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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ HISTORY

Bombast: Spinning Atoms in the Desert

Michon Mackedon
Peter Goin, photographer
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The 1950s signaled the last Age of Innocence in America. Curiously, one of the things we were the most innocent about was also the most deadly—the atomic bomb.

As Michon Mackedon reveals in meticulous detail, our innocence about the atomic bomb is understandable. The atom bomb was something entirely new, and even the scientists who detonated the first Trinity bomb in 1945 couldn't agree on its power. Oppenheimer thought the blast might be ten kilotons, Enrique Fermi thought it might be 25 kilotons, and Edward Teller thought it might destroy the world. As late as 1952 an Atomic Energy Commission scientist told a group of anxious Alaska residents not to worry about fallout: "The half-life of the radioactive elements that are produced will be so short that some will be gone in a matter of hours; some will take longer." Quite a bit longer, as it turned out—about a thousand years.

Although scientists struggled to understand the bomb, that didn't stop them from testing it more than a thousand times, nine hundred times just an hour's drive from Las Vegas. Some of the testing reported by Mackedon was so crude that it wouldn't pass muster in a school science fair. Researchers strung rats along a rope to test the effect of radiation in the Trinity tests, but they forgot to give the rats water and they died of thirst. It wasn't until 1953 that radiation effects started showing up in the wild. In Utah, where open-range sheep herding was common, "ewes began giving birth to lambs with missing legs and extended bellies," Mackedon wrote. The AEC, sensing a massive public relations problem, blamed the sheep deformities on malnutrition.

But if scientists were confused about the bomb, the American public wasn't. We loved it. In page after page of color photographs that seem almost incomprehensible today, we see pictures of atomic candy bars, atomic bowling alleys and motels, Fat Man and Little Boy earrings and Up N' Atom carrots. There were Miss Atomic Bomb beauty contests and Atomic City comic books. The atomic bomb was the symbol of American power. What could possibly go wrong?

The history of atomic and later hydrogen bomb testing was brief, less than fifty years (1945-1993). But Mackedon reminds us it is still being written. To this day we haven't figured out where to permanently store the radioactive plutonium, nor exactly what words and symbols to use to warn people not to open that canister 10,000 years from now.

Despite its title, *Bombast* is not the least bombastic. It would rather pile up facts than point fingers. Although it is clear that Mackedon feels that many decisions about the frequency and location of atomic testing sites were made more for political than scientific reasons, she is a historian, not a polemicist. And the history she tells comes alive, especially to the "duck and cover" generation that lived through those terrible and innocent days.
JACK SHAKELY (September 2, 2011)

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