

Book review

Disasters – Learning the Lessons for a Safer World

David Eves. IOSH, Wigston, 2010, ISBN 978 0 901357 46 5, **£30.00, 256 pp.**

David Eves CB brings extensive knowledge and experience to the writing of this book. He also acknowledges the input from others to help make this a volume of significance – in many ways. Many will know the author from his years with the Health and Safety Executive, where his roles included chief inspector of factories and also deputy director general.

This 250-plus page soft-covered book includes 32 chapters with topics that range from descriptions of specific incidents to wider issues such as 'The human factor', 'Reducing hazards and risks' and 'The politics of disaster', while including health issues as well as the expected safety context. It could be regarded as an eclectic mix, ranging from land-based sites to offshore installations – and including aviation. Safety issues range from process safety to structural collapse. The comprehensive seven-plus page index is there to help the reader locate text of specific interest.

A number of the illustrations are in colour, with some not being for the faint-hearted! Bearing in mind the title of this book, the author has not shied away from showing the grimmer side of disasters as well as the immediate aftermath of such incidents. This includes the forensic work that needs to be undertaken to determine the causes in order to help in 'learning the lessons for a safer world'.

Most of the examples are from the last 100 years – but not all. With some of them the author will have written from personal knowledge, which adds to the incisiveness of the accounts given.

The title begs a question, of course. What is a disaster – and when does an incident elevate to a disaster, for example? Is the public influenced by the press coverage of such events? From the point of view of this book the answer is probably not that important, as what is important is the gathering together in one volume of a number of

significant events which act as an essential and easily-read compendium for both students and practitioners alike. It will help the former become aware of such incidents and act as a salutary reminder of underlying circumstances for those advancing through their career, perhaps even into different areas of personal responsibility. This could thus, perhaps, form part of continuing professional development.

The writing style helps the reader understand the salient points of the incidents, while the quotations at the start of many chapters help set the mind for the ensuing descriptions. As the author mentions, he is writing *stories* about incidents – some of which are quite short, with others much longer. Of necessity, short stories of complex occurrences will leave much out. It is suggested, therefore, that readers should be aware that it would be unwise to extrapolate or make assumptions in place of what has not been written as that may lead to inaccurate understandings of particular aspects of incidents. There is help in the book, however, for the reader who wishes to know more than the outlines of incidents described. This is the collection of essential references – perhaps of official inquiries or reports into investigations, as well as some appropriate web links. These can be found throughout the book.

Is there anything new to be learned? A number of common themes can be seen in the various examples given. Hence the question might be – are we learning or are we re-learning from such incidents or disasters? The answer probably depends on whether one thinks of 'we' in terms of individuals or perhaps in terms of professional disciplines, corporate bodies and society – in the wider sense. As for what is a disaster, the author does include his views on this as the term applies to his selected examples.

This volume is thoroughly recommended, as many people will realise there is much that can be learned.

Brian Neale