

Cannabis Nation: Control and Consumption in Britain, 1928-2008

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Psychoactive drug restrictions and prohibitions have typically followed a reactionary pattern. From tobacco to LSD, the introduction of novel drugs has prompted therapeutic experimentation. Officials showed little concern until these substances also became popular recreational intoxicants. It was one thing for early modern physicians to apply tobacco as a wound salve, quite another for courtiers and sailors to smoke it in taverns and bordellos. Reaction took the form of denunciations, bans, and punishments. Eventually, most bans gave way to taxed, regulated commerce, as also happened with tobacco. But then a new drug would come along and the process would begin again. Psychoactive drugs were the barnacles of modern history, continuously fouling the hulls of nation-states. Drug control was born of the impulse to scrape them off.

Cannabis Nation, James Mills's absorbing history of cannabis in Britain, reverses this familiar story. Britain established cannabis control *before* significant domestic consumption. At the Second Geneva Opium Conference, convened in 1924–5 to tighten restrictions on narcotics and cocaine, the Egyptian delegation insisted on bringing cannabis under international control. British representatives opposed the move – taxed cannabis sales were still an important revenue source in India – but, in the end, they reluctantly went along. As a signatory to the treaty, the government was obliged to control domestic consumption, which was how the Home Office Drugs Branch came to concern itself with nonmedical cannabis use.

The problem, such as it was, mostly involved Lascar seamen smoking cannabis while passing through British ports. As a public health concern, it registered between minuscule and non-existent. The same might be said of illicit drugs generally: Britain was little troubled by nonmedical narcotic or cocaine use during the 1920s and 1930s. The inter-war drug landscape, dominated by alcohol and tobacco, remained as reliably duochrome as men's evening dress.

The near-absence of cannabis traffickers and smokers did not prevent *ideas* about cannabis from taking root. Newspapers occasionally ran sensational stories. Medical journals regarded the drug as a therapeutic anachronism, unnecessary in an age of synthetic analgesics and hypnotics. The same journals featured the work of Russell Pasha (Sir Thomas Wentworth Russell, 1879–1954), head of Egypt's Central Narcotics Intelligence Bureau and an authority on drug trafficking. Russell's reports depicted cannabis preparations 'as nothing more than dangerous intoxicants traded by criminals who were willing to defy the authority of one

of the last policemen of the Empire' (p. 30).

Mills, who has an eye for inconsistency, shows that the left hand of Empire chose not to know what the right hand was doing. While Egypt escalated its drug war, British authorities in India continued to permit taxed cannabis sales, including exports to South Asian workers who had migrated to the West Indies and Burma. That the Government of India, rather than cannabis traffickers, should enjoy the revenue seemed the most prudent course.

The Raj's accommodation to a drug with deep roots in Indian culture had few implications for Britain itself during the first half of the century. In 1948, however, the British Nationality Act enabled colonial residents to migrate to the UK without a visa. During the next 15 years half a million immigrants took advantage of the opportunity. They included ganja and hashish smokers whose presence made the British cannabis market larger and less transient. As early as 1951 the head of the Drugs Branch, F. W. Thornton, warned that 'the "invasion" of unemployed coloured men' threatened Britain with a 'serious hashish smoking problem' (p. 76). Though Thornton's views were frankly nationalist and racist, it should be said that some anti-colonialist historians, such as Hans Derks, have framed the same phenomenon as a species of ironic justice. European imperialists foisted drugs on their overseas subjects, until 'the snake bit its own tail' when nonmedical drug use came to the home countries via immigration.⁽¹⁾

If that is what happened in post-war Britain, it took roughly a decade for the effects to be widely felt. Mills is careful with chronology. He shows that, aside from a few sensational cases, police files offer little evidence that cannabis smoking spread from immigrants to young white Britons until the late 1950s and early 1960s. Though drug control experts at the United Nations and the World Health Organization were urging a hard line on cannabis, British control remained relatively independent and relaxed. Even during the 1960s, when cannabis unmistakably emerged as a white countercultural drug, police surveys suggested that its use remained 'patchy' among British youth. 'Where it was consumed', Mills writes, 'new users were more likely to have tried the drug through association with migrant groups than with radical politics, and were as commonly workers or labourers as they were students or the offspring of the well-to-do' (p. 125).

In 1965 Parliament enacted a new Dangerous Drugs Act. The law included prohibitions against cultivating cannabis or allowing it to be consumed on one's premises – the provision that led to Keith Richards's celebrated 1967 drug bust. But the cannabis story had two sides, and the press also began reporting stories of Drugs Squad corruption and evidence-planting, mostly in London. Elsewhere police abuses were rare, as were cannabis arrests generally. Of the 72,000 persons prosecuted in Lancashire in 1967, the chief constable of Preston reported, just 80 faced drugs charges. 'Soft drug taking', he wrote, 'is an adolescent aberration which most of them will grow out of ...' (p. 139). Heavy press and television coverage encouraged imitation, worsening a situation that was, in his view, primarily a medical problem.

This sort of pragmatism informed the research of the LSD and Cannabis Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee on Drug Dependence. Its chair, Lady Wootton, was a reform-minded sociologist and criminologist who observed that many medical authorities thought cannabis no worse than alcohol. She urged that penalties for cannabis be reduced and that mere possession should be treated as other than a criminal offense.

The full committee's report, released in November 1968, echoed these views. Conservative and Labour politicians – not least James Callaghan, the Home Secretary – attacked the recommendations. Mills interprets their criticisms as pre-election posturing, a free swing at the counterculture piñata. Actual policy was less combative. The 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, the legislation that finally emerged, incorporated most of the Wootton Report's recommendations. Thus was born 'the British compromise' that prevailed for the next quarter century. Cannabis possession remained illegal, but with reduced penalties and greater circumspection by police, magistrates, and judges. In 1989 three out of four British cannabis offenders received only a caution. In London, it was closer to nine out of ten.

Mills tells the control story in rich, convincing detail. It is hard to think of another book on drug history that makes such a clear distinction between policy as framed in treaties and statutes and policy as administered in the street and courts. His archival research gives us a clear picture of when and why mid-century consumption patterns changed, though he is less explicit about why use kept spreading after the 1960s. And spread it did. By 1983 a third of Scots aged 19 or 20 years said they had tried cannabis, a rate that would have been unimaginable two decades before. British consumption continued to rise during the 1980s and most of the 1990s. It has since tapered off, but remains at a historically high level compared to the mid 20th century.

Mills's thoughts on cannabis' staying power are mostly social in character. He cites, for example, a 2008 Rowntree Foundation report that 'young people tended to use cannabis for the purpose of being sociable, and that it was a practice that was important in contexts of friendship and networking where acts of sharing were significant' (p. 213). Cannabis had thus become a youthful rite of passage, though not necessarily one of lasting consequence. But is there more to the story?

One possibility is that the British compromise itself encouraged use. Or, rather, that it failed to discourage use. Deterrence, criminologists argue, is a function of the swiftness, certainty, and severity of punishment. None of these prospects troubled casual British cannabis users. It was otherwise in the United States, where, in the 1980s, federal and state governments pursued policies diametrically opposed to the British compromise. Rather than de-emphasizing marijuana, they made it the centerpiece of what came to be called the drug war. The number of first-time cannabis users fell, from around 3 million in 1979 to 1.5 million in 1990. Propaganda and punishment seemed to work. Then the situation reversed after 1992, as the number of new marijuana users began rising again. Demography may have played a role: During the 1990s, 'echo-boom' children began entering their prime drug-experimenting years. They had little trouble finding pot, the drug war having proved better at filling prisons cells than shutting down illicit supply. Nonetheless, the rise-fall-rise pattern in the US during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, compared to the steady rise-rise-rise pattern under the British compromise, suggests that determined suppression could have at least a short-term effect on incidence.

This is not to say that British priorities were mistaken. In America, the obsession with marijuana in the early and mid-1980s drew attention and resources from the explosive growth of cocaine consumption in the inner cities. In Britain, authorities had to confront their own urban crises in the 1980s and 1990s, including increases in heroin and cocaine use and street robbery and burglary. Brian Paddick, a no-nonsense Metropolitan Police commander quoted by Mills, observed that aggressive enforcement against cannabis under those circumstances was simply a waste of resources, particularly when his department was so short of officers.

The late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a quondam presidential advisor, Harvard professor, and U.S. senator who wrote on crime and drugs, coined a phrase for this dilemma. He called it 'defining deviancy down'. When the amount of deviant behavior in a society exceeded the institutional capacity to deal with it, deviancy was redefined 'so as to exempt much conduct previously stigmatized, and also quietly raising the "normal" level in categories where behavior is abnormal by any earlier standard'.⁽²⁾ That seems a fair description of what happened with cannabis in Britain after the 1960s, and what is still happening today. Though the New Labour government upgraded cannabis from a Class C to a Class B drug in 2008, the year Mill ends his narrative, cannabis enforcement has remained a relatively low priority with police, who continue to exercise wide discretion over who is stopped, warned, and charged. Like pornography (which once fell within the Drugs Squad's remit), cannabis has been demoted from a major to a minor vice, in the process becoming a permanent part of the social landscape.

Mills remarks that 'the story of cannabis and the British has been shaped by the wider history of twentieth-century Britain' (p. vii). That is apparent for immigration, diplomacy, medical science, and politics. But did broad cultural trends – more specifically, the growth of permissiveness in an increasingly secular, affluent,

and intoxication-prone society – provide cannabis with a tailwind? It is striking that per capita alcohol consumption rose in tandem with cannabis consumption for most of the last half century. The police of the 1930s, whom Mills calls ‘highly sensitized and constantly alert to the issue of intoxication and the law’ (p. 23), would have been as little inclined to tolerate carnage nights as casual reefer smokers. Now both sorts of behavior are commonplace.

Finally, there is the question of cannabis’ intrinsic psychoactive properties. Mills acknowledges that expert opinion has long been divided on the drug’s dangers and addictive potential – a historical controversy that he also described in a previous book, *Cannabis Britannica: Empire, Trade, and Prohibition, 1800-1928*.⁽³⁾ He nonetheless tends to view the drug as a benign social lubricant. For most people it is – but not for everyone. Cannabis is a dopamine-augmenting (and, when smoked, fast-acting) drug that affects some more powerfully than others, depending on their genetic makeup and social circumstances. Nor is the high the only attraction. Users with symptoms such as nausea or insomnia can find relief in regular use. For whatever reason, at least one in 11 cannabis smokers will eventually become dependent.⁽⁴⁾ They account for far more than an 11th of the market, for cannabis or any other drug. The more dependent users there are, the more inflexible the demand and the greater the incentive for traffickers. The greater the volume of traffic, the greater the likelihood that neophytes will be exposed, and that some of them will eventually become dependent. Drugs like cannabis create and sustain their own demand.

This dynamic deserves closer attention, particularly in view of how swiftly and permanently Britain became a ‘cannabis nation’. Within a single lifetime – within a single generation – cannabis became Britain’s most popular illicit drug. (Indeed, the world’s most popular illicit drug, catching on among groups such as middle-class students that had been largely impervious to illicit drug use.) What jumps out from the post-1962 chapters is the speed of cannabis’ spread. That speed suggests a drug with powerful reinforcing properties, properties that could be further enhanced by such practices as mixing cannabis with tobacco or using cannabis to enhance music or sex. If Mills were describing a car rather than a drug, it would be one with the capacity to accelerate from 0 to 60 mph in under 6 seconds. That should prompt a second look at the engine under the bonnet.

Notes

1. Hans Derks, *History of the Opium Problem: The Assault on the East, ca. 1600–1950* (Leiden, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, ‘Defining deviancy down’, *American Scholar*, 62 (Winter 1993), 19. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. James H. Mills, *Cannabis Britannica: Empire, Trade, and Prohibition, 1800-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jonathan P. Caulkins et al., *Marijuana Legalization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, NY, 2012), p. 58. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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