

Jamie Bronstein. *Caught in the Machinery: Workplace Accidents and Injured Workers in Nineteenth-Century Britain.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 240 S. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-0008-5.



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Industrialization, Trauma, and Tragedy in the Nineteenth-Century Workplace

About twenty-five years ago, it was possible to detect the beginnings of a meaningful history of occupational health. However, individual and tragic misadventures—the horrifying experience of being mangled by machinery; knocked down in the street; or falling, unprotected, from a clapped-out fishing vessel into mountainous seas—remained *terra incognita*. The main problem was, and remains, how, in the words of Roger Cooter, to frame and contextualize the “moment of the accident,” the instant when the world stands still and then stands on its head.[1] Unequal conflict between soft human tissue and unguarded, scything machinery can only make social and cultural sense if the sub-second of personal disaster is located within larger social and cultural frameworks. The history of the accident needs to tell more than we already know about the total society and culture in which such incidents have occurred, or in Paul Virilio’s phrase (in *The Original Accident* [2007]), were “produced.” In recent years, we have had large-scale studies of warfare, violence, and crime that have transcended the parameters within which each of these topics has been traditionally investigated.[2] As yet, however, there is no overview of the accident in history.

Now, in a well-documented and organized monograph, Jamie L. Bronstein joins the small number of historians who have engaged with workplace death and injury during the peak period of industrialization in nineteenth-century Britain. Focusing on an overview of the incidence of accidents, “options for injured workers,” the cultural meanings of workplace death and injury (an excellent and densely argued chapter), and the shift from the ideology of “free labor” to the beginnings of state-backed compensation, the author follows a broadly chronological path. The main thrust of her argument is that, between the early nineteenth century and the 1880s, “workplace accidents were ideologically reconstituted, from individual human tragedies into a social problem that could only be solved by government intervention” (p. 170).

A project of this kind demands journeying into trans-cultural terrain. This Bronstein achieves by juxtaposing British against North American experience during the peak period of nineteenth-century industrialization. Her chapters on legislation, compensation, and the state draw on industrial accidents to highlight differences between the development of the two societies, and particularly dif-

ferentials in the pace and intensity of protective intervention in a federal as opposed to a nonfederal system of government. Bronstein's foray into the comparative domain is less effective than Mark Aldrich's recent, monumental study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century railroad accidents, *Death Rode the Rails: American Railroad Accidents and Safety, 1828-1965* (2006), though neither author pays enough attention to continental Europe. Too often, Bronstein's comparativism veers toward bald juxtaposition so much so that at times one might be forgiven for thinking that the study is as much about the United States as Britain. Did a Stanford University Press editor suggest that the author strike camp in mid-Atlantic in the hope of attracting larger numbers of U.S. readers than could be garnered by appealing exclusively to reduced ranks of American scholars with a specialist interest in British history? The problem could have been solved by choosing a title emphasizing the overtly comparative dimension.

This study might have been enriched by reference to contemporary developments as well. Thus, in the early twenty-first-century developing world, and particularly booming India and China, ancient and unguarded machinery wreaks havoc on the lives and welfare of workers, families, and kin. The statistics are elusive, and likely to remain so. However, innumerable incidents in contemporary Afro-Asia precisely reproduce the fractures, lacerations, and massive tissue damage, which, as Bronstein shows, constituted sentimentalized, gory fare for readers of nineteenth-century newspapers. In China and India, which now also experience much higher proportionate rates of road traffic and street accidents than then economically developed nations in the 1920s and the 1930s, health and safety benchmarks and bureaucracies have barely begun to be established. Domestic accidents, leading to death and serious injury, have also reached dizzyingly high levels. Incidence and distribution are closely linked to low per capita income and educational attainment, poor housing, chronic overcrowding, and lack of emergency and primary medical facilities, as Peter Barrs and others have noted in *Injury Prevention: An International Perspective, Epidemiology, Surveillance and Policy* (1998).

Oversimplistic comparisons between past and present should, of course, be avoided. But nineteenth-century statisticians and social reformers—preeminently William Farr at the registrar-general's office—became obsessed by domestic accidents, not least since so many families continued to use the home as a makeshift part-time or full time workplace, contradicting later and oversimplified distinctions between a nationwide preindus-

trial and industrial society. Passing reference to some of these themes—connections between different categories of accidents in different historical epochs—would have enriched a study of the nineteenth century. Greater space might also have been given to long-term changes in collective attitudes. Self-evidently, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we still experience major and minor accidents: running for a bus or train on a frosty morning, and slipping and fracturing a wrist; missing a step at the top of the stairs; braking violently on a gridlocked motorway; and finishing up in the accident and emergency room with chronic whiplash, or much worse. But, as Bronstein correctly argues, far fewer individuals in Europe and the United States now suffer the kinds of ghastly workplace death and injury that scarred nineteenth-century industry and society. However, on this specific issue, her comparisons between past and present give rise to important problems. On her last page, Bronstein states that the idea that “one should send something to the families of [those who have been] left behind is now no longer as common” as it was (p. 175). She also contends that in the early twenty-first century, “businesses are free to take risks with workers' lives” and that industrial accidents loom small in public consciousness (p. 175).

This oversimplifies several complex historical processes. Over-sentimentalizing the past, it underplays the increasingly intrusive early twentieth-century influence of the state in relation to the organization and bureaucratization of compensation and the much later emergence of the risk society. Increasingly intensive interchanges from the Edwardian period onward between inspectorates and technically well-informed union representatives kick started substitution of rudimentary action for Victorian rhetorical empathy. A generation and a half later, ideas and ideologies imbedded in the risk society played a major role in dealing a deathblow to voluntaristic discourses and practices associated with accidents. The crucial step was the post-Thatcherite incorporation and internalization of the idea of industrial and other forms of safety. (Marginalized by the savage antilabor legislation of the late 1970s and early 1980s, activists moved sideways into new and less overtly “ideological” areas.)

By the early twenty-first century, governmental departments and inspectorates, union representatives, and plant and construction site level health and safety officers had gained a firmer foothold in the day-to-day operation of factories, the construction industry, major retail outlets, and massive new leisure complexes. (When leg-

isolation was ignored, corporations could now expect expensive and embarrassing litigation and a barrow load of bad publicity.) At the same time, it is exceptionally difficult to establish anything solid about the value, scale, and impact of the ubiquitous Victorian culture of moral-cum-sentimental empathy that the writer so effectively delineates.

Bronstein produces ample and credible evidence to support the living reality of elite giving and working-class self-help. But, while the victims of massively newsworthy rail and pit disasters gained significant support from spontaneous philanthropy, few benefits accrued to innumerable nonunionized workers who suffered injury and death in small-scale and economically backward activities, such as rope and chain making as well as agricultural labor. (But briefly and intriguingly, Bronstein notes that in the early 1860s, the editor of the *British Miner and Workmen's Advocate* printed details of death and serious injury in a wide range of traditional sectors, including farm laboring, quarrying, and sawmilling [p. 17]).

As Gareth Stedman Jones and Raphael Samuel have shown, unskilled labor long remained dominant in what was once believed to have been a highly mechanized culture.[3] Only in the late Edwardian era would Britain finally move toward full industrialization. Throughout the nineteenth century, workshops, employing between half a dozen and twenty employees, retained quantitative supremacy. Hand labor remained central to nearly every mechanized activity. For the historian of nineteenth-century industrial accidents, the message is clear. Factory labor was untypical and highly regionalized. But, it generated a vast corpus of documentation—royal commissions and select committees, departmental and inspectorates' reports, and incessant newspaper and pamphlet coverage.

This fundamental fact long skewed our understanding of working conditions in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. The danger is that it may exert a similar effect on the fledgling subdiscipline of the history of industrial accidents. Researchers will need to turn their attention to old and enduring sectors, classically described sixty years ago in a three-volume work by Sir John H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain* (1926-38). However, agricultural workers and innumerable categories of casual laborers on docks, in markets, and on building sites who experienced high levels of accidental death and injury will be in danger of being marginalized. For these activities, the evidence is scanty, and until new sources—or new combinations of sources—

are discovered and imaginatively exploited, large quantities of research time may generate only limited results.

Bronstein is right to concentrate on areas that have been moderately well documented, particularly mining and the railways. In 1983, P. W. J. Bartrip and Sandra Burman published a pioneering study, *Wounded Soldiers of Industry: Industrial Compensation Policy, 1833-1897*, which showed that the operation of the law in the latter industry revealed much about accidents in general in nineteenth-century Britain. In a slightly later contribution to an edited collection, Karl Figlio interrogated the deep history of relationships between common and statute law, and the epistemology and interactions between less tangible entities, such as responsibility, providence, and blame.[4] (Like Cooter's essay on the moment of the accident, Figlio's work goes uncited in Bronstein's notes.)

One decade later, in another study that Bronstein has not consulted, Rande W. Kostal published a densely legalistic, economic, and social analysis of nineteenth-century railway accidents, *Law and English Railway Capitalism, 1825-1875* (1994). Minutely detailing the intensive pressure brought to bear on the later nineteenth-century companies, Kostal placed strong emphasis on the power, influence, and autonomy of the law, and the extent to which, after about 1870, owners and shareholders became increasingly preoccupied by the scale of damages demanded by wealthy travelers (or their surviving families). Increasingly preoccupied by what would now be called image and customer satisfaction—and spiraling compensatory costs—the companies finally and belatedly acknowledged increased responsibility for accidents leading to death and disability.

Thereafter, the narrative becomes ever more mazy, but the ensuing thirty years witnessed less intransigent attitudes toward employees as well as trade unions and created an environment that finally made it possible for the government to enforce a higher degree of technical homogeneity between companies. A succession of acts between the later 1840s and the 1870s had empowered the railway inspectorate to urge universal adoption of best existing technical practice. The inspectorate urged but did not compel: between mid-century and the later 1870s, evasion ran rife; and "small accidents"—thousands of employees were killed or paralyzed during the construction of the national system (a subject well covered in Bronstein's study) workshops and shunting yards—gained scant official attention or publicity compared with the victims of large-scale and astonishingly widely pub-

licized collisions.

I have dwelt on the railways because the designation of employees as “servants” lies close to the heart of Bronstein’s excellent discussion of the rights, responsibilities, and expectations of “free labor,” and her parallel analysis of the legislative aftermath of large-scale accidents and disasters. In the National Railway Museum at York, a bleakly anonymous canvas declares itself to be a portrait of W. John Metcalfe, railway policeman, Stockton and Darlington Railway. The caption alongside the picture states that he “worked about 12 hours a day for six days a week. In return he got a hut, a smart uniform, 20 shillings a week and the respect of everyone in the community.” One of Metcalfe’s tasks was to prevent strangers—and many potential suicides—from wandering on to company property. As his dress and demeanor indicate, Metcalfe was a proud man, holding down a demanding job. Within the class, or caste, system that sustained the social hierarchy of Victorian Britain, he had long since moved into the echelons of the respectable. But, Metcalfe was a servant as well as an employee, and worked to the requirements of an occupational and organizational code predicated on the assumption that, whatever one’s precise role, “the risk of injury from ... negligence is so much a natural and necessary consequence of the employment [which is accepted] that it must be included in the risks which are to be considered in a [worker’s] wages” (p. 29).

Despite the reservations noted in this review, Bron-

stein has written a valuable and assiduously documented monograph that ranges far and wide in a field requiring microscopic attention to social and economic detail, regional and sectoral diversity, and extreme legislative and legal complexity. Maybe the history of accidents really is finally taking off.

Notes

[1]. Roger Cooter, “The Moment of the Accident: Culture, Militarism and Modernity in Late Victorian Britain” in *Accidents in History: Injuries, Fatalities and Social Relations*, ed. Roger Cooter and Bill Luckin (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), 107-157.

[2]. See, especially, Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); and Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2007).

[3]. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between the Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); and Raphael Samuel, “The Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *History Workshop Journal* 3, no. 1 (1977), 6-72.

[4]. Karl Figlio, “What is an Accident?” in *The Social History of Occupational Health*, ed. Paul Weindling (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 180-206.

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