

The Largest Fire Never Known

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The Largest Fire Never Known

ALAN MACEACHERN, LONG A LEADING VOICE AMONG both environmental and public historians in Canada, and more specifically Atlantic Canada, has hit the mark again from a variety of perspectives with *The Miramichi Fire: A History*.¹ As he explains, the 1825 fire was “the most famous historical event to have taken place in New Brunswick. It is also the largest wildfire to have occurred within the British Empire, one of the largest in North American history, and the largest ever recorded along the Eastern Seaboard” (6). In spite of its importance, the fire has oddly been given relatively little attention by historians, having all but disappeared from public memory to a significant degree because W.F. Ganong, in many ways the godfather of New Brunswick environmental history, concluded in the early 20th century that the fire had not been all that significant.

Determined to set the record straight, MacEachern has exhaustively researched the subject – reading pertinent primary sources and engaging in field work (along the way indulging what he admits was an obsession) – in order to document the origins of the fire, its extent, the destruction it caused, and its aftermath. He finds, however, that some aspects of the fire could more definitively be addressed than others. MacEachern, for instance, quite confidently explains the context in which the fire took place, pointing to a volcano eruption in Indonesia in 1815 that led to the coldest decade of the previous 500 years, with 1816 distinguishing itself as “the Year Without a Summer” (33). This meant that for forests there were few fires in the years leading up to 1825, allowing vegetation to accumulate and making it more likely to combust. At the same time local knowledge about how to deal with fires evaporated, a situation made worse by the arrival of large numbers of immigrants to the Miramichi region, themselves “climate refugees” from Europe, who became engaged in New Brunswick’s booming timber trade.

MacEachern also feels that he is on firm ground in dealing with the aftermath of the fire in exploring such subjects as the massive relief effort, which was the largest such initiative in pre-Confederation Canada. It was designed

1 Alan MacEachern, *The Miramichi Fire: A History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020).

(although unsuccessfully) to move the region towards agriculture, which was viewed more positively than lumbering as colonial elites were concerned about social instability when men lived in lumber camps without connections to either family or the land. Similarly, MacEachern provides us with a fascinating account of what happens to forests during a fire and then in the aftermath – explaining how new species came to replace those that were destroyed. Along the way, he is careful to avoid over-generalizing because there were “a variety of contemporaneous Miramichi forests” (157). Indeed, it was the diversity of impacts that allowed Ganong to find that earlier apocalyptic readings of the impact of the fire were off the mark and to conclude that the Miramichi Fire’s significance had been overblown.

As for what the fire itself actually was, however, MacEachern recognizes that he was on weaker ground. He asserts that on “7 October 1825 [the day the fire began] the Miramichi was more prosperous than it had ever been and more prosperous than it would ever be again” (48), but once he moves beyond that claim there was much about the fire that he was unable to conclusively prove – not due to any lack of effort, but due to the nature of the evidence. While he presents numerous theories regarding the source for the start of the fire, he was unable to conclude which, if any, of them provided the spark. It was also difficult for him to definitively establish the size of the fire, in part because there were so many different definitions of what constituted the Miramichi Fire. Fall 1825 saw fires across large stretches of northeastern North America and, since the fire in the Miramichi watershed was the largest, fires as far away as Montreal were sometimes incorporated under the “Miramichi” rubric. However, using the narrower definition led most observers to view the fire as having incorporated an area of over 15,000 square kilometres or one-fifth of New Brunswick. That said, MacEachern recognizes that the fire’s “size has always been impossible to determine” while acknowledging “that some things can never be known and that is worth knowing” (69, 87).

Nor can he be any more conclusive in terms of the number of people (not to speak of other species) killed by the fire, noting that “just as the sparsely populated nature of the fire’s area made it difficult to determine exactly how immense that area was, so the immense distances made it impossible to know exactly how many the fire had killed” (101-2). Most accounts of the time were in the 100-to-200 range, with an official count of 160, but MacEachern identifies gaps in these estimates – not the least of which was the absence of any reference to Mi’gmaq deaths.

In spite of these challenges, MacEachern provides an appendix with his compilation of 130 individuals whose death due to the fire can be confirmed by his sources. He argues that the list is significant, pointing to “the list’s size: 130 represents more than 80 per cent of the official death toll of 160,” and goes on to state that “even if only half of the names are accurate, or 40 per cent of the death toll, it is impossible to imagine that, even with an infinite amount of historical research, one could name 40 per cent of the individuals . . . residing in the Miramichi in October 1825. This fact suggests either that the official death toll is low, that the fire’s victims have been better remembered than its survivors, or that some combination of the two is in play” (187).

MacEachern provides no basis for making the assumptions that justified his inclusion of this appendix, and the exercise seems problematic given that he knows just how hard it is to come to any precise conclusion regarding this or other matters connected with the fire. Ultimately, MacEachern appears ambivalent about the exercise: on the one hand he recognizes that such precision is impossible, but on the other he is prepared to go the extra kilometre to try to be precise even if such precision is unlikely to be achieved. There is something quixotic about many of his deep dives; a reader might indeed wonder at times if all the detail compiled along the way is worth reporting since the data cannot be entirely trusted.

And it is not as if MacEachern is unaware of this conundrum, recognizing how historians collect evidence in the search for some truth that is inevitably shaped by their own subjective choices. As he puts it, “What worries me is that historical methodology and the historical genre itself seem bound to distort the historical event under examination.” So he could collect data as historians are trained to do, but still remain a long way from the “truth.” In regard to his trying to understand what was the immediate cause of the fire, for instance, he remarked: “I felt simultaneously closer to history and more distant from the past than I ever had before” (54). I give MacEachern full marks for this admission, given that historians often present their findings in a fully self-confident manner and try to gain credibility through the veneer of certainty. But I kept wondering why, if he actually was so concerned about how his adherence to professional norms took him further away from what happened, he committed himself so deeply to the accumulation of data that did not (and could not) bring us closer to some convincing conclusion.

Taken from a different starting point, I also wished that MacEachern had brought in the voices of other authors regarding the numerous topics that he

addresses. In terms of his reflection about the fragility of getting closer to the truth, he could have usefully (to take only one example) reflected on the work of Pierre Nora, who is referenced in the text in the context of how the Miramichi Fire has been remembered. Nora has drawn the distinction between *milieux de mémoire* – memory that was organically generated in premodern times by word of mouth – and *lieux de mémoire* – or products such as monuments, songs, and also books such as this one, which distill an event such as the fire into something constructed but not lived. It would have been interesting for MacEachern to reflect on whether he was in fact the creator of such a *lieux de mémoire* as part of his questioning of the process in which he was involved.

In one particular context, MacEachern did in fact bring in the voices of other authors. In discussing the efforts to rebuild society in the aftermath of the fire, he directs the reader's attention to works that explore what "in disaster studies . . . is called the 'phoenix effect'" – that is the opportunity to "build back better" (to use a post-pandemic expression). He draws our attention in particular to the work of Rebecca Solnit, who sees such an impulse as normal in the aftermath of a disaster – a perspective that has been challenged by others who thought it more likely that the old world would be replicated in the new (98).

Against this backdrop, MacEachern was able to assess the efforts to rebuild after the fire and it would have been interesting to introduce pertinent studies on other topics such as the impact of fires on the forests. To be sure, he presents the reader with a wide array of voices contemporary to the fire who wrote about it. But the book would have been even stronger if MacEachern had panned out, from time to time, to lean on pertinent literatures and to insert his own findings within them. His immersion in every aspect of the fire produces much evidence about its impact but, in the absence of reflection on the work of others, sometimes falls a bit short in terms of increasing understanding of the pertinent topics.

In a sense, however, I was left wanting a bit more because MacEachern has created a lively and engaging text, which benefits from his own role as an actor in the narrative and his ability to turn a good phrase. This is a fine work of public history as much as it is one of environmental history, exploring collective memory and creating an accessible text that should reach an audience beyond specialists in the pertinent fields to which it speaks. Along the way, he tells terrific stories about his efforts to learn as much as possible about the Miramichi Fire, closing the book with a detailed description of how he tried to find trees – outside the limited area that Ganong had identified as constituting

the fire – so that cores might be removed to see if there were evidence of fire roughly 200 years ago. Referring to the exercise as “boring history,” he described how he found himself “bouncing along the teeth-jarring forestry roads of the Miramichi region in a four-wheel drive” (177).

As for the writing gems, and there are many, I was drawn in particular to his explanation of how Ganong had been so wrong about the extent of the fire. He refers to one of Ganong’s sources who tried to convince a woman who experienced the fire that she had been mistaken: “Mansplaining on the Miramichi. You almost have to admire a person so self-assured as to be able to talk the survivor of a disaster out of what happened to her” (168).

Beyond what was in the book, I was also drawn in because it made me think about matters outside the issues directly raised in its pages. Writing this review essay during the summer of 2021 meant, most obviously, that it was hard not to reflect on how we were living through the warmest summer on record, with fires raging out of control on numerous fronts. MacEachern observes that in eastern Canada “wetter conditions are likely to protect the forests from the worst fires” (181). But this is cold comfort as the ravages of climate change are present just the same, particularly – for Atlantic Canada – due to the warming and rising of coastal waters.

MacEachern also made me reflect on the subjects that have passed as important to Canadian historians, trained until fairly recently by a narrative that was heavily political and institutional. It is nothing short of mind-boggling that an event such as the Miramichi Fire could have been left outside the narrative, even by specialists on the subject. But of course many other big subjects have also managed to go under the radar and, in the summer of 2021, historians’ longtime neglect of the subject of Indian residential schools came home to roost with the discovery of the bodies of Indigenous children buried in unmarked graves on the grounds of many of the schools. Public memory is as much about what we forget as what we remember, and so MacEachern has done us a great service by producing such an engaging book about a subject too long ignored. We need more such works that make history personal and which can attract a large audience to questions that provoke reflection on the challenges of our time.

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