

(reprinted with permission from *New Scientist*, 15 November 1975)

## **Radioactive contamination**, by Virginia Brodine (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)

By Walt Patterson

In 1953 the US Atomic Energy Commission declared that the only possible hazard to human beings from strontium-90 in fallout would be from "the ingestion of bone splinters". Somehow they overlooked milk. This sort of relentless misinformation prompted scientists at Washington University in St Louis to form a "Committee for Information". Abjuring any policy-making position, they undertook to provide accurate, comprehensive and intelligible scientific information about issues of public importance. Since 1958 CNI has become the Scientists' Institute for Public Information; the duplicated pamphlets of "Nuclear Information" have become the magazine *Environment* - a magazine which deserves to be more widely known outside the US than it probably is.

*Radioactive Contamination* is the third in a series of *Environment* guides to a major environmental issue (the two earlier titles were *Air Pollution* and *Water Pollution*). Those familiar with *Environment* will know what to expect: a clear, readable and orderly exposition of the scientific details, in the relevant historical, economic, political and social context. We are told how radioactivity is created, how it reaches the environment, how much is known - and not known - about its effects, and how it is - or is not - controlled; and about radiation biology, radioisotope applications, nuclear power generation and nuclear weapons. Appendices describe radiation units and the characteristics of some 40 radionuclides.

The language is calm and measured. The framework and examples are almost exclusively American, but - except as regards regulatory activities - are of equivalent significance in Europe and elsewhere. One niggle: as so often happens, no distinction is here made between "radioactivity" and "radiation": please let it be noted that the former produces the latter. But let it also be noted, as this book emphasises, that the source of radioactivity we ought to be most concerned about is the growing arsenal of nuclear weapons. The authors, following their creed, conclude: "This is a subject for political analysis - but for a political analysis which never loses sight of the central fact about nuclear weapons: they can destroy us all."

(c) Walt Patterson 1975-2009