



CHICAGO JOURNALS

NACBS  
North American  
Conference on  
British Studies

---

James C. Whorton. *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work and Play*

Author(s): Catherine Mills

Source: *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 536-537

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.uchicago.edu) on behalf of [The North American Conference on British Studies](http://www.nacbs.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/658258>

Accessed: 16/05/2011 15:52

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*The University of Chicago Press and The North American Conference on British Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to The Journal of British Studies.*

<http://www.jstor.org>

Isaac Rosenberg. He wrote what Fussell regards the greatest single poem of the war: “Break of Day in the Trenches.” As Jews, they too were outsider figures, and they were also modernists moving toward abstraction. This was true, even though they studied at the Slade, the leading art school attached to University College, London, there taught by the conservative Henry Tonks, who told them not to look at the art of the Post-Impressionists, such as Roger Fry’s exhibitions of 1910 and 1912. Tonks plays a major role in Alan Munton’s piece on what he sees as the misrepresentation of the Slade scene in Pat Barker’s novel, *Life Class* (London, 2007). One would have thought that a novel might not be obligated to be historically accurate, although it causes problems when it is not. Others figure in the story found in the essays in this collection: Yeats in a piece rather shaky in its historical aspects by Louise Blakeney Williams and Walter Sickert discussed by Jonathan Shirland. Jonathan Black vividly depicts the friendship between those two powerful artists, Edward Wadsworth and the London-based Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, whose most famous work was his hieratic sculpted head of Ezra Pound, another crucial outsider figure on the London scene who plays a central role in several of the essays. A powerful and convincing case is made that the war was not necessary for the abstract forces of modernism to be a rising part of the culture. Violence was suggested in many of the works discussed here: through the war history caught up with art.

The editor chooses to frame this useful collection in a rather Fussell-like way, dedicating the book to his great-uncle who was killed in the war. He prints as an appendix his great-uncle’s letter from the front to his mother and two other letters, one from the nurse in whose arms his great-uncle died and another from a fellow soldier, wounded next to him on the front. Before the war, these avant-garde artists powerfully and effectively predicted the violence to come as well as the course that art was to take after the war. Though most of what is discussed here takes place just before August 1914, the war itself greatly deepened its significance.

*Peter Stansky*, Stanford University

JAMES C. WHORTON. *The Arsenic Century: How Victorian Britain was Poisoned at Home, Work and Play*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 359. \$29.95 (cloth).

As the title suggests, *The Arsenic Century* charts the history of the use of the heavy metal at home, work, and play across nineteenth-century Britain. Whorton chose to emphasize this period due to the extensive incidence of both intentional and nonintentional poisoning and the democratization of its criminal use. He selected Britain, because of the dominance of laissez-faire and lack of regulatory and prohibitive traditions, and arsenic over other heavy metals and noxious materials, such as mercury or soot, because “no other substance other than lead could begin to rival the extent and variety of arsenic laden-threats in the environment” (xv).

Whorton begins by vividly detailing the effects of arsenic on the human body and the historical development of its nefarious and formidable reputation as a tool of choice in both murder and suicide in the period. Drawing on contemporary legal, medical, and popular literature, the author reveals how fear of poisoning became a public preoccupation in the Victorian period, exacerbated by expanding awareness and knowledge of the poison, its affordability and availability, and the rise of the insurance industry. Arsenic provided the ideal means for this “new race of poisoners,” as Whorton described those who poisoned for profit (28), because of the substance’s ability to imitate common symptoms of disease (31). This is well illustrated by the case of Mary Ann Cotton, who murdered her mother, three husbands, and fifteen children and stepchildren, whose deaths were all originally attributed to gastric conditions. Cotton’s story also highlights two further characteristics

common to the “new race” as identified by Whorton. She was of both working-class origins and female. Cotton and other examples, such as Sarah Chesham and Betty Eccles, detailed in the study, support Whorton’s suggestion that the period witnessed the universal accessibility of arsenic’s criminal use and challenged the contemporary imagery of women as cut from a finer cloth (35).

The “new race of poisoners” prompted the physicians of the day to strive for new and accurate ways of detecting the presence of arsenic in viscera, in ingested food, and in evacuated fluids after death (73). Indeed, Cotton herself was eventually exposed by advances in forensic toxicology. The tests that developed, Whorton suggests, made the act of poisoning “a great deal riskier for the perpetrator than it had ever been before” (111), but the presence of arsenic did not necessarily indicate foul play. The substance was pervasive in the Victorian household. It was not only used as a poison for vermin and an insecticide, it was also found in food, beer, candles, fabrics, wallpapers, paints, and medicines. In the latter instance, arsenic became a “therapeutic mule” (236), a cure-all for a variety of conditions ranging from simple, self-limiting complaints to terminal disease. Perhaps the most curious of all the victims of unintentional poisonings were those who habitually consumed arsenic in lethal quantities for its alleged effects of increased energy and endurance. This was, the author describes, a practice common in the southern Austrian region of Styria. Although largely dismissed by the medical profession, arsenic did find its way into beauty preparations, as Mother Nature’s great secret. Deliberate and/or accidental consumption paved the way for what became known as the “Styrian defence,” whereby “crafty lawyers” could argue that the victim was exposed to arsenic by means other than intentional poisoning (285).

For those who escaped both deliberate and unintentional exposure in the home, there was always the workplace. A myriad of occupations exposed workers, such as the men who wrought and smelted metallic ore and the men who ensured the health of sheep by periodically dousing the animals in arsenical dips, to the toxin in the nineteenth century. Arsenic in the workplace also straddled the home environment by the production of green pigment that found its way into artificial flowers, wallpapers, and by the taxidermist’s preservation of fur and feathers. Although arsenical paints, paper, and cloth are no longer manufactured, Whorton draws attention to the legacy of arsenic by highlighting the hazards that continue into present day faced by museum curators handling historical artifacts, the internal renovation of Victorian properties, and the remediated smelter sites where the arsenical subsoil remains hidden beneath new luxury developments. Arsenic in the nineteenth century, Whorton concludes, provides “a backdrop against which one can consider the myriad chemical threats facing the world today” (359).

*The Arsenic Century* is a compelling and entertaining read, with much tongue-in-cheek humor, but it is not for the fainthearted, as symptoms and distress are graphically described and illustrated. The narrative is a complex mix of quotation and the author’s own words, which creates the feel of a Victorian melodrama. It is well researched and finely detailed with the history of legislative controls, medical advances, and the development of medical jurisprudence all successfully interwoven throughout the narrative. Although the text has wide popular appeal, it will also be of interest to scholars researching environmental, legal, and medical history.

*Catherine Mills*, University of Stirling

CLAIR WILLS. *Dublin 1916: The Siege of the GPO*. Profiles in History. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. Pp. 272. \$23.95 (cloth).

It is little wonder that literature professor Clair Wills opens *Dublin 1916: The Siege of the GPO* with a quote by the French historian of memory Pierre Nora. This book owes a great