

Book Review

Burning Table Mountain: An Environmental History of Fire on the Cape Peninsula

Simon Pooley, *Burning Table Mountain: An Environmental History of Fire on the Cape Peninsula*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, xi + 315 pages, £60 hardcover.

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Fires regularly burn the mountainous landscape around the burgeoning city of Cape Town, South Africa. These intense blazes blacken, with equal measure, scrubby indigenous *fynbos* vegetation, introduced pine and eucalyptus plantations, wealthy suburban houses, and poor shanty shacks. Each blaze inevitably sparks overheated prose that is too simple in its analysis and demonstrates a short social memory of all the previous fires and reactions to them. In contrast, Simon Pooley’s *Burning Table Mountain* (2014) presents a detailed, careful account of the struggles of Capetonians to comprehend, master, or adjust to the sometimes beautiful, sometimes dangerous environment in which their city grew over the past several centuries.

The book is organized in three sections. The first reconstructs the deeper history of fire at the Cape, from prehistory through Dutch and British colonial rule. The second is a window into the twentieth-century development of forestry, botany, and ecology as disciplines and institutions in South Africa through their perspectives on fire. It reviews the personalities, institutions, and ideas that shaped these fields and that set the context of ongoing debates. Among other things, the book demonstrates just how

much the Mediterranean-climate Cape flora dominates botany and environmental management in South Africa.

The final, and longest, section of the book addresses the twentieth-century history of fire on the peninsula extending from Cape Town and Table Mountain south to Cape Point. The first four chapters in this section each focus on a particular theme. Chapter 5 examines the impact of expanded settlements, transportation infrastructure, and urbanization on fire—essentially the growth of the so-called ‘wildland-urban interface’. Chapter 6 investigates the relationship of fire to diverse visions for how to manage Table Mountain, particularly in terms of evolving politics of nature conservation. Chapter 7 addresses the intertwined histories of forestry, forest plantations, and invasive trees and their role in debates over fire. Chapter 8 catalogues and assesses the different human activities blamed for increased fire ignitions, from general population growth to specific activities like flower harvesting, wood collection, and recreation. The final chapter in this section then offers a blow-by-blow account of the major fire events of the twentieth century as well as the public, political, and managerial reactions to them.

Burning Table Mountain is a work of history, and, as such, Simon Pooley tells the story based on painstakingly detailed evidence from state archives, historical newspapers, and the like, but he also relies on interviews with fire researchers and environmental managers. Unsurprisingly, non-white voices feature less in such sources, and regrettably Pooley does not go far with opportunities to glean additional perspectives (who are, for instance, the ‘vagrants’ on whom some fires are blamed?).

Pooley adds important nuance to a number of facile analyses about the relationships of fire to the indigenous flora, to invasive plants, to hydrology, as well as about the causes and contexts of South African debates about the fires. These nuances are often brief tidbits mentioned in passing. For instance, he reminds us about the antiquity of the antipathy to exotic pines, wattles, and other introduced and invasive plants, dating back to at least the 1920s, with hydrological arguments appearing in the 1930s and the first use of ‘Green Cancer’ in a report in 1959. Or, he suggests that street-side flower sellers played as big a role in the international fame of the Cape flora as white botanists (yet, of course, they were accused of lighting fires to stimulate flushes of wildflowers to collect). Or, he shows that a simple argument linking antipathy to non-native, invasive trees (as catalysts of the destructive 2000 fires) to contemporary xenophobia and nationalism ignores a long, complex history of debate over indigenous vegetation, introduced plants, national identity, and fire.

Most importantly, Pooley’s historical evidence allows him to go beyond blaming the trend of increased fire incidence simply on population growth. While the wildland-urban interface clearly has increased, most population growth has occurred away in the flats. Throughout the decades, as Pooley shows, fire ignitions have shown a strong correlation instead with more privileged, recreational uses of the mountain areas. The social justice angle is clear: repeated blame

on the ‘influx’ of poorer black populations is partially a red herring. As is blame on alien trees or the foresters that promote them. Like in California, Australia, or Mediterranean Europe, people must come to terms with what it means to build suburbs and recreate in an inherently, indeed necessarily, flammable vegetation.

The book covers a lot of useful ground, and will certainly interest students of environmental history, fire management, and South Africa. Only a few critiques come to mind. For one, the book is organized more topically than chronologically, proceeding by theme rather than period. What is gained in topical clarity unfortunately inevitably results in a sacrifice to the historical narrative, with awkward time-jumps and several redundancies. Second, the historical narrative is less convincing in recent years. For instance, it is not really explained how the ‘unique historical moment’ of the end of Apartheid led Nelson Mandela to proclaim Cape Peninsula National Park after seventy years of failed efforts (p. 161). Finally, a geographer’s quibble: the book lacks a high-quality reference map for non-locals to cope with the plethora of toponyms evoked; instead, one has to make do with some principal place names inserted on a National Park map quite late in the book.

Fire, as others have said before, really is a crucible or an event that brings into contact diverse elements: native plants and their ecology, introduced species, environmental management, ideologies about nature, urban growth, public health, disasters, weather patterns, social tensions, scientific disciplines and more. The story of the Cape Peninsula as told by Simon Pooley reflects quite similar challenges faced by suburban residents and land managers around Los Angeles, Melbourne, Athens, Porto, and Valparaiso that are just as chronic and just as complex.

Christian A. Kull
University of Lausanne, Switzerland

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