
Amy M. Hay
that there is much work left for historians to undertake examining how these processes unfolded at the local level, rather than just accepting broad generalizations at face value.

Sweeny pushes the reader to take into consideration the epistemology of the documents they rely upon, and how they reflect an unjust society. Particularly noteworthy here is his critical assessment of censuses, street maps and city directories of Montreal published in the 1820s and 1830s. While these documents, Sweeny argues, might tell us a great deal about the city’s composition at a transformative moment, they were intrinsically shaped by the assumptions and aspirations of their creators. In the face of rapid social change and relationships that were being renegotiated on the fly, the producers of these sources were finding ways to accentuate the order and modernity of their surroundings. Taken at face value, these documents can sometimes push historians towards assumptions that Montreal’s transition to a capitalist society shaped by liberal assumptions about property occurred much more tidily than it did. There is a richer vein, Sweeny argues, that can be tapped by digging deeper into the archival record. An essential part of this, he argues, comes with taking into account the importance of human agency. The importance of choices and strategies is crucial to Sweeny’s interpretation of social change, and is reflected in the book’s title, which reframes industrialization as the product of complex decisions, rather than of an invisible hand. The restructuring of society that occurred in the first two thirds of the nineteenth century and produced a less equal society with regards to class and gender was not inevitable. The usurping of a longstanding moral economy by liberal concepts of property ownership was profoundly transformative, and its impact reached into every aspect of public life and people’s lived experiences. Historians, Sweeny insists, must demonstrate how contentious and audacious the transition was.

Common assumptions about social change during this period are shaped, he argues, by the reality that historians tend to pay much closer attention to the economic activity of the colonial elite, rather than the complex economic activities of daily life in a bustling city. This gave credence to the notion that the exportation of staples like wood and grain, dominated by a masculine merchant elite with close connections to the political establishment, shaped the colonial economy. A closer look at notarial records, however, reveals the persistence of a local craft economy. Furthermore, evidence that the majority of stalls in the city’s public markets were owned and operated by women demonstrates that the daily workings of the Montreal economy were far less marked by gender segregation than many historians have assumed. Again, this is an occasion where Sweeny pushes historians to seek nuance through a careful reading of archival records.

Elsewhere, Sweeny argues convincingly that the conventional approach to studying urbanization and the economic and cultural transitions of the nineteenth century has led many historians to lose sight of the crucial place that changing gender relations played in this process. In keeping with recent works by Bettina Bradbury and Sherry Olson and Patricia Thornton, that grappling with the gendered nature of the strategies that men and women used to negotiate their place in a changing world is essential to understanding the transition. For Sweeny, this was part of a larger realization that the structuralism adopted by many politically engaged scholars in the 1960s and 1970s did not leave adequate room to take into account human agency. Sweeny uses sources like tax rolls and census records to trace the process of suburbanization, and notes the ways in which it was rooted in geographic and economic restructuring of work and family life that was the product of personal decisions and strategies. These complex processes paved the way for a more explicitly patriarchal and unequal society.

Why Did We Choose to Industrialize is not a conventional academic monograph. It is a fascinating and at times contentious record of an historian’s career, of the unexpected places that the archives, successive historiographical debates, and the geographic trajectories of academic life can take us. Sweeny traces his shifting perspective on theory and methodology to definitive moments- days spent in archives or panels attended at academic conferences across Canada and Europe. In doing so, he reminds readers of the challenges and rewards that come with remaining engaged with our colleagues, of continuing to pursue fresh insights into the places, processes and periods that we study, and of staying attuned to the connections between the events we study in the past and the contemporary world we inhabit.

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In A Town Called Asbestos, Jessica van Horssen tells the story of Asbestos, Quebec, a mining town founded in the late nineteenth century. The town was named for the mineral, which when added to materials made them flame resistant, an increasingly important quality in the industrializing world. A geological anomaly, the asbestos in the mineral deposit located roughly equidistant from Quebec City and Montreal lay in the form of a circular mound versus the more typical linear sheets. William Jeffrey discovered the site in the 1870s, and working with Charles Webb, formed a company to work the newly named Jeffrey Mine. Asbestos the mineral
represented the marvels of modernity ahead, and Asbestos
the town and its inhabitants looked to it to build their fortunes.
In recounting the story of Asbestos over the course of a 100
years plus of history, van Horssen examines three different, but
overlapping, kinds of bodies – the physical land, human beings,
and the political arena. In eight chapters plus an introduction
and conclusion, the book chronicles the story of this Canadian
resource town. In the process, it examines understandings of
risk, the regulatory state, the significance of resource towns,
and the making of an industrialized mining operation.

The Introduction and Chapter 1 cover the founding of the town
and initial mining operations up to 1918. The site’s physical
layout allowed opencast mining which was also the best way to
“harvest” the highly valued long-length asbestos fiber, desirable
because of its quicker processing time and ability to be spun
into a kind of yarn. The realization that the discarded earth held
copious amounts of short length fibers – asbestic – represented
wealth not waste and helped increase the mine’s worth at a
crucial time. This material could be ground up and added to an
infinite number of products, including paint, shingles, even wall
plaster. The Jeffrey Mine output was valued at over $2 million
in 1905. The town’s population boomed as well, with a French
Canadian mining workforce and anglophones heavily represent-
ed among mine’s management. Mining operations were eventually
purchased by an American corporation, Johns-Manville (JM).
While JM modernized mining operations, it neglected to raise
miners’ wages. At the end of the First World War the internation-
al asbestos trade increased and helped ensure the 1920s would
be a profitable decade as the Jeffrey Mine expanded to satisfy
increased demand.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 all examine the period from 1918 to 1949
from different vantage points. Chapter 2 focuses on the dramat-
ic changes in the land that the mine and town occupied. The
Jeffrey Mine’s geographic advantages made it an enormously
productive and profitable mine. Increased demand meant the
mine consistently expanded throughout the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. This
put it in conflict with the local community. Mine owners paid for
township lands and goodwill by providing residents’ electric-
ity, plowing city roads, and paying for new roads and buildings.
The city mostly cooperated with only minor pushback. Work
during the Great Depression meant that JM’s expansion needs
would be met. In the process, the Jeffrey Mine grew wider and
deeper, profoundly changing workers’ experiences and the
local landscape. Chapter 3 shines light on a particularly dark
aspect of the Asbestos story, the considerable and consistent
suppression of medical information on the health hazards
posed by working with asbestos. The 1920s and 30s saw
increasing medical concerns over specific conditions associ-
ated with exposure to asbestos fibers: asbestosis, where lungs
lost their flexibility and the increasing stiffening of tissue caused
pain and decreased lung efficiency; mesothelioma, cancer of
the lung and abdominal lining; and generalized cancer beyond
the lungs. JM managed to limit these potential outcomes of
asbestos exposure not only among their workers, especially the
francophone miners at the Jeffrey Mine, but within the medi-
cal community as well. This was achieved through financial
sponsorship of asbestos health studies and the editorial control
it gave the company and its allies. Unlike other infamous cases
of public health complicity, such as the case of the New Jersey
radium watch dial workers, the JM company directly interfered
with the health studies being done on asbestos. Even as the
broader world grew increasingly concerned about the growing
evidence of asbestos’ exposure harm, JM kept its Asbestos
francophone, conservative workforce mostly ignorant of the
illnesses they faced. This abruptly changed with a January 1949
expose, printed in French, on the health dangers of asbestos
appeared in Montreal’s Le Devoir. The piece appeared just as
contract negotiations between the company and miners had
stalled. It became one of the sparks that led to one of Canada’s
best known labor disputes, the five-month Asbestos miners’
strike of 1949. Using neglected sources, Chapter 4 explores
company-town relationships, and contentions over land use and
company policies prior to the 1949 strike. Chapter 5 specifi-
cally examines the strike at the local level, focusing on miners’
attempts to force JM to meet their demands of greater pay,
better health protections, and greater worker authority. Initially
the miners kept in good spirits and received aid from their union
and supporters. But by the end, JM’s use of strikebreakers and
violence broke the movement. Asbestos’ residents and workers
conceded their need to work outweighed their needs for a safe
workplace and homes.

The last three chapters provide multiple perspectives on the
years 1949 to 1983, the year JM declared bankruptcy and sold
the mine. Here the previous decades’ patterns repeat, as the
Jeffrey Mine continued to expand, although JM experienced
more conflict with the township; the company continued to
suppress medical information on asbestos’ risk; and, as the
importance of asbestos mining to Quebec’s export economy
gradually faltered, the ways nationalization of the industry
helped save it for a while. These chapters complete the declen-
sionist narrative of Asbestos’ story, with multiple parties failing
to stop the mining, or miners’ exposure, to asbestos despite
consensus on the dangers of asbestos materials. Company
doctors and leaders continued to subvert medical information
on the lethal outcomes of asbestos exposure. Local, regional,
and national public officials refused to regulate asbestos mining,
dependent on the monies the industry brought. The people
of Asbestos failed to fight further for their health, resigning
themselves to working for a dying industry, van Horssen shows
the links between land and health, the realities of a resource
industry, and Asbestos’ residents connection to the land. What
her study cannot adequately explain, and it may not be fair to
ask it to, remains the question why that connection to the land
never grounded worker and/or community challenges to the
health hazards posed by the mineral? Can this failure be due to
the conservative nature of francophone, Catholic unionism? Did
miners and townspeople need new definitions of the “ecological”
to connect their ill health with the wounded landscape? Were
economic conditions so bad that people would do anything
to keep their jobs, even if it meant exposing their families to
dangerous hazards? This understanding remains elusive and
incomplete. Instead, pride of place led to serious and unfortu-
nate outcomes in the mining of a mineral, harming the town and
the world beyond it.

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