The story of opium

High and mighty

Milk of Paradise: A History of Opium. By

Lucy Inglis. Pegasus Books; 448 pages;

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UNTINGDON,WestVirginia,isdying.

As a share of the town’s population,

overdoses kill more than ten times the

American average. Startling numbers of

babies are reportedly addicted to opioids

at birth. The country at large is suffering,

too: 42,000 Americans died from opioid

overdoses in 2016, compared with 58,000

fatalities in the Vietnam war. This is not

howthingswere meantto be. Scientists de-

veloped opioidsto dull pain, notcause it.

AsLucyInglisrecountsin hersweeping

new history of opium, the tension be-

tween the substance’s medicinal virtue

and itsdangersisancient. From their earli-

est uses, opium and its cousins have both

soothed and troubled people. Roman

herbalists used the drug to combat dysen-

tery, even as they warned against the

“chilled extremities” and “laboured

breath” ofoverdosing. Two thousand years

later, a doctor anguished by the addictive

power ofmorphine reflected that no drug

“hasbeen so greata blessingand so great a

curse to mankind”.

Ms Inglis untangles these contradic-

tions with gusto, guiding readers from

primitive Neolithicexperimentswith pop-

pies to the modern “war on drugs”. Her

narrative is propelled by savagery and

greed. In 1621the Dutch helped secure trade

in the East Indies (which included opium)

bymurderingand enslaving13,000 people

on the islands east of Java. Two centuries

later Victorian merchants got rich by forc-

ingthe “vile dirt” into China, spawningan

estimated 12m addicts.

Yetifthe opium trade led to violence, vi-

olence has also led to the development of

innovative applicationsforopium. The sy-

rette, a sealed single-use dose of painkill-

ingmorphine, emerged from the mud and

guts of the first world war. Severely

wounded troopsin Afghanistan have been

treated usinglollipopslaced with fentanyl,

apowerful syntheticopioid.

Ms Inglis does not just trace the arc of

history. She wallowsin the exoticdetails of

her story—from the sharpened bamboo

the Chinese used to fight British interlop-

ers, to the heroin pills“flavoured with rose-

water and coated with chocolate” that

were once sold over the counter. Remark-

able personalities scamper past. Ralph

Fitch, an Elizabethan adventurer and opi-

um trader, returned with tales of the king

of Thailand and his pet white elephants,

all “dressed in cloth ofgold”. Antoine Gué-

rini foughtforthe French resistance before

makingitbigin the heroin business. There

are energetic descriptions of drug culture,

from the Romanticpoetsto David Bowie.

Sometimes“MilkofParadise” readslike

fiction. Occasionally the author over-

crowdsthisnarrative with incidental char-

acters; in whatisa panoramicsurvey, she is

prone to the odd tendentiousclaim. None-

theless, thisisa deeplyresearched and cap-

tivatingbook. The final chapters, in which

Ms Inglis escapes the archives, are espe-

ciallycompelling.

Her interviews provide rich insights

into the modern heroin trade. Asked if his

family grows poppies, one Afghan farmer

is blunt. “Sure. Who doesn’t?” A study of

the online drug world is similarly reveal-

ing. One forum helped addicts avoid dan-

gerous, fentanyl-spiked heroin. The Silk

Road website facilitated over a million

drug transactions in just two years. Like

opium itself, Ms Inglis discovers, the inter-

nethasbeen both a blessingand a curse.