

## Book Reviews

JACQUELINE KARNELL CORN, *Response to occupational health hazards: a historical perspective*, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992, pp. xvi, 182, £31.00 (0-442-00499-5).

In 1970 the United States' Congress passed the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The Act's main provision was to establish a federal regulatory agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), responsible for inspecting workplaces, setting standards, enforcing the law, and educating employers, workers and the public. To British eyes, accustomed to decades of industrial health and safety regulation, the aim of assuring, so far as practicable, safe and healthy working conditions for every working man and woman in the nation, is unremarkable; in the U.S. it signalled a change of philosophy which was well-nigh revolutionary. Not only had Washington asserted the principle that employers were responsible for health and safety in their plants, it had also voted the resources to make it a reality. Although the impact of the 1970 Act is still hotly debated, there can be little doubt that it has done much to raise public awareness.

Until the late 1960s the federal government paid little attention to occupational health and safety. Previous initiatives—of the Progressive, New Deal, and Second World War eras—were not only infrequent but short-term. Inertia was the norm. In these circumstances responsibility was left either with State Legislatures, whose commitment was often half-hearted or non-existent, or with individual employers. If employees did not like the conditions in which they were expected to work, they were free to seek employment elsewhere. Of course this assumed not only that they could find an alternative job, but also that they were in a position to understand and assess the risks posed by the dusts and fumes which they might encounter.

Not surprisingly, the United States' record in safeguarding workers from the hazards of work was, until the 1970s, unimpressive. Repeatedly, knowledge of the existence of a danger failed to lead to the introduction of preventive measures. Clearly this reflected a culture and ideology which perceived health as a matter of individual rather than collective responsibility. Less clear, and still a matter of debate, is the extent to which *laissez-faire* principles merely provided an excuse for calculatedly sacrificing lives and health in the interests of profit. Yet tough health and safety measures capable of providing real protection for workers need not mean reduced competitiveness. Since 1970, as Corn shows, the cotton and PVC industries have shown increased production and productivity following the establishment of rigorous standards.

In recent years, a number of American historians have turned their attention to the history of occupational health in the United States. Jacqueline Corn, a previous contributor to the field, has provided a useful addition to the literature. Her book falls into two parts; first, there are overviews of government action before and after 1970, which include the areas of risk assessment and standard setting. These are followed by case studies of five health hazards: lead, asbestos, free silica, vinyl chloride, and cotton dust. The outcome is a valuable contribution to the growing corpus of policy-relevant or practical history, the aim of which is to place present-day concerns within an historical context in order that the mistakes of the past can be avoided and the lessons of the past learnt.

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J. R. BUSVINE, *Disease transmission by insects: its discovery and 90 years of effort to prevent it*, Berlin, Heidelberg, and New York, Springer-Verlag, 1993, pp. xii, 361, illus., DM 98.00 (3-540-55457-2).

Among the many important discoveries of the last 100 years, insect transmission of communicable disease rates high in its effects on disease control, and hence as a potential tool in preventive medicine. The present volume gives an account of the initial discovery of insect vector transmission in the battle for control of such diseases, and the subsequent applications of this acquired knowledge. It is written by a medical entomologist, now Professor Emeritus at the University of London, whose career has spanned the high hopes and later disappointments of the campaigns to combat those diseases by controlling, if not eradicating, their vectors. The young James Busvine was there, from the beginning of the enthusiasm for the insecticidal powers of DDT, through the dashed hopes of the anti-malaria campaign which had seemed so promising in the 1950s