Research Unit at London's City University in 1996. Perhaps even more extraordinary was the MCS, a mainly political initiative by the government of then-prime minister Tony Blair, devised to celebrate the millennium. Funding was not agreed until early in 2000, so planning was rushed and the design far from ideal: when the participants were recruited, the babies were already nine months old.

Pearson concentrates on social history rather than research findings, although she does highlight impacts on social and educational policy and medical practice. This is wise, because the science is difficult to synthesize: thousands of papers have been written on the studies' biomedical, social, economic and educational ramifications. Pearson inserts stories of participants such as Steve Christmas of the 1958 cohort, who overcame the disadvantages of a limited education with hard work and determination. These provide vivid accounts of growing up in different decades, and the roles of educational opportunity and psychological outlook in shaping lives.

As Pearson explains, the studies have had to fight for funding, owing in part to a tension between the need to maintain a sequence of measurements to understand how people change as they age, and the need to generate new hypotheses and collect new data in every funding period. At one time or another, each investigation was at risk of disbanding.

Which brings us to the melancholy tale of the Life Study. Planned by paediatric epidemiologist Carol Dezateux to begin in 2012 with

"Findings on the enduring impact of social and economic adversity have fed into national debates."

80,000 participants, the project aimed to take detailed measurements including data on air pollution, mobile-phone use and water quality; samples of blood, urine, saliva and faeces; and

recordings of behaviour. It was immensely complex, balancing the demands of medical and social scientists, and costs spiralled. Recruitment finally began early in 2015, but uptake was low, and the UK Research Councils withdrew funding within months.

It seems likely that there will be no new national birth cohorts any time soon. Yet it is encouraging that major funders such as the MRC and the Economic and Social Research Council have recognized the value of such studies. They are an important national research resource, and *The Life Project* does a great service in bringing them and the people at their heart to life for a general readership. ■

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Books in brief

Dark Territory: The Secret History of Cyber War

Fred Kaplan SIMON AND SCHUSTER (2016)

Beyond the bombs and drones of on-the-ground warfare, a shadow conflict is playing out in a virtual theatre of war. Covert cyberattacks — the hacking of digital systems that control everything from dams to centrifuges in uranium-enrichment facilities — are a new norm. Pulitzer-prizewinning journalist Fred Kaplan's taut, urgent history traces the dual trajectory of digital surveillance and intervention, and high-level US policy from the 1980s on. In 2014 alone, he reveals, almost 80,000 US security breaches occurred — an artefact of the very network connectivity that enriches the country's economy.

Being a Beast

Charles Foster PROFILE (2016)

Humanity's obsession with animals spans shamanic 'possession' by wolves and a hefty tranche of children's literature. Charles Foster's contribution might just stand alone. In his exquisitely strange, often hilarious chronicle, the writer recounts neuroscientific self-experiments centred on immersion in the sensory maelstrom experienced by iconic British species. He gets down and dirty, chomping earthworms and sleeping in a homemade sett (badger); honing his olfaction and attempting to hunt voles (urban fox); and parachuting (swift). A bold, unsettling try at comprehending the rest of life on Earth.

Meathooked

Marta Zaraska BASIC (2016)

From char siu to boeuf bourguignon, meat has us hooked, proves journalist Marta Zaraska. Starting 1.5 billion years ago, when one bacterium first engulfed another, she zips through the evolution of human carnivory and examines the enduring pull of animal flesh by way of genetics, developmental biology, chemistry and nutrition. Zaraska negotiates the complexities nimbly, from meat's pivotal part in building our big brains to the 1,000 substances that underpin its cooked odour (3-octen-2-one, for instance, smells of "crushed bugs") and the unpalatable influence of the industry on research.

Raptor: A Journey Through Birds

James Macdonald Lockhart FOURTH ESTATE (2016)

Fifteen species of raptor — from hen harrier to red kite — form nuclei for the crystalline narratives of this meditation on the British wild, a winner of the 2011 pre-publication Jerwood Award for Non-Fiction. James Macdonald Lockhart grew up knowing birds through photographs shot by his great-grandfather, Seton Gordon. His own understanding of raptor ethology shines. His journey — intercut with passages by Victorian ornithologist William MacGillivray — flings us into skies where a hobby 'concertinas' the air, or a marsh harrier's ruff give it the air of an Elizabethan grandee.

Eco-Homes: People, Place and Politics

Jenny Pickerill ZED (2016)

We have the science, technology and political will to build eco-housing — as well as to retrofit our not-so-green abodes. What stops us? The greatest hurdle is often cultural adaptation to a new norm, concludes environmental geographer Jenny Pickerill in her cogent sociopolitical work. Focusing on self-build eco-housing, Pickerill looks at more than 30 case studies from a range of countries, along with lessons learned on construction materials, geography and climate, gender, costs and the right policy for rapid rollout. **Barbara Kiser**