

# A TOWN CALLED ASBESTOS.

## Environmental Contamination, Health and Resilience in a Resource Community

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This book was written by Jessica van Horsen, a senior lecturer at the University of Leeds Beckett. She has extensively researched the environmental and health impacts of asbestos and obtained her PhD from the University of Western Ontario with a dissertation titled "Asbestos, Québec: The Town, The Mineral, and the Local-Global Balance Between the Two".

This book explores the evolution of the complex relationships between the residents of Asbestos, the Jeffrey Mine and the Johns-Manville Company who owned the mine from 1916 to 1983. The book is not about the cover up of Asbestos' health dangers (even though one chapter is devoted entirely to this), but rather about the close links between the workers and the land, their acceptance of health risks. The narrative also describes how the interconnections between the community, the mine and the company shaped people's understanding and acceptance of their dependence on a single resource, and how this changed with time.

At first, I found there was lots of redundancy in the introduction and the first few chapters. I felt I was not given enough details about the health impacts of asbestos, and the vulnerable position in which such resource-based communities are placed. But as I progressed in the book, I realized the book is articulated around three time periods in the story of the mine: the beginnings (before 1918), the growth and industrialization (1918-1949), and the rapid expansion and struggle to survive (1949-1983).

The introduction is a long summary of the book which leaves you hungry for more information. You have no other choice but to read on. The first chapter, *Creation Stories: Asbestos Before 1918*, is almost like a second introduction, in which the author recounts the creation of both the Jeffrey Mine and the town of Asbestos and their evolution until 1918. After difficult beginnings in the 1870s, the Jeffrey Mine thrived for a short while but went bankrupt in 1892. Then, the Danville Slate Co. made profits from the short asbestos fibers discarded by the founding company. Later, the discovery of long asbestos fiber deposits increased the value of the mine. In 1896, the mine was bought by the British Asbestos and Asbestic Co. and in 1901, Johns-Manville Co., a leading producer of asbestos-based products, bought controlling shares of the company. As demand increased during WWI, Johns-Manville bought the mine in 1916, consolidating its mining and manufacturing operations.

The next three chapters explore different aspects of the 1918-1949 period. Chapter 2, *Land with a Future, Not a Past 1918-49*, examines the rapid mine expansion and modernizing of both the mine and the town that followed the First World War, the radically changing landscape and the sacrifices that the community made to accommodate the mine's activities. It emphasizes how workers developed a close connection with the land as it changed and as they changed it. Chapter 3, *Negotiating Risks 1918-49*, puts in parallel what was then known and published about the health impacts of asbestos with the cover up of health risks by Johns-Manville and its doctors.

Chapter 4 *Essential Characteristics 1918-49* sheds light on the local politics, changing identities and loyalties in the community. The author does a good job describing the roles played by the company, workers, town council and unions.

The next section of the book explore the time period between 1949 and 1983. Chapter 5, *Bodies Collide: The Strike of 1949* provides the reader with a good understanding of what lead to the 1949 strike, a comprehension of what the strike entailed, and how it unfolded. In Chapter 6 "Une ville qui se déplace" 1949-83 the reader will be in awe at the incredible impact various episodes of mine expansion had on the community and its people, and how the community changed its acceptance of risks and worked to gradually diminish the company's control on the town and its inhabitants. We see how the community came to reject the paternalist attitude of the company towards its workers and town council, and how the community became more assertive, gradually becoming less dependent on the company.

Chapter 7, *Useful Tools 1949-83*, further explores the medical evidence for the harmful health impacts of asbestos, after the 1949 strike. In Chapter 8, *Altered Authority 1949-83*, we learn about the town's struggle to survive, the impact of various provincial government and unions on the mining activities and finally, the impact of nationalization at further covering up the health risks of asbestos.

The author did not fall into the easy trap to antagonize the "bad rich English-speaking managers" and "the persecuted French-speaking Canadian workers". Rather, it depicts the relationship between the workers (miners and workers in the Asbestos textile plant), the surrounding community (miners' families, local businesses, and clergy) and the plant managers. The reader will learn how the political and religious context evolved during a period of intense societal transformation, before and after the 1949 strike. While reading Chapter 4, the movie "Mon Oncle Antoine" came back to my mind. The story is set in a small asbestos mining town near Thetford mine, and takes place in the 1940s. It offers glimpses of the paternalistic attitude of the company towards the community, and of the tensed relation between the miners and their English boss. After reading this book, I have a better understanding of the relationships the movie only briefly displays and of the political context of that mining community.

Overall, this book almost reads like a novel. The chapter on the strike has the feel of an action book, in which we feel the tension building up, to see it dissolve as the strike ends and life very gradually returns to normal or to a new normal. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in twentieth century North American industrial history and all of those who want to know more about the links between the people and the land in resource-based communities.