Author Interview: Jonathan Rees, The Chemistry of Fear: Harvey Wiley’s Fight for Pure Food

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Join the Library of Congress Manuscript Division on November 2, 2022 for a conversation with author Jonathan Rees about his recent biography of controversial pure food crusader and influential USDA chemist Harvey Washington Wiley, The Chemistry of Fear: Harvey Wiley’s Fight for Pure Food (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021). The book examines Wiley’s many – and varied – clashes over food safety, and reveals that his impact on what Americans ate often depended more upon fear than upon the quality of his research.

Though trained as a medical doctor, Harvey Wiley spent most of his professional life advocating for "pure food"—food free of both adulterants and preservatives. A strong proponent of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, still the basis of food safety legislation in the United States, Wiley's influence lives on in many of our current popular ideas about food: that the wrong food can kill you; that the right food can extend your life; that additives are unnatural; and that unnatural food is unhealthy food. Eating—the process of taking something external in the world and putting it inside of you—has always been an intimate act, but it was Harvey Wiley who first turned it into a matter of life or death.

Jonathan Rees is a professor at Colorado State University-Pueblo, and a historian of late-19th and early-20th century America specializing in technology, food and labor. He is the author of eight books, and his writing has been published in The Atlantic, Slate, and Inside Higher Education.

The event will take place online only on Wednesday, November 2, 2022, 12:00pm - 1:00pm EDT. Register for the program here.

Request ADA accommodations five business days in advance at (202) 707-6362 or ADA@loc.gov.

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