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A Preventable Disaster: Corporate Responsibility in *Dark Tide*

In Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919, Stephen Puleo presents a strong and convincing argument that the Boston Molasses Flood was not a random accident but a preventable disaster caused by corporate negligence. Puleo's argument is persuasive because he consistently supports his claims with eyewitness testimony, historical records, and legal evidence, demonstrating how the United States industrial alcohol company ignored safety warnings and prioritized profit over Public Safety. Through careful presentation of evidence, Puleo examines both the human and structural factors that led to the strategy. Rather than treating the flood as a strange historical footnote, Puleo reframes it as a powerful example of the dangers of unregulated industrial growth and corporate irresponsibility in early twentieth-century America.

Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919 tells the story of one of the most unusual and devastating disasters in American history. In January 1919, a giant steel tank holding more than 2 million gallons of molasses in Boston's North End sent a wave of thick liquid through surrounding streets. The flood destroyed buildings, crushed vehicles, and trapped residents beneath the heavy molasses, ultimately killing twenty-one people and injuring many others. While the image of a molasses flood may seem almost unbelievable, Puleo treats the

event with seriousness and respect, emphasizing the real human suffering that resulted. He avoids sensationalism and instead focuses on the lived experiences of those affected, which gives the narrative emotional weight without undermining its historical credibility. And causing untold property damage in the aftermath. However, Puleo, in what promises to be a terrible and fascinating tale, moves back from the incident itself to deliver a wider contextual narrative on what it was all around in 20th-century American society, in Boston, particularly. Puleo examined how and why “the Great Molasses Flood,” which started in 1919, had its roots in a period of rapid industrial and population expansion in Boston in the late 19 early 20th centuries. Using vivid eyewitness accounts, newspaper reports, engineering analyses, and courtroom testimony, Puleo reconstructs both the Human Experience of the flood and the technical failure that made it inevitable.

Puleo strengthens his argument by showing that warning signs were present long before the tank burst. Workers and nearby residents repeatedly expressed concern about the tanks' safety, yet these warnings were ignored by the United States industrial alcohol company. Puleo notes that the tank “groaned, leaked, and protested from the day it was filled.”¹ This detail is crucial because it shows the danger was constant and visible, not sudden. Puleo further illustrates the company's indifference by recounting how children pointed by stating that children collected leaking molasses in pails, a detail that emphasizes how long the company ignored the problem rather than repairing the tank.² By including these details, Puleo strengthens his claim that the company knowingly allowed unsafe conditions to continue.

¹Puleo, Stephen. *Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood* economy of that of 1919. 100th ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 2019. 44.

² Puleo, Stephen. *Dark Tide* (Boston, 2019), 45.

One of the most effective aspects of *Dark Tide* is Puleo's use of eyewitness testimony. By incorporating the voices of workers, residents, and first responders, Puleo humanizes the disaster and reinforces the credibility of his argument. These accounts reveal that the risk posed by the tank was common knowledge within the community. Puleo's narrative makes clear that responsibility lay with those who had the authority to act by choosing not to do so.

Puleo also critiques the company's priorities by examining the economic pressures that shaped its decisions. He explains that the tank was rushed into service to meet wartime demand for industrial alcohol, writing that "speed and capacity mattered more than safety" to company executives.³ This statement directly supports Puleo's central thesis that profit was valued above human life. He further reveals that the tank was never properly tested, noting that it "had never been filled with water to check for leaks."⁴ This omission is especially damning because it represents a basic and inexpensive safety measure. By highlighting such avoidable failures, Puleo demonstrates that the disaster was not the result of technical limitations, but of conscious cost-cutting and disregard for safety.

In addition to examining the causes of the flood, Puleo devotes significant attention to its aftermath, particularly the legal battle that followed. The resulting lawsuit became one of the longest and most complex civil trials of its time. Puleo's analysis of courtroom testimony and engineering reports adds depth to the narrative by showing how responsibility was contested and ultimately established. This legal dimension is essential to Puleo's broader critique, as it illustrates how the flood contributed to evolving standards of corporate accountability. The trial forced the public and the courts to confront the consequences of industrial negligence, marking an important moment in the history of American business regulation.

³ Puleo, Stephen. *Dark Tide* (Boston, 2019), 53.

⁴Puleo, Stephen. *Dark Tide* (Boston, 2019), 53.

While *Dark Tide* is clearly critical of corporate behavior, Puleo avoids oversimplifying the historical context. He acknowledges the immense pressures of wartime production and economic competition, but he does not allow these factors to excuse negligence. This balanced approach strengthens the book's argument, as it demonstrates that understanding context does not require abandoning moral judgment. Puleo's careful attention to evidence ensures that his conclusions remain grounded in historical fact rather than emotional response.

Overall, *Dark Tide* makes it impossible to view the Boston Molasses Flood as a random accident or an unavoidable tragedy. Through eyewitness testimony and engineering analysis, and courtroom records, Steven Puleo shows how repeated warnings were ignored and basic safety measures dismissed in favor of speed and profit. What lingers most powerfully is not just the image of the flood itself but the realization that it didn't have to happen. Puleo's account forces readers to confront the consequences of corporate negligence and the human cost of valuing profit over responsibility.

In conclusion, *Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919* is a historically accurate, well-researched, and deeply compelling work. Puleo successfully combines narrative storytelling with rigorous analysis to demonstrate how industrial disasters are often the result of deliberate decisions rather than chance. The book offers valuable insight into early twentieth-century American industrial culture and remains relevant today as debates over corporate responsibility and public safety continue. For readers interested in history, law, or social accountability, *Dark Tide* is not only a worthwhile read but an important reminder that preventable tragedies leave lasting scars on both communities and historical memory.