

Restoring Memory

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Eileen Welsome, *The Plutonium Files* (New York: Dial Press, 1999), 564 pages, \$26.95.

It is fitting that the "Atomic Century" draw to a close with the publication of *The Plutonium Files*. A decade in the making, Eileen Welsome's book explores the secret human radiation experiments that grew out of the U. S. atom bomb program. Carried out under the auspices of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), the Department of Energy's predecessor, the experiments were designed to help determine atom bomb plant safety standards and to replicate nuclear battlefield conditions. As a result, thousands of hospital patients and servicemen were unknowingly exposed to dangerous levels of radiation.

What Columbia University's David Rothman has called "the triumph of laissez-faire in the laboratory" took the form of deceptive or coercive medical practices that harmed patients at prestigious research universities and government institutions throughout the United States. At Vanderbilt University, pregnant women were given "cocktails" containing radioactive iron. Some of their fetuses developed fatal cancers as children. At the University of Cincinnati, hospital patients (two-thirds of whom were African Americans) were given high doses of "Total Body Irradiation" that resulted in bone marrow failure, organ damage, precipitous drops in blood counts and, often, premature death. Prisoners in state penitentiaries in Oregon and Washington had their testicles irradiated, resulting in lowered sperm counts and, frequently, sterility. Researchers lured children at the Fernald State School in Massachusetts into a "science club," and then fed them

radioactive cereal. At the University of Rochester, radioactive substances (including plutonium, uranium, and polonium) were injected into unsuspecting hospital patients. The uranium experiment was designed to determine the minimum dosage at which renal dysfunction would occur.

The subjects for these experiments were typically the most disadvantaged of American society. "Women, children, unborn fetuses, minorities, the mentally retarded, schizophrenics, prisoners, alcoholics, and poor people of all ages and ethnic groups were targeted," writes Welsome. The extent of the atmospheric nuclear testing was such that, as one serviceman put it, "everyone is a downwinder."

The task of the historian with regard to these past events is a difficult one. Destruction of the files of the AEC's Intelligence Division continued until as recently as 1989, and even the records of destruction were themselves destroyed. What documents remain are full of gaps and redactions, making the re-creation of AEC activities akin to a jigsaw puzzle full of missing pieces. The documents consist of exchanges among a closed circle of scientists and AEC personnel and often require technical expertise to understand fully. The scientists who carried out the experiments have sought to cover up their responsibility for their actions. When interviewed, they suffered from amnesia or simply dodged the questions.

The wonder is that these experiments remained hidden for so long. This is, in the words of the poet Daud Kamal, "the lack that rends." It is a measure of Welsome's perseverance that she restored personalities and names to the human subjects who were referred to in documents by code numbers. Her 1993 Pulitzer-winning series in the *Albuquerque Tribune* divulged the identities of many of the plutonium-injection patients. Primarily as a result of her articles, President Clinton convened

an Advisory Committee to look into the human radiation experiments, in order to determine whether they met scientific and medical standards of the time.

Welsome credits Hazel O'Leary for expediting the release of documents pertaining to the radiation experiments and for canceling fifteen underground nuclear tests shortly after she took over as Energy Secretary in 1993. Welsome believes, however, that the Advisory Committee "didn't have the political will or the desire to thoroughly probe the Cold War experiments." Thus, the committee failed to find any individual or institution responsible for the experiments, to call for a ban on intentional releases of radioactive material into the environment, or to recommend medical monitoring for the thousands who participated in the experiments. Coming only two hours before the verdict in the O. J. Simpson trial, Clinton's public apology received little notice. As Welsome observes, "Not even the clever doctors of the Manhattan Project could have dreamed up such a diversion.

Welsome's evocation of the New Mexico landscape recalls the unfulfilled promise of our world. Pulsating beneath her narrative is the remembrance of what Eduardo Galeano calls "what the world wanted to be before it ever was." At Los Alamos, writes Welsome, "the skin of the world felt so thin it seemed that a bigger reality were about to break through." Now the region is contaminated with uranium, strontium-90, mercury, and plutonium.

The Plutonium Files belongs on the desk of every legislator, university president, and research laboratory scientist in the United States. It is the definitive statement on the harm wrought by our 5.8 trillion dollar investment in nuclear arms. "Let the lessons of history remind us all that the best safeguard for the future is an informed and active citizenry," concluded the Advisory Committee in its 1995 final report. For such a safeguard to exist, the culture of secrecy built around the military

establishment and intelligence agencies must end. Welsome's book is a singular invigoration of our collective memory.