

Jessica van Horsen. *A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health, and Resilience in a Resource Community*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016. 256 pp.

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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 inextricably 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.

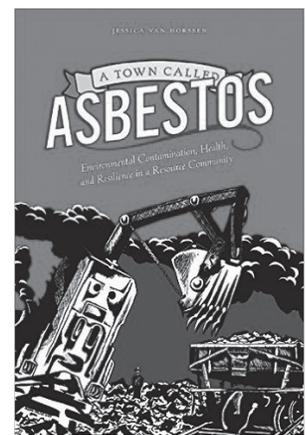
Why Did We Choose to Industrialize is not a conventional academic monograph. It is a fascinating and at times contentious record of an historian's career, of the unexpected places that the archives, successive historiographical debates, and the geographic trajectories of academic life can take us. Sweeny 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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**Jessica van Horssen. *A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health, and Resilience in a Resource Community*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016. 256 pp.**

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 open-pit 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 – asbestos – 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 represented 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 international 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 dramatic 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 on 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' electricity, 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 associated 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 medical 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 specifically 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 declensionist 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

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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 unfortunate outcomes in the mining of a mineral, harming the town and the world beyond it.

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