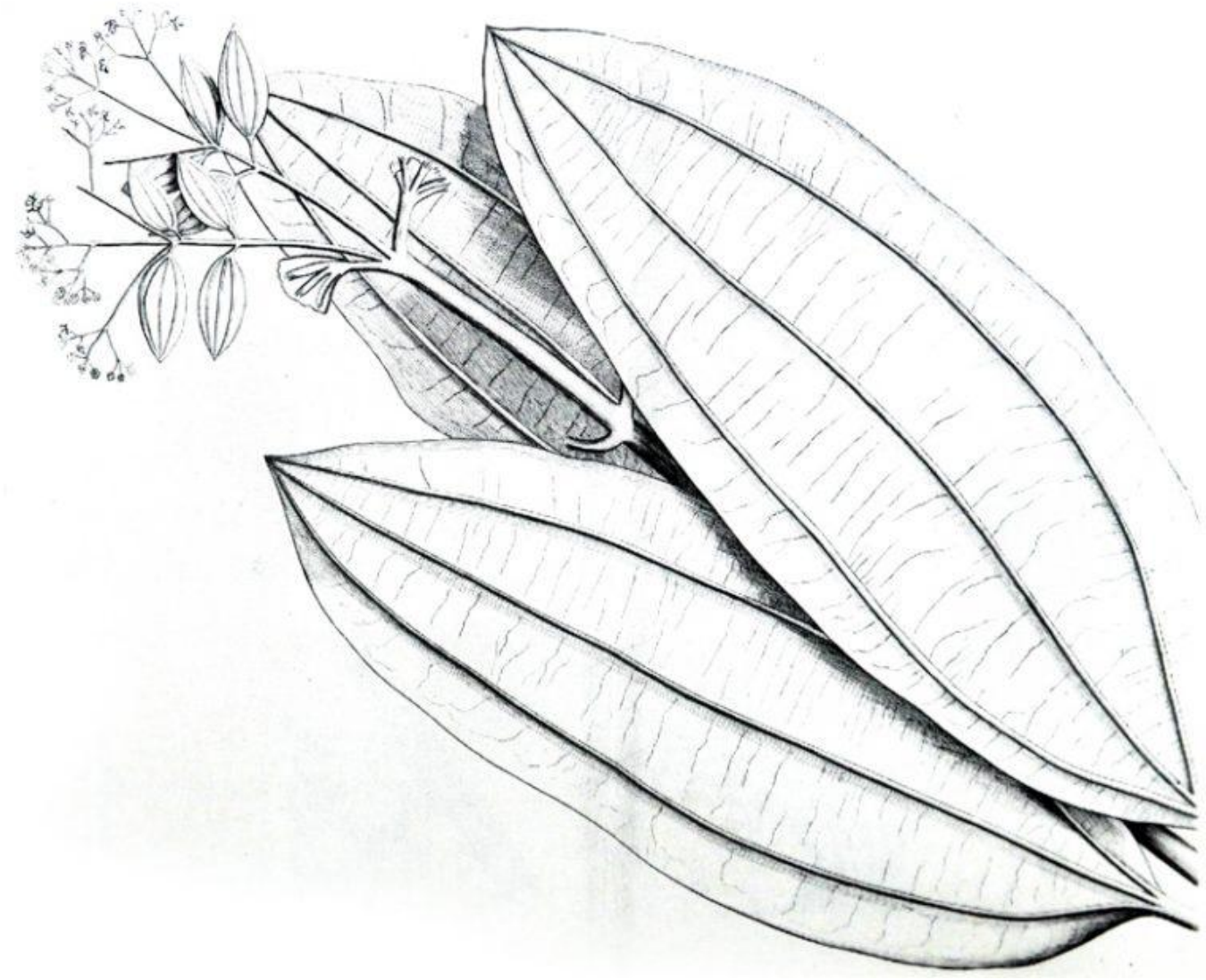
Ceylon Cinnamon: A Concise History

Posted on



Wild cinnamon, Hortus Malabaricus, 1682

Words Richard Boyle

From time immemorial, cinnamon, the peeled inner bark of a tree, was one of the most coveted of spices. Arab traders in particular sailed to the Island in search of this spice, which grew wild in the Kandy jungles and kept its location secret. It is an endemic species – later given the apt botanical name Cinnamomum Zeylanicum –

and considered the world’s finest. In the first century AD, a mere 350 grams of this cinnamon cost five kilos of silver.

Today it is given the same geographic identity by the trade, ‘Ceylon Cinnamon’ – its fine quality reflected in its grade – ‘True Cinnamon’. The bark is paper thin, brittle, yellowish brown in colour, and highly fragrant; far superior to common cinnamon varieties.

The Portuguese

The search for valuable cinnamon motivated the Portuguese to discover the route round the Cape of Good Hope to Ceylon in 1505. Their selection of Colombo as a trading post in preference to Trincomalee with its vast natural harbour was due to it being the centre of the cinnamon trade. The Portuguese began the first commercial cultivation of cinnamon by reorganising production and they became the first Europeans to trade in True Cinnamon.

The Dutch

Cinnamon peeling, Romeyn de Hooghe, 1682

True Cinnamon was precious enough for Portugal and Holland to fight to control its trade and in 1656 the Dutch seized the Island, by then the world’s largest cinnamon supplier. Such importance was reflected in the local coat-of-arms of the quasi-governmental Dutch East India Company: bales of cinnamon beside the forelegs of an elephant with a cinnamon branch in its trunk. During early Dutch times it was the wild cinnamon of independent Kandy that they focused on. But when the supply became undependable, cinnamon gardens were planted around Negombo, Colombo – the residential area of Cinnamon Gardens marks the site – Moratuwa, Beruwela, Galle and Matara.

Dutch VOC coat-of-arms with elephant and
cinnamon

The British



Cinnamon peelers (WLH Skeen & Co)

After the British gained control of the Island from the Dutch in 1796, they continued the state monopoly of the cinnamon trade, which had been introduced by their predecessors. Cinnamon was then the only major export crop, which fetched £8 per pound in weight, in London. But Ceylon’s world monopoly of the cinnamon trade ended due to competition and the muddled policies of the British government. Instead, coffee, and later tea, eclipsed cinnamon, yet today Sri Lanka still provides a substantial share of the global market.