

Jessica Borge, *Protective Practices: A History of the London Rubber Company and the Condom Business* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020). 306 pp. Cloth \$39.95.

Jessica Borge's monograph presents her unique research into the London Rubber Company (LRC), the British condom distributor that maintained a near-monopoly on condom sales in Britain for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. The company created the iconic brand Durex, though it stopped production in 1994 and condoms currently sold under the Durex name have no relation to the London Rubber Company. Borge's research is unique because, in spite of the growing interest in the history of contraception and sex in recent decades, there has only been limited research into the activities of the London Rubber Company, at least in part due to the lack of a specific company archive. As such, Borge's research draws on several different archives of related organizations and topics, as well as interviews with some LRC employees. Despite this lack of a single archive for the company, Borge is able to piece together a comprehensive story of the first fifty years of the company (1915-65), in the process tracking the rise of the condom as the contraceptive of choice for many Britons and, later, its popularity as a preventative for disease.

Protective Practices explains how a wide range of factors including the logistics of condom production and the social dynamics in Britain resulted in the London Rubber Company's dominance in the market. For example, Borge outlines how early latex condom factories often caught fire due to the solvents involved in production, resulting in higher costs and interrupted production. When Lucian Landau in British Latex Products (LRC's "sister company") was able to automate the production process and scale it up without the risk of fire, the company was able to quickly outpace competitors, having a 50% market share in 1939, and 95% in 1952 (32). Borge also explores the popularity of latex condoms in relation to their dipped rubber sheath predecessors: the earlier "cement sheaths" (so-called owing to the production method of being shaped over cement moulds) were thicker and reusable, requiring washing and powdering, having a lower cost over time owing to their not needing to be repurchased regularly. However, they also had reduced sensation and were bulky, needing a special case rather than subtle packaging which could be slipped in a pocket or a purse like the later Durex-style condoms. These factors allowed the London Rubber Company's efficiently produced discreet latex condoms to rise in popularity with little competition.

Further to outlining its initial manufacturing advantages, Borge explores

the London Rubber Company's "mission to stamp out, exploit, or otherwise control competition, both within the contraceptives industry and beyond" (216). By the 1960s, when they unsuccessfully attempted to launch their own version of the contraceptive pill in Britain, LRC were "virtually omnipotent in the contraceptive marketplace, producing condoms, creams, diaphragms, and now, a pill" (185). However, notwithstanding its intention to control the British contraceptive market, Borge details how the Company tried to meet social norms rather than change them, resulting in them being slow to include less socially acceptable customers following the HIV/AIDS epidemic that led to wider awareness of the preventative value of condom usage. Speaking of the LRC in the late '80s, during the height of the AIDS crisis, one employee claimed "it wasn't just AIDS they felt uncomfortable with, it was homosexual sex—disease and buggery just wasn't how they wanted to see the Durex brand" (202), which fits with wider analysis of Durex advertising as resistant to non-normative sexual identities.

Protective Practices focuses on the first fifty years of the company, ending in 1965 with only one chapter covering the years after that. Though including varying social and societal aspects in her analysis, Borge situates *Protective Practices* firmly within the frame of institutional history. Indeed, Borge gives the disclaimer that "the downside of doing an institutional history of Britain's biggest condom maker is that it takes most of the sex out of the subject" (xviii), emphasizing that she is examining the institutional and corporate history, not the end use of the condoms, describing how "a source-driven framing pushes beyond the existing social, political, and public health narratives in contraceptive history" (8-9). Though eschewing the social history approach of many other contraceptive historians, Borge does engage with the individual stories of those involved, shining particular light on the "forgotten founder," Lucian Landau, who enabled the large-scale production of latex condoms.

It is the period after 1965 where Borge's focus on the early institutional history does not go into the depth that social and sex historians may desire. Issues such as the multiple investigations into the LRC by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, the impact of and response to the AIDS epidemic, and the internationalization of production, are compressed into a single chapter, with little detail. This period is full of factors that many historians of the field may expect more engagement with: the so-called "Sexual Revolution," various health scandals around the Pill and IUDs, decreasing family sizes, later marriage, and the introduction of free contraception by the National Health Service. However, these lie beyond Borge's scope; it is to be hoped her work will provide a foundation for future approaches that will help build a more complete picture of the latter years of the company.

In summary, *Protective Practices* gives excellent detail of the early years of the London Rubber Company and its initial success and growth to market dominance, but feels much less involved in its eventual shrinking during the period of

change in the British contraception market in the latter half of the twentieth century. This gap can be filled to some extent by the work of other historians, particularly social historians working in the field of contraceptive history, but it seems unfortunate that such a comprehensive history of the first fifty years is lacking in the latter years. This book is an excellent source for understanding the biggest manufacturer and distributor in the British contraceptive market for most of the twentieth century, but do not expect a broad approach to British society in the twentieth century. It is a history with a singular focus on one company that is successful in achieving its specific intentions, and is an excellent resource for a company that otherwise lacks a singular archive.

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