

REVIEW OF**ALAN MACEachern, *THE MIRAMICHI FIRE: A HISTORY.*****MONTREAL & KINGSTON: MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020.****Richard W. Judd**

Natural disasters, Alan MacEachern writes, are the “low-hanging fruit of environmental history” (98). This may sound dismissive in regard to such a prominent example as the Miramichi Fire, but it hides a deeper truth: sometimes low-hanging fruit can give us a lot to chew on. MacEachern was drawn to this topic not so much to fill a gap in the historical record but to find out why other historians left this gap open. The fire’s legacy, he concludes, was shaped not only by social and environmental trends, but by the changing ways people remembered the event.

Miramichi Fire begins with a chapter on the New Brunswick timber boom in the decades prior to the fire. The colony’s failure to transcend this staple trade ties MacEachern’s study to traditional interpretations that go back to Graeme Wynn’s 1981 *Timber Colony*. Mi’gmaq figure in MacEachern’s narrative, but since few contemporary accounts of the fire recognized their presence, they appear only as shadows. The environment looms larger. The decade-long cold spell prior to 1825 limited fire activity and resulted in larger fuel loads. Ironically the 1816 “Year without a Summer” encouraged the use of fire to enlarge clearings, on the assumption that fewer trees would bring a more salubrious climate. The fire, in short, was a cultural, as well as natural event—a confluence of climate, geography, land use, and the trade in timber.

Extracting a history of the fire from the scattered frontier settlements is an exercise in obscurity since there are no accounts of the fire’s beginnings and only contradictory estimations of its spread. MacEachern sorted through first-hand accounts, contemporary reports, cartographic representations, surveys, historical memories, and scattered bits of information and carefully weighed this often-conflicting evidence against social context, possible bias, and scientific logic. From this comes a credible portrait of the fire’s origins, speed, range, duration, and dynamics and its impact on New Brunswick.

Fears that barbarism would follow the flames went unrealized, as did prognosticators’ dire predictions for the timber trade. Survivors made no mass exodus from the province, but neither did they create a better society in its wake—a common trope in disaster stories. MacEachern attributes the success of the timber trade to the fact that fires generally move too fast to consume all that lie in their path. The erratic behaviour of the Miramichi Fire also explains contradictions in the reports of its extent. Avoiding the temptation to over-dramatize, MacEachern relies on first-hand observers to provide the vivid similes and centers his own descriptive skills on environmental causes and effects and the natural evolution of disaster memory.

MacEachern also teases out of these reports a description of post-conflagration forest succession: the surge in vegetation encouraged by heat shock and nitrogen load that led to the ultimate return of the balsam-dominant forest. Did this cataclysmic event change attitudes toward forest fires? Not dramatically, he posits, advances in forest protection came only after the equally disastrous 1871 Peshtigo Fire in Wisconsin. Still, an “apocalyptic reading” (162) shows how the fire became lodged in nineteenth-century conservation thinking. In a wood-dependent era, he argues, the Miramichi Fire was a cautionary tale, demonstrating for the first time “the vulnerability of the seemingly inexhaustible North

American forests and of the communities that drew their living from them.” In this sense the fire was “for a time, a world-historical event” (175).

The sources MacEachern uses to piece together this history range from ecological science and Geographic Information System mapping to newly digitized online databases. From this assemblage he gives us a carefully balanced account of the fire and its aftermath that combines the excitement of disaster history with the appeal of following a skilled historian through a morass of contradictory narratives and distorted memories. Using first-hand accounts lost to history for almost two centuries, MacEachern inserts the Miramichi Fire back into the history of New Brunswick with new information on its extent, destructiveness, and lasting effects. A deft interweaving of newly unearthed detail and up-to-date ecological science, this is a book to be savoured, not only as a vivid retelling of dramatic events but also as an engaging example of the historian’s craft. Given the current interest in climate and disaster studies, and environmental history, *Miramichi Fire* will find an eager audience well beyond the borders of New Brunswick.

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