

Cannabis Britannica: Empire, Trade and Prohibition. By *James H. Mills*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xii + 239 pp. Photographs, illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-199-24938-5.

Reviewed by Alex Mold

James Mills's study of British attitudes and policies toward cannabis between 1800 and 1928 is a most welcome addition to the growing historiography of the social, economic, and political significance of psychoactive substances. While the histories of narcotic drugs, such as opium, have been effectively explored by, among others, Virginia Berridge in *Opium and the People* (1981; revised edition, 1999), surprisingly little academic attention has been paid to cannabis. An account of the regulatory experiences of the drug is particularly important, according to Mills, because history has had a vital role to play in determining contemporary cannabis policy. Based on the "belief that what had gone before must have been properly considered and established for rational reasons" (p. 219), Mills argues that successive governments have referred back to the actions of previous legislators toward cannabis.

That past policy was motivated by anything like rational principles, as Mills effectively demonstrates, is an entirely false assumption. Indeed, British policy toward cannabis before 1928 appears to have been shaped almost entirely by vested interests. This can be seen in Britain's earliest interactions with the substance. During the late seventeenth century, cannabis originated mainly from the Dutch East Indies. Its entry into Britain was prohibited not as a result of a growing awareness of the plant's potential psychoactive properties (it was primarily valued for the fibrous qualities that were useful in making rigging) but because it would have been carried by Dutch ships. The Navigation Acts introduced under Charles II guaranteed that all trade into and out of Britain was in ships owned by Britons. According to Mills, "Cannabis seems to have been illegal in the UK as early as the 1680s then, not because of its effects, but because it was the product of a rival Asian empire" (p. 26).

Empire is a key theme of *Cannabis Britannica*. Most British experiences of the drug in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came from India. Cannabis use was a

part of Indian society and culture before, during, and after the colonial era. It played a central role in Hindu legend and was used in rituals and celebrations. Victorian scientists and doctors experimented with cannabis on animals, on the local population, and even on themselves. Opinion was clearly divided, with some medical men seeing it as a panacea, capable of curing a wide range of illnesses from cholera to insanity. Others thought that the drug had dangerous side effects and believed that instead of curing madness, it actually caused it. Here Mills expands on the subject of his earlier work, *Madness, Cannabis and Colonialism* (2000). Statistics on admissions to asylums seemed to demonstrate that smoking cannabis led to insanity, though these statistics were flawed, as they were based on “bad information, administrative expedience, and colonial misunderstandings of a complex society” (pp. 91–2).

At the same time as one group of colonial officials dealt with the perceived damaging effects of cannabis, another group sought to profit from it. Mills shows that the British were leading purveyors of narcotic drugs in this period, not only selling opium to China but also taxing the trade in cannabis within the Indian subcontinent. A complex system of licenses and duties developed, so that by 1900 the British made 5,640,000 rupees from the taxation of cannabis, 2,790,000 rupees from Bengal alone, which accounted for a fifth of all revenue raised in the region. It is hardly surprising, then, that the British opposed the idea of international controls on the production and distribution of cannabis that was presented at the Second Opium Conference, which was hosted by the League of Nations in 1924–1925. The conference was supposed to discuss limitations on the trade in opium and cocaine, but attention was drawn to cannabis by the Egyptian delegation. Mills implies that though the Egyptians did have a domestic problem with cannabis use, imperial politics were their prime motivation. The cannabis used in Egypt came from British India, and preventing trade in the drug was a way of inflicting damage on the country’s former colonial oppressor. Cannabis was eventually included in the list of drugs that were subject to international restrictions, not so much because the Egyptians were successful in persuading delegates that it was intrinsically dangerous, but because most countries had rarely encountered the drug and knew little about it. Mills notes that, even in Britain, there was no substantial cannabis use before the 1950s. However, there was a minor panic about the drug in the 1920s, resulting in restrictions being placed on its

sale, initially as a poison. Then in 1928 specific legislation made it an offense to possess cannabis without a prescription.

It is when dealing with this latter part of the story that Mills has perhaps missed a number of opportunities. He does not consider how international restrictions on cannabis affected trade of the drug in India. Did production and consumption fall? Did the British make less money? Given that considerable revenue was derived from the taxation of cannabis, why was there not more opposition to international and domestic legislation on the drug? Answers to these questions would have integrated his discussion of the nineteenth-century attitudes toward cannabis more closely with his treatment of the early regulation of the drug in the twentieth century. This does not detract from a meticulously researched, rich account of British experiences with cannabis before 1928, but if Mills's goal of educating contemporary policymakers about historical precedents is to be achieved, the linkages between Victorian views of cannabis and more recent attempts to regulate the drug need to be made more effectively.

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