

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Mescaline: A Global History of the First Psychedelic** *by Mike Jay*

Hardback, 304 pages  
Yale University Press  
May 2019

Mike Jay has written a highly detailed but very readable and fascinating history of the use of mescaline through the ages. He describes two parallel worlds. The first is that of the native Americans and Andeans, using the San Pedro cactus in the Andes and the peyote cactus in Mexico to enable spiritual experiences, boost shamanic powers and to strengthen communities through group experiences, where hallucinations were a relatively minor issue and the social aspects reigned.

From the 19th century, the white Americans and Europeans tried to destroy this “religion”, demonstrating their complete ignorance of the reality of peyote use. They then, in turn, became fascinated by the cacti, but concentrated on their hallucinogenic properties, as they experienced the effects usually alone or under the scrutiny of a scientist and rarely as part of an act of social cohesion. As a result, the Western world concentrated on the visual hallucinogenic effects when the original users saw these as a minor aspect. The book chronicles the campaigns that came and went as the Western world tried to control the native American culture and understand the effects of mescaline, and how it might become a medical tool.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mescaline inspired theories on the cause of schizophrenia, but they proved erroneous even if they boosted its fascination for scientists. The 1960s cultural adoption of mescaline and other psychedelics, inspired by Aldous Huxley and other writers, brought it fully into western consciousness, whilst the Native American Church has spread the use of peyote through most native American cultures who never previously used it. The use of peyote is now as great as it has ever been. The high demand threatens its existence because commercial harvesting destroys the cactus. Now, we also have the Ayahuasca cult to parallel it, along with the use of many synthetic derivatives such as LSD and ecstasy.

*Mescaline* draws on a wide range of sources and is full of personal stories but draws many threads together. It taught me that the use of mescaline was advocated by the leader of the Church of Latter Day Saints as a religious tool, and that some of the content of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was inspired by hallucinogenic experiences, as well as by author Ken Kesey's experiences of working in a psychiatric hospital in order to illicitly access psychedelics after he had taken some doses in medical experiments.

This book sets itself up as the definitive social and medical history of mescaline and is certainly the most detailed and comprehensive available. It will appeal to anyone with an interest in psychedelic culture and is a very good read.

**Peter Carpenter**  
**December 2019**

Published online at [www.bshm.org.uk](http://www.bshm.org.uk).