

New study reveals a hidden nuclear history

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On the week of the 26th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, the first-ever study of nuclear engineers has shown how they were shaped by secrecy and shifting goals. First defined by the Second World War's Manhattan Project, they marked out a new field described as a 'strange journey through Alice in Wonderland' and 'What Buck Rogers reads about when he reads'.

In a new book Sean Johnston, Reader in History of Science and Technology at the University of Glasgow's School of Interdisciplinary Studies in Dumfries discovers how the working experiences of these experts shaped not only their identities but our collective memories of the nuclear age.

Nuclear specialists remained hidden by security for a decade after the Second World War to explore peaceful applications of atomic energy at a handful of new national labs. During the early Cold War, nuclear scientists were often characterised as unapproachable geniuses or as potential traitors of the atomic secret. But even after they became more visible to the public, nuclear workers carried the legacy of their origins. At universities and the first nuclear power stations, they often became symbols of national ingenuity and even selfless bravery. By the 1970s, though, nuclear engineers were just as often seen as isolated and unreliable promoters of dangerous technologies. And, as illustrated by the Fukushima nuclear accident seven decades after the Manhattan project began, they are still seen conflictingly as heroes or as untrustworthy guardians of a malevolent genie.

Sean explained, “We often think of the nuclear era in terms of famous scientists and decisive government policies. I felt a ‘bottom-up’ account was needed to understand the more enduring impact of these engineers who often led cloistered but idealistic working lives.”

Johnston’s book is based on four years of research at archives and interviewing nuclear specialists across the UK, USA and Canada – the three countries that collaborated on the first atomic bombs. From Dounreay in Scotland’s far north to Illinois, home of the world’s first nuclear reactors, his account tracks these shadowy experts and how they have influenced contemporary science, industry and culture.

Provided by University of Glasgow

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