

THE ORIGINS OF THE ENGLISH DRUG “SCENE” 1890—1930

by

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The drug subculture which developed as part of the rise in narcotic drug use in the 1960s has received much attention. Academic sociologists and the media found this, as an area of deviant behaviour, a subject of considerable intellectual interest and also of popular fascination. Drug taking as an alternative way of life, where, as Jock Young puts it, “drug use is given a different meaning from that existing previously”, has become part of the sociology of deviance. Issues such as the formation and role of the alternative subculture, the social reaction against deviant drug use, and the particular importance of the changing social class of drug takers as providing justification for a moral response, have attracted attention. The transformation of the typical drug user in the 1960s from a middle-class middle-aged female into a young working-class male had, it is argued, much to do with the social reaction evoked, and the type of legal and social controls put into effect.¹ In the 1980s, the link with unemployment has again been stressed; and the reappearance of cocaine as a “smart” drug has also provided another source of sensationalism for the popular press. However, the widespread assertion that drug taking has now become more “normal” would seem to downgrade the ‘60s emphasis on drug use as a subcultural activity.² Certainly, the “junkie” stereotype is less prominent in media coverage.

The historical analysis of how such groupings came to emerge, and their earlier antecedents, has been scanty. In other areas of deviance, the historical formations have begun to be analysed. Weeks’ work on homosexuality, for instance, has traced the construction of a homosexual personality and “role” together with a separate homosexual way of life.³ Walkowitz’s study of prostitution in Plymouth and Southampton has likewise shown how female prostitution, once one of a range of activities open to working-class girls, gradually became defined as an “exclusive” and separate occupation and way of life, accompanied by residential segregation.⁴ The

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¹ Jock Young, *The drug-takers*, London, Paladin, 1971; P. Bean, *The social control of drugs*, London, Martin Robertson, 1974; D. Downes, ‘The drug addict as folk devil’, in Paul Rock (editor), *Drugs and politics*, New Jersey, Transaction Books, 1977, provide examples of the academic sociologists’ point of view.

² As, for example, in John Auld, Nicholas Dorn and Nigel South, ‘Irregular work, irregular pleasures: heroin in the 1980s’, in Roger Matthews and Jock Young (editors), *Confronting crime*, London, Sage, 1986.

³ Jeffrey Weeks, ‘Sins and diseases: some notes on homosexuality in the nineteenth century’, *History Workshop*, 1976, 1: 211-219; *Coming out: homosexual politics in Britain from the nineteenth century to the present*, London, Quartet Books, 1977; and *Sex, politics and society. The regulation of sexuality since 1800*, London, Longman, 1981.

present paper is an attempt to begin the same type of analysis for the drug subculture, whose origins are located primarily around the turn of the present century and in its first few decades. Three particular phases can be defined: recreational drug use in literary circles in the decadent movement of the 1890s; its extension to broader circles in the 1914-18 war; and finally, the drug "scene" of the 1920s. That "scene" was far from the subculture of the 1960s. There was no highly structured group with a distinct pattern of life centred on drug use. Drugs were, at all stages from the 1890s to the 1920s, still an incidental part of wider literary, artistic, and upper-class interests,—the aping of French literary fashion in the 1890s, the vogue for anything American in the 1920s.⁵

To locate the beginnings of self-conscious recreational use among small groups in the 1890s is not to ignore the opium use of the Romantic poets, most notably Thomas De Quincey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The well-known drug usage of this group earlier in the nineteenth century was a harbinger of a more widespread recreational use. The circle that surrounded the Bristol physician, Dr Thomas Beddoes—Coleridge, De Quincey, Charles Lloyd, Tom Wedgwood—were all opium eaters. But the type of public disapproval which cemented recreational drug use as a "way of life" in the twentieth century was absent. The publication of De Quincey's *Confessions* in the *London Magazine* in 1821, for instance, attracted interested comment rather than outright condemnation.⁶ That came, significantly, only in relation to the possibility of working-class "luxurious" use. The belief that the working classes in the industrial towns were turning to opium as a cheap means of oblivion exercised the public mind—the Factory Commissioners in the 1830s made special inquiries into the extent of popular recreational use.⁷ But there was no working-class drug subculture at this date—only a simple confusion of the extent of working-class self-medication with opium which could shade into continued non-medical use.⁸ Certainly, there was no experimental culture here; and the Romantic writers established little of a drug-using identity. Writers dependent on opium later in the century were, like Wilkie Collins or James Mangan, individual opium eaters rather than members of a drug-using fraternity.⁹

It was around the turn of the century, as part of fashionable literary "decadence", that self-conscious recreational use became more apparent. The "new aesthetics" of

⁴ Judith Walkowitz, 'The making of an outcast group: prostitutes and working women in nineteenth century Plymouth and Southampton', in Martha Vicinus (editor), *A widening sphere. Changing roles of Victorian women*, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1977; and Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian society*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

⁵ For some definitions of subculture in relation to youth culture, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style*, London, Methuen, 1979.

⁶ The Romantic poets and their opium use are described and analysed in Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the romantic imagination*, London, Faber & Faber, 1968; Molly Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge. A bondage of opium*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1974; Grevel Lindop, *The opium eater: a life of Thomas De Quincey*, London, Dent, 1981.

⁷ For discussion of this point see Virginia Berridge and Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the people. Opiate use in nineteenth-century England*, London, Allen Lane, 1981, and paperback ed., Yale University Press, 1987, pp. 36-37.

⁹ For Collins and Mangan, see Peter Haining (editor), *The Hashish Club*, London, Peter Owen, 1975, vol. 1; and Wilkie Collins, *The moonstone*, London, Tinsley Brothers, 1868, for an example of the literary use of the theme of opium addiction by a writer who was himself addicted to laudanum, the liquid form of opium.

the 1890s rested on a denial of society, a retreat into the individual with an emphasis on separation and inner consciousness and experience, rather than the vulgar materialism of the external world. The aesthetic movement was accompanied by an increased interest in the occult and paranormal, and consequently in drug use. Organizations like the Society of Psychical Research (1882), the Theosophical Society, the Fellowship of the New Life (1884), the Rosicrucian Society of England, a small group of Master Masons with a penchant for the occult, emphasized the need, psychic and otherwise, to change society. A group of Rosicrucians and Masons, MacGregor Mathers, Dr William R. Woodman and Dr William Wynn Westcott, the London coroner, founded in 1888 the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an order of "Christian Cabalists", which addressed its appeal to "students of Zoroastrianism, Egyptology, Hermetism, Mystery Schools, Orphism, Pythagoreanism . . . etc."¹⁰ The Society attracted support among the literary-cum-magical circles of the period. W. B. Yeats joined the Golden Dawn in 1890.¹¹ Algernon Blackwood, Maud Gonne, and Aleister Crowley were members. There was considerable cross-fertilization with the "decadent" movement in literature, most notably through membership of the Rhymers Club. Yeats, together with Ernest Rhys, an ex-mining engineer best known for his later editorship of J. M. Dent's Everyman library series, and T. W. Rolleston, had formed the club in 1890. Meeting every night in the Cheshire Cheese in the Strand, its members included Edwin Ellis, Arthur Symons, John Todhunter, Richard Le Gallienne, John Davidson, William Watson, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson. Francis Thompson, the opium-addicted poet rescued by Wilfred and Alice Meynell from destitution and obscurity, occasionally attended, but never joined the Club. However, it was one of the main vehicles, along with mystic groups, through which recreational drug use was initially established.¹²

Drugs were not the only means of expanding consciousness and studying the nature of mystic elements used in these circles, but they did play a significant part. The use of two drugs—hashish (cannabis) and opium was particularly noticeable.¹³ Hashish appears to have been the drug most often used in the 1890s. Yeats himself took it in Paris in 1896 while continuing his investigations into the occult. He recalled the incident in his *Autobiography*.

I take hashish with some followers of the eighteenth-century mystic Saint-Martin. At one in the morning, while we are talking wildly, and some are dancing, there is a tap at the shuttered window; we open it and three ladies enter, the wife of a man of letters who thought to find no one

¹⁰ These developments are described in Phyllis Grosskurth, *John Addington Symonds, a biography*, London, Longman, 1964, p. 148; Ellic Howe, *The magicians of the golden dawn. A documentary history of a magical order, 1887-1923*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, pp. xxii, 26; S. Levenson, *Maud Gonne*, London, Cassell, 1976, pp. 80-81; Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *The first Fabians*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977, pp. 16-18; V. Moore, *The unicorn, William Butler Yeats' search for reality*, New York, Macmillan, 1954, pp. 25, 128.

¹¹ Kathleen Raine, *Yeats, the tarot and the Golden Dawn*, Dublin, Dolman Press, 1972, p. 9.

¹² For further details of the Rhymers' Club, see P. Gannon, *Poets of the Rhymers' Club*, Buenos Aires, Colombo, 1953, pp. 12-19; J. Hone, *W. B. Yeats*, London, Macmillan, 1943, (paperback ed., Pelican, 1971), p. 79; Levenson, op. cit., note 10 above, pp. 80-81; Lewis J. Moorman, 'Tuberculosis and genius. Francis Thompson', *Ann. med. Hist.*, 1931, 3: 407-411; Derek Stanford, *Poets of the '90's. A biographical anthology*, London, John Baker, 1965, p. 25; Moore, op. cit., note 10 above, p. 29.

¹³ Holbrook Jackson, *The eighteen-nineties*, London, Grant Richards, 1913, p. 53; see also Bernard Muddiman, *The men of the nineties*, London, Henry Danielson, 1920, p. 47.

but a confederate . . . She is very confused at seeing us, but as she looks from one to another understands that we have taken some drugs and laughs . . .¹⁴

Maud Gonne, Yeats' "beloved" was also part of this climate of feeling. She was herself interested in theosophy, believing in the fundamental union of all souls within a universal over-soul. She had experimented with Yeats in extrasensory communication, and used hashish herself as a remedy for insomnia. One night under its influence, she awoke to feel her legs paralysed and her heart beating irregularly. She saw a tall shadow at the foot of the bed and appeared to visit in spirit the bedside of her sister Kathleen, who was sleeping with her son Toby beside her. "It convinced me", she later wrote, "of the possibility of being able to leave the body and see people and things at a distance, and to travel as quick as thought."¹⁵

Yeats took her in 1891 to a meeting of the Rhymers Club, where the company of poets present drank black coffee and smoked hashish. Several of its members were known to have experimented with the drug. Lionel Johnson, who at the time of his death in 1902 was drinking two pints of whiskey every twenty-four hours, had also, according to Ernest Rhys, tried drug use.¹⁶ Ernest Dowson, too, had used hashish whilst a student at Oxford in the 1880s, although his experimentation there appeared to have been limited, in contrast to Arthur Symons' subsequent assertions.¹⁷ As a member of the literary circles in London, Dowson turned also to absinthe; but during an afternoon tea party given by Arthur Symons in his rooms at Fountain Court, Dowson, the writer John Addington Symonds, and some of Symons' lady friends from the ballet, all tried hashish. Symonds, at this period earnestly pursuing "experience" in all its forms in his private life, with love affairs, visits to low pubs, music halls, and foreign travel, later described the event:

On the following afternoon, Dowson turned up, then the ballet girls one after another, whose laughter and whose youth always enchanted me; then Symons, whose entrance seemed to disturb them, then began to be curiously nervous and by being for a few minutes nervously shy. Yet when, with the gravity of a Doge, he handed round the tea, and I the cakes and cigarettes, we suddenly became quite at home. Later on we tried the effect of hashish—that slow intoxication, that elaborate experiment in visionary sensations, which to Dowson at Oxford had been his favourite form of intoxication, which, however had no effect on him, as he sat, a little anxiously, with, as his habit was, his chin on his breast, awaiting the magic, half shy in the midst of that bright company of young people, of which I was the host and the gatherer, whom we had seen only across the footlights.¹⁸

¹⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, London, Macmillan, 1926, p. 428; W. B. Yeats, *The autobiography of W. B. Yeats*, New York, Macmillan, 1938, pp. 295-96.

¹⁵ Levenson, op. cit., note 10 above, p. 85; Moore, op. cit., note 10 above, p. 25.

¹⁶ Ernest Rhys, *Everyman remembers*, London, Dent, 1931, p. 112; Stanford, op. cit., note 12 above, p. 27.

¹⁷ The incident at Oxford is cited in a number of sources, notably, Rupert Croft-Cooke, *Feasting with Panthers. A new consideration of some late Victorian writers*, London, W. H. Allen, 1967, p. 239; J. M. Longaker, *Ernest Dowson*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945, 3rd ed., 1967, p. 42; Arthur Symons, *Studies in prose and verse*, London, J. M. Dent, 1904, p. 265; and Denis Donoghue (editor), *W. B. Yeats. Memoirs. Autobiography—first draft journal*, London, Macmillan, 1972, p. 93 n. 2. Symons' original reference to the Oxford incident was in 'A literary causerie: On a book of verses', *Savoy*, 1896, 4: 91-93, but this is generally held to have over-emphasized the extent of Dowson's hashish use. See W. R. Thomas, 'Ernest Dowson at Oxford', *Nineteenth Century*, 1928, 103: 560-566; and J. Gawsworth, 'The Dowson legend', *Trans. R. Soc. Literature*, March, 1939.

¹⁸ Haining, op. cit., note 9 above, p. 196; Roger Lhombreaud, *Arthur Symons*, London, Unicorn Press, 1963, p. 93; J. M. Munro, *Arthur Symons*, New York, Trayne Publishers, 1969, pp. 144-145; Stanford, op. cit., note 12 above, p. 29; Yeats, (1972), op. cit., note 17 above, p. 93, n. 2.

The parallels with the French "Club des Hashischins" were obvious. The English aesthetic movement drew much of its literary inspiration from the French Symbolists. It was entirely appropriate that the description of hashish eating which appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* of 1894 was set in Paris.¹⁹ The hashish use of Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Gerard de Nerval, Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and others excited similar, if less extensive, trials in England. The use of the drug was part of a self-conscious aping of French literary and artistic fashions.²⁰ Arthur Symons was in many ways the mediating influence. His *Studies in two literatures* and *The Symbolist Movement in literature* analysed the French writers for the benefit of English audiences. Symons had met Verlaine in Paris whilst on a visit there with Havelock Ellis; the writer, on a later visit to England, stayed in Ellis's rooms, which were part of Symons' flat at Fountain Court.²¹

Arthur Symons was, in fact, familiar with other forms of recreational drug use. He was the author of a poem entitled 'The opium smoker'.

I am engulfed, and drown deliciously,
Soft music like a perfume, and sweet light
Golden with audible odours exquisite,
Swathe me with cerements for eternity.
Time is no more. I pause and yet I flee.
A million ages wrap me round with night.
I drain a million ages of delight.
I hold the future in my memory.²²

Hashish was not the only recreational drug in use. Opium smoking was also current in the same types of circle. Its use had begun to spill over into middle-class English groups from Chinese dockland communities of seamen and lodging-house keepers by the last quarter of the century.²³ As early as 1870, Charles Dickens had introduced this type of theme into his *Mystery of Edwin Drood*; and Oscar Wilde had used middle-class opium smoking in *The picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).²⁴ The spread of what was seen as an "alien vice" into English society was continually emphasized by the anti-opium movement. Such concern was also part of anxieties about "deterioration of the race" current at the time of the Boer War and after. At the turn of the century, however, recreational opium smoking in English society was quite a limited practice.²⁵

¹⁹ 'Hashish eating', *Cornhill Magazine*, 1894, 23: 500-505. See also C. Baudelaire, *Artificial paradise. On hashish and wine as a means of expanding individuality*, New York, Herder & Herder, 1971.

²⁰ See J. Pierrot, *The decadent imagination*, University of Chicago Press, 1981; P. Jullian, *Dreamers of decadence. Symbolist painters of the 1890s*, London, Phaidon, 1971.

²¹ Henry Havelock Ellis, *My life*, London, Heinemann, 1940, pp. 206-207; Gannon, op. cit., note 12 above, p. 16; Arthur Calder-Marshall, *Havelock Ellis*, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959, p. 118.

²² Arthur Symons, *Poems*, vol. 1, London, Heinemann, 1902, p. 3.

²³ The extent and spread of the practice is described in Virginia Berridge 'East End opium dens and narcotic use in Britain', *London J.*, 1978, 4: 3-28.

²⁴ Charles Dickens, *The mystery of Edwin Drood*, London, first published 1870; Oscar Wilde, *The picture of Dorian Gray*, first published 1891.

²⁵ For examples of warnings of the danger of English opium smoking, see *East London Advertiser*, 28 December 1907, G. Piercy, 'Opium smoking in London', originally published in *Methodist Recorder* and reprinted in *Friend of China*, 1883, 6: 239-242; C. W. Wood, 'In the night watches', *Argosy*, 1897, 65: 203.

One of the more extreme literary exponents in the 1890s was Count Eric Stenbock, the son of a Bremen family settled in England who had inherited estates in Estonia. Stenbock, an opium eater and alcoholic who died at thirty-five, homosexual, occultist, and accustomed to appear with a live snake encircling his neck, was truly “a sort of living parody of Ninetyism”²⁶ Stenbock returned to London around 1887, where he frequented literary circles. He himself published little beyond two studies, *The shadow of death* (1893) and *Studies of death* (1894). He nevertheless struck up a friendship with Ernest Rhys and others of the Rhymers’ circle. Rhys later related how, invited by Stenbock to stay the night at his house in Sloane Terrace, he found the door locked. Through a window, the hapless Rhys, wet through from the storm outside, could see the Count asleep in an opium stupor before the fire.²⁷ But it was in the years immediately preceding and after the First World War that opium smoking became more extensive as a recreational activity.

One other drug—mescal—was part of experimentation at this time. Again, Symons’ rooms in Fountain Court in the Temple were the scene. In 1894, Symons was joined there by Henry Havelock Ellis, who stayed for a few days or weeks at a time and shared trips abroad with Symons (including the Paris visit where both had met Verlaine). Ellis, later famous for his *Studies in the psychology of sex* (1897-1928), a pioneer social scientist and theorist of homosexuality, was interested, too, in the relationship between dreams, visions, and drugs.²⁸ Mescaline appeared to have the particular capacity to evoke the dream-like effect of a procession of visual imagery, and in 1896, Ellis began to experiment with it in his Temple lodgings. Both Yeats (who was also lodging with Symons at the time) and Dowson co-operated in the trials, Yeats expressing a preference for hashish, Dowson experiencing a feeling of “well-being and beatitude”. Ellis’s publication of ‘Mescal: a new artificial Paradise’ in the *Contemporary Review* in 1896 was the result.²⁹ He retained an interest in the drug. ‘Mescal: a study of a divine planet’ appeared in 1902; ‘The world of dreams’, in which he surveyed his trials in 1911. His interest in it pre-dated Aldous Huxley’s more widely-known trials (described in *The doors of perception*) by more than fifty years.³⁰

There are several notable features of recreational drug use at this stage. There was a literary subculture of which drugs formed a relatively small part. Subcultures express violations of codes through which the social world is organized, and at this stage there was no self-defensive and self-conscious cohesiveness that might have arisen from a condemnatory reaction in society. Theories of addiction were only beginning to be sketched out at this time; and the drugs were still relatively easily accessible. What was noticeable, too, was how close literary experimentation with drugs was to medical

²⁶ J. Adlard, *Stenbock, Yeats and the nineties*, London, Cecil & Amelia Woolf, 1969, p. 45; Croft-Cooke, op. cit., note 17 above, p. 250.

²⁷ Rhys, op. cit., note 16 above, pp. 28-29.

²⁸ Ellis’s interests in this direction are analysed in Jeffrey Weeks (1976), op. cit., note 3 above, pp. 141-185; in Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the new life; the personal and sexual politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis*, London, Pluto Press, 1977.

²⁹ Henry Havelock Ellis, ‘Mescal: a new artificial paradise’, *Contemporary Review*, 1898, 73: 130-141; Ellis op. cit., note 21 above, p. 54; J. S. Collins, *An artist of life. A study of the life and work of Havelock Ellis*, London, Cassell, 1959, p. 158.

³⁰ Aldous Huxley, *The doors of perception*, London, first published, 1954.

experimentation. Disease theories of addiction were concerned to establish clear lines of division between legitimate "medical" and other non-medical use of drugs. Yet the type of medical experimentation that took place could itself have been classified as recreational but for its medical context. The literary interest in feeling and form was accompanied by a general medical reaction against physiological theories of mental functioning and a search for psychological explanations which naturally emphasized the role of the unconscious. Ellis himself was an ex-medical student at St Thomas's and his mescal trials had initially been prompted by discussion of the drug's effects in the medical journals. Dr Weir Mitchell's 'Remarks on the effects of Anhelonium Lewinii (the mescal button)', read before the American Neurological Society in 1896, was reprinted in England.³¹ Mitchell had taken two drachms of the extract, of which each drachm represented one mescal button. "The display which for an enchanted two hours followed was such as I find hopeless to describe in language which shall convey to others the beauty and splendour of what I saw", he wrote. To be able to experiment with such phenomena was, to Mitchell, "an unusual privilege", and he considered the drug to be of value for the developing science of psychology.

There were also medical recommendations of the therapeutic value of opium smoking—these were intended as part of the debate on the medical utility of opium smoking stimulated by the anti-opium agitation.³² Hashish (or *Cannabis indica*) was also used in medical experiments. The Club des Hachishins itself had been founded after the excitement aroused in Paris by the published trials of it by Dr Jean Moreau of Tours. Moreau had been treating the mentally ill at the Bicêtre Hospital with extracts of cannabis; his 1845 book, *Du hachish et de l'aliénation mentale: études psychologiques*, was largely responsible for introducing the drug in the treatment of insanity.³³ In England, too, there was considerable discussion in the last quarter of the century. Dr Thomas Clouston had won the Fothergillian Gold Medal of the Medical Society of London in 1870 for a piece of research carried out at the West Riding Lunatic Asylum. This demonstrated that cannabis and bromides were more efficacious than opium in the treatment of the insane.³⁴ There was also considerable medical interest in the isolation of an active, stable principle of cannabis which could be readily used in medical practice. The notorious medical unreliability of cannabis was the background to experiments with cannabiniun, cannabidine, and cannabiniol.³⁵

The experimentation of these years helped make the reputation of a medical man to be an important force in the shaping of narcotic policy. Walter Ernest Dixon, a leading member of the Rolleston Committee on Morphine and Heroin Addiction in the 1920s and a public opponent of a penal narcotics policy on the American model, worked on the pharmacology of *Cannabis indica* in the 1890s. He analysed its irregularity of action and physiological effect and the therapeutic use to which it might be put. Cats and dogs

³¹ S. Weir Mitchell, 'Remarks on the effects of Anhelonium Lewinii', *Br. med. J.*, 1896, ii: 1625-1628.

³² 'A dangerous pamphlet', *Lancet*, 1903, ii: 330-331.

³³ T. Carlson, 'Cannabis indica in nineteenth century psychiatry', *Amer. J. Psychiat.*, 1974, 131: 1004-1007; Ian Hindmarsh, 'A social history of drug use', *Bull. Soc. Soc. Hist. Med.*, 1972, 6: 7-17.

³⁴ Thomas S. Clouston, 'Observations and experiments on the use of opium, bromide of potassium, and cannabis indica in insanity, especially in regard to the effect of the two latter given together', *Br. for. med.-chir. Rev.*, 1870, 46: 493-511; and 1871, 47: 203-220.

³⁵ C. R. Marshall 'Cannabis indica', *Pharm. J.*, 1902, n.s. 14: 362-364.

were called into service; and even those dogs which were normally inclined to be “evil-tempered and savage”, he found docile and affectionate under the influence of the drug. His conclusions were that its activity would vary greatly according to the type of preparation used. The mode of ingestion had its different effects too; Dixon advised that smoking be tried if an immediate effect was desired, in particular for the relief of depression and headache. He concluded, “Hemp taken as an inhalation may be placed in the same category as coffee, tea and kola. It is not dangerous and its effects are never alarming, and I have come to regard it in this form as a useful and refreshing stimulant and food accessory, and one whose use does not lead to a habit which grows upon its votary”.³⁶ The line between medical and non-medical experimentation was quite unclear.

But in the 1890s, there were few links between medical and literary experimentation and radical political opinion. There were some links between the avant-garde art world and progressive opinion as displayed in the newly established Fabian Society and other socialist groups.³⁷ Ellis himself was a member of the Progressive Association and the Fellowship of the New Life. Both preached the doctrine of withdrawal from society and individual change by means of self-governing, self-supporting communes; the more politically inclined members developed the Fabian Society as an off-shoot.³⁸ There is little evidence, organization and individual overlapping apart, that support for recreational drug use was an important part of the outlook of the politically radical intelligentsia of the period. It was simply a rather distant part of the general reaction against established convention. Certainly, George Bernard Shaw’s reaction to the morphine use of his friend, the actress Janet Achurch (the original Mrs Warren in *Mrs Warren’s profession*) was less than complacent. In 1895, he accused her of “coming back to your weak wicked old self, your brandy and soda self, your fabling, pretending, promising, company promoting, heavy lidded, morphia injecting self” and urged more practically, “. . . if you take exercise you won’t want so much morphia. Eat stewed fruit and hovis”.³⁹

The limited recreational use of the 1890s had expanded both in terms of users and of drugs by the time of the First World War. Drug users now included theatrical and artistic circles with connexions with upper- and middle-class Bohemians, possibly also with war-time links with army officers. The recreational use of cocaine was supposed to be spreading in Europe and the United States in the 1890s, but there is little evidence that the drug had been used in England then.⁴⁰ Conan Doyle’s portrayal of Sherlock

³⁶ Walter E. Dixon, ‘The pharmacology of Cannabis indica’, *Br. med. J.*, 1899, ii: 1354-1357; also reprinted in *Pharm. J.*, 1899, 4th ser., 9: 521.

³⁷ Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians, the remaking of British society*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975, pp. 195-196.

³⁸ Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, note 10 above, p. 179.

³⁹ Shaw’s letters, written in 1895, are reprinted in Dan H. Laurence (editor), *G. B. Shaw, collected letters, 1874-1897*, London, Max Reinhardt, 1965, p. 581 and pp. 583-584. A similar distrust of the possibility of drug use in radical circles is demonstrated by Beatrice Potter’s (later Webb) comments on Eleanor Marx after meeting her in the British Museum tea room. Miss Marx, she reported, had a “complexion showing signs of unhealthy excited life kept up with stimulants and tempered by narcotics”. Quoted in Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx. Vol. 1: Family life 1855-1883*, London, Virago, 1972.

⁴⁰ The spread of cocaine use in Europe and the US is detailed in Lester Grinspoon and James B. Bakalar, *Cocaine, a drug and its social evolution*, New York, Basic Books, 1976, pp. 37-39.

Holmes' injection of the famous "7% solution" was appearing regularly in the *Strand Magazine* in the 1890s, most notable in *The sign of four*, *The yellow face*, and *The adventure of the missing three quarter* (1897). But this was a recognition not so much of literary cocaine use, but of medical abuse of the drug which Conan Doyle as a doctor had encountered. However, the deaths in 1901 from cocaine overdoses of Edith and Ida Yeoland, two unemployed actresses, did indicate that recreational use might be spreading among a more broadly defined artistic clientèle.⁴¹

But it was during the 1914-18 war that these "new" drug-using groups were most clearly exposed to view. The so-called cocaine "epidemic" of 1916, when prostitutes were found selling drugs to soldiers, brought fears that recreational cocaine use was spreading in the army, and was a clear indication that the limited literary usage of the 1890s was a thing of the past. Despite the press hysteria of the time, the investigations of the Select Committee on the Use of Cocaine in Dentistry in 1916 and 1917 led to the conclusion that "there is no evidence of any kind to show that there is any serious, or, perhaps, even noticeable prevalence of the cocaine habit amongst the civilian or military population of Great Britain . . .". At the most, three or four hundred Canadian, not English, soldiers had been involved, out of the quarter of a million Canadian troops who had passed through London in 1914-16 alone. However, the episode, as well as securing stricter control of cocaine and smoking opium under Regulation 40B passed under the Defence of the Realm Act in 1916, also revealed the existence of a street trade in drugs in the West End of London.⁴²

The drug-using circles came more clearly into focus in the Billie Carleton case in 1918-19. Miss Carleton, a popular young actress, was found dead in bed in November 1918, supposedly from an overdose of cocaine, on the morning after attending a Victory Ball at the Albert Hall. The inquest and subsequent trial for manslaughter of Reggie De Veulle, a theatrical dress designer who had supplied Billie Carleton with cocaine, provided evidence of the widening of the drug "scene". In the Carleton circle, opium-smoking parties and cocaine sniffing were quite the fashion. Billie herself, Reggie De Veulle, Lionel Belcher, a "cinema actor" working for the British and Colonial Film Company, and Olive Richardson, his girlfriend, were typical of this group of theatre and film people, and their hangers-on, who, in Olive Richardson's words, experimented with drugs "absolutely for the fun of the thing". There were possible connexions with army officers on leave and passing through London. Jack May, American proprietor of Marray's Club in Beak Street, and organizer of West End dances for officers on leave and passing through London during the war, figured during the trial of De Veulle as the man who had introduced Billie to opium smoking.⁴³

⁴¹ Details of the Yeoland case were reported in the *Daily Mail*, 20, 22 July, 10, 13, 15, 16 August 1901, Parliamentary questioning on the matter is reported in *Parl. Deb. 4th ser.* 1901, 97, col 1121. Warnings of the spread of drug use and the drug subculture began to appear more frequently in the press from this time, e.g. *Daily Graphic*, 12 September 1903.

⁴² Details of the drug "epidemic" are in Virginia Berridge, 'War conditions and narcotics control: the passing of Defence of the Realm Act Regulation 40B', *J. soc. Policy*, 1978, 1: 285-304.

⁴³ The popular and quality press of the time was full of details of the Carleton case. See, for example—*Daily Mail*, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 27 December 1918; 2, 3, 6, 10, 16, 24, 29 January; 1, 5, February 1919.

There was a *demi-monde* of London society in which recreational drug use was by this stage well-established. Once again developments in France showed the way. There were obvious parallels with similar activities in France: Paris café society, the opium smoking of Cocteau, Berard, and Artaud, the cocaine and hashish use of these circles, had their English counterparts, although there is less evidence that French literary fashion had the same influence on English drug taking that it had had in the 1890s.⁴⁴ The English drug “scene” was more broadly defined than it had been; its original literary basis had extended to include theatre people, army officers, aristocrats, and artists. Despite this broadening, it remained distinctly upper-class in tone. Cocktails, parties, meetings at the Coq d’Argent in Soho, drug dealing at the Café Royal in Regent Street, and visits to Limehouse were all part of the extended post-war “scene”. Some of the drug novels of the period give an approximation of the climate. Sax Rohmer’s *Dope. A story of Chinatown and the drug traffic*, Lady Dorothy Mill’s *The laughter of fools* (1920), G. P. Robinson’s *Testament* all gave fictional presentations.⁴⁵ Of these, *Dope* may be taken as typical. The book, published in 1919, was loosely modelled on the Carleton case. The tale involves Monte Irvin, a city alderman and prospective Lord Mayor, his wife Rita, an ex-actress, and Sir Lucian Pyne, a swarthy, cynical aristocrat, who had proposed to Rita during her stage career and been refused and who had introduced her to drugs—cocaine, veronal, and opium smoking. Chandu, or opium smoking, parties were held at the Duke Street flat of an American comedian, Cyrus Kilfane, then appearing in London. Attended by Sir Lucian, Rita and Mollie Gretna, a “notorious society divorcee”, one party was officiated over by Mrs Sin, or Lola, the wife of a Limehouse Chinese. Rita’s drug habits lead her into other areas, including drug dealing with Sir Lucian in Limehouse, and visits to a doctor no longer recognized by the BMA, but recommended by a titled lady friend addicted to the use of the hypodermic. The tale is complicated by the intervention of a mysterious Home Office investigator, empowered to enquire into the drug traffic by Lord Wrexborough, the Home Secretary. The investigator goes under the pseudonym of “719” but turns out to be Seton Pasha, originally employed by the Foreign Office and a “sound man to have beside one in a tight place”. All is well in the end; Pasha and Inspector Kerry, an upright policeman, trace the drug warehouse in the East End and crack the syndicate which had obtained control of the market; Pyne is killed by Mrs Sin, with whom he had had an affair in Buenos Aires, and she is, in her turn, strangled by her husband with his pigtail.

Despite the somewhat melodramatic nature of the story, it corresponds both in detail and general ambiance with the type of picture emerging from non-literary sources. Augustus John, for instance, the painter and frequenter of the Café Royal,

⁴⁴ Drug use in French artistic circles is detailed in Jean Cocteau, *Opium, the diary of a cure*, London, 1930; Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau, a biography*, London, 1970, pp. 323-324; and in ‘Meeting of the Society of Mental Medicine in Paris’, *Br. med. J.*, 1913, I: 193. For links between the 1890s French-influenced decadents and the 1920s social set, see M. Green, *Children of the sun*, London, Constable, 1977.

⁴⁵ Lady Dorothy Mills, *The laughter of fools*, London, Duckworth, 1920, pp. 169-172; Sax Rohmer, *Dope. A story of Chinatown and the drug traffic*, London, Cassell, 1919; G. P. Robinson, *Testament. The confessions of a drug taker*, London, Duckworth, 1922; Mary Lake, *The drug slave*, London, Cassell, 1913, is another fictional treatment of a “morphia fiend”. But Raymond Midhurst, the addict in question, is an isolated individual, not part of a group of users.

The origins of the English drug "scene" 1890–1930

was a typical participant. John was a friend of Curtis Moffatt, who was married to Iris Tree.

When he lived in Hampstead, Curtis used to give small parties at which sardines and wine were consumed—and sometimes hashish. I had already tried smoking this celebrated drug without the slightest result. It was Princess Murat who converted me. She contributed several pots of the substance in the form of a compote or jam. A teaspoonful was taken at intervals. Having helped myself to the first dose I had almost forgotten it when, catching the eye of Iris Tree across the dinner table, we were both simultaneously seized with uncontrollable laughter about nothing at all. This curious effect repeated itself from time to time throughout the evening. During the intervals we were completely lucid and even grave but, as it were, in another world.⁴⁶

This combination of artistic and upper-class drug taking was exemplified, too, in the life of Lady Diana Cooper, a close friend of Iris Tree. Lady Diana “doped” with chloroform, “jolly old chlorers”, and also with morphine. Her friend, Katherine Asquith, was also a staunch champion of the drug. In 1915, Diana told Raymond Asquith that her only moments of pleasure in the last month had arisen when she and Katherine had lain “in ecstatic stillness through too short a night, drugged in very deed by my hand with morphia. O the grave difficulty of the actual injection, the sterilizing in the dark and silence and the conflict of my hand and wish when it came to piercing our flesh. It was a grand night, and strange to feel so utterly self-sufficient . . .”. Her feeling about the use of drugs was indicative of the upper-class nature of recreational use—whisky and gin were almost inconceivable drinks for a woman: to reduce oneself to a stupor with morphia was risky, perhaps immoral, but to drink a whisky and soda would have been common—a far worse offence!⁴⁷ Her participation, and that of people like Billie Carleton, emphasized the extension of recreational drug taking from an adjunct to a literary movement into circles no less restricted in class terms, but more broadly situated in terms of the range of participants and their attitude to drug use.

This tendency was confirmed in the 1920s. For the first time, because of the operation of the Dangerous Drugs Act passed in 1920, the extent of recreational drug taking can, with reservations, be quantified. Statistics of those prosecuted under the Act confirm what is indicated by more subjective evidence—that there were three distinct drug-taking populations.⁴⁸ There was a generally older, more medically oriented morphine-taking group (often prescribed the drug initially for a medical condition, or with some medical connexion). Recreational use was not concentrated here, nor was it well represented in the prosecutions for possession of opium for smoking, where mostly Chinese were prosecuted. It was cocaine that was the main recreational drug of the period, although prosecutions, at an average of sixty-five a year in the period 1921-23, were never high and smaller in number than those for smoking opium.

Individual cases in the 1920s bring life to these statistics. The death of Freda Kempton in 1922, for instance, evoked memories of the Carleton case and brought the

⁴⁶ Augustus John, *Chiaroscuro*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1952, pp. 177-179.

⁴⁷ Philip Ziegler, *Diana Cooper*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1981, pp. 54-55.

⁴⁸ These prosecution figures are analysed in H. B. Spear, ‘The growth of heroin addiction in the United Kingdom’, *Br. J. Addiction*, 1969, 64: 245-255; and in Terry Parssinen, *Secret passions, secret remedies*, Manchester University Press, 1983, pp. 163-168.

drug “scene” to public attention. This young nightclub dancer was hardly a match for Billie Carleton in terms of fame, but the inquest revealed that she had taken cocaine, and phials of the drug were found in her flat. As in the Carleton case, there was Chinese involvement—not Limehouse seamen, but the far more dapper person of “Bill” or Brilliant Chang, owner of a restaurant in Regent Street and with connexions in London’s West End smart set. It was Chang who was alleged to have supplied Freda with the cocaine.⁴⁹ The case itself, followed by the conviction in 1923 of Edgar Manning, a black musician dealing in opium and cocaine, brought anti-alien feeling to a new high and was accompanied by considerable police pressure against cocaine dealing in the West End.⁵⁰ Brilliant Chang himself was sentenced and deported for possession of cocaine in 1924, and the new Dangerous Drugs Amendment Act of 1923 brought a harsher line in relation to drugs offences.

Cocaine was the “in” drug of the period. It was part of the 1920s fashion for all things American. The popular press was as hysterical as ever. The *Daily Express* thought (in 1922) that signs of drug taking could be easily erased—but “They cannot alter the expression of the unfortunate deluded habitues living in their pitiable paradise of sensation. They cannot cast clothing over the immodesty of the half clothed young girls, they cannot make the drug fiend and his associates look like clean men . . .”⁵¹ The Board of Film Censors and the LCC banned a film called *Cocaine*, based on the Kempton case. It portrayed, again according to the *Daily Express*, “sleek young men and thinly clothed girls . . . [who] jazz and shimmy and foxtrot under the influence of late hours and excitement, nigger-music and cocktails, drugs and the devil.”⁵² Nicky Lancaster, Noel Coward’s cocaine-taking character in his play *The vortex*, symbolized the hectic and nervy pace of post-war upper-middle-class life.⁵³

At its most extreme edges, the subculture included in the 1920s a person like Aleister Crowley. Crowley, the son of a Plymouth Brethren family, had been involved in ritual magic since he was at Oxford, and was a member of the Golden Dawn in the 1890s. His connexion with Allan Bennett, a chemist who later became a Buddhist monk, introduced him to the consciousness-expanding potential of drugs; his recreational use of cocaine began with Bennett.⁵⁴ Crowley’s strident defence of recreational drug use continued into the 1920s—his poem ‘Morphia’ (1914) and a 1917 piece on cocaine culminated in two articles in the *English Review* in 1922 and his *Diary of a drug fiend* published in the same year. Crowley’s articles, ‘The great drug delusion’, by “A New York specialist”, and ‘The drug panic’ by “A London physician”, the latter supposedly a response to the first piece, although in fact also written by Crowley himself, put the opposition case apparently from the medical point of view. He argued that repressive legislation would only lead to

⁴⁹ *Daily Express*, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 21 March; 3, 11, 18, and 25 April 1922.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 24 April 1922.

⁵¹ *Daily Express*, 11 March 1922.

⁵² *Daily Express*, 4 May 1922. For discussion of the banning of the film, see Public Record Office, Home Office papers, H.O.45/11599.

⁵³ Noel Coward, *Three plays, with the author's reply to his critics*, London, Ernest Benn, 1925, p.vi; Sheridan Morley, *A talent to amuse. A biography of Noel Coward*, London, Heinemann, 1969, pp. 77-85.

⁵⁴ Howe, op. cit., note 10 above, p. 150; J. Symonds and K. Grant (editors), *The confessions of Aleister Crowley*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1969, p. 180; A. Crowley, *Diary of a drug fiend*, London, Collins, 1922; Sphere books, 1972, p. 12.

increased production and police corruption. Crowley was particularly concerned to undermine the common medical and public belief that addiction, once drugs were used, was inevitable. To do this, he tended to overstate his case.

... I attempted to produce a 'drug habit' in myself. In vain. My wife literally nagged about it: 'Don't go out without your cocaine, sweetheart!' or 'Did you remember to take your heroin before lunch, big boy?'. I reached the stage where one takes a sniff of cocaine every five minutes or so all day long; but although I obtained definitely toxic results, I was always able to abandon the drug without a pang.⁵⁵

Concepts of "disease" and inevitable addiction were in direct opposition to Crowley's belief in free will—"do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law". In the *Diary*, he provided, in the opening chapters, a fair picture of the post-war "scene". The "Cafe Wisteria" (or Café Royal) with its set of barely disguised writers and artists including Augustus John, Jacob Epstein, Frank Harris, Lord Alfred Douglas, and Iris Tree, once again provided the starting-point for an excursion into the illicit drug world of 1920s London society. With pieces on 'A heroin heroine' and 'Au pays de cocaine', Crowley continued in his book his attack on what he termed the "diabolical Dope Act" and the regulation of post-war society.⁵⁶ Crowley perhaps appears a somewhat ludicrous figure, but his role was significant. He personified, far more than the general upper-class drug-taking milieu, the type of exclusive addict who became a more typical figure in the 1960s. The self-conscious use of drug slang in the *Diary*—"snow" for cocaine, "H" for heroin, "cold turkey"—also underlines the construction of a separate drug-using identity. He approached nearest to the American junkie model which, as Judith Blackwell has argued, was adopted by British addicts as a subcultural model in the early 1950s.⁵⁷

The more generalized recreational use developed when it did primarily for both legal and medical reasons. Certainly, the type of legal restrictions introduced during and immediately after the First World War had some effect. The DORA Regulation 40B of 1916 controlled cocaine and smoking opium; the 1920 and 1923 Dangerous Drugs Acts brought in more widespread controls. Crowley's defence of recreational drug use became more strident as a result. But there does not appear to have been a direct relationship with legal restriction. David Courtwright's recent study of drug use in the United States shows that drug use was descending the social scale well before the passing of the Harrison Narcotics Act in 1914.⁵⁸ In England, too, the extension of recreational use was on the way to being established even before the restrictions of 1916.

This type of self-conscious non-medical use of drugs can perhaps more usefully be related to the growing medicalization of drug use in general, and the drawing of specific

⁵⁵ Aleister Crowley, 'The great drug delusion. By a New York specialist', *English Rev.*, 1922, 34: 571-76; also, 'The drug panic. By a London physician', *ibid.*, 1922, 35: 65-70.

⁵⁶ Crowley, *Drugfiend*, *op. cit.*, note 54 above; see also Symonds and Grant (eds.), *op. cit.*, note 54 above, pp. 489, 537; J. Symonds, *The Great beast. The life and magick of Aleister Crowley*, London, Macdonald, 1971, p. 288; C. Wilson, *The occult*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1971, pp. 349-375.

⁵⁷ J. Blackwell, 'Saboteurs of Britain's opiate policy: over-prescribing physicians or American-style junkies?' unpublished paper, 1986.

⁵⁸ David Courtwright, *Dark paradise. Opiate addiction in America before 1940*. London, and Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 113.

ideological and practical barriers between legitimate medical and illegitimate non-medical use. For much of the nineteenth century, such barriers did not exist and drug use, primarily opium, had been common among all sections of the population, whether for medical or semi-medical reasons—the barriers are difficult to place and self-medication was common. By the end of the century, non-medical use was more sharply defined. The disease theories advocated by the medical profession at the end of the century singled out the addict as a distinct, abnormal personality. The anti-opium movement, campaigning against Britain's involvement in the Indo-Chinese opium trade, used the distinction between medical and non-medical use constantly in its polemics. Opiate use in the general population was declining too, and over-the-counter sales of drugs were even more restricted after the 1906 Pharmacy Act.⁵⁹ Recreational use, it should be noted, concentrated on those drugs—cannabis, cocaine, smoking opium—which (cocaine excepted) had few medical uses. Nevertheless, it took place within a climate of increasing hostility to narcotic drugs in general.

By the 1920s, the drug scene was more broadly defined and its participants were more numerous than in the 1890s. It remained as socially restricted as it had been at the turn of the century.⁶⁰ The characteristic drugs of the 1890s—hashish and smoking opium—were being supplanted, although not entirely displaced, by cocaine.⁶¹ Morphine and heroin, although used by addicts, were not yet drugs of the subculture. The scene was still limited to London, with a fair degree of cross-class liaison. The close relation with the working-class street trade in the West End of London—and further links with the East End—is noticeable. Exclusive addicts like Crowley were still rare. There was a good deal of upper-class drug-taking camaraderie (exemplified in Diana Cooper's attitudes), not in conscious opposition to social codes but as part of the social world of 1920s upper-class society. Recreational drug use had reached a half way stage; it remained an aristocratic and upper-middle-class indulgence, not yet a way of life in itself.

⁵⁹ These developments are discussed more fully in Berridge and Edwards, *op. cit.*, note 8 above.

⁶⁰ One example of the social class of drug takers is to be found in the addiction of the Duke of Kent, weaned from his dependence by the efforts of the Prince of Wales. See J. Bryan III and C. J. V. Murphy, *The Windsor story*, London, Granada, 1979, pp. 101-102.

⁶¹ Hashish appears to have still been used, in particular by those who had travelled in the Middle East. See D. H. Lawrence, *Women in love*, first published Martin Secker, 1921, where Gerald Crich mentions his use of the drug after foreign travel.