
Reviewed by James Mills, University of Strathclyde.

In contemplating a book that includes cocaine, Sigmund Freud, William Halsted, and medicine at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries there was a certain relish on the part of this reviewer. After all, with such elements how could the volume fail to be an interesting read? The news is that Howard Markel has taken this range of constituent parts in order to produce something that is some way short of their sum.

The structure of the book is straightforward. It follows a chronological narrative and alternates chapters with biographical accounts of each of the medical pioneers in turn, starting with Freud. The purpose of the book is less clear at the outset however. Readers are given the title, and then a Prologue rather than an Introduction, in which an injured builder finds himself admitted to Bellevue Hospital in 1885 for emergency surgery on a broken leg. Halsted is summoned, only to flee the scene. He did so, according to the author, in order to sink into “a cocaine oblivion that lasted more than seven months” (p. 6). Less dramatically, the author then observes that Freud published his monograph *Über Coca* at much the same time, and was also consuming cocaine.

What follows is more of the same. The author convincingly demonstrates that both men were experimenting with cocaine for professional and personal purposes in the middle of the 1880s. He correctly notes that this was not unusual as the substance was celebrated at that time as a ‘wonder-drug’ in medical circles across the western world, and repeats familiar stories about Vin Mariani and Coca Cola to show that it found its way into tonics and recreational consumption. Much is made of Freud’s continued use of the drug into the early 1890s, particularly when he took it to overcome social awkwardness when visiting the alienist Charcot in Paris. The well-known efforts of friends and colleagues to tackle Halsted’s growing taste for cocaine in the 1880s, which included a cruise around the Caribbean and a period in the Butler Hospital for the Insane, are also dwelt upon in some detail. Other familiar aspects of their biographies are similarly repeated. Readers are reminded that Freud and his sister-in-law appear to have had an affair, while Halsted and his wife enjoyed more distance in their relationship. Halsted’s warm relations with other men are often alluded to but rather coyly discussed, so that an early flatmate and he enjoyed “a close and loving relationship” (p. 106) while the man’s lifelong sponsor and protector, William Henry Welch, “loved helping young men” (p. 145). It is not clear why we are treated to a retelling of these tales as cocaine does not seem to have been a feature of these relationships.

As one ploughs through the book the question continues to nag of what the volume is for. Having never set out its purpose from the start this is a legitimate concern, and one that nags all the more as cocaine disappears from the story. Despite the considerable, and increasingly strained, efforts of the author to prove otherwise it seems that cocaine soon disappeared from the lives of his heroes. With Freud, Markel is forced to concede that he last mentions taking cocaine in a letter of 1896, and that by then he was more likely to indulge in a glass of wine, although he did not develop a long-lasting
taste for alcohol. However, it seems that even earlier in the 1890s cocaine begins to vanish from his correspondence, and the author finds himself increasingly reliant on the dubious strategy of retrospective diagnosis to beef up the narrative. For example, a bout of nasal congestion in 1893 is, as the author states “in his medical opinion” (p. 170), diagnosed as the outcome of “serious cocaine abuse” (p. 171). This despite the fact that Freud’s physician at the time clearly linked it to his patient’s habit of smoking cigars, and advised him to desist in order to solve the problem. While Markel gives up trying to show that Freud maintained an interest in cocaine for the last forty-three years of his life, he is more dogged with Halsted. Using ‘clinical retrospection’ the conclusion is reached that Halsted’s complaints of tachycardia were not down to chain-smoking cigarettes, which was Halsted’s own diagnosis, but caused by cocaine. The book is forced to admit, however, that between 1893 and 1898 Halsted was more likely to use morphine than cocaine, and he seems to have reduced consumption of the opiate over the course of the following decade.

To the book’s credit it does survey the range of witnesses, from his nieces and former secretaries, to those that tended to him in his final illness, who stated that Halsted did not return to cocaine after his earlier experiences or showed any interest in the drug in his later years. However, the author does not give up, and insists on reproducing some gossipy comments by Harvey Cushing, who worked with Halsted between 1896 and 1912, to claim that these witnesses were mistaken. A close reading of this evidence, however, shows that it relies on a retelling of the Caribbean episode of 1886. As Halsted approached death, from a combination of jaundice, pancreatic, pneumonia, and gastrointestinal haemorrhages, it was reported that he took about 16 milligrams a day of morphine divided into four or more doses. This hardly seems to be the actions of an addict, but rather the measured response of a dying man to managing the physical pain of his demise. Yet, despite the lack of evidence that Halsted regularly used morphine, or ever used cocaine, in the later years of his life the author still insists that “he presumably pursued many prolonged binges [and]… these relapses probably coincided with his isolated summer vacations in Europe and North Carolina” (p. 243).

It is when the reader realises that the book offers little new on Freud or Halsted that it becomes obvious that it is really about neither, and is in fact devoted to the third character in the title, cocaine. This explains the pains taken to try to trace cocaine in the lives of Freud and Halsted in those long periods of their life when the evidence suggests that neither took much interest in it. This explains the surveys of the history of cocaine and of its effects on the human body included in the volume. This also explains the odd epilogue, which makes a series of disconnected assertions like “cocaine failed to make either man more productive, happier or smarter” (p. 247) and “cocaine no more explains the sum total of their lives and occupational achievements than a diagnosis of diabetes or hypertension would define others” (p. 247) without making it apparent that anyone claimed otherwise. By the end of the Prologue it is obvious that the whole book has been written because the author does not like cocaine, and because he does like Freud and Halsted, and is keen to show that neither benefited from consuming the substance.

At this point the reader is entitled to ask the question “So what?” The book tells no one anything new about Freud, about Halsted, about cocaine’s place in their biographies, or about the drug itself. It is laced throughout with poor historical technique, in the frequent speculation and the lapses into retrospective diagnosis, and in the baffling series of notes at the end which are not proper endnotes and which are numbered in an inscrutable way. It is peppered with silly writing, so that when discussing cocaine
and the libido the author asserts that “ecstatic arousal and desire are jet-propelled, but the fuel to finish the journey is defiantly lacking long before the first orbit is complete” (p. 104). If there is a similarity between this book and the drug that it contemplates it is certainly not in its effects, as the volume cannot be thought of as exhilarating or dangerous. However, it can safely be said that neither are to be recommended.


Reviewed by David Wolff, University of Nottingham at Ningbo.

Manchuria has long been a second home to opium. From the mid-nineteenth century on, bootleggers carried the precious tar south to markets in North China’s population and drug consumption centers. Unlike most commodities, it was light and increased in value the further south it was carried – supply on its way to urgent, addictive demand. In Beijing or Tianjin, rather than a bowl of Patna, the smokers patriotically appreciated Manchurian. When the very first party of Russian settlers arrived at the tiny fishing village of Harbin, at the place where the yet-to-be-built Chinese Eastern Railway would cross the Sungari river, they found the fields along the banks awash in colorful poppies.

And where there are Russians, there is booze. Alcohol, of course, predated the Russian arrival, since we know that the first railwaymen arriving on site at Harbin purchased a former liquor factory in which to house the construction advance team. But what happened next was explosive growth, first driven by the arrival of the Russian and even more numerous Chinese workers, and then cranked up to new heights by Harbin’s designation as Rear Headquarters of the Russian Army fighting the Japanese for supremacy in Manchuria. Today every Chinese drinker has read the Harbin *jīu* (liquor) bottle/can proclaiming that brewery the first in China, founded 1900. The more famous Qingdao beer dates from the same burst of imperial expansion, founded by German “semi-colonists,” but slightly later in 1903.

So it should come as no surprise that the Chinese Northeast has a special place in China’s history of both alcohol and opium production and consumption. Norman Smith’s stimulating new book speaks mainly to the latter. Smith’s main contribution is the meticulous discourse analysis of a wide range of fictional and non-fictional Chinese accounts on opium and alcohol, especially in the Chinese Northeast and Manchukuo, the region’s cover from 1933 to 1945. Knowing that Manchukuo and the opium and alcohol monopolies there were under Japanese control, we would want to see both policy and discourse as made in Japan, as well. Here, fortuitously or not, the University of British Columbia Press (UBC Press) and the University of California Press (UC) have cooperated fantastically with the appearance of Miriam Kingsberg’s excellent account of similar terrain (2014), with Japanese sources in strength.

But back to Smith. The book consists of eight chapters. The first two are wide-ranging historical accounts of drugs and alcohol in China and Manchuria. Extensive footnotes and the long bibliography give many options for where to read further and in detail. The Manchuria account could have benefitted from the use of Japanese sources, but John Jennings’ *Opium Empire* (1997) and Kingsberg’s *Moral Nation* can cover much of the gap. Chapter Three focuses on the bifurcated narration of alcohol as a debilitating gateway to addiction and a lubricant of modernity. Not surprisingly, the critique became more prevalent during the war years when exertion, not distraction,
was demanded of the population, both Chinese and Japanese. Here, Smith really comes into his own, making expert use of contemporary journals and newspapers. Chapter Four examines a different genre of writings on both opium and alcohol, the world of advertisements. Even more impressive, a whole cast of Chinese authors is introduced in Chapter Five with their powerful indictment of both opium and alcohol. Smith has read widely in a little known literature and I found some of the intercultural stories particularly fascinating. Chapter Six continues in this vein, but focuses on gender issues, the effect of drinking and smoking on women.

Chapter Seven is the historiographically most important chapter in the book arguing forcefully from a wide range of media that despite the demonization of Manchukuo as a “narco-state,” in fact, the Opium Monopoly’s stated goal of eliminating opium addiction has to be taken seriously. In this chapter, Smith presents new evidence on the “Healthy Life Institutes” with a capacity reaching 300,000 patients by 1940 (p. 158). Smith also presents the advertisement material for Ruosu (basic element), an anti-addiction drug, among other colorful illustrations. The Japanese authorities, addicted themselves to the tax revenue flowing from the production and sales of opium and alcohol, are often portrayed as cynically hypocritical in claiming the elimination of opium as their ultimate end, but Smith effectively calls this assumption into question. Reality seems to have been more complex than nationalistic rhetoric on either side.

Chapter Eight analyzes one final text issued by the Opium Monopoly to “bring together the main strands” (p. 7) of the book, but this reviewer found the role of alcohol in the chapter somewhat peripheral. In general, the treatment of alcohol and opium together seems logical, but we do know that opium has a very special symbolic place in the imagery of Chinese oppression at foreign hands, still a staple of Chinese government legitimacy for this “liberation.” This is simply not something that can be said of beer, despite all its foreign connotations. More evidence on opium in the rest of China and a sustained comparative perspective, using such archival studies as Jennings’ and Edward Slack’s would also help in teasing out what is unique about the Manchurian situation.

The extremely extensive scholarly apparatus of glossary, footnotes and bibliography takes up eighty pages, but here again the lack of Japanese materials leaves a gaping hole. UBC Press is to be commended for including an excellent set of forty-one illustrations. This book is an important source for all those interested in the discourse of Manchuria/Manchukuo, as well as scholars and general readers interested in the discourse of alcohol and opium consumption in China during the 1930s and 1940s. I highly recommend it.

**References**


Reviewed by Paul Jennings, University of Bradford, UK.

In common with a number of combatant nations, the issue of drink attained particular prominence in the United Kingdom during the First World War, as alcohol’s baleful effects were held to be undermining soldierly prowess and national efficiency in the prosecution of the conflict. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George, expressed it in his famous, indeed notorious, phrase, “We are fighting Germany, Austria and Drink; and, as far as I can see, the greatest of these three deadly foes is Drink.” Robert Duncan’s book is to be welcomed as the first modern book-length study, based in extensive archival research, of the drink question in the United Kingdom during the First World War. Hitherto we have relied upon two contemporary studies in particular: the Reverend Henry Carter’s *The Control of the Drink trade in Great Britain: A Contribution to National Efficiency During the Great War 1915-1918* and Arthur Shadwell’s *Drink in 1914-1922: A Lesson in Control*; the first written by a temperance-minded former member of the Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic), the second by an interested author and lecturer who liked to present a more ‘neutral’ view of the issue. Both remain essential reading for the subject, the former in particular for the richness of its detail. More recently, there has been an accumulating historiography of various aspects of the issue in a number of articles, chapters in edited collections, and sections of wider studies.

Duncan’s book then charts the origins of this anxiety over drink and the country’s response to it, focusing on the work of the Central Control Board, which was set up in June 1915 with wide powers in any area where drink was deemed to be interfering with the war effort. Eventually, these covered some 95 per cent of the population. Its measures included more limited opening times for public houses; direct control of the drink trade in some areas, notably around Carlisle and Gretna, together with associated efforts there to transform the drinking environment of pubs on more temperate lines; and restrictions on giving credit, treating (buying rounds) and the so called long pull or over-generous measure of beer. It begins with an introductory chapter setting the pre-war scene before proceeding to examine the nature of the perceived crisis and the government’s response. The establishment and work of the Central Control Board are then detailed. Chapters are devoted to the vexed (for some) question of women’s drinking during the war and the broader work of reform before a concluding examination of the demise of the Board and its legacy. Its key conclusions are that patriotism, and an associated belief in the necessity of sacrifice for the common good of victory on the part of both workers and the drink industry, ensured widespread acquiescence in the Board’s measures. In so doing, Duncan contends that on the one hand the workers were not the irredeemably heavy drinkers they were sometimes portrayed and on the other the drink industry was not the unmitigated evil depicted by its temperance opponents. The Board put through a series of workable reforms, which can be viewed as radical in providing a solution which blended restrictive and constructive policies to cut through the temperance versus trade antagonism which had hitherto bedevilled attempts to solve the drink question. In the end though the Board was wound up, against the wishes of its chairman and members, due to its unpopularity, arising in particular from its unjust identification with the rising price and restricted availability of drink, over which in fact it had no control; as having outlived its usefulness once the war was won; and as part of a reaction generally to wartime restriction.
Put succinctly, and I hope fairly, the book’s core arguments seem straightforward enough. However, in working through them, to this reviewer anyway, they are sometimes rather more opaque or contradictory. One example is the question of whether or not there was a drink crisis at all, or if there was, it was one purely of perception. Duncan seems at the outset to take the latter view, for, as he puts it, “social anxieties, rather than factual certainties, dictated attitudes to drinking” (p. 8). A little later, it does not matter if one actually did exist, since it is in any case difficult to prove (p. 13). Yet elsewhere he writes that there was indeed an actual problem going back for a century (p. 89). And if there was indeed a problem, how does that square with his relatively benign view of “normal working class social habits” (pp.12 & 38)? Buying rounds seems to merit that view, but what of the abundant evidence of drunken disorder or alcohol fuelled domestic violence in Victorian and Edwardian England? Here, as also, for example, in his assessment of the nature of the temperance movement, which is rather simplistically characterized as a middle-class phenomenon aimed at working-class drinking, there was a need for a more critical or balanced assessment. A more specific example relates to his evaluation of state control of the trade in Carlisle. On the one hand the Board is credited, for example, with success in reducing Carlisle’s number of arrests for drunkenness (p. 146). Yet elsewhere, and more plausibly, it is pointed out that drunkenness proceedings fell widely and in areas outside the Board’s direct control and that any fall in any case was due to many more variables, a view endorsed by the Board itself (p. 148).

The book’s analysis would also have benefited from more evidence on how the Board’s efforts worked out at the local level. This may be a little unfair given the extensive archival work undertaken for this study but detailed local work is essential to a full understanding of the Board’s work and much could usefully be undertaken. Take the issue of treating for example. Duncan argues for general acceptance of the prohibition on buying rounds from the basic patriotic motives noted above. Yet one of his pieces of evidence, of a soldier home from the front bought drinks by well-paid female munitions workers, suggests that it was carried on regardless (p. 155). Local evidence from the West Riding of Yorkshire, from my own researches, shows treating widespread and efforts to stop it resented, attacking as it did an essential part of pub sociability. This fact, rather than acceptance, might explain the relatively low level of actual prosecutions for the offence. Duncan does not in fact include any details of the incidence of prosecutions arising from the Board’s regulations; drunkenness of course was already an offence.

There are a number of copyediting oversights and stylistic infelicities, which are occasionally distracting. The otherwise interesting illustrative cartoons do not always reproduce terribly well. This is a pity given the book’s price but not of course necessarily the author’s fault. Neither this nor the reservations noted above should detract from the fact that this is an important study of a significant episode in the history of drink.