

Also noticed

Smoke down our lungs and smoke up our asses

The Cigarette Century:

The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product That Defined America.

Allan M Brandt

New York: Basic Books, 2009. 600 pp. Illustrations, references, sources, index.

Allan M Brandt is, amongst other things, a Professor of the History of Medicine at Harvard and is thus well qualified to chart the epidemiological story of cigarette smoking and health issues. However, the book is a lot more than that. It's also a compelling study of the culture of cigarette smoking, the rise of the tobacco industry within a capitalist economy (his analysis would be a credit to any Marxist historian), a documentation of advertising and marketing and its rise within a consumer economy, the politics of tobacco, and the legal trials of Big Tobacco versus The Law.

It's an exhilarating book about a sordid and duplicitous industry that believes everything and everybody is fair game for subverting. Now, this may not be news to anyone aside from the Revd Blair, but to read the cumulative and ongoing evidence here is a sobering experience. Big Tobacco is Big Money and the industry soon learnt that there was no problem that couldn't be solved by throwing greenbacks at it.

Brandt is a very engaging writer and his lucid prose is a joy to read even when he's discussing highly detailed analyses of what constitutes medical statistical proof or the minutiae of complex legal arguments. He's also a wizard at the telling phrase with a sucker punch: 'By the late 1980s, the tobacco companies recognised that second-hand smoke posed a potentially life-threatening risk — to the industry.'

Aside from his merits as an historian I'd also describe Brandt as a *mensch*. Here are his last words at the end of the book:

'...it is equally critical that this past not be purchased and subverted by the interests of the [tobacco] industry. At one time, I worried that serving as an expert witness might be perceived as compromising the integrity and persuasiveness of this book. I have put this concern to

rest. Historians are hardly exempt from the common duty to contribute to public life and civil society. It seems to me now, after the hopes and disappointments of the courtroom battle, that we have a role to play in determining the future of the tobacco pandemic. If we occasionally cross the boundary between analysis and advocacy, so be it. The stakes are high, and there is much work yet to do.'

Anthony Frewin

Empire of Illusion
The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle

Chris Hedges

New York: Nation Books, 2009

I hadn't read Hedges before and his Wiki entry told me, *inter alia*, that in 2002, Hedges was part of the team of reporters at *The New York Times* awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the paper's coverage of global terrorism. He also received in 2002 the Amnesty International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism.

He has written a study of contemporary American society, in sorrow and anger – this is a protracted cry of rage, really – which concludes that really bad things are just around the corner. Yes, he lines up the usual suspects: TV, corporate power, the military-industrial complex, the failure of journalism and the corruption of politicians. But he finds new angles on most of it.

Having lived through the post-WW2 American expansion and absorbed large chunks of its cultural broadcasting (jazz, blues, pop, literature), for me this prospect is depressing and cheering: depressing because it is going to be dreadful; and cheering because the whole ghastly murderous, deluded fiasco is is going down the tubes.

This is powerful, gripping stuff. Highly recommended.

Here's a recent paragraph from an article Hedges wrote (and similar paragraphs are on many pages here) which conveys his conclusion and tone better than I could.

'There are no constraints left to halt America's slide into a totalitarian capitalism. Electoral politics are a sham. The media have been debased and defanged by corporate owners. The working class has been impoverished and is now being plunged into profound despair. The legal system has been corrupted to serve corporate interests. Popular

institutions, from labor unions to political parties, have been destroyed or emasculated by corporate power. And any form of protest, no matter how tepid, is blocked by an internal security apparatus that is starting to rival that of the East German secret police. The mounting anger and hatred, coursing through the bloodstream of the body politic, make violence and counter-violence inevitable. Brace yourself. The American empire is over. And the descent is going to be horrifying.'

Robin Ramsay

Unperson
A life destroyed
Dennis Lehane

London: Quartet Books, 2009, £20.00

This is not Dennis Lehane the American crime writer of that name. This is Denis (one 'n') Lehane, the co-author with Martin Dillon of the 1973 Penguin Special *Political Murder in Northern Ireland*. Lehane was a journalist and this book is his account of what befell him when he declined to be recruited by the CIA. Although mostly an account of how a life can turn to shit if the spooks start playing with it, this is of significance because of the names that Lehane names.

Lehane was awarded a Harkness Fellowship to go and study in the USA and discovered that the Harkness scheme is a front for an intelligence recruitment operation. Bright young things (though not so young in Lehane's case) go the States where the CIA can give them a look over and recruit the best. When Lehane declined to be recruited he became a man – worse, a journalist – who knew something he shouldn't and the Agency and its various allies in the US and here set about discrediting him. Lehane attempted for almost 20 years to get his version of reality taken seriously by a thick slice of great and the good in UK public life, without success. When it comes to it most people put career and reputation ahead of something as relatively trifling as the truth.

This is an important addition to the collection of stories of innocent individuals who are trashed by the state simply to save it from embarrassment. (CF Malcolm Kennedy's story in this issue.)

Robin Ramsay

