

BOOK REVIEW

Busted: An Illustrated History of Drug Prohibition in Canada

By Susan Boyd

Halifax: Fernwood Publishing (2017), 169pp.

Reviewed by Lucas Ridgeway

Knowing about the history of Canadian drug prohibition allows for critical reflection on both past practices and recent events. The illustrated accounts provided in *Busted* stipulate that since our laws and policies are neither static, nor neutral, we need to elucidate our history in order to see clearly ahead. The author portrays her thoughts from an unmistakably grassroots activist perspective with many efficient, academic, and objective arguments posted throughout 169 colourful, high-gloss pages, wherein Professor Susan Boyd of the University of Victoria suggests that for more than a century drug prohibition has been and continues to be an expensive failure. Likewise, she concludes that our reliance on criminal law to eliminate illegal drug production, selling and use has not proven effective.

This book's title, *Busted*, is a homage to the more than 3 million Canadians who have been arrested for drug offences over the past 150 years. It explores the drug control system and its implementation, over a linear timeline, beginning with the onset of settlers into our current dominion up until current events. Boyd examines the system's impact upon peoples of the past, its negative impact today, and the potential cost of drug policy moving forward. For the uninitiated, Boyd successfully delineates the evolution of plant-based drugs such as certain grains, tobacco plants, opium poppies, and coca leaves from their natural origins to their refined, semi-synthetic, and synthetic products. With precise explanation, she delves into cultural history and dismisses stereotypes to expose the roots of misinformation relating to these substances. Meanwhile, the author does not shy away from writing of the British involvement in the opium trade, the socially accepted practices of the white settlers versus ethnic populations, or the punitive policies enacted against Canada's Indigenous people.

She connects with her initial aim by amalgamating concise historical evidence along with striking graphic endorsement to extrapolate the context inside of the moral, medical, social, and legal issues at hand in order to chart the future. Indeed, Boyd does affirm that people who use illegal drugs are framed unjustly as immoral, criminal, pathological, and out of control;

notwithstanding the fact that right up until the nineteenth century there was little distinction between the medical and non-medical use of plant-based drugs. In fact, all classes of people from Britain and France consumed alcohol, tobacco, and opium without any form of restriction whatsoever, as they were embedded into the social custom. Conversely, colonial trading posts sold and bartered whiskey for important commercial items such as furs, long before temperance advocates helped to develop legal mechanisms that banned alcohol to Status Indians.

The author explains many of the oxymoronic paradigms instituted by our government, since our confederation in 1867. For example, Indigenous people used a variety of plant-based medicines, which they subsequently introduced to settlers. Interestingly, many contemporary Western medicines are now derived from this very knowledge base. However, colonial legislation directed at Status Indians in 1868 banned the sale, trade, use, and consumption of alcohol until the 1955 amendment of the *Indian Act*. In due course, colonization played a significant role in the racialization of drug policy, which would also go on to strike Asian immigrants at the turn of the 20th Century. Temperance advocates believed there would be less inter-racial mixing between Indigenous, Chinese, and white people, and therefore less mixed-race children, if smoking opium were banned. These policies encouraged covert and dangerous consumption practices countrywide; meanwhile you could buy opium-based cough syrup, cocaine toothache drops, and oral cannabis at any department store.

Boyd seems intent on delivering a message that even today the concept of addiction itself is continually changing in response to cultural and historical awareness. At first glance, it may appear that the author downplays the dangers of recreational drug use or upsells an attempt to vilify Canada's Forefathers. She boldly cites the hypocritical fear of innocent white women associating with foreign others at the turn of the century, the mass media led hysteria of 'reefer madness' in the 1930s, and the stigmatization of the illegal drug addict versus the legal drug addict today. Yet, Boyd is always able to prove her statements and quell common objections with the use of empirical data derived most notably from the House of Commons, Library & Archives Canada, the Supreme Court of Canada, and the Office of the Correctional Investigator.

The professor never strays far from her association with feminist, anti-prohibitionist, and penal abolitionist worldviews, and binds these with a passion for scholarly activism. The intensity of her convictions is

entirely at place and appropriate when dealing with a subject that is both constitutionally and culturally relevant to each individual reader. Here there is an emphasis on the illusory and unstable line separating both legal and illegal drugs, as the focus of most media reports highlight the negative effects of criminalized drugs. She explores the impact on the health and welfare of the community at large, and examines the harm reduction model used on the Downtown East Side of Vancouver, which hosts a supervised injection site named *Insite*. Boyd reveals how advocacy is an important tool for everyday citizens, as many politicians have attempted to violate established rights by rallying against such compassionate legislation. This has forced lawyers to petition the Supreme Court of Canada to uphold basic *Charter* rights from infringement in order to keep *Insite* open to the public. All this despite the fact supervised injection sites have already proven to be the best short-term solution for saving human lives amidst the opioid epidemic. Furthermore, the writer proposes that grassroots interventions are necessary to help drive drug policy in a fair and equal direction.

By the same token, the writer counterattacks unbalanced responses from neoliberal governments by listening to the voices of people who use illegal drugs as an avenue for practical change. The *2017 Annual Report of the Correctional Investigator* supports the argument that prison time does not stop drug use. At the same time, it is acknowledged that systematic racism and colonialism shape disproportionate rates of contact with the criminal justice system. Boyd demonstrates how the political backlash between ruling parties continues to propagate the demonization of criminalized drugs, while white privilege has helped to usher in the present opioid crisis. Overall, Susan Boyd has helped clarify the perpetual re-write of history by illuminating the antediluvian worldviews that led to the dim perspective we inherited from our ancestors.

Ultimately, anyone who would like to know more about where we are going as a society vis-à-vis drug policy will enjoy learning precisely about where we have already been. I strongly recommend supporting this manner of informed debate to avoid making errors in thinking and repeating historic injustices. Additionally, *Busted* is a seminal venture that could also serve as an excellent icebreaker to open the family discourse on all forms of drug use. At present, drug policy touches as many of us, as that of cancer, yet this book has the capability to take your understanding of prohibitionist strategies in Canada from simply “Just Say No” to “Just Say Know”.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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