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Book review

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Tom Crook and Mike Esbester (eds), *Governing Risks in Modern Britain: Danger, Safety and Accidents c.1800-2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. xiv+315, £63.00, hardback, ISBN:978-1-137-46744-7.

To the editors' credit, this book is an example of an edited collection with a single voice. Taking risks in their multiple contexts, it convincingly argues that risk and its management are a useful means for rethinking how Britain has been governed over the past two hundred years and more. Individual chapters examine an eclectic variety of risks, dangers and accidents, including drowning, gas leaks, poisoning, traffic accidents and environmental pollution. Each contributor is subsequently drawn to the ways that such risks challenge and normalise everyday social interactions, and are even, in some cases, resisted by those who feel disenfranchised by state bureaucracy. There is much here of relevance to historians of medicine, not least in the emergence of the state's legislative responsibility for public safety, the professionalisation and specialisation of safety as a field of concern, and the regulation of dangers in specific sites, notably the home, the workplace and on the street. Whilst chapters can certainly be read individually, this book is more than the sum of its parts and worth reading in its entirety.

The book benefits from an excellent introduction by the two editors, Tom Crook and Mike Esbester, who situate its themes within the fledgling historiography on risk. They subsequently outline the theoretical contributions made in recent decades to understanding the 'age of risk' (p. 10) that we live in today, drawing particular attention to Ulrich Beck's important work. Moreover, the book's conclusion, jointly written by the editors with Arwen Mohun and Thomas Le Roux, makes a strong case for comparative and international research into the evolving governance of risk in western capitalist societies. As Chris Otter and Timothy Cooper remind us in their chapters, knowledge of risks spread unevenly because accidents remain localised events, but they also reverberate further afield, which offers greater scope for comparative research in future studies.

The book is a little unevenly organised into four sections (early risk societies, environmental risks, mobility and leisure risks, and occupational risks), but this does reflect the breadth of original scholarship on show. Taking the work of the sociologist of risk, Ulrich Beck, as a general framework for the book, a clear chronology shifts from the early risk societies of the eighteenth century to the more recognisable risk societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet whereas Beck's work focused on the post-Second World War period as the age of risk, the chapters in this volume identify earlier periods where risk significantly influenced the governance of British society. The chapters by Francis Dodsworth, Ryan Vieira, and Chris Otter are particularly good at historicising the development of risk society, in ways that the sociological literature is not. Dodsworth locates an embryonic culture of risk management in the field of policing in the late eighteenth century. Vieira stresses the cultural production and dissemination of risk in his chapter. He takes the enormous public interest in accidents, and charts the rise of the 'single accident article' (p. 57) in early nineteenth-century London newspapers as evidence of the significance of risk to social relationships. Otter's gripping synthesis of the evolving materiality of risk stresses the contradictions to new technologies and chemicals, which, whilst designed to be socially useful, have brought new forms of pain, chronic illnesses and death. For example, whilst the growing use of synthetic materials like benzene and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) brought initial benefits to industry, they are also substances with molecularly specific risks, which have endangered ecosystems and animals as well as human health.

Later chapters provide detailed case studies of the sort of unintended risks generated by new technologies. Tom Crook's chapter on sewer gas and Rebecca Whyte's on the dangers of carbolic acid in disinfectants clearly demonstrate the contingent and contested

nature of public health policies. The growing use of chemical disinfection products in the late nineteenth century, for example, helped health experts and mothers kill germs in the home, whilst simultaneously generating anxieties about their use in suicides during the 1890s, which led to a successful campaign by professional groups to better regulate their sale. Later chapters, by Bill Luckin on the history of drink driving in Britain, and Chris A. Williams on the role that the police played in enforcing, educating, and engineering safer driving in the early twentieth century, continue this theme. Police experts like Arthur Bassom and Herbert Tripp were integral in collating statistical information on road accidents and traffic licensing to shape policies addressing traffic segregation and control.

The book provides a wealth of voices from risk professionals, ranging from police officers and health and safety inspectors to voluntary groups and commercial operators. Health practitioners feature occasionally, often in the form of medical officers of health, and this journal's readers might reasonably expect more consistent coverage of their role in accident prevention and treatment (Glen O'Hara, for example, briefly mentions the Royal College of Surgeons' Working Party on Accident Prevention in his informative chapter on water safety in the mid to late twentieth century). While the state features heavily, it is never taken as a monolith, and the different interests of local and central government feature in various chapters.

The general public, as consumers, critics and victims of risk society, are somewhat neglected by this focus on the regulators, with a couple of exceptions. Timothy Cooper makes good use of oral interviews to show how environmental disasters like the Torrey Canyon oil spillage off Cornwall's coastline in 1967 generated problems for local communities' recovery. Moreover, Paul Almond and Mike Esbester's excellent chapter on the contested nature of health and safety regulation analyses the intensification of populist public discourse surrounding deregulation since the 1980s. Having read this book in the aftermath of the tragic Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017, this chapter, and Christopher Sirrs' similarly effective chapter on the origins of health and safety legislation in the 1970s, remind us of the continued importance of regulation to public safety and the hard-fought battles ahead to protect and strengthen them. This is an important and timely book that situates present anxieties surrounding public safety in their historical context, and demonstrates that, contrary to popular opinion, bureaucrats can be good for our health.

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