

P.W. Barber. *Psychedelic Revolutionaries: LSD And the Birth of Hallucinogenic Research*. 384 pp., Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2018. \$34.95 (paperback), 9780889774209

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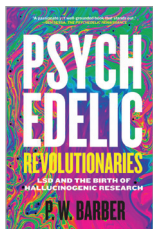
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In December 2020, Health Canada gave permission to a handful of healthcare providers, including doctors, nurses, and therapists, to use psilocybin—the psychoactive ingredient in “magic mushrooms”—as part of their professional training in psychedelic therapy. Just a few months earlier, the agency granted an exemption for a group of palliative care patients to legally use psilocybin. These moves reflect a larger trend in the medicalization of psychedelic drugs. But this trend is not new. Over 70 years ago, health professionals in North America and Europe were dosing their patients with LSD and psilocybin in the hopes of treating alcohol dependency, cancer-related anxiety, and other mental health problems. Many of those practitioners also took these drugs themselves to better understand what their patients were going through. One of these early practitioners was Humphry Osmond, a British psychiatrist who launched one of the most influential research groups in the first “wave” of psychedelic science—a period stretching from the early 1950s to mid-1970s—with the help of his colleagues Abram Hoffer and Duncan Blewett in Saskatchewan, Canada.

In *Psychedelic Revolutionaries*, P.W. Barber chronicles the rise and fall of the trio’s psychedelic experiments

to understand how their research came about, what ideas they put forth about psychedelic drugs, and why their work was subject to acidic critiques. Part of this task involves contextualizing psychedelic research within the broader scientific field. Similar to other recently published historical scholarship (i.e., Matthew Oram, *The Trials of Psychedelic Therapy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), Barber moves the conversation on psychedelic science away from its common association with the sixties counterculture, and instead, examines how transformations in postwar psychiatry impacted the innovations and controversies of hallucinogenic research. In the process, Barber reveals the ways in which scientific knowledge is intimately intertwined with its social environment.

Psychedelic Revolutionaries is divided into two parts. The first part covers the Saskatchewan-based team’s work during the period spanning 1951 to 1961. The opening chapters trace the trajectory of Osmond and his colleagues’ thinking about hallucinogens. Initially, Osmond and Hoffer took up mescaline as a means of testing biochemical theories of schizophrenia—a move that matched broader psychiatric conceptions of hallucinogenic drugs as psychotomimetic, or “madness mimicking.” Later joined by Blewett, the group’s research shifted towards studying the therapeutic potential of hallucinogens—after all, it was Osmond who coined the term “psychedelic” with the explicit intention of disentangling these substances from the “model psychosis” interpretation.

Barber shows the crucial contributions that the team made to psychedelic treatment models, particularly through their work using LSD to treat alcohol dependency.

The second half of the book delves into the later years—from 1961 to 1975—with a particular focus on the scientific backlash against psychedelic research. This portion of the book in particular delivers on Barber’s promise to demonstrate how larger transformations in science had trickled down, so to speak, to impact the legitimacy of psychedelic science, such as changing ideas about what constitutes “good” methodology (e.g. can randomized controlled methodologies be used to study *all* psychotropic drugs?) and what counts as an appropriate topic of study (e.g. can and should spirituality be subject to scientific scrutiny?).

In focusing on the Saskatchewan group, Barber follows in the footsteps of historian Erika Dyck, whose monograph, *Psychedelic Psychiatry* (2008, Johns Hopkins University Press), offered the first scholarly account of the Canadian research group. To be honest, I went into Barber’s book expecting it to more or less rehash what Dyck has already said, but I was pleasantly surprised to find a plethora of new material about this fascinating group. In particular, Barber’s incorporation of Duncan Blewett into the Saskatchewan story offers a look into the ideas of an important but

often ignored character in the history of psychedelic science—although, Barber’s suggestion that Blewett might have been the “Timothy Leary of Canada” felt like a stretch. That said, by highlighting the rifts between Blewett and his colleagues Osmond and Hoffer, Barber demonstrates the internal disagreements that were happening in psychedelic science alongside the critiques from the larger scientific community.

The book’s conceptual framework largely draws from the foundational work of scholars like Steven Shapin, Karl Popper, and Michael Polanyi. This literature, however, felt a bit dated. An engagement with more recent scholarship in science studies might add nuance to the larger arguments and make a more unique contribution.

But what the book lacks in theoretical depth, it more than makes up for in its empirical richness. Barber conducted extensive archival and historical research that is organized into a coherent narrative. What’s more, Barber accomplishes this using accessible prose, making the book readable not just for historians and sciences studies scholars but for nonacademic audiences as well. Indeed, *Psychedelic Revolutionaries* is well worth the read for anyone who wants to learn more about the history of psychedelic drugs in Canada or about the struggles for scientific legitimacy more broadly.
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