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Review: Dirty Water: One Man's Fight to Clean Up One of the World's Most Polluted Bays

By Bill Sharpsteen

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller

Sharpsteen, Bill. *Dirty Water: One Man's Fight to Clean Up One of the World's Most Polluted Bays*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010. 288pp. ISBN 9780520256606. US\$27.50, cloth. Alkaline paper.

Los Angeles reporter Bill Sharpsteen presents here in a dramatic telling the somewhat successful efforts by Heal the Bay to clean up and protect Santa Monica Bay. This Los Angeles story with cinematic potential provides an environmental case study which has ramifications for all of the California coast and the oceans everywhere. Even though it was too late to remove the municipal and industrial waste that was pumped into Santa Monica Bay, the tides turned and efforts by activists turned this into a California environmental success story.

Though well told, the story is historical, taking place in the mid 1980s and to some extent the accounts are at the mercy of the actor's memories. Sharpsteen also does not spare his criticism, even for some of the heroes of the story, but there is not a lot of self-deprecation here which seems wanted at some points. Some will find Sharpsteen annoying when he questions everybody's verisimilitude. The book does provide fascinating descriptions of the key folks involved. Sharpsteen succeeds at sharing elements of the life stories of the key actors and their motivations. There are the scientists, whistleblowers, concerned citizens, activists, politicians, bureaucrats, legislators, and journalists.

Though about pollution, which is often a downer of a subject, the account is compelling and inspirational. At stake was efforts by municipal governments to get a waiver from needing to put all sewage disposed through secondary treatment, a cost which Los Angeles County sought to avoid. Some scientists felt that sewage dumped out to sea would biodegrade and result in more food for sea life, but there was also a lot of DDT discharged before efforts were made not to use it anymore. The sewage also contained assorted dangerous chemicals. Though the battle is over, the clean up is not fully over and the problem is not fully solved.

This book would serve as a useful contribution to the study of Los Angeles's environmental history. The book would also be helpful for those studying oceanography, sewage treatment, and toxicology. As a textbook it would also be helpful for beginning students of environmental studies who would like to have a deeper understanding of the roles that they can play. This work can help clarify for students they what part they would like to take in this field if so inclined. This book could also serve as a supplemental textbook for an environmental journalism class. It would help reporters who seek to understand the process of fighting for environmental change. Depicted here are the strengths and motivations of many of the key players involved in the process of fighting for a clean Santa Monica Bay in the 1980s, and can serve as a useful case study. As such it would also be helpful for environmental education students.

There is also mention of the roles that journalists play in these efforts. As Sharpsteen points out, "it's that symbiotic relationship between protester and reporter that gets the most done" (p.89) and "recognizing that when all else fails, you must get a reporter to stir the pot" (p.112). Whistleblower Dave Brown, probably the biggest hero, the innocent party who lost the most, was to reflect from his experiences: "Although years later Brown says he doesn't regret any of what happened, he was briefly stunned by the circus he entered that day" (p.130), but "he was just a scientist trying to get the information out" (p.131). This upbeat Los Angeles story could make an inspiring movie. The degraded ocean still inspires, as Sharpsteen eloquently writes, "If nothing else, all one had to do was turn one's back to the east and face the ocean. One could easily fool oneself into believing nothing else existed." (p.4).

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