

the final section of the book appears to be over-dominated by macro-political administrative and organizational detail, this is because many of the old ‘flushing’ problems remain unsolved and new means of dealing with them have been heavily dependent on interregional bureaucratic negotiation. At the same time, new developments—centrally and unavoidably, the water implications of global climate change—have generated wholly new sets of dilemmas. Only when the latter are transnationally confronted on a range of interrelated fronts, will the spectre of multiple world water—and waste—crisis begin to loom less large.

Anyone who has dipped a toe into the murky complexities of the history of sewage can have nothing but admiration for the clarity with which Benidickson has tackled his multifaceted themes. *The Culture of Flushing* deserves a supporting place on the same shelf as Martin V. Melosi’s *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (2000).

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Stephen Pyne, *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008).

There are few scholars who dominate a field as Stephen Pyne does with the history of fire. Since the publication of his classic *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* in 1982, Pyne has published over a half-dozen books on fire in world environmental history. In all his works, he puts fire at the centre of his narrative and retells familiar tales of European expansion and American history with wildland fire as his conceptual tool. Now he has done the same for Canada in *Awful Splendour*. The volume shows the importance of fire in the country’s history, but it also exposes some of the shortcomings of his approach.

Like other world environmental historians, Pyne covers large swaths of time and space in his narrative. *Awful Splendour* begins with the melting of the Pleistocene ice sheets and the return of vegetation to the northern half of the continent. With forests and grasslands came combustion. Such cycles of fire and ice had occurred throughout the Pleistocene, but this time the revegetation of what became Canada was accompanied by the arrival of humans who burned the landscape. In early chapters, Pyne offers an exhaustive survey of the fire regimes of indigenous Canada. While necessary, this section does get bogged down from the litany of fire and vegetation characteristics of tundra, boreal forests, and other ecosystems.

The narrative pace quickens in the two central sections of the book “Axe” and “Engine.” In “Axe”, Pyne shows the role of fire as a tool and byproduct of colonization. Settlers used fire to clear land for farms and burn slash from logging. Colonization left no shortage of combustible materials in its wake, and

as a consequence, flame consumed forests and even settlements. Pyne has a seemingly never ending reserve of colorful phrases to illustrate fire's role in Canadian history. When discussing how the timber industry fostered the conditions for the Miramichi fire of 1825, probably the most famous conflagration in Canadian history, Pyne writes "logging was a kind of industrial swidden, slashing and burning and moving on" (128). Fire, then, was both an essential tool and an inevitable part of colonization.

In "Engine," Pyne discusses how industrial tools harnessed combustion within machines, but just as importantly, reconfigured the relationship between humans and fire throughout Canada. As logging had done in earlier eras, the expansion of the railroads throughout the country left combustible debris in its wake. Locomotives provided the sparks that set this tinder ablaze as cinders cascaded onto the dry brush beside railway lines. This was also the era when Canada created a set of institutions to deal with wildland fire. Pyne is at his best when he shows the role of the state in fire protection, and specifically, the perennial debates between the provinces and federal government on such matters. Fire was an obsession among early forests in Canada, and it remains a focus to this day.

Stephen Pyne is a gifted writer and pays careful attention to narrative. At the beginning of the book, he discusses the challenges he faced writing *Awful Splendour*. Given the country's size and the power of the provinces in fire matters, the topic does not lend itself to one grand story. Pyne struggles mightily to hold the provincial and national aspects of his story together. He does an admirable job, but the result is not entirely satisfying. He is forced to retrace his steps temporally in sections about different Canadian provinces or regions. When coupled with the staggering detail he includes in the book, this narrative strategy inevitably creates overlap and confusion. The fire history of Canada might be too vast and complicated to effectively cover in one volume.

Pyne is extremely thorough. He is also deeply familiar with the relevant archival sources. But most readers, particularly of *Left History*, will be struck by what is left out. In this book and others, Pyne pays little attention to race, class, and gender—the fundamental categories of social history. Women are largely absent. To some degree, of course, this is understandable. Women were not directly involved in wildland fire decision making, at least at the provincial and national levels. A more striking omission is the lack of attention to First Nations. Pyne convincingly demonstrates the role of fire in colonization. Yet the impact of this on Native peoples is never discussed. Many other environmental historians and geographers have examined how conservation policies were part of colonialism. If Pyne is correct, and fire policy was an abiding concern of conservationists and foresters, it would be worthwhile to look at the consequences of fire policy on First Nations. Fire control over a nation as vast as Canada required marshalling the resources of the state and extending authority deep into territories where Native peoples continued to reside and pursue livelihoods. Later scholars

might investigate not only how fire policy affected First Nations, but whether they later participated in state fire fighting efforts. Certainly, they have done so in other countries such as the United States, where many Native peoples on reservations have found well-paying seasonal employment fighting fires, both on reservations and elsewhere.

Given Pyne's relative inattention to social relations, readers of *Left History* might think *Anful Splendour* is not worth the trouble. That would be a mistake because while Pyne is relatively uninterested in social history, he shows clearly the pivotal role of fire in shaping the Canadian landscape. Wildland fire reworked thousands of hectares in the span of few days or weeks. Global warming will, in the words of Pyne, "only enhance the habitat for fire" (478). Pyne's monumental book on Canadian fire history has not exhausted the topic. Rather, it has left a clear path for scholars with other proclivities to venture in new directions with different sets of questions about this fundamental element in the Canadian environment.

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James C. McCann, *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500-2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Maize and Grace is an African environmental history of the maize plant itself, of the advantages and dangers to farmers and markets of an early-yielding, low-labour, but drought-vulnerable grain, of the different hardness and starchiness of kernels, of plant and human diseases, seed hybrids and genetic variations. James McCann has a great admiration for the maize plant. He appreciates the plant's history of adaptability and unpredictability. His fascination with maize and his creative structuring of the monograph make *Maize and Grace* one of a rare breed: a successful single commodity history. Though the book sits at the intersection of three literatures—African environmental history, the single commodity history, and the history of food—it succeeds less as a history of food, or even as a chronicle of a single commodity in a particular venue, than it does as an innovative and exciting African environmental history.

The single commodity history seems to hold great promise as a method for doing world history, for revealing world systems and transnational connections. But in the years since Sidney Mintz's groundbreaking *Sweetness and Power*, which McCann lauds in his introduction, and Emmanuel Wallerstein's explication of the commodity chain, the single commodity history has struggled. The literature has tilted toward gift and coffee table books on coffee, tea, oil, gold, salt and bananas. Most of these texts contribute in small ways to the scholarly conversation about world history, but for the most part are episodic, meandering, and at times are often lacking in theoretical rigor and even substantive theses. The diffi-