

Book Reviews

Through the eyes of some of the women—and many of their accounts are available—she shows how the medical consequences developed and the attitude of employers towards the accumulating weight of medical evidence showing the effects of the ingestion of radium. Derisory sums were paid in out of court compensation for the early cases. An ineffectual Bill was passed in 1926 which precluded claims for compensation for injuries caused before that date. It was difficult to prove that the main employers (US Radium) knew before 1926 that they were doing harm to their employees or that they had failed to take adequate measures to safeguard them. Clark explores the attitudes, compromises, and sometimes downright dishonesty of company officials, their lawyers and some of the medical experts involved. The reaction of the public and press at the time are very well described. Later the factories moved to Illinois, where one factory owner, Joseph Kelly, translocated his business to Ottawa, setting up in an old school house. It is clear that the exposure greatly diminished in the 1930s, but women continued to work in unsafe conditions with no official standards in place until 1941. Even in 1943 it was calculated that 15 per cent of workers were receiving more than the “tolerance” dose of radium.

The social and political climate in which this industrial poisoning occurred are very well documented in this book. It is, of course, a description of US labour laws and practices, but it has uncomfortable similarities with the difficulties encountered in enforcing safety standards for asbestos workers in the UK.

The book is a considerable achievement. In my opinion the medical part is not fully described—it is very much more fascinating than Clark’s account—but this was not her point in writing. It is a salutary and sobering story of the damage inflicted on a very vulnerable group of young women and of the reactions of confusion, denial, subterfuge and sometimes frank dishonesty which the emerging facts provoked.

Robert Souhami,
University College London Medical School

Roger Cooter and Bill Luckin (eds), *Accidents in history: injuries, fatalities and social relations*, Clio Medica 41, Wellcome Institute Series in the History of Medicine, Amsterdam and Atlanta, Rodopi, 1997, pp. x, 273, Hfl. 40.00, \$25.00 (paperback 90-420-0093).

The phrase “accidents in history” perhaps suggests a historiographical volume encompassing such “what if” questions as: would the First World War have happened if Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s chauffeur had not attempted a three-point turn in the streets of Sarajevo in June 1914? But this volume is more concerned with the automobile as an engine of destruction (exclusively so in the case of Bill Luckin’s study of road traffic accidents in Second World War Britain) than it is with either the assassin’s bullet or the so-called “accidents of history” with which historians have such fun. Billed, in part, as the product of a one-day conference held at the Institute of Historical Research in 1991, the collection actually includes only one of the papers presented on that occasion. The single survivor is Roy Porter’s characteristically erudite and entertaining essay on ‘Accidents in the eighteenth century’. For the rest we have chapters on the philosophy and sociology of accidents, accidents in the home, on the road, and at work, disease and risk management, the rise of the civilian ambulance movement, and reasons for a temporary surge of public interest in accidents during the late nineteenth century. The spatial and temporal spread of these contributions encompasses Europe and North America from the eighteenth century to the present day, though within these boundaries Britain, Germany, and the USA in the period 1870–1945 loom particularly large.

One of Cooter and Luckin’s main objectives in this volume is to rescue accidents involving physical injury and death from the historical neglect they have supposedly suffered. That the history of accidental injury has been insufficiently considered is no doubt true, though, as the select, but still extensive, bibliography supplied here indicates, the point

should not be exaggerated. Certainly, further investigation is justified if only because of the statistical and demographic significance of accidental injury and death. In Britain in 1991 more than 50 per cent of deaths among minors (aged 5–14) were attributed to accidents, while in the same year accidents were the commonest cause of death for people in the age range 19–34. Infants are hard hit by domestic accidents, while road traffic continues to kill the British at a rate of around 4000 per year, with younger age groups suffering disproportionately to their numbers. In other periods and places the accident toll was higher still. As a former US Commissioner of Labor observed in 1913, American industry had no equal in terms of the “maiming and mangling and killing of those who attempt to earn their bread in the sweat of their faces”.

Perhaps paradoxically, in light of the foregoing, much of this volume, including the editors’ stimulating and incisive introduction, is concerned with denying the existence of the subject under consideration. In other words, insofar as a common argument is presented here, it is that accidents, in the sense of arbitrary occurrences devoid of social, economic, cultural, or political meaning, do not exist. While it is true that accidents have causes and consequences, some of which may lie far from the scene of injury, and also that, for example, the industrial working class is more likely to suffer a workplace injury than the aristocrat or capitalist, it is equally plausible that the identity of any given victim will also owe something to a phenomenon which, for want of a better word, we might call “chance”. In this sense it can be said that accidents, like the poor, are always with us.

The editors of this volume, both of whom have previously written on their subject, are to be congratulated on putting together a wide-ranging collection which provides a valuable introduction to the subject while indicating that there is much scope for further work.

Peter Bartrip,
Nene University College, Northampton

Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Creating born criminals*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1997, pp. xi, 284, illus., \$36.95 (0-252-02237-8).

The title neatly encapsulates Rafter’s central argument: that biological theories of crime “create” criminals by categorizations which reflect nothing more scientific than power relationships and professional interests. Rafter, needless to say, is a self-confessed disciple of Foucault, and throughout applies a Foucauldian approach to her reconstruction of eugenic theories of crime and assessment of their impact on criminal justice practices. This is a “definitional” history which treats “born-criminal discourses as a series of texts that created social-truths” (p. 9), and scientific knowledge as a “resource in the structuring of power and social organisation” (p. 10). Her main contention is that in the period 1870 to 1920 “*eugenic criminology*” (defined loosely and anachronistically) “constitutes a distinctive set of criminological discourses” (p. 7) which have been underestimated in previous works on eugenics and criminology.

The deficiency is made good by a narrative account of the evolution of eugenic criminology and its interactions with asylums for the retarded and prisons for criminals in New York state. Essentially, eugenic criminology is treated as “a story of widening jurisdictional claims” (p. 28), and Rafter ably connects theoretical developments with professional interests. Different phases of eugenic labelling, from moral imbecile, through defective delinquent, to psychopath, are carefully distinguished and each stage presented as a further refinement of “professional legitimation”. Eugenics is not so much appropriated as developed by “psychiatrists, psychologists, prison physicians, social workers, and institution superintendents” keen to excuse their own failures, justify funding for their institutions and establish their own authority, as part of an “emerging professional middle class” (pp. 86–7).

Rafter uses nuanced definitions of the different stages of eugenic criminology to build