BOOK REVIEWS

The Later Working Life in the Building Industry. A Study of 320 Ageing Maintenance Workers. By F. Le Gros Clark. (Pp. 21. no charge.) London: Nuffield Foundation. 1954.

The author was given access to the "dead files" of the maintenance section of London County Council's Housing Department; from these he extracted the records of 320 men "whose careers (in that Department) were more or less traceable from the age of 60 onwards". The group comprised 100 painters, 100 other tradesmen, and 120 labourers. The ages at which these men left the L.C.C. maintenance section were used to estimate wastage rates from age 60 onwards and from evidence contained in the records wastage was attributed to such factors as ill-health.

In his background information the author states that the L.C.C. was a tolerant authority which in the post-war years "was not at all rigid in its policy of discharge of men who reached the pensionable age". He emphasizes that the men were all on maintenance jobs in which the chance of retention for an older worker was probably higher than on the constructional side of the building industry.

As to his method of study, Mr. Le Gros Clark unfortunately fails to describe fully the nature of the records from which he has derived his data. The procedure in use when a man leaves is not described and it is therefore doubtful how much weight can be attached to the recorded reasons for leaving. The apparently common occurrence of such expressions as "age" in the records suggests that the precise circumstances of leaving were often either not examined or not noted by those responsible for completing the records, presumably because they did not consider it relevant to do so. Hogben and Cross (1954) have recently discussed this kind of situation and stressed that unless records call for information on precise points, the value of what information they do contain must be in doubt.

In all such studies as this there is inevitable difficulty in establishing comparability between men reaching the same age at different points in time. Mr. Le Gros Clark has taken age 60 as the starting point of his 320 men but he does not give the actual year dates of their leaving nor does he do more than refer broadly to their length of service with London County Council. Even in the short period of years over which the men presumably left, employer attitudes to older men might have changed and it is well known that length of service is taken into account when making decisions about retirement.

With these possible sources of error in mind some comment may now be made on the findings. The

author emphasizes that the smallness of his sample makes conclusions tentative. He postulates from the data that, if the 320 men are regarded as coming into view at age 60, between 70 and 75% "could be expected to reach the age of 66 in a reasonable state of working efficiency" (with reference to the particular occupations under study); at age 70 about 30% of the original 320 men were still in the labour force. The total wastage rate was about the same in tradesmen and labourers. In the discussion of wastage rates at different ages the report stresses the fact that those who are still at work over 70 are quite exceptional physically. The fascination of extremes has not misled this author.

In the report frequent reference is made to the numbers of men leaving on account of "age". This is a most unsatisfying reason for retirement unless it is accompanied by some pointer to the particular effects of ageing which have reduced mental and physical efficiency. If we are to seek the truth about such an important social and personal event as retiring, precise information about reasons and circumstances should replace vague expressions like "age". What we want are measures of age in terms of ability.

The contribution of ill-health to wastage was cautiously computed by the author from statements on the records. It was evident that disability took a heavy toll in the late 60s, there being few light jobs available in the industry. Perhaps the most interesting and important finding was that 17% of the 320 men left within one to three months of their return to work after a spell of sickness absence. This kind of event has been observed by other investigators and merits intensive study. Mr. Le Gros Clark suggests that "rehabilitation" might reduce this proportion but he does not indicate what forms of rehabilitation he has in mind.

Despite the limitations imposed on the data by uncertainties about the records on which the study is based, this report has real value in that it replaces impressions by numerical information. Breaking new ground is usually difficult; we should be grateful to the author for laying bare promising points for further investigation, and we can look forward to reports on the future studies which he is to make for the Nuffield Foundation.

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Symposium on Fatigue. Edited by W. F. Floyd and A. T. Welford. Vol. I. (Pp. viii + 196; 47 plates. 24s.) London: H. K. Lewis. 1953.

This volume consists of 20 papers which are most of those read at a meeting of the Ergonomics Research Society in March, 1952. The society numbers amongst