Review of The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play

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In this disheartening chronicle, James C. Whorton fully justifies both his title and his subtitle. Of course arsenic was not a product of the nineteenth-century chemical imagination, as were, for example, aniline dyes and artificial phosphate fertilizers. It is a chemical element (number 33 in the periodic table, itself another product of the nineteenth-century chemical imagination), and many of its uses had been known for centuries before Whorton’s account begins. In the nineteenth century, however, its impact became increasingly pervasive. There were several reasons for this shift. Arsenic often occurs naturally in association with other metals, and it was produced in large quantities as a by-product of mining and smelting. It turned out to have numerous commercial applications, and so it was widely disseminated in the Victorian environment. In addition, it was readily and inexpensively available as a poison (intended, at least ostensibly, for rodents or insects) and as a medicine (intended for humans). But these two targets could easily be interchanged. While in earlier periods arsenic had been deployed as a weapon predominantly by elite murderers, Whorton shows that, beginning in the eighteenth century, its homicidal use was “democratized.”

Death could result from unintentional or negligent poisoning, as well as from malice aforethought, but only the latter was considered to be criminal.

The Arsenic Century is full of vignettes and anecdotes, of which the most immediately compelling are a series of sensational murder cases. Based largely on legal records and journalistic accounts of trials (since contemporaries also considered them sensational), they repeatedly illustrate that poison was the weapon of the weak.
Malefactors included daughters who killed their parents, mothers who killed their children, and ex-girlfriends who dispatched suitors who had become disappointing or inconvenient. Members of the same household were particularly vulnerable to arsenic poisoning, since it could be subtly administered in stages by a person they trusted to feed and dose them. Indeed, once post-mortem chemical analysis became common in cases of suspected poisoning, evidence of a single massive recent ingestion of arsenic was frequently taken to indicate suicide. But evidence of slow steady ingestion did not necessarily indicate murder. In the course of the nineteenth century it became increasingly clear that arsenic could accumulate in British bodies from many sources.

Clever lawyers often suggested that apparent victims had indeed been poisoned, but not by design; in consequence, even notorious poisioners might be acquitted. There were, however, some circumstances that could not be extenuated. For example, when James Maybrick died after experiencing suspicious symptoms for several days, his wife Florence was tried for murder. The couple had been on bad terms, the result of her extravagance and his infidelity, which she finally decided to repay in kind, albeit briefly. A maid had discovered arsenic in her mistress’s possession, and, thus alerted, had opened what turned out to be an incriminating letter. A search of the house uncovered numerous sources of arsenic, both where it should have been (fly paper) and where it should not have been (food and medicine intended for James). Her lawyer argued that, like many other women, Florence used arsenic to improve her complexion, and that James had been an extreme hypochondriac who treated his supposed ailments with the poison. Nevertheless, the jurors who heard her case rapidly returned a guilty verdict, which carried an obligatory death sentence. It seemed clear at the time that she was being
punished for adultery rather than for murder. (A public uproar resulted in her sentence being commuted to life in prison, but not to her release.)

Less spectacular but much more sobering are the reasons that lawyers could make such arguments. After all, even during the period when contemporaries decried an epidemic of domestic poisonings, such homicides were relatively rare, especially in comparison with the numerous victims of accidental and unwitting exposure. Whorton exhaustively documents the numerous and varied contexts in which nineteenth-century Britons routinely encountered arsenic. These included staples of consumption: food and drink might be intentionally adulterated or unintentionally contaminated; arsenic was both an advertised and an unacknowledged component of medicines and cosmetics. Its use as a component of industrial dyes was widespread, especially, although not exclusively, to produce a deep rich green that colored items from candles to wallpaper to fabric to the bindings of books now handled only by Victorianists. The most frequent sufferers were the people who encountered arsenic in the workplace, such as farmers who worked with arsenical sheep dip, the women who fashioned artificial flowers (including green artificial leaves), and the employees of smelteries (as well as people and livestock who lived close enough to inhale the fumes).

These hazards were not, of course, confined to Britons. They were also encountered by workers and consumers in continental Europe and North America. (Thus Whorton incidentally suggests that the arsenic discovered in Napoleon’s body after his death resulted from environmental exposure.) But Whorton suggests that the political and ideological climate of Britain made its citizens particularly vulnerable, at least in comparison to their neighbors across the Channel. Regulation came slowly in the United
Kingdom (not to speak of the United States) partly because of reflexive resistance to it and partly because politicians routinely balanced the welfare of individual constituents against the economic interests of manufacturers and merchants. The over-the-counter purchase of arsenic was not regulated until 1851, and its sale was not restricted to licensed pharmacists until 1868. An ineffective Food and Drug Adulteration Act was passed in 1860, in the wake of a scandal caused by unintentional poisoning (but intentional adulteration). Despite continuous public discussion of the risks of environmental arsenic, politicians committed to laissez faire reasoned that people made rational decisions to expose themselves to lethal workplaces, prudently preferring slow poisoning to slow starvation. As Whorton points out, these tendencies have not vanished from Anglo-American politics. They help explain the inclination of the British government to treat the BSE crisis of the 1980s and 1990s as an issue of marketing rather than of public health, and the more recent inclination of the American government to allow BP to manage the clean-up in the Gulf of Mexico.

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