

Review: *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada*

By Stephen J. Pyne

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Pyne, Stephen J. *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007. 549pp. ISBN 978-0-7748-1392-1. US \$34.95, paper. Ancient-forest-free, acid-free paper.

The second largest country on the planet after Russia, Canada has had a long and sometimes dramatic relationship with wildfires in its large forests. A notable environmental historian, professor Stephen Pyne (from Arizona State University) has already written some 17 books, including *Fire in America* (1982). The title of this new book comes from an ancient remark made by Henry Hind in his *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857* in which he wrote "It is like a volcano in full activity, you cannot imitate it, because it is impossible to obtain those gigantic elements from which it derives its awful splendour" (p. xi).

In his insightful foreword, Graeme Wynn reminds that "natural disasters" are in fact disasters which occur in the nature, but these are not that much "natural," in the sense that they imply a human presence, participation, and social representations: "Different cultures, different societies, have different attitudes toward their environments; different technological complexes differentiate societies' capacities to identify and make use of different parts of the biophysical system" (p. xv; see also p. 124). Furthermore, Wynn also observes that the casualties of most "natural disasters" are usually measured in terms of human losses (which is understandable), economic losses, and lastly ecological losses (p. xvi). As a consequence, the history of wildfires in Canadian forests had still to be written until the publication of this timely book, since, as Wynn suggests, the relative number of victims can not be compared to the thousands made by the Hurricane Katrina disasters and the floods which occurred elsewhere in recent years (p. xvi). Luckily, Canada has not encountered such natural tragedies in terms of number of deaths.

Although Pyne's book focuses mainly on the 19th and 20th centuries, the opening chapter takes the reader to the very beginning, some 15000 years ago, when most of Canada was covered by more than two kilometres of ice (p. 3). Some famous fires in Canadian history are retold in the first half of the book, such as the Chinchaga fire in 1950 between British Columbia and Alberta, which burned 1.4 million hectares and created a smoke cloud so massive that it covered most of the northern hemisphere (p. 61). Chronologically, Pyne recalls many of the various narratives of the "dark days" which occurred during a few hours in many Canadian regions and cities when exceptional fires went on elsewhere, for example in 1716, 1780, 1785 and 1814 (p. 125).

However, Pyne's original approach is always unique, because he sees fire history as linked with human activity and understands all these interlinked phenomena as parts of what he coins as a "culture of fire" (p. 60). Given his experience and international knowledge of forests from Russia to Australia, Pyne is in good position to include timely comparisons, arguing that "Canada has made little attempt to intensify silviculture, restricting the scope of fire exclusion for economic rather than ecological reasons" (p. 477). Moreover, Pyne also argues that fire can even be linked with national identity in some countries, but not yet in Canada: "Fire mattered to Australians and Americans in ways that it did not to Canadians" (p. 478). The last chapters focus more on institutions and research, with new challenges such as global warming.

Of course, *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada* is not an art book or an album of wildlife photographs; it is rather a jargon-free, scholarly account of how forest fires occurred in Canada during the previous centuries, and how institutions (and the people behind those) have dealt with that reality. It is not meant to be a general book about the history of Canada, but it will be useful for professionals and students in environmental history, forest studies, physical geography, and Canadian studies.

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