

In Mortal Hands: A Cautionary History of the Nuclear Age

Stephanie Cooke
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This is a large volume hot off the press. A full 488 pages to be precise. The author is a journalist and historian who has written about the nuclear industry for three decades. She brings to the table lots of experience and a whole collection of interviews she's had over the years.

Major topics covered are: the development of the atom bomb, the decision to bomb Hiroshima and the race to develop nuclear programs during the cold war. This book puts those developments into an historical context and makes for good reading with personal stories of contacts and visits.

Some of the biggest plusses have to be the insights she brings from visiting places of relevance and interesting interviews she's had over the years. It is the untold human story that is of most interest in this book. There are many eyewitness accounts, personal interviews and first person impressions.

The title of the book gives the impression of a balanced account of the nuclear age's history. Yet, on page 18 the goal of the book is explained in greater detail: "This book will detail how and why nuclear energy has failed to develop in the way its planners hoped, providing relevant reminders of what could happen in the future."

And this is why, unfortunately, the book was for me a disappointment. It only pays lip service to being balanced at the start, and then goes on to become one long argument on why nuclear is bad, clouded in secrecy, full of conspiracy and generally something evil people get involved in.

This is a thick book. In such a volume, you'd expect a lot more systematization. I believe a good editor would also have cut at least one third of the book without any real loss to the reader. The author seems to focus in great depth and detail on events and people of interest that she has either met or had direct contact with. Others are glossed over when she's not had the same level of access or exposure. The chapters seem almost disconnected from each other. It certainly makes one feel as if these are previously written articles that are reworked and linked chronographically to create a "history of the nuclear age"

Another problem is that the book promises to be balanced and then chooses sides very clearly and becomes one long argument on the dangers and the secretive nature of the industry. It is the language of conspiracy, evil, and the alarmist tone that eventually begins to irritate the reader.

A few examples to illustrate the point:

- "It was used to seduce an unsuspecting public with its promise of inexpensive electricity ... " (p15);
- Talking about most "nuclear people"(sic) she met: "(I found) as if they were heavy with a weight they could not lose" (page 24);
- "Encouraged by inept or unquestioning government ministers, atomic establishments in **most** countries engaged in highly questionable methods of bookkeeping and phony economics to justify large expenditures." (page 134) (My bold).
- Or when the deputy director of the UK Atomic Energy Authority and chief science advisor at the Department of Energy is described as "Tall and heavysset, with blue-gray eyes that appeared expressionless and cold, Marshall had developed a reputation for arrogance, accentuated by an odd haughty manner of speaking." (page 350) versus

Britain's minister responsible for nuclear energy who had become disillusioned with nuclear energy who is then introduced as "the Rt Hon. Anthony Wedgewood Benn" with no reference to character (or looks for that matter) on the very next page (page 350).

The oversimplification of the link between nuclear for energy generation and fission processes, and the link to the arms industry, the general demonization of most people attached to the industry adds to the frustration for the reader.

I found it positive that the book included a preface to the Australian edition, but then got frustrated when I read it. I suspect you'll learn more about the Australian encounter with nuclear if you read Bill Bryson's "Down Under" than you will from this book.

All in all, this book offers some new information of what has been a chequered and fascinating industry. We do need to know more about the past in order for us to make informed decisions going forward. But do not expect a balanced view that will help inform you on all the issues at hand. This book is as biased as the many publications seeing no threat in nuclear and the many more seeing nuclear as the biggest threat to the planet ever. If you've already made your mind up and you think all that is nuclear is bad, this book will give you more ammunition if needed.

I would have love to see a more balanced approach to help us think about the possibility of nuclear as an alternative energy source (in the light of the coal led disaster we're heading towards). The reports about the death of the nuclear energy industry may be a bit premature. And we need a lot more debate.

Chris Crause