The Poison Squad: One Chemist’s Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the End of the Twentieth Century
Deborah Blum

You probably haven’t heard of Dr Harvey Washington Wiley, but without him, we wouldn’t have the US Food and Drug Administration. The Poison Squad, as the book’s subtitle suggests, tells the story of this indefatigable chemist whose quest to keep adulterated food and dishonest labeling out of the American food supply made him a household name at the time. His biggest achievement, the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, was often called “Wiley’s Law” in tribute to his unrelenting work in the then-new field of food safety.

There is much in Ms Blum’s recounting—political deals and companies obsessed with profits at the expense of workers and consumers—that sounds all too familiar today. Yet while reading this lively book, occasionally I had to remind myself how pioneering Wiley had been. For example, in 1890, when he was chief of the Bureau of Chemistry in the US Department of Agriculture, Wiley hired Alex Wedderburn, a journalist, to write brochures explaining to consumers (usually housewives) how to read labels when food shopping, what false advertising meant, and the importance of safety in the food supply—“Honest food,” as Wiley put it. This may have been the first time a federal employee sought to communicate directly to the members of the public, to educate them about how they could protect their health.

Wiley eventually became a national celebrity through his monthly column for the magazine Good Housekeeping. In his column, he explained the basics of food chemistry, clearly and without condescension, to an overwhelming female audience. He knew that women concerned about their families’ health were eager for this information, and he understood the power of mobilizing women’s concerns (taking a leaf from the women’s suffrage movement, whose leaders were his allies).

The book takes its title from Wiley’s audacious idea to test the effects of consuming borax, a common food preservative, in a controlled clinical trial. Twelve brave young men—primarily low-paid federal employees (and bachelors) for whom free meals were a motivation—were recruited for the 6-week experiment, conducted under strictly controlled conditions in the basement of the US Department of Agriculture building. Participants ate all their meals there, and their seating was arranged so that they did or did not receive borax-laced meals (without them knowing which was which). Participants had to keep food diaries, pledge not to eat anything outside the test kitchen, be examined by physicians every 2 weeks, and bring in “every particle of their excreta,” in Wiley’s words, for testing. Remarkably, participants dropped out after several weeks not because of the onerous routine, but because of multiple side effects. A repeated experiment testing the equally common preservative benzoate yielded even more alarming results. These studies became part of the evidence that finally propelled passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, despite determined lobbying from food and beverage makers.

Blum knows how to tell an engaging, and sometimes revolting, story. Yet she avoids the easy way out of demonizing food manufacturers and grocers, some of whom seemed genuinely unaware of adulterations in what they sold and some who felt forced to put various additives in their products to make profits in the face of rising costs.

If you enjoy American history, are a food buff, or have studied nutrition or chemistry, you will enjoy this book. The extensive quotations from key players bring the narrative to life, and the footnotes and bibliography showing the author’s extensive use of archival materials is a gold mine for anyone doing research in this area.

Reviewer: Karen Potvin Klein, MA, ELS, GPC, MWC®
Karen Potvin Klein is the owner of Clarus Editorial Services, a biomedical grant consulting and manuscript editing company in Winston-Salem, NC.