The subjects of workplace accident and the risk of injury remain as important to the employed population today as they were to the first generations of industrial workers who staffed the mines, workshops and factories of Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. As Jamie Bronstein shows in this fluently-written and accessible text, legal responsibilities and compensation rights were vital elements in the story of prevention as well as restitution throughout the 1800s. The central argument of this book is that we need to understand not only the institutional framework in which accidents are identified and contractual liabilities are determined, but also the various cultural meanings of risk and injury to which workers’ families and communities contributed as they dealt with the hazards of working life and the consequences of disaster. The author draws on various contemporary texts from the United States as well as Britain to elucidate the individual careers of employees who suffered damage and even destruction as a result of their employment. In discussing the complexities and limitations of common law and the eventual arrival of employers’ liability and workmen’s compensation legislation in the United Kingdom (and significantly later in most American states), Bronstein shows that voluntary paternalism as well as social philanthropy failed to meet the expectations of workers and was steadily replaced by the attribution of responsibility under statutory obligations.

To illuminate the terrible costs that workers and their families often suffered at the hands of industry, *Caught in the Machinery* traverses the familiar ground of railway casualties, mining fatalities and the crushing and tearing of bodies in the textiles and other factories of industrialising Britain. The story of reform is enlivened by the introduction of active personalities such as the trade unionist Alexander MacDonald and the legislator Sir Edward Watkin. In a concluding ‘epilogue’ the author considers the slower pace of progress in the United States and muses on the remarkable celebration of technological achievement in American popular culture, resisting the necessary recognition that such innovations often brought new hazards and unknown risks. The reasons for legislative change in both countries are explained as the outcome of a multitude of factors including the political drive of the Progressives in the United States and the growing recognition that the dense undergrowth of case law and common law did not deliver justice to the working population. Bronstein concludes that the introduction of compensation systems has also had adverse consequences in reducing the scope for communal concern with the families of accident victims and even an obscuring of the blame or fault for injuries when they occur by chloroforming the public with the certainty that financial awards will be made.

There is considerable merit in tackling the painful subject of accidents and the often appalling injuries inflicted on employees during the nineteenth century and this text seeks to make a complex subject comprehensible to its readers. However, the book must also be considered a disappointment in various ways. Most historians of occupational health and industrial compensation
will be familiar with much of the evidence presented for Britain, which the author has the worrying tendency to think of as equivalent to 'England' though many of the key figures (such as MacDonald) as well as the worst disasters were to be found in Scotland and Wales. Rather than a systematic examination of accident rates and patterns of mortality and morbidity we are offered interesting snippets of information and a chain of cameos which do not always encompass the depth and diversity of industrial experience during these decades. The period being discussed is not abundantly clear, for the 'nineteenth century' hangs rather uncertainly over the book without a clear or crisp sense of chronology, though most of the detailed discussion of reform deals with the two decades before the passing of Britain’s Employers’ Liability Act of 1880. This is an important point for, it can be argued, the vital transition took place between that legislation and the introduction of the more important Workmen’s Compensation Bill by Joseph Chamberlain in 1896-97, establishing the principle of ‘no fault’ compensation for injured and deceased workpeople with a clear scale of payments.

The need for greater conceptual as well as empirical rigour in the treatment of this subject is apparent in the rather loose references to industries such as textiles, where the suction shuttle is misleading identified as the vector for a range of respiratory illnesses. Such claims formed an important point of contemporary as well as historiographical debate and require more careful analysis. For this was a period when ‘accidents’ themselves were being redefined away from unforeseen happenings to recordable events which were capable of scientific scrutiny and measurable prevention. Contemporaries came to recognise that information and communication were the keys to effective human agency in the prevention of catastrophes, which resulted from the fatal combination of intense physical energy (often but not always mechanically supplied) and human misunderstanding. Bronstein makes a fundamental point that we must engage with the cultural meanings of such events but the interrogation of culture must go beyond the familiar slabs of workers’ collective perception and communal identity to a critical engagement with scientific and technological (as well as legal) models of human motivation and behaviour. It can be fairly argued that the classification of accidents, injuries and diseases was a complex labour of construction that provided some of the foundations of legislative intervention in these decades and requires more meticulous delineation.

This book will provide teachers and undergraduates with a readable narrative of some of the salient features of industrial injury and liability in Britain during the later nineteenth century. It is a useful starting point for considering some of the questions raised in the reform of laws that left workers seriously unprotected for much of that century. A more searching analysis will be required by serious historians of occupational injury and those wishing to investigate the cultural underpinnings of disaster and disease in the first industrialised nation.

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