**Review: Toms River: a Story of Science and Salvation**
By Dan Fagin

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Fagin, Dan. *Toms River: a Story of Science and Salvation*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2013 and 2015; xxiii, 543 pp. ISBN: 9781610915915, US $18.00, paperback, 1 illus. Printed on recycled acid-free paper.

*Toms River* is a story of how "the first solid links between illness and chemical contaminants" (p. 29) were forged, and how centuries later this fact affected a small town in New Jersey called Toms River. The story provides background history for a number of key components of the book, such as, aniline dye manufacturing, communicable diseases, modern observational epidemiology, and cancer research. Also brought to light are the mistakes, cover ups, and secretiveness made time after time by corporations, governments, and other key players.

In the mid-18$^{th}$ century, coal tar, a residue of coal gas and solid coke, had become a driving force of chemical plants, primarily in dye manufacturing. Further experimentation found that it could be used in the manufacture of paints, adhesives, detergents, and other products, which led to industrial growth that materialized into the largest chemical plants in the world. One company in particular, Ciba-Geigy (later Toms River Chemical), relocated to Toms River in 1952. Driven by "America's love affair with bright colors" (p. 59), both the product demand and the local population grew exponentially. On the surface, there was an era of optimism in the town, but an unfortunate aspect of dye manufacturing came not only from a high volume of waste, but also a lack of monitoring the waste. Initially, the waste ended up in buried drums, which over time, began to leak, trickling through plastic covers and sandy ground into the aquifer and water wells. Water from residential faucets began to smell, but efforts to correct the problem were minimal. Water users were told nothing by the chemical company, water supplier, or local government. Surprisingly, even by the mid-1960s there were no specific limits for any of the involved chemicals in drinking water.

A growing awareness of cancer causing chemicals gradually developed among the population, especially certain residents and others in the field of epidemiology. These key individuals organized and demanded a number of studies, which the corporations and governmental units agreed to conduct. The research entailed was slow, time consuming, had many failures, and was very expensive. No definite links were found between the water and cancer until a new study on a possible cancer cluster in children ages 0 to 20 was conducted. In the end, it proved very difficult to show that a specific cancer came from a certain water well. The legal case brought by those families dealing

with cancer, however, resulted in one of the largest corporate payouts ever in a toxic exposure case. As part of the agreement, the families were required to keep the terms of the settlement secret, and, “There was no reciprocal letter from the companies expressing regret about what had happened in Toms River over the previous fifty years” (p. 432). The chief legacy of Toms River was “…to solidify governmental opposition to conducting any more Toms River—style investigations” (p.443).

Dan Fagin is associate professor of journalism and the director of the Science, Health, and Environmental Reporting Program at New York University’s Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. He does a superb job of investigative research in documenting this story, one that is well worth preserving. The book went on to win a Pulitzer Prize. While there is an abundant amount of information available on components of the book, such as health aspects of drinking water, the only other book analogous to *Toms River* is Jonathan Harr’s *A Civil Action* (1995) entailing a similar circumstance in Woburn, Massachusetts. *Toms River* is complemented by a map, notes and an index. The book is meant for readers of all kinds and is highly recommended.

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