

Jessica Van Horssen. *A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health and Resilience in a Resource Community*. 228p. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019. \$32.95 (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-77482842-0

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

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I am surrounded by asbestos. Behind the four walls of my office lies at least some of this deadly substance; breathing in even a small amount can cause deadly lung diseases such as asbestosis and mesothelioma (an aggressive form of cancer) to develop years later. While safely inert behind plaster (I hope), I dare not put a nail, or even a thumb tack into the wall. I am not paranoid: asbestos remains the biggest cause of workplace death in Canada, killing anywhere between 300 and 600 people annually, and some predictions suggest teachers and professors who work in older asbestos-filled buildings will be prominent among the next generation of victims. The Canadian government plans a long overdue ban on the use of the substance by 2018, but the almost casual industrial use of substance known for decades to be dangerous raises questions about who knew what when, and why was this allowed to happen. Jessica Van Horssen's stunning new book, *A Town Called Asbestos*, provides several answers to these questions, a chilling reflection on the lengths to which the asbestos industry went to deny the mounting evidence of danger associated with the substance.

The book's focus is the massive open pit Jeffrey Mine and the mining

town of Asbestos, Quebec, a mining development that, along with the Thetford Mines near Quebec City, positioned Canada as global leader in asbestos production as early as the 1880s. The early chapters describe the growth of the mine and the co-development of the town, the latter always giving way to the insatiable demands of pit expansion as production increased in response to technological developments and market demands. As urbanization proceeded rapidly in North America during the early twentieth century, the owner of the Jeffrey Mine, construction materials giant Johns-Manville, was set to reap whirlwind profits as demand for the new miracle substance asbestos was sought after to make fire resistant wall plaster and insulation for the interior of walls and for electric wiring. In the book's early chapters Van Horssen's analysis of the relationship between technology, labour, and cascading changes to the landscape and the town are as evocative as any in recent works of environmental history.

The heart of *A Town Called Asbestos* is, however, the later chapters depicting the pattern of denial, suppression and deceit Johns-Manville employed as evidence of the dangers associated with asbestos production and use mounted beginning in the 1920s. The story is shocking, with Johns-Manville's handling of the issue providing a significant antecedent to the anti-public health campaigns of the tobacco industry and other "merchants of doubt" after World War Two. As with other hazardous trades, a primary strategy was to exert control over the health monitoring and scientific study of the

issue, steering workers to company doctors, funding the establishment of a Department of Industrial Hygiene at McGill (with expectations of a return on investment), and the suppression of scientific studies detrimental to the industry's interests. Van Horssen's book is at its absolute best when she describes Johns-Manville's deplorable (and illegal) practice of secretly shipping the lungs of deceased workers across the Canada-U.S. border to the Saranac Lake Laboratories between 1944 and 1958, and then hiding the clear evidence of 70 cases of lung cancer. While environmental historians have justly celebrated the work of pioneering industrial hygiene crusaders such as Alice Hamilton, Van Horssen provides a stark reminder that the practitioners of many "dangerous trades" were almost able to completely impede rational approaches to workplace health and safety issues when they proved too great a threat to business.

The latter point alone represents a substantial contribution to the environmental history literature, but Van Horssen also manages to challenge prevailing interpretations of one of the most significant post-war moments in Quebec history: the 1949 strike at the Jeffrey Mine. According to the conventional wisdom, the heated and sometimes violent strike represented an early assertion of Quebec nationalism, a struggle by francophone Quebecers to wrest control of the economy from the Anglo corporate elite, resentment magnified by the fact that Johns-Manville was American-owned. Add in the fact that three prominent activists against the oppressive anti-labour policies of Marice Deplessis'

government, the *Le Devoir* journalist Gerard Pelletier, union leader Jean Marchand, and the writer and intellectual Pierre Trudeau, became the core of Quebec's new assertive presence in the federal government when appointed as the "three wise men" to Lester Pearson's cabinet in 1965, and you have seemingly irrefutable proof that the strike was, as Trudeau famously declared, "the violent announcement that a new era had begun." Van Horssen argues convincingly that interpreting the strike as a harbinger of the Quiet Revolution masks the reasons that workers went on strike in the first place, including pay, holidays, union recognition, and especially improved dust control measures to reduce the risk of asbestos-related diseases. The publication of a report by journalist Burton LeDoux in *Le Devoir* on the eve of the strike largely confirmed what workers had suspected: the company had been lying to them and suppressing evidence about the health risks of asbestos in the mines. While there may be some hints of a broader symbolic nationalism attached to the 1949 strike, Van Horssen reclaims the meaning of the strike for the workers who fought a front line battle to protect the health of their own bodies.

The decisive defeat of the strike allowed Johns Manville and their allies in the provincial and federal governments to deny the deleterious health effects of asbestos, particularly the chrysotile variant produced in Canada. Workers remained aware of the danger, and did fight for the maintenance of an ever-diminishing buffer zone between the pit and the community in the years after the strike.

But Van Horssen argues that after increasing pressure from international asbestos bans in the early 1980s, and after Johns-Manville sold the mine to a group of former executives, workers and residents of Asbestos tended to adopt the idea that the mineral was safe. Indeed, from 1983 to the final closure of the mine in 2011, government, industry and organized labour unanimously supported the false argument that chrysotile asbestos was safe for export to emerging Third World markets so long as it was handled safely. I do quibble somewhat with Van Horssen's suggestion that workers adopted the idea asbestos could be safe as a rational choice meant to protect their jobs. She might have delved a little bit more into the broader "job blackmail" strategy that corporations adopted in the early 1980s

and explored the role that structural power (of markets, or corporations, of growing neo-liberal ideals in the 1980s) played in transforming workers' attitudes to asbestos. However, this is slight criticism of what is otherwise one of the finest works of Canadian environmental history to come out in recent years. Painstakingly researched with a compelling writing style, *A Town Called Asbestos* fulfills the promise of recent U.S. environmental histories that integrated histories of labour, public health, and environmental change into a single narrative. It is essential reading for anyone interested in labour, industrial or environmental history, or any person who wants to know why a deadly substance may persist behind the walls where they live and work.

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