

SHORT TAKE

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**THE POISON SQUAD: ONE CHEMIST'S SINGLE-MINDED
CRUSADE FOR FOOD SAFETY AT THE TURN OF THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY. BY DEBORAH BLUM. NEW YORK,
N.Y.: PENGUIN PRESS. 2018. PPS. 352. \$28.00.**

This awkwardly and to some extent misleadingly labeled account of the birth and infancy of federal food and drug regulation demonstrates that the caution against judging a book by its cover might also apply to titles. The connection between the terse main title and the wordy subtitle of *The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* is not readily apparent. Moreover, the work of the so-called "Poison Squad," a group of young volunteers engaged by the government to ingest allegedly adulterated foods in order to determine what harms they might actually cause, was but one of the elements contributing to the passage of the path-breaking 1906 federal Food and Drugs Act. The sobriquet given to these intrepid human guinea pigs turned out to be an effective publicity generator at the time, just as its use in a book title today is probably meant to serve a promotional function. In fact the text devotes only a bit more than a single chapter to the exploits of the "Squad."

Nonetheless, the substance of the book provides an excellent account of the struggle to enact and administer the 1906 statute. Author Deborah Blum, a Pulitzer-Prize winning reporter and widely published science writer, adopts as the centerpiece of her account the role played by Department of Agriculture chemist Harvey Wiley in the long struggle to impose science-based federal oversight on the manufacture and promotion of edibles and potables. But she also gives full credit to the parts played by social and political reformers, investigative journalists, forward-thinking entrepreneurs, women in the forefront of the suffrage and temperance movements, and larger than life characters such as Upton Sinclair, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.

The story has been told a number of times before (in a number of books and in one source Blum seems to have missed, Richard Cooper's excellent chapter "The Struggle for the 1906 Act," in the Food and Drug Law Institute's 2006 anthology *A Century of Consumer Protection*). But it is still well worth re-telling. Blum presents vivid, at times stomach-turning descriptions of the practice of adding impure or harmful substances or cheapening ingredients, and of omitting valuable ingredients, on the part of unscrupulous food producers; the ideological and political barriers to initial attempts to secure food and drug legislation; and most importantly, the relentless efforts of an unusually gifted bureaucrat whose doggedness and strength of character provided the leadership that helped secure the enactment of what became

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popularly known as “Dr. Wiley’s Law” (and for whom the federal office building that currently houses the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition is named).

Poison Squad lionizes Wiley, but at the same time describes the flaws that made him all too human. For example, the operating procedures of the “Poison Squad,” which he created, had shortcomings that made it easy for opponents to criticize its findings. He allowed himself to be diverted by controversies over the content and labeling of whiskey. And at times he could be excessively moralistic and rigid, and a bit of a nitpicker.

Poison Squad also has its own weaknesses. It provides not even a rudimentary explanation of how government agencies functioned at the time, an omission that may leave some readers puzzled about why important regulatory decisions involving foods became law through the mechanism of presidential proclamations. There is no curiosity about the implications of lumping together the regulation of food and drugs, an odd marriage that continues problematically to the present day. The book does not confront squarely criticisms of Wiley’s approach to toxicology. The presentation of the government’s enforcement action against Coca-Cola for its inclusion of allegedly addictive levels of caffeine in a soft drink marketed heavily to children is disjointed and draws no lessons from the prolonged litigation it produced. The assertion that the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetics Act made the Food and Drug Administration an “independent agency” is inexcusably erroneous. And on a technical level the tiny print used for the notes and index renders them nearly unreadable to the naked eye.

On the positive side, *Poison Squad* strikes a number of familiar chords. It shows how the food industry blamed cooks for preparing meals that made wholesome food dangerous, a ploy calling to mind how the auto industry tried to blame “nuts behind the wheel” for serious highway accidents, in an attempt to stave off the 1966 Traffic Safety Act. Efforts to undercut the 1906 statute by slashing the budget of the agency administering it created a standard ploy that has remained in the anti-regulatory playbook. And the planting of misleading information by a borax-company specialist in public relations pretending to be an independent advocate with a science background differs only in degree from the current epidemic of fake-news dissemination. This demonstrates how little some things have changed in the regulatory arena, and gives the book a contemporary relevance to add to its value as a reminder of the difficult birth of consumer protection in the United States.