

CIGAR AFFAIRS

Up in Smoke Down Under: A Very Short History of Tobacco in Australia

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Ok... so Australia isn't known for its huge contribution to the tobacco and cigar industries, but our big, er lets say small, maybe tiny...or insignificant contribution of .02% of global tobacco production doesn't mean we should all be forgotten about down here. We've still got a story to tell....really! How the leaf was first introduced, cultivated and enjoyed in Australia makes for an interesting yarn none the less, covering the expanses of an empire, barraging oceans and over 40,000 years of pre-history.

The ancient, extreme land where Aboriginal dreamers used the canvas of the world around them to lay their stories down for thousands of years was too easily disrupted with the arrival of fair Britannia's dregs: bandits, pick pockets, ladies of ill-repute and their masters, transforming the idyllic surrounds of the locals forever. Along with Europe's many virtues and other vices, tobacco was also stowed away amongst the first of the hulk residents to be transported to a land deemed far enough away so that the great tyranny of distance would prove enough of a deterrent for anyone to return.



Long before the heavy white clouds on British masts made their appearance in Sydney Harbour, Aboriginal groups already had their own way of getting nicotine. Aborigines could have possibly been the first in the world to become familiar with the stimulant and its heady effects, by appreciating the leaves from a number of native Australian plants. One of these, known as 'Pituri' or *Nicotiana Benthiana*, played a major role in traditional Aboriginal society, leading Australian J.R. Chisholm to remark "What opium is to the Chinaman, what whiskey is to the Scotchman, so is pituri to the western blackfellow. It is his very soul - without it he has no life almost."

This native, wild form of tobacco was an important trading tool used between clans as the leaves, flowers and flowering stalks were highly valued. Leaves were dried, powdered and mixed with a particular ash which made the nicotine more easily absorbed. Unlike the native populations of the Americas, this potent mixture was not smoked but rolled into balls and chewed. This type of tobacco was only available at certain times of the year, making the English introduced tobacco popular among Aboriginal groups who had lost the mystic ways of their elders.



Convict ships hauling their human cargoes often picked up tobacco along with other supplies whilst stopping in Rio de Janeiro, breaking up the long journey on their way to the new penal colony. Upon arriving, soldiers, free settlers and convicts soon demanded tobacco for their pipes. At one stage it was deemed necessary in order to preserve order in the fledgling settlement. It was as if the very morale of the new colony depended on everyone's ability to light up and alleviate the hot, dry and dreary desolation of their new outpost.

Tobacco was first sown shortly after the first fleet arrived in Sydney, but these early attempts were largely unsuccessful. The poor soil and the poor agricultural knowledge of the petty criminals, led to the failure of the tobacco crop and also the near starvation of the settlers. Governor Macquarie established a government farm and experimented successfully with the crop at Emu Plains, on the western fringe of the Sydney basin in 1818. By the 1820s it was being cultivated by farmers in the Hunter Valley, where today the same rich soil is home to one of Australia's premier wine growing regions.

Although the majestic leaves of tobacco no longer grow in my home state, I am glad that at least a token amount is grown down here in Oz, (alas not rolled into cigars.) God-forbid if I were to ever smoke anything else besides cigars to appease my longing for tobacco I'm pretty sure I won't be rolling up the dried remains of a native plant and chewing on it with ash in my mouth. How's that for an after taste?