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“Dirty Father Thames”:

The Pollution and Restoration of the Thames River, 1840s–1980s

“Dirty Father Thames” was a cartoon from *Punch* 1848, with Father Thames shown as a filthy looking vagrant and the river as a repository of filth and industrial waste. Beneath the cartoon appeared a poem bemoaning the state of Britain’s largest waterway, the central artery of London. This cartoon and poem reflected the long-prevalent British view of Thames pollution, and it became a symbol of water degradation throughout industrial civilization.

The growth of industry and cities disturbed the ecosystems of rivers all over the world, but among the first to be severely polluted was the Thames. London grew to be the largest city in the world by 1800, and its water became some of the dirtiest and most toxic on earth. When the Thames flowed through a preindustrial agricultural landscape, it may have caused floods or droughts, but the quality of the water remained good. But with industrialization water quality became an even larger problem than water quantity. By the 1840s the great river was badly polluted, and it would stay that way for nearly a century and a half, until people began to clamor for its restoration to what it had once been—when fish swam in it and people could do the same, or even drink it.

My project aims to explore the process and the important accidents or disasters of the Thames pollution during the 1840s and 1980s, investigate the main changes of the British view of the issue, and evaluate the effects of different attitudes and policies for dealing with pollution during this period. The main emphasis will not only be the chemistry or biology of river pollution itself, but also on the changes in people’s awareness of this issue, and why those changes occurred.

The final product of this project will be a book comprising five chapters with an introduction and a conclusion: Chapter One, “The Water that John Drinks,” will describe the condition of the pollution of the Thames from the 1840s to 1960s. Chapter Two, “Quoth Father Thames,” will trace and analyze the causes of this pollution. Chapter Three, “Father Thames Introducing His Offspring,” will discuss the social and ecological hazards of the pollution of the Thames. Chapter Four, “Your Money or Your Life!” will investigate the process of controlling Thames pollution, with a special focus on changing attitudes and policies. Chapter Five, “The Return of Salmon and the Others,” will evaluate the effects of Thames pollution control and conclude lessons from it.

The case of Thames’s pollution and restoration might be a valuable reference for us to think about the water crisis arising with the industrial development of contemporary China and its countermeasures. This project is an attempt to understand, from a comparative perspective, the significance of Thames pollution control in coping with the water problem of contemporary China.