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## Review: 'Brush with Death: A Social History of Lead Poisoning'

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medical regimes. (See Linda M. Hunt, Brigitte Jordan, Susan Irwin, and C. H. Browner, "Compliance and the Patient's Perspective: Controlling Symptoms in Everyday Life," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 1998, 13:315–334.)

But these are basically quibbles. This is an excellent book that deserves a wide readership among both medical historians and health policy analysts.

EMILY K. ABEL

**Christian Warren.** *Brush with Death: A Social History of Lead Poisoning.* xvi + 362 pp., illus., fig., tables, app., index. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. \$45.

Christian Warren's *Brush with Death: A Social History of Lead Poisoning* is an ambitious attempt to trace the twentieth-century history of lead poisoning in America. As such, it focuses on a timely and important topic. Yet, despite Warren's claim that he offers a comprehensive social and cultural approach integrating discussions of three different yet interrelated modes of lead exposure—occupational, pediatric, and environmental (universal)—this work is uneven, at times superficial, and in several instances interpretively incorrect.

Warren divides his chronological account into three sections, beginning with a description of a turn-of-the-century America that was largely enamored of, yet oblivious to, the dangers of white lead carbonate in the workplace and home. In the second part of the book Warren examines how this prevailing mentality was challenged; here he highlights the efforts of Progressive Era reformer Alice Hamilton and other industrial hygienists. In his concluding chapters Warren considers post-World War II developments in pediatric and environmental lead toxicology. He asserts that a "silenced" epidemic of occupational and childhood lead poisoning, suppressed largely by the dominance of industrial interests, gave way to the activists' "screaming" epidemic of the 1960s. In closing chapters that move toward the present, Warren's previously exhibited ideological balance wavers as he sketches the coming of regulation, the emergence of controversial low-level studies, the subsequent redefinition of childhood lead poisoning, and an ultimate failure to bring this issue to closure.

At the heart of Warren's recounting of this history are individuals, and the manner in which he weaves biographical detail into the narrative is one of the book's strong points. Those who figure prominently in Warren's story include—

in addition to industrial hygienists Hamilton and Carey McCord—researchers Joseph Aub, Robert Kehoe, Julian Chisholm, Clair Patterson, and Herbert Needleman, as well as Lead Industries Association (LIA) employees Felix Wormser and Manfred Bowditch. Warren contends that it is these individuals' negotiations, which were aimed at balancing the perceived needs of industry and consumers, that defined acceptable risk at any one time in the past. Warren thus concludes that all parties tied to these negotiations—manufacturers, government, and consumers—share the financial responsibility for what he sees as a current crisis: a nation contaminated and poisoned by lead introduced into the environment by the manufacturers of paint and tetraethyl lead.

Warren's idealistic conclusion is weak, however, given an analysis that sometimes goes no deeper than the surface of an inherently complex topic. In several instances, for example, he confidently discusses the International Labor Organization's White Lead Painting Convention No. 13 of 1921 as evidence of America's unwarranted commitment to white lead. A more thorough examination of this topic, however, reveals that not only was the convention in part motivated and influenced by post-Versailles Treaty international politics and economics involving France, Germany, and Poland, it was also filled with so many interpretive loopholes and non-existent enforcement policies that the restrictions were anything but "sharp." Further, Warren consistently fails to distinguish the conflicting interests of metallic lead, pigment, and paint manufacturers. Yet recognizing these differences is particularly important in any discussion of the LIA, its membership, and its organizational commitments.

In addition, key subjects that merit careful consideration are conspicuously absent from Warren's narrative, among them changes in paint technology, consumer preferences, methods of blood lead analysis, and notions of parental responsibilities. And finally, although the book's cover suggests that this history is a story about paint, two chapters focus on tetraethyl lead, offering puzzling and unresolved conclusions as to the contribution of tetraethyl lead to childhood lead poisoning statistics. As there surely existed other sources of lead poisoning—water, for example—this monograph's conclusion left me, for one, in a quandary about the key issue of responsibility and redress.

JOHN A. HEITMANN