

The Still-Burning Bush

Stephen Pyne, Scribe Short Books, Melbourne, 2006, 137 pp. ISBN 1 920769 75 7 (paperback), AUD\$22.00.

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Readers familiar with Stephen Pyne’s dozen books on fire management and fire history will not be surprised by his latest, an overview of Australian fire politics. In *The Still-Burning Bush* they will recognize his elegant, metaphorical pen and his philosophical overview of the broad tides of social and environmental change seen through the prism of fire. The only surprise for Pyne habitués, perhaps, is the length of this book, a brisk 137 page.

The title refers to Pyne’s 1991 book *Burning Bush*, a detailed fire history of Australia. The essay that grew into this new book grew out of reflections following the 2003 Alpine fires; the new book also distils and updates key themes out of the original. The result is an eminently readable overview of Australian fire history and politics, peppered with international comparisons. In its melding of fire ecology with social history, it is just the kind of work that earned Pyne the title of ‘honorary geographer’ at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers.

Parts one and two review the different “firestick” periods of Australia’s past. Traditional “firestick farming” of the Aborigines was displaced by the “firestick agronomy” of white settlers, where fire served the purposes of paddock clearance, grazing, and farming. Then, asserts, Pyne, the firestick passed into the hands of professional foresters, following the meteoric rise of this profession and the associated creation of vast domains of public land. Australia foresters – like foresters everywhere – criticized the fires of indigenes and settlers alike. However, instead of practicing fire suppression, they lit their own fires, practising a kind of “firestick forestry” with drip torches and incendiary firebombs.

Part three chronicles the social changes shifting contemporary fire policy. Australia is more and more urban. Public lands and fire control have now moved out of the hands of state forestry into the hands of environmental and emergency-services bureaucracies. While a kind of “firestick ecology” might be expected to emerge as the new theme, it has not. To make his point Pyne analyses the political fallout of the massive 2003 fires that burned much of the Alpine forests and into Canberra. In the main new empirical portion of his book, he reviews the inquiries, inquests, and rebuttals that followed the fires. He shows how the debate reflects the demise of Australian forestry and its perspective of active management through burning. The State of Victoria’s inquiry (the “Esplin report”), in particular, ushered in a new era, seeing the fires not as a disaster but as a “tantrum of nature” (p. 101) playing a key role in the mountain flora.

Pyne ends with a number of observations or suggestions. Two useful themes emerge. First, he points out that the vehemence of the on-going debate about how to

manage fire arises out of contrasting cultural values and professional identities – that is, fire management reflects the changing politics of Australian society. Fire serves as flashpoints in numerous debates: “city v. country; greenies v. farmers, graziers, and loggers; ecologists v. foresters; those who live off the land v. those who visit it; those who believe bushfire is ultimately an expression of a nature beyond human contrivance, and those who believe humanity can, for good or ill, profoundly alter fire’s regimes” (p. 9). He reminds the reader that fire management decisions are rightfully decided in the political arena, for there is no single ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ approach.

Second, Pyne urges Australians to continue to celebrate their firestick heritage. Indeed, he allows that his preference for fire management is for continued active burning with an opportunistic and diversified strategy: “the precautionary principle would seem to argue for keeping fire on land, and the firestick in the hands of people, while the pondering and the research and the queries flare and smoulder” (p. 114). To make it happen, he proposes the development of institutions focused on fire, instead of placing fire management within the domain of institutions with other goals (e.g. forestry, risk management, or biodiversity protection).

Pyne writes with a lyrical style that is illuminating in its grand themes but frustratingly abstruse in its details. The writing makes sense to those who have followed fire issues, but may be baffling to the uninitiated. Interesting assertions are buried in the poetic language and rely on unnamed evidence or absent examples. Digging in the text, for example, to find out exactly what the Esplin Report stated, is nigh impossible. While this style allows Pyne to rise above the detail to brilliantly capture broad trends, newcomers have little with which to anchor their understandings or convince themselves of his correctness. Readers should also know that the book is dominated by the stories and experiences of south-eastern Australia; other regions are less well discussed. All the same, the book is a useful outside perspective on Australian fire that may just convince us that there is “No compelling reason not to be the fire creature that we are” (p. 117).

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