

## Kurlansky reviews tantalize with historical, cultural tidbits

Print.Google.Com has a couple **excerpts** from the book ( [Intro](#) [Chinese history](#) ).

Below are excerpts from **online reviews** of Mark Kurlansky's book, *Salt: A World History* offer a number of historical facts used by the reviewers to illustrate their articles. Enjoy.

### **Robert MacFarlane in the Guardian Unlimited Observer**

Kurlansky is especially good on the metaphysics of salt, its metaphoric connotations and its religious significances. He draws our attention to the unrecognised ways in which salt has crystallised into our language. Salad is so named because the Romans liked to salt their vegetables. Salacious is from the Latin salax, meaning a man in love: literally, 'in the salted state'. The Roman army paid its soldiers in salt: thus the word salary and, indeed, soldier. And thus 'to be worth your salt', to earn your pay.

### **Alan Prince in Bookpage.com**

Kurlansky tracks the impact of salt on the political, military, economic and social lives of societies throughout history. He details, for instance, Mahatma Gandhi's leading thousands of Indians on an exhausting 240-mile march to the sea to make their own salt in protest of a tax on the substance. Gandhi was jailed, but the march was a tool that led to his ending British rule over India without striking a single blow. Another of Kurlansky's heroes is Anthony Lucas, who ignored the advice of geologists and drilled a Texas salt dome called Spindletop. He struck oil in 1901 and thus gave birth to the modern petroleum industry.

### **Zsuzi Gartner in Globebooks.com**

Mark Kurlansky's almost 500-page opus on earth's only edible rock is the stuff of which epics are born. Basque and Viking ships ply the seas seeking and trading salt; the Chinese come up with myriad innovations involving the quest for salt (including drilling and gunpowder); the Hebrews seal covenants with salt; the first great Roman road, the Via Salaria (Salt Road) is built to transport salt, and the words "soldier" and "salary" originate with the Latin word for salt; the history of the Americas is constant warfare over salt, which plays a role in the War of Independence as well as the U.S. Civil War; Gandhi's almost mythic "salt satyagraha"(march to the sea) begins the process of India's independence; the drilling for salt leads to the petroleum age when an enormous oil reserve is discovered at a Texas salt dome. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is salt's role in economics, particularly as one of the first necessities of life ever taxed. The most reviled salt tax of all was France's hated gabelle. Begun piecemeal in the 13th century, by 1660 it was a leading source of state revenues and spawned still-legendary salt smugglers and a series of revolts.

### **G. David Wallace in Business Week Online**

Undaunted, I returned to the role of salt in the American Civil War. The stuff has been absolutely essential throughout world history for such things as medical care, food preservation, and human and animal health, so the Civil War was not the first time that disrupting an opponent's access to salt became a priority. Kurlansky relates how the center of the Union salt industry was Syracuse, N.Y., where harvests from surrounding brine wells were transported via the Erie Canal to the Midwest and Northeast. In fact, it was taxes on salt that helped finance the canal in the first place. The Union salt supply remained secure throughout the war, but one of the first targets of Northern troops was salt production along the Kanawha River in what was then Virginia. The Ohio and Mississippi rivers initially made the salt from those wells available throughout much of the South, but Union troops captured and destroyed the Kanawha installation in November, 1862. With the elimination of this and other Confederate salt factories, the rebels found it impossible to keep their troops, horses, and hospitals supplied. By the final year of the war, notes Kurlansky, the Confederate States Almanac was advising: "To keep meat from spoiling in the summer, eat it early in the

spring." The book offers a few other insights into history. Kurlansky tells how the Venetians of Marco Polo's era parlayed a tax on salt into a monopoly that financed their navy and helped the city-state dominate world trade. And he shows how more than a century of unjust taxation and suppression of the Indian salt industry for the benefit of England's salt producers handed Mohandas Gandhi an opportunity to attract widespread support for his independence movement by defying the British salt laws.

### **Merle Rubin in the *Los Angeles Times***

What is known is that as hunters, humans got all the sodium they needed by eating meat, but with the switch to agriculture came the need to add salt to a grain and vegetable diet. (This dietary deficiency explains why deer and other herbivores gravitate to salt licks). To ancient agrarian civilizations such as those in China and Egypt, salt was as vital as water. Not surprisingly, salt came to acquire a totemic significance. Perhaps because of its association with the teeming oceans, salt has been associated with fertility. The Romans called a man in love *salax*, in a salted state, the origin of the word *salacious*. In Germany, brides' shoes were sprinkled with salt, and in Egypt celibate priests abstained from salt because it was thought to excite sexual desire. Just as often (clearly because of its ability to preserve), salt has been seen as embodying permanence, longevity and loyalty. Because it inhibits the growth of bacteria, salt is a popular food preservative, and the ancient Egyptians used it to mummify bodies. Elsewhere in Africa and in Japan, salt was thought to ward off evil spirits; in Haiti it was thought to bring zombies back to life. In language, proverbs using salt suggest reliability and permanence. The Bible describes God's covenant with Israel as "a covenant of salt forever ...." and in Islam and Judaism, Kurlansky tells us, "salt seals a bargain because it is immutable." In the secular realm, a solid, unpretentious, trustworthy person is "the salt of the Earth." A sensible individual knows to how to take exaggerated claims "with a grain of salt." A good employee is "worth his [or her] salt." Indeed, Roman soldiers were paid in salt, the origin of the word "salary." And we shouldn't forget the salt that went into "salami" and "salad." "Today," Kurlansky philosophizes, "thousands of years of coveting, fighting over, hoarding, taxing, and searching for salt appear picturesque and slightly foolish. The seventeenth-century British leaders who spoke with urgency about the dangerous national dependence on French sea salt seem somehow more comic than contemporary leaders concerned with a dependence on foreign oil. In every age, people are certain that only the things they have deemed valuable have true value." And what value salt once had. Throughout much of history, salt influenced the conduct of wars, the fiscal policies of governments and even the inception of revolutions. Salt was taxed, from as far back as the 20th century BC in China. The Roman Republic and Empire controlled the price of salt, increasing it to raise money for wars, lowering it to be sure that the poorest citizens could easily afford this important part of the diet. An unjust and exploitative system of salt taxes in France, known as the *gabelle*, may well have played a big part in engendering the French Revolution. The *gabelle*, in addition to making a common, necessary product unduly expensive (a burden that naturally fell more heavily upon the poor than the upon the rich), required everyone older than 8 living in a certain region to purchase far more salt each year than he or she needed. Similarly, the British in India imposed a harsh and onerous salt policy, enacting laws that forbade Indians not only from manufacturing but even gathering their own salt. This led to Gandhi's famous 1930 march to a seaside salt pan to scoop up salt in defiance of the British. Kurlansky explains that the chief reason behind this seemingly senseless policy was Britain's desire to protect its salt industry by forcing Indians to purchase salt imported from Cheshire—where, ironically, extensive salt mining had actually eroded the ground to such an extent that buildings and houses were leaning and sometimes collapsing into the streets. Meanwhile, back in the supermarket, the ubiquitous blue canisters of Morton's Salt may not be trendy, but the story of how Joy Morton revolutionized the salt industry, first in 1911 by adding magnesium carbonate to make salt flow more freely, then in 1924 by adding the nutrient iodine, is an American success story worth telling, and Kurlansky saves it for his conclusion. Today Morton is the largest salt company in the world.

### **Worldlink**

Egyptians, Greeks, Hebrews, Chinese, Phoenicians, Africans, Celts, Romans, Aztecs, Venetians, Genoese, Basques, Vikings, Flemish, Hanseatics, Spanish, Cossacks, British and Americans are among those whose histories have been dramatically influenced by the search for salt. Austrians have also been affected; Salzburg gained its name from the ancient alpine salt mines located nearby. They were first dug by Celtic

miners more than two millennia ago and are now famous for the giant underground slides, some more than 350 feet (107 meters) long, used by later miners to descend into the bowels of the earth. Those brave enough can still slide deep underground.

### **David Williams in *The Seattle Times***

On March 12, 1930, a 61-year-old man began a 240-mile long, 25-day march to obtain a pinch of salt from the coast of the Arabian Sea. When he arrived, he walked into the sea and splashed water on himself in a rite of purification. He then turned around, waded back on shore, and picked up a chunk of coarse salt. With this small act, Gandhi, who had begun the walk with 78 followers and now led thousands, broke the law and helped jump start the Indian fight for independence from the British.

### **Stephen Gray in *Stanfords Newsletter***

All the major empires and great cities of the past, it seems, cultivated, mined, traded and domesticated salt. It was sought after and fought over tenaciously and for considerable periods was revered as being more precious even than gold. In the narrative, we are told of the importance of salt to both the Roman and Ottoman Empires, how the once mighty ports of Venice and Genoa endeavoured feverishly to control its trade and how the Basques and Scandinavians travelled great distances across great tracks of open ocean just to get their hands on it. The British even travelled to the eastern seaboard of North America with recovery and production salt firmly on the colonial agenda. For those who maintained control of production and trade the reward was great wealth. Significant portions of text are given over to an explanation of the history of taxation on the salt trade in order to protect one particular interest or another. In both Europe and Asia and across great time periods, the importance of salt tax seems indisputable and the revenue gleamed undoubtedly cemented and secured the status of mighty empires. Kurlansky also notes how salt played an integral and key role in several high profile conflicts. During the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln ordered southern ports, where foreign salt was imported in millions of tons annually, to be fiercely guarded by northern ships in order to starve the enemy of salt.

### **Edward Rothstein in *The New York Times***

Part of salt's appeal is evident. "There is no better food than salted vegetables," an Egyptian papyrus said; other cultures added herring, soybeans, beef, cheese, anchovies, salami and potato chips. The salting of greens, preferred by the Romans, led to the Latin "sal" (salt) as an integral part of "salad." Salt's importance was practical as well. Salt was used to clean chimneys, solder pipes, glaze pottery and alleviate toothaches. And since it was difficult to obtain — distilled from evaporated sea water or mined from mountains — its scarcity may have helped its status. Mr. Kurlansky describes jewel-encrusted ships on tables in medieval French courts that served as saltcellars. By the Middle Ages caravans consisting of as many as 40,000 camels traversed 400 miles of the Sahara bearing salt, sometimes trading it for slaves. The Continental Congress encouraged "the making of salt" and in 1777 New Jersey granted military exemptions to salt workers. Salt was also so necessary for daily life that nations could rely on salt taxes for revenues. "Salt has the singularly important power to maintain the basic economy of our state," asserts a seventh-century B.C. Chinese text. In China, as in almost every Western nation, there were heated debates over salt tariffs, price controls, trade restrictions. In 1875 a German botanist even argued that there was a correlation between salt taxes and despotism. One example Mr. Kurlansky proposes was the gabelle in France, a salt tax that by the mid-17th century was a leading source of state income; violations of this tax law led to thousands of deaths and imprisonments. The tax wasn't abolished until 1946. Another form of draconian salt law imposed on India by the imperial British inspired Gandhi's 240-mile march to the Arabian Sea, where he defied the authorities by collecting salt crusts from the beach. Salt protests spread quickly, propelling the movement that eventually led to the withdrawal of the British.

### **Regina Schrambling in *The New York Times***

Tabasco was what the McIlhenny family came up with when their salt-mining business dried up after the Civil War. Parmesan cheese needs weeks of immersion in a salt bath to acquire its characteristic texture and flavor. It was the salt tax in India that inspired Mohandas K. Gandhi to start the passive rebellion that helped lead to independence. Marco Polo, best known for the noodles he may or may not have discovered in China, also found a sophisticated salt industry there. And the war George Washington led for independence from England was partly incited by salt shortages.

### **Peter Lewis in the *San Francisco Chronicle***

The book is arranged roughly chronologically, starting with the Chinese, who were the first of record to appreciate the strategic and economic importance of salt, willing to go to war over its control, the revenue from which filled the royal coffers and financed its territorial expansion. The scene then shifts to the Mediterranean, where early salt works were designed by Phoenicians and Egyptians, and to the Celts in central Europe, "huge and terrifying men in bright fabrics," but great salt miners and likely the first to salt-cure ham, a distant cousin to prosciutto and Danish ham-in-a-can. The demand for salt went into overdrive thanks to the medieval Catholic Church. With its mortal prohibition of meat and all foods considered "hot" (sexually charged, that is) on religious, lean days -- which had expanded to include half the calendar -- the demand for fish was enormous.

### ***Las Vegas Mercury***

On the shelf above the range in my kitchen--and maybe in yours too--there's a container of sea salt from France. I'm no snob, but you need some of the white stuff around, and the label shows where the salt came from, which is somehow appealing. I've got a blue box of the kosher variety too, because it's frequently called for in a cookbook I like. Two kinds of salt--an extravagance of an ingredient that's supposed to raise blood pressure and stop hearts. Mark Kurlansky starts his entertaining and informative history of the ubiquitous substance by persuasively invoking the argument the Monsanto corporation uses as a policy defense: Without it, life itself would be impossible. "Salt is a chemical term for a substance created by the reaction of an acid with a base," the author tells us, triggering memories of the deadly boredom, measured in hours, that was the lab science survey course experience. But Kurlansky doesn't write a dull sentence very often, and when he's got to, he comes quickly to your rescue: "When sodium, an unstable metal that can burst suddenly into flame, reacts with a deadly poisonous gas known as chlorine, it becomes the staple food sodium chloride, NaCl, from the only family of rocks eaten by humans." That's science at its most entertaining--at its most literate, too. And it's true, which not only makes the book more readable but rewards you with a wealth of arcane trivia you can use to impress friends and family. Kurlansky, who wrote a similar treatise on cod, calls this book "A World History," but the subtitle more accurately discusses plurality. There's the history of salt in China, where it was mined and controlled by the government from pre-dynastic times to the 20th century. There's the history of salt in and around Europe, where it defined both production and trade from the glory of Rome through the rise of Venice to the collapse of the British Empire. There are plenty more manageable vignettes, like the interconnected annals of fish sauce, gunpowder, salads, Gandhi, cheeses, the Erie Canal and McIlhenny's "Tabasco" sauce--a blend of local salt, imported vinegar and peppers that are brought to seed on the family homestead in southern Louisiana but grown in Mexico, where the labor to pick them is still affordable. And it was used to stuff King Tut, too. What connects these disparate narratives is the value our cultures put on salt as a basic life necessity, as an evolutionary tool, as a commodity. Initially, salt was privileged for its utility as a preservative; this didn't change until the mid-19th century in Europe, with the invention of canning, and even later in Asia. The refrigerator had an incredible impact on food preservation, but consider the climates--and populations--where electricity, let alone grocery stores, are available only to a select social strata. Medieval Venice first realized that controlling the trading of salt was more economically beneficial than controlling its production; centuries later, companies and national coffers would both swell based on the fact that trading salted fish generated more income than dealing in either component alone. Sometimes, as you might suspect, Kurlansky makes some long figurative reaches. Students of America's past might agree that both our Revolution and Civil War rose from economic concerns; salt might have been an issue, but not one that comes readily to mind. And while China was still drawing brine from wells a decade ago, to forge a causal link between the collapse of the salt monopolies with the abdication of the last emperor in 1912 seems...perhaps a bit forced. But there's no doubt that salt always had

a cultural and economic importance that is easily overlooked by contemporary standards, and even when Kurlansky's arguments seem farfetched, there's some validity in making them. Salt is a fun book, and while you may learn a lot, you won't find the answers to those pesky health issues here. The Chinese were debating the pros and cons of salt use centuries before the birth of Christ, and scientists are still arguing about its impact on the human body. But hey, it's been around for longer than we've been keeping track, and we wouldn't have olive oil, French fries or mummies without it. Learn to cope.

#### **Raymond Sokolov in Natural History (March 2002)**

If you want to know a lot about the biochemistry of salt or its use in the kitchens of the world, this is not the book for you. Kurlansky is primarily a social historian. Or perhaps he should be called an economic mineralogist, since his focus is on the intersection of salt with civilization. His approach will be familiar to people who read his earlier work *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*, a study that must have led him logically to this one, since salt cod really did change the world. Here was a food with a remarkable shelf life that made it possible to feed Christendom despite the menu-challenging insistence by Rome that dozens and dozens of days be officially meager, which is to say meatless. Salt cod was not the only response to the need for fishy protein. Indeed, Catholics in this country have in some times and places chosen to deem that muskrat was fish. But cod, salted down, dehydrated and cured stiff as boards, was a meal for the pious--seemingly infinite in its availability and lightweight, therefore easily shipped. This is why conquistadores from the landlocked Spanish region of Extremadura spread salt cod to the New World, where it is a staple of Latino cookery today. The fish came from northern waters, but the salt--well, that is Kurlansky's subject this time: where it came from, how it was gathered, the economic and political ramifications of the salt trade, and the infamous salt taxes. And, gosh, he is thorough.

#### **Amanda Watson Schnetzer in Insight on the News (March 11, 2002)**

Discerning readers might shudder when, in the introduction, the author launches into a passage about the Jungian psychologist Ernest Jones and his theories on salt and sexuality -- or, more precisely, on "the human obsession with salt -- a fixation that [Jones] found irrational and subconsciously sexual." Titillating as this notion might be, it corrupts salt's straightforward symbolism for purity and preservation. And to be fair, Kurlansky shows proper deference for salt's religious interpretations. For Jews, salt represents God's covenant with Israel. As the Old Testament book of Leviticus explains, God told Moses that, "You shall season all your cereal offerings with salt; you shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be lacking." For Christians, the New Testament touts salt as a sign of wisdom, and in Roman Catholic rites it has symbolized cleansing and purification. Other groups and peoples have relied on salt to ward off evil. The Japanese, for example, throw salt onto the stage before a performance of traditional theater.

Salt has inspired public policy in America as well. After the American Revolution, an English block on trade with the enemy led to salt shortages in the United States. In response, when the U.S. government encouraged domestic production by offering a bounty of 33 cents for every bushel, the Atlantic Coast soon became dotted with private saltworks. Years later, the building of the Erie Canal would be financed with a tax on salt of 12.5 cents per bushel.

And blogs offer "non-traditional" reviews of the book. See the [Ex Libris Book Review](#), [The World According to Pooh](#), [Paper Frigate](#), and [johnfry](#), as examples. Kurlansky's book is also discussed in [About.com's](#) discussion of geology.