BOOK REVIEWS


These three reports, all issued by the Nuffield Foundation, represent the most recent British contribution to the study of ageing in industry through detailed examination of official figures. The first two documents are based on the relevant census tables for 1921, 1931, and 1951, while the third uses Ministry of Labour and National Service records. The object of the first study was to determine "what numbers of workers are physically able to continue in their various occupations beyond their mid-sixties"; that of the second and third to inquire into "what alternative or modified jobs are actually available for older men".

Ageing in Industry consists mainly of a detailed survey of census figures relating to 32 selected occupations. The choice of occupations rather than industries has everything to recommend it if one accepts the fundamental importance of the "actual nature of the job" a man does when trying to ascertain how long he can carry on at work.

The authors are also to be commended for their realization that "all industrial studies of this kind must have a practical aim" and for their determined effort to be lucid in presentation. The selected occupations were chosen by reference to fairly unambiguous criteria, and are precisely defined by the official census "classification of occupations". The basis of the authors' method is to take the members representing an age-group of men in a specified occupation at the date of the 1921 census, and to bring forward this number as an expected population for the appropriately older age-group at the 1931 census. It is then compared with the actual numbers of men found in that age-group, and attempts are made to account for the observed difference. In doing this, the expected or brought-forward figure is in effect reduced by the number of men who have died or become wholly unoccupied ("retired"), though in fact the authors made this adjustment in a rather more roundabout fashion. If the adjusted "expected" figure is greater than that actually found in the 1931 census, the discrepancy is styled "unaccounted for", and reasons are put forward for regarding this as a (maximum) estimate of those who have changed their occupation between 1921 and 1931. Where the 1931 figures are greater, the difference is referred to as "intake". It will by now be apparent that this use of differences is not quite what it seems at first glance: like the balance in a profit and loss account, the intake is really the excess of intake over outgoings, and conversely the "unaccounted for" figure represents an excess of outgoings over intake.

To be fair, the authors do start off by referring to "overall intake", but this is tiresome to continue and the reader could easily miss the point. The actual figure for 1931 is then shifted forward to become the expected figure for 1951 for the age-group 20 years older, and the process of comparison is repeated.

The second exercise carried out by the authors is to compute, at each census date, the ratios (a) 65 and over, to the numbers 35-64; and (b) 55-64 to the same base, 35-64. Thirdly, they examine changes in the age-structure of the 32 occupations by tabulating in age-groups the percentage increases and decreases in the numbers employed from 1931 to 1951. The results of these three exercises are then examined separately for each occupation, and efforts are made to account for variations and anomalies. For example, if a heavy net intake occurs at an age-level where this is not to be expected, an explanation is advanced which is usually based on enquiries made in industry or from Government departments.

From an impressionistic integration of all the data obtained concerning an occupation, the authors arrive at what they call "survival rates", defined as "broad percentage values of the total numbers of men we know to have reached their mid-sixties while still in their accustomed jobs and in a reasonable state of working efficiency." That the integration is impressionistic cannot be doubted if one quotes from the text (p. 136) in respect of coal-mining:

"All the evidence suggests that a considerable number of men gravitate [sic] in their later working lives from the coal face to the surface: they may move to a lesser extent to other work below ground. A proportion of them, of course, stay at the coal face until they retire. To judge from the figures, it seems improbable that nowadays the survival rate at the coal face can be much more than 5-15%; the changed methods of working are beginning to make a difference" (reviewer's italics).

These estimated survival rates are then assembled in a comprehensive table (pp. 140-141) and the figures are there described as representing "not the proportion of men who do at present carry on beyond their mid-sixties, but the proportion who probably could carry on under suitable conditions" (authors' italics).

By now it will be realized that Ageing in Industry is extremely difficult to evaluate fairly. If one uses the criterion suggested by the actual use of officially based
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figures, then, although these are clearly presented and
dealt with, the conclusions drawn are not based on them
directly, but rather on adjusted figures which depend on
estimates and assumptions. This being the case, it seems
preferable to use a different criterion as well, and to
evaluate the conclusions more in terms of the shrewdness
with which the authors have handled their imprecise
figures. Provided, for example, one does not take
the actual numerical survival rates too seriously, it seems
reasonable to accept the broad implications of the table
which they are used to produce. In this table one finds
makers of watches and clocks and of musical instruments,
together with workers in precious metals, at one extreme
of occupational viability in the mid-sixties; the other
end is represented by coal-face workers and railway
signalmen. What the present writer finds hard to
follow is the reasoning of the authors when they insist
repeatedly that these survival rates represent "the
proportion who probably could carry on under suitable
conditions": it is here that the presence of the original
tables becomes more of an embarrassment than a help.
Those original figures must by their very nature refer
only to the proportion who actually do carry on until
their mid-sixties without dying, giving up work alto-
gether, emigrating, or changing their occupation. The
transition to the authors' table of comparative survival
rates for the 32 selected occupations must therefore be
an exercise (of an admittedly high order) in the weighing
of other relevant evidence in such a way as to permit
the shift from "actually do" to "probably could".
Turning to New Jobs for Old Workers we find a
similar approach. The authors start with census figures
for 16 occupations "of the kind to which men are known
or commonly suspected to move in their late middle
lives". They then give good reasons why they "must
necessarily have recourse to conjecture", and consistently
with this, the detailed examinations of the census figures
for each occupation regularly contain phrases such as
"the figures suggest", "we have the impression", or
"there is some probability that". All this must sound
like destructive and damaging criticism unless it is made
absolutely clear that in the opinion of the reviewer the
census information simply does not lend itself to definitive
statements: it must be illumined by some such process as
that adopted by the authors of these reports. They are
not always successful in showing how their rough esti-
mates have been derived logically and computed from
the figures in the tables: the reader must often take such
a derivation on trust, though like the reviewer he may
sometimes baulk. No, these studies must be regarded as
brilliantly suggestive interpretations; the association
between figures in the table and the final estimate at
least serves to ensure that the interpretations will never
be wild.
The third report, The Employment Problems of Elderly
Men, is based on a study of the placing records of 141
labour exchanges during the month October-November,
1954. It is "mainly concerned with an analysis of the
transitions" apparently being made by 537 men aged 60
or over who were placed in jobs which could be described
as of "a lighter nature". The author, with characteristic
responsibility, makes it clear that the men who under
present conditions turn up at labour exchanges are
"rarely typical of any branch of industry or any social
group". Most of the 537 men were finding their way
"either to light labouring jobs in factories or to one or
other of the occupations usually reckoned suitable for
older men". The author makes the extremely important
point that at present little or no effort seems to be made
to train older men for alternative work, and he seems
justified in his expression of anxiety about the con-
tinuing tradition of "old men's jobs". He ends by
suggesting "as a working hypothesis that somewhere
around 15 or 20% of all men in their early and
mid-sixties probably need to be given either the chance
of a new job or working conditions better suited to their
age", and adds significantly, "Against this yardstick
of demand we should have to measure the current supply
of lighter jobs available in the country."
These reports (especially the second and third) should
be read by every industrial medical officer in the country
—and in particular by those who are still caught in the
tradition of "old men's jobs".

Alastair Heron

Guiding Principles for the Organization of Occupational
Medical Services in Places of Employment. Reprinted
April-September, 1955. (Pp. 10. 9d.; 15 cents.) Geneva:
International Labour Office. 1955.

This publication which, perhaps, is intended for use in
countries where the occupational health services are less
well developed than in Britain can be read with advantage
by any doctor working in industry, or in practice in an
industrial area where he comes in contact with some of
the problems of the health of work-people.
It lays emphasis on the need for catering for small
undertakings, but does not suggest the solution. The
present enquiry being undertaken by the Ministry of
Labour may throw some light on the needs of smaller
industries and how this problem can be solved.
This report draws particular attention to some of the
 quasi-medical functions of occupational health services
which are frequently considered to be no part of the
industrial medical officer's job, although his training
has equipped him to give this advice. For example, it is
extremely difficult to persuade the most enlightened
management of the need for consultation with the
industrial medical officer at the planning stage of a new
factory building or process; too often many factors
which, though not always dangerous to health but
giving poor working conditions, are only discovered
after a new process or factory is in operation. Often
elementary knowledge of anatomy and physiology has
to be applied to machine and building design.

The need for the industrial physician to have access
at all times to all parts of the plant seems too obvious
to mention, but the need is equally great for the industrial
nurse, and at times, working alone without a medical
officer, she may be confined to her surgery and be most
unwelcome in the plant.
The section covering first-aid requirements restates
the need for standards of proficiency and retraining
courses; it is a pity that a definite time limit is not put