

# WHAT IS IT WITH VANCOUVER AND DRUGS?

## *A Review Essay*

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### *The Oxford Handbook of Global Drug History*

Ed. Paul Gootenberg

New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

720 pp. \$150 USD hardcover.

### *Cannabis: Global Histories*

Ed. Lucas Richert and James H. Mills

Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021.

418 pp. \$73 paper.

**I**N 1958, A YOUNG AND inebriated Hunter S. Thompson wrote to Jack Scott, editor of the *Vancouver Sun*, looking for a job: “It’s a long way from here to British Columbia,” the esteemed journalist wrote, “but I think I’d enjoy the trip.”<sup>1</sup> He would have.

Around the world, in books and films about drugs, one city continues to get its chapter – Vancouver. Geography is obviously central to the city’s role. Vancouver is where Canada meets the Pacific Ocean, where vast quantities of illicit drugs are imported from Asia, and have been since before Confederation. Vancouver is also “Terminal City,” at the end of the Trans-Canada Highway and CP Rail, the end of the line for people with nowhere to live and nowhere to go. Poor people who are more likely to use drugs to forget their lives go to live there. At the other extreme, Vancouver teems with the liquor, cocaine, and prescription drugs of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter S. Thompson to Jack Scott, New York, 1 October 1958, in *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman, 1955–1967*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Random House Ballantine, 1997), 139.

infinitely rich. As SFU psychology professor Bruce K. Alexander wrote in 2008:

Vancouver provides an excellent case study of the spread of addiction on a globalising planet. It is a thoroughly modern city that was not founded until the late 19th century. It came into existence to fill a niche in the global economic system then maintained by the British Empire – the precursor of today’s globalising civilisation. There was little shared culture in early Vancouver to smooth the hard edges of its raw economic function. Despite its beauty, civility, and prosperity, Vancouver soon became known as the city with the biggest drug-addiction problem in Canada. And Canada, peaceable and tidy as it is, has a world-class drug-addiction problem.<sup>2</sup>

At every stage of the twentieth century, Vancouver retained its title as Canada’s Drug Capital. It began with early Chinese opium users and moved to mostly white heroin users on skid row. From 1922 to 1961, “British Columbia had less than 10 per cent of Canada’s population, but 47 per cent of all the convictions under the Opium and Narcotic Drugs Act.”<sup>3</sup> Addictions Research Foundation (ARF) investigator Reg Smart noted that, in the early 1950s, “60% of all Canadian street addicts resided in British Columbia, with most in the Vancouver area.” In 1956, while the rate of addiction for the rest of Canada was 11 per 100,000, in British Columbia it was *fourteen times* that rate, at 156 per 100,000.<sup>4</sup> The first major Canadian study of narcotics addiction was G.H. Stevenson et al.’s *Drug Addiction in British Columbia*, published in 1956, which led “indirectly” to the creation of the Narcotic Addiction Foundation of British Columbia.<sup>5</sup> In 1972, the first year we have Bureau of Dangerous Drugs statistics, 805 of 1,509 Canadian methadone patients were in British Columbia.<sup>6</sup> In 1973, there were thirty-eight narcotics-related deaths in Vancouver, compared to only fourteen in the rest of Canada.<sup>7</sup> In 2021, at

<sup>2</sup> Bruce K. Alexander, *The Globalisation of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession: Illegal Drug Use, Regulation, and Power in Canada, 1921–1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Reginald D. Smart, *Forbidden Highs: The Nature, Treatment, and Prevention of Illicit Drug Abuse* (Toronto: Alcohol and Drug Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario, 1983), 17. The study’s full citation is G.H. Stevenson, L.R. Lingley, G.E. Trasov, and H. Stansfield, *Drug Addiction in British Columbia*, 2 vols. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1956, <https://www.worldcat.org/title/21097575>).

<sup>5</sup> Smart, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Smart, 202.

<sup>7</sup> Smart, 61.

least 2,224 Vancouverites fatally overdosed on drugs,<sup>8</sup> a rate second only to that of Ontario.<sup>9</sup>

Most Vancouver heroin addicts were and are centred in the notorious Downtown Eastside. According to the RCMP, Vancouver's heavy use in its early days had little to do with its Asia-facing port since, until the early 1970s, most of North America's heroin came from Europe via east coast ports – the infamous French Connection.<sup>10</sup> The Burns Brothers – Eddie, Kenny, and Tommy – distributed millions of dollars worth of heroin in Vancouver in the late 1950s and early 1960s through their connection with Vic Coroni and the Montreal mafia (though Eddie did make trips to India to buy directly).<sup>11</sup> Some heroin from Southeast Asia's "Golden Triangle" also came through, but it was not until the French Connection was disrupted in the early 1970s that East Asia became the primary source of heroin.<sup>12</sup> High-quality "China White," cultivated in the Golden Triangle, processed in Hong Kong and South Vietnam, and trafficked mostly by couriers on commercial airliners, gained market share.<sup>13</sup>

LSD came to Vancouver early too. In 1958, when Timothy Leary's primary drug was still whiskey, there was "Captain" Al Hubbard, an eccentric US millionaire who saw LSD as a panacea for the world's ills. With British Columbia's Dr. Ross McLean, Hubbard opened an LSD clinic at New Westminster's Hollywood Hospital, the first private Canadian clinic to use LSD therapy.<sup>14</sup> And there was marijuana, which, until the 1990s, was imported into rather than exported from British Columbia. In the early 1960s, Vancouver criminals established a supply-route from Mexico,<sup>15</sup> and once Vancouver became the countercultural destination for every hitchhiking hippie in Canada (and tens of thousands of US draft resisters),<sup>16</sup> there was no stopping the city's love affair with weed. Cheech and Chong began in Vancouver – Richard Marin (Cheech)

<sup>8</sup> <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2022PSSG0010-000188>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/maps>.

<sup>10</sup> Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession*, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Neil Boyd, *High Society: Legal and Illegal Drugs in Canada* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1991), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003), 262.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Schneider, *Iced: The Story of Organized Crime in Canada* (Mississauga: Wiley, 2009), 333.

<sup>14</sup> Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 175. See also Jesse Donaldson and Erika Dyck, *The Acid Room: The Psychedelic Trials and Tribulations of Hollywood Hospital* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Aronsen, *City of Love and Revolution: Vancouver in the Sixties* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2010), 91.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Mahood, *Thumbing a Ride: Hitchhikers, Hostels, and Counterculture in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), 158.

described Vancouver as the duo's "Hamburg."<sup>17</sup> For the last twenty-five years, we have had "Vansterdam."

#### A GLOBAL HISTORY OF DRUG USE

Which is why it is odd the words "Vancouver," "British Columbia," and "Canada" do not come up in the indexes of two new collections on global drug history – Paul Gootenberg's *Oxford Handbook of Global Drug History* and James Mills and Lucas Richert's *Cannabis: Global Histories*. David Bewley-Taylor, in the essay "The Creation and Impact of Global Drug Prohibition" in Gootenberg, mentions the Canadian Opium and Drug Act of 1911 – Canada's first comprehensive drug law, before every other country except Australia and New Zealand – but that's it. This is not a criticism so much as a shrug of disappointment – it is a big world out there, both books visit great portions of it, and there is not room for everyone. The fact the editors did not include Vancouver points to the fact that drug history, if not drug use, is understudied in Canada.

Gootenberg's tome is massive in every sense – it is physically huge and heavy, it is thematically, geographically, and temporally expansive, and it costs a stupendous \$150 USD. Separated into thirty-five chapters in six parts, Gootenberg takes us on a journey through, for example, Neolithic Europe (Elisa Guerra-Doce), Aryan South Asia (Davide Torri), the Colonial Americas (Martin Nesvig), Belle Époque France (Sara Black), 1920s Chelsea (Christopher Hallam), and the drug-trafficking gangs of today (Enrique Desmond Arias), concluding with an essay from Virginia Berridge, in which she assails the innumerable ways history has been perverted for drug policy ends.

I am happy to report no perversions here. Gootenberg, a historian at Stony Brook University in New York who has also published a major monograph on Andean cocaine, selected well. This is a serious collection that does not mind taking a few odd turns, as you would expect in a history of mind-altering substances. It wisely chooses to not get bogged down in policy, selecting articles that mostly explore the social, cultural, economic, and political lives of the people who grew, processed, transported, and used all kinds of drugs. In the introduction, Gootenberg acknowledges sociology, cultural studies, and literature's contributions to drug history (7–8), and his contributors make use of them. Naomi D. Campbell criticizes the trend towards subculture in drug

<sup>17</sup> Cheech Marin and John Hassan, *Cheech Is Not My Real Name ... But Don't Call Me Chong!* (New York: Hachette, 2017), 83.

history as she analyzes “Illicit Drug Cultures in the Postwar United States” (453), and Christopher Hallam’s “Interwar Drug Scenes and Restrictive Regulation in Britain” takes us into the boudoirs of the Bright Young Things as well as the boardrooms of Whitehall (350). Benjamin Breen, in “New Imperial Drug Trades, 1500–1800,” reminds us how moral panics can be whipped up at any age, like the late seventeenth-century propaganda war against coffee, a drug few people in Europe consumed at that time (124).

The collection reminds us how orientalism is a vital concept in modern drug studies as hashish and opium were associated with the barbarian masses in the East. Davide Torri, in “Soma and Drug History in Ancient Asia,” writes how, since antiquity, Europeans saw these “unknown lands of wonder and horror from which a flow of spices, drugs, warrior hordes, and fantastic animals reached the western parts of the Eurasian landmass” (95). The most interesting essay in the collection is the last one, from British historian Virginia Berridge, “Drugs: The Lessons from History?” Berridge reminds us that US alcohol prohibition, despite its drubbing in popular history, *worked* – at least, if the goal was to get people to drink less, which they did, significantly. She also reminds us that Roosevelt did not end Prohibition because it was wrong: he ended it because it made financial sense (666). This is not to defend Prohibition, either now or then, but it is a warning to be careful how history is deployed politically.

If there is a theme that unites these very diverse essays, beyond drugs, it is the power of capitalism and trade. Global drugs go global because people seek to make money off them. After the Europeans conquered the Americas, they produced drugs – great plantations of coffee, tobacco, and sugar cane, worked by slaves and indentured servants who brought their own drugs from Africa and Asia, and supervised by Europeans who had still other drugs, and sold them around the world. The Opium Wars of the nineteenth century are contentious in drug history, especially around the narrative of an aggressive Europe conquering a servile China. But nobody argues that the Opium Wars were not about making vast sums of money.

Richert and Mills also follow the money. “Regarding consumption in the twentieth century,” they write in their introduction, “the question remains of what has driven the establishment of new markets around the world. The simple answer is consumers” (xxvi). *Cannabis: Global Histories* came out of a 2018 conference of the same name. Richert, a historian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Mills, a historian at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, collected fifteen essays and

divided them into four sections. It begins in the eighteenth century, and, like Gootenberg's volume, it spans the globe. David A. Guba takes us to July Monarchy France, where doctors are experimenting with making medicine from hashish; Thembisa Waetjen visits the Union of South Africa as it bans "dagga" for creating lazy workers, Black, white, and Chinese; James Bradford goes to "Smuggler's Paradise," Kabul, which sixty thousand hippies visited in 1971, many leaving with their luggage bursting with hash; and Maziyar Giabi takes us to Iran, where the type of cannabis you smoke defines where you fit in postrevolutionary society. Richert and Mills is also two-thirds the size and half the weight and price of Gootenberg's volume.

Richert, Mills, and the authors understand that cannabis is an ideology as much as a drug. When someone smokes marijuana, they are advertising they are somehow *different*. Before the 1960s, they were *radically* different; after then, it depended on place and time, but it is only in the last decade that smoking a joint has become as inoffensive as opening a bottle of Chablis. (And for some, it remains a sign of degeneracy, no matter how many dispensaries open on Robson Street.) The best essay on ideological constructs around cannabis smoking is Ned Richardson-Little's "Hashers Don't Read *Das Kapital*: East Germany, Socialist Prohibition, and Global Cannabis." In Soviet-dominated East Germany, it was, writes Richardson-Little, "nearly impossible to buy cannabis, let alone any other kind of illicit drugs" (207). The East German government declared this was because "the socialist revolution has eliminated the social and economic conflicts that lay at the root of drug abuse in the West" (207). More likely, drug dealers did not want to be paid in worthless *ostmarks*, so they stuck to West Germany, where there was a thriving counterculture, a large market for drugs, and a currency backed by the Bundesbank. What is fascinating, though, is how cannabis took on opposite meanings on opposite sides of the Berlin Wall. In West Germany, drug use was a sign of left-wing radicalism and revolution. In East Germany, it was associated with capitalist decadence, and drug-using West German revolutionaries were derided in East Germany as narcissistic and self-destructive, not the types of people who could guide the nation to unity under socialism (212).

## VANCOUVER IN A DRUGGED-OUT WORLD

So what can these volumes teach us about Vancouver? I see two key lessons. First, how drugs are dealt with in society – any society – is almost always a reflection of who is using them. Second, drug use continues to expand because capitalism continues to expand.

To the first point – drugs are a problem when other people use them, especially those who are very *Other*. In 1907, opium was a “problem” because the Chinese used it. People only paid attention to Canada’s harsh drug-sentencing laws when middle-class white kids started getting arrested and prosecuted in the 1960s. Similarly, we see both in Gootenberg’s and in Richert and Mills’s tales of drugs being treated differently depending on who is using – colonials or citizens, owners or workers, peasants or nobles, and, of course, Black or white (or otherwise). José Domingo Schievenini, in “A Historical Approach to the Criminalization of Marijuana Use in Mexico,” shows how postrevolutionary Mexico banned marijuana wholesale because: “In seeking to explain away the turmoil of the previous decade, cannabis became one of the culprits” (Richert and Mills 139). Isaac Campos, in “The Making of Pariah Drugs in Latin America,” shows how Chile and Mexico deployed the same rhetoric as has the United States about “drug-using foreigners,” but in reverse – bad Gringos bringing marijuana to upstanding Catholic citizens (Gootenberg 366). Kasia Malinowska and Summer Walker, in “Global Drug Debates in the Twenty-First Century,” remind us that women have “historically been marginalized, silenced, and not considered in drug policy decisions” (658), never mind the enormous stigma that comes with women versus men using drugs.

These volumes remind us that Canada can continue to let addicts die in the streets because they are *poor*. They are a class of Other, a lumpenproletariat even Marx did not like. There is no reason here to rehash the details about conditions in the Downtown Eastside. Most of us know this area well enough, and we know it is a place for *Them*. It is only now, with the overdose crisis hitting all strata of society, that the country is even thinking about doing something.

Which brings us to the second point – capitalism. People have all kinds of exotic theories about why drugs are traded – the CIA does it to enslave Black Americans, leftist revolutionaries in Latin America do it to destroy capitalism, secret ethnic armies in the Burmese jungles do it to destabilize the state. At the beginning of the Cold War, each side blamed the other for trying to force drugs on their populations. The fact is, *businesspeople* sell drugs, and they do it because people are



willing to pay out the nose for them. The most moronic myth we were taught in school was that “drugs aren’t fun” and that the only reason people use drugs is because of peer pressure or addiction. It depends on set and setting, but for the most part, drugs are *great fun*. That is why people will pay ludicrous prices for them, and it is why someone will always take the risk of selling them, no matter how severe the penalties for getting caught. The payoff is too great, especially if the alternative is minimum-wage penury.

Decades before the Taliban banned cannabis, James Bradford, in “Smuggler’s Paradise: The Hash Trade and Drug Control in the Building of the Afghan State, ca. 1923–1974,” tells us how King Zahir Shah tried to *increase* cannabis cultivation in Afghanistan in the early 1970s. Why? So farmers could buy tractors, something that was not possible with other crops (Gootenberg 193). It was an initiative you would think the United Nations could get behind – instead, it continues to outlaw the drug trade. Isaac Campos, in “Reefer Madness Past and Present: Dr. Leopoldo Salazar Viniegra, Mexico, and the United States, ca. 1938–2018,” notes in his introduction that today: “Marijuana is big business, a designer lifestyle accessory, and a source of inspiration for Hollywood moguls. It has even been touted on the pages of the *New York Times* as a performance-enhancing drug – for parents” (Richert and Mills 157). Marijuana, corporations know, sells, and it sells because people like it. Same with the harder drugs. I personally see no difference between heroin dealers and the BC Liquor Store, except their legal status.

Vast trade networks link Vancouver to world drug suppliers, and vast ideological constructs decide how we see, use, and understand these drugs. Bill Clinton should have listened to his own advice when he introduced harsher drug-sentencing laws in the United States in the 1990s: “It’s the economy, stupid.” Drugs will always make money. The question is where we want that money to go – criminal syndicates or tractors.