



Cannabis: Evolution and Ethnobotany

Robert C. Clarke and Mark D. Merlin. 2013. University of California Press, Berkeley. 456 pp. \$95.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-520-27048-0.

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Much has been written about *Cannabis* and Robert Clarke and Mark Merlin are well known for their contributions to this literature. But their book, *Cannabis: Evolution and Ethnobotany* – a ‘labor of love’ as they call it, is a landmark publication in our knowledge of this important species. It is a comprehensive interdisciplinary study of the genus *Cannabis* that is well-researched, readable, richly illustrated, and timely. It is indeed a study of the evolution and ethnobotany of *Cannabis*, as indicated by its title and by content covering the ‘Natural Origins and Early Evolution of *Cannabis*’ (chapter two), ‘Hypotheses Concerning the Early Evolution of *Cannabis*’ (chapter 12), and discussion of ‘Classical and Molecular Taxonomy of *Cannabis*’ (chapter 11). What is not featured in the title, however, and yet is a fundamental feature of this interpretive summary that will make it of interest to a wide variety of readers, is the excellent historical perspective the book presents that links an ethnobotanical understanding of *Cannabis* as a multipurpose plant to its worldwide human dispersal from its origins in Central Asia.

Cannabis is best known for its psychoactive properties, which is today its most widespread use. Chapter seven discusses its psychoactive use in ritual and recreation, while chapter 13 looks at the ‘long-term’ coevolution of humans and *Cannabis*, including a case made for the social benefits from its psychoactive properties. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the focus of this 434 page work is on the psychoactive uses of *Cannabis* or the current debate

regarding its legalization and recreational use. This is a book about the significance of *Cannabis* in human history, with thoughtful speculations concerning its significance in prehistory and in human evolution that in time, whether proven right or wrong, will contribute to shaping future research. Chapters three, four, five, six, and eight cover in detail, from a variety of perspectives, the uses of *Cannabis* for fiber, food, oil, medicine, and feed, as well as its diverse uses in religious and recreational activities. Each of these broad areas of use is rich in details, as for example, the fascinating discussion of the use of hemp fiber and the account of the worldwide religious significance of psychoactive *Cannabis*.

Anyone interest in learning more about *Cannabis* from any point of view will find this book well worth reading and an indispensable reference. It has the feel of a text book and tabletop book combined, and is equally suitable to these uses. In addition to the many excellent black and white and color photographs, there are also a number of engravings, paintings, drawings, diagrams, and botanical illustrations that add to the value of this book. The authors provide a timeline entitled ‘*Cannabis* in History,’ an extensive bibliography, a thorough general index, and a number of helpful black and white and color maps which are essential to appreciating the global perspective this book presents and to following its broad historical sweep. *Cannabis: Evolution and Ethnobotany* is a welcome addition to our knowledge of this very significant plant.