



The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Global History of Narcotics, 1500-2000

Richard Davenport-Hines

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Davenport-Hines' landmark book draws on a dazzlingly wide range of sources to show how narcotics such as opium, morphine, cannabis, heroin, cocaine, amphetamine, LSD and ecstasy came to have such an impact on Western society and how, in turn, that society has attempted to cope with the arrival of each. Although it should become the standard account of the subject, this book is no dry academic tome: Davenport-Hines is one of the great historical story tellers and *The Pursuit of Oblivion*, though serious in purpose, contains a dazzling array of strange, amusing and macabre stories. It reveals the intimate drug habits of Sir Christopher Wren, Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, Gladstone, Freud, George IV, Queen Victoria, Marilyn Monroe, W. H. Auden and Anthony Eden (to name just a few); the role of enterprises such as the East India Company and Glaxo in distributing drugs (especially opiates); the part played by war in expanding drug use; the origins of the different policies of Britain and the United States, Holland and Switzerland, Thailand and Indonesia; the routes by which narcotics are transported around the world (including a brilliant account of the murderous career of the Colombian cocaine warlord, Pablo Escobar); and the evolution of attitudes towards, and taboos about, illicit substances. Spanning centuries, continents and empires, wars and revolutions, immigrants and aristocrats, *The Pursuit of Oblivion* neither celebrates nor condemns the use of narcotics. It concludes with an assessment of why, despite increasingly harsh sanctions, illegal drug use continues to increase and considers where law-makers go from here.

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