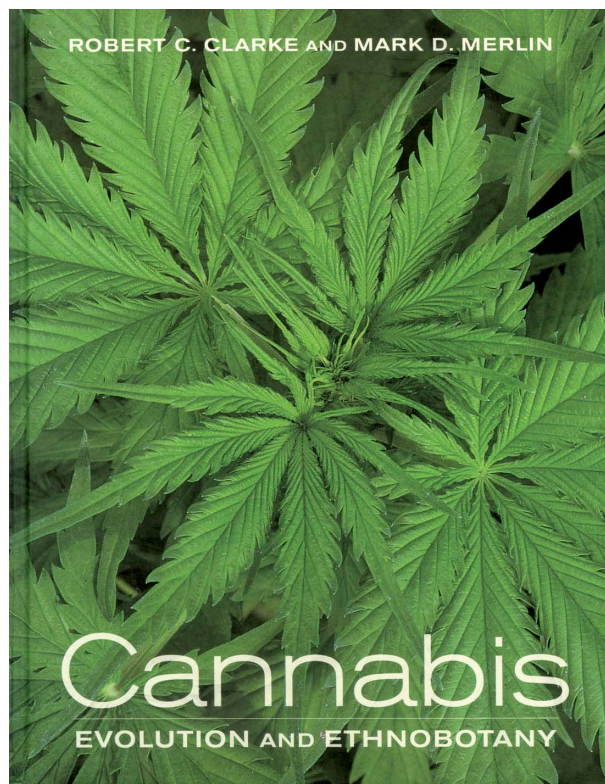


R.C. Clarke & M.D. Merlin (2013)
Cannabis: Evolution and Ethnobotany
xv + 434 pp., 204 illustrations.
Berkeley, University of California Press
ISBN 978-0-520-27048-0; US\$ 95.00



Whether you like it or not, cannabis as a title, a drug and a plant, will attract attention. In modern western culture it conjures up images of stoned students and chilled out Rastafarians. Yet *Cannabis sativa s.l.* has a far richer, varied and interesting history than modern stereotypes give it credit for. Clarke and Merlin have put together an encyclopaedic volume on the origins of cannabis and its many uses. In thirteen chapters they cover its use as a fibre, oil, food and drug. They cover its use since prehistoric times and in different cultures around the world, from medieval Russia to modern Korea.

The book is well illustrated with pictures and diagrams and these add greatly to the book's aim of documenting the ethnobotany of cannabis. One can explain so much in text, but seeing pictures of people growing cannabis plants and using cannabis products in their daily lives says so much more than words.

The book is well written, but I found the chapters sometimes lacked a coherent chain of thought. This is perhaps a problem faced by the authors who, on the one hand, try to include all the available information, but on the other hand,

want to form a consistent, readable narrative. It would have perhaps been better if the authors had stuck with one paradigm in writing this book, either encyclopaedia or documentary.

Given the recent rapid progress in molecular phylogenetics, the chapters on evolution and taxonomy are the likely to date rapidly. The taxonomy of cannabis is controversial and varies between authorities. In the book, the authors avoid classic taxonomy by classifying cannabis by the width of its leaflets and cannabinoid content. Given the undoubted introgression that has occurred in the anthropogenically evolved entity, that is modern cannabis, such a classification is a pragmatic solution.

The ethnobotanical and historical portion of the book is, in my opinion, by far its most valuable contribution. In contrast, I'm not convinced that the debate on *Cannabis*'s evolution is all that useful. Certainly, there is considerable pondering over its origins and I don't find this particularly constructive when there is barely any concrete evidence. Chapter twelve, for example, is titled "Hypotheses Concerning the Early Evolution of Cannabis", it is indeed a hypothesis, restating much of what is already known about world climate since the Pleistocene and suggesting where cannabis may have grown and how it could have evolved. Yet I did not find these many pages of speculation all that informative. In the absence of evidence it is easy to speculate, but it is not that fruitful.

Clarke and Merlin propose that man and cannabis "... have coevolved during their lengthy association...", which I find rather a stretch of the evidence. Certainly, cannabis has, and does, have an important role in some societies, but so have many other crop plants. Has cannabis been "shaping the future" of mankind? Yes, certainly to some extent, but then so have wheat, rice, potatoes, poppies and even apples. Clarke and Merlin clearly have an admiration for the influence that cannabis has had on the history and culture of mankind, but I feel their enthusiasm sometimes gets the better of them.

Where the book was lacking was in the modern experience of cannabis, particularly as a drug. For example, I could barely find a mention of Rastafarianism; nor were there details on law enforcement and the debate surrounding legalization.

This book is unlikely to be read cover-to-cover by many people. It will primarily be used as a reference book or jumping off point for future study. Given that the internet has largely supplanted the use of encyclopaedias, I suspect that it will be of most use to other ethnobotanists. To conclude, this book is a valuable reference on the subject, but I feel it could have been more succinct.

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