

Tekst 9

JULIAN KEELING

Two of a kind

OPIUM: A PORTRAIT OF THE HEAVENLY DEMON

Barbara Hodgson *Souvenir Press*

EMPERORS OF DREAMS: DRUGS IN
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Mike Jay *Dedalus*

1 **N**owadays, opium is a fairly rare drug in
England, perhaps because the profit margins
from importing heroin are so much higher. I
know this because, in the early 1980s, after I had
5 outstayed my welcome in south-east Asia and
returned with a powerful physical dependence on
the drug, I sought help from my doctor. After
prescribing me a controlled drug (as was my wish),
10 he informed the Home Office (as was his duty). On
our next meeting, he told me he had received an
amused response from the Home Office, informing
him that I was the first person to have been
registered with them as an opium addict since the
end of the 1960s.

2 15 Perhaps because opium is perceived to belong to
the past (although it still grows wild all over the
country and is present in several over-the-counter
medications), and because we are no longer con-
fronted with the miserable realities of its harmful
60 side effects, it is no longer perceived as a threat.
In this way, it has become romanticised and glamor-
ised – descriptions of it are invariably wreathed in a
smoke of nostalgia and longing. It is just this sort of
view that *Opium: a portrait of the heavenly demon*
25 plays on and, in turn, furthers. With its seductive
cover of black and gold, its lazy, ill-informed text
and endless, lavish illustrations of silk-clad maidens
and wise, wizened old Chinamen lost to their
dreams, this book seeks to present opium in the best
30 possible light, as if it were a lengthy advert
sponsored by some opium growers' association.
What troubles me about this kind of titillating drug
pornography is how it neatly sidesteps any
contentious issues, avoids mention of withdrawal
35 and addiction, and dismisses the first opium war
with China – one of the more shameful and
hypocritical episodes in our colonial history – as
being caused simply by “misunderstandings”. As
well as enhancing the drug's image by associating it
40 with the exotic “East”, it lends opium credibility
by quoting from all the usual suspects: De Quincey,
Cocteau, Baudelaire, Coleridge, Wilde and William
Burroughs. The author makes the mistake of
suggesting that these writers' works were created
45 because of, rather than in spite of, their drug use,
overlooking De Quincey's amusingly snobbish claim
that “if a man whose talk is of oxen should become
an opium-eater, the probability is that (if he is not
too dull to dream at all) he will dream about oxen”.

3 50 My contempt for books such as this arises
precisely because they are so effective. After a
couple of hours reading it, I was on the point of
overlooking my years of suffering, harm and
struggle and almost booking a one-way ticket to the
55 Laotian jungle, there to reside on a teak bed
surrounded by jasmine flowers. It is these dreamy



Le Petit Journal (1903), reproduced in *Opium*

and languorous notions of the drug that the fashion
house Yves Saint-Laurent hopes to draw on – and
cash in on – by naming one of its perfumes Opium.

60 As Mike Jay points out in his excellent *Emperors of
Dreams*, it is hard to imagine it marketing “Heroin”
quite as successfully, “with its entirely different
evocation of inner-city misery, addiction and low-
life squalor”.

4 65 The distinction between the two drugs is, in any
event, bogus – they do the same job. It is only their
image that separates them, an image that was
entirely reversed at the end of the 19th century:
opium was the one with the bad reputation, the
70 devil that was destroying the fabric of our society
and the harbinger of a sinister Chinese plot to take
over the world. Heroin was new, clean, efficient
and, above all, medical. One of the original claims
for the drug was that it would prove an effective
75 treatment for opium and morphine addiction.

5 80 Intelligent, witty, cogent and a bit pissed off,
Emperors of Dreams is one of the best books on
drugs that I have come across, and should be
mandatory reading for anyone concerned with drug
legislation. It places the discovery and use of drugs
80 in the context of the prevailing post-Enlightenment
and Romantic thinking as well as scientific
discovery, against a background of the period's
social, racial and economic history. Focusing on six
85 drugs – nitrous oxide, cocaine, ether, opium,
cannabis and mescaline – Jay builds up a picture
of a world in which drugs were much more freely
available, but where problems associated with them
were much less evident.

6 90 I am convinced, like Jay, that the American-led,
neo-imperialist “war on drugs” is a dangerous and
doomed folly, and that the current drug laws need
gradual, if not radical, overhaul. A possible side
effect is that opium will regain some ground from
95 its more potent chemical cousin, and that others will
come and join me on that Home Office list; it is
getting awfully lonely.

New Statesman

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- Julian Keeling begint zijn artikel met een persoonlijk verhaal.
- 1p **35** Welk punt wil hij hiermee illustreren?
- 3p **36** Geef van elk van de onderstaande citaten uit alinea 2 aan of zij door de schrijver als positief punt of als negatief punt van het boek *Opium: a portrait of the heavenly demon* gezien worden.
- 1 “this book ... best possible light” (regels 29-30)
2 “it neatly sidesteps ... issues” (regels 33-34)
3 “avoids ... addiction” (regels 34-35)
4 “dismisses ... ‘misunderstandings’” (regels 35-38)
5 “enhancing ... ‘East’” (regels 39-40)
6 “lends ... Burroughs” (regels 40-43)
- Noteer het nummer van elk citaat, gevolgd door “positief” of “negatief”.
- 1p **37** ■ What does Julian Keeling want to make clear by quoting De Quincey in lines 47-49?
- A Artistic talent fired by opium produces wild creations.
B Creativity springs from sources other than the use of opium.
C Imagination is stimulated by the use of opium.
- 1p **38** ■ What is the main point made in paragraph 3?
- A Opium is generally associated with an exotic rather than with a modern urban environment.
B The atmosphere of pleasure associated with opium is very powerful.
C The use of opium as a brand name has little to do with the effects of opium as a substance.
D Though heroin has an effect similar to opium, it attracts a completely different kind of user.
- “Heroin was ... medical.” (lines 72-73)
- 1p **39** Aan welke mensen moet deze visie toegeschreven worden?
- 1p **40** ■ Why should *Emperors of Dreams* “be mandatory reading for anyone concerned with drug legislation” (lines 78-80)?
- A The book is very informative about drugs as the cause of present-day social problems.
B The book makes clear that the present legislation on drugs should be extended to make more drugs illegal.
C The book provides support for a more liberal approach to drugs.
D The book shows which drugs have proved useful throughout history.
- 1p **41** Wat is de “Home Office list” (regel 96)?