

The Lipton Saga in Sri Lanka

Posted on

Theja Weeratne

The name “LIPTON” is synonymous with Good Tea. “Lipton’s Tea Garden” – as Ceylon was known in the 19th Century became a household word to the British who were inveterate tea drinkers. The tea habit later spread to the rest of the world.

Soon after the failure of the coffee crop on the island and when the value of real estate was at a low ebb, a group of London Bankers representing some Ceylon estates persuaded Thomas Upton to invest in tea plantations.

Quick to seize an opportunity, Upton visited, -“that lovely and delectable Island of spicy breezes” -as he described Ceylon. His visit culminated in the Purchase of some of the finest tea estates in the Haputale range -“Dambatenne, Laymostotte and Monerakande” – consisting of two or three thousand acres. Later he purchased, “Pooprassie” or Pussellawa and Keenapitiya rubber estate. The newly acquired tea estates provided tea to the shops he owned in London, thus eliminating the Brokers and Middlemen at Mincing Lane. The London newspapers at that time described the revolution in the tea industry as “a unique method of trading between the planter and the public.” The masses must inevitably stand to profit”.

The slogan “Direct from the Tea Garden to the Teapot” – was made the utmost of in Lipton’s advertising campaigns. And advertise he did – with a vengeance: on trains, buses and using every gimmick he could dream of. Once he had “Sandwich Men” dressed as Sinhalese carrying tea slogans parading the streets. As a result of his new venture – Tea – the self-made millionaire became a multi-millionaire. By 1893 more than eighty million pounds of tea was being exported from Ceylon, and by 1898 one hundred and twenty million pounds. After his visit to America in 1892 Upton decided to invest heavily in the project and persuaded Ceylon to take a stall in the Chicago Exposition of 1893. This was the first step towards making tea popular in America. In 1895 he was granted a royal warrant to supply Queen Victoria with tea and was later to receive a knighthood. Soon his fame and popularity spread to all corners of the world. In America it inspired Chauncey Olcott to write the hit number.

“Come over, come over, come on over here
It’s a wonderful place, it’s a wonderful place,
Sir Thomas Lipton from over the sea Is making a fortune in Cocoa and Tea”.

1919 saw Sir Thomas’s new offices opening in New York In contrast to the modest premises, his earlier offices had occupied, he took over a large twelve storey building from where the “Upton Tea” sign was seen by every boat that steamed up the Hudson. The Irish born Thomas Upton of humble parentage, who started as an errand boy to a stationer’s, achieved every businessman’s dream to be a millionaire, by his sheer hard work, intelligence and sharp business acumen. His tea gardens in Ceylon, the fruit farms in Kent, and the stockyards in Omaha stand evidence to his success and popularity worldwide. In memory of this inimitable, legendary figure, there stands a wide stone seat a thousand feet or so above “Dambatenne” at the very edge of a spur of land, known to this day as “Lipton’s Seat” and where he was wont to survey the panorama of his beloved tea estates and surrounding valley. From humble beginnings of a Upton Provision Shop down Stobcross Street, Glasgow in 1871, Upton came a very long way. Besides a strong presence internationally with a reputation for supreme quality teas, Lipton has diversified into other areas as well in the food and drink business. One of the outstandingly successful brands has been Upton “Cup-A-Soup” now marketed in several countries and extending to others. Lipton also markets Jams, Sauces, Cordials, Peanut Butter, Food Accompaniments etc. The name “Lipton” has always been synonymous with quality. It ensures value for money with complete consumer satisfaction.