

Cannabis, Colour and West Indian Migration to Britain, 1945 to 1960

James MILLS
University of Strathclyde

This article will consider the developing market for cannabis products in 1950s Britain. In the first place I will study the nature of the consumers themselves, and the significance of the arrival of West Indian migrants in the UK for the diversification of the market in intoxicants. I will then examine the anxieties which were expressed in discussions of cannabis consumption in the immediate decade and a half after World War II. Finally, I will speculate about the ways in which the meanings attached to cannabis in the 1950s were to have wider cultural impacts in subsequent decades.

Migration and the cannabis market

*'It is of interest here to refer to a case in Liverpool in December 1945; a Maltese lodging house keeper who was arrested when both hemp and opium were found on the premises kept a pistol in the house, while an Arab, who was present at the time actually tried to draw a loaded revolver. Both men were alleged to be smoking drugged cigarettes when the Police entered the room.'*¹ While the story of cannabis in Britain after the Second World War started in dramatic fashion, the reality was rather more mundane. New Scotland Yard produced an internal report in 1950 that concluded that across the whole of the UK in 1947 there were only 46 'offences concerning Indian hemp', and that this had risen slightly to 56 by 1949.² Seizures of the drug at the docks in London and at ports around the country including Liverpool, Middlesbrough and Cardiff, and Home Office descriptions of the 'simple, coloured, seafaring men' who brought cannabis to those cities suggested continuity with the pre-war period.³ The situation then was best summarised by a Home Office report of 1925 that had concluded '*there is no evidence of the abusive use of Indian hemp amongst the inhabitants of this country. Very occasionally haschish [sic] has been found in the possession of oriental seamen who have brought a small quantity for their own use*'.⁴

¹ "The illicit traffic in Indian hemp in Great Britain since the war", Drugs Branch Home Office 4 February 1947 in HO344/32.

² "Dangerous Drugs", Metropolitan Police, CID, 25 January 1950 in *Ibid.*

³ "The illicit traffic in Indian hemp in Great Britain since the war", Drugs Branch Home Office 4 February 1947 in HO344/32.

⁴ "Draft Memorandum by Kirwan: The traffic in Indian hemp in Great Britain and Northern Ireland" in HO 144/6073 (57).

Yet the picture of cannabis consumption in the UK did become more complex in the period just after the war. A list of those arrested in Stepney in 1949 included Asians, such as the Indian Abdul Rajak and the Pakistani Ummer Ali, who seem to have put aside the antagonism between their newly divided countries to get themselves arrested together on Cable Street for possessing cannabis. However, among the others included on the list were Maurice Oliver Forrester, a Jamaican, and Backary Manneh who was described simply as ‘coloured’.⁵ Indeed, the statistical evidence produced at the time also suggested the increasing significance of those of African or West Indian origin in the cannabis cases dealt with by the authorities; an internal memorandum on the illicit traffic in cannabis produced by the Home Office Drugs Branch in 1947 noted that ‘*of the thirteen persons involved (including two cases in which hemp was seized but no prosecution ensued) two were white men, two Indians, and the remaining nine negroes*’.⁶ It went on to detail that six of the latter had been arrested in the Charing Cross Road area and that a number of them should be considered as ‘traffickers’. The report described these as ‘*rather unsavoury characters [with] several previous convictions for larceny, violence, and drug offences [and] one was sent to prison for living on the immoral earnings of a white woman*’. It concluded that:

The traffic itself is practically confined to the two negro groups in London in the West End centred on the Charing Cross Road and in the East End on the Commercial Road, with its headquarters around Lemn Street where the Colonial Club- a hostel for coloured seamen- is to be found. Even within these groups the use of hemp seems to be confined to the more vicious element and not to be widespread. The individuals concerned are loafers, pimps, and petty criminals.

Within three years of this estimation of the cannabis trade in the UK the head of the Drugs Branch had moved to a rather more hysterical position on the issue.

I think I should take this opportunity to place on record the fact that unless something can be done, by any of the authorities concerned to stem the ‘invasion’ of unemployed coloured men (mostly British subjects) from Africa and the British West Indies, we shall in a very short space of time be faced in this country with a serious hashish smoking problem ... they are of little use in our labour market and ultimately drift to the West End of London- Tottenham Court Road area- where they associate with lower class white girls, drink, peddle hashish cigarettes and generally present a problem to the police.’⁷

Indeed, in the following year the author of this report, F.W. Thornton of the Home Office Drugs Branch, produced evidence that seemed to vindicate his tone. In 1951 there were 128 convictions for offences relating to cannabis, compared with 86 in the previous year and only 70 for the years 1944 to 1947. He pointed out that

⁵ “Dangerous Drugs”, Metropolitan Police, CID, 25 January 1950 in *Ibid.*

⁶ “The illicit traffic in Indian hemp in Great Britain since the war”, Drugs Branch Home Office 4 February 1947 in HO344/32.

⁷ F. Thornton to J. Walker, 14 March 1951 in HO45/24948.

almost all of those who had been convicted were of African or West Indian origin, and concluded that *'the drug is used to prepare 'reefer' cigarettes and normally is distributed among the ever increasing coloured population centred in the larger cities. The sharp incline in convictions from 1947 onwards coincides with the notable increase in immigration from the areas mentioned'*.⁸

Few at the Home Office shared his over-excitement. J. Walker, to whom the report was submitted, commented that

*The picture is as before, a small drug problem kept within narrow bounds by a rigid system of control ... there is still no sign of a widespread, organised traffic, of violent crime arising from the habit, or of the white inhabitants taking to the habit to any degree. Nor is there any indication that hemp smoking leads to other, and perhaps more deadly, forms of addiction as it does in the USA. So long as these danger signs are absent we need not be unduly alarmed.*⁹

Elsewhere in government, there seemed to be similar levels of unconcern about cannabis in the UK. *'No special interest in the references to drug trafficking was shown by the Inter-departmental Committee on Colonials'* was the handwritten note in a Home Office file of 1950 which suggests that the issue had received wider attention. Indeed, the idea that the 'invasion of unemployed coloured men' was a problem at all was given short shrift by those who looked into it in any detail and an official at the Colonial Office wrote in 1952 that *'it is not, I think, that the migrants behave badly, though naturally they have their black sheep'*.¹⁰ F.W. Thornton's particular concern may well have been the result of his close relationship with the Metropolitan Police in London. Drugs Branch annual reports spoke often of *'the close liaison with the Metropolitan Police'*,¹¹ and this is likely to have become closer still with the decision of the latter in 1954 to establish its own Drugs Division. It is clear that from the start of the 1950s onwards the Metropolitan force was becoming increasingly interventionist in its approach to those in London who had arrived from Africa or the West Indies. The Drugs Branch at the Home Office reported in 1950 that:

*On the 1st July 1950 the police raided a dance hall in Tottenham Court Road at which there were about 500 persons, the men mainly coloured and the women white. All were searched and eight men, all coloured, were found to have small quantities of Indian hemp in their possession and were subsequently convicted for possessing this drug ... during the search 20 packets containing Indian hemp were found on the floor of the dance hall.*¹²

This followed an earlier raid in that year, also in the West End of London, at

⁸ Dangerous Drugs Branch, Annual Report 1951, p. 1 in HO45/24948.

⁹ J.H. Walker, 3.7.1952 in HO45/24948.

¹⁰ From WIJ Wallace, Colonial Office to Sir Hugh Foot, Governor of Jamaica in CO 1028/19.

¹¹ Dangerous Drugs Branch, Annual Report 1948, p. 2 in HO45/24948.

¹² Dangerous Drugs Branch, Annual Report 1950, p. 6 in HO45/24948.

which *'there were found to be between 200 and 250 persons, male and female, coloured and white ... these were all searched and ten men (of whom two were coloured) were found to have in their possessions small quantities of Indian hemp'*. Indeed, in the following year the Drugs Branch annual report recorded a change of target for the police.

The unusual case of a London public house being raided for drugs (believed to be the first occasion this had happened) occurred on the evening of 10th March on a warrant issued under the Dangerous Drugs Act at the 'Roebuck', Tottenham Court Road. The premises were sealed off and all the occupants searched, resulting in the arrest of two men, one being a labourer and the other a corporal in the 509th Bomb Group, US Air Force for illegally possessing Indian hemp. The men had purchased the drug for their own consumption from another frequenter ... police had received complaints that drug trafficking was occurring at this licensed house by men of colour and subsequent enquiries showed that 99% of the customers were coloured people who had, in the space of a few months, ousted the local 'regulars' thus reducing the place to a miniature 'Harlem'.¹³

When read together the stories seem to show an intriguing progression, from searches of night clubs at which it is suspected that there are illegal transactions in drugs to targeting places where men from Africa and the West Indies went in their leisure time. After all, the raid on the first club where there was a diverse crowd produced the highest yield of arrests (all of which were prosecuted), and yet there is no record of further raids on such establishments. Instead, the focus seems to have narrowed to the club and the pub where there were only men considered as immigrants. Indeed, the way in which the report of the pub raid is written points to the tensions underlying the raid; enquiries subsequent to the tip-off revealed nothing more than the fact that the pub had become the chosen destination for 'coloured people' and that there was a feeling that the former regulars of the place had been 'ousted'. Yet in the account provided by the Drugs Branch, this is offered as an explanation for the unusual step of raiding a public house to conduct a drugs search. The historian is left to wonder how far the warrant issued under the Dangerous Drugs Act was a pretext for the police to intervene in a contested public space, especially as the search produced such a small yield of arrests.

While it would be difficult to verify that an anxiety about the *'the "invasion" of unemployed coloured men'* voiced by the head of the Home Office Drugs Branch had permeated police approaches to the cannabis market in London in the early 1950s, it should be recalled that there was certainly a growing unease about the relationship between the indigenous population and the recent arrivals. After all, at the same time as the police were raiding clubs and pubs frequented by migrants from Africa and the West Indies, other government officials were warning of a rise in racist anxiety in the UK. A confidential note sent in 1952 from the Colonial Office to Sir Hugh Foot, the Governor of Jamaica, warned that *'we and other United Kingdom Departments have been worried for some time that the growing influx of*

¹³ Dangerous Drugs Branch, Annual Report 1951, p. 9 in HO45/24948.

coloured migrant workers – and Jamaica provides the majority of those who come – would lead to increased coloured prejudice. It went on *‘there are naturally people who resent their coming and say that they are getting unfair advantages from the national services to which they have not contributed’*.¹⁴ Indeed, the Home Office had been compiling data on racist attacks and in 1952 amendments to the Defamation Bill were considered that would have made it a criminal offence punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment to utter, publish or distribute statements calculated to bring any body of persons in the UK distinguishable as such by race, creed or colour into hatred, ridicule or contempt.¹⁵ There was clearly anxiety in government circles about racism in general, and resentment towards African and West Indian migrants in particular.

Murder and the media

While the authorities seemed content in the 1950s that there was little to worry about from the limited market for Indian hemp among seafarers and a small group of migrants, a murder trial was to make cannabis a public issue through sensationalist media reporting and the interference of an expert witness. The high-profile trial of Backari Manneh in 1952 associated the drug firmly with the growing anxieties about the migrant population, combining as it did violence, unemployment, cannabis, white women, and the Roebuck House pub on the Tottenham Court Road.

Joseph Aaku was a 25-year-old man of Nigerian origin who was stabbed to death in his flat in Oakley Square near Euston Station on 4 January 1952. He had arrived in the country in 1949 as a stowaway on a ship where he was discovered once it put in a Middlesbrough. He was fined £10 for his illegal voyage on the ship, and was then released for he was a British citizen by way of his origins in the colony of Nigeria. Since that time he had worked as a labourer in factories and then a railway carriage oiler at the terminus near his flat. He earned a reasonable wage of up to £8 a week, and lived with his girlfriend at the address, who confessed that she had taken to wearing a gold wedding ring to legitimise the relationship. She was back at her parents after a row on the night that he was found stabbed to death in the flat. The police had been called to the address in Oakley Square after other tenants in the block were awoken by a heated row in Aaku’s room, which had concluded with a hasty exit down the stairs and cries for help coming from the room. His neighbours found Joseph Aaku alive, and repeating over again that *‘I am dying, I am dying’*. By the time the doctor arrived he had lost consciousness and even though an ambulance managed to get him to hospital, he died almost as soon as he arrived there. The brutality of the attack was emphasised in the post-mortem:

The deceased died as a result of a stab wound at the back of the neck which penetrated to the spinal cord between the 1st and 2nd vertebrae. The spinal cord was almost severed and haemorrhage extended to the base of the brain. There were five other stab wounds to the face and side of the head. The left upper second tooth had been knocked out, apparently as a result of a blow from a fist. Dr Teare describes the

¹⁴ From WIJ Wallace, Colonial Office to Sir Hugh Foot, Governor of Jamaica in CO 1028/19.

¹⁵ Standing Committee B, Thursday 20th March 1952 in HO45/25124.

*deceased as a healthy and extremely muscular man, 5'9" in height. So it is evident that he was attacked suddenly and with great violence and, in the opinion of the pathologist, whilst he was running away or cowering from the attacker.*¹⁶

At the scene of the crime the police recorded that ‘a small bloodstained packet of hemp was found lying on the carpet’ from which they deduced that ‘this packet had been the subject of conversation’. A further search revealed more packets of cannabis in Aaku’s jacket. Other clues to what had happened that night included blood stains on the banister and in the doorway of a nearby working man’s club, and a sharpened knife stolen from Veeraswamy’s Indian restaurant on Regent Street which was found in Oakley Square and which was covered in blood. Most important of all, one of Aaku’s neighbours had seen a man of West Indian or African origin fleeing the scene. The police busied themselves in publicising the incident in the newspapers in a bid to get information, the *Evening News* carried the story on 5 January 1925 with the headline ‘*Knife Clue to Stabbed Man*’ in which it made it clear that the police were looking for ‘a coloured man with a seriously cut hand’.¹⁷ Eventually Backari Manneh was identified as just such a man, but when he was first questioned about injuries that had occurred to his hand, he told police that he had been assaulted by white youths in a racist attack on the Tottenham Court Road, which he had reported to the police. There was no record of this report, and when the police found out that he had sold a watch that matched the description of one missing from the dead man’s wrist, and that he had worked at Veeraswamy’s restaurant in 1951, they believed that they had found their man. He was arrested on 14th January in the hospital where he was being treated for his wound, and was charged with murder. The police searched the belongings that he had with him there, and found a cigarette there which contained cannabis.

The series of interviews conducted with those who knew both the deceased and the accused provide fascinating glimpses of the lives of those who were migrating to London. According to his uncle, who was an accountant in London at the Board of Trade, Joseph Aaku was educated at the Wesleyan Methodist School in Lagos and had served in the Army in Burma in WWII. Having returned from service, he was advised by another uncle in Lagos to wait until he could secure him a job in his company. Impatience took over, however, and Joseph escaped to the UK as a stowaway. Aaku’s ‘wife’, Teresa Maher, revealed that once in London he became a regular customer at the Roebuck on the Tottenham Court Road as early as 1950, and she first met him there in that year. He confessed to her that he made money from selling nylons and cigarettes for American servicemen. He also seemed to be involved in other curious activities, and told her that he was off to Paris in the summer of 1951 to ‘*put on a show of African mystics*’. He was gone for several weeks, but then returned and found himself the job on the railway and larger accommodation, after which she moved in with him. They had rowed because he was working late shifts, and she was afraid to spend the night alone at their digs.¹⁸

¹⁶ Metropolitan Police Report 201/52/4, p. 12 in DPP2/2130.

¹⁷ Central Criminal Court 18 March Session 1952 “Notice of Further Evidence” in DPP2/2130.

¹⁸ This accounts is taken from “Statements of Witnesses called at Magistrates’ Court and the Statements of Witnesses not called at Magistrates’ Court” in DPP2/2130.

Backary Manneh also led an interesting life. He too had served in WWII, spending six years from 1940 in the Royal West African Frontier Force during which time he was wounded in Burma. He had married a paternal cousin in 1942 and had fathered a son, and his family remained in Gambia which he had left after the war, as he had been unable to find work there upon leaving the army.¹⁹ He had been landed as a stowaway at Hull in 1947, and went at first to work in Birmingham. Eventually he drifted to London, where he worked for a few days at a time for over twenty companies. He was mentioned earlier in this chapter as he was convicted in 1949 for possessing Indian hemp. Also in that year he was convicted for grievous bodily harm, for which he served two months in prison, and obtaining money by false pretences. He seems to have developed a propensity for robbing wristwatches, and was charged with just such a crime in September 1950. One witness, Momodou Bojang, recounted trouble over a woman in which Manneh had pulled the Veeraswamy knife on him. Another, Phyllis Beardmore, was with Manneh on New Year's Eve when he had been racially insulted by a white Liverpudlian and had similarly pulled the knife out. She stayed the night with him and while he was out next day had stayed to prepare lunch for him. She was severely scolded by him on his return for using his Veeraswamy knife to peel the potatoes with.²⁰

Ivan Dias was sure that he had seen the two men together, outside the Roebuck in November 1951, and inside the pub a couple of weeks before the murder. The police suspected that cannabis was the link between accused and victim.

We believe that as both men were hemp smokers, that this was the possible connection between them. It will be remembered that a blood-stained packet of hemp was found at the scene of the crime. Where they met on the night in question is not known, nor is there any evidence other than the finding of this packet of hemp, to suggest why Aaku took the accused to his room. It is assumed therefore that a transaction in hemp was the reason for the meeting and it is significant that the accused denies being a hemp smoker, in spite of the fact that a 'reefer' was found among his possessions at the Hospital.²¹

Teresa Maher confirmed that the victim had used cannabis in the past. She stated that she knew about Indian hemp because she had been friends with migrants in London for a couple of years and they had introduced her to it. She had smoked it on one occasion but it had no effect.

During the time I knew Joe Aaku I saw him roll reefer cigarettes, taking Indian hemp from a small packet, place it in a cigarette and then twist the end of the cigarette. I have been present when he has smoked these cigarettes and I know it was Indian hemp he was smoking owing to the distinctive smell that comes from it. It smells like

¹⁹ H.M. Prison Brixton 25.2.1952 in CRIM1/2206 Part 1.

²⁰ This account is taken from "Statements of Witnesses called at Magistrates' Court and the Statements of Witnesses not called at Magistrates' Court" in DPP2/2130.

²¹ Metropolitan Police Report 201/52/4, p. 49 in DPP2/2130.

wood burning. He did not smoke a lot in my presence but when he has it made him rather happy, just as though he had had a few drinks.

She had been present ‘on two or three occasions [when] I saw small brown packages containing hemp and they would all roll themselves cigarettes and smoke them. I don’t think they were buying or selling the hemp but just meeting there to smoke it. Joe did not seem to be particularly friendly with any of the men who visited him’.²² She also revealed that on one occasion he had tried to conceal a parcel from her which she suspected contained cannabis. He had gone out with it and returned without it and she had assumed that he had sold it.

The police believed that cannabis was the reason for the meeting of the men, but decided that Manneh had resorted to violence in order to get hold of Aaku’s watch. The drug was not, in their opinion, in any way connected to the commission of the crime and rather simply explained how the men happened to be standing alone together in the flat. However, when the case went to trial, cannabis found itself in the dock. The prosecution was dismissive of the place of cannabis in the events that lead to the death of Aaku but the defence was intent on focusing attention on the packets of the drug. It called as its ‘expert’ one Dr Donald MacIntosh Johnson. His credentials were laid out for the court, he had medical degrees from London and Cambridge, was a Bachelor in Surgery and a Barrister-at-Law and a member of Gray’s Inn. He was also the author of a ‘special study’ of Indian hemp, a book called *Indian Hemp: A Social Menace* which was published in 1952, and a copy of which was presented to the court as Exhibit number 23.²³ Johnson gave evidence that ‘a few grains will send a person into a state of mania and violence’ and ‘in every country in which this vice is known, Indian hemp, or its equivalent marihuana, is associated with sudden outbreaks of violence’.²⁴ The doctor/surgeon/barrister agreed that ‘there is an overwhelming quantity of evidence ... that marijuana or Indian hemp, as it is called, is a thing which is closely linked with outbreaks of violence of a sudden and unexpected character’.²⁵

There was some confusion in the court as a result of this performance. The prosecution declined the opportunity to cross-examine Johnson as it did not seem clear to them why he had been called in the first place. The judge also seemed nonplussed. However, the defence lawyer, Mr Sarch, soon made his case. After explaining to the jury that the ‘murder’ of Joseph Aaku might have been in fact manslaughter or even a killing made in self-defence, he turned his attention to cannabis; ‘the possession on that scale by a man of Indian hemp on more than one occasion – on many occasions, because Maher, who had been with him for some time, did not say it was only once or twice – entitles you to infer that Aaku was a drug addict’.²⁶ Based on this inference, he argued that ‘assuming Aaku to have been become heavily under the influence [...] may he not quite well have made a frenzied

²² “Statements of Witnesses called at Magistrates’ Court”, pp. 3-6 in DPP2/2130.

²³ D.M. JOHNSON, *Indian Hemp: A social menace*, London: Christopher Johnson, 1952. The copy presented at court is contained in CRIM 1/2206, part 1.

²⁴ Transcript, p. 172.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

attack upon his visitor?' In case they were confused, he reminded the jury of the evidence of Johnson who he branded '*a most impressive witness*'.

There was no one in court to act for the defence of cannabis, and indeed Mr Humphreys of the prosecution was clear that '*I entirely accept the evidence given by Dr Johnson*'. He was more concerned to argue that there was no evidence whatsoever that anyone had smoked the drug on the night of the murder and therefore the defence was a '*fanciful theory*'.²⁷ The judge in his summing up was equally respectful of Johnson, repeating his assertion that '*the taking of this drug is closely linked with outbreaks of violence of an unexpected character*'. However, he also reminded the jury that they had heard much about the deceased's domestic life from Teresa Maher and that '*there is no evidence [...] to suggest that Aaku, during the time she was living in his house, had ever shown any signs of being a drug addict*'.²⁸ It took the jury less than two hours to reject the defence and to find Backary Manneh guilty of murder. He was sentenced to death and executed on 27 May 1952.

This case took place against a backdrop of lurid newspaper headlines stimulated by the publication of Johnson's book. '*Reefer Madness was Cause of Bread Madness: Doctor Reports*' was the headline in the *Daily Mirror* of that year, while the other papers went with similar reports, the *Daily Mail* leading with a headline '*Dope: Warning is Given by a Doctor today*', *The Star* weighing in with '*The Marijuana Menace*' and the *News Chronicle* contributing '*The Girl who Tried Reefer Smoking*'.²⁹ The book was full of lurid reports and conjectures. Moving from accounts of cannabis in Asia and Africa, he surveyed its recent popularity in the USA before moving to consider experiences in England. It reproduced a newspaper report published in the *Sunday Graphic* by the reporter John Ralph on successive Sundays in September 1951 which asserted that:

*As the result of my inquiries I share the fears of detectives on the job that there is the gravest danger of the reefer craze becoming the greatest social menace this country has known ... the other day I sat in a tawdry West End Club ... I watched the dancing. My contact and I were two of six white men. I counted 28 coloured men and some 30 white girls. None of the girls looked more than 25 ... 'the day will come', said the dusky Jesse, 'when this country will be all mixtures if we don't watch out. There will be only half-castes'.*³⁰

The book pointed to the increase in prosecutions in the UK for cannabis offences, and went on to consider the drug's mental effects; '*the extreme degree of stimulation that can occur brings mania*'.³¹ Johnson ended the book by suggesting that the accused in Russia's show-trials were numbed by cannabis, and by

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206-208.

²⁹ Headlines from 29 March 1952 and 31 March 1952 reproduced in D.M. JOHNSON, *A Doctor Returns*, London: Christopher Johnson, 1956, p. 124.

³⁰ D.M. JOHNSON, *Indian Hemp: A social menace*, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-49.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

suggesting that wheat imported into the UK from the Soviet Union was spiked with cannabis; *'what more effective weapon could there be for waging the Cold War than by promoting the use and consumption of noxious drugs within the ranks of your enemy that will corrupt his youth; and so rot your foe from inside so that he will crumble of his own accord? For such a purpose the hemp drug would be an admirable medium'*.³²

Johnson's book and the newspaper reports by John Ralph clearly reflect anxieties in a post-war Britain that was losing its Empire about racial miscegenation and Soviet power. Yet evidence from elsewhere does suggest that cannabis was crossing over from the West Indian to the local population. A Home Office Drugs Branch report of 1952 provided glimpses of a transference of interest in cannabis from the migrant to the indigenous population. One case was of Kathleen Nora Jacobs, a 19-year-old unemployed waitress in Liverpool. She was arrested when she was observed *'behaving in an excited manner'* and on a search of her bag she was found to have a small quantity of cannabis, estimated to be enough for three cigarettes. She confessed that she had obtained this *'from a public house frequented by men of colour'*, and that she earned a living by prostitution.³³

A second case involved 'two young girls, a typist, and a shop assistant, aged only 17, residing at Northampton [who] made one or two visits to London to visit 'modern music' dance clubs'. They evidently made friends at these venues as they exchanged letters with a man called Nwakanama, who they knew as Jimmy Demian.

*In one letter the typist asked Nwakanama to send her some 'doped cigarettes, reefers, marijuana or whatever you call the things', signing the letter in a false name and giving the other girl's address. Nwakanama replied to the letter, enclosing some Indian hemp, but the letter was intercepted by the girl's father, and the police informed. As a result a search warrant was obtained and in the man's flat a small quantity of Indian hemp and two letters from the girl typist were found. Nwakanama was arrested and eventually brought to trial at the Central Criminal Court on the 22nd November 1951. He did not avail himself of the services of counsel and stated in his defence that he did not smoke Indian hemp, alleging that the substance found in his room was put there by the police who made the search.*³⁴

It is not clear how wise his defence was, as he was sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment. What is clear, however, is that these reports show that those who moved in the same circles as the migrant population were not entirely uninterested in the cannabis which was the customary indulgence of many of their associates. Indeed, these stories hint at the interface at which consumption of the drug was entering the social life of the British working class. An earlier report in 1947 showed that it was not just the working class that had elements that were developing a taste for experimenting with new intoxicants. The Home Office noted

³² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

³³ Note by JHW 3 July 1952 in HO 344/32.

³⁴ Dangerous Drugs Branch, Annual Report 1951, p. 8 in HO 45/24948.

that of the thirteen arrests made for cannabis-related offences in that year, two had been white men.

*The two white men were both of a 'Bohemian' character, one was an author and the other an artist; both dwelt in Chelsea, where there is a well-established coterie of drug-addicts, many of whom have criminal records.*³⁵

While there is no evidence that consumers among the indigenous population were widespread or numerous in this period, such stories do point to a widening circle of those with an interest in consuming cannabis, and the relationships behind that developing interest.

Conclusions

This article has provided glimpses of both the cannabis market in the late 1940s and 1950s and the meanings that were attached to it. It is clear that the arrival of a migrant population from the West Indies, some of which settled permanently and some of which was a constantly changing and transient sector, stimulated a larger market for the drug than had ever existed in the UK before. West Indians used cannabis for recreational and medicinal purposes in similar ways to Asians, and in contexts where Europeans tended to use alcohol.

Reading through the sources from the period however gives a number of insights into the dynamics and tensions of a society that was dealing with immigration. In the first place publications from the period show how discussions of a drug could in fact be the vehicle for expressions of anxiety about racial miscegenation. The newspaper accounts produced by John Ralph, and quoted approvingly by the cannabis 'expert' Donald McIntosh Johnson, clearly represented cannabis as a weapon used by male immigrants to seduce women of the local population. In the discourse it was the drug that robbed white women of the sense not to sleep with black men, thereby rescuing the former from blame while constructing the latter as conniving and underhand. Quite simply, in tracing cannabis stories such as these historians can glimpse the racist tensions of the period.

However, the historical evidence can reveal more to historians than the racist anxieties of the local population. In the stories about Kathleen Nora Jacobs, the girls from Northampton and the night clubbers of London are clues as to the mechanism by which the UK population developed a taste for cannabis. Evidently not all members of the white population feared the migrants who were arriving from the West Indies, and it is clear that many were attracted to them. In associating with them and circulating with them socially, the habits of the new arrivals quickly became adopted by locals. Both British men and women occasionally surfaced in the records of the authorities as being in possession of cannabis in the 1950s, something that had been far more rare in previous decades. In understanding where the mass market for cannabis came from in contemporary Britain it is necessary to look back

³⁵ "The illicit traffic in Indian hemp in Great Britain since the war", Drugs Branch Home Office 4 February 1947 in HO344/32.

to the 1950s and to see the transfer of a habit from the migrant populations to the members of the host society.

Finally, it can be argued that the meanings attached to cannabis in the UK in subsequent decades were established in the experiences of 1950s Britain. Cannabis was associated with the '*unemployed coloured men ... from Africa and the British West Indies*' by the authorities in that decade. In other words, in the twilight period of Britain's empire, the drug was seen as representative of the colonial Other. As such, when the youth movements of the 1960s were casting around for a symbol which they could adopt in order to represent their challenge to the orthodoxies of their society, cannabis neatly fitted the bill. Quite simply, white, middle-class British youth seized upon cannabis as it was a potent symbol of the Other of their elders and of an establishment that was still swathed in the symbols of imperial superiority. The cannabis story of the 1960s was built upon the meanings attached to cannabis amidst the tensions and energies of a British society that had become more racially diverse throughout the 1950s.