



The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain Was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play

James C. Whorton

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Arsenic is rightly infamous as the poison of choice for Victorian murderers. Yet the great majority of fatalities from arsenic in the nineteenth century came not from intentional poisoning, but from accident. Kept in many homes for the purpose of poisoning rats, the white powder was easily mistaken for sugar or flour and often incorporated into the family dinner. It was also widely present in green dyes, used to tint everything from candles and candies to curtains, wallpaper, and clothing (it was arsenic in old lace that was the danger). Whether at home amidst arsenical curtains and wallpapers, at work manufacturing these products, or at play swirling about the papered, curtained ballroom in arsenical gowns and gloves, no one was beyond the poison's reach. Drawing on the medical, legal, and popular literature of the time, *The Arsenic Century* paints a vivid picture of its wide-ranging and insidious presence in Victorian daily life, weaving together the history of its emergence as a nearly inescapable household hazard with the sordid story of its frequent employment as a tool of murder and suicide. And ultimately, as the final chapter suggests, arsenic in Victorian Britain was very much the pilot episode for a series of environmental poisoning dramas that grew ever more common during the twentieth century and still has no end in sight.

The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain Was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play Details

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From Reader Review The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain Was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play for online ebook

slauderdale says

Less reviewed than it is discussed in my blog post, "Adventures in Morbid Non-fiction":
<https://librarianslauderdale.wordpress...>

"Fashion Victims," like "Bitten by Witch Fever," also cited Whorton's book, so I finally gave in and requested "The Arsenic Century" through ComCat. ... No wonder everyone was citing it. It's a fascinating, occasionally funny, always horrifying, and terrifically thorough survey of the prevalence, and the many and devastating effects, of arsenic in Victorian Britain. ...

Helen says

Very interesting look at how arsenic reached into what seems like almost every part of life especially in the 19th century: not just food and drink, but also wallpaper, dresses, artificial flowers, make-up ... Quite a bit about murders but even more about accidents, and the effects of industrial use of arsenic. How did anyone survive at all? Most significant perhaps for us today is the opposition to any kind of protective legislation, driven by business interests ("Elf-and-Safety", anyone? "intolerable burdens on small businesses"?) One warning: not to be read just before dinner due to some fairly graphic descriptions of symptoms ...

Elspeth G. Perkin says

A grim and oddly fascinating look back at “the poisons of poisons”.

The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain Was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play is one book that may not be for everyone, but for me this was exactly what I have been looking for: a comprehensive well-told mixture of medical and legal case histories that involved a truly unusual portion of history and central subject. It seems I am drawn to these types of titles that can serve me well to learning more about certain eras and *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain Was Poisoned at Home, Work, and Play* definitely had me saying “I didn’t know that” quite a few times when it came to its hodgepodge of little known facts and the strong doses of bygone crimes and old beliefs had me eagerly reaching for my kindle late at night. It also had the right number of true deadly examples that clearly explained why the 19th century could be aptly called “The Arsenic Century” and the many reasons Arsenic was said to be “the poisons of poisons”. It did however let me down somewhat with the final chapters that meandered away from the central interest at certain points and the lack of photographs surprised me. Thankfully though everything else presented kept me reading and I am very satisfied with this non-fiction work joining my eclectic shelves, it has found a proper place next to *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present*, *A is for Arsenic: The Poisons of Agatha Christie* and perhaps by *The Poisoner's Handbook: Murder and the Birth of Forensic Medicine in Jazz Age New York* but time will tell.

*For more reviews see <http://asthefinalpageturns.blogspot.com>

Helen says

This book covers in great detail the use of one of the world's most well known poisons. It could be said that it covers the area with a degree of repetition as many points are laboured several times over before the author moves on. That being said, I will never view the colour green again without thinking of arsenic.

Mary Whisner says

Lively writing and interesting stories woven through some of my favorite subjects: England, science, and crime.

Some readers might find that there are a few too many stories of poisoners, but I liked them. Ooh, that sounds wrong. It's not that I *liked* the idea of a mother poisoning her children to get the money from the small burial plans for them—or any of the other horrible stories, but I thought they were interesting. And face it, anyone who's read shelves of murder mysteries or watched a fair bit of television crime dramas has enjoyed some pretty disturbing plots, too. (If you like the forensic angle, see also *The Poisoner's Handbook: Murder and the Birth of Forensic Medicine in Jazz Age New York*.)

It wasn't all murder. Arsenic was also widely used in a lot of products in Victorian England— popular green wallpapers (including those produced by William Morris's company), paints, ball gowns, and more. The young working women making artificial flowers for the hats of wealthy women often became very sick, as did the men who made and hung wallpaper (and removed it once the homeowners realized the wallpaper was dangerous). (The arsenical wallpaper was also discussed in *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*.)

There were also horrible accidents, like the candy maker who accidentally used arsenic when he meant to use plaster of Paris (one can intend to adulterate food without intending to kill children!). The brewers in Manchester used glucose in addition to barley malt. Alas, a huge batch of glucose was made with sulphuric acid that was tainted with arsenic. Hence the beer was poisonous, and thousands of people sickened during the "Manchester beer epidemic" in the summer of 1900.

Some people even took arsenic intentionally, often prescribed by their doctors. It seemed like a good idea at the time, I guess.

The arsenic story provides an interesting contrast between England and the continent. France and Germany regulated arsenic much more tightly long before England did, largely because of England's commitment to laissez-faire.

Margaret Sankey says

From a historian of medicine, the 19th century as a minefield of unregulated chemicals available over the counter for rat killing and murder--a parade of household killings (deliberate and sordid, or just extremely stupid--the number of "I found a white powder residue at the bottom of a box in the kitchen and scraped it up to use in a cake" defenses is astonishing), apprentice mixups (hmmm, two unlabeled barrels of white powder

in the store back room--one of them must be flour, right?), industrial malfeasance (these peppermint candies should be green, some arsenic powder will do the trick! and powdery green flocked wallpaper), as well as the chemists who struggled to come up with reliable easy tests, the court cases in which they became celebrities and the political campaigns for regulations with all the shocked arguments that regulating chemicals was a blow to the very freedoms on which the British state was built! Uh, yeah, have some of this green candy.

Pip says

Started off interesting, but became quite repetitive.

mica-micare says

CN - spousal and familial murder, historic animal abuse (experimentation)

I thought this book was excellent. Whorton relates a great deal of academic research in relatively accessible language, all the while relating the issues of arsenic in the Victorian century to relevant issues today, both in term of accidental poisoning (as in wells in Bangladesh today) and in terms of marketplace poisoning (as we discover new synthetic materials that may or may not affect our health, or, as lobbyists from certain commercial concerns argue over what is an acceptable risk).

Margaret says

I'll go on record as saying I am utterly bewildered as to how anyone in Great Britain survived the 19th century.

Going by this book, it seems like EVERYTHING was out to get people. Their books, wallpaper, dresses, sweets, hats....even their socks were out to get them!

The most shocking thing about the book was learning that the government of Great Britain over that century were more interested in keeping industry going than protecting the lives of their citizens. It took several major poisoning outbreaks for them to actually legislate against arsenic, and even then the legislation was piss weak.

Not a book for those without a strong stomach as the descriptions get a little graphic. No photos, thank goodness, but could have done without the artist's illustration of a scrotum suffering from arsenic pock. Yuk doesn't begin to cover it.

A good book for anyone interested in toxins, British legal and medical history, and British history in general.

Zazzu says

Interesting read and good writing. Fascinating how long arsenic was touted as a beneficial or harmless drug!

As we love/fear lead today, so the Victorians had their relationship with arsenic!

I would have liked more information on arsenic in fabrics and clothing as well as pictures of emerald/arsenic greens--I was led to this book by researching arsenic dresses (I'm a loony costume fiend with a love for history!) and wanted to know more. What information this book had on arsenical fabrics was good though, and the parts about arsenic in the home was fascinating.

I'm mildly surprised people were foolish enough to keep poisons stored near food...and for crying out loud....to use an unlabeled white powder stored in a CLOCK for cooking! I did read though in another book of a similarly foolish poisoning...a pioneer family in a wagon kept a bottle of laudanum (liquid opium)within a child's reach and the young child overdosed before anyone detected that the bottle'd been gotten into.

It's not just people today who are thoughtless about keeping harmful things locked up!

Karen says

Good background on Victorian England in several ways. When I first started reading this book, I was really disappointed. I thought I was picking up a book having to do with arsenic poisoning due to food and the presence of arsenic in things around their homes. The first few chapters were purely on people using arsenic to poison other people. It was very interesting, but that wasn't what I wanted. I knew about arsenic being a common poison used against other people, but I've been studying the problems with various chemicals that were used in everyday things that usually caused disabilities or death, such as mercury in Beethoven. So I was getting very concerned when the book at first seemed to concentrate on deliberate poisonings.

But finally the book moved into the area I wanted...to know how adulteration of many common household products ended up poisoning the Victorians in both the US and Great Britain without their knowledge. The book proved to be a great read, with terrific research using court cases and medical knowledge that developed from people who were alarmed at all the poison being spread. I love history in medical information that can be used in my classes.

Catherine Richmond says

As a comprehensive look at the impact of one chemical on life in 19th century Britain, this book could have titled, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Arsenic, But Were Afraid to Ask." Arsenic was common and inexpensive. Uses for the chemical ranged from murder to wallpaper. I intended to research a few questions for a story I'm working on, but ended up reading the entire book. Editing to remove duplications would have been appreciated. I enjoyed the deft touches of humor, such as "Sheep dip stories could be recounted till the cows come home."

Jess says

[This review was originally posted on my blog: <http://turnherintoliterature.tumblr.com/>]

I'm a crime and thriller junkie, so I'm always curious about the real-life effects of poisons and the like (I also

own Deadly Doses: A Writer's Guide to Poisons by Serita Stevens and Anne Klarner), so it's par for the course that I want to learn as much as possible about the content of my favourite books.

This book is an enlightening view to the dangers of life in Victorian Britain - everything seemed to have an arsenical compound, and was therefore deadly. It's also a lesson in exactly how dangerous life in that era was. Most surprising, to me, was the continued use of green items despite the only way to produce the colour was by using arsenical compounds. Many people died through the use of green wallpaper (the heat of the lamps used caused fumes to be emitted), green book covers (children died through spitting on a cover, then mixing it to produce green "paint" which was then absorbed through the skin) and green cake decorations (why you would use poison in icing is anyone's guess).

It did, however, drag on exceptionally long, and in the Kindle version, the illustrations were a page or two after what they were depicting. In spite of the length and the bouncing between storylines, it was an interesting read, especially as I'd never really thought about arsenic at all before seeing this book.

rabbitprincess says

An extremely fascinating look at the Victorian period from the perspective of everyone's favourite poison -- arsenic, the murderer's friend, "inheritance powder", odourless and tasteless and therefore very easily mistaken ("mistaken"?) for baking powder or sugar. Whorton takes us through every aspect of life that was touched by arsenic, starting of course with its use for homicidal purposes, before wending his way through food and drink, occupational exposure, everyday household objects, clothing and medications, before ending with a look at arsenic-contaminated beer. (Oh the horror!)

Whorton writes extremely well, with clear logical connections that steer the reader along. The work is sprinkled with judiciously chosen quotes (the chapter titles in particular are excellent: "Death that Lies Wait in the Pint-Pot", "A Very Wholesome Poison") and the details are excellent. For example, apparently the mucous membranes in the stomach retain arsenic, so even if an unfortunate victim is vomiting incessantly, the poison is still embedded in their system. The description of an arsenic victim's stomach as "glittering with diamond-like arsenic crystals" is spooky but also kind of cool if you have a taste for the macabre.

Now this book is a really interesting read on its own, but I was also impressed by Whorton's ability to tie arsenic scares and contaminations to modern-day issues, such as the past decade's drive to eliminate trans fats from food, and the ongoing difficulty of getting politicians to apply regulation to force manufacturers to do the right thing and eliminate hazardous materials from their products. He also closes with a comment about all of the new chemical products we bring into our homes every day, some of which have never existed before and whose long-term effects on health are as yet unknown.

The book also includes some illustrations, not too many but again very judiciously chosen (although to be honest I could have done without the picture on page 298). The text tends to speak for itself for the most part.

To sum up, this is highly recommended for anyone interested in the Victorian period, murder mysteries (especially those of the Golden Age), environmental issues or chemistry.

Tracey says

It's pretty horrifying the kinds of things that manufacturers will put into their products and sell to the public. There's some sick humor in the case of the baker who was adulterating his products by using plaster of paris instead of flour, and ended up poisoning his customers because the plaster of paris had been adulterated with arsenic (it was really cheap).

Glad that Strong Poison got a shout-out! /LordPeterWimseyFan

Lynnee Argabright says

This is an enjoyable nonfiction read for the interested public. Its approachable (and occasionally humorous!) prose, engaging chapter openers and closers, and choice of chapter content made this a worthwhile book choice to learn about the subject of arsenic in Victorian England. I didn't know arsenic was involved in so much of societal products and therefore caused not just intentional murders and suicides but also accidental deaths and illnesses. This book includes great primary sources and many examples of arsenic instances but not too many to become exhaustive. Importantly, it notes the sensationalism related to the issue but doesn't account facts using unrealistic sources. It well describes economic causes, medical symptoms, court results, public/media reactions, and legislative/public actions. It traces the many lines of accident in which arsenic became involved unintentionally. Examples of sarcastic cartoons and photographs from the time illustrate the topic well without being over-graphic. I learned a lot about arsenic and I felt educated and interested throughout. And I liked at the end that it relates to issues of today and reminds us, just as studying history can be a useful way to avoid making mistakes that had previously been made, to be mindful of the numerous chemicals used in the present day.

Miriam Smiley says

Educational, disturbing, but somewhat dry... Reads like a particularly entertaining doctoral thesis

Robin Stevens says

An absolutely fantastic and incredibly informative account of what must be one of the biggest public health scandals of the 19th century. In the 1800s arsenic was part of pretty much every industry and household good - in sweets, in wine, in wallpaper, in medicine (no, really, it was), in children's toys, in clothes ...

There are so many fascinating, horrifying stories, well-told and extremely well-researched. It's incredibly wide-ranging - at times the examples given seem almost too much. But the problem is that Whorton just has too many examples to choose from. An amazing story, very well told, and an invaluable research book for all writers of children's murder mysteries (not that Whorton probably anticipated this use of his book).

Nina says

OMG! Arsenic was everywhere! It was used in face creams and other beauty preparations. It small doses they used as medicine. Dies for fabric, wallpapers and food colorings were brightened with its addition. Children were poisoned from eating birthday confections. Toxic rooms were created with beautiful, green wallpaper. It was mistaken for various baking supplies (as people stored it in the cupboard with them) and mother would kill her family with biscuits. Beer and wine had it as a clarifier. And of course it was the poison of choice for women to off their husbands! The 19th century also saw the advance of medical forensics and the beginning of regulatory agencies to protect the public from toxic substances and food fraud. Interesting book.

Carley says

An enjoyable and engaging read! Whorton provides a good contextual background history as to the uses of arsenic pre-nineteenth century, when poisoning became the crime of the century. The book is filled with so much detail, and I particularly like the way Whorton uses real-life case studies and recounts grisly murders to support his historical research. I would definitely recommend.
