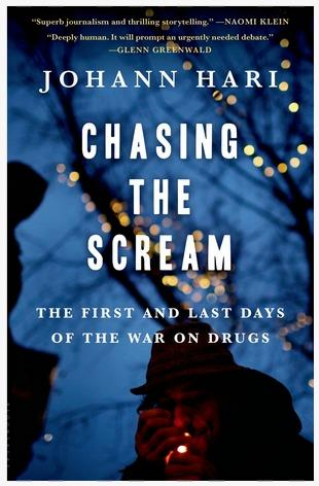

Book Review of *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*, Johann Hari, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015, 389 pp.

The author is an established British journalist. In the "Introduction" he explains that his research took him "across nine countries and thirty thousand miles, and it would last for three years (p. 2)." At the end of the Introduction, the author writes:

> It turns out that many of our most basic assumptions about this subject are wrong. Drugs are not what we think they are. Drug addiction is not what we have been told it is. The drug war is not what our politicians have sold it as for one hundred years and counting. And there is a very different story out there waiting for us when we are ready to hear it – one that should leave us thrumming with hope (p. 3).

I confess at the outset that so much of his material corresponded to what I have known as a longstanding practitioner in the criminal justice field.

Part I is called "Mount Rushmore". Chapter 1 is entitled "The Black Hand". The start of the war on drugs, the first shot fired, is by Harry Anslinger, whose face would be one of three carved into a Mount Rushmore for drug prohibition. The author proceeds to tell his story, one of many throughout the book. The first scream "chased" in the drug war was none other than that of Anslinger's own mother, who, Anslinger as a twelve-year-old discovered, was an addict. He learned his lesson from her screams: that drugs were the great "unhinging agent". Hari writes:

> When he grew into a man, this boy was going to draw together some of the deepest fears in American culture – of racial minorities, of intoxication, of losing control – and channel then into a global war to prevent those screams. It would cause many screams in turn. They can be heard in almost every city on earth tonight.
>
> This is how Harry Anslinger entered the drug war (p. 8).

We read similar accounts of how others entered the drug war: Arnold Rothstein as successful drug lord; Billie Holiday as brilliant jazz artist and drug addict. All three become larger than life in their relationship to drugs. Harry Anslinger became the ultimate drug law proponent and enforcer. There was a significant problem however: there was never scientific evidence to prove Anslinger right. In the end, all doctors/scientists who opposed Anslinger's point of view were destroyed through Anslinger machinations.

Racism was central to the war waged through Anslinger's eyes. Billie Holiday was Black and Anslinger made himself her nemesis; Judy Garland was White and an addict, but she was left alone by Anslinger. Racism also applied to the Chinese "Yellow Peril".

But the author muses that there is a Harry Anslinger in many of us. At least, the author avers, Anslinger's mission in life is defined by a poem addressed to him:

> Until the day that "the Great Judge proclaims: /'The last addict's died,'… Then – not till then – may you be retired." (p. 32).

In Chapter 2, "Sunshine and Weaklings", Hari uncovers an almost entirely forgotten story that "has the power to transform how we see this whole drug war (p. 33)." For, the author explains, right from the start of the drug war, there was resistance to it, of the kind Anslinger was determined to utterly eradicate, since it told a (truthful) different story from his.

The alternative understanding is the story of Henry Smith Williams, a doctor who lived in Los Angeles, and his brother, also a doctor: Edward Huntington Williams. The former began to suspect that Harry Anslinger worked for the Mafia (no such evidence has ever been forthcoming), so lucrative was the business of supplying illicit drugs due to prohibition, such as the Harrison Act of 1914, banning heroin and cocaine. In 1938, Henry Smith Williams published *Drug Addicts Are Human Beings*. The author thought it would expose the war on drugs led by Anslinger to be one giant fraud. He suggested that the crackdown on drugs was instigated by the Mafia in whose pay Anslinger no doubt was.

> The book contained a prediction. If this drug war continues, Henry Smith Williams wrote, there will be a five-billion dollar drug smuggling industry in the United States in fifty years' time. He was right almost to the exact year (p. 41).

However:

> The story of the Williams brothers, and all the doctors who were crushed alongside them, was so successfully wiped from America's collective memory that by the 1960s, Anslinger could say in public that doctors had always been his allies in the drug war. "I'd like to see," he told a journalist, "the doctor who claims he was treated in anything but the kindliest fashion." (p. 41)

Chapter 3, "The Barrel of Harry's Gun", tells the story of global prohibition, which by the 1960s was firmly established. Even though, as it turned out, by the time Anslinger stepped down from running the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, it was found that "the bureau itself was actually the major source of supply and protector of heroin in the United States." – in the words of historian John McWilliams.

In Chapter 4, "The Bullet at the Birth", Hari investigates the world of drug dealers. "The first man to really see the potential of drug dealing in America was a gangster named Arnold Rothstein… (p. 48)" We read at length his story. But,

> Every time [a drug dealer] is killed, a harder and more vicious version of him emerges to fill the space provided by prohibition for a global criminal industry… It is Darwinian evolution armed with a machine gun and a baggie of crack (p. 58).

The same obtains however for reincarnations of Harry Anslinger:

> Before this war is over, his successors were going to be deploying gunships along the coasts of America, imprisoning more people than any other society in

> human history, and spraying poisons from the air across foreign countries thousands of miles away from home to kill their drug crops… The policy of prohibition summoned these characters into existence, because it needs them. So long as it lives, they live (p. 58).

This takes us to Part II, "Ghosts", and three stories of:

> One [who] was trying to be Arnold Rothstein.
> One [who] was trying to be Harry Anslinger.
> And one who was sitting outside on her porch, playing with a doll (p. 58).

In Chapter 5, "Souls of Mischief", we are introduced to Chino Hardin, drug dealer. By story's/chapter's end, the author looks behind Hardin's story to discover

> that this story – of a street dealer – is only the story of the first layer of violence and criminality caused by transferring the drug trade into the illegal economy (p. 84).

Behind that, and successively, are gangsters controlling the neighbourhood; a network of smugglers; a mule who carried the drug across the border; a gang controlling the transit through whatever country to the U.S.; a gang controlling production of the drug; a farmer growing the opium or coca.

> And at every level, there is a war on drugs, a war for drugs, and a culture of terror, all created by prohibition. I started to think of Chino, and all he has been through, as only one exploded and discarded shell, left behind on a global battlefield (p. 84).

The next chapter (6), "Hard to Be Harry", tells the story mainly of Leigh Maddox, though after interviewing sixteen drug enforcement officers in all. After many years on the front lines of drug enforcement,

> Leigh was beginning to realize that while she went into this job determined to reduce murder, she was in fact increasing it. She wanted to bust the drug gangs, but in fact she was empowering them (p. 91).

She eventually found her way to become part of "Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP)".

Chapter 7, "Mushrooms" is pointedly short, telling the story of Tiffany Smith gunned down during a drug skirmish…

Part III, "Angels", begins with Chapter 8, "States of Shame". We learn of Sheriff Joe Arpaio, personally employed first by Henry Anslinger in 1957, and re-elected continuously as Sheriff since 1993 in Maricopa County, Arizona. Though "state of shame" is used by Sheriff Joe to depict female drug addicts in a forced chant as part of their imprisonment, the true "state of shame" is Arizona itself. The author intones:

> I keep looking at the statistics. The United States now imprisons more people for drug offenses than Western European nations imprison for all crimes combined. No human society has ever imprisoned this high a proportion of its population. It is now so large that if the U.S. prisoners were detained in one place, they would rank as the thirty-fifth most populous state of the Union.

> From the liberal state of New York to the liberal state of California, the jailing and torture of addicts is routine.

"State(s) of shame" indeed! The author chooses just one statistic: rape. The Justice Department estimates rape of men in U.S. prisons to be at 216,000 a year. This means "that the United States is almost certainly the first society in human history where more men have been raped than women (p. 109)."

The author tells the story of "Prisoner Number 109416" (Marcia Powell) who was cooked alive in a cell in the hot Arizona sun where the thermometer soared to 108 F. It is gruesome and tragic.

Chapters 9 & 10, "Bart Simpson and the Angel of Juárez", and "Marisela's Long March", tell the stories of three teenagers: "an angel, a killer, and a girl in love (p. 119). They all highlight the brutal drug cartels.

Part IV, "The Temple", begins with Chapter 11, "The Grieving Mongoose". It tells in part of the Temple at Eleusis where ancient Greeks gathered annually to participate in a massive drug party, likely developed from fungus. It was "revelry with religious reverence" – which was shut down by force subsequent to the conversion of Constantine to Christianity. "This "forcible repression by Christianity represents the beginning of systematic repression of the intoxication impulse in the lives of Western citizens." (p. 151), according to Stuart Walton in a book entitled *Out of It.*

No further research in the book under review is adduced in support of Walton's statement. A minor point really. But it is one of a few (only) barbed comments about (versions of) Christianity, such as evangelicalism one finds in Hari's book. I only draw attention to point out how readily misleading such information can be in generalizations about. Christianity (or any other entity). *Wikipedia* for instance tells a more nuanced story of the Eleusinian Mysteries – which were not *only* a big drug party! And *Atheist Delusions* (2009) by classicist David Bentley Hart underscores that the various ancient mystery religions were devoid of the central Christian ethic of charity. One quote from that book will suffice:

> Christian teaching, from the first, placed charity at the center of the spiritual life as no pagan cult ever had, and raised the care of widows, orphans, the sick, the imprisoned, and the poor to the level of the highest religious obligations… From the first century through the fourth, I think I can fairly say, no single aspect of Christian moral teaching was more consistent or more urgent than this law of charity (p. 164).

Hari asserts:

> Just as we are rescuing the sex drive from our subconscious and from shame, so we need to take the intoxication drive out into the open where it can breathe (p. 152).

To his credit, he does not blame ("Saint") Augustine for the West's sexual hang-ups, as he legitimately in part could have. He further cites Walton in calling "for a whole new field of human knowledge called 'intoxicology' " (p. 152). The drive is in all humans, the author claims. But, Hari wonders,

> This leaves us with another mystery. If the drive to get intoxicated is in all of us, and if 90 percent of people can use drugs without becoming addicted, what is happening with the 10 percent who can't (p. 152)?

The answer to that question covers the next two chapters, 10 & 11, "Terminal City" and "Batman's Bad Call".

Gabor Maté is a physician who has worked for years in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. In his book, *In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, another explanation of addiction is given, one relating to early childhood trauma, and coming to terms with it.

Another researcher, Bruce Alexander (at Simon Frasier University), began to discover that addiction was not a disease, rather an adaptation – to the environment one is in.

> If your environment is… a safe, happy community with lots of healthy bonds and pleasurable things to do – you will not be especially vulnerable to addiction. If your environment is… where you feel alone, powerless, and purposeless, you will be [especially vulnerable to addiction] (p. 174).

Hari writes:

> So Bruce [Alexander] believes, the gap between the 90 percent who use drugs without its causing a problem and the 10 percent who can't isn't set in concrete. It's the product of social circumstances – and it can change as social circumstances change (p. 174).

Dislocation is the words Alexander uses. Being cut off from meaning. He sets his ideas on this out in *The Globalization of Addiction*. Hari summarizes:

> Humans seem to have evolved with a deep need to bond, because it was absolutely essential to staying alive (p. 174).

A friend of Bruce Alexander, Professor Peter Cohen, suggests that "bonding" should replace "addiction".

An aside comment: For 2,000 years, and millennia longer, the Judeo-Christian tradition has understood a central way of being created in God's image, of being human, is loving interpersonal relationship. Just as God is a Trinity of loving relationship, so humans are wired (created) to be in relationship. This is recognized perhaps above all in the African concept of *Ubuntu* so foreign to Western concepts of being human: "a person is a person through other persons."

Hari found himself wanting to be convinced by Gabor and Alexander. When Hari tested this understanding with Robert DuPont, founder of NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse), which funds 90 percent of all research into illegal drugs in the world, Hari drew a blank. DuPont knew nothing of the research/work of Gabor and Alexander, doubted it more. For such scientists as DuPont "overwhelmingly focus on biochemistry and the brain (p. 178)." No one, Hari was told, funds studies into "how people use drugs out here on the streets (p. 178)." So the central idea of why people use drugs – because of their addictive qualities – is as hollow as smoke and mirrors, Hari concludes. And why do these ideas dominate? Because almost all research grant money comes from governments waging the war on drugs. To fund studies in the direction of Gabor and

Alexander would be a form of drug war suicide. If dislocation is the spreading disease that negates social bonding in other words, it is the very phenomenon *not* to study in relation to the war on drugs! Hari writes:

> The drug war began when it did because we were afraid of our own addictive impulses, rising all around us because we were so alone. So, like an evangelical preacher who rages against gays because he is afraid of his own desire to have sex with men, are we raging against addicts because we are afraid of our own growing vulnerability to addiction (p. 181)?

Hari further comments:

> If we think like this [Maté and Alexander], the question we need to answer with our drug policy shifts. It is no longer: How do we stop addiction through threats and force, and scare people away from drugs in the first place? It becomes: How do we start to rebuild a society where we don't feel so alone and afraid, and where we can form healthier bonds? How do we build a society where we look for happiness in one another rather than in consumption (p. 181)?

Hari believes that

> We haven't been able to reduce addiction… because we have been asking the wrong questions.
>
> … Cut off from one another, isolated, we are all becoming addicts – and our biggest addiction, as a culture, is buying and consuming stuff we don't need and don't even really want.
>
> Unless we learn the lesson… we will face a worse problem than the drug war. We will find ourselves on a planet trashed by the manic consumption that is, today, our deepest and most destructive addiction (pp. 181 & 182).

Hari turns to the issue of nicotine addiction to arrive at percentages attributable to the chemical content versus other factors. He observes:

> With the most powerful and deadly drug in our culture, the actual chemicals account for only 17.7 percent of the compulsion to use. The rest can only be explained by the factors Gabor and Bruce have discovered (p. 183).

Hari makes some sense of this by the distinction between physical dependence (say on caffeine), and an actual addiction which

> is the psychological state of feeling you need the drug to give you the sensation of feeling calmer, or manic, or numbed, or whatever it does for you (p. 184).

Hari avers:

> As a culture, for one hundred years, we have convinced ourselves that a real but fairly small aspect of addiction – physical dependence – is the whole show (p. 184).

Gabor Maté likens this to Newtonian versus quantum physics. Newtonian physics simply does not deal with the heart of things.

This entire section of the book is central, and warrants close reading.

Part V, "Peace", tells the story of "The Drug Addicts' Uprising" (Chapter 14). This includes the story of Bud Osborn, a Vancouver Downtown Eastside addict who

effected lasting change in that community through standing up for himself, and inspiring scores of addicts to do the same. One profound outcome was seeing the average addict's life expectancy jump by ten years in the Downtown Eastside!

A closely intertwined story is of Mayor Philip Owen's resistance to the Bud Osborn imitative, and his eventual dramatic change of heart.

Hari tells other stories of similar dramatic turn-abouts in Chapter 15, "Snowfall and Strengthening". He also discusses the prescription drug crisis beginning on page 225. He asks and answers three main questions in this section, well worth reading.

Chapter 16, "The Spirit of '74", discusses Portugal where all drugs were decriminalized in 2001. Hari sums up the positive results for Portugal thus:

> In a true democracy, nobody gets written off. Nobody gets abandoned. Nobody's life is declared to be not worth living. That was this spirit of the revolution [of 1974]. The revolution lives (p. 255).

Chapter 17, "The Man in the Well", tells the story of Uruguay that legalized marijuana. He explains:

> When you decriminalize, you stop punishing drug users and drug addicts – but you continue to ban the manufacture and selling of the drugs. They are still supplied by criminal drug dealers. When you legalize, you set up a network of stores or pharmacies or prescription where users and addicts can buy their drugs (pp. 263 & 264).

One outcome of such policy is "Legalization slightly increases drug use – but it significantly reduces drug harms (p. 266)." Further, legalization also, including decriminalization, from Portugal's experience, saw addictions fall substantially. Why? Because users were no longer trapped in cycles of shaming, caging, and being rendered unemployable. But overdoses in such cases also fall. Why? Two big reasons: clean drugs are now available to users instead of those laced with unknown, often deadly, substances like fentanyl. Two, the "iron law of prohibition" makes users turn to the strongest, and most deadly, drugs when there is prohibition.

But what about legalizing meth and crack? The reality is, Hari indicates (p. 270), only a tiny percentage exposed to the drug ever become addicted – at most 20 percent.

Beginning on page 271, the author draws up a kind of balance sheet on whether to support legalization, and for which drugs. It is worth reading why the author opts for legalization: arguments such as thereby crippling the drug cartels; making it harder for teenagers to access drugs; emptying the prisons of jailed drug users. In short, the author states, "I can't support a policy that sacrifices people… (p. 273)

Chapter 18, "High Noon", discusses the legalization of the sale of marijuana in Colorado and Washington State.

Hari sums up thus:

> [In Colorado and Washington State] all the killing – from Arnold Rothstein to Chino's gang to the Zetas – is being replaced by contracts. All the guns are being replaced by subordinate clauses. All the grief is being replaced by regulators and taxes and bureaucrats with clipboards.
>
> This, it occurs to me, is what the end of the drug war looks like (p. 290).

In the final chapter (19), "Conclusion", Hari writes:

> In the 1930s, Harry Anslinger recanted his support for alcohol prohibition. He wrote: "The law must fit the facts. Prohibition will never succeed through the promulgation of a mere law if the American people regard it as obnoxious. Temperance by choice is far better than the present condition of temperance by force." If this logic had been extended to a few more substances, the drug war graveyard would still be a rolling green field (p. 294).

He also utters a challenge:

> If you are alone, you are vulnerable to addiction, and if you are alone, you are vulnerable to the drug war. But if you take the first step and find others who agree with you – if you make a connection – you lose your vulnerability, and you start to win. You can put down this book and make that connection now (p. 297).

Hari concludes the book by telling us how Harry Anslinger became both a drug dealer, and a drug addict. He conjectures, upon Anslinger's first use of the outlawed drug that Anslinger might consequently have heard "at last, the dying of the scream (p. 298)."

No review of this length, or by me, can do the book justice. It is an amazingly well-done story, or a series of stories, of the persons caught up in the century-long war. It is meticulously researched, but the notes are all at the back of the book and in no way intrude on the superb story-telling. It is a compelling case that Hari builds. He invites real-life further involvement and information gathering at the book's end, giving means of following through.

On principle I have opposed all war for decades. This book tells me why the war on drugs has been such an overwhelmingly waste of resources and countless lives. It squares with all that I have learned from having worked 40 years in the criminal justice system. Yet, the war rages on. In the election period in Canada of 2015, the Prime Minister again is making it an election issue, as he does the war against two other kinds of enemies, one domestic, the other international: "criminals" and "jihadists". Sadly, as so often proves to be, Canada's Prime Minister shows himself in his very support of the drug war to be the real criminal, the real jihadist, the real addict, a man truly alone in his dangerous views.

Get this book and read it is my short-term advice. What one does then is up to us all.