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*Thai Stick: Surfers, Scammers, and the Untold Story of the
Marijuana Trade* by Peter Maguire and Mark Ritter (review)

James Bradford

Enterprise & Society, Volume 19, Number 4, December 2018, pp.
1020-1022 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press



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chain stores of the last century nor modern megastores like Walmart have successfully eradicated the independent grocer from American society. Further, Spellman argues, independent grocers' willingness to share information and construct trade networks, sales cooperatives, and wholesale syndicates to outfox chain stores, wholesaler combinations, and trusts forced those larger entities to compete with the independent grocer, not vice versa. The networks established by these independent grocers dramatically contradict any view of local grocers as backward, and instead recast the local, individual store operator as a key player in a complex web of interconnected stores, markets, and cash flows. Spellman's devoted attention to examining the real complexity of independent grocery networking is another contribution to the greater historical narrative worthy of praise.

Only three distractions—the absence of a clear definition of small business, a foray into the invention and sales genesis of the cash register and the National Cash Register company, and a conclusion that jumps from the New Deal to a brief diatribe against Walmart, distract slightly from the narrative's flow, although one hopes Spellman will devote future volumes exclusively to the cash register and to independent grocers in the postwar era. The cash register chapter in the text, while a distraction, unquestionably merits expansion in a future volume.

Overall, *Cornering the Market* is a worthy addition to the historical conversation about independent businesses in America and is essential reading for anyone studying business in the Gilded Age.

Gregory Carter

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

E-mail: greg1832@siu.edu

doi:10.1017/eso.2018.24

Published online October 2, 2018

Peter Maguire and Mark Ritter. *Thai Stick: Surfers, Scammers, and the Untold Story of the Marijuana Trade*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. xxxiv + 272 pp. ISBN-13 978-0-231-16135-0, \$19.95 (paper).

In the last several years, marijuana has had a “coming out” of sorts. Gone are the days of Reefer Madness or hippies and the counterculture movement; they are now replaced by professional weed entrepreneurs and 4/20 festivals. Marijuana is now integrated into the American economy and culture unlike ever before. But how did we get here? As Peter Maguire and Mark Ritter argue in their book *Thai Stick: Surfers, Scammers, and the Untold Story of the Marijuana Trade*, marijuana's

normalization is due in large part to a global smuggling trade that helped fuel the growing demand for marijuana. Maguire and Ritter focus on the “voices of a voiceless group that was conspicuously absent” from marijuana historiography, that of the marijuana smuggler (xxxii). *Thai Stick* aims to show how this obscure, but essential, group of surfers, hippies, and entrepreneurs emerged as key agents of the global marijuana trade, which clearly influences America and the world today.

Thai Stick is ambitious, considering the difficulties of researching the illicit drug trade using traditional historical methods. As they note, “there are no smuggling archives and state records only document the victories of law enforcement” (xxxii). But to tell the history of marijuana smuggling, *Thai Stick* has to defy convention. It does so through its methodology. This book is primarily an oral history, but also part autobiography, resulting in a narrative that could be described as cultural or business history, or even anthropological or sociological analysis. This methodological approach stems primarily from the authors themselves. Maguire is a historian, but one who grew up surfing the California shores surrounded by the very smugglers being analyzed. Ritter, on the other hand, was a direct player in this game, and his recollections of people, places, and key events serves as the glue for much of this narrative. What they have created is an important, and much needed, account of the emergence, growth, and eventual downfall of a key aspect of the global marijuana trade.

Much of *Thai Stick* centers on the theme of how a ragtag group of surfers adapted to the changing legal and economic landscape of the illicit marijuana trade and helped turn marijuana into one of America’s most influential industries. As Maguire and Ritter note, surfers were more than marginal figures in American society; they were ideal for navigating the contours of the illicit global marijuana trade. The authors state that “the transition into the black market was not a stretch for thrill seekers who had traditionally come from the margins of American society. Not only did surfing provide excellent cover, but in a few nervous days or hours, one could earn enough money to pay for years of surfing dreams” (p. 3).

The book evokes two eras in the smuggling of drugs. The first four chapters, in particular, focus on a more naïve period for Ritter and the others involved. In chapters 1 and 2, for example, Maguire and Ritter provide a broad historical picture of how the political and social chaos of the 1960s, spurred by the countercultural movement, lured surfers like Ritter beyond the waves of California. But by chapter 3, when Ritter smokes the Thai sticks, and “his Thai seduction was complete” (p. 52), the more entrepreneurial components of the book take shape. Unlike hashish from Afghanistan or Nepal, “if you had Thai sticks (reverently known as Buddha Sticks), you named the price—consumers happily paid 10 times more than anyone had

ever paid for marijuana before" (p. 53). More important, the Thai marijuana trade offered no barriers of entry, as it was dictated by "the economic law of supply and demand," not by larger cartels and criminal organizations" (p. 54). If one had the will, the way was apparently quite easy.

As the book progresses, Maguire and Ritter demonstrate how a cat-and-mouse game unfolded between the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and marijuana smugglers. In particular, after Nixon launched the War on Drugs, which gave law enforcement far greater leverage in going after the illicit drug trade, smugglers had to adapt to an increasingly risky environment. Despite the immense risks, many continued to reap huge profits from smuggling Thai marijuana. What Maguire and Ritter chronicle is how these vagabond drug smugglers succeeding in the face of an ever-expanding American anti-drug apparatus. Ultimately, the DEA failed to understand the structure of the Thai marijuana trade, assuming it was far more hierarchical and structured than it actually was, when it was in fact "never so orderly ... no one person controlled it" (p. 91). Tim Nicholson, one of Ritter's colleagues, states, "We were disorganized crime. It was just a bunch of idiot surfers ... It was a very loose hierarchy" (p. 86). The end result was a remarkably lucrative, albeit disorganized, trade. Toward the latter end of the 1980s, smugglers like Ritter could fetch upward of \$30 million for smuggling ten kilos of Thai sticks, worth more than the price of gold (p. 154).

Thai Sticks is an unorthodox history. Although at its core an oral history, the multidisciplinary approach provides much needed nuance to a critically understudied aspect of the global illicit drug trade. The presentation of the various stories entangled with the broader history of drugs creates an academically nuanced but also entertaining read. In many ways, this book, in its methodology and narrative, is a reflection of the very characters it analyzes and exposes, and this is why the book works. For students of the history of drugs, American history, business history, and even of business programs themselves, this is an important book. For those heralding the "coming out" of marijuana, this book is a critical read. Much of what is happening today in terms of decriminalization or legalization of marijuana is due in part to the surfers who dared to bring Thai sticks to American shores.

James Bradford

Berklee College of Music

E-mail: jtbradford@berklee.edu

doi:10.1017/eso.2018.25

Published online October 2, 2018