In 1958, Fred Iklé, a nuclear weapons analyst and a recurring figure in Eric Schlosser’s _Command and Control_, looked back over the thirteen years since the Second World War. Although no nuclear weapons had exploded during that period, he insisted that the very fact that those events had not occurred “provided the fact that no unauthorized detonation has occurred to date”. In fact, he proclaimed, that perfect safety record meant nothing for the future, and he cheerlessly calculated that, looking ahead, there might well be twelve crashes of nuclear-armed bombers and seven bomb jettisons every year.

Iklé was wildly off in his predictions about how many bombs would be crashed in bombers or would be jettisoned from them. However, these years, while obviously undesirable, are substantially irrelevant to concerns about inadvertent nuclear explosions. Nuclear weapons do not detonate simply by crashing to the ground, nor by being subjected to fire or external explosions.

For the weapons to explode, not only must their considerable array of safety devices be undermined or switched off, but they must be detonated by mechanical processes, not by impact or by fire. (It is a true nuclear weapon can be “ground burst”. However, this means that the weapon must still reach the ground and its fireball gouges out a crater in the earth, not that it hits the ground. Both the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, in contrast, were “air bursts”)

Schlosser seems to know this, but apparently he could not bring himself to make it central to his argument perhaps because it would undercut the easy flow of his determined alarmism. The perfect safety record for unauthorized nuclear explosions has now been extended to nearly seventy years, and it embraces not only the United States but the entire world, which currently harbours nine countries with nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, Schlosser, while noting that achievable and reporting Iklé’s prediction without irony, essentially insists that the seventy-year experience, too, means nothing for the future because an unauthorized detonation of a nuclear weapon could still happen. It is not impossible.

His book, some 485 pages of text and nine-nine-page bibliography, attempts to raise the alarm with a series of rather breathless anecdotes involving accidents which involve nuclear weapons in one way or another. Strung through the text is a dramatic and extremely detailed account of one that took place in 1980 at an American military base near Damascus, Arkansas. A fire caused a missile to explode and resulted in the death of one person, although the antiques and very large nuclear weapon on the missile survived intact. It is situations like that one that occupy the majority of Schlosser’s anecdotes. Scarcely any involve the potential detonation of a nuclear weapon.

Mishaps in which a nuclear weapon crashes to the ground or is involved in a fire or an external explosion are essentially like industrial accidents – tragic and costly, but nowhere near as destructive as a nuclear detonation. Working to reduce industrial accidents is certainly a sensible policy goal, and Schlosser’s vivid book does an excellent job of detailing both the human and mechanical complexities of ensuring that nuclear weapons are safe.

A reason Iklé’s statement that the thirteenth year of the atomic age were so extravagantly pessimistic is that he didn’t take safety improvements into account. Schlosser’s narrative shows that these have been applied to nuclear weapons as they have to other areas. For example, in the year one man was killed at the Damascus fire and explosion documented by Schlosser, 133 died in coal-mining accidents in the United States. However, that number had been 1,158 in 1947, and by 2012 it had declined to twenty.

And there have been other developments favourable to nuclear weapons safety. Since the end of the Cold War the sheer number of nuclear weapons in the world has declined greatly. The United States and Russia have reduced nuclear arsenals, and France has reduced its arsenal by two-thirds unilaterally. Moreover, the average explosive capacity, or “yield”, of a nuclear weapon is far lower than it was during most of the Cold War.

More importantly, the decline in international tension has reduced the threat that missiles have to stand down from a hair-trigger readiness, something that greatly reduces the dangers of accidental or unauthorized use. Even tension-racked Pakistan reportedly stores its nuclear weapons in pieces in separate secure locations. And, of course, the weapons continue to be held primarily in remote locations where detonation, however undesirable, is likely to do limited damage. The radius of destruction of a Hiroshima size bomb is about 5 kilometers – tragic and significant in a city, but far less so in a desert.

However, none of this is likely to cheer Schlosser. In the end, he demands “perfect safety and security” from the inadvertent or unauthorized detonation of nuclear weapons.

In another book, perhaps, he will apply that approach to the Romantic era, we might think of _Unusual Suspects_ as a cross between William Hazlitt’s _The Spirit of the Age_ and E. P. Thompson’s _The Making of the English Working Class_ group biography meets radical history.

While one hesitates to name the focus of a group biography, Johnston’s chapter on Joseph Priestley and the 1791 Birmingham Riots brilliantly coordinates many of the concerns of his book. The politically progressive scientist and theologian Priestley found himself at the heart of a storm in July 1791, about a month after he had taken steps to found a constitutional reform society. Priestley was a notable target of a three-day riot that brought Birmingham to a halt amid fires, looting, and property destruction (including the razing of Priestley’s extensive library and scientific laboratory). Some historians have termed the 1791 Birmingham Riots as evidence of a popular British loyalty that gained strength in the wake of the French Revolution; others have argued that this “church and king” mob was directed by government agents who wished to muzzle Birmingham’s growing political militancy. One thing is clear: there was something unsettling in the strange events which the “rioters” carefully targeted the houses of political reformers. But for Johnston the very shadowiness of the case is part of the interest, and his compelling account of the riots brings together the central concerns of his study: mysterious, quasi-gov- ernmental attacks that left lives damaged or ruined, and the ensuing historiographical problem of how we sometimes misunderstood orchestrated repression as popular loyalty.

Johnston shows how Priestley’s fate was a break of a generation, as he describes the effects of repression “not in terms of theoretical analysis or grand historical panorama, but in the individual lives of the people to whom it happened”. And it happened in the lives of a constellation of major Romantic writers: Helen Maria Williams, Charles Lamb, James Macintosh, William Godwin — even Coleridge and Wordsworth. To read Johnston’s account of the reticulations of repression that came to define 1790s Britain is to understand why his initial tabulation of contents listed seventy-one “unusual suspects”. Though Johnston has distilled the narrative to a more focused cluster of fascinating case studies, for each person whose dire encounter with political repression is uncovered and recounted here we could add a dozen or more. This, too, is the history of the Romantic era.