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To Spurn, Burn or Return... that is the Concern. Review of *Wasteland*, by Oliver Franklin-Wallis

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That concern is sure to stump a modern-day Hamlet, as readers will agree after reading Oliver Franklin-Wallis' *Wasteland*. A conundrumal concern more intriguing and vexing than the existential 'To be or not to be,' which Shakespeare 'dumped' into Hamlet's mind...

Shocking, essential, gripping, fascinating, enraging, engaging, interesting, urgent, probing, compelling, smart, fair, funny, very important....these are few of the adjectives used to describe **Oliver Franklin-Wallis' *Wasteland*** – a 400-page eye-opener published by Hachette Books in 2023. I would add 'timely' to the mix, and replace the 'but' in the 'Shocking but compelling reading' (Tim Spector on the cover), with 'and therefore'. The 'What', 'Where' and the 'Why' of waste generation and handling (or mis-handling, rather) have been explained by the author with the skill of a raconteur, with the aid of the 'Who', 'When', and 'How' in this comprehensive account which is sure to interest professionals, decision-makers in government and industry, and most of all, students in universities around the world. It is this last-named group of potential readers to whom I would like to strongly recommend this book.

Oliver takes readers on a roller-coaster ride through Dirtiness (Part I), Foulness (Part II), and Toxicity (Part III), encompassing the multiple R's of a circular economy in the process, before finally leaving behind some good advice and hope for the future...

Introducing waste-exports as 'toxic colonialism' indulged in by a NIMBY (Not In My BackYard) western world, Oliver



Picture source: www.amazon.com

acknowledges that where there is muck, there is brass, and quotes UK-based materials recovery facility Green Recycling's GM Jamie, to impress upon readers that it is often a matter of perspective – *We do not call it waste. We call it materials.* And then, he leads you to the Indian capital city and the Ghazipur dump on its outskirts, and using words skillfully, enables you to visualise and imagine. Well, just as some Indians may have blamed Daniel Boyle and his crew for vividly portraying the poverty in Mumbai's slums in *SlumDog Millionaire* and bagging eight Oscars in the process, readers of this book in India may wonder why Oliver Franklin-Wallis waxes eloquent about the Ghazipur dump. Well, the answer is to open eyes, ears and minds to a challenge that has been looming large for a long time, and needs urgent redressal....but then, is that feasible? It is a known fact that the rag-pickers (or 'rag and bone men' as they were called in England in the 1800s) – marginalised citizens in modern urban societies - have been enduring a host of professional hazards all at once – chemical, biological, microbiological, physical, and psychological (Venkatesh 2023).

Spurned – Dumps to landfills

The distinction is important here. Dumps refer to what is created by the process of open dumping like Ghazipur and Deonar (in Mumbai) referred to by the author. Wastes have open channels, so to say, to the atmosphere, hydrosphere and the pedosphere. Landfills however, are covered, and the wastes are not visible to passers-by. Sanitary landfills are engineered sequestrations of waste, with leachate and biogas collection in place, to curb ground water, soil and air pollution...and of course, to redesign the much-maligned landfills as 'energy plants'.

Oliver brings out the stark differences between Ghazipur and the Ellington sanitary landfill in the UK, while paying homage to the Californian Jean Vincenz, who can be conferred with the epithet - 'father

of (official) sanitary landfills'. Better than dumps, yes, but yet, a squandering of resources – or materials as Jamie of Green Recycling would like to say. The author wonders what would happen to the livelihoods of the waste-pickers in the developing countries, if all dumps disappeared, and waste management became privatised, mechanised and automated. Decision-makers (urban planners) in these countries would rather like to push this concern under the carpet...far easier to see the dumps and the rodents scurrying up and down, than confront this seemingly unresolvable impasse. The author makes readers pause and think when he quotes Anwar, the waste-picker/waste trader in Delhi – *I do not see waste. I see resources for myself.* Echoing the very same sentiments as the white-collar professional Jamie in another continent. The author infuses enthusiasm by quoting Vic who works at the Ellington sanitary landfill – *I feel that I have a responsibility to do this.* Yes, the world needs more people like Vic! Delhi also attracts attention for the wrong reasons when it comes to dumping toxic wastes into rivers like the Yamuna. It is ironical (and hypocritical) that Hindus worship rivers as goddesses but have struggled to understand their carrying capacities (or assimilation limits). There is hope, the author points out, thanks to new clean-up schemes which have been put in place... but then religiously implementing them is what will matter in the long run.

While dumps and landfills are of course to be minimised and ultimately avoided in the future, Oliver points out more than once that dumped wastes have helped anthropologists to understand the past of human civilisation. Deriving value (knowledge, in this case) from wastes, in a different way! And Victor Hugo labelled the sewer as the conscience of the city, in *Les Miserables*. Continuing with the French, we learn that the English word 'loo' is actually sourced from *leau* which simply means 'the water'! Dumps include tailings and slag heaps (mining wastes – unprocessed ore, rock and dirt)

as well as radioactive waste from nuclear reactors, which potentially are human and environmental hazards. The author presents an overview of the toxic wastes generated by the mining sector globally, with some striking instances from Brazil; and also refers to the recycling of mining wastes into asphalt in the USA (as part of the implementation of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act).

It is sad but not surprising to read that the USA buried (landfilled and not composted) or burned (mostly without any energy recovery) 80% of its food waste in 2018. UK, the author's home country, fared much better in this regard, though he prefers not to use the USA as the 'benchmark of how not to be' and rejoice.

Burned - Get Rid of, and Get Energy

The description of the incinerator reminds one of Dante's Inferno (also referred to, by Oliver) – all types of wastes being purged together in the same fire. He does delve deep into the technology of incineration, and the problem-shifting which has to be avoided - the substances in the solid wastes which are to be gotten rid of, being partitioned into pollutants in the exhaust gas

and bottom/fly ashes with a certain degree of toxicity. A responsible energy-from-waste, EfW (or waste-to-energy, WtE) plant, Oliver notes, has to treat the exhaust gases, and also arrange for the ashes to be either sequestered in sanitary landfills or recycled as additives in concrete.

The wastes which are incinerated include plastics (which trace their origin to crude oil) and the energy produced by the WtE plants, has a sizable greenhouse gas footprint – in per unit energy output terms. If recycling greater quantities of plastics is not possible or feasible, incinerating them for energy seems to be the next best option. It must be noted that all 'burning' is not accompanied by energy recovery. That is a cruel, unpardonable loss of resources – both materials and the energy-content thereof.

Returned - the Virtuous R's in a Circular Economy

There are many virtuous R's associated with returning materials (not 'wastes'; remember Jamie!) or resources (not 'wastes'; remember Anwar) back to the anthroposphere – Recycle, Recover, Repurpose, Remanufacture, Refurbish, Repair, Reuse... To incorporate more of these into waste management, one



'Värde' means 'value' in Swedish. Waste has been rechristened as value. Here, they are being trucked to an incinerator to be burnt for 'clean' energy recovery. Picture by G Venkatesh, taken in Karlstad (Sweden), on 21st August 2023

needs to step out of one's comfort zone, rack one's brains, think out of the box and be creative, walk or jog the extra mile, and be determined to be the change one wishes to see around her/him/them. The author exemplifies this by referring to jackets resewn as backpacks (repurposed or upcycled in the process), and discarded denim converted to agricultural protective gear in Accra by a company named The Revival. Often, one does these things by compulsion...and that is very common in a country like India, for instance. But choosing to do any or all of these in the affluent western world, is far from easy. Till you get introduced to the dumpster-diner/diver 'freegan' John in the UK, who eats edible food waste that others throw away, distributes some of it to homeless charities and composts the remaining, in a spiritual rejection of consumerism. In John's words, *'My lifestyle is all wrapped up in using as few resources, so that you are creating as little waste as possible.'* Up to a third of all the food produced in the world is thrown away, without being eaten – a gargantuan human and environmental tragedy, in the author's words. Composting, which John the freegan takes delight in, is recommended incidentally by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital!* Industrial-scale composting is now a century old, having originated in Italy during the first World War. Oliver names trendsetter South Korea, calling it the '*nirvana* for compost nerds', and writes that over 95% of food waste there is converted into compost and biogas. He however points out that it is not 'done and dusted' or rather 'done and composted', as microplastics and toxic constituents often render the compost unsuitable.

The author points out that though recycling as a public good is quite commonplace these days, there are 'dirty truths about where what we throw away goes.' And what he finds out and reveals, is indeed shocking, and readers will feel that the wool has long been pulled over their eyes. In a nutshell, a significant proportion of what is returned, say to the global second-hand

'repair-repurpose-resale for reuse' market, ends up being 'spurned' or 'burned.' As an example, Oliver points out that 40 percent of the resold/resalable garments that flood into what is the largest second-hand market in Ghana – 'complete chaff' in the words of the head of Accra's waste management department - ends up in a subterranean dump which pollutes surface rivers and groundwater. Shipped in (as part of charity) to be resold and reused, but ending up getting 'dumped by the westerner' as a part of modern-day neo-colonialism. It is this proportion which needs to be decreased consciously (and conscientiously) over time. Ghana incidentally also takes in a lot of electronic waste from the western world and the beautiful nexus that prevails between the repair-reuse culture in the country and the scrap recyclers, recirculates electronic waste back into the anthroposphere, refurbished and reusable. To quote Evans Queye, an e-waste recycler in Accra, *'Recycling, one way or the other, creates some environmental impacts...but these are much less than what is created by processing raw materials.'*

It is interesting to read about how the imports of scrap metal contributed to China's monumental economic growth, and how wastepaper recycling was behind the emergence of the first Chinese woman billionaire (Zhang Yin of Nine Dragons). Plastics (and thereby microplastics) have attracted a lot of attention of late. Oliver creates an epiphany – at least it was one for this reviewer - when he writes that plastics themselves are sourced from wastes (or byproducts) generated in oil-refineries which have fossil fuels as their primary products. Polyethylene terephthalate or PET (pictured on the cover of the book) is a ubiquitous plastic waste, potentially recyclable to a great extent (a finite number of times, with loss in quality in the process), but being subjected to incineration and landfilling quite widely. *'Absolute bollocks...greenwashing,'* as Chris Hanlon of Biffa Polymers (UK) tells the author, *'most plastic bags and films which are returned for recycling are*

sent away somewhere to be burned or buried. A reference is made to chemical recycling which can potentially handle a wider variety of plastics in the future. However, can those plastics which are difficult to recycle be gradually phased out?

While wastewater treatment plants have evolved over the years to 'refineries extracting value out of human wastes', Oliver refers jokingly to the fact that arms manufacturers in England in the 17th century considered excrement as the raw material for potassium nitrate production, and that 'the Spanish Armada was defeated, at least in part with Londoners' shit.' He writes about the existence of water cascading (the need of the 21st century) in ancient Rome, and the respect accorded to the sewers by adding a goddess Cloacina to the pantheon (*Cloaca* means sewer), Joseph Bazalgette and his redesigning of the sewer system in London to 'take shit out of the public eye', and leaves readers to chuckle at '*Shit still happened, but in private.*' But yes, on date, sewage is not returned for valorisation to wastewater treatment plants everywhere in the world, and that is common knowledge to readers. In cases where it is returned, in the words of Dina Gillespie, the site manager at London's Mogden sewage treatment plant, Oliver interacted with, '*The general public just flush the toilet and nobody really knows what we are doing. If we did not do what we do, there would be big problems.*' This is where history is useful – the knowledge of the cholera outbreaks of yore will instil a great degree of appreciation and gratitude for the work done by the personnel at the world's sewage treatment plants. Sewers, Oliver remarks, are perhaps the greatest contribution of the Victorian Era to the modern world – ranking above railways, bridges and steam ships.

Wonder, Ponder....

Well, instead of having to spurn, burn or return, perhaps, deciding not to buy stuff one does not need, will be the best way to show concern in the years ahead. Planned

obsolescence practised by the industry (and explained in detail by the author in the chapter *Control, Delete* in part III) must be recognised as something evil.

This will also stanch the import of second-hand goods into the developing world, and perhaps allay the socio-economic and environmental challenges faced therein. More and more second-hand shops can very well be set up in the developed world as well, so that a domestic market burgeons at the expense of an export market. Many such small decisions will amount to a groundswell of much-needed change. Nevertheless, there are many 'known and unknown unknowns' here – ripple effects, both desirable and otherwise – which make analyses, decision-making and judgment quite complex. What about the livelihoods of the poor people in the developing countries who depend upon such imports?

The book, when read from cover to cover, is likely to not just make readers wonder and ponder, but also motivate them to not blunder and squander. Wasteland, as the reviewer indicated early on, has been published just at the right time, when it is most needed! Spending money on a copy will surely be an investment with good returns...not a waste.

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