



Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness

By Suellen Hoy

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Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness By Suellen Hoy

Americans in the early 19th century were, as one foreign traveller bluntly put it, "filthy, bordering on the beastly"--perfectly at home in dirty, bug-infested, malodorous surroundings. Many a home swarmed with flies, barnyard animals, dust, and dirt; clothes were seldom washed; men hardly ever shaved or bathed. Yet gradually all this changed, and today, Americans are known worldwide for their obsession with cleanliness--for their sophisticated plumbing, daily bathing, shiny hair and teeth, and spotless clothes. In *Chasing Dirt*, Suellen Hoy provides a colorful history of this remarkable transformation from "dreadfully dirty" to "cleaner than clean," ranging from the pre-Civil War era to the 1950s, when American's obsession with cleanliness reached its peak.

Hoy offers here a fascinating narrative, filled with vivid portraits of the men and especially the women who helped America come clean. She examines the work of early promoters of cleanliness, such as Catharine Beecher and Sylvester Graham; and describes how the Civil War marked a turning point in our attitudes toward cleanliness, discussing the work of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, headed by Frederick Law Olmsted, and revealing how the efforts of Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War inspired American women--such as Dorothea Dix, Clara Barton, and Louisa May Alcott--to volunteer as nurses during the war. We also read of the postwar efforts of George E. Waring, Jr., a sanitary engineer who constructed sewer systems around the nation and who, as head of New York City's street-cleaning department, transformed the city from the nation's dirtiest to the nation's cleanest in three years. Hoy details the efforts to convince African-Americans and immigrants of the importance of cleanliness, examining the efforts of Booker T. Washington (who preached the "gospel of the toothbrush"), Jane Addams at Hull House, and Lillian Wald at the Henry Street Settlement House. Indeed, we see how cleanliness gradually shifted from a way to prevent disease to a way to assimilate, to become American. And as the book enters the modern era, we learn how advertising for soaps, mouth washes, toothpastes, and deodorants in mass-circulation magazines showed working men and women how to cleanse themselves and become part of the increasingly sweatless, odorless, and successful middle class. Shower for success!

By illuminating the historical roots of America's shift from "dreadfully dirty" to "squeaky clean," *Chasing Dirt* adds a new dimension to our understanding of our national culture. And along the way, it provides colorful and often amusing social

history as well as insight into what makes Americans the way we are today.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

How did the U.S. get so obsessed with cleanliness? Indiana historian Suellen Hoy goes back to the 19th century to explain how a decades-long struggle to educate government and the public on the need for sanitation and health reforms has now turned into a cultural obsession fueled by many millions of dollars in carefully calibrated ad campaigns. It may have originally been a question of stopping disease in America's booming new cities, but now it's really about our self-image--and the private house-cleaning business is booming.

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In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europeans were shocked by Americans' filthiness: dirty bodies and clothes; cluttered, malodorous farms and homes; littered, vermin-infested villages and cities. By the middle of the twentieth century, foreign visitors laughed at Americans' obsession with cleanliness: a fondness for showers and deodorants and sanitation and odor eradication that struck most of the world as neurotic. In *Chasing Dirt*, historian Hoy (whose father, Christopher, was an ALA staffer until his retirement in the early 1980s) explores how this strong commitment to cleanliness developed. This is fascinating social history, analyzing how a variety of factors--the Civil War, urbanization and industrialization, epidemics, changing definitions and aspirations of the middle class, new industries such as advertising and soap and plumbing equipment manufacturing--produced major behavioral changes in millions of Americans. Particularly interesting elements of Hoy's analysis include parallel developments in the concept of cleanliness and the approved role of women and the strong class element in the campaign to produce a "cleaner" America. Not an essential purchase, but larger social history collections will want to dust off a place on their shelves for this volume. *Mary Carroll*

Review

"Readers will never look upon their surroundings or their personal hygiene in quite the same way."--*Science*

"Lively and reassuring....Thorough, accurate, and very readable."--*The Boston Sunday Globe*

"A tour de force of social history,"--*American Heritage*

"Deft and fascinating."--*The Women's Review of Books*

Users Review

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