Editorial Foreword

The author of this book is a sociologist whose name came into prominence in 1965, when he published his report The Sexual Behaviour of Young People, which was the product of a rigorously scientific survey of representative samples of teenagers from six localities in England. His principal research interest has been in two areas, the educational and extra-school experiences of young people and the study of various forms of social deviance. During recent years, as member of a Government committee on cannabis, he discovered that committees of this kind, if they achieve nothing else, certainly ensure that their members learn a great deal about the subject under review.

He also discovered, in a somewhat painful manner, that when an emotionally charged topic is discussed in public, the response of the popular press, of Members of Parliament, and even of the Minister concerned, can be violent and irrational rather than level-headed. This was certainly the case when the Wootton Committee on cannabis published its report in January 1969. The outcry which greeted this report was both irrational and strikingly ill informed, and this has prompted Michael Schofield to share his store of information about cannabis, and his views on how to control its misuse, with a wider audience.

He supplies us with an abundance of little-known facts. Speaking for myself, I admit to learning many things here for the first time: for example, that the term 'pot' is derived from the Mexican-Spanish potaguaya; that as long ago as 1894 a massive report on the drug, running to seven volumes, was published by Queen Victoria's government of that date; and that the Mayor's Committee of New York studied every aspect of this drug for years before publishing their report in 1944. Why is it that, in spite of the massive bibliography of research reports cited here, public discussions of the drug still almost invariably refer to our ignorance about its properties? Surely this is what Catholic theologians refer to as 'invincible ignorance'. The reports of 1894, of 1941 and of 1969 all had this in common, that they found cannabis to be a non-addictive drug, significantly less harmful than heroin or other 'hard' drugs, and much less often associated with violence, crime, self-injury or anti-social behaviour than is alcohol. This is something that the public, including many of their elected representatives, simply did not want to hear.

There are numerous precedents for vehement reactions against new drugs. The introduction of coffee, tea and tobacco to Europe was attended in each case with extravagant denunciations, dire warnings and even more dire penalties. It was only after their gradual adoption, in the course of several centuries, that people ceased to believe that tea undermined the character, that tobacco smoke blackened the brain, or that coffee rendered its drinkers impotent.
During the last three decades, the increased resort to psychotropic drugs has been noted with concern in countries all over the world. Partly, this is simply because they are there, in vastly increased numbers, thanks to pharmaceutical discoveries; and partly this has been a question of social learning. Hitler's blitzkreig of 1940 was fought by soldiers who kept fatigue at bay by taking benzedrine tablets. Since then, tranquilizers and pep pills have been taken by many of the 'norm-bearers' of the modern world, by film stars, astronauts and members of pop groups. It is easy to forget that it is not only the young who try to cloud their consciousness. As this author puts it: 'The most typical drug addict in this country is a woman of about fifty who is taking sleeping pills every night and tranquilizers every day.'

The remarkable thing about cannabis is that, unlike the new psycho-tropic drugs, it has been around for very many years but has only recently become a 'problem'. Long before Timothy Leary or even Alders Huxley was born, this oriental drug attracted the interest of a group of Parisian poets and painters, who formed the 'Club des Haschischins' and experimented with its use. For generations, Indian hemp was known in Britain only as an exotic form of intoxicant patronized by Lascars and other Asiatic seafarers. It has become a matter of concern only in the post-war period, when it has been used increasingly by young people.

Today, we have the remarkable situation that members of the older generation, including many of our magistrates, know much less about cannabis than do the youngsters who are charged with breaking the law. On the whole, adult public opinion strongly condemns the use of cannabis, and this is reflected in the extremely serious penalties imposed. No less than 17 per cent of first offenders found guilty of being in possession of cannabis are sent to prison — with all that that implies for their subsequent careers. Young people accuse their elders, and the law, of confusing the dangerous 'hard drugs' with cannabis which, they claim is less harmful than alcohol.

It seems very likely that cannabis is suspect simply because it gives pleasure. Our Protestant ethic (or what is left of it) argues that easily attainable pleasure must be corrupting, morally if not physically. In this debate, Michael Schofield's sympathies are very clearly on the side of the young; but he plays fair and tries to present the serious arguments, as well as the ill-informed prejudices, on the anti-cannabis side.

He is well aware that where strong feelings are aroused it is easy to misrepresent the motives of one's opponents. He concedes that those who demand stern penalties against any use of pot believe that they are combating a very serious physical and moral danger — but of course the
same could be said of the good people who supported the burning of witches for centuries before their fears were proved groundless. Michael Schofield does not want to `legalize pot' until the technical problems of adulteration, standards, transition and distribution have been solved; he would prefer an interim reform of the law so that in effect the use of cannabis in private homes would not be subject to legal interference. But whatever views one holds, public attitudes and public policy where cannabis is concerned must be based on sound information, and not on prejudiced opinions, either pro or con. This book will, I believe, help all of us, young and old, to be better informed about a highly contentious topic.

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