

**MacEachern, Alan. *The Miramichi Fire: A History*. McGill-Queen's Rural, Wildland, and Resource Studies Series 13. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. Pp. 288. \$110.00 (cloth).**

Connor J. Thompson

PhD Student, University of Alberta

A thorough analysis of one of North America's worst natural disasters, Alan MacEachern's *Miramichi Fire* offers an account both of the fire itself and its immediate impacts, as well as the later processes by which the fire was remembered, and ultimately, largely forgotten. Sweeping through the town of Miramichi, New Brunswick, in 1825, the blaze was part of a particularly awful forest fire season throughout Eastern Canada and the north-east United States, with the town becoming a particularly potent symbol of its devastating effect on the region. The "forgetting" of the Miramichi fire is as worthwhile an investigation as the fire itself; while it was devastating, and reduced an entire community to ashes in a matter of perhaps fifteen minutes, its scant memorialization astonishes. In the years immediately following, the fire was the subject of numerous literary works, and an international relief effort, but was not a major subject of discussion afterwards. MacEachern offers the reader as valuable a contribution on processes of historical memory as a work of environmental history.

Certainly, MacEachern provides a thorough account of the fire, and marshals a significant number of contemporary sources to reconstruct the events of the catastrophe itself. Evidence tracking how little burning there had been in previous years (thus allowing for the ample accumulation of vegetation), the pattern of burning, and even the movement of a hurricane's remnants north on the coast, all illustrate just how unusually powerful the set of circumstances were that produced the Miramichi fire. Moreover, the transnational relief efforts directed towards aiding the communities affected are surveyed with erudite brevity, offering substantial but not miring detail. Indeed, MacEachern's study illustrates, as much astute environmental history does, how arbitrary national boundaries can be: fires burning simultaneously with the conflagration in Miramichi on both sides of the border factored into how people responded to the situation in New Brunswick. The at-times distracting humor in the book (among a multitude of examples, the book's third chapter is entitled "Leafs vs. Flames") and lingering lack of a clear estimation of the fire's overall extent are relatively minor faults in the otherwise thorough account of the fire's immediate and long-term effects.

The issue of historical memory is a major component of the book, and provides an excellent illustration of how the subfields of historical memory and environmental history can work effectively together. Despite the nearly apocalyptic events of the day, the fire itself was not as terrible a disaster in the long term as might be assumed: to the contrary, thanks in part to post-fire relief efforts and the pattern of burning, a considerable level of constancy in Miramichi life before and after the fire was ultimately possible. The timber industry, the main economic engine of the colony, revived shortly after the blaze thanks to the numerous unburned trees, a common aspect of forest fires (132–133). This, ultimately, is the groundwork for MacEachern's argument regarding historical memory: the remarkable degree of continuity in Miramichi after the conflagration, despite the devastation of the fire, contributed to its "forgetting". Memorialization

of the event was also hampered by a simple lack of repetition, which is strange in that such memorial efforts may well have occurred despite the timber industry's swift reemergence; while commemorations had been undertaken in the immediate wake of the fire, celebrated on its anniversary (October 7<sup>th</sup>), only a decade after 1825 these days of commemoration were no longer observed (134–137).

A methodological element of MacEachern's study that he foregrounds is the importance of online databases to the way in which the book's research was undertaken. The amount of international press about the fire (which were readily accessible to the historian because of online newspaper databases) is integral to the book's positioning of historical memory, as well as the aid efforts directed towards Miramichi's rebuilding. Moreover, this allowed for the discussion of some interesting events not previously mentioned in any North American accounts of this event: as MacEachern writes, "I learned that some would-be British immigrants sailed to the Miramichi region in early October 1825, found it in flames, and sailed right back, reporting what they had seen in local British newspapers" (12). Such an appreciative account of the possibilities online databases provide for research is welcome, and draws the historian's attention to these new avenues by which research may be undertaken with a greater attention to the international, and indeed the global, context.

*The Miramichi Fire* offers an engaging example of how the subfields of environmental history and the study of historical memory can work together. Its writing style is accessible for undergraduate courses in Canadian history, while its analysis is sophisticated enough for graduate seminars on environmental history and historical memory.

Connor J. Thompson

*University of Alberta*