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## Book Reviews

used, as its twentieth-century counterparts were, to procure abortions, to induce or speed the progress of labour, and to stop postpartum bleeding.

Occasionally, however, a real action is hidden among a gallimaufry of distracting indications. Dandelion, for example, or pissabed, is a diuretic, but its other uses, mostly in Ireland, are among the most diverse in the book, including coughs and colds, jaundice, stomach upsets, rheumatism, cuts and sprains, broken bones, thrush, headaches, diabetes, anaemia, and in Tipperary “every disease”.

The many alternative common names of these plants have been omitted, although to be fair this spares us some inordinately long lists. More important is the omission of maps showing how the uses of the plants vary from region to region, one of the major fascinations of this work. Perhaps there is another volume to come—an atlas of British and Irish herbs.

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**James H Mills,** *Cannabis Britannica: empire, trade, and prohibition 1800–1928*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. xii, 239, £25.00 (hardback 0-19-924938-5).

Myths and conspiracies have littered cannabis’s past and a good history of the plant has long been needed. Focusing on the British empire’s relationship with cannabis, this account stretches from 1800 to 1928, tantalizingly leaving us to await the second volume for the years up to the present.

Writings on the cannabis plant generally consider its medicinal and euphoriant properties, but Mills examines all aspects, including its use as a source of fibre for rope dating back to at least the sixteenth century. We learn that, unlike opium, cannabis was not widely consumed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britons. From the 1700s British medical publications showed an awareness of the plant’s properties as a medicine and intoxicant but it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that William Brooke O’ Shaughnessy, a pioneer of

telegraph technology in India, wrote the definitive account of cannabis based in part on his human and animal experiments. Meanwhile in India cannabis preparations were popular as tonics, medicines and for recreation.

This book contains a great deal of interesting information, such as the description of how cannabis cultivation fitted into a nineteenth-century Indian village’s ecological, social and economic systems. A range of crops were grown but it was the hemp harvest that paid the land’s rent and even influenced the timing of weddings and festivals. Before the hemp was trampled to make hashish, an 1889 commentator recorded that “the persons to be so employed salute the ganja before placing their feet on it”. Much original material is quoted, which is entertaining to read, but at times the path of argument can be difficult to discern amid the dense forest of fact and anecdote.

Mills is rather dismissive of other works on cannabis and their authors, on the grounds that they have failed to consider the history of its regulation, whether or not that was part of their brief or might be of interest to their readership. This cannabis history is intended not only for its own value but because “It may be directly relevant to contemporary debates about laws and policies relating to cannabis in Britain today.” Today’s politicians, Mills contends, defend the UK cannabis laws on the assumption that the judgements of their predecessors “were based on solid ground” and have since been reinforced by reference back to an unknown past. If the reality of this past were known, he suggests, the case for the current laws would be weakened. While such research can be valuable in informing current debates, the claims that this book makes for its powers are exaggerated and some opportunities for comparisons with the present are missed.

The author seems to imply that had cannabis not been controlled in the 1920s, it could still be legal today, but the intervening years have seen many psychoactive substances, including some with therapeutic pedigrees, come under even stricter controls. Are today’s politicians defending cannabis prohibition because they think their predecessors knew best

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and should not be questioned, or because they have their own reasons and precedent is a useful tool for supporting them?

It is interesting to read about Indian methods of tax evasion and smuggling which developed to outwit colonial administrators, but more might have been extracted to inform current policy: what level and what methods of taxation prompted cultivators to start breaking the law? Tobacco smuggling in contemporary Britain has grown as duty has risen on cigarettes; what factors determine the point at which such subterfuge becomes worthwhile?

While this book leaves room for further histories of cannabis in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is certainly an enjoyable and informative read, and I look forward to starting volume two.

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**John Greenaway,** *Drink and British politics since 1830: a study in policy-making*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. xii, 271, £50.00 (hardback 0-333-91782-0).

In *Drink and British politics since 1830* John Greenaway presents in detail the history of British alcohol legislation. He traces it from the acknowledgement of drinking as an issue of national interest with the birth of a mass temperance organization and the Beer Act of 1830, to the discussions of policy on drink and driving in the 1960s. This study, based mainly on Public Record Office documents, certainly fills a gap in scholarship, especially for the period after 1870.

In his concluding chapter, Greenaway briefly compares the British legislation on drink with that of other European countries. The differences in policy are remarkable. Countries that historically have most problems with excessive drinking, such as Britain and Sweden, are as a rule nations with more extensive alcohol legislation. Or, one wonders, was it that an enhanced interest shed a brighter light on a problem that was not acknowledged elsewhere?

One of the questions Greenaway sets out to answer in this study of British policies is exactly how and why an issue like drink came and went on the national political agenda. He discusses the shifts of power between different pressure groups, most particularly how trade and private enterprise on the one hand, and the powerful temperance movements on the other, influenced policy making. The work questions the ways in which the issue of drink as a moral problem addressed by individual MPs became a party-political issue of the greatest importance in the late nineteenth century, and how it then developed into a topic to be discussed with matters of broader social concern after the First World War.

Greenaway identifies five main episodes in the history of drink and politics before the Second World War. During the early Victorian period the market ruled, counteracted by an ever more powerful temperance movement, a social, political and moral force, transforming the drink question into a central political theme. Then, in the last half of the nineteenth century, the focal point of the discussions shifted to the control of local authorities, as politicians disagreed on the issue of local control and licensing. Subsequently, in the period before the First World War, the abstinence pressure groups gained momentous impact, and massive rallies brought pressure to bear upon politicians discussing the possibility of a state regulated industry and licensing reduction schemes. The outbreak of the First World War is considered a turning point in the history of alcohol legislation. What Greenaway calls “a moral panic” about drink and national efficiency and the rationing of raw materials led to a major reduction in alcohol consumption, regulated by the Central Control Board on Liquor Traffic. Finally, during the interwar period the controlled sale of alcohol and restricted opening hours of the public house became further endorsed.

For Greenaway it is precisely the changeable nature of the question of drink that renders it interesting in the history of policy making. Indeed, when and why drinking became a matter deemed fit for discussion in the upper