

Book

British cannabis policy: an enduring and uneasy compromise

Histories of drug use are often disguised forms of policy advocacy. Their authors use history to subvert current policies by arguing for a return to an earlier golden age when use of the drug in question was legal and seemingly trouble-free. These accounts often fail minimum standards of historical scholarship by making selective and uncritical use of secondary sources to support a preconceived policy position. Much rarer are dispassionate scholarly histories that document the messy process that produces policies by critically analysing primary sources, oral histories, and syntheses of previous scholarly work. *Cannabis Nation: Control and Consumption in Britain, 1928–2008* is very much in the latter tradition.

Central to historian James Mills' account is the emergence of the "British compromise" on cannabis in the 1970s. Criminal penalties for cannabis use were retained while the police were urged not to enforce the law too rigorously and magistrates encouraged to impose minimum or no penalties for first offenders. This was initially a policy stopgap in the face of conflicting political and expert opinions on how best to respond to rising cannabis use among young people in the UK at the time. Mills explains why this compromise has remained at the centre of British cannabis policy over the subsequent 40 years, despite the best efforts of would-be reformers to remove criminal penalties for cannabis use.

Cannabis Nation documents Britain's failure to prevent cannabis from being included under the same provisions as cocaine and opiates in the international drug control treaties after the World War 1, with the result that the prohibition of cannabis use in Britain in 1928 preceded its widespread recreational

use four decades later. Mills describes inconsistent imperial policies towards cannabis in the interwar period: prohibiting use in Egypt while licensing and taxing cannabis in India, and exporting Indian cannabis to indentured Indian labourers in other British colonies.

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Immigrants from former British colonies in the Caribbean, South Asia, and Africa brought recreational cannabis use to Britain after World War 2. Cannabis became a political issue in the late 1960s in Britain as a symbol of the youthful rejection of mainstream culture. And cannabis arrests involving celebrities in the late 1960s provoked civil liberties campaigns. The Wootton Advisory Committee on Drug Dependence, established in 1968 in response to these concerns, recommended a policy compromise in which the law was left unchanged but the severity of its enforcement was moderated. The compromise was initially rejected by the government but later quietly put into practice.

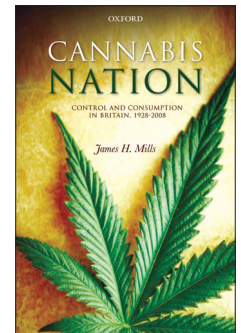
Mills cogently describes how the policy compromise succeeded in reducing the public profile of cannabis use but at a cost—namely, that the police used their discretion in enforcement to selectively detain minority cannabis users and young people who already had criminal records and who were suspected of more serious offences. A reluctance to

surrender this discretionary power lay behind the successful opposition of senior police to attempts by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, to remove the police power of arrest for cannabis use offences in 2002.

Mills' book highlights several important features of British cannabis policy since 1928, many of which probably also apply to policy histories in other developed countries. First, the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 prohibited more liberal policies by precluding the UK as a signatory state from removing criminal penalties for cannabis use. Second, policies towards cannabis have been affected by its inclusion along with other controlled drugs under international control efforts—for example, opium in the 19th century, cocaine and synthetic opiates in the 1920s, and heroin in the 1980s. Thirdly, Mills' account illustrates the dangers of what he describes as "over-theorising" the messy processes of formulating cannabis and other drug policy, namely, that happenstance, and the actions of idiosyncratic individuals, have played a larger role than policy analysts often allow.

I am less persuaded by Mills' suggestion that in formulating cannabis policy in the 2010s British policy makers should attempt to start with a blank sheet. I doubt that we can ever avoid starting from anywhere except where our history has left us. But I do not doubt that policy makers in the UK and other developed countries would benefit by an acquaintance with Mill's history of UK cannabis policy: its features resonate with the less well documented histories of cannabis policies in other countries, like in my own native Australia.

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Cannabis Nation: Control and Consumption in Britain 1928–2008
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