

**AN ESSAY ON THE OPIUM  
TRADE: INCLUDING A  
SKETCH OF ITS HISTORY,  
EXTENT, EFFECTS, ETC**

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An Essay on the Opium Trade: Including a Sketch of Its History, Extent, Effects, Etc by Nathan Allen

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**NATHAN ALLEN**

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AN  
ESSAY  
ON  
THE OPIUM TRADE.  
INCLUDING A  
SKETCH OF ITS HISTORY, EXTENT, EFFECTS, ETC.,  
AS CARRIED ON IN  
INDIA AND CHINA.

BY  
NATHAN ALLEN, M. D.

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## THE OPIUM TRADE.\*

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SCARCELY anything was known respecting China till the present century, and most of the knowledge which we now possess has been obtained within the last fifteen years. As foreign intercourse continues to grow more frequent and unrestricted with this Empire, the world will undoubtedly become better and better acquainted with its history and the character of its inhabitants. The recent settlements and great increase of trade on our Pacific shores will open a more direct communication with China, and render whatever concerns that people far more interesting and important to our own country. The antiquity of that nation, tracing its history by a direct and connected series of events back almost to the creation of the world, its vast extent of territory and resources, its literature and its arts, its government and its immense population, estimated at 350,000,000, constitute objects of exceedingly great interest. But passing by all these topics, we propose to examine a subject which vitally affects the interests of this great nation, viz., *the opium trade*. The amount of capital invested in this traffic, its present and prospective effects on human happiness, involving the welfare of nearly one half of the race as well as the relations existing between the two greatest empires in the world, render the subject vastly important to the statesman, the philanthropist, and the Christian. China expends for the single article of opium, annually, more money than the

\*When this Essay was commenced, it was intended for the pages of some Review or Magazine, but, after its completion, it was found too long to appear entire in any periodical, and the writer has been induced by the advice of friends, to present it to the public in pamphlet form.

whole amount of the revenue of the United States, from all sources whatever, and a larger sum than any one nation on the globe pays to another for a single raw material, with the exception of what Great Britain pays to this country for cotton. The traffic is yet comparatively new,—has grown with unparalleled rapidity, and is almost unknown except to those personally concerned in it.

Opium is a production of the plant, *Papaver Somniferum*, and commonly called, in English, Poppy. The peculiar properties of this vegetable were discovered at a very early age. Though it is not specifically mentioned by name in the Old Testament, yet there are good grounds to believe that the product or juice of the Poppy constituted an important element of what is called in Scripture, "*mixed wine*." The art of distillation not being then known, it was customary to mix certain drugs, and aromatic gums, with their wines, in order to improve their flavor, and give them more stimulating qualities. Homer and other Greek writers, who lived in the same century as David and Solomon, make frequent mention of the peculiar intoxicating properties of the Poppy. It was also well known among the Romans. Virgil, Livy, Pliny, Ovid, and other authors, describe it as being used for various purposes.

The Poppy was originally a native of Persia, but it may now be found growing as an ornamental plant in gardens throughout the civilized world. It is cultivated somewhat extensively in Turkey, and most of the opium used for medical purposes in Europe and America, is produced in that country. But India affords a far more extensive field for its cultivation. It is estimated that more than 100,000 acres of the rich plains of central India, as well as the alluvial valley of the Ganges, are now occupied for this purpose. Formerly these same grounds were used for the production of sugar, indigo, corn, and other grain, but these useful crops have yielded to the more profitable culture of the Poppy. It appears that a mild climate, rich soil, plentiful irrigation, and diligent husbandry are absolutely necessary for its successful cultivation. The crop is also very much dependent on the season, being easily injured by storms and winds, as well as seriously affected by the amount of moisture distilled in the form of dew.



The Rev. James Peggs, an English Missionary, having resided many years at Cuttack, province of Orissa, India, gives the following account of the cultivation of the Poppy, and the manufacture of its juice for market: — "In India, many thousands of men, women and children, are employed in poppy cultivation, which is throughout, a simple process. The ground in the first place requires to be finely ploughed, and completely cleared of all weeds. The fields are then fenced in, and divided off into many squares, by means of small dikes, and thus the requisite amount of water is conveyed to every part of the plantation. The plant requires to be well weeded and irrigated even until it comes to maturity, as the cultivation is entirely carried on during the dry season. The seed is sown in November; and during a period of about six weeks in February and March the juice is collected.

"The falling of the flowers from the plant is the signal for making incisions, which is done by the cultivators in the cool of the evening, with hooked knives, made for the purpose, in a circular manner around the capsules. From these incisions a white milky juice exudes, which is concreted into a dark brown mass by the heat of the next day's sun; and this being scraped off every evening as the plant continues to exude, it constitutes Opium in its crude state.

"The great object of those in India who prepare Opium for the China market, is, so to inspissate the crude juice as to leave a very hot-drawn, watery extract which will, being dried, possess the greatest amount of purity and strength of flavor when smoked through a pipe. The Chinese, themselves, estimate its value in direct proportion to the amount of these qualities. The process of inspissation is carried on in the cool shade, and care is observed in securing a proper jelly-like consistency, without grit or sourness, both of which are readily detected by the Chinese. When ready for market it has a smell peculiar to itself, heavy and not unpleasant, and possesses an adhesiveness which keeps it from dropping from the hand for some seconds, though the hand be in an inverted position. The Chinese carry it through another process of boiling before they use it. In smoking, they always lie down, and the ordinary kind of tobacco pipe is never used for Opium.

“The Bengal Opium is made into balls about the size of the two fists, and covered over with a hard skin, made of the petals of the poppy, each ball having a separate apartment in the chest when sent off to market. The chest is made of mango-wood, and consists of two stories, each story containing twenty balls. In other regions of India, it is made into cakes about the size of a single fist, and packed up in dried poppy leaves, having no separate apartments in the chest. For the sake of securing their contents, the chests are always covered over with hides, or coarse cloth. India produces about *forty thousand chests* of Opium annually — the chests varying in weight from 125 to 140 pounds: the prices in China during the last three or four years fluctuating from 500 to 900 dollars per chest.”

Malwa, Benares and Behar (or Patna) are the principal localities in Bengal for its cultivation, and every chest of the drug exported from India bears one of their names, according to the part of the country where it was produced. The cultivation of the Poppy, as well as the manufacture, and the traffic in Opium, in the two last named provinces being both subject to the East India Company, is a strict monopoly of the government. For superintending and managing the business, there is an extensive and complicated system of government agency. Large sums of money are advanced to the Ryots, or native cultivators, to meet in part the expense of cultivating the Poppy, and when the crop is come to maturity and the juice is collected, it must all be delivered to government agents at a fixed price. As all engaged in its cultivation and manufacture, are paid for their services, the Opium when prepared becomes the property of government.

In Benares and Behar, the cultivation of this drug is not altogether a matter of choice, or interest, on the part of the native inhabitants, but such a combination of circumstances and influences are brought to bear upon them, as to amount almost to compulsion. In the Chinese Repository for Feb. 1837, may be found an able article on this subject, with references to various works as authorities; from this article, we make the following quotation: — “The lands under cultivation are measured every year, and their boundaries fixed, in order to prevent collision among those to whom they are assigned. The government an-

nually enters into an engagement with the cultivators, through an intermediate agency, constituted in the following manner: there is 1st, a collector, who is an European; 2d, there are gomastahs, a superior class of men (native) both in education and caste; 3d, sudder mattús, a respectable class of landholders; 4th, village mattús, the principal villagers, a little superior to the ryots; 5th, the ryots, the chief laborers in the cultivation of the poppies. The 'engagement' entered into with government is this: when the poppy is ripe and immediately before extracting the juice, the gomastah and his establishment make a circuit of the country, and form, 'by guess,' a probable estimate of the produce of each field. He then makes the ryot enter into an engagement with him to deliver the quantity there estimated, and as much more as the field will yield, at the price previously fixed; if he fails to deliver the estimated quantity, and the collector has reason to suppose he has embezzled the deficiency, he is empowered by law to prosecute the ryot in the civil court, for damages. And should an individual undertake the cultivation, without having entered into engagements with the government to deliver the produce at the fixed rate, his property would be immediately attached, and the ryot compelled either to destroy his poppies, or give security for the faithful delivery of the product." Thus we see a most oppressive system of espionage at the same time established over the natives to prevent the cultivation of the poppy for private uses or sale.

It is true the engagement is made only for one year, when the ryot may abandon its cultivation; but then in case he does, he must remove at considerable sacrifice from the grounds, and perhaps from the village, with no reasonable prospect of improving his situation. Besides, these cultivators and such natives as are landholders, are, from policy, kept constantly in debt to the government agents, and thus become so dependent upon them as absolutely to be obliged to do their bidding. It is found that each chest of Opium, obtained in this way, costs the government about 300 Rupees.\* A small portion of it is sold in the interior provinces of India, for native use, but the greater part is trans-

\* The value of a Rupee, in our currency, is 45 1-2 cents.